

Navigating Workplace Absenteeism: A Comparative Analysis of Trends, Impacts, and Strategies in Ireland and Europe

I. Executive Summary

Workplace absenteeism represents a significant and growing challenge for organizations across both Ireland and the broader European Union. This report provides a comprehensive analysis of current trends, underlying causes, and the profound economic and operational impacts of employee absence. It highlights that while the specific rates and legislative frameworks differ, both regions are grappling with a surge in absences, largely driven by escalating mental health concerns, workplace stress, and the evolving dynamics of modern work environments, including remote and hybrid models. The financial burden is substantial, costing billions annually and severely impacting productivity, employee morale, and organizational resilience. This analysis underscores that absenteeism is not merely a human resources issue but a critical indicator of overall organizational health, demanding a strategic, holistic approach to workforce well-being and engagement. Effective management strategies, rooted in clear policies, comprehensive wellness programs, flexible work options, and data-driven insights, are imperative for fostering healthier, more productive, and sustainable workforces in both Ireland and Europe.

II. Introduction

Defining Absenteeism: Types and Key Measurement Metrics

Absenteeism, in the context of the workplace, refers to an employee's absence from work, whether planned or unplanned, for various reasons beyond formally approved leave such as vacation or public holidays. It is crucial to distinguish absenteeism from "presenteeism," which describes the phenomenon of employees attending work despite illness or reduced productivity, often due to pressure or fear of repercussions. Both absenteeism and presenteeism negatively affect organizational performance, with presenteeism often representing a hidden, yet substantial, cost.

Absenteeism typically manifests in several forms:

- **Short-term absence:** These are generally brief periods of absence, often attributed to minor illnesses, personal appointments, or, in some cases, the misuse of leave policies.
- **Long-term absence:** Defined as extended periods away from work, often exceeding three days in a quarter or four consecutive weeks. Such absences are frequently linked to serious health conditions, chronic illnesses, or significant personal challenges requiring prolonged recovery or attention.
- **Unauthorised absence / No Call, No Show:** This occurs when an employee fails to report for work without prior notification or a valid, communicated reason. This type of

absence presents immediate operational disruptions and often triggers disciplinary procedures.

Measuring absenteeism accurately is fundamental to understanding its scope and impact. The most common metric is the absenteeism rate, calculated as the total number of absent days divided by the total number of scheduled working days, multiplied by 100 to express it as a percentage. Beyond this primary rate, organizations also track metrics such as the cost per employee, frequency of absences, and specific trigger points that necessitate intervention. The meticulous tracking and analysis of these metrics are vital for identifying patterns, uncovering root causes, and implementing effective, targeted interventions to mitigate the problem.

The Global Context of Rising Absenteeism and its Significance

Workplace absence is not an isolated issue but a growing global concern. Sickness-related absence rates have reached a decade high in many regions, signaling profound underlying issues within contemporary work environments. This upward trend is a critical indicator of broader systemic problems within organizations, extending beyond simple individual health matters.

The ramifications of elevated absenteeism are extensive and ripple throughout an organization. They directly impact productivity, diminish employee morale, and undermine financial stability across various sectors worldwide. The consistent observation of these effects underscores that absenteeism is not merely an operational inconvenience for human resources departments but a fundamental symptom of an organization's overall health. When absence rates climb, it often points to deeper, pervasive issues embedded within the company's culture, its management practices, or the overall employee experience. Addressing absenteeism effectively, therefore, requires a strategic perspective that recognizes its role as a key performance indicator for organizational well-being and resilience. Prioritizing employee health, engagement, and a supportive work environment is not just a moral imperative but a foundational element for maintaining business continuity and productivity.

III. Absenteeism Landscape in Europe

Current Rates and Trends (2023-2025)

Absenteeism rates across the European Union generally present a higher average compared to the United States, typically falling within a range of 3% to 6%. However, some reports indicate a broader spectrum of absence, with rates varying anywhere from 2.5% to as high as 14% across the continent, reflecting significant national and regional disparities.

Specific country data illustrates these variations:

- **Higher Rates:** Nations such as Czechia, Germany, and Belgium consistently report some of the highest levels of absence within Europe. For instance, Germany recorded an average absenteeism rate of 6.1% in 2023, translating to approximately 15.1 sick leave days per employee annually. France also demonstrated consistently high shares of absences throughout 2020.
- **Lower Rates:** In contrast, countries like Switzerland, Iceland, and Sweden tend to exhibit lower overall absence rates.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered absence patterns across Europe. Eurostat data reveals unprecedented highs in temporary absences in 2020, particularly during the second

quarter, when absence reached 18.9% of employment. This surge was primarily driven by temporary lay-offs implemented in response to the pandemic's economic disruptions. While rates saw a return to pre-pandemic levels in the third quarter of 2020, they experienced another increase in the fourth quarter, reaching 11.8% of the employed population.

Looking at sickness absence trends, with the UK often serving as a proxy for broader European patterns due to available data, the sickness absence rate in the UK climbed to 3.4% in 2024, marking its highest level since 2004 and imposing an economic cost exceeding £100 billion per year. A substantial portion of this increase is directly attributable to COVID-19, which accounted for 37% of sickness absence in 2022. A concerning trend is the sharp rise in long-term sickness, with mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, and musculoskeletal conditions identified as the predominant reasons for these extended absences.

The sustained high sickness absence rates observed in 2024, coupled with the significant contribution of COVID-19, indicate that the pandemic's impact on workforce health, particularly mental well-being, is not a fleeting issue but a lasting challenge. The continued increase in stress and anxiety-related absences suggests a deeper, prolonged health crisis that extends beyond acute infections. This implies that European employers and policymakers cannot simply anticipate a "return to normal" but must instead integrate long-term health and well-being strategies, with a particular emphasis on mental health support, into their core operational and human resources frameworks. This proactive approach is essential to address the enduring consequences of the pandemic on workforce health and productivity.

