

Causes and effects of absenteeism in local government (uk)



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1. 0- ABSTRACT

Absenteeism can happen through authorised and unauthorised absence and these can be grouped into: situational, personal and attendance factors.

Causes: headaches, hang-over cold flu, unchallenging jobs and poor management are common causes of absenteeism and managers generally suspicious of employees' reasons for absenteeism.

Effects: Unplanned absence is disorganising, frustrating and expensive for organisations. UK absenteeism rate in European is similar to Denmark, (see p11-12). Absenteeism is positively correlated with employee motivation and satisfaction.

Combating absenteeism: absence can be minimised by providing challenging jobs, rewarding attendance and maintaining a zero tolerance to absence.

Return-to-work interviews are empirically proven method of reducing absenteeism in local government.

Adding, studying industries with lower absence rate may prove a useful tool for minimising absenteeism in local government. This report acknowledges that limitations such as privacy and Human Rights laws protects workers privacy from being invaded by organisations, HR managers ought to know there limitations.

2. 0- INTRODUCTION

Absenteeism is the avoidance of or failure to attend one's place of work hence unable to perform a contractual working obligation owing to absence.

In other words, absenteeism is unplanned or planned absence created by an employee intentionally such as deliberately avoiding work through non-
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attendance for personal reasons or unintentionally like maternity leave, bereavement and ill-health.

This research essay shall be confining the report to intentional or self created absenteeism which can be disruptive, expensive and difficult to manage, (Armstrong, 2006). Undoubtedly, this form of absenteeism is the worst nightmare of all managers because of having to deal with the same workload with limited workforces.

According to Benington, (2000) site in (McHugh, 2001) the UK local government has become a “ last chance saloon” meaning failure to ‘ put-up’ will require government takeover or privatisation. Furthermore, CBI, (2004) cited in Taylor (2005), acknowledged that absenteeism costs the UK government £12 billion pounds yearly. Presenteeism is the opposite of absenteeism and it means ‘ 110%’ attendance with the view to impressing one’s boss.

The most regular mentioned ‘ causes’ of absenteeism reported by employees especially in local government are: headaches, cold, flu, stress, back pain, food poisoning and family issues. It must be stated that other causes such as repetitive jobs, poor management, leadership, and organisational climate are factors.

3. 0- LITERATURE REVIEW

3. 1- CAUSES OF ABSENTEEISM

Public sector absenteeism has attracted much research especially in the local government probably because of better monitoring systems such as extensive documentation than the private sector. Noteworthy is the fact that

there are no universally agreed causes of absenteeism however; there are some regular cited ones are claimed to contribute to absenteeism.

According to Taylor, (2005), a research company called My Voice asserted that 56% of employees admitted to taking a 'sickie'. That is claiming absence from work under false pretence. Interestingly, the real reasons stipulated by the survey for the absence includes: hung-over, stress and hatred for the job itself.

Consequently, managers are generally suspicious of employees claiming absence on sick grounds based on the above survey. It is an undeniable fact that such findings breeds mistrust between managers and their employees. Obviously, one can understand why managers might be frustrated by employees' absence because it brings disorder to management plans and the execution of scheduled activities.

Gennard, Judge, (2005) are of the view that death, paternity leave, inability to return from planned holidays and 'alleged sickness' are the main causes of absenteeism. It is abundantly clear that bereavement does cause absenteeism but on limited scale however, this report is less concern with that form of absenteeism because it is natural rather than intentional.

Paternity leave being a cause of absence might sound baffling however, this report maintains that paternity leave even though a planned absenteeism, might potential cause some form authorised absence for reasons like a sudden developments- such as mother falling sick, baby's health, family and family visits and gatherings. This report maintains that the possibility of this form of absenteeism being abused is not unlikely.

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Adding, planned holidays might degenerate into unplanned absence due to certain unforeseen circumstances. This is likely to affect those who take holidays abroad. This form of unplanned absence might be caused by flight delays and cancellations due to political issues like wars and protest as happened in Thailand, natural disasters such as disease outbreak, for example the pandemic “ H1N1 Swine Flu” which first broke out in Mexico and for that matter the quarantine of infected victims had to be done, earthquakes as happened in Indonesia.

According to Armstrong, (2006), the causes of absenteeism could be broadly attributed to three (3) factors namely: ‘ Situational factors, Personal factors and Attendance factors’:

‘ Situational factors’ include the nature of the job itself; is it repetitive and boring or interesting and challenging enough? Obviously, a repetitive job may generate stress and job resentment. The sort of leadership and organisational climate employees operate under may generate absenteeism. While agreeing to some extent that these situational factors might generate absenteeism, it is worth acknowledging that some people hate change and will always struggle to maintain the status quo. These people may rather prefer doing a repetitive job than a challenging one.

