

Workplace Presenteeism

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Abstract

Presenteeism is coming to the office or workplace even when ill. Presenteeism may seem like a positive attitude among the workers or employees, but it is, in fact, an economic indicator of disease burden. Coming to work even when ill can have implications for the employer and his employee. Presenteeism in the workforce is a growing concern for the management today. They need to take immediate short-term decisions if the worker should take a day off while sick or keep working. Presenteeism behavior can have both positive and negative consequences for the employee, his organization and job performance. It is essential to understand the clinical significance of the presenteeism behavior as it carries significant implications for organizational practice. The management should create a supportive work culture for their employees and communicate with them to lower presenteeism.

Keywords: Absenteeism, Organisation, Presenteeism, Productivity, Workplace

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1. Introduction

The contemporary work practices leave an impact on the health and working experiences in workplaces. Employees have to work under tighter deadlines for longer hours to meet the goals and enhance workplace productivity. While many employees take leave when sick and prefer to stay at home, there are workers who come to work despite being sick. The paper discusses the groin issue of presenteeism and the reason behind. It looks at various impacts of Presenteeism on the employees as well as the organization.

2. Presenteeism and Absenteeism

American Psychiatric Association states presenteeism to be a new word for an old problem. Because of the growing awareness, it is indeed surpassing to see how pervasive the issue of presenteeism (Rise Staff, 2018). While companies have been busy cutting down on absenteeism, presenteeism has been ignored. Presenteeism is the practice of employees to be at work and use privileges such as rest days and holiday allowances to catch up with work. There could be different reasons behind presenteeism (Higginbottom, 2018). Absenteeism is seen to be higher in countries with high insurance coverage. There are contradictory views when it comes to

presenteeism and its adverse effects on the economic conditions and health (Dew & Taupo, 2009).

The old-fashioned HR departments focus more on absenteeism and often tend to ignore presenteeism. It is a mistake to measure success based just on absenteeism as widespread presenteeism can lead to much worse figures (Rise Staff, 2018). Research on absenteeism has focused on interventions to reduce absence due to sickness and improve the poor workplace conditions and absence cultures. Models of absenteeism work on improving job satisfaction and work involvement by changing attitudes and goals among the workers (Dew & Taupo, 2009). In contrast, presenteeism relies on self-report measures to measure its effects and impact on productivity. It is seen that when compared to absenteeism, presenteeism leads to higher drainage of productivity.

Some employees choose to work because they are workaholics and not take the days off for rest and recreation. Gradually, presenteeism leaves negative impacts on their performance and well-being (Higginbottom, 2018). The quality of work and engagement suffers, and the employees face issues like mental health and stress. Presenteeism can eventually lower the morale of the employee and can thus lower their performance. There is evidence that proposes that going for work is good for health and thus it suggests that presenteeism should be encouraged as stated by Dew and Taupo (2009). However, at the same time, it is more important to see that the workplace is free from any possible risk due to presenteeism. There is a growing interest in presenteeism as a negative impact is seen on the productivity of organizations due to employees going to work despite being unwell. It is seen as a potential productivity loss at the workplace (Yang, Guo, Ma, Li, Tian & Deng, 2009). Productivity is more predictable than absenteeism and health was a significant factor. Depression and psychological problems figure heavily in presenteeism and rated to be good reasons to be absent from work. Some examples are family illness, inadequate transportation, bad weather or doctor's visit (Johns, 2010).

According to Higginbottom (2018), an employee needs to be actively engaged with his work, both physically and mentally for effective performance and outputs. Employers should be aware of the employees and gather information behind their presenteeism and absenteeism. The managers should build a positive culture to support good attendance and discourage both presenteeism and absenteeism. Employees come to work, even when they are sick because of various reasons. However, it is not possible for them to act to their optimal performance due to health problems. Although health and life expectancy have improved significantly and the retirement age is now older, one cannot ignore the physical and cognitive competencies that decline with age (Yang, Shen, Zhu, Liu, Deng, Chen & See, 2010). Thus, it would not be incor-

rect to assume that productivity loss due to presenteeism among the aging workers could be higher.

3. Reasons behind Presenteeism

There are different factors and reasons behind presenteeism. The employees may feel discouraged to take time off due to personal reasons and the company culture. If the workplace culture is less supportive and more restrictive, workers may prefer to come to work despite being ill. The worker may feel worried and stressed out about losing his or her job and would attend the workplace to prove their worth and dedication to their management (Rise Staff, 2018). It is seen that part-time workers with lower income are more prone to presenteeism. Thus, presenteeism prevails because of financial needs and job stress among workers.

