Data-Driven Look at Health-Related Absenteeism in UK and US

From the common cold to major illnesses, health-related absences have become a global issue that can seriously impact the productivity and profitability of businesses everywhere.

Data shows that poor mental health alone costs UK businesses £45 billion each year. The implications are clear: when employees are absent due to sickness, work can pile up, deadlines can be missed, and the overall efficiency of the organization can take a hit.
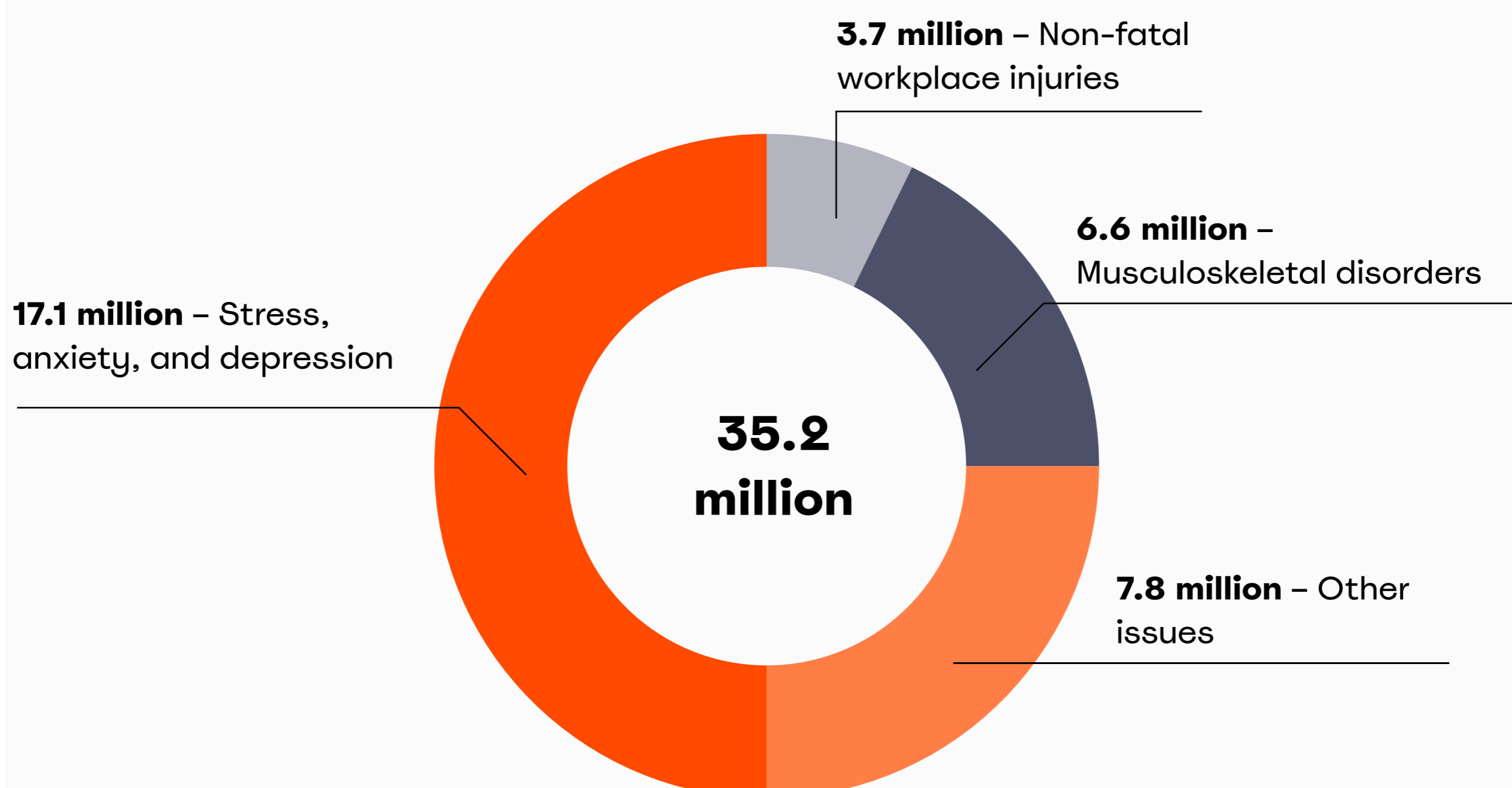
To help you understand the magnitude of this problem and find effective solutions for promoting a healthier and more productive workforce, we're going to dive deep into the data and statistics on sickness absences in the UK and the US. We will uncover some eye-opening information that will help you take a proactive approach to managing sickness absence in the workplace and ensure that your team members remain healthy, happy, and productive.

Sickness Absence Rates Hit a 10-Year High

According to recent data, sickness absence rates in the UK have soared to a 10-year high, with a staggering 35.2 million working days lost in 2022-2023 alone. Stress, anxiety, and depression were responsible for almost 17.1 million of those lost days, highlighting the urgent need for greater investment in workplace well-being.

The CIPD survey also revealed that around 76% of employees reported some stress-related absence. And while over two-thirds of employers say that they take this issue seriously, they often lack the confidence and necessary line manager skills to tackle the problem once and for good.

## The State of Employee Well-Being Programs in UK Companies (%)

3.7 million – Non-fatal workplace injuries

6.6 million – Musculoskeletal disorders

17.1 million – Stress, anxiety, and depression

35.2 million

7.8 million – Other issues

Source: https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/dayslost.htm

Employers Are Prioritizing Employee Well-Being More Than Ever

After the pandemic years, the number of companies implementing at least some form of employee well-being programs has been steadily rising.

For instance, this CIPD study found that the % of employers with dedicated staff well-being strategies increased by 13 since 2018. Besides, more employers are now undertaking a proactive approach when dealing with sickness absences – the % of those who simply react to such absences has decreased by 14 since 2018.

The State of Employee Well-Being Programs in UK Companies (%)

