

Workplace Health Insights: Do the basics well

Many people have never heard of occupational health. This means it can be difficult for any organisation to know when to bring in occupational health support, or how to get the most out of it. This blogpost will bring you up to speed so your organisation can do the basics well when it comes to occupational health.

What is occupational health?

Occupational health is an area of healthcare that focuses on the relationship between work and health.

This is a two way relationship:

Health affects work...

...And work affects health

When an employee becomes unwell, particularly with a longer term illness, they may find it difficult to do their job in the same way that they did before. Sometimes, work itself can make employees unwell, for example high levels of stress at work can lead to anxiety and other mental health conditions. The relationship between work and health can be cyclical: if an employee is unwell, they can underperform, which can be stressful and contribute further to deteriorating health. Therefore, it is really important to address any issues at the interface of work and health as quickly as possible, to make sure things do not spiral out of control.

Whose responsibility is occupational health?

The law around work and health makes employers responsible for providing a safe work environment. However, the law does not make it mandatory for employers to provide occupational health services. Given the National Health Service does not provide occupational health services for the public, the only way businesses can get their employees to access occupational health services is to buy them in. This is a business cost but when done well it can be an investment that pays dividends in workforce productivity. Occupational health services give organisations a competitive edge.

How can occupational health services be an investment?

Some ways occupational health services help organisations include

- Reducing sickness absence
- Improving retention on competitive talent
- Improving an individual's productivity while working

All of these things are cost saving!

What are the common pitfalls when it comes to using occupational health services?

Sometimes, employers buy in occupational health services but do not use them to their full potential. Here are four common pitfalls, with simple workarounds.

1) *Lack of pre employment screening*

More people than ever are living with chronic health conditions. Knowing about employee health conditions at the [start of an employment journey](#) means support can be put in place early where necessary. It stops issues at the work and health interface from spiraling out of control and getting to breaking point. Frontloading occupational health input with simple pre-employment checks helps pick up issues and signpost to support. Insight Workplace Health offers a largely automated pre employment triage process run via a confidential secure online portal. This means that occupational health expertise is only deployed where it is needed, keeping costs and hassle to a minimum and ensuring employee confidentiality throughout.

2) *Inadequate awareness of the service which leads to late referrals*

The whole organisation should be briefed on the relationship between work and health, and the offer of occupational health support available. When something does come up, and an employee calls in sick or raises a health issue with their manager, the key is to act quickly. Otherwise, things can significantly deteriorate over time. Insight Workplace Health offers a [one day absence call service](#). This means an occupational health clinician checks in with an employee on the very first day a health issue affects their ability to work. This helps address issues efficiently, reducing longer term sickness absence.

3) *Manager/ HR confusion on implementing occupational health advice*

An occupational health report can be detailed and suggest changes to work patterns or the workplace environment. Sometimes, an employee will also have a fit note from their GP that contains other advice, or even suggests the individual is not fit for work at all. Often, GPs will change their advice based on what occupational health suggest because they are aware occupational health can offer more time, workplace expertise and a more detailed assessment. Whenever there is ambiguity or conflicting advice, ensure the occupational health clinician is aware and they will explain whether or not it is necessary for the employee to go back to the GP to check they are in agreement with the occupational health plan. At Insight Workplace Health the clinical team always take a holistic approach to liaising with an employee's treating team or GP.

4) *Expecting an occupational health referral to solve internal problems*

Sometimes, occupational health assessments pick up issues in the workplace such as bullying, poor change management or unsustainable high demand on employees. These issues are important to uncover and must be addressed. But they cannot be addressed entirely by the occupational health clinician. Instead, this feedback needs to get back to the manager of the team in question and must be used to drive improvement locally. While it is frustrating that the issue cannot be completely solved with an occupational health referral it is extremely important to listen to concerns about workplace factors

impacting employee health. The Insight Workplace Health team are always happy to support employers and managers implementing local improvements.