

How to use Bradford Factor information – Flexibly!

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The Bradford Factor scoring mechanism is built into [Activ Absence](#). While most HR Managers understand the scale, many employees don't.



A lot of people get hung up about the Bradford Factor – although it isn't complicated to understand and used well can be a really useful addition to your absence management toolbag.

Our recommendation is that employers take a flexible approach to using it – this guide should help Managers understand how the Bradford Factor works and how it can best be used to reinforce your absence management policies in the workplace.

The Bradford Factor is just a scale - that's it!

I find it best to explain the Bradford Factor as being like a fuel gauge on your car - whereas your car measures your speed, the Bradford Factor measures absence from work in terms of the impact that absence has on the business.

Just like the same car dashboard can be used in any country, but mileage limits vary from one country to another, what Bradford Factor scores will trigger disciplinary action (if any) vary from one company to another, depending on the company's HR policy.

Why 'Bradford Factor' and not 'Sickie Scale'?

The scale was developed by the Bradford University School of Management, who were researching sickness absence and found that lots of short term sick days caused more business disruption than long term sickness absence. The scale was therefore named after the school.

Employees worry about it

Employees often think that there are 'hard and fast' [Bradford Factor](#) rules that apply to every company, and they often ask whether or not the Bradford Factor is legal, and what the 'legal rules' are surrounding its use. One of the most common searches on Google is 'Bradford Factor rules'.

How does the scale work?

Four employees could have taken the same number of days off sick during a year, say ten days each, but their patterns of sickness absence, and therefore their impact on the organisation would be different. The Bradford Factor is simply a formula that adds weight to short term absence to illustrate this.

How do you calculate an individual Bradford Factor Score?

The actual formula looks like this:

$S \times S \times D = \text{Bradford Factor}$

S is the number of spells of absence of an individual over a given period; and

D is the total number of days of absence of the individual over the same period

Here are some examples of how the calculation works in practice:

(a) One absence of 10 days = $1 \times 1 \times 10 = 10$ points

(b) 3 absences of 1 day, 3 days and 6 days – $3 \times 3 \times 10 = 90$ points

(c) 5 absences of two days each – $5 \times 5 \times 10 = 250$ points

(d) Ten absences of one day each – $10 \times 10 \times 10 = 1,000$ points

If you would rather not perform this manually, we have a handy [Bradford Factor Calculator](#) on our website!

How should my company use the Bradford Factor?

There is no right or wrong way to use the Bradford Factor, as it is only a tool. Usually, HR will decide what levels should be set, and what action happens when that level is reached. These can be set automatically in Activ Absence using trigger point alerts, once you have decided where the triggers should be. Consequences for reaching a trigger vary widely among employers.

Using the Bradford Factor to motivate employees

In our experience, showing an employee their ongoing Bradford Factor Score can have a big motivational effect on employees, who take pride in seeing their score as low as possible – even if your company does not use the Bradford Factor for disciplinary purposes.

However, the scale works brilliantly when used as a 'trigger for review', alerting HR when their individual skills would be the best solution.

An example of how some employers use the scale:

Here is how one public sector employer uses the scale:

50+ points – verbal warning.

201 points – written warning

401 points – final warning

601 points – dismissal

You don't necessary need to formalise the process this much, again this varies from one company to the next. Personally, I favour a flexible review rather than firm action attached to a particular score.

Can you give examples of flexibility in practice with real cases?

The important thing to remember is that the scale doesn't care why people are off, only that they are.

Lets say two employees have had 5 periods of absence, each lasting two days, giving them both a score of 50. The Bradford Factor score could have triggered a review by HR prior to disciplinary action depending on the company's disciplinary policy.

On the surface, both look the same pattern of absence, but using other information gives HR a full picture, enabling more flexibility.

Combining Bradford Factor & return to work interview data and line manager experience

A 'hard rule' such as shown above in the Local Authority would see both employees disciplined with a verbal warning. This would be 'fair' - but it may not achieve the best outcome for the employer, which is a reduction in future absence.

Combining the Bradford Factor report with previous feedback from return to work interviews enables HR to offer an individual approach and determine the best response to prevent further absence, rather than simply 'punishing' employees for being off sick.

Let's look at differences between our two employees and why they need a different approach:

Person 'A' appears to be taking sickies, with no real reason for the absence. The ailments are not serious, and a chat with the line manager reveals poor motivation and a bad attitude. Disciplinary action, such as a verbal warning based on triggering a Bradford Score seems to be reasonable. The impact of the warning would hopefully see the employee's absence behaviour corrected.

Person 'B' is stressed and disengaged in return to work interviews, they appear awkward and tearful. They disclose they are thinking about visiting their GP due to stress (at which point their GP is likely to sign them off work).

A verbal warning is likely to be the trigger that sends them to get signed off. often on long term illness as the discipline sees them fearful of returning.

Stress and depression could constitute a disability, so careful handling is essential anyway.

Before taking disciplinary action, an employer could gently explore potential mental illness and offer appropriate support, such as a referral to occupational health or counselling, making any workplace adjustments and/or a change of hours.

The extra support could help keep the employee in work, guide them towards recovery and possibly prevent longer term absence.

The disciplinary option is still available to HR, but it is unlikely to be the most effective tool in this case.

So what would I need to look at for a more flexible approach?

This individual, best-practice approach is only possible if a system documents the facts from the very beginning so the 'human' HR manager can apply the skills they trained for.

Having a good return to work process and an absence management system can support HR Managers in making good decisions with sensitivity.

Look at the return to work data, speak to line managers and try to get an overall picture of the employee as well as just a picture of absence.

Special Cases

The British Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and 2005 (DDA), (replaced by the Equality Act 2010) creates a duty on employers to tailor their actions to the individual circumstances of disabled employees.

Whilst their absences may still have the same impact on an organisation, disabilities like epilepsy, MS or asthma are more likely to result in short term rather than long term absence. As employers cannot discriminate against disability, these protected characteristics may need to be taken into account – a reasonable adjustment could be to record disability related absence separately so they do not count as part of the Bradford Factor score.

So I can't dismiss someone for sickness if they are disabled?

This is not the case and there is a limit to what level of absence is reasonable even when an employee has a disability.

However, this will depend on many factors and can be complicated. It certainly isn't often a 'first discussion' topic unless there are other factors.

Our advice is always to speak to occupational health or to an employment law specialist before making any decision on disability related sickness absence.

What about cancer patients who are off for months?

Cancer or any other serious but recoverable illnesses could see an employee rack up over 200 points from a single long absence. Again, this is a situation we would recommend seeking external advice on.

As a rule, most employers would not want to give a written warning in these circumstances, and would want to support their employee through a very troubling time, and see them return to work successfully after it.

Again, these instances call for gentle, sensitive handling and implementing a return to work plan is usually more effective than applying a 'hard rule' based on the Bradford Factor.

Conclusion

As with any complex HR policy, when and where the Bradford Factor is appropriate is a matter for expert guidance.

However, used well, it can be a useful ally in letting HR know when their skills and judgement are needed.