

## **Absenteeism: Its Disruptive Presence**

### Introduction

Absenteeism is a term used referring to absences that are avoidable, habitual and unscheduled in nature. These are commonly practiced by employees which become a source of irritation to employers and co-workers. Absenteeism is widely acknowledged to be a problem, yet it is not easy to quantify (Statistics Canada, 2007). It is a major concern of all managers and organization, both private and public. Productivity is reduced to zero for the employee who is absent from the workplace (Rogers and Hertin, 1993) and can be an expensive problem (Scott and McClellan, 1990). At least 50% of all employee absenteeism is not caused by bona fide illness or other acceptable reasons (Buschak et al., 1996). In some studies, it has been shown that absenteeism has been closely related and an influencing factor in companies. Absenteeism levels of employees who voluntarily leave in organization will tend to be higher than those who remain with the organization (Mcelroy et al., 1995).

Absenteeism can be classified into two subtypes. The first of which is the culpable absenteeism which is the lateness or absence problems for which the employee should be held responsible because the problems are within the employee's power to address and correct. This is also sometimes referred to as unapproved absence (Buschak et al, 1996). Some of its symptoms are lateness/leave early, failure to notify when absenting, absences without leave and abuse of leaves (University of Western Ontario, 2008). The second form is the non-culpable (innocent) absenteeism or approved (Buschak et al., 1996). This form refers to the absence of employees due to illness or

injury for reasons beyond the employee's control, unlike the first one such accidents, natural illness and diseases or pregnancy. This is not subjected to disciplinary actions but is approached on the basis of identifying and understanding the medical needs of the employee and any restrictions as identified by the employee's health care practitioner (University of Western Ontario, 2008).

Studies conducted on the past has shown that men from 16 to 19 years old have the highest incidence of absenteeism in the year 1980, also the same with women, and decreases as the men age (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1982). Absenteeism is higher in manufacturing environments than in other areas and is a bigger problem among blue-collar workers than white-collar (Hazzard, 1990). Absenteeism is related to many factors such as family responsibilities and number of dependents. Because of increased family responsibilities, the incidence of absenteeism decreases as women approach ages 25 to 44 (Taylor, 1981; Jamati, 1962; Boise and Neal, 1996). Absenteeism may occur when there is role interference, which is where the obligations to one's family interfere with one's job schedule. Another incident is when there is role overload, as when the amount of responsibility for both job and family exceeds available hours (Boise and Neal, 1996).

Also, one important aspect affecting incidence of absenteeism is the attitude of the employees towards their job (Steers and Rhodes, 1984). These attitudes though to have a gender-related impact on absenteeism include role conflict, job satisfaction, central life interests and job involvement (Scott and McClellan, 1990).

In some establishments, they have used reward systems to control disruptive absenteeism and have been found to be more effective than punishments by some studies (Buschak et al., 1996; Bunning, 1988). This has been done by offering nonmonetary

privileges to employees with good attendance. Others have given 10\$ bonus to perfect attenders (Buschak et al., 1996).

In this paper, specific problems brought about by absenteeism, such as cost problems and non-productivity, and how these problems are addressed by the company. Some company policies on absenteeism shall also be discussed.

### Cost of Absenteeism

Attendance and quality performance of the employees are important part of the company's elements for achieving success and high productivity. Better attendance is synonymous with quality, lower costs and greater productivity (Hazzard, 1990). Absence and absenteeism thus, has a direct influence to the productivity of the company. Absenteeism creates cost productivity problems, puts an unfair burden on the majority of employees who show up for work, ultimately hinders customer satisfaction and drains the country's economy (Buschak et al., 1996).

In a study conducted by Steers and Rhodes (1984), they have reported that for every 0.5% increase in national absence rates in the United States, the gross domestic product drops \$10 billion. In another study conducted in Taiwan, Tsai and colleagues (2005) have identified those male workers who smoke took off an average 4.36 sick days resulting to excess absenteeism. Female son the other hand took off an average of 4.96 days. This excess absenteeism estimated to cost \$178 million per annum for males and \$6 million for females (Tsai et al., 2005).

