

## Employee Absenteeism and Competitiveness

In times of plenty, organisations sometimes tolerate undesirable habits. Employee absenteeism may be one such case. The cost to organizations has been, and continues to be, high. Its effects are insidious and far reaching. In times of economic austerity, such as that which Trinidad and Tobago is currently experiencing, this will probably be considered a luxury that can no longer be afforded.

It is an area of concern that may have been neglected or ignored for a long time but which more than ever now, requires the attention of management because of its importance to the economic well-being of the organization.

Employee absence from work is usually part of terms and conditions of employment in Trinidad and Tobago. It is embedded in the existing Minimum Wages Order in the form of vacation leave and sick leave and it is a normal part of Collective Agreements and individual contracts of employment. These provisions are generally accepted as good employment practice. If this is so, then why should employers - and employees - be concerned about employee absenteeism?

To answer this question we may have to explore the difference between employee absence from work and employee absenteeism, the difference between eligibility and entitlement to different types leave, their use and the abuse of, acceptable and unacceptable levels of employee absenteeism and responsible behaviour towards the use of employee benefits, such as sick leave and personal leave.

In Trinidad and Tobago, there is often a prevailing workplace culture where eligibility to sick and casual leave is interpreted as entitlement to

them, and the allocations are deliberately exhausted as a 'right'. The abuse and misuse of such leaves are complex matters that require creative approaches and judicious application of both incentive and discipline, and cases must be assessed on an individual basis, using the guidelines of the Industrial Court.

It is necessary for companies to assist in changing the culture of workplaces, so that employees shift focus from being absent from work at every opportunity, to attending work regularly and punctually and being productive when they are at work. Employees on the other hand, should be continually asking themselves what value they are adding to the organization. They should be challenging themselves to increase their contribution to their respective organizations, otherwise they may run the risk of becoming irrelevant or even obsolete. It is imperative, therefore, that this country immediately embarks on an employee productivity drive..

In order to gain and maintain the edge in today's globalised marketplace, it is crucial that our competitiveness be increased. In the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index this country's scores for "Poor work ethic in the national labour force" as well as "Pay and Productivity" need to be improved.

Employee productivity is one area which the Chamber has been advocating as a key determinant in the thrust to making our enterprises more competitive locally, regionally and internationally. When an employee is absent from work, his or her productivity is zero. The cost of that employee continues while replacement costs may also be incurred. Employee morale could suffer and operational efficiency reduced. The cumulative impact on the enterprise over an extended

period could be deleterious and in some cases disastrous. The end result could be loss of market share, both local and international, with consequential reduction of employment opportunities. This is a human cost which is avoidable and we should take timely action to do so.

The Chamber believes that increased national productivity is a key success factor in this country's goal to increase competitiveness and should have special focus as we chart our way forward. The global economic environment demands no less.