

FIRE SERVICES EXAMINATIONS BOARD STUDY NOTE

EXAMINATION	SUB-OFFICERS EXAMINATION
PAPER	HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT
SUBJECT	HEALTH, SAFETY AND WELFARE
ITEM	WORK RELATED SICKNESS
STUDY NOTE No.	2311

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY NOTE

This study note has been prepared as the basis of study in connection with the qualifying examinations for promotion.

Candidates will be expected to demonstrate knowledge of the information contained in the study note and understand how it should be applied:

The 'References' made at the end of the Study Note are included for information only and candidates will not be expected to study these as part of the bibliography.

WORK RELATED SICKNESS

1. Introduction

This study note relates to the issues of work related sickness absence and the practical measures that that could be taken to reduce its incidence.

2. Background

Over 500 people die each year as a result of accidents at work. However, it is estimated that 10 times that figure die from work related illness and disease.

Sickness absence can seriously affect operational efficiency because the numbers of firefighters and civilian staff are geared to operational needs.

3. Unplanned Absence

Unplanned absence reduces a brigade's ability to fulfil its commitments and places additional burdens on those who have to cover for absent colleagues.

Many brigades are unaware of the costs incurred by them through sickness absence and work related ill health. The reality of absent staff is that work is delayed or more strain is placed on others to handle it. The long-term effects on performance and morale should not be underestimated.

In addressing these issues it is important to recognise that ill health, whatever its cause, will impact on an individual's ability to perform effectively and efficiently; and within the fire service, ill health can increase the risk to individual firefighters when they are exposed to severe hazards. This can lead to serious injury and even death.

4. Causes of Sickness Absence

Any firefighter may from time to time be absent from duty because of illness and will include:

- (a) absence as a result of injuries sustained on duty;
- (b) work related ill health, such as stress caused by especially difficult situations;
- (c) exposure to hazardous chemicals at an incident; and
- (d) the kind of sickness which might arise in any circumstances.

Sickness absence is inevitable in any occupation. Sometimes it is caused by organisational and personal factors, which can include:

- (a) unsatisfactory working conditions;
- (b) low morale;
- (c) conflicting domestic and professional priorities; and
- (d) poor management.

If excessive work related ill health is arising then it may indicate a training, system of work or equipment related problem. Excessive work related ill health should, therefore, be thoroughly investigated. This process may include revision of existing risk assessments and the associated precautionary and protective measures. Sub-Officers will need to liaise closely with the Station Commander in respect of these issues.

5. Ways of Identifying Work Related ill Health and Health Issues

Line Managers should be aware that not all ill-health results in sickness absences. It may manifest itself in many ways, for example: low staff morale and motivation; reduced productivity; increased staff turnover; and in the longer term, a rise in the level of ill health retirements.

Ill health issues may arise in a brigade from the work processes, the working environment and the management system. There are many ways in which these factors can be identified, evaluated and monitored enabling remedial action to be taken at the earliest stages.

6. Responsibilities of Managers

It is important that managers recognise their responsibility for managing work related sickness absence. This involves:

- (a) Dealing with individuals sensitively and fairly, but also firmly when required.
- (b) Respond sympathetically and supportively and help those who are on sick leave to return to work.
- (c) Develop and maintain a system for managing sickness absences, which minimises the scope for abuse.
- (d) Identify any organisational factors, which might affect sickness, and report them to the Station Commander.

7. Organisational Arrangements

Brigades who are successful in reducing the impact of work related sickness absences are likely to have policies and procedures that will:

- (a) Make it clear to all employees that abuse of sickness absence is a serious and accountable matter.
- (b) Establish clear principles and standards for managing sickness absence.
- (c) Emphasise the fundamental responsibility of managers to promote a genuine caring attitude among employees under their command and where possible, to take positive steps to expedite the early return to work.
- (d) Establish an effective brigade reporting system to enable the incidence and costs of sickness absence to be monitored and analysed at all management levels.

8. Role of Watch and Station Commander

It falls to the line managers to implement brigade policy and procedures, especially in regard to the reporting and monitoring of absence the implementation of policy in order to manage individual cases of sickness absence.

It will be necessary to establishing good liaison with the brigade support services such as:

- (a) Occupational Health;
- (b) Personnel Section; and
- (c) Safety Adviser.

9. Role of Occupational Health

This should include the provision of advice and support for management and staff in the areas of:

- (a) Support to management and employees in the prevention of accidents and ill health.
- (b) Support services to individuals following sickness absence, accidents and work-related ill health.
- (c) Assistance with the investigation and analysis of accidents, sickness absence and work related ill health.
- (d) Regular inspections of work places to identify health and safety problems.

- (e) Periodic health reviews and medical examinations of people at risk, eg personnel working at live fire training areas to monitor lung function.
- (f) Biological monitoring, as appropriate, of individual workers exposed to specific hazard.
- (g) Maintain records of accidents, incidents, sickness, ill health, health care and treatment provided at work; and provision of programmes to promote good health.

References

A Guide for Managers - Fire Service Health and Safety Guide Volume 2 issued by HM Fire Service Inspectorate.