

Qualification: CIPD Diploma in Applied Human Resources

Module Name:

Understanding the Management of Employment Relations

On the Job Training

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By signing below, I confirm that the work/evidence presented is my own, unaided work. I understand the regulations pertaining to candidate malpractice and the action that may be taken as a result.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Duncan Hook', is written over a light grey rectangular background.

Date: 05/01/2022

Employment Relations at Pembrokeshire County Council during the COVID 19 Pandemic

The initial lockdown order in March 2020 was a huge catalyst for change in Pembrokeshire County Council. It has taken a long time to adjust to working differently and along the way attitudes within HR and Senior Management have needed to change to ensure staff are supported while also being given adequate regulation when needed.

As a public service, furlough was only available for employees whose wages were paid through additional public spending such as Leisure centre staff. Although the hundreds of other staff who could not work in their substantive roles were put into a redeployment pool, a large number were never redeployed and simply paid to remain at home. This long period of rest led to certain bad habits forming which had to be remedied when staff returned to work. Disciplinary action was taken with some staff in the Building Maintenance department who were falsifying their working time and there was communication about what was expected in representing the Authority.

At the other end of the scale, many of our corporate teams were overworking and experiencing burnout as a result. Senior Management have learned the hard way that staff working from home were not lazy and instead felt additional pressure to always be on and working doubly hard to counteract the supposed 'comfort' of home working. The result has been a sharp increase in long-term absence related to stress and anxiety, which put additional pressure on teams leading to more stress. Senior Management have changed their communication style over time, focussing on performance and output rather than hours spent at the computer. Managers have been encouraged to promote a better work/life balance and include messaging in email signatures sent 'out of hours' that it is not expected for all staff to work at these times.

Over time, the initial high engagement and the sense of pulling together has dissipated. Staff are becoming disengaged while workload has increased under difficult conditions. The narrative seems to be that they were under so much pressure that they realised they did not want it to affect their health and have changed how they feel about work. Managers are noticing less discretionary effort, perhaps encouraged by communication of work/life balance and, more quantifiable, there has been an increase in short term absence for reasons outside of covid.

Short-term absence management was initially put on pause for the around 6 months at the start of the pandemic. The initial reasoning behind this was three-fold:

- For practicality. The HR department were not accustomed to holding meetings remotely at all prior to the pandemic and absence review meetings were considered too important to be held on Skype or Microsoft Teams.
- As cold and flu were treated with concern initially as they were symptomatically similar to covid, it caused the lines to be slightly blurred. Managers were prone to 'ring-fencing' absence as they felt even if it was not covid itself, the early anxiety about the virus had led to people being more concerned about minor sickness.
- Short-term absence was lower. Corporate staff were not catching colds as easily or having accidents that would lead to them taking time away from work.

Picking up short-term absence has been challenging since this pause period. Of course, over time we have all become comfortable with using video conferencing software to hold formal meetings with

even council member meetings being held on Teams. Absence reviews and investigation interviews have all been held remotely with employee consent.

The challenge has been with manager comfort with holding these meetings. Sympathy with employees has been higher which has meant that many staff are hitting the trigger and not having an absence meeting. With short term absence increasing and more staff hitting triggers there has been a recent push to hold a meeting for every employee triggering for consistency but it is still challenging to convince managers that this is the best course of action to support staff and reduce absence.

We are also in unprecedented territory with managing the absence process with 'long-covid'. This has proved debilitating for the low number of staff who are suffering from it but until there is relevant case law or a definition of disability for the condition, we have struggled to know how to deal with it.

The other major challenge has been around the transition of home working to a hybrid model. The new CEO started in Q3 2021 and had started to communicate that the offices should start to be full again for collaboration and 'office buzz'. This was unpopular with staff and has since been negated by the latest covid variant. It is clear that this will be a challenge to drive as employees have had two years to get used to working completely differently, with an IT infrastructure that supports home working. Our travel expenses policy has now been updated to allow staff, such as social workers, to be able to claim travel from home and not just from the office, which again suggests that this could be a viable option.

A questionnaire was sent to employees in Q2 asking for their preference and it was clear that the majority of managers and staff were keen to work in a hybrid model and so planning has been put in place to make this a long term reality once the situation improves.