Improving Employee Attendance - Dealing with Absenteeism in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

One of the most burning issues in the workplace is Absenteeism. The employees not reporting to work, as expected, leave the Organizations battling. This is due to the fact that the absence of employees is not anticipated, as they absent themselves for duty without having been giving the necessary permission to do so beforehand. Absenteeism is determined by numerous factors including personality, attitude and sometimes gender. Grounds for absenteeism can vary and include, inter alia, financial, social, economic, health and personal factors. The operations of any organization could be disrupted by Absenteeism and is often proves costly to the organization.

Within the milieu of the study, workplace absenteeism is identified as a crisis with sub-areas. This research comprises the thoughts and discussion on absenteeism from the theoretical viewpoint with reference to relevant literature. The research defines absenteeism followed by a discourse on various types of absenteeism. The study explores an integrative model of absenteeism, together with its different causes and effects. The study concludes by summarizing various guidelines in formulating absenteeism guidelines. The study provides an opportunity for further exploration of these fundamental aspects when dealing with absenteeism in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

Employee absenteeism positions among the most widespread and costly human resource problems (Kutzmits and Adams (2009:280). It is astounding that the organizations are still grappling with the true cost of employee absence (Navarro & Bass, 2006:32). Absenteeism occurs when employees are absent from work when they are scheduled to be there (Pillay, 2009:1). Such junctures can be classified as voluntary and involuntary absence. Voluntary absence is under the employee’s direct control and can be traced back to factors like a poor working environment, job dissatisfaction and difficulties with line management (Pillay, 2009:1). Involuntary absence is deemed to be beyond the individual’s control, such as in case of illness or an emergency to deal with (Pillay, 2009:1).

Absence from work is one of the everyday managerial realities that have a far-reaching impact on organizational operations. Absenteeism as one of the most omnipresent and taxing problems faced by the organizations (Sheika and Younis, 2006:65). Absenteeism is a real nuisance for managers, forcing them to make alternative provisions to allocate the resources to cover for the deficit.

As per Sheika and Younis (2006:65), from the economic perspective absenteeism is perceived as a factor that increases the overhead costs. The economic impact of employee absenteeism derives mainly from the costs of decreased productivity because of absence from work, less experienced replacement staff and the additional expense of hiring substitute labor.

Absenteeism is not well management because employees abuse sick leave (Van Niekerk 2010). It is essential for the organizations to be well equipped for managing absenteeism and hence there is a need for training programmes to empower managers for dealing with the problem. In addition, in the testing times, commitment and responsibility of managers is the key to managing workplace absenteeism through well-structured interventions (Paton, 2006:1).

The poor management style and poor working conditions too are among the major causes of absenteeism (Pierce, 2009). Grobler (2010) suggest that, in dealing with absenteeism, numerous parameters like soft side that policies, rules and programmes should be considered by the managers
and organizations. Work engagement is another aspect to be addressed at the time of employee absenteeism.

Absenteeism management programmes are beneficial and prove quite useful in addressing the impact of absenteeism in an organization (McIntosh and Jansen, 2007:135 and Beira, 2008:29). The programmes are beneficial as they reward good attendance through initiatives like promotion and incentives, which discourages non-attendance at work. Furthermore, they help in developing well-structured employee wellness programmes (Beira, 2008:29), which helps in providing insight into genuine needs of an employee. Hargrave, Hiatt, Alexander and Shaffer (2008:283) recommend an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) toward economic benefits by saving costs when dealing with absenteeism, which relates mostly to the number of days saved per employee through consistent attendance at work. The effective adoption of employee wellness programmes might reduce the rate of absenteeism, which in turn would increase both productivity and the overall performance of the organization.

**DEFINITION OF ABSENTEEISM**

Absenteeism is regarded as one of the greatest strategic risks for companies. Organizations are faced with the challenge of controlling and managing employee absenteeism mainly because it is costly. When someone engages in activities that compete with scheduled work at the organization, it is called as Absenteeism (Martocchio & Jameson, 2003:229). These authors view absence according to its physical sense, as an individual is deemed to be absent when there is a social expectation for him or her to be present at a given location and time. Anderson (2009:13) defines absenteeism as the employee’s failure to report for work, regardless of the reason. As classified, when an employee fails to physically report on work at a specified location and time when expected to do so by the employer, can be defined as Absenteeism.

