



How good is your business really?

Wellbeing, engagement and productivity: Airbus

Airbus UK is a wholly owned subsidiary of Airbus SAS which produces wings for the Airbus aircraft family. It has two main sites responsible for the design and manufacture of the high-technology wings for all Airbus models as well as overall design and supply of the fuel system. The company employs around 10,000 people at two sites: Filton, where the engineering and design activity takes place along with some manufacturing, and Broughton, where other major wing component manufacturing and all wing assembly takes place.

The senior management and trade unions have developed two innovations related to improving attendance and increasing engagement at both sites. The Time Savings Accounts (TSA) and Absence Management System (AMS) have both contributed to improved attendance rates and enhanced capacity planning capability. For example, sickness rates have reduced from above 5% to circa 3% in a short space of time whilst maintaining the principle that 'people will be off genuinely sick and we should treat employees properly'. Both schemes also demonstrate to staff that the company has a strong interest in their wellbeing, an essential factor in sustained employee engagement.

Both managers and staff have found benefits with TSA; the latter by having an 'excellent tool to manage capacity' and the latter by being able to bank additional hours worked to gain extra holidays.

The purpose of TSA was to provide staff with the following opportunities:



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- To increase their annual holiday entitlement following the implementation of a 2 week summer shutdown
- To have a phased rundown prior to the agreed retirement date
- To protect them in the event of a downturn

It was also designed to improve the organisation's flexibility and protect the business and employees through difficult times. All staff were provided with a detailed handbook outlining the background, general principles, payment/conversion rates, rules plus a comprehensive list of questions and answers. All of the questions and answers were, for example, approached from both the organisation and the staff perspectives. The idea, which originated from Germany, was introduced on a voluntary basis and has been used by approximately 70% of all staff to date. The majority of this use is to achieve the one week additional holiday allowed by the scheme.

Although it is not a large percentage of the overall use of TSA, the opportunity is there for staff to leave Airbus prior to their agreed retirement date by up to one year or to reduce their hours prior to retirement while still receiving basic pay. Hours can be banked in an "End of Career Account". Similarly, banked hours can be built up in a "Downturn Account" which could avoid redundancies if Airbus faced serious headcount challenges. It is not surprising, however, that staff tended to initially focus primarily on the latter option when the scheme was first communicated to them. Despite attempts to communicate thoroughly, some staff reached their own conclusions about what the scheme was designed for – 'people tend to read what they want to read and jump to conclusions' – but the decision to make it voluntary made a huge difference in the perceptions of staff.



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Airbus are fully supportive that 'staff use it to their advantage' but the business benefits are considerable. For example, its introduction increases the company levels of adaptability by up to 7.5% - which means that up to 300 jobs will be protected in Broughton alone in the event of a short term downturn. Moreover, it helps Broughton to achieve targets - 'if we add this to existing levels of adaptability... we start to achieve our targets of 30%'. There are some complexities to running the TSA system but the rules are intentionally simple. All staff have been trained to use the system which is transparent to all staff and managers.

The AMS is, arguably, even more innovative. Many organisations struggle to adopt a sickness and absence process that allows them to 'support people in their hour of need'. The answer to how Airbus has achieved this lies not just in the process itself, but in the meticulous manner in which it was thought-through and introduced. Initially, around 144 ideas were gathered from all of the staff in Broughton on how to improve general attendance. After risk and feasibility assessments, these were reduced to 15 options that were presented formally to the trade union representatives. After three months of joint weekly meetings, the current system was agreed.

The system requires every member of staff to call a designated number to report their first day of sickness. At this point, the line manager receives a text and an email to notify them that the member of staff is sick. As it was pointed out, 'that's enough for now at that point'. The line manager will, however, call the staff member and note that a return to work interview will need to be scheduled when the person is fit to return. The key innovation is that, on the fourth day of sickness, the member of staff



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is obliged to call the Occupational Health team to give them an update and a potential return to work date. Under the previous notification system, Occupational Health were rarely involved and only at a late stage in the process. This could mean that this process could drag on through their lack of intervention.

If, on the fourth day of sickness, a return date cannot be established, a triage call will be arranged with the Occupational Health advisor. The advisor's first priority is to help and offer support. A formal process exists if a member of staff becomes 'non-compliant' but the early involvement of Occupational Health, who are there to 'ensure fairness at all times' has made a considerable improvement – for example, very few people get to Stage 2 of the process. This shows that, as well as genuinely helping people, the system and process provides a real deterrent to those who might feign illness. It was noted that 'putting people into the system can help to educate and provide life guidance – it focuses people's minds'. Line managers are also fully involved in the process.

The Occupational Health team provides all types of nurses, doctors (although not full-time), physios, staff support, a mental health nurse, a consultant psychiatrist and a well-being advisor. They also have arrangements with other organisations if staff need highly specialised treatment. This level of support is appreciated by staff and there were over 25,000 interactions in 2015. For example, 500 staff used staff support and 1500 were treated by the physios. Many staff used to believe that Occupational Health 'were on their side' but are now more informed about their priority of fairness. The trade union representatives are also supportive of Occupational Health's role and regard themselves as custodians of the policy.



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The early involvement of Occupational Health presents an opportunity for preventative action that can have a significant effect on an individual's health and well-being. 90% of issues referred to Occupational Health are dealt with by the nursing team and a great deal of work is applied to phasing a person's return to work and trying to ensure that they can be found a job that matches their current capabilities. This process is aided by a clear definition of what 'fit to work' means, a definition that was established during the initial consultation meetings.

Supporting both the TSA and AMS processes is a programme of training for line managers that aims to embed the knowledge gained during workshops - which are designed to give the line managers the confidence to deal with difficult issues using real life examples from within Airbus. By improving management capability in capacity planning and absence - the TSA and AMS initiatives are supported by fully informed individuals from all areas of the company. This ensures that the initiatives remain 'business as usual' regardless of future challenges.

Learnings

- Effective relationships with recognised trade unions can lead to agreement around workplace innovations such as TSA's which impact positively on both engagement and productivity, benefitting individual employees, the workforce generally and the company
- These approaches need to be developed with the involvement and understanding of the workforce; their ideas need to be sought and options developed



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- The proactive involvement of occupational health services is a strong indicator of employer concern over staff wellbeing, a central factor in sustainable employee engagement
- Line managers need support and training in how to implement such schemes effectively