

**Absenteeism, Presenteeism, and Workplace Climate:
A Taxonomy of Employee Attendance Behaviors**

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Abstract

Absenteeism and presenteeism are workplace behaviors that both impose costs upon employers. Research on presenteeism has surged in recent years and has accelerated with the growing realization that the costs of presenteeism are much larger than the costs of absenteeism. Where much of the knowledge about absenteeism and presenteeism has been acquired through separate strands of research, at this point further progress calls for more theoretical analysis focused on the joint determination of absence and presence decisions. Moreover, there remains a need to consider the context in which workers make attendance decisions. This paper develops a four-way typology of attendance climates that provides a conceptual framework for understanding employee attendance outcomes. Each attendance climate defines a different context that entails different motivations for workers such that different types of absence and presence can be identified. The analysis demonstrates that absenteeism and presenteeism rates are endogenously determined within a workgroup and the expected rates of absenteeism and presenteeism differ systematically across attendance climates. The paper concludes with a discussion of its implications for both researchers and human resource managers.

Over any given production period we can assume that the employer's goal is for each workgroup to produce the greatest possible output. But, on average, employers cannot expect 100% attendance since there is a positive probability that any worker may become incapacitated due to illness or injury at any time, which results in involuntary absence from work. Ideally, employers want every fully able worker to attend on any given day, but realistically firms can expect some workers who are fully able to choose to be absent voluntarily, which results in lower attendance, less than potential output, and higher costs. On the other hand, attendance rates may be higher than the rate that would best serve the employer since some workers who become less than fully productive due to illness, injury, or other factors such as anxiety and stress but who are not fully incapacitated may choose to attend work. This phenomenon, called presenteeism, can also be costly to the firm; the stress felt by a worker engaging in presenteeism may cause that worker to be absent at higher rates in the future. Moreover, if the cause of a worker's reduced productivity is a contagious illness then other workers are also likely to exhibit higher absence rates in subsequent periods. The purpose of this paper is provide a conceptual framework for understanding workgroup attendance outcomes that jointly addresses worker incentives for both absenteeism and presenteeism.

I will first offer a brief review of the research addressing the motivation to attend work as it has evolved over time. The earliest work on attendance primarily concerned absenteeism while it has been only over the last two decades that a substantive body of research on presenteeism has emerged. Following this review of the literature I develop a four-way typology of attendance climates where each attendance climate defines a unique context that, in turn, fosters unique incentives for workers with regard to their absence and presence decisions. Accordingly, different types of absence and presence are associated with different attendance climates. Moreover, the analysis will demonstrate that absenteeism and presenteeism rates are endogenously determined within a workgroup and that the expected rates of absenteeism and presenteeism differ systematically across attendance climates. The following discussion will then elaborate upon the implications of this typology of attendance climates for both researchers and human resource managers.

ABSENTEEISM AND ATTENDANCE

Employee attendance has been heavily researched over most of the postwar period. The driving force behind that research was the recognition that lower attendance rates lead to higher costs and lower profits. Therefore, the dominant research question that initially emerged was to ask—"Why do employees choose to be absent from work?"

As Steers & Rhodes (1978) indicated in their literature survey, most of the absenteeism research up to the 1970s was documented in the management literature and investigated bivariate relationships between absence and a number of variables, most prominently, individual job satisfaction. Arguing that situational constraints can affect the attendance/absence decision, they developed a process model that provided a systematic explanation of how variables that were individually correlated with attendance/absence outcomes jointly determine an employee's motivation to attend (or be absent from) work, and that took account of both discretionary and involuntary absenteeism. Moreover, an important aspect of their work was that they modeled the

processes through which current attendance outcomes feed back on subsequent motivations to attend.

Despite its status as seminal contribution, the Steers & Rhodes model was limited since it did not sufficiently address the context in which attendance decisions are made. As Kaiser (1998) indicated in his multidisciplinary survey of absence research, from the 1970s onward social psychologists and economists had begun to make important contributions to our understanding of attendance and absence decisions. In short, an interdisciplinary interpretation of absence research in the management, social psychology, and economics literatures leads to the conclusion that ongoing research on employee absence behavior must recognize that individual attendance decisions are constrained by the social pressures and economic incentives perceived by individual workers.

In this vein, Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson, & Brown (1982) presented a social theory of absence implying that workgroup norms will emerge as a result of the interactions among individuals, workgroups, and the organization. Moreover, their empirical analysis across a number of industries and occupations confirmed their prediction that different absence outcomes should emerge in different settings. Nicholson & Johns (1985) subsequently presented a framework explaining the formation of workgroup norms. To do so, they specified two dimensions that define the culture of an organization—first, whether the psychological contract between the employee and the organization exhibits high or low trust, and second, whether cultural salience is high or low. As succinctly defined by Rousseau & Tijoriwala (1998: 679), “[a] psychological contract is an individual’s belief in mutual obligations between that person and another party such as an employer (either a firm or another person).” Cultural salience is the degree to which beliefs about absence, assumptions about employment, and conceptions of self-control exist within a work unit, where high (low) cultural salience is associated with a high (low) degree of interdependence among members of a workgroup. (Nicholson & Johns, 1985: 400) Accordingly, Nicholson & Johns (1985) defined a typology of four “absence cultures,” each of which implies a different type of absence.

