DATA-DRIVEN DISABILITY PREVENTION: HOW INTERMITTENT LEAVE INFORMATION CAN IDENTIFY AT-RISK EMPLOYEES

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Keeping an actively engaged workforce is vital for the success of every business. Many businesses are dealing with reduced numbers of employees due to ongoing economic factors, and ensuring that they remain on the job is a primary concern. Therefore, identifying at-risk employees early on is critical – doing so can help employers connect those employees with the services and support they may need to continue being productive at work.

But isn't this asking employers to predict the future? **How can businesses identify those in their workforce today who may be at risk for a disability claim down the road?** And, once they have this information, how can they best use that knowledge to help at-risk employees remain fully engaged on the job?

Some of the answers lie within the data that employers have access to through the use of the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). According to recent research from the Integrated Benefits Institute (IBI), FMLA results have an impact on short-term disability experience, both in incidence and duration. Most notably, its research determined that **employees who had a continuous or intermittent FMLA leave in one year were more likely to have an STD claim in the next year**. Additionally, the research found that FMLA leaves could also be an early warning indicator of later LTD claims; an STD claimant with a previous continuous FMLA leave is about twice as likely to have a later LTD claim as a claimant with no prior FMLA leave.[1]

In order to achieve early engagement with employees who request FMLA leave, employers need to do more than ensure compliance and track the time used. Employers should be proactively looking at the reasons why employees are taking leave and should take action based on those findings. For example, by evaluating the reasons why an employee has lost time from work, employers may be able to channel them through health and wellness programs to make sure they are getting the proper support. Programs such as elder care, legal or financial support services can be critical to employees who are absent due to family care issues.

Using leave data can help pinpoint these opportunities for continued employee engagement. As the IBI research indicates, regardless of leave reason, **often these frequently used intermittent leave occurrences predict a future disabling condition**. Supervisors also play a role in keeping employees engaged and connected to the workplace. This applies during times of intermittent leave usage as well as while out on a continuous leave.

In summary, the most important takeaways are:

- At-risk employees need to be identified using FMLA data;

- Early identification enables employers to act and help those at risk remain engaged and productive;

- Employers should leverage health and wellness programs to impact employee engagement; and

- Adoption of these techniques is part of a comprehensive strategy that can maximize workforce productivity and engagement.

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[1] Gifford PhD B, T Parry PhD, K Jinnett PhD, *Early Warnings: Using FMLA to Understand and Manage Disability Absence*, Integrated Benefits Institute, February 2013, p.2.

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