Presenteeism

SSQ Financial Group

Health *InSight*

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Introduction

While employers have paid particular attention to absenteeism, especially physical absenteeism, for several years now, a lesser known phenomenon called presenteeism is contributing greatly to the deterioration of employee performance and work quality. While work attendance has long been valued, we notice today that the presence of employees who is not in condition to perform to their fullest potential (presenteeism) can be more harmful than their absence.

In fact, both absenteeism, which continues to grow, and presenteeism are linked mainly to psychological health factors, even when they involve physical conditions, (e.g. chronic back pain). Moreover, the two problems go hand in hand and have similar causes and origins.

With significant increases in the costs related to these factors, employers are facing an ongoing dilemma: must we always encourage employee attendance, and if so, to what extent? It goes without saying that the absenteeism rate alone cannot be used to adequately determine the health or productivity of an organization.

Facts and figures

The authors of an American study (Loeppke, Taitel, Haufle, Parry, Kessler, and Jinnett, 2009) have formulated three important findings:

- Health-related productivity costs are much more significant than the costs of healthcare and medication.

- Conditions such as depression, anxiety, obesity, arthritis, and neck and back pain are the main causes of productivity loss with regard to both absenteeism and presenteeism.

- Health and productivity are closely linked. Integrating productivity data with health data can help employers develop a strategy for investing in their human capital.

In Quebec (Brun and Biron, 2006), presenteeism is estimated to cost 9.9 days per year and absenteeism, 7.1 days. According to Gary Johns, Professor of

Management at Concordia's John Molson School of Business, and author of the *Attendance dynamics at work: The antecedents and correlates of presenteeism, absenteeism, and productivity loss* study, participants reported an average of three days of presenteeism and 1.8 days of absenteeism, mostly due to illness, at a ratio of 2 to 1. This is similar to Brun's findings of two days of presenteeism for one day of absence.

According to this research and previous studies, presenteeism is more frequent among people who do not have job security or who have short-term employment. Absenteeism is, however, higher in unionized workplaces or when unemployment is low. According to a related study conducted by Gosselin, Lemire and Corneil in 2011, people with major responsibilities reduce absenteeism but cause presenteeism, a problem that is just as serious as absenteeism itself.

According to Statistics Canada (2002), 4% of workers, or approximately 500,000 people have suffered from depression, but 40% of these depressed workers have never been absent from work!

What it all means

**And how can we strike a balance
between absenteeism and presenteeism?**

First, some definitions:

Absenteeism is defined by the repetition and length of absences over a given period. **Presenteeism** is characterized by the behaviour of workers who, despite physical or psychological health problems requiring them to be absent, continue to report to work (Gosselin et Lauzier, 2011) or by the reduction in employee performance due to a health problem.

The signs of presenteeism or potential absenteeism

The state of an employee's health, barring a sudden accident or incident (e.g. an accident at work or at home, a tragic and unforeseeable event), deteriorates gradually and without any apparent sign from the start. Employees can already experience difficulties, for example, insomnia, even though they or those around them are

unaware of the consequences. As symptoms develop and stressors increase, the signs can become more apparent.

Each person reacts differently and exhibits different defence mechanisms, behaviours and personality traits. No two cases are alike. For example, sick employees can be present physically while their mind is somewhere else. Others can be suffering and, yet, perfectly functional.
However, some signs can indicate potential difficulties.

Here are some of the main signs that can be **observed in individuals at work**:

- Unmet deadlines

- Drop in productivity

- Drop in work quality

- More frequent absences and tardiness

- Difficult interpersonal relationships which were previously positive

- Changes in behaviour: irritability, social withdrawal

- More frequent forgetfulness

Within a company, besides the generally known absenteeism rate, there are clues that can indicate that presenteeism could be on the rise, such as:

- Overall drop in productivity even though there is no drop in the number of employment contracts

- Increase in medication insurance premiums and in the proportion of medications used for psychological health

- Increase in the use of the employee assistance program (EAP)

- Increase in expenses resulting from managing absences.

Organizational factors that influence absenteeism and presenteeism

While we all have our own medical history or conditions, it is obvious that company-related factors, such as the organizational plan or the working conditions and environment, contribute directly to the rate of absenteeism and presenteeism. Some examples of these factors include:

- Work schedules

- Workload (physical and psychological)

- Supervisor and group support

- Workplace autonomy

- Workplace relationships

- Company culture

- Leadership style

- Workplace recognition

- Organizational fairness

- Change management

- Job security

It is important to mention that these factors can have a positive or a negative influence on an employee's psychological balance (especially if it is already fragile), but they can also have an impact on physical problems (e.g. pain). The links between physical and psychological health no longer need to be proven. Therefore, we can see that, even in the presence of a physical pathology, factors such as a work conflict can increase physical symptoms and lead to presenteeism or absenteeism.

