

Sickness absences and their monitoring in state administration

More attention has been paid to sickness absences recently, since resulting costs are large and sick leave is not always the best solution for the employee or the workplace. In state administration the total costs of sickness absences came to nearly 260 million euros in 2009, and they took up about four per cent of working time. It is very important to strive to influence work-related illness and sickness absences both preventively and in a way that supports sick employees. From the viewpoint of government agencies sickness absences are always losses.

The National Audit Office conducted an audit regarding this subject for which data were collected with the help of expert interviews and a written questionnaire. The target group for the questionnaire was selected from state administration as a whole so that it included organisations of different types and sizes. The National Audit Office also considers these quite noteworthy in Finland's state administration.

The audit included an examination of an audit concerning sickness absences that was conducted by the National Audit Office of Denmark in 2009, on the basis of which five recommendations were made. The National Audit Office considers that these are also quite worthy of attention in Finland's state administration.

The main question in the audit was whether monitoring data concerning sickness absences supports agencies' management. As an answer to the question it was noted that monitoring data are a significant support for good management but have not been utilised adequately.

The audit drew attention to the methods used in monitoring sickness absences and recommended that the Tahti personnel information system be developed to make it easier to use and improve its reliability while ensuring adequate user training.

The audit noted that returning to work after a lengthy absence is a demanding situation both for the person who has been ill and for the work community. In order to operate successfully an organisation must have procedures agreed in advance to deal with an employee who has been ill or is recovering and to assist the employee's return to work.

An important part of a culture of caring is keeping in touch and maintaining a dialogue. Employees who are absent from work for a long time or repeatedly because of illness are in need of such a dialogue. Discus-

sions concerning sickness absences are most beneficial when they are conducted as soon as possible once the matter has become timely.

Partial sickness allowance has been found to be a good way to support returning to work after sick leave. This requires clear rules, uniform guidelines and smooth cooperation among different actors, however. The use of partial sickness allowance has been quite limited so far.

The audit found that in most agencies cooperation with occupational health care had worked well, but in some cases it needed to be improved. For example, the monitoring of sickness absences due to work by occupational health care and related reporting and cooperation with agencies are necessary.

The handling of documents related to cases of illness should be planned in advanced and recorded. There should also be written guidelines concerning how sick leave certificates are to be handled and by whom.

Although illness is most often unpredictable, setting objectives for the maximum number of sickness absences is justified especially in large organisations, since an objective guides supervisors to look after employees' occupational health insofar as this is possible. If objectives are communicated in a good spirit and the workplace atmosphere is sufficiently good, the setting of objectives can in the best case support employees to act so as to promote their own and other employees' health.

The support provided by supervisors in work and creating preconditions for work has become an important factor in managing sickness absences. The good planning of organisational changes and the evaluation of risks resulting from change would also facilitate responding to changes, along with balanced and open management.

The National Audit Office recommends that government agencies study matters related to sickness absences in their own organisation more deeply and if they notice needs for improvement that they consider solutions that are suited to their organisations' needs.

In discussing sickness absences it is important to remember that an employee's illness must be dealt with in the required manner and that illness and recovery often require the kind of rest that necessitates interrupting work.