‘ Personal factors’ are: the worth of an employee, his or her personality, age and sex may contribute to an employee absence. This research report concedes to the fact that these stated factors are influencer of absenteeism in local government based on a valid research: Barmby et al, ‘ survey’ (1999) cited in Taylor (2005), p316 recorded that men were unlikely to be absent

from work than their female counterparts and even more profound was the fact that England has lower absenteeism than any were else in the UK. Quite obviously, the wage disparity across the UK has a lot to with it hence the lowest rate (absenteeism) in England than anywhere else in the UK.

Lastly, attendance factors include; the sort of incentives allocated to rewarding good employee behaviour like regular attendance as well as sickness policies. It is an undeniable fact that most people respond positively to incentives and rewards both in kind and in cash. According to Jacqueline A.-M et al, (2003), the ' psychological contract' plays a significant role in contributing negatively or positively to employee performance and attitudes in the local government.

Absenteeism is gradually gaining the publicity it deserves in the local government according to CBI, (1999); Local Government Auditor, 1999) cited in (McHugh, 2001). This report is of the view that organisations either private or the local government can no longer afford to remain in a vacuum but rather to face up to the challenges like the unpredictability of the marketing environment.

This means all local governments and organisations are compelled to make the necessary savings they can get from all areas in order to survive in this aggressive but compelling marketing environment called ' the survival of the fittest.' In fact, there has never been a century that has imposed and forced change on all manner of organisations like the 21st century. The present business environment is one that constantly says keep changing or you will be made obsolete.

Furthermore, Johansson, Palme, (2002) proposed that a positive attitude to 'a short-term sickness and taxes' encourages absenteeism. In other words, encouraging 'nanny culture' such as paying for sick leave encourages local government workers to take off sick for private reasons other than genuine sickness. In short, such policies however well intentioned may rather be taken for granted and instead abused.

IDS, (2001b, pp2-3) cited in (Taylor 2005), p329 proposed that the public sector workers records higher absenteeism than the private sector because, there are less punitive measures taken against public servants than their private sector counterparts. This research lends support to some extent to the argument however, contrary to the point; local government organisations do take longer time to act due to bureaucracies but does not necessarily mean that punitive measures are not exercised in the public sector as claimed.

Adding, this report supports the view that absenteeism is more prevalent in the private than the public sector. This is due to the fact that public employees receive better treatment and are valued fairly than their private sector counterparts (the psychological contract), (Jacqueline A.-M et al, 2003).

This report observes that certain councils are renowned for recording high rate of absenteeism for instance, Northern Ireland councils than those in England, (McHugh, 2002). In summary, there are disparities between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as regards to absenteeism.

And in Europe as a whole, the UK is not doing badly according UK government statistics.

Also, it is an undeniable fact that poor record keeping encourages absenteeism. If organisations and for that matter local government organisations like the NHS, keeps up-to-date records of all employee absence, it would discourage absenteeism because most people hate being monitored. Proper documentation and monitoring of employee absence is likely to generate the needed attention absenteeism deserves leading to a collective action against the perpetrators of absenteeism.

Conversely, it is not an exaggeration that the costs of keeping up-to-date information on employee attendance are expensive and complicated because of the technology involved such as biometric data collecting systems like the 'Swipe in Swipe out', 'phone book-ins' and finger and hand scanning are expensive systems which are not without disadvantages. For instance, an employee may give his or her card to a colleague to wipe them in discretely and on the other hand, an employee may genuinely forget to swipe in and out.

3. 2- EFFECTS OF ABSENTEEISM

The effects of absenteeism are difficult to quantify though various researches have attempted valuing it. Absenteeism costs the UK government £12 billion pounds yearly, (Taylor 2005). That figure can be a full year budget for most developing countries especially in Africa and Asia.

Adding to the above, Davis, Geddes, (2000); Blair, (1998) cited in (McHugh, 2001), p43 was reported to have issued a warning to local councils to stop <https://assignbuster.com/causes-and-effects-of-absenteeism-in-local-government-uk/>

wasting local government funds by providing 'value for money' services by combating preventable issues like absenteeism. Quite earnestly, absenteeism is an avoidable cost which if managed properly has benefits for all organisations both public and private firms. The US economic is on record for losing \$40 billion dollars a year on absenteeism, (Dalton, Mesch, 1991; Unckless et al 1998) mentioned in (Gaudine, Saks, 2001). That money is enough to provide employment for hundreds of people especially under this current economic turbulence.

Another disadvantage of employee absence, despite it being costly for the local government is that it also disrupts management plans and decisions according to Armstrong, (2006). Managers are usually provided with a specification tasks with limited time-frame within which to report back to their superiors for assessment. Consequently, an unplanned absence may significantly affect managers flexibility, time and the speed at which the work and for that reason, may cause irritation for management as a whole.

