

Sick Notes versus Fit Notes

In Wales in 2008 there has been a trial of the use of electronic "fit notes" but what does this mean and how might it help your business?

As part of the strategy to make us all more healthy and able to work the focus is moving to what someone is able to do instead of what they are not able to do. Now, in occupational health this approach has been used for a long time. What supervisors and managers want to hear is what the employee CAN do at work and not what they CAN'T do at work.

Sick notes give the minimum of information and just usually say - unfit for work - no ifs, no buts. And in defence of the GPs - who can blame them - they have no more than 10 minutes per person and it is quite likely they don't really know what the employee does at work and they do not have time to call the employer to discuss the options. The GP has to make a decision that protects the employee's health and in the absence of more information they will choose to be cautious in most cases and give a sick note for a set period of time.

Fit notes, on the other hand are going to require the GP or other health professional to tell you what the employee CAN do at work. There are a few problems with this - at the moment not many GPs know this is coming their way - apparently it is supposed to be being introduced later this year and early 2010. And how are the GPs suddenly going to know what is needed at work?

I am a fan of Fit notes and have been using them (or variations of them) for a long time. For an employer the best thing to do is to write a list of core physical and mental job demands for the main jobs that are done in your business. This then enables you to establish what parts of the job someone can and can't do with a medical problem or injury, and a one side sheet sent with the employee to the GP might make the difference between a meaningful and useful "fit note" and getting the employee straight back to work or a frustrating 4 week sick note.

Here's a straightforward example:

An office receptionist needs to be able to (amongst other things!)

Get to work (walk, drive or take public transport, get a taxi)

Sit

Walk

Talk

Listen

Write

Type

Remain calm under pressure

Answer the phone within 4 rings

Last week she broke her left wrist and has been put in plaster for 6 weeks and the GP has given her a sick note for 6 weeks. She is right handed. So can she be at work - YES - can she do all her tasks - YES.

Now if it was her right wrist where we would we be?

She can still get to work but may need help with this if she normally drives

She can still sit and walk, talk and listen.

She can't write or type - consider seeing if one of your computers already has voice recognition software built in, switch mouse use to the other hand (but be prepared for a slow down in productivity).

She can still answer the phone, run errands etc.

So, there is work that can be done which would be of some value - there need to be modifications and that may mean that there is less to do than normal so the work might be part time for a bit (only a limited time as you plan for a full return to normal duties as soon as reasonable).

Now, there is usually a cry of "but we won't be insured" - believe me you will be insured if you have thought through the above process, and your insurer will be very pleased to hear you are proactively managing absence. If in doubt - call them - it could save you a lot of unnecessary absence days and lots of money.

If you need help with identifying job demands and planning a return to work please get in touch for a free consultation to find out how I can help your business.