



WEEKEND WORKOUT » CATCHING MALINGERERS

Kira Vermond dissects the latest workplace and career trends

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So, why are you shovelling snow if you called in sick?

Admit it: Everyone in the office partied hard last night trying to forget the disastrous fourth quarter – and now the morning commute is bound to be a wintry hell. Between the throbbing headache and the certainty of sluggish traffic, it's enough to make anyone want to play hooky from work.

Busted: Too bad the boss follows up on employees who call in "sick."

A BUNCH OF LIARS

Yet, perhaps those managers have reason to question some workers.

According to a CareerBuilder.com survey of U.S. workers earlier this year, one-third of employees have called in sick when they were in fact healthy.

Many employers, however, are getting wise to the wicked,

with 31 per cent saying they've checked up on a sick employee, either by demanding a doctor's note, calling the house, and, yes, even driving by the employee's home.

Canadians probably aren't too much more honest, although numbers quantifying our lack of moral superiority are hard to come by. Still, is trying to catch workers in a lie the best way to go? Or is the whole concept of granting employees a set number of sick days – typically 10 a year – a paternalistic throwback that sets up overworked employees to fake illness just so they can run errands, see family or get some R&R?

"Sick days create stress for the employee because most of them don't want to be lying to their employer, but they feel caught between personal

needs and their work life," admits Lin Gensing-Pophal of Chippewa Falls, Wis., author of *Motivating Today's Employees*.

FRAUDULENT FRAUD ANALYST

Of course, some employees really do try to play the system, as Diane Ness discovered a few years ago when she was vice-president of fraud prevention for a financial institution in Cleveland. After months of pleading ill and working from home – but never seeming to make any progress with his projects – Ms. Ness finally asked the rogue fraud analyst for a doctor's note.

Turns out, he had his friend forge one. It was fairly easy to spot, she says. "It was just the cheesiness of it, the unprofessional look of the note. I just had a gut feeling." Ms. Ness

called the doctor's office, faxed over the note – and a short time later fired the analyst.

PERSONAL CARE DAYS

Most employees who take the odd fake sick day do it because they have an ill child at home or they simply need a day to rest and recharge. That's one of the reasons that KPMG Inc. doesn't give employees sick days at all, but instead offers personal care days to be used for whatever life issues pop up.

"We want our people to be honest with us. We don't want them to feel that they have to sneak around," says Mario Paron, chief human resource officer at KPMG in Toronto.

Workers receive 50 hours a year, or roughly seven days, and use them when needed.

Bruce Powell, managing partner for IQ Partners Inc., an

executive search firm in Toronto, agrees with this kind of benefit. His company encourages the small staff of 16 to take time off when they need to.

"Whatever policy you put in place, somebody is going to figure out a way to work the system to their advantage. So you might as well be as transparent as possible and focus more on performance."

STAR SICKIES

Sure, performance should count for something, but what happens when that top sales person thinks he's entitled to call in sick whenever he feels like it? How much latitude should there be?

Not too much, cautions David Willows, vice-president in Aon Consulting's health and benefits practice in Toronto.

"You could be looking strictly at numbers and what he produces," Mr. Willows says, "but are those numbers at the cost of team morale?"

LEAVE A MESSAGE

Here's one way to cut down expensive sudden absenteeism: Demand that employees speak to a live person when calling in sick, instead of leaving a message on a machine. That's a policy Mr. Willows helped one company launch last year with great success.

"Over the first six months, their absenteeism declined by 50 per cent simply because workers had to talk to somebody and tell them they would be away – as opposed to having a free pass with voicemail. It's harder to lie when you have to explain yourself."

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