Key Drivers of Absenteeism

Absenteeism in Europe is driven by a complex interplay of factors, with several key themes emerging consistently across research:

- **Mental Health Problems:** This is a pervasive and escalating cause of absence throughout Europe. Reports indicate that over 50% of managers and individual contributors are experiencing declining mental well-being. Mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and general burnout are significant contributors to employee absences, necessitating greater attention and support from employers.
- **Workplace Stress and Burnout:** Heavy workloads, demanding deadlines, insufficient support from management, and ineffective leadership styles are major factors contributing to employee stress and subsequent burnout. When stress levels become unmanageable, employees may require time off to recover, or they may become disengaged from their work, leading to chronic absenteeism.
- **Working Conditions & Psychosocial Risks:** Poor overall working conditions, a lack of effective collaboration among teams, and instances of harassment or bullying significantly contribute to employee absence. Additionally, certain performance management practices, such as overly challenging goal setting and intense monitoring, can intensify work pressure, inadvertently leading to higher rates of both absenteeism and presenteeism.
- **Remote and Hybrid Work Challenges:** While flexible work arrangements offer considerable convenience and can enhance work-life balance, remote work introduces its own set of complexities for absence management. It can blur the boundaries between professional and personal life, intensifying work-related stress and contributing to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and isolation among employees. However, when remote work is managed effectively, with clear expectations, robust communication, and deliberate efforts to foster social interaction, it has been shown to reduce unplanned absenteeism and

increase productivity.

- **Unstable Work Schedules:** Data from the U.S. indicates that a significant proportion of employees (62%) lack predictable and stable work schedules, which directly correlates with decreased productivity and higher employee turnover. This lack of control over work hours is a notable factor contributing to absenteeism, particularly affecting part-time workers and those with lower educational attainment. This trend is broadly applicable across various developed economies, including those in Europe.

The data reveals a nuanced situation regarding work arrangements and employee well-being. On one hand, flexible work models, when implemented thoughtfully, can enhance productivity and reduce absences by providing employees with greater autonomy over their schedules. Conversely, a lack of control over work schedules, rigid management approaches, and performance management practices that intensify work pressure are explicitly cited as drivers for increased absenteeism and presenteeism. This presents a clear observation: while flexibility and autonomy can improve attendance and engagement, excessive control or the intensification of work, even when facilitated by modern tools, can actively disengage employees and lead to their absence. This highlights that the *quality* of work design and management, rather than simply the physical location of work, is paramount. Effective policies must genuinely empower employees, provide sufficient autonomy, and offer adequate support to mitigate stress and cultivate a sense of fairness, rather than merely introducing flexible options without addressing underlying issues of control and work intensification.

Economic and Operational Impact

The financial and operational repercussions of absenteeism in Europe are substantial, posing a significant drain on economies and individual businesses.

- **Significant Costs:** Absenteeism is estimated to cost the European economy approximately 2.5% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) annually. Country-specific figures underscore this burden; Germany, for example, faces an annual cost of €200 billion due to absenteeism, which equates to 4.5% of its GDP. In the United Kingdom, sickness absence costs the economy over £100 billion per year. Furthermore, an increase of £30 billion in absenteeism-related costs has been observed in the UK since 2018. Forecasts for 2024 predict sickness absence alone will cost UK businesses approximately £22 billion.
- **Direct Costs:** These are the most visible expenses and include statutory and contractual sick pay benefits, the costs associated with hiring temporary staff or new employees to cover absences, overtime payments (with nearly 50% of overtime being used to cover employee absences), and the administrative burden of managing and monitoring absences.
- **Indirect Costs:** Beyond direct financial outlays, absenteeism incurs substantial indirect costs that undermine overall organizational performance. These include significant lost productivity, with unplanned absences leading to an estimated 36.6% reduction in output. The increased workload placed on remaining staff can lead to decreased morale, heightened stress, and increased burnout, creating a vicious cycle that can further exacerbate absence rates. This can also result in higher employee turnover as frustrated and overworked staff seek alternative employment. Customer dissatisfaction can arise from delays in service or reduced quality due to understaffing. Finally, chronic absenteeism can negatively impact a company's overall culture and reputation, making it harder to attract and retain talent.

While absenteeism directly imposes substantial costs, a deeper examination reveals that the economic impact is significantly compounded by presenteeism. An IPPR report on the UK highlights that £25 billion of the £30 billion increase in costs since 2018 was attributable to *lower productivity stemming from presenteeism*, with only £5 billion linked to an increased number of sick days. This observation indicates that the financial drain on businesses is not solely from employees being absent, but also, and perhaps more substantially, from those who are present but operating at reduced capacity due to illness or other health conditions. This hidden cost of presenteeism is often larger and more insidious than direct absence costs because it is less visible and harder to quantify. This implies that organizations focusing exclusively on reducing physical absence days may be overlooking a significant portion of their economic losses. Therefore, effective strategies must extend beyond merely managing attendance and actively address the root causes of presenteeism, such as a punitive absence culture, excessive workloads, and inadequate management support. A holistic approach that improves overall employee well-being is essential to truly enhance productivity and reduce the total economic burden.

Legal and Policy Frameworks

The legal and policy landscape governing employee absence in Europe is characterized by a blend of overarching European Union directives and diverse national implementations. While EU directives set minimum standards, individual member states often enact more generous or specific provisions, creating a complex regulatory environment that organizations must navigate.

- **EU Directives:** Key directives from the European Union influence national leave policies:
 - **Working Time Directive:** Establishes minimum requirements for annual leave, daily and weekly rest periods, and maximum working hours, aiming to protect worker health and safety.
 - **Parental Leave Directive:** Provides a framework for parental leave entitlements, allowing parents to take time off work to care for children.
 - **Pregnant Workers Directive:** Ensures the health and safety of pregnant employees and new mothers, including provisions for maternity leave and protection against discrimination.
- **National Sick Leave Provisions:** The implementation of sick leave policies varies significantly across Europe, often reflecting stronger union protections and more comprehensive social security systems compared to other global regions.
 - **Germany:** Known for its generous provisions, Germany allows workers to take up to six weeks of paid sick leave, a policy that some critics argue contributes to higher absence rates.
 - **Netherlands:** Employers in the Netherlands are legally required to pay at least 70% of an employee's salary during sickness for an extended period, potentially up to two years.
 - **France:** The national health insurance system in France typically begins to provide sick pay on the fourth day of absence, covering approximately 50% of the employee's salary within a specified threshold.
 - **Spain:** In Spain, employees receive sick pay from the fourth day of illness, with the benefits primarily funded by social security contributions.
 - **General EU Practice:** A common practice across the EU mandates that employees provide a doctor's note after eight calendar days of absence. Employers may be responsible for paying a portion of the salary (e.g., 80%) for the initial 14 days of

sick leave, excluding the first day.

