Research Brief:

Absence and Disability Management Practices for an Aging Workforce


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Overview

The goal of Disability and Absence Management (A & DM) programming is to limit absence, control costs, and retain workers to maintain a productive workforce. This can include the development of supportive policies (e.g. flexible work options), manager and employee education, supportive benefit programs, return to work programs, among others. A & DM professionals frequently use data on employee demographics, health, and risks in order to inform program design and implementation. Increasingly, older workers have become a group of interest among A & DM professionals, in part because many baby boomers are forgoing retirement and working longer, both out of financial need, and also because they enjoy their work and desire to stay involved. Projections suggest that by 2020 those 55 and over could account for 25% of workers. This shift is especially important for A & DM given that disability prevalence increases with age – as the workforce ages, organizations will increasingly need to ensure their programming supports older workers.

Disability Prevalence in the U.S. by Age

During the fall and winter of 2012-13, Cornell University’s Employment and Disability Institute and the Disability Management Employer Coalition (DMEC) collaborated on a survey and key informant interviews with DMEC members and conference attendees to learn more about what organizations are doing to respond to and prepare for an aging workforce.

Concerns about an Aging Workforce

The majority of DMEC members were “very” or “somewhat” concerned about the potential impact of an aging workforce on their organization; though there was some variation in the level or concern across industries.
Organizational concern about the impact of an aging workforce

Leading Practices for an Aging Workforce

Survey respondents identified what they felt were leading practices for an aging workforce. In analyzing these practices we identified seven practices as key to retaining older workers.

1. **Flexibility.** Many types of workplace flexibility were mentioned as important to hiring and retaining older workers: flexible scheduling, part-time/seasonal work, phased retirement, flex-place opportunities, and flexible leave policies.

2. **Maintaining and enhancing benefits.** While many older workers are interested in flexible work, part-time or seasonal work may result in the loss of benefits. Respondents mentioned several approaches to addressing older workers’ desire for continued benefits: education for employees on eligibility for company and/or government benefits; programs that offer benefits to “bridge” the gap between employer and government benefits; and adjusting short- and long-term disability policies to better serve older workers.

3. **Wellness programming.** Respondents talked about using employee data and health care cost drivers to develop targeted preventative health programs, disease management programs, and onsite wellness options. They also mentioned integrating wellness programs with health insurance, creating incentive programs and comprehensive health initiatives, offering work-life resources and Employee Assistance Programs.

4. **Ensuring safety.** Respondents discussed the need to use appropriate equipment and technology to facilitate work, especially in physically demanding jobs; and the necessity of creating a “culture of safety” to foster an environment where everyone helps contribute to safe behaviors.

5. **Accommodations.** Accommodations were identified as one key tool for retaining older workers. This included providing training to managers, building strategies and support systems for providing accommodations, reaching out to local resources for assistance in
making accommodations, and writing job descriptions to ensure that they are accurate and properly identify essential functions of a position.

6. **Stay-at-work and return-to-work programs.** Respondents discussed several approaches to improving and managing return-to-work, and helping older workers stay at work. This included: personalized case management, stay-at-work programs and transitional work assignments, work training, mentoring and career progression.

7. **Constructive communication and recognition.** Many of the strategies mentioned by respondents focused on workplace culture, and the importance of equipping front line managers with an understanding of issues around aging and to help them to improve communication.

**Planning and Implementing Programming**

Key informant interviews provided insight into the process that organizations can engage in to develop and implement programming to address aging issues.

- **Identify issues:** Identify relevant patterns in employee demographics, legal charges, productivity or employee engagement. Then use this information to develop related improvement objectives.

- **Organizational education:** Provide education and information to both business leaders and front-line managers – including raising awareness of aging and related issues, as well as best practices in responding to these issues.

- **Plan:** Develop more intensive educational programming, plan changes to organizational practice or encouraging cultural shifts that will help achieve the identified objectives. Realize that one-size does not fit all; different locations or units may have different needs around an aging workforce.

- **Implement:** Implement the planned programming and track its impact within the organization, using metrics that are meaningful.

**Conclusion**

Many organizations are concerned about the implications for an aging workforce, but relatively few have considered an aging workforce in designing A & DM programming. Flexibility, maintaining and enhancing benefits, wellness programming, safety checks, accommodation, return to work programs, and improving communication and culture, were identified as good practices for retaining all workers, and as particularly important in addressing the needs of older workers. There was also an emphasis in the responses on the importance of using organizational data, both workforce demographics and A & DM metrics, to target the planning of A & DM programming for an aging workforce.


This brief was prepared by Valerie Malzer and summarizes the full research report: State of the Field: Absence and Disability Management Practices for an Aging Workforce by Sarah von Schrader, Valerie Malzer, William Erickson, and Susanne Bruyère, Cornell University, Employment and Disability Institute.
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