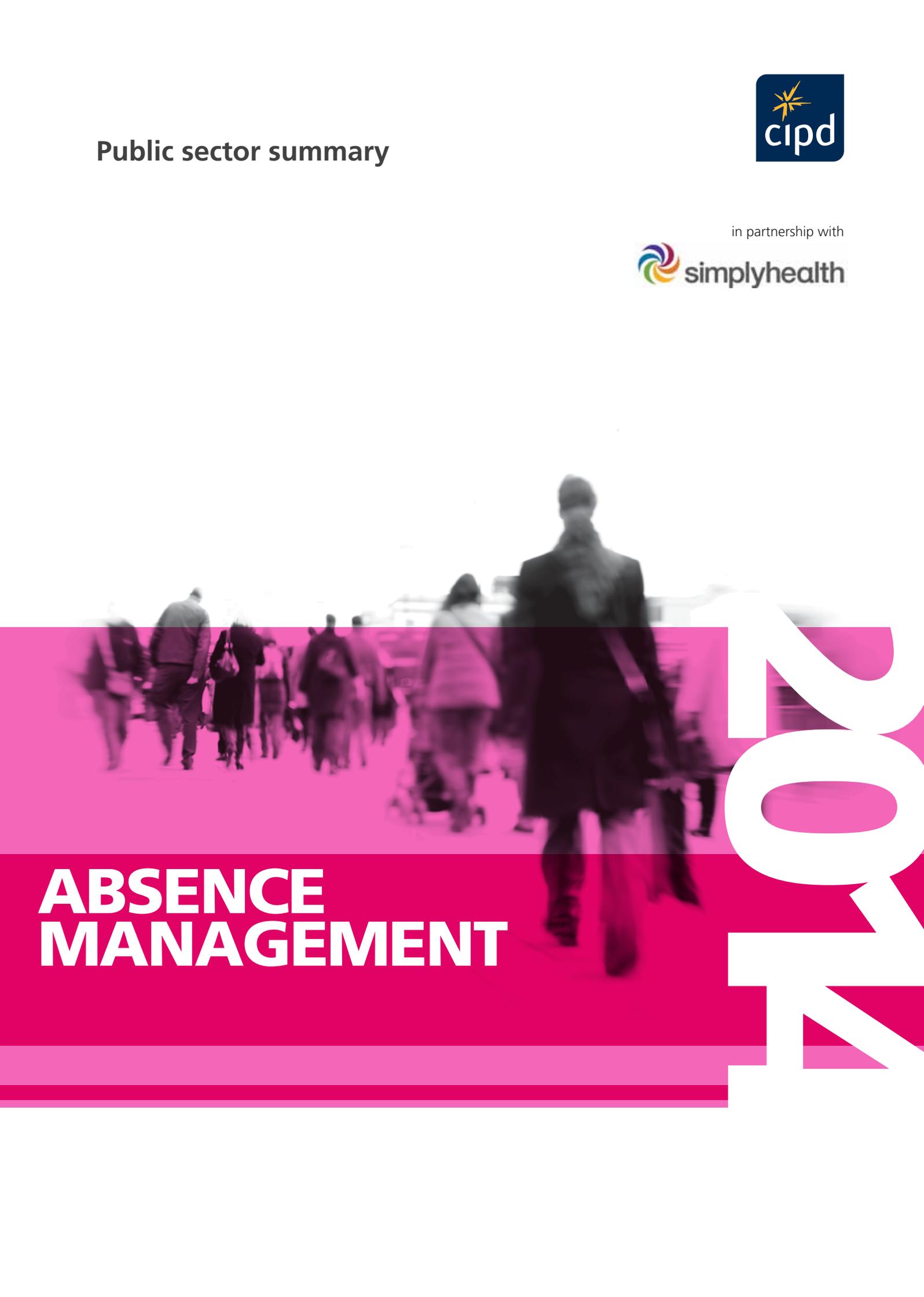


Public sector summary



in partnership with

A blurred, black and white photograph of a crowd of people walking away from the camera on a wide, open space, possibly a train platform or a public square. The image is overlaid with a large, semi-transparent pink rectangular area that covers the bottom half of the page.

ABSENCE MANAGEMENT

FOR HR

PUBLIC SECTOR SUMMARY

Overall summary of findings

The findings of the CIPD's 2014 *Absence Management* survey, conducted in partnership with Simplyhealth, show that the average level of employee absence has fallen compared with last year from 7.6 to 6.6 days per employee. Moreover, there is some indication of a fluctuating downward trend over the last few years.

