



Early Warnings: Using FMLA to Understand and Manage Disability Absence

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Managing work absence under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) continues to challenge employers. Our conversations with benefits managers and FMLA claims administrators revealed that employers focus much of their efforts and resources on complying with the law, tracking time off and preventing misuse of leaves.

This raised the larger question of how FMLA leave management can be improved, specifically with regard to its impact on longer, more-expensive disability claims. With ongoing economic challenges for employers and the need to have employees at work and productive, businesses need tools to promote employee health while preventing absence. FMLA can be an effective “early warning system” for both.

To provide this deeper understanding of FMLA, IBI analyzed data provided by a leading absence management company to identify the key relationships between FMLA, short-term disability (STD) and long-term disability (LTD). This report examines data collected between 2007 and 2011 culled from 161 businesses and 520,000 covered employees.

Findings include:

- A substantial minority of employees takes FMLA leave (24% over a five-year period).
- Employees who use FMLA are more likely to use STD the following year.
- Employees without access to STD benefits use more FMLA days.
- When preceded by FMLA claims, STD durations are longer, and later LTD claims are more likely.
- Employees who request FMLA leave but are denied as ineligible are at a higher risk of a later STD claim—and could benefit from health interventions.
- Contrary to a common perception, employees aren’t any more likely to take intermittent FMLA on a Monday or Friday as on any other weekday.

Employers have an opportunity to minimize disability and lost-productivity costs by developing strategies for connecting at-risk employees to interventions.

Recommendations from IBI’s panel of experts include:

- Take advantage of FMLA as a way to improve employees’ health at early stages to prevent future disability absences.
- Take steps to connect employees requesting FMLA leaves with resources such as employee assistance programs, ergonomic interventions and disease management programs, regardless of an employee’s eligibility for FMLA.
- Foster discussions about job accommodation and stay-at-work at the earliest opportunity.
- Coordinate activities across benefits programs silos, which continue to be barriers to effective FMLA management.
- Expand FMLA training for supervisors on early warning signs and potential interventions, and train employees on rights and responsibilities under FMLA.

Members can access the full report at www.ibiweb.org/fmla2013.

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