Lastly, an employee's sudden absence may stir up negative feelings among his fellow work- colleagues. It is a convincing fact that more often, managers are unable to fill in or organise a quick replacement for an absent employee but rather, overburden their subordinates with the same magnitude of workload. Nevertheless, they (managers) still expect their workforce to deliver the same level of performance without considering the manpower shortage.

Consequently, this leads to the development of hatred and resentment among work colleagues which is not healthy for the organisation and for that

matter the local government because, synergy may be lost in the process (working against one another rather than as a team or $2+2=5$). Is absenteeism a function of employee motivation or dissatisfaction breeds absenteeism?

This research report argues that a good psychological employment contracts is a recipe for a better employee attitude as in the case of local government employment than the private sector (Jacqueline A.-M et al, 2003). Obviously most government jobs are fairly stable and permanent hence the issue of job security is guaranteed as opposed to the private sector.

Moreover, Martocchio, (1994); Johns, Nicholson, (1992) cited in McHugh (2001, p44), claimed that an employee's commitment and dedication are a function of his or her motivation in the organisation. This report shall concede to this fact because people generally response positively or otherwise to incentives and rewards depending on their situation (perception).

Ehrenberg et al, (1991) claims that students' absenteeism impact on their academic performance especially during examinations. Now, if this assertion is true then, one can justifiably maintain that employee absence affects their work in terms of quality, speed and concentration.

CIPD, (2006), cited in (Torrington et al, 2008), p339 found that absenteeism was high in food and drink sector, and in local government; however, NGOs, Media and the leisure sector had lower absence rate. Arguably, it is not surprising that voluntary and leisure organisations had better attendance

because they are satisfying jobs with high commitment and goal congruence.

According to the CBI, (AXA, 2005) and (CIPD, 2005) mentioned in (Torrington et al, 2008), UK absence is similar to Denmark's but lower than Norway, Sweden and Finland. This statistics were rather surprising to because, these three countries above beaten by the UK are usually among the top 10 countries for quality living hence they should have beaten the UK.

3. 3- RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ABSENTEEISM AND MOTIVATION?

Kass, et al, (2001) empirically concluded that unchallenging and uninteresting jobs profoundly determine the performance (poor) of an employee, their longevity in the organisation and even more importantly the frequency of absenteeism he or she exhibits. This reported utterly concedes to the above fact that boredom breeds laziness and the attitude of it because people who are boredom prone such as activists and kinaesthetic learners (hyperactive) performance may be hampered by unchallenging tasks and subsequently but inevitably lead to worker absenteeism.

Interestingly, Wyatt, (1929) cited in (Kass, et al 2001, p318), concurred that performance, motivation and employee attitude to work are correlated (positively). This means that an employee's performance is a function of the level of motivation he or she enjoys from the job. In other words, an unmotivated employee will obviously demonstrated a lackadaisical attitude to his or her job and for that matter the company.

Furthermore, in Maslow's theory, ' man is an insatiably need driven animal' who is always seeking for the fulfilment his or her present need but in a
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successive order of prominence, (Croft, Norton, 2005). Ultimately, Maslow's needs theory shares light on employees' behaviour in the sense that, it categorically emphasises studying and listening to the workforces in order to avoid being 'out of touch' and concluding that what motivates Mr. A will motivate Mr. B, as it were and even more importantly the theory advises a full analogy of an employee before concluding on sort of incentives that will induce a desired behaviour.

The Hawthorne study supports that recognition of a workgroup motivates performance and arguably the Hawthorn enquiries are in line with Abraham Maslow's needs theory.

Another useful theory for analysing the relationship between motivation and performance is Herzberg et al (1957) two factor theory: Motivators- responsibility, recognition and achievement and Hygiene factors- wages or salaries, job security and supervision, cite in (Armstrong, 2006). The absence of hygiene factors results in worker dissatisfaction claims Herzberg. In other words, hygiene factors do not creates satisfaction by themselves but rather, their absences leaves employees dissatisfied according to Herzberg's theory.

Now if Herzberg's theory is anything good to go by, an employee's absence (regular) should trigger an investigation and a subsequent identification of the causes. For instance, employee absenteeism can be due to lack of job satisfaction because of repetitive and boring jobs, due to lack of recognition for the employee's achievement also, poor leadership in the form of supervision may equally cause dissatisfaction. Herzberg's two factor theory failed to anticipated the change in the psychological employment contract

which has shifted power away from the employer to employees consequently, Herzberg's assertion that money is not a motivator is debatable (untrue) today and for that matter, it leaves the famous two factor theory for criticism.