Legend: 2023 | 2022 | 2021 | 2020 | 2019 | 2018
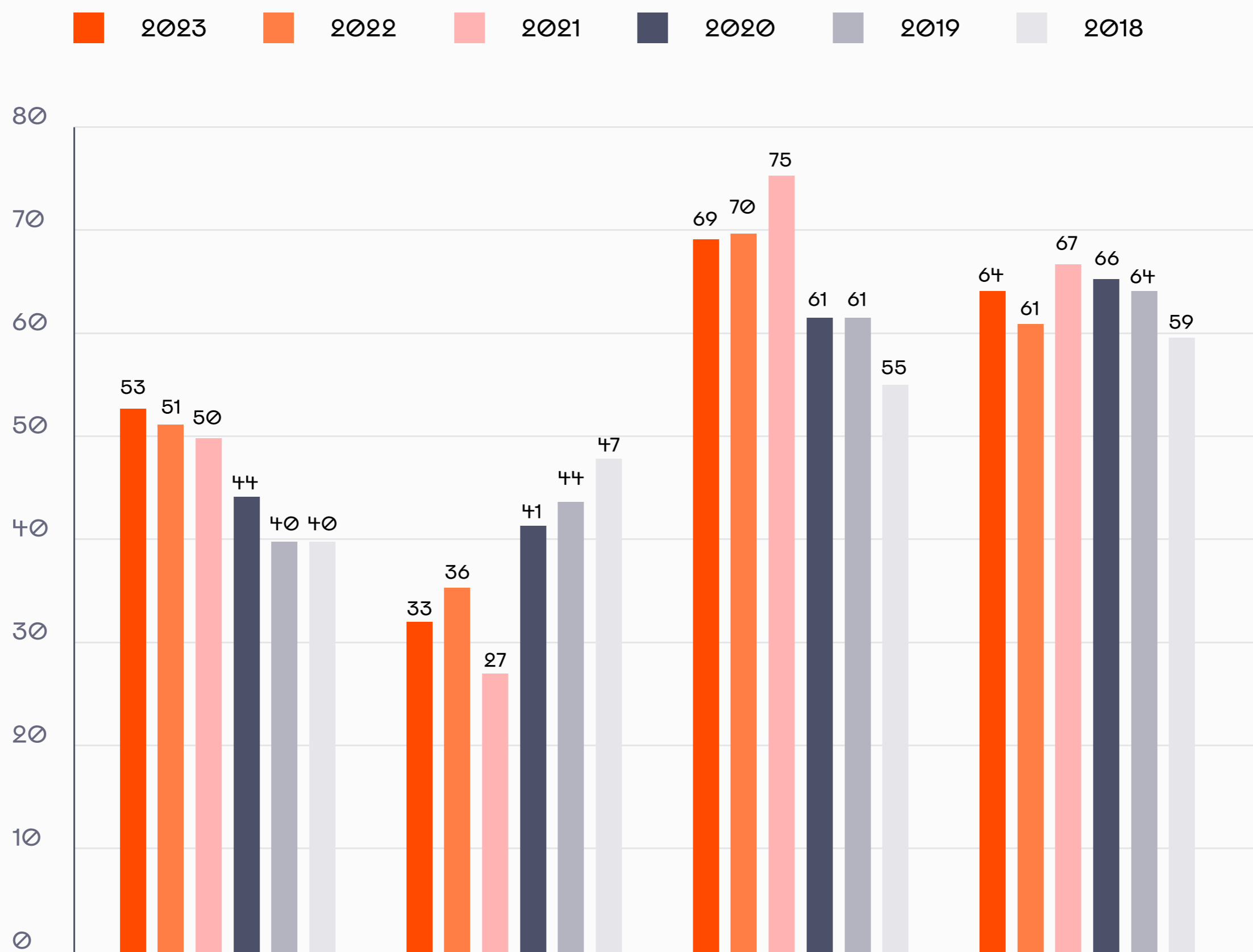
	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018
Organizations with dedicated employee well-being strategies	53	51	50	44	40	40
Organizations that keep undertaking a reactive approach to sickness absences instead of promoting employee well-being	33	36	27	41	44	47
Senior leaders have employee well-being on their agenda	69	70	75	61	61	55
Employees are eager to engage with the introduced well-being initiatives	64	61	67	66	64	59

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Companies with 1000+ staff members tend to have dedicated employee well-being programs more often than smaller ones. As per data by CIPD, 76% of such large companies in the UK have stand-alone well-being strategies in place as compared to 56% of the organizations with 250-999 employees and 37% of small and medium-sized companies (SMEs). At the same time, smaller organizations prefer to undertake a flexible approach to managing employee sickness and well-being, handling each case individually.

Approach to Employee Well-Being Based on Company Size (%)

■ SMEs ■ 250-999 employees ■ 1000+ employees

76

56

37

67

47

28
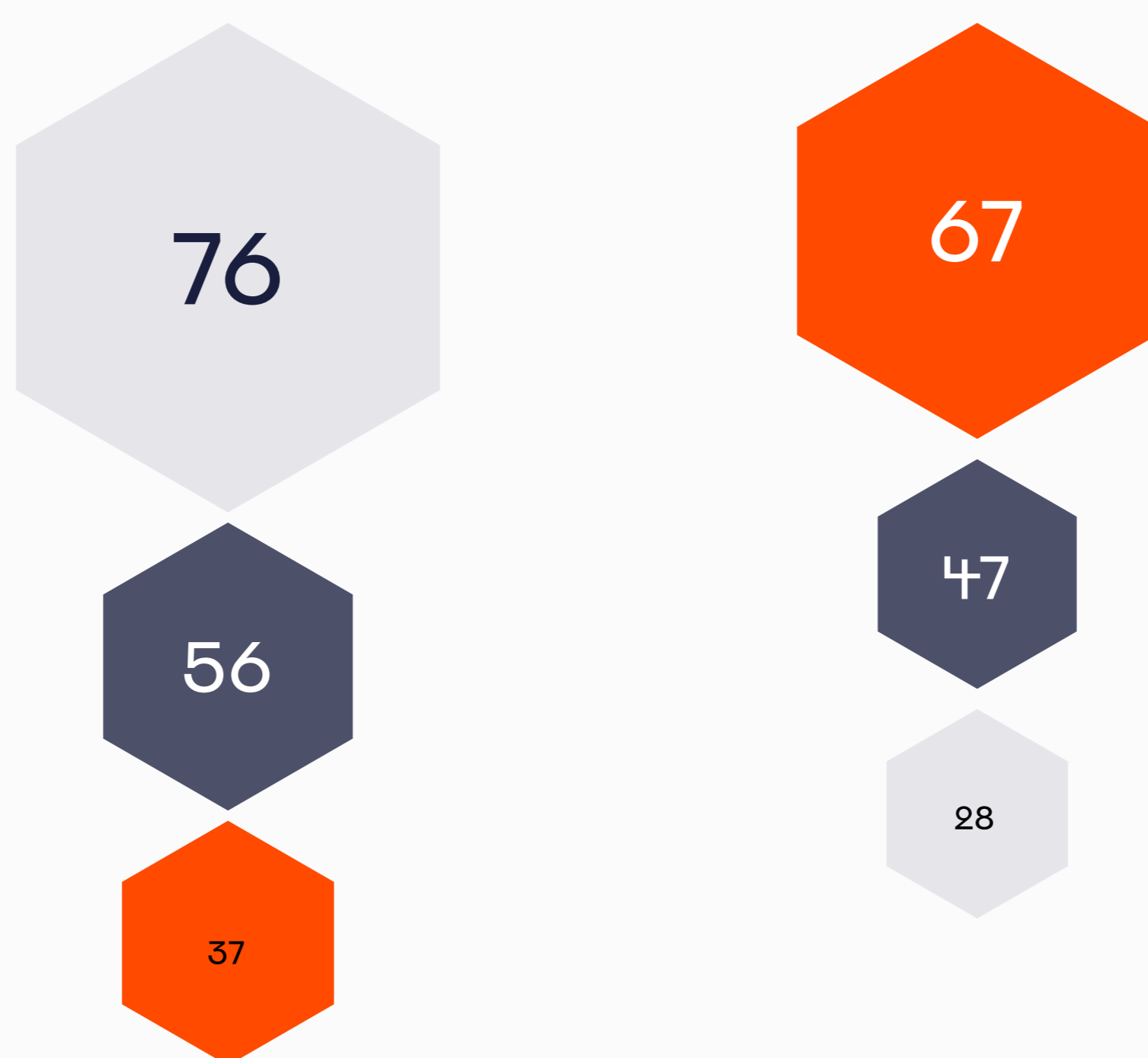
Have a dedicated employee well-being strategy that aligns with the overall company's strategy

Don't have a stand-alone employee well-being strategy but prefer to stay flexible and approach each employee's case individually

Source: https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/reports/2023-pdfs/8436-health-and-wellbeing-report-2023.pdf

# COVID-19 Is Still Affecting Work Environments

The 2020 lockdown had its effect on every organization, requiring us to adapt to the new workplace reality. However, as per CIPD, over half of employers who undertook some measures to promote employees' health in the face of the pandemic no longer do so, and only 43% of employers continue to implement the same measures as before.