- Compliance Challenges:** Employers frequently encounter difficulties in ensuring compliance due to the complex and often overlapping nature of these legal provisions. For instance, navigating the interplay between various national and EU-level leave laws, similar to the challenges posed by FMLA and ADA in the US context, can be intricate. Inconsistent application of absence policies across an organization can expose businesses to significant legal penalties and allegations of unfair treatment or discrimination.

The generally higher absenteeism rates observed in the European Union are often attributed to "stronger union protections and more comprehensive social security laws". This is evident in countries like Germany, with its 15.1 sick days per employee in 2023, and the Netherlands, where employers are obligated to provide sick pay for up to two years. This situation reveals a fundamental policy trade-off: while robust social safety nets are undeniably beneficial for employee well-being, supporting health recovery, and reducing financial stress during illness, they can also contribute to higher overall absence rates and increased costs for businesses. This highlights a core policy dilemma for European nations: how to effectively balance comprehensive social welfare provisions with the imperative for economic competitiveness and productivity, particularly in the context of persistent worker shortages and rising operational costs. It suggests that while protecting employee rights and well-being remains paramount, policymakers may need to explore innovative mechanisms that encourage the responsible use of sick leave and provide adequate support for employers in managing its economic impact, without inadvertently undermining fundamental worker protections.

Table 1: Comparative Absenteeism Rates (Ireland vs. EU Average, 2023-2025)

Metric	Ireland (2024/2025)	European Union (EU) Average (2023/2024)	Notes
Overall Absenteeism Rate	Forecasted 8.5% (2025) 7.4% (Q1 2024)	3% to 6% (general range) 2.5% to 14% (wider range across countries)	EU rates generally higher than US due to social security laws. Ireland's forecasted rate for 2025 is notably high.
Average Days Lost Per Employee Annually	2.8 days (2022 average) 8 days (National average, 2009) 5 days (Small firms, 2009) 10 days (Large firms, 2009)	15.1 sick leave days (Germany, 2023) 7.8 days (UK sickness absence, 2024) 4.4 days (UK sickness absence, 2024)	Significant variation by country and firm size. UK data shows a post-pandemic rise.
Peak Absenteeism (COVID-19 Impact)	Not explicitly stated, but Irish Prison Service saw 15.82 days/person (2023)	18.9% of employment (EU Q2 2020, due to temporary layoffs) 11.8% of employed population (EU Q4 2020)	Pandemic caused unprecedented spikes in absence across Europe, driven by various factors including temporary layoffs.

Value of Table 1: This table provides a direct comparison of absenteeism rates, offering a quantitative overview of the scale of the challenge in both Ireland and the broader EU. It

highlights the variations across different periods and types of organizations, allowing for a quick assessment of where each region stands relative to the other. The inclusion of specific country examples within the EU average also underscores the diverse national contexts and their influence on overall absence figures.

IV. Absenteeism Landscape in Ireland

Current Rates and Trends (2023-2025)

Absenteeism in Ireland is a significant and evolving challenge, with forecasted rates indicating a continued upward trend. The anticipated average absence rate for 2025 is projected to rise to 8.5%. This figure carries substantial implications for both productivity and operational costs across the country. Recent data from Quarter 1 2024 shows that an estimated 199,400 persons, or 7.4% of those employed in Ireland, were absent from work during the reference week for reasons such as holidays, sick leave, or maternity leave. This rate is consistent with the 7.4% recorded in Q1 2022, but an increase from 6.7% in Q1 2023, indicating a fluctuating but generally high level of absence.

Historically, the national average for absenteeism in Ireland was reported as 3.6% or 8 working days in 2009. However, this average varied significantly by firm size: small firms (under 50 employees) had an average of 2.6% or 5 working days, while medium firms reported 3.7% or 8 days, and large firms experienced the highest rate at 4.6% or 10 days. This historical data suggests that larger organizations, even over a decade ago, tended to face higher absenteeism burdens. More recent data from 2022 indicated an average of 2.8 sick days per employee in Ireland, though this figure appears to be a specific measure of *sick days* rather than overall absence, and the context of its calculation differs from the broader Q1 2024 "absences from work" rate.

Regional and industry-specific variations are also pronounced. In Q1 2024, the Education sector recorded the highest absence rate at 13.4%, a notable increase from 10.0% in Q1 2023. The Human Health and Social Work Activities sector also experienced a high rate of 10.6% in Q1 2024, up from 8.6% in Q1 2023. The Information & Communication sector saw its rate increase to 7.5% in Q1 2024 from 5.5% in Q1 2023. Conversely, the Mid-west region historically showed a lower average absence rate of 1.8%, while the West/North-west exhibited the highest at 4.2%. These disparities highlight that absenteeism is not uniformly distributed across the Irish economy but is concentrated in specific sectors and geographical areas, likely reflecting differing working conditions, demographic profiles, and management practices.

Key Drivers of Absenteeism

Several critical factors are driving absenteeism in Ireland, many of which mirror broader European trends but also include specific local nuances.

- **Dominance of Mental Health, Stress, and Burnout:** Mental health challenges, including anxiety, stress, and depression, are consistently identified as primary causes of long-term sickness in Ireland. In 2023/2024, anxiety/stress/depression/other psychiatric illnesses accounted for the largest proportion of working days lost in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (43.0%), with work-related stress alone responsible for 32.8% of those days. This aligns with findings that stress remains a high reason for absenteeism, potentially leading to a less productive workforce and faulty decision-making. The Laya Healthcare's

Workplace Wellbeing Index 2024 for Ireland identified the cost of living as the top stressor for 63% of employees, exacerbating mental health challenges and leading to a doubling in reported substance abuse due to poor mental health compared to previous years.

