

UK firms have half the rate of high staff sickness of Germany companies, research says

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The proportion of UK companies reporting high rates of staff sickness fell to less than half the rate in Germany and France in five years, research says. The fall was partly due to the UK having weaker employment protection and lower sick pay, the British Sociological Association's conference on work, employment and society in Warwick heard today [Tuesday, 3 September 2013].

Dr Wen Wang, of the University of Wolverhampton Business School, told the conference that in 2004 around 17% of UK firms studied said they had high rates of staff sickness, which fell to 9% by 2009.

By contrast, 24% of firms studied in Germany said they had high staff sickness in 2009, up from 17% in 2004. In France the percentage fell from 29% in 2004 to 21% in 2009.

Dr Wang and Professor Roger Seifert, also of the Wolverhampton Business School, analysed statistics on 2,620 private-sector firms with more than 10 employees in the three countries, as recorded in the European Company Survey.

They found that the lower staff sickness in 2009 in the UK was statistically linked to factors including:

- less overtime worked, with overtime earning extra pay rather than time off in lieu
- more profit-sharing among staff
- less variation in workload than found in German and French firms
- good working atmosphere

The higher staff sickness rate that developed in Germany by 2009 was statistically linked to factors including:

- laws which made sacking or disciplining staff hard for employers
- more generous sick pay
- high rates of staff working overtime. (In a quarter of German firms studied in 2009 all of the workforce had worked some overtime, and overtime was usually rewarded with time off in lieu and not more pay)
- increased workload variation (more than half of firms in Germany in 2009 had to cope with large changes in workload at short notice)

“Workplace absence through sickness was reported to cost British business £32 billion a year – our findings show that Germany and France suffer even bigger losses,” Dr Wang told the conference.

“We see that the proportion of companies reporting high staff sickness decreased in the UK from 2004 to 2009, turning it to the lowest rate of high staff sickness among the three large economies in Europe.

“Strong employment protection and generous sick pay was empirically found to contribute to increased staff sickness in Germany and France. Employment protection is much higher and sick pay is more generous in Germany and France.

“Our results also show that a friendly and supportive working environment can also reduce sickness, regardless of nationality.”

- Dr Wang and Professor Seifert analysed data from the European Company Survey for the study. In this a senior company manager at each company was asked if the company had a high rate of staff sickness and the response was recorded as ‘yes’ or ‘no’, without giving further statistical detail. The researchers excluded firms with more than 20% of the workforce working part-time.

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1. The British Sociological Association’s work, employment and society conference takes place from 3 - 5 September 2013 at the University of Warwick.
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