Here are some of the most common steps now taken to support employees suffering from COVID-19 long-term:

Measures Taken to Support Employees Dealing with Long-Term COVID

- Occupational health assessments
- Support based on individual employee needs
- Flexible work arrangements
- Mental health support
- Enhanced return-to-work process
- Training for line managers on how to support sick employees
- Guidance for employees on how to stay at work when dealing with a health issue

Steps taken to support people experiencing long COVID

72%
57%
54%
51%
37%
30%
24%
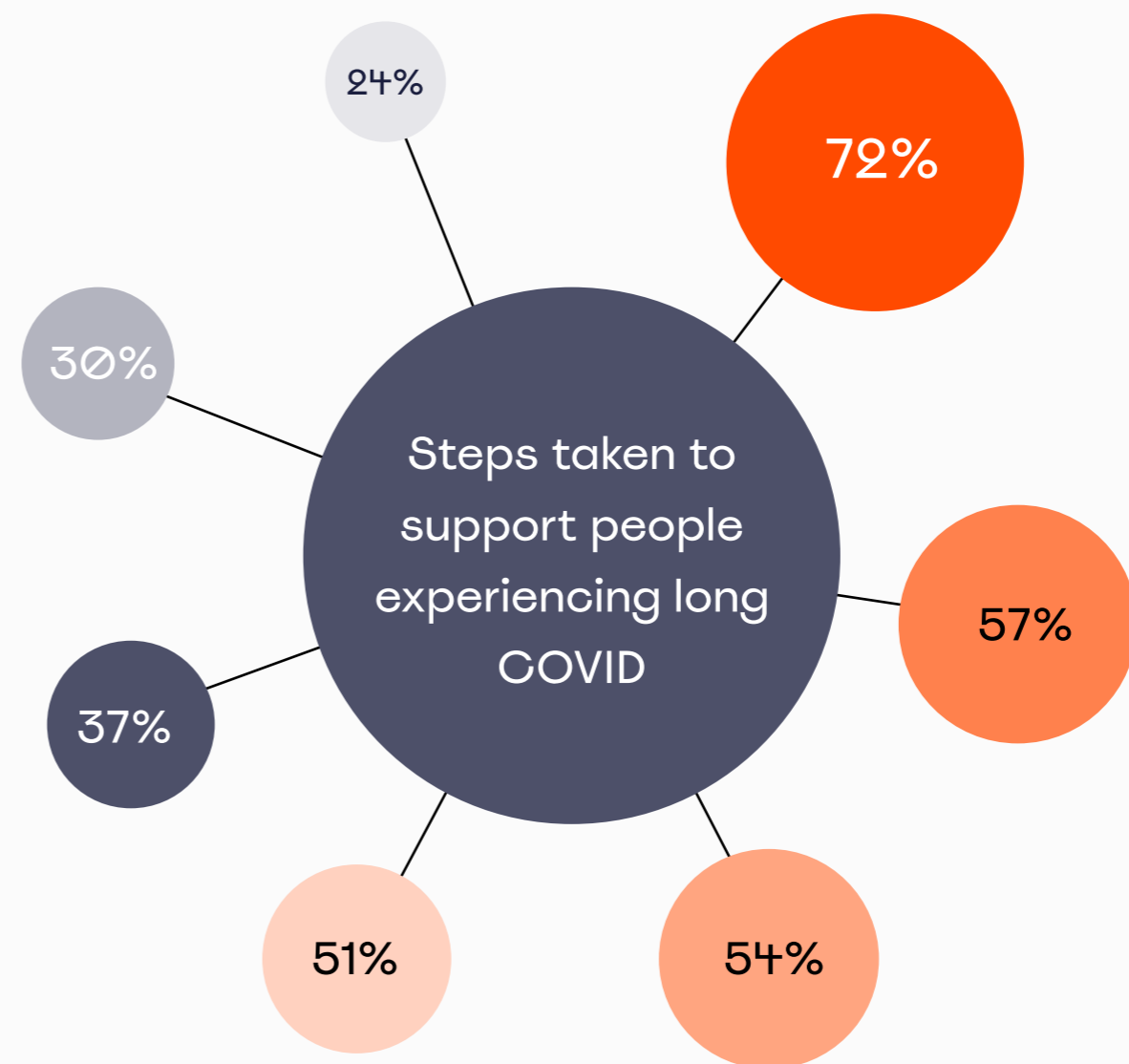
While employee health remains in the focus in the majority of organizations, just 4% of companies with at least one effective well-being initiative intend to significantly expand their staff well-being budgets in the year to come. For 63% of respondents in the CIPD survey, the budget will remain the same, and 7% plan to slightly decrease it.