Positive findings suggest that organisations that actively engage in absence management and make changes to improve their approach do evaluate their efforts and generally report positive outcomes on absence levels. Our findings also imply that investments in well-being pay off.

There has also been an increased focus on developing line manager capability to manage absence, an important finding given that line managers have primary responsibility for short-term absence in two-thirds of organisations as well as long-term absence in half of organisations. Nevertheless, many of those who report line managers have responsibility for absence do not provide them with training and even fewer provide them with tailored support.

Some organisations are clearly more proactive than others in their approach to managing absence and promoting well-being. While the vast majority have an absence management policy, record their employee absence rate, collect information on the causes of absence and provide one or more well-being benefits, fewer have a well-being strategy or targets to reduce absence and the majority do not evaluate the impact of their well-being spend. Just one in seven report attendance is driven by the board.

Seventy per cent of organisations believe it is possible to reduce their absence levels. The main challenges they face, in terms of the most common causes of absence, include minor illness, acute conditions, musculoskeletal injuries, back pain, stress and mental ill-health.

Just a fifth of organisations plan to access the new government Independent Assessment and Advisory Service (now called the Fit for Work Scheme), slightly fewer than last year, although many remain undecided. It will be important to improve dialogue regarding the service if its value is to be realised.

Organisations themselves need to ensure that they understand the costs of absence to help galvanise senior management support for addressing absence issues. They need to regularly monitor, review and act on the data they collect regarding the level and causes of absence, to ensure their approach to absence and well-being is relevant to their organisation's specific issues. Demonstrating the impact of current initiatives is a crucial part of that.

Public sector summary

As in the private services and non-profit sectors, the average level of employee absence in the public sector has fallen compared with last year. Moreover, there is some indication of a fluctuating but generally downward trend in average levels of public sector absence (as well as in non-profit and private services organisations) over recent years (2014: 7.9 days; 2013: 8.7 days; 2012: 7.9 days; 2011: 9.1; 2010: 9.3).

This summary examines findings from the CIPD's *Absence Management* survey for a fuller understanding of public sector efforts to reduce absence and the challenges they face.

ABSENCE MANAGEMENT

More monitoring of absence in the public sector

The public sector leads the way in formal practices to monitor absence. Public sector organisations are more likely than the private to record their absence levels (91% versus 73%) and monitor the cost of employee absence (55% versus 30%). They are also more likely to use absence level as a key performance indicator (75% versus 55%) and twice as likely to have a target in place to reduce absence (60% versus 31%).

Greater focus on promoting health and well-being

As we've found in previous years, the public sector is more likely to use a range of methods to promote good health and attendance. They are considerably more likely than the private sector to have a well-being strategy (69% versus 43%) and offer a range of benefits designed to promote health, well-being and work-life balance. They are also more likely to provide support for employees in the form of counselling services, employee assistance programmes and occupational health services.

Greater focus on addressing stress

The majority of public sector employers are taking steps to identify and reduce stress in the workplace (77% versus 52% of the private sector) and they use a wider range of methods to do so than private sector organisations. More than half report they have increased their focus on stress management over the past 12 months compared with a quarter of the private sector. They are more likely than the private sector to offer stress management training (70% versus 52%) and training to build personal resilience (57% versus 31%) to all or some groups of employees.

More support for employees with mental health problems

The public sector also leads the way in supporting employees with mental health problems through a range of initiatives, including increasing awareness of mental health issues across the workforce as a whole (53% versus 22% of the private sector).

A wider range of approaches to manage absence

The public sector are more likely than the private to use a range of pre-emptive strategies to manage absence and promote attendance. In particular they are more likely than the private sector to provide flexible working, which can reduce illegitimate absence. They are also more likely to have specific policies or guidelines to support employees who are carers (36% compared with 15% of not-for-profits and 8% of the private sector) and provide leave for family circumstances.

In addition, more public sector organisations include changes to working patterns or environment, capability procedures, rehabilitation programmes and risk assessments to aid return to work after long-term absence among their absence management approaches. In organisations where line managers have primary responsibility for managing absence, those in the public sector are more likely to train them in absence-handling and provide them with support. Public sector organisations are also more likely to have a nominated absence case manager/management team.

More efforts to improve absence practices

As we've found in previous years, public sector organisations are most likely to have made changes to some aspect of their approach to absence management in the last 12 months (68% compared with 45% of the private sector). This implies they are proactive in developing their absence practices.

