

Absenteeism and presenteeism: possible causes and solutions.

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Abstract: This article covers absenteeism, presenteeism, and related concepts. The impact of the concepts is discussed in terms of the objectives of an organisation. Possible causes of absenteeism, presenteeism and absence from workstations are discussed as well as possible solutions [1-10]. The challenges facing managers in the public sector regarding record keeping of absenteeism are highlighted.

Keywords: Presenteeism; sleep; shift-work; tea-breaks; sick leave

Introduction

Absenteeism is probably one of the biggest problems that a manager has to handle on an ongoing basis as it impacts on service delivery, staff morale, and could lead to financial losses. If the cause has been identified and solutions implemented and an employee continues to be absent from his/her workstation then the only solution would be normal disciplinary procedures.

It is generally accepted that in terms of common law a contract of employment is based on an agreement between two parties: an employer and an employee. The employee has a fundamental obligation to tender his/her services to the employer [1]. If this is done then the employer is contractually obliged to pay the employee for services rendered. When an employee fails to report for work the employer would record this absence as absenteeism [1, 2].

Absenteeism, however, usually has different meanings for employers

and employees respectively. From an employer's perspective absenteeism is a huge problem as it impacts on service delivery, puts pressure on those employees who are working, highlights the health and safety ramifications in some workplaces, and could lead to loss of revenue, to list a few examples. Are all absences bad for an organisation? Robins [2] argues that at times absenteeism could be to the advantage of an organisation when an employee's productivity could be below standard due to fatigue which could have safety implications. Here we need to consider persons who should be alert when on duty, such as airline pilots, nuclear reactor personnel, and so on.

Usually most organisations require a low absenteeism rate to meet objectives. Do employees concur with the employer? Employees usually do not believe that they are failing to meet their fundamental obligation of service delivery when they are not at allocated workstations doing what they are paid to do. They see themselves as being at work whereas the employer

sees them as being unproductive and not focusing on the organisation's goals and objectives.

Definition of absenteeism

In order to explore the different meanings of absenteeism we need a definition. For the purpose of this paper absenteeism is broadly defined as being absent from a workstation. This could include, for example, being off sick [1], taking extended tea/lunch breaks, doing shopping during work time, absenting oneself without leave. In these examples the employee intends returning to work hence the need for management to tackle absenteeism so that the employees can accept their obligations to tender a service.

This broad definition does not include desertion because a deserter is some one who is absent without leave and does not intend returning to work [3]. Desertion is therefore not discussed in this paper.

Presenteeism is another aspect of absenteeism as this refers to an employee who is present at work but not actually rendering a service due to a range of reasons, such as chronic ill health, or personal problems [4]. This concept is discussed in this paper.

Absenteeism due to ill health

There are times when an employee may not be able to tender his/her services to an employer. This requires proof of not being able to tender such services and this is the responsibility of the employee. According to statute law, namely the Basic Conditions of Employment Act [5], an employer is required to pay an employee if he/she is too ill to work provided a medical practitioner's certificate of not being fit to work is produced. However an employer is entitled to check on the validity of all medical certificates [3]. For example, the doctor who signed the certificate could be contacted to verify authenticity of the certificate. However this does not mean that the employer has a right to be informed of the employee's illness without the consent of the employee. It is argued that going this route is a waste of time as the doctor is obliged to uphold patient confidentiality [1].

Another option is for an employer to place burden of proof on the shoulders of the employee by withholding payment until there is receipt of absolute proof of validity or authenticity of the medical certificate [1].

Persons employed by the state are entitled to 36 working days normal sick leave with full pay in a 3 year sick leave cycle [6]. When an employee uses all entitled sick leave then application may be submitted for incapacity leave.

Possible reasons for absenteeism

Research undertaken in the United States of America highlights the impact of shift work on absenteeism because changes in sleep patterns affect work productivity and mood patterns which could lead to a greater incidence of chronic illness [7]. To reduce the negative impact of shift work employers could promote anti-stress measures; meditation and physical exercise, for example. The impact of permanent shift work seems to be less stressful. The overall impact of this type of shift work on the health of employees is not as great as changing shifts [7].

According to Levine [8] under-trained supervisors are one of the main causes of absenteeism. Studies indicate that low pay, poor benefits, and high workloads do not contribute significantly to absenteeism whereas low job satisfaction, boring repetitive work, and unfair treatment received by supervisors do [8]. Haun also highlights poor/weak leadership as being a major cause of poor morale amongst healthcare workers resulting in a high absenteeism rate [9].

Arriving at a single cause for absenteeism is problematic as there are many complex causes. What is evident in the literature is that poor leadership is a factor as this creates stress in the workplace. Stress was identified as a major cause of absenteeism in a retrospective study undertaken on non-academics at an American university whereas there was a tenuous link to health risks, such as obesity, and actual absenteeism [10].

Recording absenteeism

Absenteeism for one or more days has to be recorded by managers as sick leave which is deducted from the employee's sick leave balance. This is a straight forward process. The issue of how to handle absenteeism if an employee reports for duty and works for a short period during a shift before going off sick should be clearly spelt out in a policy. Each employee should be treated the same because co-workers may believe that some are favoured thus their sick leave records are not factual.