Planned Changes in Employee Well-Being Budgets in 2024

- Keep it the same
- Increase a little
- Decrease a little bit
- Increase considerably
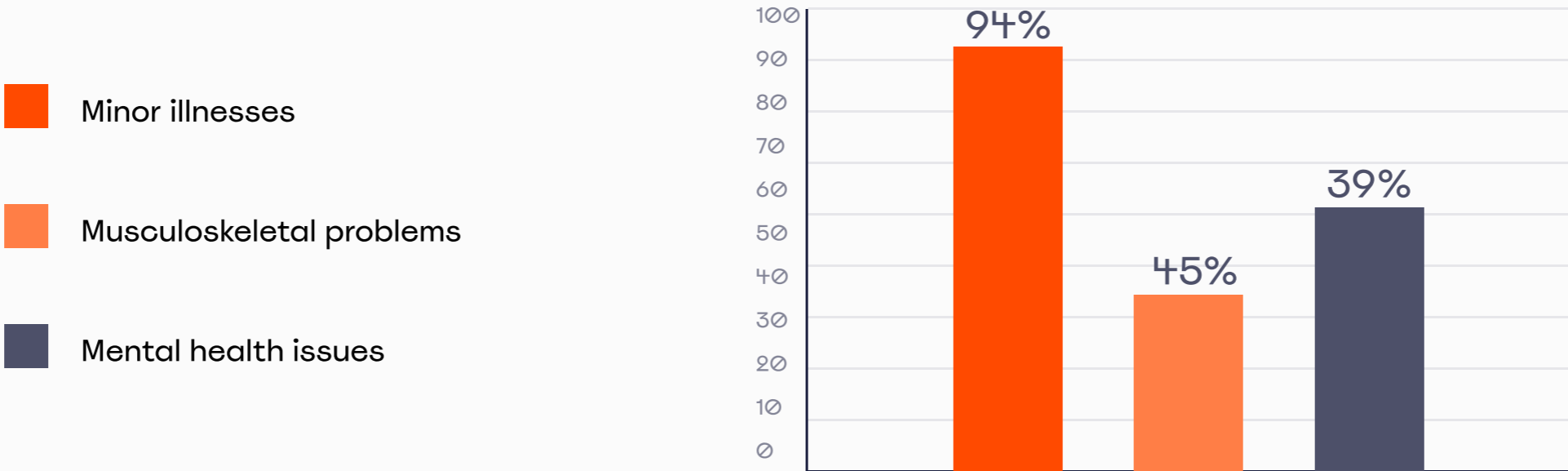
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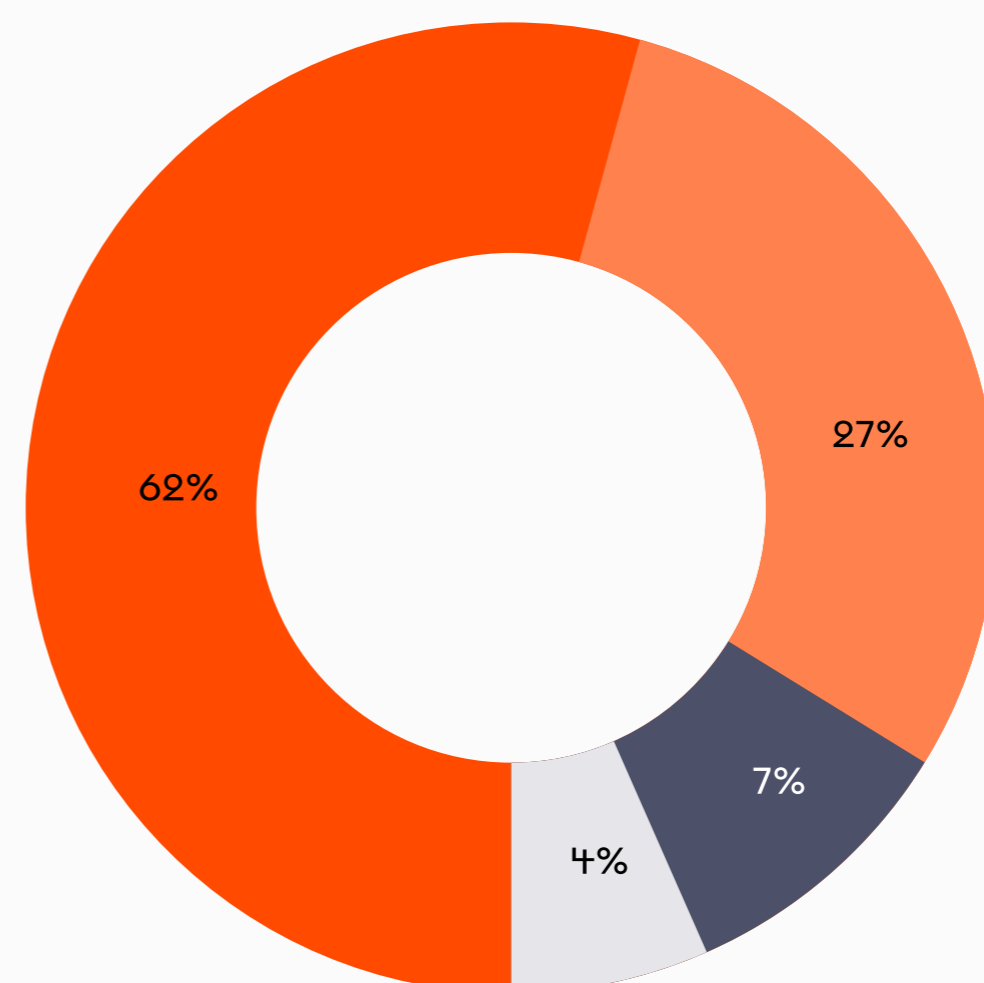
A Closer Look at Sickness Absence Statistics
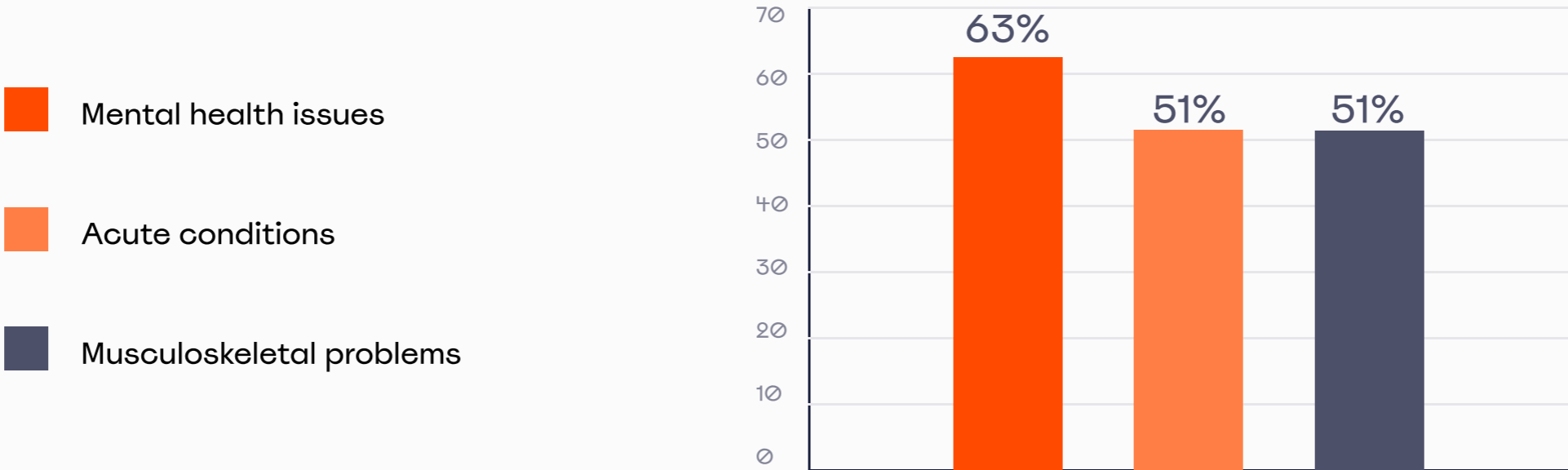
Short-term vs. long-term sick leave in UK

According to official data, the UK employees who called in sick during 2022-2023 took 15.8 days off work on average. As for the reasons behind sickness absences, they differed slightly for short-term and long-term leaves:

Main Causes of Short-Term Sick Leave in UK, 2023

- 🟧 Minor illnesses
- 🟧 Musculoskeletal problems
- ⬛ Mental health issues

https://www.cipd.org/uk/about/press-releases/workplace-absences-highest-over-decade-new-report/