- **Impact of Workplace Dissatisfaction, Perceived Underpayment, and Staff Shortages:** A significant proportion of Irish employees express dissatisfaction with their work environment. A 2025 survey revealed that nearly half (49%) of employees felt underpaid for their work. This perception of underpayment, coupled with widespread feelings of being overworked due to staff shortages, contributes to a growing sense of dissatisfaction. Approximately 46% of employees reported their teams were facing staff shortages and struggling with current workloads, with 48% expecting these talent shortages to worsen. This increased workload on present employees can lead to burnout and frustration, creating a vicious cycle that perpetuates absenteeism.
- **Challenges Related to Management Practices and Lack of Guidance:** Poor management practices are a significant driver of absence. Employees who feel micromanaged, underappreciated, or unsupported are more likely to take unscheduled time off. A 2025 survey in Ireland indicated that 39% of respondents felt their manager struggled with effective leadership, suggesting a lack of valuable guidance and mentorship. This absence of effective leadership can contribute to employee frustration and disengagement, further fueling absenteeism.
- **Incidence of Leave Policy Misuse:** A concerning finding from a 2025 SD Worx Ireland survey is that one in five (21%) employees admitted to misusing leave policies and taking absences without valid reasons. This suggests either underreporting of unauthorized absences or a heightened suspicion among colleagues regarding the legitimacy of absences. This misuse can erode trust and negatively impact team morale among those consistently present.

The confluence of these factors highlights a critical observation: while the Irish labor market is at "full employment," organizations face a pressing need to re-evaluate how they engage and support employees. The high rates of dissatisfaction, perceived underpayment, and struggles with workload, even among motivated employees, suggest that the current economic climate and competitive landscape are placing immense pressure on the workforce. This implies that simply filling vacancies is insufficient; a strategic investment in people strategies that prioritize support, development opportunities, and a positive workplace culture is essential for retaining talent and building resilient, engaged workforces in Ireland. Without addressing these fundamental issues, the cycle of burnout, dissatisfaction, and absenteeism is likely to persist and intensify.

Economic and Operational Impact

Absenteeism imposes a substantial financial and operational burden on Irish businesses, affecting everything from direct costs to overall productivity and team dynamics.

- **Estimated Annual Costs:** Absenteeism is estimated to cost employers in Ireland around €1.5 billion per annum, according to the Irish Business and Employers' Confederation (IBEC). The Small Firms Association (SFA) initially put the cost at €563 million per annum for small businesses in 2009, but warned that factoring in indirect costs could bring the total closer to €900 million. The average cost of sick leave for an employee in Ireland is estimated at €1,500 per year, encompassing both direct sick pay and indirect costs like lost productivity and temporary staffing. For medium-sized businesses, the average cost of replacing an employee was estimated at €10,125 in 2024.

- Concrete examples underscore this impact: Castlerea Prison in Co Roscommon incurred a staggering €1.2 million cost in 2023 due to staff sick leave, with the Irish Prison Service as a whole facing an eye-watering €11.15 million cost, averaging 15.82 sick days per person.
- **Consequences for Productivity, Team Dynamics, and Employee Turnover:**
 - **Decreased Productivity:** When employees are absent, their work either remains undone or is redistributed, leading to reduced output and delayed project timelines. Unplanned absences alone can lead to an average of 36.6% productivity loss for businesses.
 - **Increased Workload and Burnout for Remaining Staff:** The burden of covering for absent colleagues falls on those present, leading to increased workloads, longer hours, and heightened pressure. This can result in burnout, frustration, and resentment among team members.
 - **Strained Team Dynamics and Morale:** Frequent absences disrupt team cohesion and workflow efficiency, fostering frustration and conflict. A drop in morale often translates to reduced engagement and higher turnover. Disengaged employees, often a symptom of underlying issues, have been found to have 37% higher absenteeism and 18% lower productivity.
 - **Increased Turnover Costs:** Absenteeism and employee turnover are closely linked. Frustrated employees, whether due to poor support or strained team dynamics, are more likely to leave, incurring significant recruitment, selection, and training costs for replacements.
 - **Customer Dissatisfaction and Reputational Damage:** When frontline or client-facing employees are absent, service delays, reduced quality, or unavailability of key personnel directly impact customers, harming trust and tarnishing a company's reputation.
 - **Administrative Burden:** Managing absences, including recording, monitoring, and addressing issues, places a significant administrative load on HR departments, especially when understaffed.

The substantial financial and operational costs associated with absenteeism in Ireland, coupled with the high reported levels of employee dissatisfaction and perceived underpayment, highlight a critical observation: the economic burden of absenteeism is compounded by a workforce that feels undervalued and overworked. The stated average cost of €1,500 per employee per year and the €10,125 average cost of replacing an employee are not merely abstract figures; they represent tangible financial losses that directly impact a company's profitability and growth. This implies that organizations in Ireland are facing a dual challenge: not only are they losing money from absent employees, but they are also incurring significant costs from the ripple effects on their present workforce, including burnout, reduced morale, and ultimately, increased turnover. Addressing absenteeism effectively in Ireland requires a comprehensive strategy that goes beyond punitive measures and instead focuses on improving employee well-being, fair compensation, and workload management to foster a more engaged and resilient workforce.

Legal and Policy Frameworks

Ireland's legal framework for sick leave has undergone significant changes recently, with the introduction of the Sick Leave Act 2022. This legislation aims to provide a statutory minimum level of financial protection for employees unable to work due to illness or injury.

