
Long NHS waiting times are killing UK productivity: Forging new partnerships



Jonathan Pearson

*****@**PACONSULTING.COM

UK Head of Healthcare - PA
Consulting, UK

[LinkedIn](#) [Twitter](#)

Lengthening NHS waiting times, compounded by an ageing population and associated long-term conditions, is compromising the health of the UK workforce. We know workplace absence costs the UK economy £18 billion in lost productivity each year and that figure is expected to reach £26 billion by 2030. Rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis alone are predicted to cause 25.9 million lost working days by 2030, costing the UK economy £3.43 billion annually.

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That creates a pressing need to find innovative ways to improve the health service and, in turn, the country's productivity. Part of this will be about better and faster treatment but we should also look for opportunities for the NHS to do more to work with employers to help them reduce absenteeism and presenteeism (substandard productivity due to working when ill). Workplace programmes that support the health and well-being of the workforce can make a real difference and are an area where the NHS could play a greater role. The combination of NHS expertise and skilled HR teams can be very powerful in supporting employees with illnesses that affect their ability to work.

The Investors in People (IIP) programme provides one example of the impact this focus can have. They are a London-based organisation which helps companies get the most from their staff. The businesses who choose to become accredited as 'investors in people' are benchmarked against top-performing firms to continually improve their own standards of employee investment. While IIP covers all aspects of working life, one of its aims is to reduce absenteeism by addressing stress, working with staff to find ways to improve well-being, and empowering managers to engage with poor mental health in the workplace. There is clear potential for the NHS to encourage approaches like this and make them more accessible to workers and so reduce the burden on health services.

Improving the health of employees is clearly a major challenge but creating effective partnerships between the NHS and businesses is one way to transform the UK into a healthier and more efficient country.

Jonathan Pearson is UK Head of Healthcare at PA Consulting. For more information visit: www.paconsulting.com/healthcare

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