Job insecurity and economic concerns are the primary reasons behind presenteeism that indicates social injustice in the workplace. Recent research shows that the workers are concerned about the quality of their work, the conditions they worked in, and injuries due to performing repetitive tasks (Dew & Taupo, 2009). Presenteeism is more common under tough economic conditions and when people fear about losing their jobs. Different illnesses impact the physical and mental capacity of a worker differently. At times, some workers suffer from more than one medical problem as asserted by Hremp (2004).

Past studies reflect that job stress have adverse impacts on the emotional well-being of the workers. Job stress is a significant predictor of presenteeism and can impact the emotional well-being of the workers. There are two kinds of job stress, challenge stress, and hindrance stress. Affective commitment is an essential mediator of presenteeism and reflects the values of an employee (Yang et al., 2009). Social exchange theory explains the outcome of stress based on communication and support for the colleagues, and staff within an organization. The emotional dependence of employees on their workplace and their relationship between organization can affect their commitment. These dimensions can decrease presenteeism while improving performance. These behaviors are valuable to organizations as they expand the workability of the employees as they fulfill their job responsibilities as asserted by Yang et al. (2009).

As asserted by Cho, Park, Lee, Min and Baek (2016), presenteeism is found to be higher in education service and treatment fields where it is difficult to find any substitutes for the workers. Certain psychosocial factors within workplaces threaten job and safety environment at workplaces. It is the socially vulnerable people like women, disabled and temporary workers that are prone towards presenteeism. A rise in physical workload and higher job risks are seen to increase presenteeism. High work intensity, heavy workload, and low work-speed control ability are other factors behind presentism (Cho, Park, Lee, Min & Baek,

2016). Other factors include time pressure, workaholism and time pressure that lead to a higher rate for presenteeism.

Employees with demanding jobs, higher work strains, and lower social support are linked to higher presenteeism. As a result, they develop further stress as they are not able to meet job demands. In order to meet the stricter job demands, the employees work harder at the workplace even while they are sick (Yang et al., 2010). Thus, having stricter job requirements means a higher probability of presenteeism. Among all medical conditions, depression is one of the major cause behind the disability. There has been a rise in the number of disability due to depression and leaves a negative impact on productivity (Evans-Lacko & Knapp, 2016). Thus, depression has a significant impact on workplace productivity.

4. Impacts of Presenteeism

Recent studies on presenteeism among US workers estimate the Lost Productive Time (LPT) cost to be well over \$150000 million (Cho, Park, Lee, Min & Baek, 2016). Employees who have not

taken any leave for three years show higher rates for coronary artery disease. Presenteeism raises health risk factors and leads to an increase in sick leave in the future. Presenteeism means having employees at work that could do more harm than good. Any kind of pain and stress, whether emotional, physical or mental can lead to increased fatigue and decreased concentration (Rise Staff, 2018). As it can result in a loss of productivity, it is an expensive problem for any business and organization. A stressed out and a fatigued worker can no longer be as productive at work. Moreover, if presenteeism goes unchecked, it enters a vicious circle and becomes a pattern. Presenteeism is a concept that describes the phenomenon of workers arriving for work despite poor-health conditions. There is an increased association seen between presenteeism and morbidity such as fatigue, musculoskeletal pains, and depression. When compared to absenteeism, there is limited research done on presenteeism (Dew & Taupo, 2009). Even a small decline can lead to a ripple effect on the productivity which can fall behind schedule (Hremp, 2004).

American Productivity Audit reports in a survey that the cost of presenteeism amounts to more than \$150 billion a year