**TYPES OF ABSENTEEISM**

Absentee behavior falls broadly into two main categories; these are scheduled and unscheduled absence.

**Scheduled absence**
The absenteeism due to events which are expected to happen and the employer has budgeted beforehand for this type of absence because it was expected to happen. The events may include maternity, study, vacation or retirement, and the companies have laid down protocols for it. The work and resources can be managed effectively by allocating them appropriately to others in the team, ensuring proper management of the workflow (Beira, 2008:28). Employers always prefer scheduled leaves because it negates any turmoil in operations, as it is usually planned in advance. This type of absence is also endorsed by the employer prior to commencement (Anderson, 2009:14).

**Unscheduled absence**
The operational disruptions are huge in this type of absenteeism since the same is not planned in advances and employer has not budgeted for it. The most common of these absences is a sick leave which is medically certified by a health care practitioner. The certificate produced by an employee complies with the guidelines of the organization (Beira, 2008:29), and the leave is categorized as medically certified sick leave. Not only is it disruptive, but it is also proves costly because of the cost of managing sick individuals, replacement or overtime, as well as potential lost opportunity costs from the loss of productivity (Beira, 2008:29).

Unscheduled leave happens when the desire to stay at home overrides the motivation to report for duty and is sometimes referred to as voluntary or culpable absenteeism since the employee is absent from work owing to reasons that are within his or her control. The employee has planned to be sick so as to participate in other no work-related actions. Since the reason is within the control of the employee in this instance, it can be viewed as voluntary absence.
The unplanned absenteeism sometimes is also involuntary or innocent absenteeism as the reasons are beyond the employee’s control. In this case too, an individual can be absent from work without prior approval owing to reasons beyond their control. This could be due to death in the family, medical emergencies, genuine sickness, house robberies, accidents, and the likes. The employee on a particular day, owing to unforeseen state of affairs, intended to be at work, but the plan did not materialize.

**LEGISLATIVE CONSIDERATIONS**

The Indian Labor Law, states that every employer is obliged to ensure that all employees receive certain basic standards of employment, including a set of leaves. Employment laws set the umbrella framework for deciding different dimensions of leave, like category or types, eligibility, duration etc. Many companies and organizations categorize leaves in different categories like casual leave, sick leave, earned leave, maternity leave, special leaves, loss of pay leave, compensatory leave etc. In India, three types of leaves are generally followed namely earned leave, sick leave and casual leave. Different provisions exist under different laws, for different categories of leaves.

In India, the Latin phrase 'Dies Non' is being widely used by disciplinary authorities in government and industries for denoting the 'unauthorized absence' to the delinquent employees. Dies-non is a period which neither counted in service nor considered as break in service. A person can be marked dies-non, if

1. Absent without proper permission.
2. When on duty left without proper permission.
3. While in office but refused to perform duties.

In cases of such willful and unauthorized absence from work, the leave sanctioning authority may decide and order that the days on which the work is not performed be treated as dies non on the principle of no work no pay. This will be without prejudice to any other action that the competent authority might take against the persons resorting to such practices.

The problem arises when the system is abused by those who are frequently away from work for reasons that could be controlled (voluntary/culprable absenteeism).

As it is, many employers struggle to cope with situations in which employees are not genuinely ill but are frequently absent, and these absences are somehow always supported by a valid medical certificate. Thus it is essential for organizations to institute a sound system for addressing and managing both absenteeism and those who are abusing their unscheduled leave.

Even though there are regulations laid down by the organizations in respect to absenteeism, Pierce (2009) is of the opinion that absenteeism is also a breach of contract between employee and employer. The contract of employment is one of the basic standards of employment to be made accessible to the employee by the employer. The provisions of the contract for the employee are as noted below:

- An agreement to offer service to the employer,
- To be remunerated for service provided,
- Subordination.

