



Health and wellbeing at work: a survey of employees, 2014

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Background

This survey of employees was commissioned in response to the recommendations from the Independent Review of Sickness Absence¹ to extend our understanding of the relationship between health and work and measure progress in the health and work policy area.

In line with a similar survey in 2011², this study updates our knowledge on and provides an overview of the health and wellbeing of employees in GB. It has a particular focus on the reasons for sickness absence and on the support as well as other factors that might help prevent absence or facilitate a return to work.

It also asked employees their views on the use and usefulness of Fit for Work, a new service offering independent expert health and work advice to employees and employers launched at the end of 2014.

Methods

The survey comprised telephone interviews with paid employees in Great Britain aged 16 and over. It used a Random Digit Dialling (RDD) approach to ensure a nationally representative sample (GB) of 2,013 employees, and incorporated a boost sample of an additional 358 employees who had been off work sick for more than two weeks in the last 12 months. Questions covered employees' experience of health and work, their history of sickness absence in the preceding 12 months and their views on Fit for Work. Interviews took place between January and April 2014.

Key findings

- Thirty-two per cent of employees had a health condition³ in the last 12 months.
- Thirty-four per cent of employees with a health condition had not discussed it with their employer. Those with a mental health condition were less likely to have discussed their condition than those with a physical health condition.
- Forty-two per cent of employees had experienced at least one period of sickness absence; with seven per cent absent for at least one period of more than two weeks.
- Having a supportive employer and discussing health conditions at an early stage were associated with being less likely to have had a period of more than two weeks off sick.

¹ Black, C. and Frost, D. (2011). *Health at work – an independent review of sickness absence*. TSO.

² Young, V. and Bhaumik, C. (2011). *Health and well-being at work: a survey of employees*. DWP Research Report No. 751. Comparisons between the 2011 and 2014 findings require careful interpretation due to differences in the methodologies and questionnaires. Both surveys were representative of the general population but the 2011 survey was conducted face to face in participants' homes, while the 2014 survey was conducted over the telephone.

³ Defined in this survey as a long-term health condition or disability, or an illness or injury that affected the work they could do.

- Most employees (61 per cent) who reported having a health condition and/or a sickness absence lasting more than two weeks had adjustments made by their employer. The most common adjustment was time off at short notice, followed by flexible hours.
- Access to flexible working, provision of injury prevention training and occupational health had increased since 2011. There was no increase in the provision of mental health associated policies.
- Eighty-four per cent of employees thought that Fit for Work would be a useful service.
- Eighty-four per cent of employees felt that they would be comfortable sharing a Return to Work Plan⁴ with their employer; 85 per cent of them were confident that their employer would act on it.

Health at work

Around one-third of employees (32 per cent) had experienced a health condition in the last 12 months. Mental health conditions (12 per cent) and musculoskeletal disorders (ten per cent) were the most commonly identified types of condition.

Most employees who had a health condition in the last year felt that it affected their work: 42 per cent of employees said it affected their work at least to some extent and 24 per cent not very much. However, a further 34 per cent reported that their conditions did not affect their work at all.

Most employees with a health condition said their work had not affected their health condition (63 per cent), but 34 per cent felt that their health had been adversely affected by their work. Employees with mental health conditions were more likely to report that work had worsened their health.

Sickness absence

Forty-two per cent had at least one incidence of sickness absence in the last 12 months, with the majority of sickness absence spells being short: 18 per cent of all employees only experienced an episode of one or two days in length. Sickness absence was more common among women, those working in the public sector, and those working for larger organisations.

Sickness absence episodes of more than two weeks were experienced by seven per cent of employees; five per cent had a long-term sickness absence spell of more than four weeks.

Health and wellbeing policies at work

Between 2011 and 2014, access to certain health and wellbeing policies increased.

Seventy-four per cent of employees reported that some form of flexible working was available to them compared with 57 per cent in 2011. Seventy-six per cent of employees reported access to injury prevention training compared to 51 per cent in 2011.

There was no increase in the provision of mental health associated policies between 2011 and 2014.

Employees working for larger organisations were more likely to report formal sickness absence policies were in place.

Seventy-eight per cent of employees who had experienced a sickness absence spell (of any duration) were paid sick pay.

Workplace culture

Previous research has identified stress as a cause of long-term sickness absence. In this survey:

- 44 per cent of employees reported work as being stressful. This was more common among those working in the public sector and those working in large organisations;

⁴ The Return to Work Plan will be provided by Fit for Work and will contain recommendations from an independent health expert about how obstacles to returning to work might be addressed.