- **Sick Leave Act 2022 Provisions (2023-2025):**
 - The Act commenced on January 1, 2023, initially granting employees three days of paid statutory sick leave per calendar year. This entitlement increased to five days from January 1, 2024.
 - As of April 8, 2025, the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment confirmed that the entitlement to paid statutory sick leave will remain unchanged at five days per calendar year for 2025 and beyond. This decision was made in response to concerns raised by business owners, particularly in the retail and hospitality sectors, regarding the cumulative impact of rising labor, input, and energy costs.
 - Under these provisions, employees are entitled to be paid at 70% of their gross earnings, subject to a daily cap of €110.
 - To be eligible for statutory sick pay, employees must have completed 13 weeks of continuous service with their employer and provide a medical certificate from a registered medical practitioner stating their unfitness to work.
 - Once an employee exhausts their entitlement to employer-paid sick leave, they may be eligible for illness benefit from the Department of Social Protection.
 - A significant Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) decision in 2023 (*A Worker v A Service Provider to Financial Services ADJ-00048825*) underscored the importance for employers to avoid penalizing employees for using statutory sick leave. The adjudicator ruled that a written warning issued for a period of certified statutory sick leave violated Section 11 of the 2022 Act, which mandates that an employee "during a period of absence from work by the employee while on statutory sick leave, be treated as if he or she had not been so absent". This highlights the legal obligation to treat periods of statutory sick leave as if the employee had not been absent, safeguarding employees from being penalized for availing their statutory rights.
- **Other Statutory Leave Entitlements:** Beyond sick leave, Irish legislation provides for other types of protected absences:
 - **Force Majeure Leave:** Employees are entitled to 3 days in 12 consecutive months and 5 days over 36 consecutive months (paid) for urgent family reasons due to injury or illness.
 - **Serious Medical Care Leave:** Provides for 5 days in 12 consecutive months for serious medical care.
 - **Unpaid Domestic Violence Leave:** Allows for 5 days in 12 consecutive months.
- **Compliance Risks and Management:** The Adare HRM report emphasizes that failure to manage absenteeism effectively can lead to significant compliance risks, including WRC claims, financial penalties, and reputational damage. Key risks include failing to meet statutory sick pay obligations, inconsistent application of policies (leading to discrimination claims), and inadequate record-keeping. Robust, legally compliant, and consistently applied absence management policies are crucial to mitigate these risks.

The decision to cap statutory sick leave at five days for 2025, despite original plans for incremental increases, reveals a significant tension between employee welfare and business viability in Ireland. The government's rationale, citing concerns from sectors like retail and hospitality about rising costs, indicates that policymakers are acutely aware of the economic implications of legislative changes. This suggests a delicate balancing act: while the Sick Leave Act 2022 aims to protect vulnerable, low-paid employees by providing a minimum safety net, the government is also attempting to prevent excessive financial burdens on businesses, particularly in a competitive landscape with increasing labor and operational costs.

This implies that future policy adjustments will likely continue to be influenced by a careful assessment of economic impact, highlighting the ongoing need for dialogue between government, employers, and employee representatives to find sustainable solutions that support both workforce well-being and business resilience.

Table 2: Key Drivers of Absenteeism (Ireland vs. Europe)

Driver	Ireland (Specific Context)	Europe (Broader Context)	Commonalities / Distinctions
Mental Health & Stress	Dominant cause of long-term sickness; anxiety, stress, depression. Cost of living identified as top stressor (63% of employees).	Pervasive and growing cause; over 50% of managers/ICs report declining mental well-being.	Common: A leading cause of absence across both regions, exacerbated by modern work pressures. Distinction: Cost of living is a particularly highlighted stressor in Ireland.
Workplace Stress & Burnout	Staff shortages lead to increased workload and burnout for existing employees.	Heavy workloads, tight deadlines, lack of support, poor management styles.	Common: Significant contributor to employees needing time off or disengaging.
Working Conditions & Psychosocial Risks	Back pain/injury and stress are most common complaints.	Poor working conditions, lack of collaboration, harassment, bullying, unfair treatment. Performance management can intensify work.	Common: Fundamental issues in the work environment that drive absence.
Remote & Hybrid Work	Hybrid work is the norm (average 2.6 days in office), but 50% of organizations report engagement challenges.	Complicates absence management; can blur work-life boundaries, increase stress, loneliness, isolation. Effective management can reduce unplanned absence.	Common: Both regions are adapting to flexible work, facing challenges in maintaining engagement and managing boundaries.
Workplace Dissatisfaction / Engagement	49% feel underpaid, 44% actively looking for new jobs (2025). 21% admit to misusing leave policies.	Disengaged employees have 37% higher absenteeism. Gallup suggests Europeans "work to live".	Common: Low engagement and dissatisfaction are direct drivers of absence. Distinction: Specific data on underpayment and leave misuse is prominent in Ireland.
Management Practices	39% say manager struggles with effective	Poor management styles,	Common: Management quality

Driver	Ireland (Specific Context)	Europe (Broader Context)	Commonalities / Distinctions
	leadership.	micromanagement, lack of support.	directly impacts employee well-being and attendance.
Unstable Work Schedules	Not explicitly detailed for Ireland, but flexible schedules are gaining momentum.	62% of U.S. employees lack predictable schedules, leading to higher turnover/absenteeism.	Common (implied): Lack of control over schedules is a general driver of dissatisfaction and absence.

Value of Table 2: This table provides a structured comparison of the underlying factors contributing to absenteeism in Ireland and Europe. It clearly delineates common drivers, such as mental health and workplace stress, while also highlighting specific issues more pronounced in one region (e.g., cost of living and perceived underpayment in Ireland). This allows for a nuanced understanding of the problem's root causes, which is essential for developing targeted and effective intervention strategies.

Table 3: Financial Impact of Absenteeism (Ireland vs. Europe, per employee/total)

Metric	Ireland (Specific Context)	Europe (Broader Context / UK & Germany)	Notes
Total Annual Cost (Estimated)	€1.5 billion (IBEC) €563 million (SFA, small businesses, 2009) Potential €900 million (SFA, incl. indirect)	~2.5% of GDP (Europe) €200 billion (Germany, 4.5% of GDP) >€100 billion (UK) £22 billion (UK sickness absence, forecasted 2024) £103 billion (UK hidden cost, 2023, IPPR)	Absenteeism is a multi-billion economic strain across both regions.
Cost Per Employee Annually	€818 (IBEC) €1,500 (sick leave, incl. indirect, 2024)	£835 (UK public sector) £568 (UK private sector, direct) £547 (UK small businesses <250 employees)	Costs vary significantly by sector, organization size, and the inclusion of indirect factors.
Cost of Replacing an Employee	€10,125 (medium-sized businesses, 2024)	Not explicitly stated for EU average, but recognized as a significant cost.	High turnover costs add to the overall financial burden of absenteeism.
Productivity Loss (Unplanned Absences)	Not explicitly quantified for Ireland, but recognized as a significant indirect cost.	~36.6% productivity loss. £25 billion of UK cost increase from presenteeism.	Presenteeism's impact on productivity is a substantial, often hidden, cost.
Mental Health Related Costs	Irish Prison Service: 43% of days lost due to anxiety/stress/depressi	US figures (indicative): \$47.6 billion annually in lost productivity. UK:	Mental health issues are a major driver of lost productivity and

Metric	Ireland (Specific Context)	Europe (Broader Context / UK & Germany)	Notes
	on.	£3.7 billion due to financial distress (2023).	associated costs.

