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Contact Us:

To learn more contact
Hughes-Consulting -
e-mail:
hughesconsulting@bellsouth.net
or phone :
985-893-2236

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'Sorry I'm Late; a Raccoon Stole My Shoe'

From gridlock to oversleeping to being victimized by a raccoon, employee tardiness plagues employers, according to a recent CareerBuilder.com/USA Today survey that found 16 percent of workers arrive late to work at least once a week. Most hiring managers typically don't question the reasons workers give for being late, but slightly more than one-fourth (27 percent) don't believe the excuses they hear most of the time and 25 percent of employees admit to faking an excuse for their tardiness. The survey, conducted in the United States from Feb. 15 to March 6, 2007, included responses from 6,823 employees in the private sector and 2,591 hiring managers and HR professionals with significant involvement in hiring decisions.

Traffic was the top excuse many gave for showing up late, with 31 percent of employees citing this; 16 percent admitted falling back asleep and 8 percent had problems getting their kids on their way to school. A long commute, forgetting something at home and feeling sick were among other reasons given.

But some were real doozies, such as:

- Someone was following me and I drove all around town trying to lose them.
- My dog dialed 911 and the police wanted to question me about what really happened.
- My girlfriend got mad and destroyed all my undergarments.
- I woke up and thought I was temporarily deaf.
- I just wasn't 'feeling' it' this morning.
- I was up all night arguing with God.
- A raccoon stole my work boot off my porch.
- I super-glued my eye thinking it was contact solution.
- I was putting lotion on my face when my finger went up my nose, causing a nose bleed.

In other findings, men are less likely to be late than women (41 percent vs. 37 percent, respectively) and—unless they're lying on the survey questionnaire—are less likely than women to fib about why they are late (22 percent vs. 28 percent).

The headaches imposed by tardy employees has been a much-discussed topic on the Society for Human Resource Management's online bulletin board, with members debating whether rewarding punctuality vs. taking punitive measures for lateness can have the most impact in stemming the tardiness tide. Unfortunately, we fire more people for attendance violation than for any other reason," one unidentified member wrote in a January 2007 posting. "But contrary to some opinions, firing people is not a long-term solution.

"We've cut our involuntary turnover in half by increasing our focus on policies such as attendance during new employee orientation, by training managers to provide continuous coaching feedback to their employees, by introducing interdepartmental job shadowing and employee-led cross-functional teams. All of these are focused on how you affect other employees and the bottom line."

Another person posting on the SHRM bulletin board claims never to have had an employee report to him/her with an attendance or punctuality problem, attributing this to discussions she/he has with job candidates. "I make it very clear that if for any reason they don't feel they can come to work five days a week and be ready to roll by 8 a.m., then do not take the job. I make it very clear that if they have these issues, the relationship will not survive." In return, she/he lets the candidate know she/he is "extremely flexible with time off needs. There are days when I say 'bail out an hour early. You deserve it.' "I really do believe that if you lay out this expectation before an offer of employment is extended, you won't incur the problem."

A third member on the bulletin board noted that "some folks just do not understand the importance of being on time consistently. Even adults in the workplace don't always make the connection as to how it affects business." Having a discussion about the importance of punctuality could especially be beneficial when a

potential new hire is starting his or her first job.

One member recalled how tardiness was a problem at a call center in the employer's Chicago office and that it "was primarily due to the age of our new hires," although those working at the company for a while knew the rules and consequences, she/he noted. "New hires actually helped us understand why they could not be at work on time consistently when they first started," she/he said in the posting. "Most are right out of college and 'used to sleeping through a class or showing up when we wanted.'" "We had to explain to them this was work now and different rules apply. We will enforce the rules, and with consequences." That could include docked pay, she/he wrote, noting, "When it hits their pay, people tend to take notice. It's tough love in the workplace." After adequate verbal and written warnings, those consequences can lead to termination.

New employees need to take the time to learn the company's culture and policies, according to Rosemary Haefner, vice president of HR for CareerBuilder.com. While 44 percent of hiring managers say they don't care if their employees are late as long as their work is completed on time and with good quality, others are much stricter in their policies," she said in a press release, noting that one in five hiring managers would consider terminating an employee for arriving late two or three times in a given year. "The key," she said, "is to know your individual manager's expectations."

By Kathy Gurchiek