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Process Review Case Study

Absence Management at Northumbria University

Are you a customer-focused organisation?

Putting the student first when designing your processes can help you achieve your goals

Of interest to:

Staff involved in Process Review; HR Managers, Payroll Managers

HR policies can be aligned with student needs

Too often HR/Personnel policies are viewed as relevant only to staff. Taking student needs into account can give a different perspective on your requirements.

But we've always done it that way

Sometimes the most fundamental assumptions about the purpose of, and need for, a process should be challenged.

Win/Win is a realistic goal

This case study shows how one organisation used the JISC infoNet method to turn an unpopular policy and a bureaucratic process into a win/win situation for students and staff.

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Process Review Case Study

Absence Management at Northumbria University

As part of its HR System implementation project, Northumbria University decided to review its Absence Management procedures. The review team used the JISC infoNet recommended approach and ended up viewing the process in a very different way to what was expected at the outset. This case study gives a very brief summary of the project.

Process Decomposition

The review team found that the process of Absence Management actually broke down into 29 sub-processes. The institution recognised 29 different types of absence including sickness, annual leave, flexi-leave, maternity and a range of others. Each of these different leave types had a different administrative process associated with it.

Statutory/Policy constraints

The University's HR management was keen to ensure that the new system supported its Sickness Absence Management Policy. The policy outlined rules for identifying employees who hit 'triggers' in relation to frequent or long-term absences and defined management procedures to follow when an employee hit a trigger. The policy had a bad press within the organisation. It was seen as overly bureaucratic and a stick to beat people with.

Client Focus

Using the JISC infoNet guidelines the team asked the questions why are we doing this and how does it affect the students our primary clients? They concluded that absence does impact on the service to students where it is unplanned. The answer to why the process exists is thus to help maintain the workforce needed to serve the client. Viewed from this perspective a key actor in the process is the Occupational Health Service. The objectives of the Sickness Absence Management Policy could thus be redefined as:

- To maintain a full and fit workforce
- To give the Occupational Health Service the tools and the opportunity to get staff back to work quickly

Project Scope

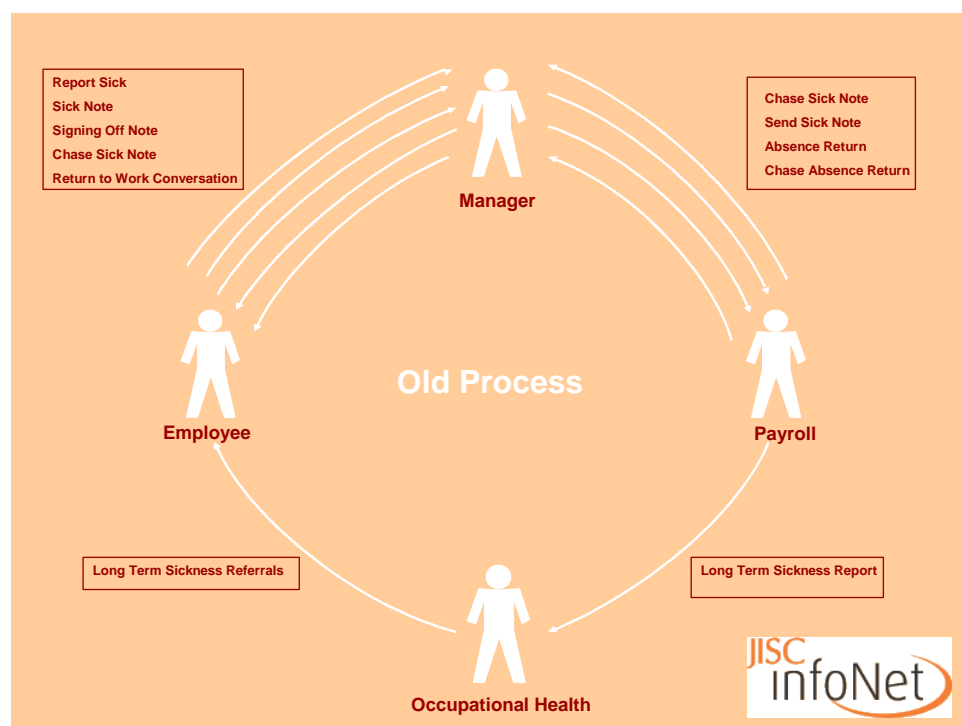
Answering the questions about purpose and clients also helped define the scope of the process review project. There was seen to be a clear distinction between sickness and other types of absence.