In the case of constant absenteeism, an employee can be seen as one who is not offering service to the employer as per the entered contract provisions. That is to say, he is in breach of common law duty (Parsee, 2008:522) by not meeting the obligations of his contract, by not offering a service as agreed, and yet might still expect remuneration.

**AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF ABSENTEEISM**

As per various theories and explanations, models of absenteeism are also large in numbers. One highlighted by Løkke Nielsen (2008) is discussed below. This is by no means exhaustive but it does focus on the model reviewed in recent years and is relevant to the current study.
Løkke Nielsen’s model (2008) appears to address various factors that play a role in determining to stay away from work. The model recognizes that the motivation to be absent from work is determined by factors internal to the individual, and is influenced mainly by individual responses to stimuli in the work or non-work environment (Løkke Nielsen, 2008:1331). This affirms why few individuals are often absent from work while others continue to be present, despite working in identical environment. In addition, factors in the social environment that contribute to absenteeism are recognized (Løkke Nielsen, 2008:1332). Absence is regarded as a social phenomenon. The absence culture is described as “the set of shared understandings about absence legitimacy in a given organization and established custom and practice of employee absence behavior and its control” (Løkke Nielsen, 2008:1332). The individual’s observation of the conduct of colleagues and management make them learn what is acceptable relating to their attendance behavior. The individuals use this knowledge in adjusting their own absence behavior (Løkke Nielsen, 2008:1332). This theory very will explains about the non-homogeneity of absenteeism among various offices in an organization. In some departments absenteeism is higher than others. This makes it important to have homogeneity in terms of clarity in applying absence norms and policies. These norms must consider all influencing determinants internal to the internal to the individual, social context, varying costs of absence across functions and occupations.

**CAUSES OF ABSENTEEISM**

The actual reasons why people are absent from work are complex and are based on a numerous factors. It has been observed that the main reasons for absenteeism are based on conditions relating to the individual reasons, the organizational reasons, and social contexts.

**Personal Reasons:**
The figure below gives an indication of the extent to which personal circumstances account for most of the reasons for absenteeism (Pillay, 2009:1).
According to Pillay (2009:1), personal factors like health, family responsibilities and stress account for most absenteeism in the workplace. The personal factors, especially those relating to ill health (solicited or unsolicited), appear to be the leading cause of absenteeism. The individual demographics also plays pivotal role in determining individual’s absenteeism (Beira, 2008). (McIntosh and Jansen, 2007) mention that older women were found less prone to absence compared to their younger counterparts because of less exposure to problems associated with young children. This clearly indicates that family responsibilities may keep employees away from work, and is positioned as the second highest (22%) reason for absenteeism (Pillay, 2009:1).

Personality plays a key role in determining who will be absent when subjected to stress (Martocchio and Jimeson, 2003:228). Employees with a conscientious personality are experienced as being dutiful, purposeful, punctual and reliable, with less probability of not showing up as compared to employees engaged in counter-productive behaviors like frequent absence (Martocchio & Jimeson, 2003:231, 234). It can therefore be assumed that the opposite can be expected from their less conscientious colleagues, who may be prone to arriving late, often showing signs of absenteeism as troubled employees. In addition, Martocchio and Jimeson’s (2003) personality theory can be used as a platform in understanding why some employees would not present with absenteeism, in spite of being exposed to the same psycho-social conditions.

**Organizational factors**

This addresses organizational conditions and work environment, such as job satisfaction, low morale, leave entitlement, inadequate remuneration and poor working conditions (Pillay, 2009:2). The employees would refrain from such unfavorable working conditions. The smaller organizational setups experience lower absenteeism as compared to big organization where the employee strength is high (Kuzmits and Adams, 2009) and (McIntosh and Jansen, 2007).

Levy (2003:3.4) points out that if the organization is large, chance that the employee is treated as numbers and not as people is higher. In smaller organizations, absenteeism is easily recognized or discerned and could be addressed effectively, whereas it can easily hide behind the greater numbers in larger organizations.

