Blame the GFC: sickies rise

Sam McKeith

Whether it is the reliable ("My car broke down") or something more imaginative ("I had to take my fish to the psychiatrist"), one thing is clear: workers embraced absenteeism with vigour last year, especially in banking, finance and insurance.

Australian employees took an average 9.9 days' sick leave in 2009, up from 9.3 the previous year, according to a survey of 130 large public and private sector employers by absence-management company Direct Health Solutions.

Absenteeism jumped most in the banking, finance and insurance sectors. Workers in these industries recorded an average of 11.17 days away sick — two more days than in 2008.

Workers in the media racked up an extra three days last year, taking their tally to 9.45 days, while telco workers took an average 10.5 days off work, up 0.6 days from the previous year.

But workers in the travel, tourism and hospitality sector called in sick an average 6.3 days, four fewer than in 2008.

Direct Health Solutions managing director Paul Dundon blamed the surge in absenteeism on the global financial crisis.

"With the cost slashing that went on after the GFC, workplace pressure built up to a point where many people were stuck in their jobs for much longer and were not satisfied, were

not engaged, and so work stress increased," Mr Dundon said.

He said the "pandemonium" around the swine flu outbreak probably contributed.

"It had a big impact in contact centres, many of which are in banking and finance industry," he said.

The Commonwealth Bank of Australia said absenteeism among its staff dropped by 0.6 of a day to 5.9 days last year and was steady so far in 2010. Westpac did not respond to requests for information.

The cost of sickies also rose. According to the DHS survey the average worker now takes $3712 worth of days off per year, costing the economy between $20 billion and $30 billion each year.

Some 95 per cent of employers

believed staff had thrown some "non-genuine" sickies, and most believed that 10 per cent to 15 per cent of all absences were fake.

They picked up a higher incidence of sick leave on Mondays and Fridays and around school holidays.

The employers surveyed listed "unexpected illness" as the most frequent reason given for a day off, outranking many non-health reasons including home and family responsibilities, substance abuse, rostering inflexibility and low workplace morale.

Career management firm Trevor Roberts Associates said there were many simple strategies managers could use to minimise sick leave.

"You can give shorter time off, adjust workload or give people the

space to slow down a bit at work rather than going at this breakneck speed," principal Edwin Trevor Roberts said.

If those failed, Mr Trevor Roberts backed looking to the dramatic arts. "Stage actors are on fire for a season that might be four weeks then get time to rejuvenate. In business we forget to give people time to rejuvenate," he said.

Spencer Travel boss Penny Spencer said the key to low rates of absenteeism was simple: give staff more leave.

"We give everyone five weeks' annual leave, so they're pretty happy about that," Ms Spencer said.

She said crafting a supportive work environment was also important.

"Our whole office is feng shui ... it has the right energy."

To solve absenteeism, some employers are allowing more time off. Photo: PAUL JONES

Absent minded

Fast facts about sickies

$30bn Estimated cost to the economy

$375 Average daily cost to employers

8% Rise in annual cost to employers

5% Increase in absence rate from 2008

36% Employers reporting more absences

37% Employers reporting no change

75% Unplanned absence due to illness

15% Unplanned days due to carer duties

71% Employers think up to 25% of absences are not genuine

7 Average number of expected sick days

SOURCE: ABSENCE MANAGEMENT SURVEY