What we can do to prevent or intervene in cases of presenteeism or absenteeism

At an organizational level

Certainly, the preceding factors must be taken as a whole in order to determine if our company is contributing significantly to presenteeism-absenteeism. Several actions can be taken such as reviewing company culture, management style, job atmosphere and work organization. Promoting health in the workplace can have a

very positive influence and in Quebec, the "Healthy Enterprise" standard, promoted by the Groupe Entreprises en santé (previously GP2S), has proven to be an effective prevention tool.

Here are some useful tips for managers from the book Missing Pieces: 7 Ways to Improve Employee Wellbeing and Organizational Effectiveness (Brun, 2009):

1. Let your appreciation be known

2. Offer support to your employees

3. Communicate with respect

4. Be open to ways to balance work and personal time

5. Avoid work overload

6. Encourage participation in decision making as much as possible

7. Clarify the roles.

At an individual level

When an employee seems to manifest one or more of the signs mentioned previously, it is important that the manager take the time to meet with the employee to try to have a better understanding of what is happening. Without lapsing into a value judgement, it is important to tell the person what has been perceived and to open a conversation about what is happening. While the manager might be fearful of interfering in the person's personal life, some respectful questions are important:

1. Mention that some changes have been observed or that some colleagues are worried.

2. Is the employee dissatisfied with something or experiencing difficulties at work?

3. Are the tasks more difficult? Are relationships with people strained? Is the employee not feeling as motivated with regard to work?

4. While respecting the employee's privacy, ask if there are any personal problems.

5. If the employee mentions a health problem, did he consult with his doctor? Moreover, we can encourage the employee to do so.

6. If the employee mentions personal problems, does he have help or does he think he needs it? We can advise him to go to to the appropriate resources or recommend use of the employee assistance program.

Managers, without blaming employees, without blaming the employee, must be able to assess with them if their reporting to work can continue to be positive for them and the company. Some employees prefer to remain at work, because keeping busy allows them to take their mind off their problems. However, if this has too great an impact on performance, the employee's presence may no longer be preferable.

Intervention strategies

Some practical actions for managers are also suggested by Éric Gosselin, Professor of Occupational Psychology at the Université du Québec en Outaouais.

- Get to know your staff members better – make sure you know their position, and especially their name.

- Make sure you give comments, follow-up or feedback to all of your associates regularly – not just during annual evaluations – and make sure that each time you intervene there is more positive feedback than negative. Mentoring and professional development always offer a high return on investment.

- Make sure to delegate specific responsibilities – associates must clearly understand that they have a specific role – a major responsibility that is their own.

- Get involved with your associates. Make an effort to spend time in your employees' working environment; give words of encouragement, congratulations.

- Implement a recognition system across the company that will be known by and communicated to all associates (e.g. employee of the month, idea of the month, etc.)

- Give your associates the tools that will allow them to communicate effectively amongst themselves and with you. Be open to suggestions and criticism, even anonymous ones.

- Eliminate negative vibes. Get to the source of rumours, communicate positive thinking and reassure your associates that you are aware of their concerns.

- Implement a reward system for meeting objectives.

- Ensure that the organizational climate is not too strained – a work environment can very well be both friendly and professional; organize a monthly picnic, involve your company and associates in charity work.

- Take action; however, making internal changes at your company is not as simple as snapping your fingers. You must take your time, analyze costs and weigh the pros and cons of the long-term effects on your company. Having the best idea does not matter much, if costs are too high and could endanger your company's survival, you might need to reconsider your plans.

Conclusion

It is always difficult and subjective to evaluate precisely if a person should not report to work and take time to recover or report to work and prolong the recovery time. If the employer is able, some adjustments can help keep the person healthy or encourage a better recovery (e.g. temporary reduction of work hours, work schedule adjustment, temporary workload reduction).

In some cases, if the employee seems to be too affected to continue working, a few days off with a referral to a qualified professional could allow for a better recovery.

When the factors are more work related, developing an action plan that involves employees and managers can make individual employees feel hopeful again and lessen the impact on their health.

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The following resources can also be helpful for managing a presenteeism situation:

- Browse the FAQ

- Take advantage of Health *InSight* Support Services

- Turn to your company's EAP

- Confide in a qualified professional in case of emergency