- 64 per cent of those who reported their job to be 'not at all stressful' had not had any sickness absence, compared with 51 per cent of those who reported their job as 'very stressful'.

The survey also explored whether employees had discussed their health condition with their employers:

- where employees viewed their employer as being supportive, this was associated with lower levels of sickness absence.
- 66 per cent of employees with a health condition had discussed it with their employer. Employees with just a mental health condition were less likely to have discussed with their employer (50 per cent compared with 70 per cent of those with a physical health condition);
- when employees discussed a mental health condition with their employer, it was more likely to happen at a later stage and after having taken time off sick from work;
- of those who had discussed their health with their employer, 80 per cent found their employer to have been supportive. This was more frequently the case for employees with a physical health condition rather than a mental health condition (87 per cent and 70 per cent).

Sickness absence of more than two weeks

Sickness absence of more than two weeks was more likely where:

- employees perceived their health condition to have a significant effect on work: 59 per cent of those affected 'a great deal' by their health condition had a period of sickness absence of more than two weeks, compared with ten per cent of those who had a health condition that affected their work 'not very much';
- an employee had both a mental and physical health condition (30 per cent compared with 18 per cent of those with just a physical health condition or 16 per cent with just a mental health condition).

Multivariate analysis showed that employer and job factors were associated with being off work for more than two weeks⁵:

- working in a large organisation;
- working for an employer who was 'not supportive at all' following discussion of health;
- having workplace adjustments made (it is likely that this factor identifies more severe conditions and in particular those that have led to time being taken off work, rather than any adverse effect of the adjustments).

Management of health conditions: fit notes and adjustments

Forty-one per cent of those with a sickness absence lasting more than two weeks said they had provided their employer with a 'fit note'⁶. Of those who provided a fit note the vast majority found the advice helpful (91 per cent).

The provision of adjustments at work was investigated:

- 61 per cent of employees who reported having a health condition and/or a sickness absence lasting more than two weeks had received workplace adjustments of some kind. However, 14 per cent reported having an 'unmet need' and wanted further adjustments;
- employees with just a mental health condition were less likely to report adjustments being made than those with a physical health condition or both;
- 90 per cent of employees found the adjustments made helpful. The most commonly provided adjustment was 'time off at short notice' (received by 48 per cent of employees); followed by 'flexible hours' (23 per cent) and 'change of tasks' (19 per cent);
- 55 per cent of employees reported that their employer made adjustments as soon as they were made aware of their health condition. A further 33 per cent said their employer did not make adjustments until after a period of sickness absence, and 20 per cent only after their GP recommended them.

⁵ Demographics and country were also included in the model and found to be statistically significant.

⁶ A fit note (or Statement of Fitness for Work) provides evidence from a doctor about an individual's fitness for work.

Multivariate analysis showed that the provision of helpful adjustments (from the employee's perspective) was associated with the following factors:

- having a supportive employer;
- working for a smaller organisation;
- working for an employer with a greater range of health and wellbeing policies and initiatives in place;
- having a physical health condition only;
- having a health condition that did not have a considerable effect on work.

Stated reasons for returning to work after a sickness absence of more than two weeks most commonly related to an improvement in the health condition, but financial reasons and getting back to normal were also factors.

Fit for Work

The survey asked employees their views on the use and usefulness of Fit for Work, a new independent health and work advice and referral service launched at the end of 2014.

The vast majority of employees felt that Fit for Work sounded useful (84 per cent) and two-thirds (67 per cent) thought that they would use it

if they were off sick for more than four weeks.

Eighty-four per cent of employees felt that they would be comfortable sharing a Return to Work Plan with their employer. Those with mental health conditions were less willing to share a Return to Work Plan than those with just a physical health conditions or no condition at all.

Eighty-five per cent were confident that their employer would act on a Return to Work Plan.

Overall, employees viewed Fit for Work more positively when they worked in large organisations, the public sector, sales and customer service occupations, and organisations that already had a good range of health and wellbeing policies in place.

Employees who had experienced a sickness absence of more than four weeks also viewed Fit for Work positively: 73 per cent said they would use the service.

Of those who reported being unlikely to use Fit for Work, most felt that their employer would help them anyway (70 per cent) or because they already had access to occupational health services at work (37 per cent). Almost a quarter, however, reported that they were unlikely to use it because they would feel uncomfortable involving their employer with the service (23 per cent).

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The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 910219 76 8. Research Report 901. June 2015).

You can download the full report free from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-work-pensions/about/research#research-publications>

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