

LI BUSINESS

When 'You're late!' happens too often

SMALL BUSINESS

BY JAMIE HERZLICH

jherzlich@aol.com

Whatever the excuse, tardiness can have rippling effects in an organization and needs to be addressed early on, say experts.

Imagine your employees came into work and said they were late because their fake eyelashes were stuck together or their dog ate their work schedule?

Well, those were some of the bizarre excuses that were reported in a recent CareerBuilder survey that found that 1 in 4 workers admitted they are late to work at least once a month and more than 1 in 10 said it's a weekly occurrence.

Regardless of the reason for being late, tardiness can have rippling effects throughout an organization and needs to be addressed early on, say experts.

"Tardiness impacts everyone," says Michael Erwin, a senior career adviser for Chicago-based CareerBuilder, a human resources management company. "It slows the business down."

Thankfully employers seem to be getting a handle on it, and the number of workers admitting to being late to work at least once a month (25 percent) was down from 29 percent last year.

This could be because employers are willing to work with employees on addressing the issue, perhaps even offering more flexible work schedules, says Erwin.

"With all the technology, workers are expected to work 24 hours a day," he says. "Employers realize as long as the employee is coming in and being productive, it doesn't really matter when they get to their desk."



Within reason, of course, and only if the job isn't dependent on on-time employees, like, say, on a production line, he says.

In those cases, arriving on time is critical and must be addressed immediately.

"What we've found is that there's typically a slow creep of these lateness issues," says Rick Maher, president of Hauppauge-based Turning Point Human Capital Management, an outsourced human resources firm.

Typically, when employees keep coming in late without ramifications they push the envelope further, he says.

Employers need to have a clearly defined written policy regarding tardiness/lateness, and that policy needs to be applied consistently, says Maher.

It's also critical to have a good time and attendance system to be able to track whether an employee is consistently coming in late, he says.

That will allow the employer to look at reports in real time, he says.

If lateness is becoming an issue, the employer should expect the employee to be part of the solution, says David Javitch, president of Javitch Associates, a Newton, Massachusetts-based organizational consulting firm.

"Part of the responsibility should be on them to come up with a reasonable solution that is mutually agreeable," he says.

For example, if the worker is late because of child care issues, perhaps a more flexible schedule could be arranged to come in later and stay later.

You shouldn't just resort to punishing or firing, he says, although the CareerBuilder survey found that 60 percent of employers say they expect employees to be on time every day, and 43 percent have fired someone for being late.

In New York, an employer can fire an employee for tardiness, says Kimberly Malerba, chair of employment law at Ruskin Moscou Faltischek in Uniondale. A worker is considered employed "at will" — the employer's discretion — unless there is a contract or collective bargaining agreement that may alter the terms of employment.

It's always best to try first to remedy the problem, but if the behavior warrants disciplinary action, the employer should make sure such action is applied consistently to all employees, she says. An employer doesn't want to receive a claim that it discriminated against a certain class of employees, she says.

As a best practice, the employer should document attendance (both tardiness and absences) and maintain an attendance policy so employees are aware of the expectations and consequences of tardiness, says Malerba.

"It's easier to take advantage if there's no policy in place," says Erwin.