

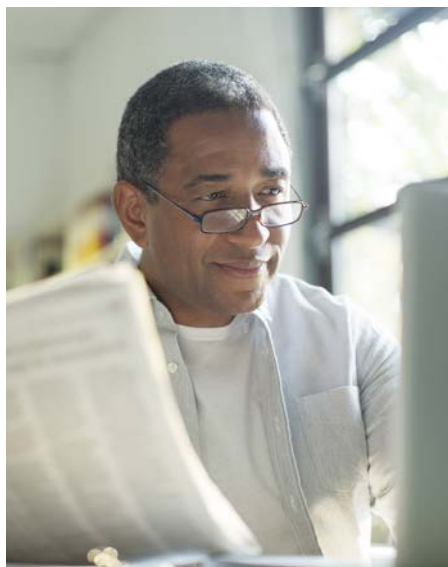


# COVID-19

## AVOIDING PRESENTEEISM IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

Until recently, the terms 'stay at home', 'social distancing', 'self-isolation' and 'quarantine' were not used in everyday conversation and no one could have predicted that over a third of the global population would be in lockdown at the time of writing. We're all trying to adapt to a unique and strange way of living, parenting, working, teaching, caring, socialising – the list is endless.

Pressures are mounting as workers are struggling to distinguish between home life and work life and not knowing when to take a sick day or try their best to work from home when feeling unwell. Organisations are trying to navigate the new 'norm' and find the best way to keep their workforces connected, and also understand the challenges individuals are faced with in their new working environment, in particular when it comes to presenteeism versus absenteeism.



Cast your mind back to a world before the current COVID-19 pandemic, a world where 9 in 10<sup>1</sup> workers admitted going to work when they were ill. With many employees now working from home, some will question whether they should be working when they are ill or if they should they be taking a sick day to rest, recover and build up their strength. The boundaries are unclear and there's no precedent set – yet. So, now is the time for organisations to pave the way to offer more support to their staff members and put their health and well-being at the top of their COVID-19 wellness agenda.

### **There's a shift in the way we're working, but the employers' role remains unchanged**

For many organisations, working from home isn't new and is something many have had in place since laptops and dial up internet made it possible. Figures released last year show that around 25 million people across Europe worked remotely at some stage last year. For others, the shift to

homeworking has been fast moving and one that's been dictated by a worldwide pandemic, meaning the introduction of new workplace policies, practices and processes, not to mention a new way of managing teams and working together remotely.

Regardless of whether staff are office based or work from home, every organisation has a duty of care for their workforce and this is particularly apt in today's current climate. With many people falling in to 'at risk' COVID-19 categories – in Europe there are more than 85 million people living with cardiovascular disease and more than 962 million people globally who are aged 60 years or over – it's likely that COVID-19 has impacted or will impact a number of workers, either personally or it will affect a member of their family.

## Supporting individuals with their physical and mental health concerns

Dealing with the latest health pandemic won't be the only health concern organisations will need to manage at this time. 87% of working people globally are stressed and 63% have noticed that a colleague is stressed. According to Cigna's 2019 360 Well-Being Survey<sup>2</sup>, 64% of people say they work in an "always-on" culture where they feel the need to constantly access work emails, attend work calls or check mobile phones for work purposes out of normal office hours. Unmanaged stress like this can build up and manifest itself in a range of physical conditions including high blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, and shortness of breath and chest pain – often becoming chronic and harder to manage. This can lead to people taking sick days from work to try to destress and take a break from their workload – 12.8m workdays are lost each year because of stress – or presenteeism because they feel pressured and obligated to continue working – especially because they are already at home – despite being too ill to be productive. 89% of employers have observed presenteeism in their workplace.



*64% of people say they work in an "always-on" culture<sup>2</sup>*



### So, when a staff member is unwell how can employers support them in the new remote working environment?

Even at this uncertain time, an organisation should aim to manage their teams in the same way by using digital tools to help them remain connected. Connecting regularly over the phone or via video meetings will enable workers to open up to their colleagues and their employer, in the same way they would normally discuss their workload or any other concerns they have whether personal, health or work related. It's important for staff to know that their employer

is still tuned into their physical and mental health requirements and their overall well-being remains a top business priority and the support offered by their colleagues remains in place, too.

Access to mental health support is also important, especially as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to bring wider economic uncertainty and our ability to see our friends, family and loved ones is hampered by the current lockdown.

### Telehealth is leading the way

Offering individuals access to telehealth could go a long way in supporting their health and well-being, not just while we're facing a global health crisis, but to encourage long-term behavioural changes, too. A key feature of telehealth is the convenient access to Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), providing easy access to counselling, online cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and mindfulness programmes to support many types of mental health concerns.



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Virtual health apps can also offer medical consultations with doctors or nurses at a convenient time, without needing to leave the house or break current self-isolation guidelines. Being able to access integrated and innovative health improvement tools, online self-help and remote counselling makes it easier for people to take greater control of their health and well-being and access essential support when they need it.

As a result, telehealth is increasingly being viewed as a key way to help fight the COVID-19 outbreak. Cigna is one provider who is encouraging organisations to take control of the health and well-being of their workforces by providing them access to Telehealth services. This includes a free, web-based interactive COVID-19 risk assessment tool, where Cigna has partnered with Infermedica.





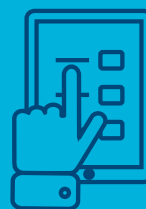
This risk assessment tool gives additional support to help provide peace of mind to Cigna customers during these challenging times by allowing users to answer questions around symptoms, risk factors and recent exposure. In turn, they will receive local recommendations on next best steps for care based on their current symptoms.

This is not only a screening tool, and it also offers links to local health authorities and educational advice about how to keep safe and is available in multiple languages.

### Let's work together and remain connected

In the wake of COVID-19 each and every one of us has had to adapt our way of working and living. However, if this current pandemic has taught us anything, it's the importance of remaining connected and staying fit, healthy and positive.

The role of the employer to offer health and well-being support to their workforces remains unchanged and there are tools available to help them do this. By feeling supported and appreciated by their employer at this time, workers should have the confidence to know their health and well-being is priority, and if a sick day is needed, there's support available to them to help get them back to being productive in the (home) workplace when they are suitably rested and recovered.



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#### References:

1. <http://rh-us.mediaroom.com/2019-10-24-9-In-10-Employees-Come-To-Work-Sick-Survey-Shows>
2. Cigna's 360 Well-Being Survey

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