Adding, it is an undeniable fact that money is a real motivator taking into account the actual causes of this current financial turmoil or the current recession across the world. It is emphatically clear that this recession was engineered by greedy people whose sole motivation was nothing rather than big bonuses, pay packages or simply put, money to be precise. If these outrageous financial institutions heads, bankers and money lenders were not motivated by money then what else brought this financial 'meltdown' to this world?

Furthermore, Vroom et al (1960s)' cited in (Croft, Norton, (2005), p16, states that person's motivations defines the measure of input he or she will expands. This means that the package (employment contract), the job itself and the organisational climate all have a definite role in contributing to the performance of an employee in a company. This report utterly agrees with this view because workers generally expect interesting and challenging jobs, good leadership, a fair pay for their work done and of course recognitions for their efforts. Consequently, the infulfilment of these expectations inevitably results in all sorts of attitudes and behaviours such as absenteeism.

Porter and lawler, model (1968) mention in (Armstrong, 2006) is arguably complementary to Vroom's thought because it advocates that two instruments were central to the contribution of workers in an organisation:

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value of reward and the relationship between their efforts and the outcome taking into account the individual capability and expectations, (Armstrong 2006).

In other words, when rewards are carefully crafted strategically taking into consideration the abilities and expertise of the individual then good performance is an inevitable outcome because there will be goal congruence between organisation and the individual which leads to superior organisational performance known as competitive advantage. Sometimes this sort of strategic fit between organisations and employees does make a company an 'employer of a choice'- a company which most people would love to work for due to several factors like good employee treatment, fairness and the organisational climate (good) for instance, British Airways, Microsoft Corporation, NASA (space centre) and the BBC.

4. 0- COMBATING ABSENTEEISM.

According to Taylor (2005), punitive solutions, using rewards and tackling the root causes of absenteeism is the answer to minimising absenteeism. Obviously, the use of the 'carrot and stick' method is being advocated and finding out the real triggers of absenteeism as well. However, this requires proper documentation and monitoring of employees attendance which can be expensive.

Most research supports the view that using punitive styles like basing promotion and rewards decisions on employee attitudes (attendance) reduces absenteeism. This strategy creates and communicates a clear

message to employees that their future especially in that organisation is a function of their contribution and commitment which convincing.

Gennard, Judge (2005) also agreed that ‘ return-to-work interviews’ are the most effective means of reducing absenteeism because it assertively notifies the worker that such attitudes would be punished if necessary. This strategy integrates investigation of the case with documentation as well as communicating to the perpetrators that they are being monitored which I think, must be applauded.

According to Armstrong, (2006), absenteeism can be eradicated through management commitment, trust, and return to work interviews.

Management commitment is about harnessing management support and commitment to abrogating absenteeism while nurturing and development trust through transparent policies, regular dialogue and communication between management and their subordinates.

In resounding, local government absenteeism can be reduced by tackling stress by way providing training and development to management and leadership with the aim of inculcating and developing good leadership and people skills into leaders. Furthermore, boredom can be prevented from inducing absenteeism by making jobs interesting and challenging like providing job enrichment, job enlargement and the empowerment of workers. Rewarding attendance (100%) has been empirically proven to reduce absenteeism from 10-8 days, (Silcox, 2005d) cited in (Torrington et al, 2008).

Finally, even though this report labours to avoid the 'stick' method of reducing absenteeism, it is conceding to note that return-to-work interviews are empirically proven beyond reasonable doubt that they are profoundly effective in reducing employee absence in both the public and private sector organisations.

5.0- CONCLUSIONS

Absenteeism is a problem faced by all organisations and the causes include: hang-over, headaches, boring jobs and poor management. However, management believes that most 'alleged' causes are non-genuine which costs organisations money. Some writers claimed that absenteeism is more prevalent in the public sector than the private sector. This report disagrees with that argument because, undeniably, absenteeism is positively related to motivation. Consequently, since the public sector gets better employment contracts than their private sector counterparts, absence must be less prevalent than private organisations. Punitive measures such as return-to-work interviews are particularly effective in reducing worker absenteeism.

Conclusively, this report maintains that absenteeism cannot be eradicated but rather minimised because providing challenging jobs, rewarding attendance and good leadership cannot change personal habits cultivated over decades. Adding though return-to-work-interviews is an effective means of reducing absenteeism; the process cannot be intrusively used due to privacy concerns. For instance, (IRS, 2002a) cited in (Torrington et al, 2008), p 349 emphasised that the Human Rights Act, 1998 awareness is important.

The report recommends a specific study into low absenteeism sectors: non-profit organisations, voluntary sectors, Media and recreational sector to ascertain the real causes of employee absenteeism.

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