Value of Table 3: This table quantifies the severe financial implications of absenteeism for both Ireland and Europe. By breaking down costs into total annual figures and per-employee estimates, it provides a clear picture of the economic drain. The inclusion of replacement costs and productivity loss figures further highlights the comprehensive financial impact, moving beyond just direct sick pay to encompass the broader economic consequences of employee absence.

V. Comparative Analysis: Ireland vs. Europe

While both Ireland and the broader European Union face significant challenges related to workplace absenteeism, a comparative analysis reveals both shared underlying issues and distinct differences in their manifestation and policy responses.

Shared Challenges and Common Underlying Causes: Across both Ireland and Europe, the most prominent and escalating driver of absenteeism is the deterioration of **mental health** among the workforce. Stress, anxiety, and burnout are consistently cited as primary reasons for both short-term and long-term absences. This is often linked to **workplace stress and burnout** stemming from heavy workloads, tight deadlines, and a perceived lack of support from management. Poor **working conditions** and **psychosocial risks**, including issues like harassment, bullying, and a general lack of collaboration, also contribute significantly to absence across both regions. Furthermore, **low employee engagement** and general **job dissatisfaction** are recognized as fundamental drivers of absenteeism, leading to a cycle of reduced morale and increased turnover among remaining staff. The shift towards **remote and hybrid work models**, while offering flexibility, has introduced common challenges related to blurred work-life boundaries, loneliness, and maintaining engagement.

Distinct Differences in Absenteeism Rates, Legal Obligations, and Cultural Approaches: Despite these commonalities, notable distinctions exist. Absenteeism rates in Ireland, particularly the forecasted 8.5% for 2025, appear higher than the general EU average range of 3% to 6%, though some EU countries like Germany (6.1%) also report elevated figures. This difference may be partly attributable to varying methods of data collection and what constitutes "absence" in national statistics.

From a **legal and policy perspective**, Europe generally has more comprehensive and often more generous social security laws and union protections that influence sick leave provisions. Countries like the Netherlands mandate employers to pay a significant portion of sick leave for up to two years, and Germany allows up to six weeks of paid sick leave. In contrast, Ireland's Sick Leave Act 2022, while a significant step forward, currently mandates only five paid sick days per year, a figure that was recently capped despite earlier plans for incremental increases. This decision in Ireland highlights a more pronounced concern among policymakers regarding the economic burden on businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and sectors like retail and hospitality.

Cultural factors also play a role. The observation that Europeans tend to "work to live" rather than "love to work" suggests a broader cultural acceptance of taking time off, potentially

contributing to higher overall absence rates compared to regions with different work ethics. In Ireland, specific factors like the **cost of living** are explicitly identified as major stressors, impacting employee mental health and contributing to absence. Furthermore, a significant proportion of Irish employees (21%) admit to **misusing leave policies**, a specific issue that points to a potential gap in policy enforcement or employee perception of fairness. The prevalence of **perceived underpayment** and **staff shortages** leading to increased workload for present employees also appears to be a particularly acute driver of dissatisfaction and absence in Ireland.

Analysis of How Varying Policy Environments Influence Absenteeism Outcomes: The differing policy environments directly influence absenteeism outcomes. European countries with more extensive social security systems and longer durations of paid sick leave, while providing a stronger safety net for employees, inherently face higher direct costs and potentially higher overall absence rates. This creates a tension between robust social protection and economic competitiveness, particularly when coupled with worker shortages. The policy choice in Ireland to cap statutory sick leave at five days reflects a more cautious approach, prioritizing business viability in the face of rising operational costs. This approach, while potentially mitigating direct costs for employers, may inadvertently place more pressure on employees to work while ill (presenteeism) or to misuse other leave entitlements if their health or personal needs exceed the statutory provision.

The distinct policy approaches also shape the nature of management challenges. In countries with more generous sick leave, the focus for employers might shift to managing long-term absences and ensuring effective return-to-work procedures. In Ireland, with a more limited statutory provision, the challenge might be more acutely centered on addressing the underlying causes of short-term, potentially uncertified, absences and the misuse of leave, alongside managing the impact of presenteeism. The legal landscape, particularly the WRC's stance on penalizing employees for statutory sick leave, further compels Irish employers to ensure fair and legally compliant absence management practices, even with fewer mandated paid days.

Table 4: Statutory Sick Leave Provisions (Ireland vs. Select EU Countries)

Country/Region	Statutory Paid Sick Days (Current)	Payment Rate	Daily Cap	Eligibility Criteria	Notes
Ireland	5 days per calendar year (from 2024, confirmed for 2025)	70% of gross earnings	€110	13 weeks continuous service; medical certificate required	Original plan for 7 days (2025) and 10 days (2026) was paused due to business concerns.
Germany	Up to 6 weeks	Not specified in snippets, but implied high (criticized as "too much")	Not specified	Not specified	Part of comprehensive social security laws.
Netherlands	Up to 2 years	At least 70% of salary	Not specified	Not specified	Strong incentive for employers to implement

Country/Region	Statutory Paid Sick Days (Current)	Payment Rate	Daily Cap	Eligibility Criteria	Notes
					return-to-work procedures due to long payment duration.
France	Not specified (national health insurance kicks in on 4th day)	~50% of salary (from 4th day)	Within a certain threshold	Not specified	Social security system plays a significant role in sick pay.
Spain	Not specified (sick pay from 4th day)	Not specified	Not specified	Not specified	Funded by social security.
General EU	Not specified	80% of salary (first 14 days, excl. first day)	Not specified	Doctor's note required after 8 calendar days	Reflects common minimums or general practices across some EU states.

