

Mitigating Sick Leave Abuse: A Comprehensive Approach to Optimize Workforce Health in Healthcare Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Sick leave abuse is a pressing issue within healthcare organizations, as it not only affects workforce productivity but also compromises the quality of patient care. This paper proposes a comprehensive approach to mitigate sick leave abuse and optimize workforce health in healthcare organizations.

Our approach encompasses various strategies, including robust policy development, proactive communication, employee wellness initiatives, and data-driven analytics. By implementing clear and consistent sick leave policies, healthcare organizations can set expectations and deter potential abusers. Proactive communication, involving regular check-ins and feedback mechanisms, fosters a supportive work environment that encourages genuine illness reporting.

Moreover, promoting employee wellness through physical and mental health programs can prevent sick leave abuse by addressing the root causes of absenteeism. Data-driven analytics enable organizations to identify patterns and trends in sick leave usage, allowing for targeted interventions and resource allocation.

This comprehensive approach seeks to balance the need for employee well-being with the imperative to maintain a healthy and efficient healthcare workforce. By addressing the issue of sick leave abuse, healthcare organizations can ensure better patient care, reduced costs, and improved employee morale. This paper provides a roadmap for healthcare organizations to proactively manage sick leave abuse and foster a healthier, more productive workforce.

Keywords: Sick leave; Abuse; Misuse; Approach; Prevention

INTRODUCTION

Sick leave (SLs) constitutes a fundamental employee benefit, offering crucial support to individuals grappling with illness or accidental injuries. This provision safeguards their financial stability during challenging times. However, the privilege of SLs has regrettably been prone to exploitation, resulting in a significant strain on primary and outpatient secondary care services^[1].

In Bahrain, the labor law, Article -58 stipulates that an employee is entitled to 15 days of SLs with full pay for the first three months of employment, and then up to 30 days of SLs with full pay for each year of service after that. The law also allows for additional SLs with half pay if the employee exhausts their full SLs entitlement. Employers are required to provide a medical certificate for any SLs lasting more than two days^[2].

Sick leave Abuse (SLA) refers to the exploitation of SL benefits by employees who are not genuinely ill or injured. This includes taking SLs for personal reasons, such as vacation or to attend non-medical appointments, or using SLs to supplement income. SLA can also include employees exaggerating the severity of their illness or injury to receive extended SL periods^[3].

Absenteeism and Presenteeism

SLA, often referred to as absenteeism, significantly undermines workplace productivity. Conversely, the phenomenon of "Presenteeism," where employees attend work while unwell or operating below their optimal capacity, can be equally detrimental^[4].

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reveals that absenteeism, akin to SLs, imposes a substantial financial burden on employers in the United States, amounting to a staggering \$225.8 billion annually. This equates to an approximate cost of \$1,685 per employee. Some estimates suggest that maintaining an absence rate of approximately 1.5 percent strikes an optimal balance between optimizing productivity and preventing burnout within the workforce. It is imperative to reduce absenteeism while concurrently fostering an organizational culture that encourages employees to take adequate time off to preserve their well-being, vitality, and enthusiasm for their work^[5].

SLA is a significant problem in the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC). According to a study by the International Labor Organization, the average rate of absenteeism due to sickness in the GCC is 4.2%, which is higher than the global average of 3.5%. The study also found that SLAs were a prevalent issue in the region, with many employees using PSLs to attend social events or participate in personal activities^[6].

Signs of SLA

Identifying potential signs of SLA can be challenging, as these individuals may have interacted with healthcare services. It is important to note that these signs should serve as a starting point for further investigation rather than conclusive evidence. The following signs warrant attention^[7].