Absenteeism is attributed to a lot of factors including vices and bad habits such as smoking and alcohol. There is a 25% reduction in work performance among heavy-alcohol users. There has been a rough estimate of \$57 million lost productivity among the working population of New Zealand (Jones et al., 1993).

Productivity loss problems have been described using a coined term referred to as: presenteeism (Lang, 2004). Researchers at the Cornell University have calculated both an average and a low estimate for on-the-job productivity losses for certain common health conditions. They have found out that 89% loss of the total productivity loss cost can be attributed to headaches. Allergies on the other hand, account for as much as 82%, and 77% for arthritis. Losses related to hypertension has been calculated to reach an amount of 4392 dollars per employee annually, \$368 for heart diseases, \$348 for mental health problems, \$327 for arthritis and \$271 for allergies (Lang, 2004).

To absenteeism related to family responsibilities, studies found out that 10% of the men missed an average of 12 work days per year, while higher on women with 33 days per year (Neal and Hammer, in press). Coming in late o work and leaving early are often related to eldercare responsibilities. There is an estimated loss of one hour per week due to the said partial absenteeism (Scharlach, 1994).

In the next sections of this paper, the mechanisms used by the companies shall be discussed in order to control or eliminate practices of disruptive absenteeism. The policy guidelines of some establishments shall also be discussed.

Controlling Absenteeism

The incidence of absenteeism can be reduced. In order to increase productivity and competitiveness. This implies that at least some absenteeism is thought to be both unnecessary and inappropriate, and that effective controls should generate improvements in absenteeism rates (Gardiner, 1992). Effectively achieving acceptable employee attendance can be gained through effective administering of the company policy. The following is the summarized five-prong action plan for decreasing absenteeism rates, as suggested by Bielous (1993).

1. Educate

The Company should explain in full and discuss the company policies on attendance. They (employees) should also be provided with a written copy of the policy. During application, applicants should be advised about the importance of regular attendance and should be reinforced as a strong requirement during orientations and actual work (McConnell, 2005).

2. Monitor

Maintain accurate attendance records of all the employees (McConnell, 2005). Observe which employees are late, leave early, or absent (Buschak et al., 1996). Publish monthly or quarterly summaries of absenteeism, by using graphs or trends, summaries of costs or other examples that show the value or consequences of lost time. Ask and investigate the reasons why, employees are always late or absent or have left early and keep a record of these reasons which you could compare and study in the future. Note any tendency toward excessive absence, including the accrual of paid time-off and the pattern of absences, days taken before or after weekends or other schedule day-offs (McConnell, 1995).

### 3. Counsel

Employees who are having problems with attendance should be talked in private about the problem (Buschak et al., 1996). Give an oral warning after an additional absence, after the allowable period stated in the company policy. If there is no improvement, then follow the progressive disciplinary process stated the policy (McConnell, 1995).

### 4. Follow-up

If the behavior still occurred again, ask for a private meeting and find out why (Buschak et al., 1996). It is also better to develop absence reports for departments or groups and be remained aware of chronic offenders and their status. Also, it would be better to require the use of employee assistance program (AEP), is available, at the written warning or suspension stage (McConnell, 2005).

### 5. Corrective Action

Follow progressive steps according to company policy, such as verbal warning, written, warning, suspension, and termination (Buschak et al., 1996). It would also be better to establish a policy for calling in sick, and a policy defining job abandonment. They should be fairly implemented and equally applied (McConnell, 2005).

Controlling and completely eliminating disruptive absenteeism could really take in extra effort. But the willingness to do so should be visible. Also, the company policy on absenteeism should be applied consistently which means that it should be in timely and uniform fashion (McConnell, 2005). It is also important to explain the policy to

employees, and that they are given a written copy of the policy. Managers also are important as positive role models for subordinates (Bielous, 1991).

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