Value of Table 4: This table provides a concise overview of the statutory sick leave entitlements in Ireland compared to selected EU countries. It highlights the significant differences in the number of paid days, payment rates, and duration of employer responsibility. This comparison is valuable for understanding the varying regulatory burdens on businesses and the level of social protection afforded to employees across different European contexts, directly informing discussions on policy harmonization and competitiveness.

VI. Strategies for Effective Absenteeism Management

Effective absenteeism management requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses both the symptoms and the root causes of employee absence. Organizations in Ireland and Europe can implement several strategic interventions to mitigate the impact of absenteeism and foster a healthier, more engaged workforce.

Policy Development and Communication

Establishing clear, legally compliant, and consistently applied attendance policies is the cornerstone of effective absence management. Policies should explicitly define what constitutes an absence, outline notification procedures, specify requirements for medical documentation, and detail the consequences for non-compliance. Crucially, these policies must be communicated clearly and prominently to all employees, ideally through employee handbooks and regular training sessions. Consistent enforcement across the organization is paramount to avoid perceptions of favoritism, ensure fairness, and reduce legal risks, particularly concerning protected absences under various anti-discrimination laws. Regular policy audits are recommended to ensure guidelines remain up-to-date and reflect evolving legal requirements

and organizational values.

Holistic Employee Wellbeing Programs

Investing in comprehensive mental and physical health support is critical for addressing a primary driver of absenteeism. Organizations should offer a range of wellbeing initiatives, including Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) that provide counseling services for mental health challenges. Physical health and lifestyle programs, such as fitness club memberships, health screenings, and nutrition education, can help manage chronic conditions and reduce illness-related absences. The focus should extend beyond mere perks to addressing work-related factors like workload, job design, and management practices, which have a greater impact on employee well-being. When employees feel secure about their and their family's health and well-being, it can significantly improve morale, engagement, and attendance.

Flexible Work Arrangements

Providing flexible work options is increasingly vital in today's evolving work environment. Models such as remote work, hybrid arrangements, flexible hours (flextime), and even compressed workweeks or four-day workweeks can enhance work-life balance, a top priority for many employees. This flexibility allows employees to better manage personal commitments, childcare responsibilities, and medical appointments without needing to take full days off. While remote work can present challenges like loneliness or blurred boundaries, when managed effectively with clear expectations and social interaction, it can lead to increased job satisfaction and reduced absenteeism. Empowering employees with agency and choice over their schedules increases their likelihood of honoring those schedules.

Fostering Engagement and Positive Culture

A positive and supportive workplace culture is fundamental to reducing absenteeism and improving overall organizational health. Strategies to improve job satisfaction, reduce burnout, and build trust include:

- **Encouraging Open Communication:** Creating channels for employees to express concerns and share challenges, including anonymous feedback systems, can uncover underlying issues before they escalate into absences. Regular one-on-one check-ins and empathetic listening from managers are crucial.
- **Recognition and Growth Opportunities:** Engaging employees by offering recognition for hard work, celebrating team achievements, and providing opportunities for professional growth and development can significantly boost morale and commitment.
- **Fairness and Respect:** Addressing perceptions of unfair treatment, such as bias, favoritism, or inconsistently applied policies, is vital for building trust and psychological safety. Employees who feel respected and valued are less likely to be absent.
- **Manageable Workloads:** Setting reasonable expectations and ensuring workloads are achievable and adequately resourced prevents overwork and burnout, which are major contributors to absenteeism.

Data-Driven Management

Leveraging technology for accurate tracking, trend analysis, and proactive intervention is

essential for modern absence management. Automated absence management systems can monitor triggers, produce detailed reports (e.g., annual comparisons, absence type, cost of absence), and identify patterns that raise concerns for individuals, departments, or the organization as a whole. This data-driven approach allows HR and management to:

- **Identify Trends:** Spot patterns in absence timing, reasons, and employee groups.
- **Forecast Needs:** Use real-time attendance data for workforce planning and to estimate scheduling requirements.
- **Measure Effectiveness:** Track the impact of wellbeing initiatives and policy changes on absence rates.
- **Support Decision-Making:** Provide fair reasoning for decisions and ensure legal coverage by documenting every step of an investigation or disciplinary process.

Managerial Training and Support

Equipping line managers and supervisors with the necessary skills is paramount for effective absence management. Training should cover:

- **Sensitive Discussions:** Confidence in having empathetic, solution-oriented conversations with employees about their absences, understanding root causes (e.g., health issues, personal circumstances, burnout), and offering support while reinforcing expectations.
- **Spotting Mental Ill Health:** Training managers to recognize signs of mental ill health and stress, and how to appropriately refer employees to support services.
- **Absence Policy Application:** Ensuring managers understand and consistently apply attendance policies, including short-term and long-term absence procedures, return-to-work interviews, and disciplinary processes.
- **Interpersonal Skills:** Improving managers' people management and interpersonal skills can build trust, which is crucial for employees to feel comfortable disclosing the real causes of their absence.

Ensuring Legal Compliance and Fair Treatment

Navigating complex leave laws and avoiding discriminatory practices is a critical aspect of absence management. Employers must:

- **Understand Protected Absences:** Be aware of absences protected by federal and state laws (e.g., FMLA, ADA in US context; EU directives and national sick leave laws in Europe) and ensure policies do not penalize them.
- **Consistent Application:** Apply policies uniformly to all employees, regardless of position, to prevent allegations of unfair treatment or discrimination.
- **Robust Documentation:** Maintain clear and accurate records of all absences, communications, and actions taken. This documentation is crucial for defending against potential legal claims, such as those related to unfair dismissal or discrimination.
- **Interactive Process:** Engage in an interactive process with employees, especially those with disabilities or serious health conditions, to determine reasonable accommodations, which may include time off. Policies that automatically terminate employees upon the expiration of statutory leave (e.g., FMLA) can conflict with anti-discrimination laws.