- **Frequent Short-Term Illnesses:** Repeated reporting of short-term illnesses or minor ailments necessitating multiple SL requests within a short time limit.
- **Pattern of Absences:** SLs patterns that consistently align with weekends, holidays, or special occasions, hinting at an attempt to extend time off.
- **Consistent Sundays and Thursdays:** Frequent SLs on Sundays, Thursdays, or close to government holidays, indicating a penchant for creating long weekends.
- **Inconsistencies in Medical Certificates:** Medical certificates provided by the employee or healthcare professionals that exhibit inconsistencies, lack specific details, or reveal visits to multiple healthcare providers.
- **Regular Doctor's Visits:** Frequent visits to healthcare professionals for minor illnesses without significant improvement in the employee's condition.
- **Selective Illness:** Reported illnesses that conveniently coincide with important work assignments or project deadlines.
- **Failure to Follow Company Policy:** Consistent failure to adhere to the company's SLs policy, such as not providing timely notice or required documentation.
- **No Clear Diagnosis:** Medical certificates lack a clear diagnosis or medical justification for the leave, often containing vague descriptions.
- **Trends in the Time of Day:** Frequent SLs taken during specific times of the day, such as consistently in the morning or after lunch.
- **Reluctance to Discuss Illness:** The employee's reluctance or evasiveness when discussing their illness or its details, is indicative of potential dishonesty.
- **Inconsistent Behavior:** Behaviors outside of SLs that do not align with genuine illness, such as activity on social media, engagement in physical activities, or frequent socializing during reported sick days.
- **Co-worker Observations:** Colleagues expressing suspicions or making observations about the employee's behavior or absenteeism

Addressing potential SLA demands a sensitive and confidential approach. In cases where multiple SLA signs are observed, a thorough and objective inquiry should be conducted following the organization's policies and

applicable laws. Consulting with HR professionals or legal experts is often advisable to ensure a fair and legally compliant process.

Physicians Encountering Suspected SLA May Have Various Challenges^[8]:

- **Ethical Dilemmas:** Physicians must navigate ethical dilemmas when asked to provide medical certificates or SLs for employees they suspect are abusing the system. Balancing their duty to provide honest medical assessments with their ethical obligation to "not harm" presents ethical complexities.
- **Patient-Physician Trust:** Refusing to issue PSL when a patient requests it can damage the trust between the patient and their physician, potentially yielding long-term consequences for the doctor-patient relationship.
- **Legal and Regulatory Obligations:** Physicians are often bound by specific legal and regulatory obligations about medical certifications and SLs. These obligations may limit their ability to refuse SLs without clear medical grounds.
- **Diagnostic Challenges:** Differentiating between genuine illness and malingering can be a challenging task, especially when medical conditions lack obvious symptoms, necessitating reliance on patient-provided information.
- **Documentation Burden:** Physicians may be required to maintain detailed and time-consuming records to substantiate their decisions, adding an administrative burden to their workload.
- **Fear of Retaliation:** Physicians may fear potential retaliation from patients who disagree with their assessment, which could involve complaints to medical boards or legal actions.
- **Lack of Clear Guidelines:** The absence of clear and standardized guidelines for addressing suspected SLA can leave physicians uncertain about the appropriate course of action.

Effectively addressing SLA necessitates the establishment of clear policies that define acceptable SL levels for employees, complete with robust mechanisms for monitoring and implementing corrective actions when misuse occurs (3). For instance, the Bahrain Civil Service Bureau provides guidelines allowing employees who have completed three consecutive months of service to qualify for SLs based on a certificate issued by specific healthcare providers^[9]. The entitlement includes fifteen days on full pay, twenty days on half-pay, and twenty days without pay^[3].

While twelve sick days per year may not necessarily raise concerns, a recurring pattern of taking sick leave every month, particularly in proximity to weekends, may indicate undesirable behavior^[3].

The impact of SLs extends to both organizations and healthcare services responsible for issuing SL certificates, with distinct consequences for each.