Levy (2003:3.6) concedes that some organizational policies and procedures unwittingly encourage absence by making it easier for the employee to stay away without any expectation of negative consequences for him/herself. With inadequate monitoring, they slip with the consequences too and become habitual of absenteeism.
When someone feels that they are not a vital part of the team, the level of commitment gets affected. Thus the employer should take care that working conditions are such that the physical and mental health of employees is assured to avoid excessive absenteeism (Chauke, 2007:27).

Social factors

Gender Divide, crime, poverty, erratic transport systems along with bad traffic conditions, Community Divide, all can have an adverse impact on absenteeism. Absentee episodes are phenomenally & logically unique to each individual. Owing to employees’ individuality, absentee behavior can be influenced by personality, social and organizational factors. Thus, absenteeism has different meanings for different people at different times (Kuzmits & Adams, 2009; McIntosh & Jansen, 2007; Martocchio & Jameson, 2003).

EFFECTS OF ABSENTEEISM

Absenteeism can lead to the following negative consequences, as noted by Pillay (2009:5):

- Decreased productivity: When an employee is integral to daily work functions and is absent, the responsibility is transferred to other counterparts increasing their workload. This has the potential to impact on their overall productivity and outputs (Chauke, 2007:24).
- De-motivated employees: When the acknowledgement for taking extra responsibility as a result of absent team members does not come, Morale, engagement and retention are affected. This could owe work overload and overtime (Chauke, 2007:24).
- Decreased customer loyalty and satisfaction: Employees are the backbone of any organization and low morale could lead to dissatisfaction amongst customers. (Chauke, 2007:24) agrees that employee service delivery may suffer on account of absenteeism.
- Decreased costs: These are as a result of lost productivity, overtime, temporary staff and increased overall company overheads initially not budgeted for. These additional financial costs are most likely to be felt in the wage costs associated with any staff replacements (Chauke, 2007:24).
- Job dissatisfaction: Employees have the habit of monitoring performance and behavior of their peers, and if absenteeism on the part of some colleagues is not addressed by management, they lose credibility among the staff, and the dissatisfaction of the staff will lead to staff turnover. Anything that impacts happiness of an employee on job can influence his motivation and affect whether they would practice absenteeism merely to stay away from an unhappy work situation (Chauke, 2007:25).

It is important to note that even though absence behavior is limited to handful of employees in the organization, the impact is felt across the entire organization. Departments and organizations work to meet the deadlines to which employees have to adhere. Even if one employee opts for unscheduled absence, it hampers productivity. The burden has to be shared by colleagues so as to complete the work and meet the deadlines. Resentment is often high, especially in instances when management takes for granted the extra mile to which people go in ensuring that productivity is not affected.

This negative experience is expressed in different ways by those affected. Some employees in the organization might opt to express their resentment by engaging in unscheduled absence which could be deemed voluntary or avoidable, because they are resting following “hard work.” On the other hand, others make clients take the brunt by giving them negative projections. Also, those in attendance may not be able to cope with the unplanned increase in workload and succumb. Also, the unintended costs of unscheduled absenteeism owe to overtime. Sometimes, the add-on workload due to absenteeism of the few is done at an enormous sacrifice and inconvenience, and could impact social life of the remaining. It is worth noting that while extra financial rewards are often welcomed, this does not prevent those employees from losing respect for management if they are perceived as not addressing the problem.
GUIDELINES TO ABSENTEEISM MANAGEMENT

According to Navarro and Bass (2006:32), absenteeism management could be done through programmes with guidelines that are clear and consistent, incorporating legal requirements so they can be established across the entire organization. Responsibility, intervention and rehabilitation must be addressed through such programmes (Paton, 2006:9). An action to remedy the abuse of leave must be sought. Paton (2006:9) further asserts that good absentee management is about cutting down on absenteeism while offering support to those who are genuinely in requirement of leaves. In truth, employers believe that only 10% of cases are not related to real illness (Paton, 2006:9).

