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Features



**KEEP
CALM
AND
CALL IN
SICK**

Has Britain become a nation of skivers?

How our stiff upper lip wobbled: the rise of sick-note UK

New figures show Britons are taking more and more days off due to illness. Does this mean we've become slothful... or sensible? By *Tim Sigsworth*

Until recently the tried and tested British response to illness was: keep calm and carry on. It became so entrenched that, from 1995 to 2019, the proportion of workers taking sick leave decreased every year, within every age group. A cold was a cold and, unless you were at death's door, being ill was an inconvenience – not a reason to stop working.

That was until 2020. Since then, according to data from the Office for National Statistics, the percentage of working hours lost to sickness or injury in this country has increased steadily across every generation. Britain, it seems, has lost its stiff upper lip.

We are now taking more sick days than at any other point in the past decade, according to an analysis of 6.5 million workers published last month by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). It found the average British employee took 7.8 days off sick in the 12 months to September, up from 5.8 before the pandemic struck.

“Covid created a false reality for many employees and it's no secret that many who work from home see it as a bit of a jolly, doing the

bare minimum work required,” says Jordan Platten, founder of marketing firm Affluent.co. “This feeds a narrative to certain employees that the company can survive just fine without them for a day or two. My opinion is that this has opened the floodgates to an increase in sick days, something that, before, most felt they could only get away with once a year.”

We are not the only country affected by the trend. In the US, 21 per cent of professionals entitled to paid leave took time off sick in 2019. Data from Gusto, the payroll software firm, shows the figure now stands at 30 per cent, with the largest increase in time off being among 25-34 year-olds.

Compared with Europe, British workers take a below-average amount of sick leave. A 2021 study by Mitrefinch, another payroll firm, found that just 2.4 days are taken off on average because of illness every year in Sweden and Switzerland, compared with 5.8 in the UK, eight in France and an enormous 18.3 in Germany. The continent's worst offender was Bulgaria, where 22 days of sick leave are taken annually.

A major part of the story behind

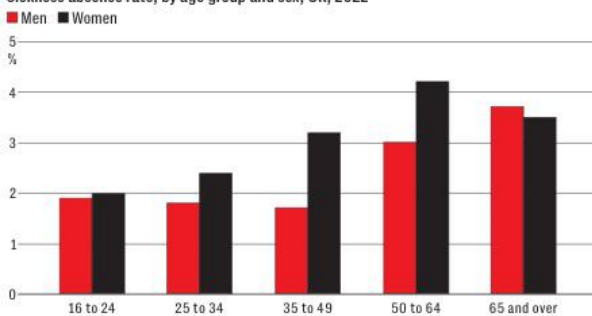
TOTAL DAYS LOST TO SICKNESS ABSENCE



For all people in employment aged 16 years and over, UK, 1995 to 2022

Women aged 50-64 have the highest absence rate

Sickness absence rate, by age group and sex, UK, 2022



Britain's growing absence problem is undeniably Covid itself. Steve Herbert, 54, is wellbeing and benefits director at insurance brokers Partners& and has not taken a sick day in a decade.

“Anyone with Covid still tends to self-isolate and, if you can't work from home, then that's you off work immediately,” he says. “There are also around 700,000 people who've had long Covid for two years or more. And that's an incredible number when you think about it. It does not necessarily mean they cannot work but, equally, it could be something that's wiping them out.”

The pandemic also germinated the now-widespread idea that it is actually anti-social to turn up to

work with symptoms of illness.

“I've done it myself where you pick up a cold from the person in the next cubicle, or the next desk over,” says David Rice, senior editor at human resources outlet People Managing People. “And after a day or two you've passed it on to your other neighbour, maybe your partner at home and now their whole office is spreading it. In the past we'd all just sort of shrug and say, 'It's that time of year again'. But Covid changed that and created a sense of social obligation.”

This new stigma is even leading some employees to ask their co-workers for approval to work in the office. “Instead of judging whether to take a day at home on

‘Before Covid, turning up sick was testament to your loyalty. Now the priority has changed’



185.6m

11 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022

SOURCE: ONS

how they feel, my team are tending to consult colleagues to find out how comfortable they are with them coming into the office," says Gary Hemming, director of Staffordshire-based ABC Finance. "People are now far more aware of the risk of passing on illness to colleagues, and even on to vulnerable family members of colleagues."

Such flexibility is only possible now that working from home and hybrid working are so common and in certain industries, this has sounded the death knell for what some see as excessive presenteeism.

"Before Covid, turning up to work sick was a badge of honour and a testament to an employee's

dedication and loyalty," says Daniela Korn, co-owner and head of employment at media law firm Tan Ward. "But during the pandemic the priority was to ensure that illnesses were not passed on, and I suspect that approach has become enshrined in people's psyche."

Amy Stone, 29, senior consultant at PR outfit Hard Numbers, agrees. "The public relations industry as a whole has historically been terrible for presenteeism and the general burn-out of employees," she says. "I do feel since Covid that has changed for the better, thankfully."

