



HEALTH VS HOLIDAY: CAN YOU AFFORD TO STOCKPILE YOUR ANNUAL LEAVE?

With many Australians working longer hours and not taking their annual leave entitlements it's hardly surprising that full-time employees have stockpiled 123 million days of accrued annual leave, the equivalent of \$33.3bn.

To compound the problem, accrual of annual leave has grown 11% from December 2006 to December 2008, according to Roy Morgan Research conducted in December 2008. In addition, 25% of Australians in full-time employment are not taking their entitled annual leave, according to Jones Donald Strategy Partners, March 2009

Not only can overwork be detrimental to productivity at work, it can seriously affect physical and mental health. Given that one in five Australians suffer from mental illness at any one point in time, the impact of increasing financial gloom, the increase in unemployment and the greater uncertainty all employees are facing is sure to hugely impact the state of mental health in the workplace, said Caroline Campbell, director of corporate wellness & incentives company A Sixth Sense.

"It seems as time progresses, no one is immune from the devastating impact of the economic crisis and this is going to increase stress and anxiety in workplaces in general," she said.

Dr Peter Cotton, director of psychology services at University of Melbourne, added: "Not taking leave can often be associated with an increased risk of burnout and stress-related problems. There is certainly a link between not taking leave and having a poor work-family balance."

However, knowing there is a problem and doing something about it are two separate issues. Even though 69% of those who have accrued 25 or more days of annual leave understand that taking a holiday benefits their long-term health, significant workplace and personal barriers prevent them from actually taking a holiday.

Barriers include:

- concerns about returning to unmanageable workloads
- a perceived lack of resources to cover leave
- scheduling difficulties with a partner
- availability of funds

"It's paramount that organisations put their employees first. It's those companies that adopt talent management and development plans for their employees that will come out of the economic crisis in the strongest position. As the saying goes, if you look after your people, the results will look after themselves," said Campbell.

Even without the current economic conditions, employers should be aware of a wide range of employee issues, including: conflict and tension; emotional stress, health and lifestyle issues; pressure and stress; separation/divorce; gambling and addiction; alcohol and drug use; relationship difficulties; financial/legal concerns; child and family issues; personal trauma; anxiety and depression; work pressure/issues; grief and bereavement.

Classic burnout warning signs that employers/managers should look for include a lack of productivity, which is often called presenteeism (when an employee is at work but not on the job); increased absenteeism; irrational or illogical decision making; increased frustration and irritability; and an individual's dependency on self-medication (drugs and/or alcohol) amongst others.

Campbell urges all companies to support employees through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Leading EAP providers can offer a free, confidential and professional counselling service for employees and their immediate family. Counsellors should be registered psychologists who have extensive training in counselling and workplace consulting. The counselling discussion can take place face to face or over the phone.

As demonstrated by the Federal Government's recent *No Leave, No Life* initiative, which encourages Australian workers to use their annual leave accruals on local holidays, an alternative approach is to simply encourage employees to take time out, and to create a culture which allows them to do so.

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