A programme for managing absenteeism could be comprised of the following components:

**Proper recording keeping of absences**
Record-keeping can be done by noting the duration of absence, trends in terms of the most popular days for people taking leave and the type of illness.

There are numerous benefits to proper record-keeping in terms of absence behavior. It offers employers an opportunity to analyze and identify the size and cost of the absenteeism problem. Employer can do a benchmarking through careful monitoring of employee’s sick absenteeism against the company and national trends and can help in deriving whether sickness is genuine or is just an abuse of the system. Lastly, according to Chauke (2007:38), records of absences will help in trend analysis and if any is developing amongst absent employees. Both Pierce (2009) and Pillay (2009:6) emphasize the importance of also having an attendance or absenteeism policy whereby to monitor the extent of the problem in the organization.

**Return to work interviews**
Another important feature of a programme is to conduct an interview following an absentee incident by an employee. Managers should behave with caution when discussing reasons for leaves and behave as if the employee is expressing genuine reason (Levy, 2003: 9). This would, in turn, help the manager to act fairly, consistently and with an open mind.

The interview by the management personnel should be about showing genuine concerns, anticipate any further leave, and to check the pending leaves of the employee. This would not only be a visible aspect of managing the problem of absenteeism, but would also act as a probable deterrent to those abusing the system, as they would have to face the manager every time they were absent from work. This means the employee would be alerted to the fact that his/her absence was being noted.

The following are guidelines recommended by Levy (2003:9.5-9.6) when conducting the return to work interview:
- It must be done in private;
- The manager must go straight to the point and not beat about the bush;
- Neutrality and objectivity must be maintained.

**Rules and standards**
There should be set standards and rules which an employee, when they are absent from work, should adhere to. The management should have level of rareness and consistency in the application of these rules (Chauke, 2007:37).

According to Falcone (2009:99), it is beneficial in the long run to avoid inconsistencies in the application of rules to avoid accusations of wrongful termination, discrimination or retaliation from a terminated worker. For example, one such rule that could be introduced could be that medical certificates must comply with standards before the employer accepts them. The employer could even ask for a second opinion from an alternative medical practitioner should the medical certificate appear not to be authentic.

Scrutinizing medical certificates could assist in the early identification of occupational and social risks that could be supported and minimized before becoming problematic. This could also lead to timely
access to appropriate health care and further reduce the risk of a medical condition deteriorating into absenteeism owing to incapacity or disability (Beira, 2008:29).

**Early action against employees who contravene set rules**
Falcone (2009:99) suggests that organizations should give advance notice about its expectations holding employees accountable if they not meet the set standards. If an individual is identified with higher that average patterns of unauthorized absences, then this must be notified to the employee (Chauke, 2007:40). This will provide an opportunity to the employee to rectify his errand behavior before he is imposed with disciplinary measures. The defaulters must be identified early and dealt accordingly, whether supportively or correctively.

**Organizational Wellness and EAP initiatives**
The treatment offered through EAPs leads to cost savings (Hargrave et al., 2008). It is important to hold formal counseling processes once the set standard has been exceeded and performance-counseling procedure can be followed. Rather than waiting for sick leaves to get exhausted, Proactive mechanisms can be employed by addressing the problem as soon as there are indicators of a pattern of absenteeism.

**Rewarding good attendance record**
Maintaining a consistent and good attendance record in good behavior of an employee and should be rewarded methodically (Pillay, 2009:6). Incentives in form of additional annual leave, bonus could be awarded. (Pierce, 2009). Employees with good attendance record could be acknowledged and motivated. The acknowledgement not necessarily be monetary. Attendance bonuses may also be seen as giving positive recognition to employees making an extra effort by rewarding them (Levy, 2003:5.7).

**Introducing specific deterrents**
The information on leaves and absenteeism may be provided to the employees and the impact of scheduled and non-scheduled leaves on the organization should be discussed. The step may be useful to discourage those employees who intended to be absent following observation of their colleagues and even habitual voluntary unscheduled absentees.

