

Flexible workplaces reduce rate of sickness absence

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People with fun and stimulating jobs, and who are able to adapt their workplace to their needs, have a lower rate of sickness absence and more often go to work despite being ill. This also applies to workplaces with heavy attendance pressure.

Gun Johansson, a postgraduate at Swedish medical university Karolinska Institutet, presents in her thesis the illness flexibility model in order to elucidate the causes of sickness absence. The study shows that the less adaptable a workplace, the higher the rate of sick leave. Her results may affect how people's working lives can be organised to incorporate ill health and make it easier for those who are ill to remain at work.

The illness flexibility model describes how illness affects people's ability and motivation to work. If people are given opportunities to adapt their pace of work, their duties and their hours according to their state of health, the chances are greater that they will be able to continue to work instead of having to take time off sick. Amongst those who are still obliged to take sick leave, the chances are greater that they will return to work after a long absence if these adaptive possibilities exist.

Absence from work can have negative consequences, both for the employee concerned and his/her colleagues, who might have to take on the surplus burden. The outcome is that certain people feel compelled to go to work despite being ill and in need of convalescence. Such a heavy pressure on attendance increases the likelihood of a high rate of sickness absence.

In Sweden, sicklistings are more common amongst manual workers than non-manual. This discrepancy shrinks if factors in differences regarding health and the opportunities people have to adapt their work, attendance requirements and job stimulation are counted for. Opportunities that are more limited for the manual worker.

Source: Karolinska Institutet

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