The most common change made by public sector organisations, and an increased focus this year, is to develop line manager capability to manage absence (2014: 67%; 2013: 45%). This is critical given that line managers have primary responsibility for managing absence in the majority of public sector organisations. Indeed, organisations that developed line manager capability confirm a positive impact on their absence levels.

ABSENCE MANAGEMENT

Another common change made by public sector organisations this year, twice as many as last year, is to introduce or revise an attendance strategy (2014: 51%; 2013: 27%). Again our findings suggest that this had a positive impact on absence levels.

More of the public sector are restricting sick pay

In the past we have found that public sector organisations are less likely to restrict sick pay than the private sector. While this is still the case, in the last two years we have seen an increase in the proportion that report they are restricting sick pay as part of their approach to managing long-term absence (2014: 42%; 2013: 41%; 2012: 34%; 2011: 33%; 2010: 27%). This may provide an incentive for employees to return to work sooner.

Ongoing challenges

While the public sector's proactive approach to absence and health management has contributed to reducing absence levels, it remains, on average, considerably higher than in the private sector. Long-term absence continues to be a particular issue: over a quarter of absence in the public sector is due to long-term absences of four weeks or longer, twice as much as in the private sector. On average, public sector employees have 2.2 more days' absence per year than their counterparts in the private sector.

Stress-related absence is particularly widespread in the public sector

Last year we reported a reduction in the proportion of public sector organisations including stress among their most common causes of absence. This year's figures are back up to previous levels and nearly three-fifths of public sector organisations report stress-related absence has increased for the workforce as a whole over the past year (compared with 33% of the private sector).

Indeed, stress is the most common cause of long-term absence in the public sector and it is considerably more widespread there than in the private sector: 77% report it is among their top causes of long-term absence for manual workers

(46% of the private sector) and 82% for non-manual workers (57% of the private sector). Three-quarters of the public sector also include stress-related absence among their top causes of short-term absence, compared with just two-fifths of the private sector.

Workload is reported to be the most common cause of stress. Budget cuts and redundancies in the public sector will have contributed to this. Nevertheless, management style and relationships at work are also reported to be common stressors in the public sector and these are issues that need to be addressed. Job security is less of a concern in the public sector this year (2014: 10%; 2013: 20%; 2012: 22%; 2011: 24%; 2010: 10%), despite our finding that 67% of public sector organisations report they will, or will possibly, make redundancies in the next six months.

Although, as reported above, most public sector organisations are taking steps to tackle stress and many have increased their focus on it, a fifth of those that have identified stress as a top cause of absence are not taking any steps to address it (40% of private sector organisations). It is also of concern that the proportion of the public sector who don't offer stress management training has almost doubled compared with last year (2014: 30%; 2013: 17%).

Musculoskeletal injuries are more common in the public sector

Musculoskeletal injuries, one of the main causes of long- and short-term absence in all sectors, are also particularly common in the public sector (approximately three-quarters of the public sector report they are among their top causes of long- and short-term absence for manual workers compared with half of the private sector; two-thirds report they are among their top causes of long- and short-term absence for non-manual workers, compared with just over two-fifths of the private sector).

Good workplace design can help reduce risks and many public sector organisations are switched

on to the value of making changes to working patterns and environment as part of their absence management approach. In addition, managers and employees need to be able to understand the hazards that some working tasks have on the body, usually over a period of time, and spot the signs before injuries become severe. Encouraging early reporting of symptoms or discomforts is crucial.

Rising absence costs

Our previous findings have shown that the cost of absence in the public sector tends to fluctuate according to the level of absence. This year, while average levels of absence have fallen (and more of the public sector report they are restricting sick pay), the average cost of absence has increased dramatically (although there is considerable variation across organisations and the figures are based on a relatively small sample of organisations). This has further increased the usual gap between the average cost of absence in the public and other sectors.

Moving forward

The reduction in average public sector absence this year is a positive sign. Nevertheless, the vast majority still report it is possible to reduce absence in their organisations. Reduced budgets in the public sector highlight the imperative of understanding the causes and costs of absence in order to target initiatives effectively and evaluate the potential savings that might be achieved. Evaluating the impact of existing and new initiatives is also critical.

The full findings from the 2014 *Absence Management* survey can be accessed by visiting cipd.co.uk/absencemanagementsurvey



Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
151 The Broadway London SW19 1JQ UK
Tel: +44 (0)20 8612 6200 Fax: +44 (0)20 8612 6201
Email: cipd@cipd.co.uk Website: cipd.co.uk

Incorporated by Royal Charter Registered charity no.1079797