Managers in the public sector need to be mindful of accurate record keeping of all periods that an employee is absent from an allocated workstation as the Department of Public Service and Administration, in its brochure on sick leave, incapacity leave and ill health [6] spells out the responsibility of the employee and employer respectively. The period of time not present at a workstation will be recorded by the employer and when a full day is completed this will be deducted from sick leave provisions.

Examples of such absence include:

- taking time off to consult a doctor, therapist, etc during working hours for reasons related one's health wellness,
- being absent for part of a day due to an illness or injury; or
- due to being disabled it is essential to attend to maintenance of equipment used as a result of disability.

Some employees, especially those who work in health care facilities, could consider time spent consulting a doctor who is on site as still being on duty thus there is no need to have time absent from work station recorded.

These employees may not realise that they cease to be an employee when they consult a health practitioner or attend an on site clinic. In such a situation an employee is a patient.

Should an employee have time away from workstation recorded if he/she participates in an employee assistance program, for example? It could be argued that time away from an allocated work station puts additional work load on the other employees and could lead to a feeling of dissatisfaction. In other words if the employer does not deduct time away from a workstation from the employee's sick leave provisions this could be perceived by the other employees as unfair labour practice. Such a situation could impact negatively on human resource retention strategies as dissatisfied employees could seek employment elsewhere.

How to reduce absenteeism in two steps

The rate of absenteeism usually reduces at the announcement that steps will be taken to check all cases of absenteeism [3].

Step 1

Meticulously record:

- all types of absenteeism of each employee each year,
- duration of each person's absenteeism,
- reasons for absenteeism.

Step 2

Follow-up each case of absenteeism:

- pay visits to sick employees, when necessary, such as those who have excessive sick leave records,
- write letters recording absenteeism which are handed to the relevant employees and proof of receipt is obtained,
- conduct interviews with returning employees.

Presenteeism

What is presenteeism and how can a manager combat it? An illness related condition that negatively affects on-the-job productivity of an employee is called presenteeism [4]. Presenteeism does not refer to loss of productivity due to employees extending their tea/lunch breaks, slacking by surfing the internet or emailing friends, or pretending to be ill to avoid working.

Presenteeism is intertwined with loss of productivity due to real health problems of employees, such as allergies, rheumatoid arthritis, chronic back pain, and so on. These health problems are not severe hence the employees report for duty but their productivity will be below par. Studies undertaken on absenteeism suggest that presenteeism causes greater loss to an organisation than the costs attributed to absenteeism [4].

Employers should attempt to find out what the problems are that reduce the productivity of employees. One way to achieve this is by education and obtaining information on the health status of employees. However employees can not be forced to disclose their health status in terms of their right to privacy and confidentiality [11, 12]. They can offer the information voluntary but this needs to be handled sensitively so that employees perceive that the employer is concerned about their best interests [4]. For example to reduce the impact of presenteeism organisations could offer free influenza vaccines to staff, use of employee assistance programs, or wellness programs. The employer's role is to motivate employees to manage their own health.

Organisations should make use of appropriate policies to combat presenteeism. The role and function of a policy is to set out clearly what can and cannot be done. For example policies that address presenteeism should include defined parameters for granting assistance to employees as well as

protecting the organisation from abuse of benefits. In addition issues such as privacy, confidentiality, and medical testing should be covered. If the effectiveness of a wellness program requires some disclosure of information about the employee's condition, the policy should address this by stating that such disclosure will be made with the employee's consent to a specified person only [4].

There needs to be buy in by all so that employees agree to commit themselves to, for example, wellness programs for a specified period. What about those who default? The policy should spell out that if they default a specified number of times within a specified time they lose the right to continue with the program. Usually the employer carries most of the costs of wellness programs but this does not exclude contributions from employees. Again this needs to be addressed in a policy.

Absence from workstations without permission

Employees should be disciplined for poor timekeeping as this constitutes being absent from duty/allocated work stations which impacts on an organisation's running costs and work ethics. Poor timekeeping includes:

- arriving late for duty on a regular basis,
- leaving work early,
- taking extended tea, lunch breaks, or toilet breaks,
- attending to private business during working hours; this could include sending and/or reading personal emails, surfing internet for non-work related matters, or any other activity that is of a private business nature.

Concluding remarks

There are many contributing factors that impact on an organisation's objectives but one of the most costly is absenteeism. Employers need to handle all forms of absenteeism in a fair and transparent manner to minimise disharmony in the workplace.

Within the context of the public health sector in South Africa there could be different interpretations of conditions of service that relate to absence from a workstation to attend to health matters. For example, some employees employed at health care facilities could perceive that they are on duty when consulting a medical practitioner who is on site. This issue should be

researched to assess the extent of such perceptions and actual loss of working hours in a given health institution. The research could also include those employees who contribute to a medical scheme thus leave their work stations to consult private sector health professionals.

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