Impact of the Frequent SLs on the Employee Organizations^[10]

- **Productivity Loss:** SLs contribute to a decline in workforce productivity, particularly when the absent employee occupies a critical role in the organization. In response, colleagues may find themselves compelled to compensate, potentially leading to an overall reduction in efficiency.
- **Operational Disruption:** The abrupt absence of employees due to illness disrupts daily operations and project timelines. This can result in delays and challenges in meeting established deadlines.
- **Increased Workload:** Employees who are not on SLs may experience an escalation in their workloads as they step in to cover the responsibilities of their absent colleagues. This heightened workload can potentially lead to burnout and diminished job satisfaction.
- **Temporary Replacement Costs:** In specific instances, organizations may need to hire temporary or substitute workers to fulfill the duties and responsibilities of the absent employee. This incurs additional expenses for the organization.
- **Administrative Overhead:** Managing SLs entails administrative costs related to record-keeping, compliance with labor laws, and the potential need for legal and HR support to address SLA issues.
- **Healthcare Costs:** Organizations often continue to provide health insurance benefits to employees on sick leave, resulting in additional financial obligations.
- **Impact on Morale:** Frequent or extended instances of SLA can have a detrimental effect on workplace morale. Employees may perceive this as unfair or burdensome, leading to a negative impact on overall team spirit and motivation.
- **Financial Burden:** Negative implications of SLA are quantified by considering factors such as the total monthly SLs and their associated costs, including potential overtime expenses.
- **Disrupt Teamwork:** It will lead to interpersonal conflicts, disrupt solidarity, and erode employee morale due to the excessive workloads imposed on the remaining workforce.
- **Erode the Ethical Morale:** The ethical aspects of frequent SL swear down employee integrity, trust in leadership, and the sense of belonging within the organization, ultimately undermining overall accountability.

Impact of frequent SLs Issuing on the Healthcare Services^[11]

- ❖ **Increased Workload:** Health services responsible for issuing SL certificates may encounter an increased workload, particularly during flu seasons or health crises, placing strain on healthcare resources.
- ❖ **Medical Documentation:** Issuing SL certificates requires healthcare professionals to prepare and maintain medical documentation, which can be time-consuming.
- ❖ **Evaluating Legitimacy:** Healthcare providers must assess the legitimacy of SL requests, a challenging task when the illness is not easily verifiable or when patients exaggerate their symptoms.
- ❖ **Ethical Considerations:** Physicians and healthcare professionals issuing SLs must navigate ethical dilemmas when suspecting an employee of an SLA.
- ❖ **Patient-Physician Trust:** Refusing to issue SLs when a patient requests it can potentially damage the trust between the patient and their physician.
- ❖ **Legal and Regulatory Compliance:** Healthcare services issuing SLs certificates must adhere to relevant legal and regulatory obligations and documentation requirements.
- ❖ **Work-Related Illnesses:** In cases of work-related illnesses or injuries, health services may become involved in the worker's compensation process, entailing additional administrative work.

The impact of SLs on organizations and healthcare services issuing SL certificates is multifaceted, influencing productivity, costs, and personnel, among other factors. Effective management of SLs and collaboration between organizations and healthcare providers is imperative to mitigate these impacts.

Several Strategic Implementations to Control Frequent Issuing SLA in Healthcare Services^[12,13]:

1- Clear SLs Policies and Regulations

Clearly defined policies aligned with labor laws to promote transparency, meet expectations, and ensure consistent application. Ensuring that all employees are well-versed in these policies, outlining the acceptable reasons for issuing SLs, and understanding the consequences of non-compliance^[4].

2- Monitoring and Enforcement Mechanisms

Effective monitoring and enforcement are paramount in the management of SLA. By vigilantly scrutinizing patterns of SL utilization and rigorously enforcing SL policies, healthcare services can readily identify employees engaging in SLA and institute appropriate interventions. These interventions may encompass disciplinary measures or counseling to delve into the underlying factors contributing to SLA. Furthermore, the systematic

monitoring and enforcement approach can serve as a diagnostic tool for the refinement and modernization of existing SL policies.

To establish a robust monitoring system, it is imperative to ensure adherence to SL policies. Such measures may encompass the mandatory submission of medical certificates for prolonged periods of SLs or the implementation of a comprehensive SL reporting and tracking system.