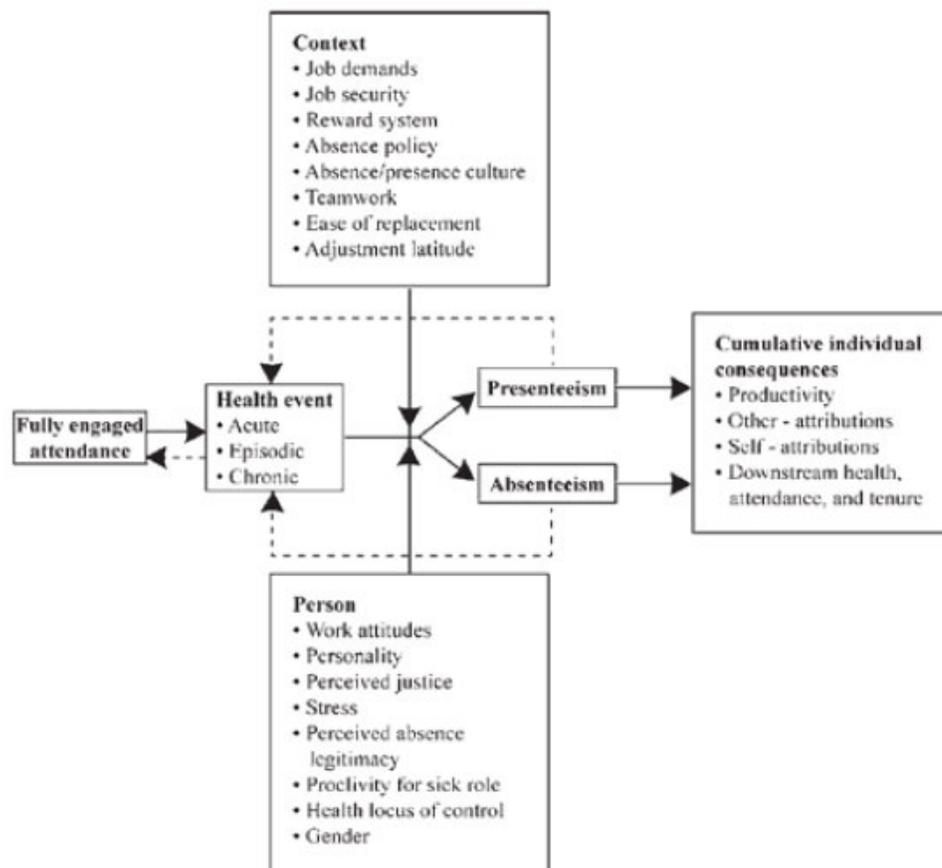


Image source: Pedersen KM and Skagen K. (2014). The Economics of Presenteeism: A discrete choice & count model framework. *COHERE, Department of Business and Economics*, 1(2), 1–51.

Figure 1. Economics of Presenteeism.

(Higginbottom, 2018). These costs are much higher than absenteeism due to illnesses among employees. Presenteeism can lead to depression and pain and further create productivity loss at work. While it is not easy to quantify the full cost of absenteeism, it is even more challenging to evaluate the impact of presenteeism. However, there is growing evidence that presenteeism is more expensive than absenteeism. Presenteeism prevents employees from being fully productive at work. It can further lead to some health issues like migraines, allergies, anxiety, and depression (Rise Staff, 2018). Researchers say that presenteeism can lower the productivity of the employees by one-third or more (Hremp, 2004). The issue is that presenteeism is not as noticeable as absenteeism as one tends to pay more attention to those who are absent from work. However, presenteeism undercuts job performance and leads to productivity loss.

5. Different Models and Perspectives to Presenteeism

Well-publicized studies confirm that presenteeism is far more expensive when compared to disability and absenteeism. It is a lot better for sick people to be absent rather than show up at work and not perform to their best. Typically, employers pay three times more for direct medical care due to presenteeism (Hremp, 2004). Several studies have been conducted on self-reported presenteeism and actual productivity loss. It is true that presenteeism is a problem for employers as well as the employees. When people do not feel good mentally and physically, they simply cannot perform to their best.

There are two perspectives to presenteeism, one is the costs associated, and the other is labor supply and demand. A model of presenteeism should address the question of how the worker makes a choice between presenteeism and absenteeism based on the role of health and possible economic incentives (Pedersen & Skagen, 2014). Discrete choice models based on behavioral interpretation explain a binary decision, the decision to go to work or decision to stay at home. The binary statistical model can be understood within a random utility framework as asserted by Pedersen and Skagen (2014). The first notion behind random utility models is that the revealed behavior is based on utility maximizing behavior. The choice is based on an alternative for which utility is maximal and characteristics of the alternatives.

Different count-models are used for analyzing utilization data in health economics, and the econometrics issues include hospitalizations or doctor visits. The count-models include negative binomial, Poisson models, zero-inflated negative binomial, latent class models and two-part models. The Poisson model is based on the probability that presenteeism and absenteeism

occurs during a time period. The zero-inflated negative binomial is a two-part model that assumes two separate statistical processes. The mixture/latent approach interprets the latent groups in the population and the related data.

6. How to Prevent Presenteeism

Research shows that some poor lifestyle behaviors can impact presenteeism such as low physical activity and lack of good sleep. About 35 to 60% of the population suffers from poor sleep quality (Guertler, Vandelanotte, Short, Alley, Schoeppe & Duncan, 2015). Thus, it would not be incorrect to link sleep disorders with presenteeism. More than half of the population has at least two unhealthy lifestyle behaviors. Thus it is essential to study the link of poor lifestyle behaviors with presenteeism. It is essential to note that the majority of office workers spend their day sitting.

The first step for any organization is to be aware of presenteeism and recognize it as a problem. It is essential to communicate with the workers about their health issues and educate them on Presenteeism (Hremp, 2004). For example, as women are more likely to suffer from depression when compared to men, the management can take special steps in this direction. Many times, it is seen that employees are incorrectly diagnosed. They can be educated about how to manage their illnesses and get the right treatment as well as take the medications regularly as stated by Hremp (2004).