Main Causes of Long-Term Sick Leave in UK, 2023

- 🟧 Mental health issues
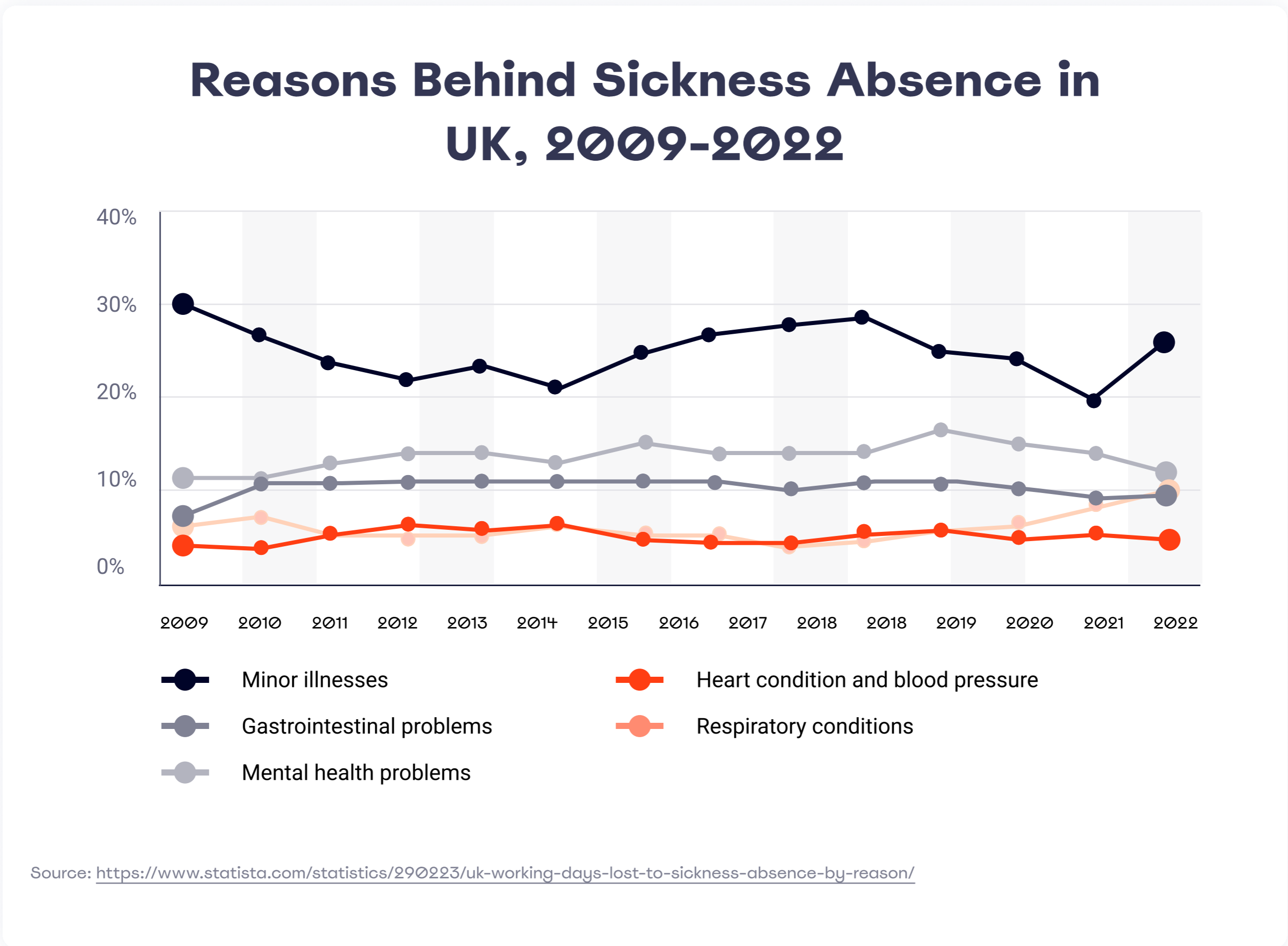- 🟧 Acute conditions
- ⬛ Musculoskeletal problems

https://www.cipd.org/uk/about/press-releases/workplace-absences-highest-over-decade-new-report/

Main causes of sick leave in UK from 2009 to 2022

Short-term vs. long-term sick leave in UK

Data shows that minor illnesses, musculoskeletal problems, and mental health conditions remained the major reasons for calling in sick among UK employees throughout the last decade. Other commonly reported causes include gastrointestinal problems, heart and blood pressure problems, and respiratory conditions.
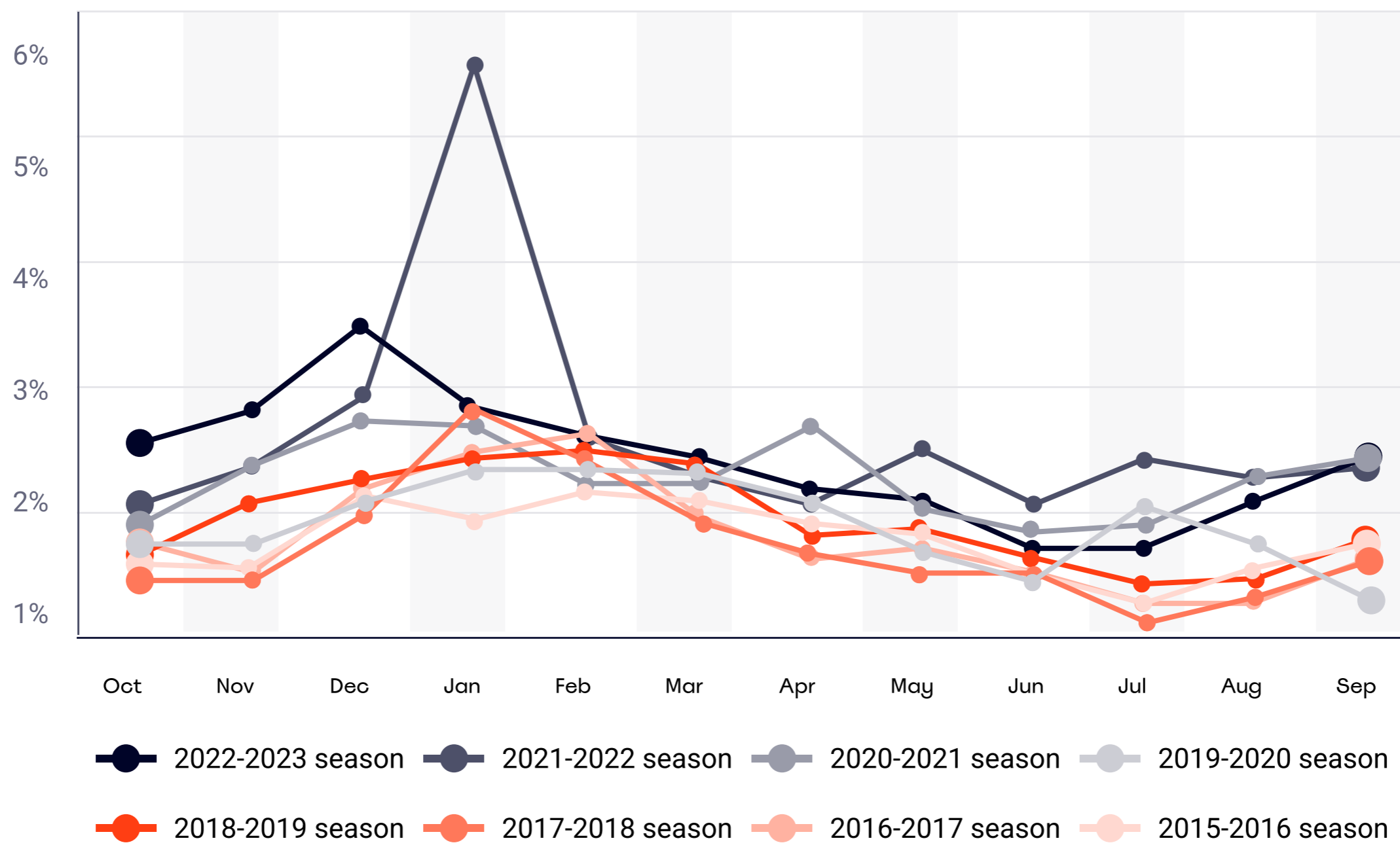
Here's how the prevalence of these reasons was changing over time:

Reasons Behind Sickness Absence in UK, 2009-2022

Legend:
- Minor illnesses
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Mental health problems
- Heart condition and blood pressure
- Respiratory conditions

Percentage of sick leave among US employees from 2015 to 2023

As per this report, the rate of sickness absences among US workers was the highest in January of the 2021-2022 work season when the annual flu epidemic was on the rise. This 5.37% absence rate was higher than any monthly absence rate reported during the lockdown period and surpassed the second-highest absence rate of 3.25% in December 2023.