Their analysis further emphasized the value of an interdisciplinary approach to attendance and absence research. Economic considerations will guide the employer’s choice of technology; whether it be labor-intensive or capital-intensive, the firm will choose the technology most likely to maximize its profit. The chosen technology will then dictate the skills required of workers and their spatial and functional proximity in the workplace. That is, economic forces drive the choice of technology and the associated social ecology (the physical distribution of workers with various personal characteristics) that shape interactions among workers, which in turn, determine the level of trust that exists between individual workers and the employer and the degree of cultural salience among workers.

An ultimate purpose of investigating the determinants of absenteeism was to shed light on how employers may act to minimize the costs of absenteeism, and hence, maximize profits. Based on the contributions of Steers & Rhodes (1978) and Nicholson & Johns (1985), Kaiser (1996) developed an interdisciplinary process model that shows the options open to employers for controlling or reducing workgroup absence rates. First, as with Steers and Rhodes, Kaiser’s model indicates the feedback processes through which current outcomes influence future

outcomes, but it goes beyond their model by incorporating the roles played by economic and social forces in explaining absenteeism. Second, following Nicholson & Johns' analysis, the model explains the determination of workgroup absence norms and absence rates based upon their typology of absence cultures.

This model generated a number of important implications regarding observed patterns of absence and employer options to influence those patterns. First, the fundamental pattern of absences is determined by the production technology and social ecology chosen by the firm and the characteristics embodied in its work force, which typically can be changed only over a long period of time. Second, because firms cannot change these things quickly, the employer's ability to influence absence decisions in the short run is limited. The only short run options to influence individual absence incentives available to an employer are to introduce a system of rewards and penalties triggered by the behavior of workers and/or programs that increase the ability of workers to attend.

PRESENTEEISM AND ATTENDANCE

I will not present a detailed survey of the presenteeism research since a number of comprehensive reviews of the literature have already been documented; among the most prominent are those offered by Goetzl, Long, Ozminkowski, Hawkins, Wang, & Lynch, (2004), Johns (2010), Prater & Smith (2011), Halbesleben, Whitman, & Crawford (2014), and Garrow (2016). In brief, as the meta-analysis of 61 studies conducted by Miraglia & Johns (2016) revealed, presenteeism is correlated with a number of variables such as job satisfaction, job insecurity, health, and job demands, among others. The presenteeism literature also provides some evidence that in some circumstances absenteeism and presenteeism are substitutable (Caverly, Cunningham, & MacGregor, 2007; Miraglia & Johns, 2016) while in others the rates of absenteeism and presenteeism simultaneously change in the same direction (Gosselin, Lemyre, & Corneil, 2013).

Presenteeism occurs when workers who are not fully productive still attend work. As the literature indicates, productivity of workers who engage in presenteeism can be reduced by health issues due to injury, illness, stress, anxiety, or depression. When workers are ill, stressed, or distracted, their diminished productivity imposes current costs upon the firm. Moreover, if a worker with a contagious illness attends work, it is likely to cause other workers to be absent in subsequent periods, further increasing costs. As has frequently been put forward, despite the methodological difficulties in measuring these costs, there seems to be a strong consensus that they are significantly larger than the costs of absenteeism. (Hemp, 2004; Howard, Howard, & Smyth, 2012; Garrow, 2016).

The analysis of this paper will go forward based upon the assumption that these costs are indeed high, and that employers consequently need to find ways to reduce the amount of presenteeism that occurs in their workplaces. But to do so effectively, first, we need to understand the causes of presenteeism. As Johns (2010: 531) stated in his survey, "Research and speculation concerning presenteeism have been markedly atheoretical." In responding to this void in the literature, Halbesleben, et al. (2014) presented a dialectical theory of the decision to go to work. They argued that "absenteeism and presenteeism are strategies employees use to

navigate the dialectical tensions in the supervisor-subordinate relationship” (Halbesleben, et al., 2014: 177) such that the supervisor characterizes the nature of the employee’s relationship with the organization. Moreover, Garrow (2016) concluded that the drivers of presenteeism are highly contextual where line managers/supervisors are important with regard to modeling behavior and responding to and managing the presenteeism of their subordinates.

In what follows I will present a taxonomy of attendance behaviors that will hopefully augment our understanding of the processes that motivate workers to attend when they are not fully able to work and to choose absence when they are fully able to work. The model I develop in this paper focuses on the organizational context in which dialectical tensions between employees and supervisors are imbedded, and hence, should be viewed as consistent with the dialectical theory offered by Halbesleben, et al. (2014).