In order to curb the negative impacts of uncontrolled capitalism, there are initiatives to encourage healthier eating and active lifestyles at the workplace. Health promotion at the workplace could take care of both presenteeism and absenteeism. (Dew & Taupo, 2009). The management should develop a supportive work culture and motivate the employees to refrain from both presenteeism and absenteeism. They should be encouraged to stay at home and take rest if they are unable to give their best efforts. The goal is to communicate what is desired and what is not acceptable (Rise Staff, 2018). Open communications can help better cooperation and improve the work culture. The management should review the current time off policies and can introduce flextime and remote work options for their workers. Those steps can help remove the anxiety and stress among the workers. The physical and mental health is a priority for higher productivity and to meet the organization goals.

Presenteeism can lead to more serious illnesses and chronic ailments like asthma, migraines, headaches, back pain, and depression. The premiums paid to the insurer by a company pays to an insurer add to the direct health-related costs (Hremp, 2004). Even if presenteeism leads to lower direct costs, there can be massive indirect costs because of the greater loss in produc-

tivity. An ill worker impacts both quantity and quality of work. As stated by Hremp (2004), researchers are looking for reliable ways to how to tackle presenteeism by investing in education, treatment, and screening. For example, free consultations at the workplace can help the workers and their employers understand their health issues and symptoms better.

Apart from the low-cost education programs, the organization should spend on providing better medical treatment and medications to keep their workforce healthy and lower presenteeism to improve productivity significantly (Hremp, 2004). The company can invest in pharmacy costs to boost productivity among workers with health problems. It should be seen as an investment in workforce productivity. There is also strong evidence that screening and outreach programs can help lower presenteeism cost-effectively. Specially designed employee assistance programs can promote healthy practices and active lifestyles among the workers. Better management of the health of the workforce can translate to improved productivity and thus give any organization a competitive business advantage in the market (Hremp, 2004).

It is essential to work on different psychosocial factors within workplaces to maintain harmony with work situations. As presenteeism not only impacts the mental and physical health of the workers, it lowers the productivity and increases social costs; there is a need to work on different measures on how to lower presenteeism (Cho, Park, Lee, Min & Baek, 2016). However, strong support from the management and co-workers can improve the work environment and leads to job satisfaction and performance. Supervisors should remain in close contact with the workers to address any complaints and lower any stress. The idea is to enhance job satisfaction and boost performance, and at the same time, lower presenteeism (Yang et al., 2010).

Employee assistance programs or EAPs can help lower costs associated with accident benefits, mental health care costs, medical costs, employee turnover, and absenteeism. Effective EAP treatment can result in a meaningful return on investment and can raise productivity and thus enhance profits for a company (Hargrave, Hiatt, Alexander & Shaffer, 2008). Daily problems leave an impact on job performance and if ignored can lead to serious psychiatric symptoms. Thus, EAPs can help raise productivity as they deal with a range of daily issues, problems in living and mental health concerns among the employees. Improving workplace conditions and creating better mental health in the workplace is getting essential. Participation in health promotion programs can help address depression in the workplace. However, the participation rates are much lower in low and middle-income countries as compared to high-income countries (Evans-Lacko & Knapp, 2016). Cost-effective interventions at the workplace can help to address depression in the workplace and deal with absenteeism and presenteeism.

7. Conclusion

The above discussion on presenteeism shows that it is a growing problem at workplaces. Apart from following the old-fashioned practice of just focusing on absenteeism, it is essential to do more research on presenteeism. Some employees come to work even when they are ill because of poor workplace conditions. The different reason behind presenteeism includes stricter work culture, poor economic conditions and the fear of losing the job. However, presenteeism leads to lower productivity as the employee faces mental health issues and stress. Employers should be aware of the reasons behind presenteeism and potential productivity loss. The primary reasons behind presenteeism are job insecurity and economic concerns. As Presenteeism raises health risk factors, it turns out to be more expensive as the company may face more sick leaves in the future. As presenteeism averts employees from working to their best capacity, it can further lead to more stress and pain and further lead to productivity loss at work. Thus, presenteeism is problematic for employers as well as the employees. The first step is to recognize presenteeism as a problem and encourage healthier lifestyles among the workers. Open communications and cooperation can build a positive work culture. Specially designed employee assistance programs can create a healthier workforce and lower presenteeism. It would be a mistake to ignore the phenomenon of presenteeism in the workplace. Economic and social constraints along with workplace cultures lead to higher presenteeism. Both the workers and the organization pays a heavy price because of presenteeism. There is still limited research on presenteeism, and more needs to be done in this direction.

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Annexure-I

Workplace presenteeism

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