Percentage of US Employees Calling in Sick, 2015-2023

Legend:
- 2022-2023 season
- 2021-2022 season
- 2020-2021 season
- 2019-2020 season
- 2018-2019 season
- 2017-2018 season
- 2016-2017 season
- 2015-2016 season

Source: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1259414/health-related-workplace-absenteeism-full-time-us-workers/

How to Minimize Sickness Absence in the Workplace: Tips for Employers

Sickness absence can have a profound impact on a business, both financially and operationally:

- When employees take time off due to illness, other team members may need to take on extra responsibilities or work overtime to pick up the slack. This can result in decreased productivity, higher stress levels, and reduced morale.
- In addition, sickness absence often results in increased costs for the business, including the cost of sick pay and the expense of hiring temporary staff or paying existing staff to work overtime.

Thus, it's vital to take steps to manage sickness absence effectively and minimize its impact on your business. Here are just a few examples of what you can do:

1. Establish a positive workplace environment

The first step in promoting employee well-being is creating a positive and supportive work environment – it's an environment where individuals feel valued, respected, and encouraged to contribute their best efforts and realize their full potential.

This type of environment fosters collaboration, creativity, and a sense of community among team members, ultimately leading not only to better employee well-being but also high productivity, job satisfaction, and retention rates.

- **Empower your employees.** Give them control over their work and provide resources and support for them to deliver results.
- **Provide recognition.** Recognizing employees' contributions will encourage them to put more effort into their work and increase their level of job satisfaction.
- **Provide training and development.** Help employees to grow their skill sets and improve their job performance.
- **Create a safe and healthy work environment.** Ensure the workplace is hazard-free and comfortable, with ergonomic seating and proper lighting.
- **Help employees enjoy their workplace.** Offer fun activities, social events, and team-building exercises. A happy employee is a productive (and healthy) employee.

2. Create a culture of open communication

The culture of open communication helps employees to freely discuss health concerns with their managers and colleagues without the fear of being penalized or judged. Such communication ensures that health issues are detected early and dealt with promptly. Plus, it can even motivate employees to change their lifestyles and improve their health in the long term.

- **Encourage feedback.** Regularly ask for feedback from your employees and make it clear that it's always welcome. And provide [constructive feedback](#) to them in return in order to help them enhance their work-related behaviors.
- **Be approachable.** Make yourself available to your employees and create an environment where they feel comfortable approaching you with questions, concerns, or ideas. Encourage open dialogue, and be willing to listen without judgment.
- **Utilize different communication channels.** Different modes of communication cater to different employees' preferences. An open-door policy, instant messaging, email, and personal meetings are just a few examples of those communication forms.

3. Implement mental health awareness programs

The benefits of targeted mental health awareness programs are numerous. For one, they provide employees with the tools and resources they need to manage stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges that can impact their work performance and job satisfaction. Additionally, these programs help to reduce the stigma around mental health issues, which can make it easier for employees to seek help when they need it.
Here are the key things to consider:

- **Training on mental health first aid.** Provide managers and employees with comprehensive training on mental health first aid to recognize and support anyone experiencing mental health challenges. This training imparts skills and knowledge to provide initial support and refer individuals to additional help if necessary.
- **Regular check-ins with employees.** Initiate regular one-on-one meetings with employees to discuss their emotional [well-being](#), stress levels, workload, and overall job satisfaction. This is an excellent opportunity to identify and address any potential issues early on.
- **Empowering resources.** Counseling, self-care modules, support groups, and access to therapist consultations are a few examples of resources that can be made available to employees.

4. Hold return-to-work interviews

Return-to-work interviews not only allow you to support employees' recovery from sickness and ensure they are fit to return to work but also provide an opportunity to identify any underlying issues that may have contributed to their current absence and work together to prevent future ones.

- **Create a welcoming and comfortable environment for the interview.** Schedule it at a convenient time for the employee, ensure that a private and quiet space is available for the discussion, and establish a friendly and supportive tone at the outset of the interview.
- **Gather information about the employee's illness or medical needs.** This can help to identify any reasonable adjustments or accommodations that may be necessary to support their successful return to work.
- **Discuss the employee's current work and job responsibilities.** Mention any changes that may have occurred during their absence. Help them feel prepared and confident as they re-enter the workplace.

5. Encourage healthy lifestyles among employees

Encouraging healthy lifestyles among employees is vital to ensure a happy and productive workforce. Here are a few ideas that can help you get started:

- **Gym memberships.** Regular exercise has been proven to boost the immune system, making employees less susceptible to illnesses. In fact, studies have shown that moderate-intensity exercise can reduce the risk of and help to cope with upper respiratory tract infections. Additionally, exercise has been shown to reduce stress levels in employees, lowering the likelihood of mental health-related absences, such as anxiety or depression.
- **Healthy food options.** Snacks and meals containing high amounts of sugar, salt, and saturated fats can lead to obesity and other health issues. By providing nutritious options like fruits, vegetables, and lean proteins, employers can help employees make healthier choices and improve their overall health.
- **Paid time off (PTO).** This benefit promotes better work-life balance and improves health. Employees who take regular vacations report feeling less stressed and are at a lower risk of burnout. PTO allows one to rest and recharge, reducing the risk of stress-related illnesses, such as anxiety, depression, and heart disease.

6. Offer flexible work arrangements when possible

Flexible work arrangements allow employees to have control over when, where, and how they work, helping them balance work and life commitments. They allow employees to achieve a better work-life balance and reduce the risk of burnout and fatigue that often lead to sickness absences.

In addition, flexible work arrangements help to reduce the spread of illnesses within a workplace. This is especially important during cold and flu season or during widespread outbreaks of contagious illnesses.

When introducing flexible work arrangements in the workplace, follow these steps:

- **Conduct a thorough analysis.** Before implementing any change, it's crucial to analyze your business's needs and preferences. Consider the nature of the work, the type of tasks performed, and the specific needs and wants of your employees. Gather data through employee surveys, interviews, and focus groups, and use this information to inform your decisions going forward.
- **Set goals and objectives.** What do you intend to achieve with your flexible work arrangement? Reducing absenteeism rates, increasing employee satisfaction, or improving overall productivity? Clearly defined goals will help you measure the success of the change and make necessary adjustments as needed.
- **Develop a plan.** Consider the types of arrangements available, such as telecommuting, job sharing, or flexible scheduling, and determine which will be best suited for your business. Then, make a policy to control the way it's handled in your team.
- **Communicate with stakeholders.** Engage with stakeholders, including management and employees, and keep them informed throughout the process. Highlight the benefits of flexible work arrangements and address any concerns that may arise.
- **Pilot the change.** Before rolling out your flexible work arrangement to all employees, test it with a select group. This will allow you to detect any flaws and make improvements before implementing the new work arrangement company-wide.

- **Monitor and evaluate.** Collect data and feedback from employees to ensure that the flexible work arrangement is meeting the set goals and objectives. Then, make any adjustments if necessary.