Moreover, the establishment of an intricate record-keeping system is essential. This entails the integration of software applications equipped with SL-time tracking features, thereby facilitating the meticulous documentation of the dates and rationales behind employee absences. Furthermore, the deployment of tabulated charts proves invaluable for the visual representation of SLA patterns spanning the preceding 12 months. Such data visualization techniques play a pivotal role in the identification of instances of excessive or irregular SL utilization.

3- Engage Creative Healthcare Leaders

Healthcare leaders should enhance trust culture and improve teamwork spirit, to follow physician adherence to relevant policies, emphasizing the importance of a robust record system to measure SL utilization and patterns^[5].

4- Implement Corrective Action and Incentive Systems

Implement corrective action measures, with work supervisors engaging with employees to understand reasons for their worker's absences by occupational physicians. Consider employee assistance programs for complex cases. Explore incentive systems in the organization that reward loyal employees to effectively combat SLA^[5].

5- Enhance Physician Perspective

Emphasize the importance of maintaining integrity and adhering to ethical standards when issuing SL certificates. Encourage physicians to issue accurate certificates without fraudulent or false claims. Prohibit backdating of sickness certificates under all circumstances^[7]. Emphasize good medical practice, including honesty, transparency, and verification of information before signing reports or certificates^[8].

6- Promoting a Positive Workplace Culture in the Organization^[14]:

Sick leaves (SLs) do not solely manifest as a concern within the realm of healthcare services; rather, they serve as symptomatic indicators of a maladaptive work environment, demanding immediate remediation. The cultivation of a salubrious workplace ethos and the elevation of the holistic welfare and vitality of personnel stand as paramount strategies in reducing the incidence of sick leaves attributable to illness. An array of methodologies can be employed to attain this objective:

- ✓ **Promote Employee Wellness:** Employers can play a proactive role in cultivating a healthy workplace environment by advocating and incentivizing positive habits among their workforces. Encouraging routines that encompass regular exercise, healthy dietary choices, and effective stress management can tangibly reduce the incidence of illness and, consequently, the need for SLs.

- ✓ **Implement Flexible Work Arrangements:** The introduction of flexible work arrangements, including options like telecommuting or flexible working hours, empowers employees to better balance their work obligations with personal responsibilities. This, in turn, reduces stress levels and mitigates the necessity for SLs.
- ✓ **Provide Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs):** EAPs serve as a valuable resource for employees, offering access to counseling and mental health services. These services effectively address stress and mental health-related concerns, which are common precursors to illnesses leading to SLs.
- ✓ **Implement Clear SL Policies:** Employers can significantly contribute to the reduction of SLs by establishing unambiguous SL policies. These policies should comprehensively outline the rules and procedures governing SL usage, including the circumstances necessitating medical certificates.
- ✓ **Address SLA:** Proactive monitoring of SL patterns is imperative, enabling employers to swiftly identify and investigate suspected SLA. Where substantiated, employers should take appropriate disciplinary action to rectify the situation.

By promoting an integrated approach to workplace health and well-being, employers can effectively minimize the prevalence of SLs due to illness, resulting in a more productive and harmonious work environment.

CONCLUSION

Healthcare services and employee organizations must recognize that addressing SLA is not solely a cost-cutting endeavor, but a multifaceted initiative aimed at enhancing patient care and elevating employee morale. This comprehensive approach offers a structured framework for fostering a healthier and more productive workforce, resulting in a mutually beneficial scenario for both employees and patients. Through the implementation of these strategies, healthcare services and employee organizations can secure a brighter and more sustainable future for their workforce, ultimately upholding and enhancing the quality of care they provide.

This article presents a systematic approach to managing SLA within healthcare services and employee organizations, emphasizing the pivotal role of well-defined policies, continuous monitoring, targeted corrective actions, and the inclusion of the physician's perspective. This multifaceted strategy fosters a culture of responsibility, accountability, and unwavering professional integrity. By cultivating such a culture, organizations can effectively mitigate the adverse impacts of SLA while upholding the highest standards of medical professionalism.

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