VII. Recommendations for Businesses and

Policymakers

Addressing the rising tide of absenteeism in Ireland and Europe requires concerted, multi-stakeholder efforts. The following recommendations are tailored for both organizational and governmental levels.

Tailored Recommendations for Organizations in Ireland

Given the specific challenges identified in Ireland, particularly the high forecasted absence rates, employee dissatisfaction stemming from perceived underpayment and workload, and the prevalence of leave misuse, Irish businesses should focus on:

1. **Prioritize Holistic Employee Wellbeing with a Financial Lens:**
 - **Action:** Move beyond basic EAPs to integrate financial wellbeing support into broader wellness strategies. This could include financial education, budgeting tools, or access to financial counseling, directly addressing the top stressor for Irish employees – the cost of living.
 - **Rationale:** Financial strain exacerbates mental health issues, which are a primary driver of absenteeism. Addressing this root cause can reduce stress-related absences and improve overall employee health.
2. **Enhance Communication and Transparency Around Compensation and Workload:**
 - **Action:** Conduct regular, transparent reviews of compensation against market rates to address perceptions of underpayment. Implement clear communication strategies regarding workload management and staffing levels, acknowledging challenges and outlining solutions.
 - **Rationale:** Perceived underpayment and unmanageable workloads contribute significantly to dissatisfaction, burnout, and the propensity for absenteeism. Proactive communication can build trust and manage expectations.
3. **Invest in Managerial Competence and Empathetic Leadership:**
 - **Action:** Provide targeted training for managers on effective leadership, sensitive communication, and absence management, particularly in identifying and supporting employees struggling with mental health or personal issues. Emphasize the importance of building trust and providing guidance rather than rigid control.
 - **Rationale:** A significant portion of Irish employees feel their managers lack effective leadership. Improved managerial skills can directly foster a more supportive culture, reduce stress, and address underlying causes of absence more effectively.
4. **Strengthen Absence Management Policies with a Focus on Fairness and Root Cause Analysis:**
 - **Action:** While maintaining clear attendance policies, ensure they are applied consistently and fairly, avoiding any punitive measures for legitimate absences. Implement robust return-to-work interviews to uncover underlying issues and discuss support needs. For instances of leave misuse, address them through documented, fair disciplinary procedures, but also investigate systemic reasons for such behavior.
 - **Rationale:** Fairness in policy application is crucial for employee morale and legal compliance. Addressing the root causes of absence, even misuse, is more sustainable than merely penalizing symptoms.

Broader Policy Considerations for European Union Member States

For the broader European Union, policymakers must navigate the inherent tension between robust social protection systems and economic competitiveness.

1. Harmonize Mental Health Support and Prevention Across Workplaces:

- **Action:** Develop and promote EU-wide guidelines and funding mechanisms for comprehensive workplace mental health programs, moving beyond reactive treatments to proactive prevention and early intervention. This should include standardized frameworks for mental health first aid training for managers and accessible mental health services for all employees.
- **Rationale:** Mental health issues are a universal and escalating driver of absenteeism across Europe. A coordinated EU approach can ensure consistent, high-quality support, reducing the overall economic burden.

2. Re-evaluate the Balance of Social Security and Employer Burden:

- **Action:** Engage in a strategic dialogue with social partners (unions and employer organizations) to review the long-term sustainability of current sick leave provisions, particularly in countries with very generous entitlements. Explore models that balance employee income protection with mechanisms that incentivize responsible use of leave and support employer efforts in absence management. This could involve exploring shared funding models or phased return-to-work incentives.
- **Rationale:** While comprehensive social security is a European strength, the high costs associated with extended sick leave in some member states can strain businesses and impact productivity, especially amidst worker shortages. Finding a sustainable balance is crucial for long-term economic health.

3. Promote and Standardize Flexible Work Best Practices:

- **Action:** Develop EU-level best practice guidelines for implementing flexible, remote, and hybrid work models that prioritize employee autonomy and well-being while ensuring productivity. This includes guidance on managing work-life boundaries, fostering virtual social interaction, and preventing digital presenteeism.
- **Rationale:** Flexible work is a growing expectation and can be a tool to reduce absenteeism. Standardized best practices can help organizations across the EU harness its benefits while mitigating associated challenges like isolation and burnout.

4. Enhance Data Collection and Benchmarking:

- **Action:** Invest in more granular and harmonized data collection on absenteeism across EU member states, including detailed breakdowns by industry, reason, and duration. Facilitate cross-country benchmarking to identify successful interventions and areas for improvement.
- **Rationale:** While Eurostat provides some data, more consistent and detailed data is needed to accurately assess trends, compare national performance, and inform evidence-based policymaking at both national and EU levels.

VIII. Conclusion

Workplace absenteeism in both Ireland and Europe presents a complex and evolving challenge with significant economic and operational repercussions. The analysis underscores that

absence is rarely a singular issue but rather a symptom of deeper organizational health concerns, prominently driven by escalating mental health issues, workplace stress, and the intricate dynamics of modern work. While Europe generally maintains more comprehensive social security frameworks for sick leave, Ireland is navigating its own path with recently capped statutory sick pay provisions, reflecting a delicate balance between employee welfare and business viability.

The pervasive impact of presenteeism, often overshadowing direct absence costs, highlights the need for strategies that extend beyond mere attendance management to address the underlying causes of reduced productivity. For organizations, this necessitates a shift towards holistic employee wellbeing programs that encompass mental, physical, and financial health, coupled with flexible work arrangements that genuinely empower employees. Critically, investing in managerial training to foster empathetic leadership and data-driven approaches to identify and address root causes will be paramount. For policymakers, the challenge lies in striking a sustainable balance between robust social protection and economic competitiveness, potentially through harmonized mental health initiatives and a re-evaluation of sick leave frameworks that support both employees and employers. Ultimately, fostering a culture of trust, engagement, and genuine care for employee well-being is not just a humanistic ideal but a strategic imperative for building resilient, productive, and sustainable workforces across Ireland and the European Union.

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