Sickness	Other Absences
Unforeseen	Planned
Impacts on service to students	
Relates to strategic HR objectives	Could be better managed via self-service functionality available in next release of HR system

Sickness absence was identified as the priority to be addressed for the reasons outlined above. Looking at the technology options it was clear that the other processes could be better tackled when the next version of the HR system was available. The 'Absence Management project' was renamed the 'Health Management project' to better reflect its priorities.

Process Analysis

The process was analysed using the tools outlined in the Process Review infoKit. Rather than duplicate the techniques we have covered in the infoKit this study will concentrate on a single diagram that clearly illustrates the issues with the existing process.



The analyses showed that the process was lengthy and complex with many steps, much duplication of data and responsibility and authority were separated from expertise with work separated from all of the other roles.

The collaboration diagram above shows the main interactions. Basically the whole process was driven by Payroll and had grown up around the need to pay Statutory and Occupational sick pay correctly. The interactions were between the employee and payroll with the manager serving as a 'postbox'. The Occupational Health Service was entirely marginal to the process. The key issues with the process can be summarised as:

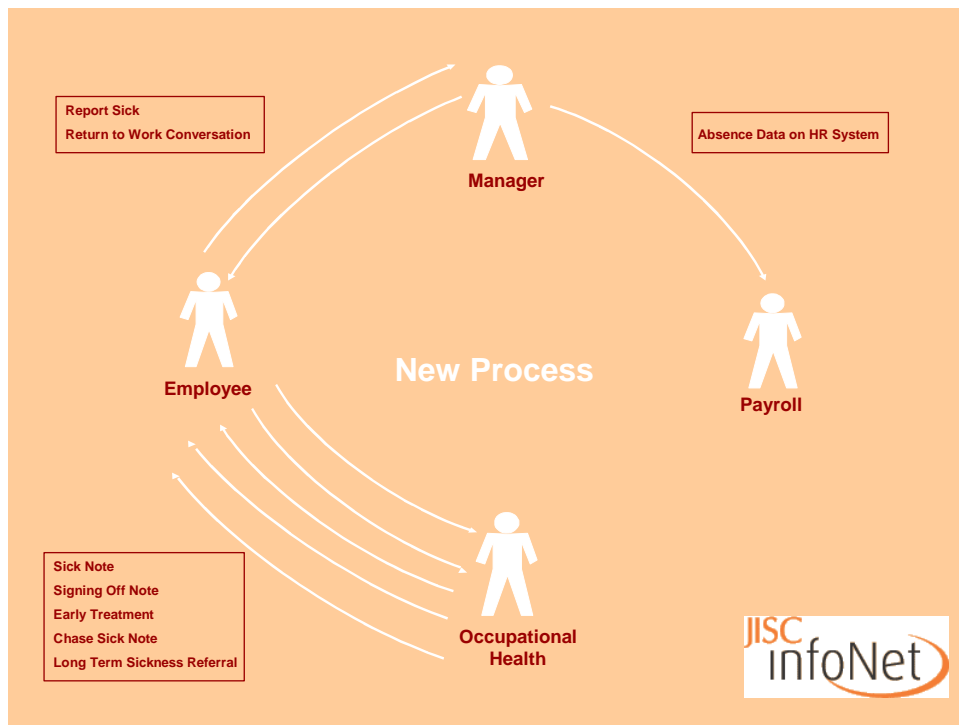
Issues with Old Process

- **Too many manual steps**
- **Occupational Health role reactive**
- **Slow response times**
- **No centrally held data**
- **Lack of confidentiality**
- **Based on payroll processing**



The paper-based nature of the process and the lack of a central information source gave rise to considerable duplication of records and the handling of sick notes by staff who had no need to view the details raised to concerns about data protection. Most importantly, in terms of the purpose of the process, there was a considerable time-lag before the Occupational Health Service got access to the information. Data was processed in accordance with the monthly payroll deadline and it could take 7-8 weeks before Occupational Health got the details they needed to take up a case.

This was an example where the team felt it necessary to throw away the analysis and start designing the future process from first principles. The result is shown below:



The new process is centred around the Occupational Health Service and trained nurses deal direct with employees. Managers and payroll can get the data they require from a central data store but sensitive data is viewed only by Occupational Health staff. Payroll is now simply a recipient of data rather than the driver of the process. The changes streamlined the process to the extent that 38% of the activities in the old process were cut out and staff resource was transferred into the Occupational Health Service.

Occupational Health is now able to deliver a much more pro-active service designed to minimise disruption caused by unplanned absences e.g. the university has a contract with a local physiotherapy centre and Occupational Health can give immediate referrals to staff with back problems. This helps to avoid long term absences caused when delays in treatment cause symptoms to become major problems.

The approach has won considerable support from employees who view the new 'Health Management' initiatives in a very positive light. This is an example of where putting the student first has resulted in a clear improvement for all concerned.

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