7. Make transparent attendance policies

[Attendance policies](#) provide a clear framework for both employers and employees to follow in the unfortunate event of sickness-related absence.

They usually contain provisions for notifying the employer of sickness-related absences, defining the expected frequency of contact between an absent employee and the employer, and detailing the procedures for returning to work after a period of sickness-related absence.

This way, they help to reduce confusion and minimize the impact of sickness-related absences on the day-to-day operations of the organization.

- **Establish clear expectations.** This means explicitly outlining what is considered acceptable attendance, as well as what the consequences are for subpar attendance. Be sure to communicate these expectations in a way that is crystal clear and accessible to all employees, whether through an employee handbook, a presentation, or a training session.
- **Take a proactive approach to attendance management.** Regularly monitor and track attendance, and address any issues as soon as they arise. Be sure to keep detailed records of attendance, and share these records with employees on a regular basis. This will help staff members understand where they stand, as well as what steps they need to take to improve.

8. Use absence management software

Absence management software eliminates the need for manual tracking of employee absences. This saves HR departments a significant amount of time and effort that would otherwise be spent manually recording and managing employee sick leave. By automating this process, businesses can ensure accurate and timely tracking of employee absences, allowing HR staff to focus on more pressing tasks.

Besides, absence management software helps organizations identify patterns in employee sickness absences. This information can be used to spot any underlying issues that may be contributing to high rates of employee sickness, allowing companies to take proactive measures to reduce illness and absenteeism among their staff.

Finally, such software also helps businesses to comply with legal obligations related to employee sick leave. For example, it can be used to track sick leave entitlements, ensuring that businesses remain compliant with local laws and regulations.

No More Sick Days Slipping Through the Cracks – Master Absence Management with actiPLANS

At the core of any successful business lies an effective workforce management system with functionality that streamlines leave requests and approvals, simplifies scheduling, and provides real-time visibility into employee attendance and availability. And when it comes to finding the perfect software of such kind, look no further than actiPLANS!
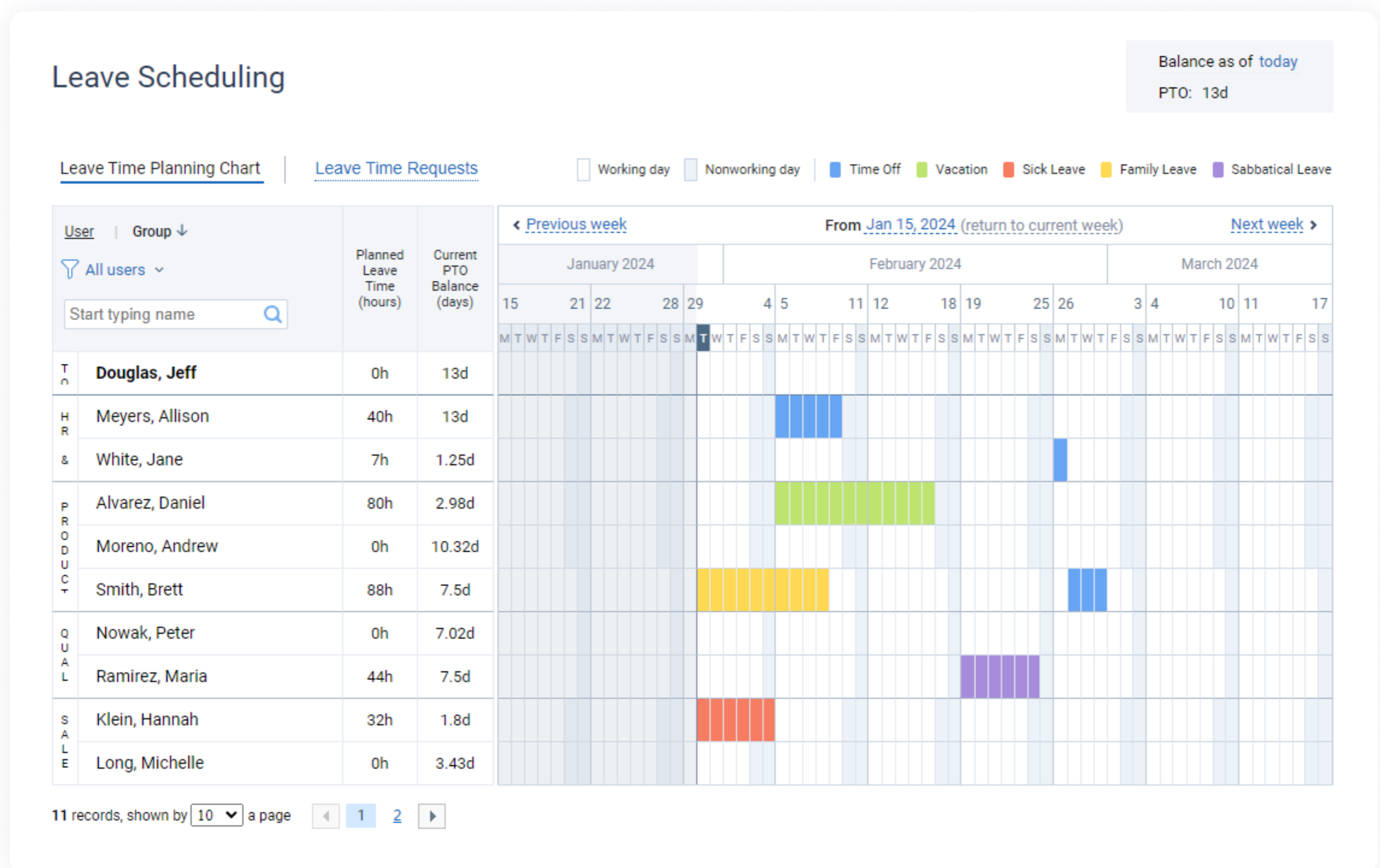
actiPLANS allows you to create as many leave types as you need, whether it's vacation time, sick days, or any other type of absence. It also lets you fine-tune PTO and sick leave accrual in line with your company's policies. This ensures that your employees are receiving the benefits they are entitled to, while also preventing abuse of the system.

actiPLANS offers powerful leave management automation. It takes care of everything from leave requests to approvals with just a few clicks. Employees can easily submit leave requests, managers can review and approve them, and HR can effortlessly track and manage all absence data.