**Maintaining a healthy work environment**
The culture of the organization is one of the most important aspects for retaining the enthusiasm in an employee. Employee relationships, organizational hierarchy, departmental structures, Ergonomics and working environment, and the like, do play important role in the commitment levels of an employee. It has been further noted that commitment to the organization has been found to be positively related to organizational outcomes like motivation and attendance (Yende, 2005:30).

**Application of good HR Management and labor relations practices**
According to Pierce (2009), management should integrate employee benefit, EAP and health care management. Occupational and safety procedures must be invested in, in order to have ergonomically-correct office equipment (Pillay, 2009:7). The employment policy framework of an organization must be reviewed with legal counsel so as to avoid any discrepancy (Falcone, 2009:98). The termination of employee be done only in the case when it shows that the absenteeism was affecting the employee’s capacity to do the job he was hired for or his absence was unauthorized, and was thus a form of misconduct (Levy, 2003:4, 12). When it comes to employment practices, employees also have rights within legal frameworks. The guidelines for managing absenteeism in the workplace must be structured to keep the spirit, zeal and motivation of employees to the highest. Rewarding good attendance, maintaining a positive work environment and using internal resources such as EAP are appropriate steps toward forming such a structure. Abiding by the points discussed above for the guidelines, organizations will be able to create a climate encouraging for people who are asset to organizations.
BENEFITS TO MANAGING ABSENTEEISM

There are enormous benefits which organizations could reap if they are able to address the absenteeism with effective policies in place (Beira, 2008:28-29). Few are listed below:

- Genuine medical need of employees could be addressed with well-structured employee health, lifestyle and wellness programmes;
- Provides support for employees who genuinely need assistance;
- Preventing abuse of the system;
- The human capital loss through burnout, exhaustion and fatigue that incurs due to work rescheduling could be reduced;
- Most potential and reliable candidates for promotion could be identified (Beira, 2008:28-29);
- Net benefits of not attending work are outweighed by those of working (McIntosh & Jansen, 2007:135).

The importance of having a programme is a necessity towards addressing absenteeism. If organisations could introduce a programme based on principle similar to those of Beira (2008) and McIntosh and Jansen (2007), it could potentially be a win-win situation for all. The programme could be useful in identifying the analyzing the leaves, addressing the most concerning issue of sick leaves, preventing the abuse of leaves and awarding the good attendance records.

The program can support the organization for formulating health and wellness initiatives. Also, the employer can control the productivity at the expense of those with real health concerns. The program will allow monitoring the absence behavior, misuse of the system could be prevented. The management utilizes all their resources to compensate for the deficit created by the defaulters. Also, the programme will help in assigning rewards to good employees who should be acknowledged for good behavior. The program could also help in measuring and addressing the stress of good employees before it escalated into burnout, because everyone would be involved in managing absenteeism in some way.

BARRIERS TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ABSENTEEISM MANAGEMENT PROGRAMMES

The following have been identified by Beira (2008) and Anderson (2005) as being impediments to the implementation of absenteeism management programmes:

- Lack of tracking mechanisms (Beira, 2008:29);
- Lack of support from management (Anderson, 2005:65);
- Unfair absence management policies (Anderson, 2005:65) and

Most of the programmes developed to supervise absenteeism be unsuccessful not because of confrontation by those for whom they are intended for, but mainly due to improper implementation by the entity whom it should benefit, mainly due to weaknesses within the organizational structures. The major weakness issue is related to favoritism in the application of rules and policies, as well as the lack of systems to record, monitor and mine the information about attendance/absence. Should the programme lack the support of management, it would undoubtedly not succeed, the prime custodians of such programs have to be the management of organizations.

CONCLUSION

Absence can be either planned or unplanned. The law makes provision for employees to take a certain number of day’s leave per leave cycle, even though unscheduled leave disrupts operational requirements. Absenteeism is a behavioral episode caused by interpersonal, intrapersonal and macro
factors. As a result, the effects of absenteeism are felt on both the micro and the macro levels, with disruptive and costly consequences. If institutions want to address the scourge of absenteeism, it is imperative that they have a programme for this, because the benefits will be felt by everyone concerned.

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