Stone's company is one of a growing number of businesses that have adopted a strand of

human-resource thinking which holds that actively encouraging employees to take time off when they are ill is good for business in the long run.

"There shouldn't be stigma, guilt, or anxiety behind calling in sick - we trust our employees and encourage them to look after themselves," says Lily Court, people and culture manager at digital marketing agency Honcho. Ben Foster, chief executive of SEO Works, says: "Healthy and happy staff leads to more productive work." Employees at his Sheffield-based digital marketing agency are taking twice as much sick leave as they did before the pandemic.

Until July 2022, however, only GPs could issue sick notes - or "fit notes" as government parlance terms them - but now nurses, occupational therapists, pharmacists and physiotherapists can also issue them. This, combined with the growing demand for sick leave, has created a new market for private clinics, which usually charge £75 a time. Some critics argue this commercialisation of sick notes is enabling employees to cheat the system.

"It is unlikely that a private healthcare service will be recommended to others if patients

'Health professionals are worried about being sued if they won't sign someone off work'

are not getting fit notes when they ask for them," says Beverley Sunderland, managing director at Crossland Employment Solicitors. "Too many healthcare professionals are worried about being sued or complained about if they will not sign someone off work. Although government guidance makes clear that employers do not have to accept private fit notes, if an employer suggests to an employee that they are not really sick then this may breach the relationship of trust and confidence."

Generational differences also remain. Sick leave may have increased since the pandemic across all ages, but the largest growth has been among the young: 16-24 year-olds (up 58 per cent) and 24-34 year-olds (up 43 per cent). By contrast, there was a rise of just 27 per cent among 35-49 year-olds and 35 per cent for 50-64 year-olds.

Managers are even, at times, having to encourage more experienced employees to get with the programme set by their younger colleagues and take time off sick.

"Generally, older people are more reluctant to take time off than our younger team members," says Hemming. Stone agrees, adding: "Those that worked pre-pandemic still struggle with ingrained presenteeism and often need to be encouraged to take sick leave by managers when it's needed."

With that sort of advice, Britain's absence epidemic is unlikely to heal any time soon.



The queue is the point: crowds outside It's Bagels in Primrose Hill

Social-media fame is a mixed blessing for trendy cafés

When eateries go viral on TikTok, the hordes arrive and the iPhones come out, says *Eleanor Steafel*

We're 35 minutes into queuing for ice cream in Paris. In front of us, a TikToker films content. Behind us, an ageing Aussie couple ask their trendy daughter if there might be another ice cream place nearby. They are sent to sit on the kerb; the daughter sticks it out, desperate for a scoop from Folderol, an ice cream parlour that's become a social media sensation.

Folderol is not alone. In cities the world over, "event queues" are on the rise. TikTok is bringing hordes of people to bakeries like the brand-new It's Bagels! in Primrose Hill, where you can line up for two-and-a-half hours for a smoked salmon and cream cheese bagel. You could make your own in that time, but you'd miss out on the queue. And the queue is the point.

Standing in line for a new opening, a product launch or a much-hyped sandwich is bread and butter for TikTok creators. In trendy Hackney, Pophams Bakery sells laminated pastries which photograph beautifully. It regularly crops up on lists of "most Instagrammable spots in London" and often has a massive line of customers outside the door. Owner Ollie Gold says social media hype is a double-edged sword. He doesn't want people to wait for their pastries. In fact, it irks him to see a pastry going cold while someone films it. "We're all going, 'Please eat it, stop filming it.'"

No sooner is something hyped than it becomes overhyped and finished. Gemma Bell, a hospitality expert at a leading PR company, says it's common for people to actively create a viral moment, but it's not a good thing. "You'll get a lot of people coming along just wanting to take a photo. You need to ask: 'Is that our long-term customer?' And it might not be."

The pasta restaurant Padella, in London's Borough Market, opened in 2016. It ran a queue rather than a booking system because it was small and wanted a high turnover of covers. "The line used to go all

the way down the street, which was amazing publicity," said owner Tim Siadatan. "But then no one wants to stand in a queue." He'd send out nibbles to keep people happy. Then Transport for London complained because they were blocking the Tube entrance. Then the council had an issue because of health and safety. Then Padella's landlords said they were blocking other people's restaurants. The restaurant even had to employ people to manage the queue.

Shamil Thakrar, co-founder of Dishoom, another early adopter of the queue, says it was never part of the plan. "It's a barrier to hospitality." Dishoom has found a way around it by making the queue part of the hospitality experience, handing out cups of chai or sherry. If he was opening a new place, would he actively try to cultivate a so-called event queue? "No, 100 per cent not."

Back to Folderol, that ice cream and natural wine bar in Paris, which found itself overwhelmed by internet influencers cradling little bowls of ice cream and glasses of cloudy wine and taking photos outside its parlour. After a challenging summer fending off the hordes and their iPhones, the owners banned people from sitting on the street. "No TikTok," the signs read. "Be here to have fun, not to take pictures." How long, I wonder, will it take for these signs to appear outside It's Bagels? "Come for the lox, not for the likes".



Queuing for a much-hyped sandwich is bread and butter for TikTok creator