Built-in visual timeline and a mobile app give managers and HR an easy-to-understand graphical representation of employee availability and leave schedules. This visibility helps prevent scheduling conflicts and ensures that the right people are working at the right time.
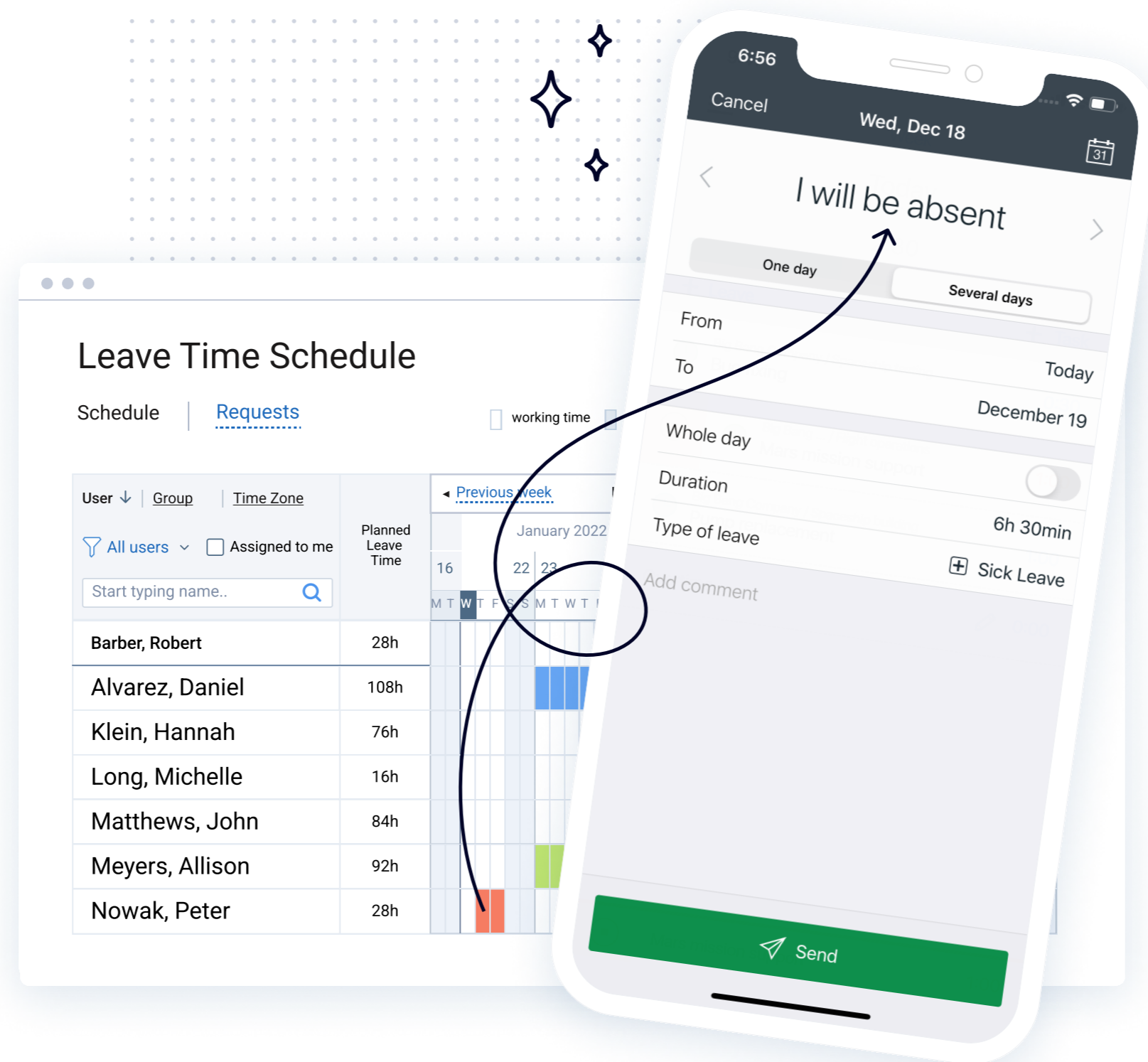
Detailed time off reports provide valuable insights into employee absence patterns and trends. They give HR and managers actionable data to help them optimize scheduling and staffing or identify opportunities for improvement.
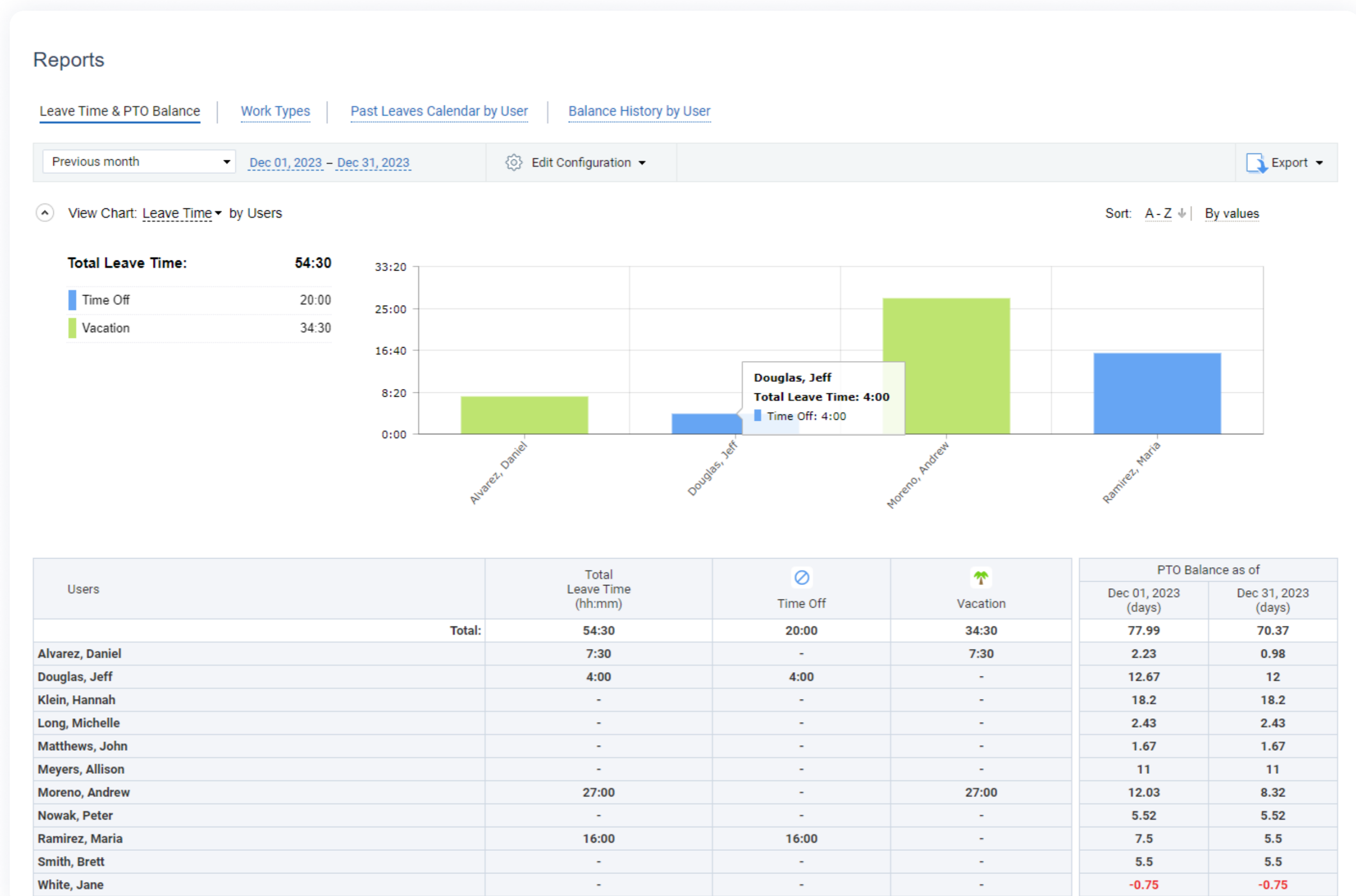
Finally, actiPLANS seamlessly integrates with actiTIME, a leading time tracking software. This integration allows businesses to manage all aspects of workforce management, from project planning to leave management, in one centralized platform.

With its powerful automation tools, user-friendly interface, and seamless integration capabilities, actiPLANS is the optimal solution for all your absence management needs. Try it today and take your workforce management to the next level.