The contextual concept upon which the following model is based is organizational climate. In their review of the evolution of organizational research, Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey (2013) explained the distinction that has emerged over time between concepts of culture and climate. They indicate that organizational culture refers to the basic assumptions about the world and values that guide life within the larger organization. On the other hand, “organizational climate is defined as the shared perceptions and the meaning attached to the policies, practices, and procedures employees experience and the behaviors they observe getting rewarded and that are supported and expected.” (Schneider, et al., 2013: 362) This concept, therefore, is most relevant with regard to analyzing the processes and behaviors associated with a given workgroup.

The research on absenteeism as described above sheds light on how to go forward with a joint analysis of absenteeism and presenteeism. In this paper I will generally follow Nicholson & Johns’ (1985) approach of developing a four-way typology of workplace settings to explain the different workgroup attendance behaviors associated with different “attendance climates.” The analysis will show that within a given workgroup absence and presence decisions are made simultaneously where they are constrained and shaped by a given type of workplace such that absence and presence outcomes must be seen as endogenously determined. (Bierla, Huver, & Richard, 2012) Moreover, working from an approach that focuses on the different contexts in which attendance decisions are made will offer insight into an understanding of the circumstances in which substitutability between absenteeism and presenteeism is or is not likely.

A TAXONOMY OF ATTENDANCE BEHAVIORS

With regard to understanding the decision to attend work, as noted above, given more and more confirmation of the high costs of presenteeism since the 1990s, research emphasis in recent years has shifted toward presenteeism and away from absenteeism. However, there is a need for a more integrated approach to attendance behavior based upon analysis of how absenteeism and presenteeism are jointly determined; current research must strive to merge the growing understanding of presenteeism with knowledge provided by the earlier and much larger literature on absenteeism. The analysis offered in this paper seeks to move in that direction. The starting point for my analysis is Nicholson & Johns’ (1985) typology of absence cultures.

As noted above, the four types of absence cultures they specified are based upon different levels of trust in the psychological contract and cultural salience in an organization as summarized below in Table 1. Where the technology and social ecology of an organization as moderated by the characteristics of its work force determine the levels of trust and cultural salience in workgroups, different absence cultures are implied. For example, where trust is high and cultural salience is low, Nicholson & Johns described their Type I culture as a “Dependent Culture.” The following discussion explains the different motivations for absenteeism implied by each type of absence culture.

TABLE 1
Nicholson & Johns’ Absence Cultures

Trust	Cultural Salience	Type of Culture	
High	Low	Type I	Dependent
High	High	Type II	Moral
Low	Low	Type III	Fragmented
Low	High	Type IV	Conflictual

Type I, the *Dependent Culture*, is characterized by high trust and low cultural salience. In this situation there is little interdependence among workers such that they have full discretion to make attendance decisions independent of other workers. Where trust is high, workers exhibit strong commitment to a paternalistic organization, yet, uniformly accepted attendance norms are not likely since interaction among workers is very limited and individual differences may be large. Each worker feels integrated vertically with the organization but not horizontally with other workers. Under these conditions, workers are motivated by their allegiance to authority and the goals of the organization where they depend upon the paternalistic approach implemented by management.

Type II, the *Moral Culture*, is also characterized by high trust, but differs from Type I since the level of cultural salience is assumed to be high. In this case, since interdependence among workers is high and workers are more homogeneous, strong attendance norms are more likely to emerge than in a Type I Dependent Culture. While the psychological contract is still paternalistic, workers in this case are also motivated by their commitment to organizational goals and to other team members; thus a sense of integration, both vertical and horizontal, is felt by the representative worker. Therefore, workers are motivated to do the morally right thing.

Type III, the *Fragmented Culture*, is characterized by both low trust and low cultural salience. Similar to the Type I, Dependent Culture, low cultural salience implies that workers make their attendance decisions autonomously. They do not experience any sense of horizontal integration with others workers in their group. But as distinct from Type I, workers in this culture have little trust or faith in paternalistic support by the organization, and these workers, rather than feeling vertically integrated, feel a sense of detachment from the organization. In this culture, the typical worker feels isolated and is not motivated by commitment to other workers or

to the organization and its goals. Rather, workers in this culture are primarily motivated by their desires for equity and self-preservation.

Type IV, the *Conflictual Culture*, is characterized by low trust and high cultural salience. With low trust workers feel that management has little interest in their welfare and hence they feel no allegiance to the organization. Therefore, as in a fragmented culture, workers want equitable treatment where self-preservation is one motive that drives their decisions and actions. On the other hand, since cultural salience is high workers are horizontally integrated with other workers in their group and so are united in opposition to management when contentious issues emerge. Therefore, this type of culture is appropriately described as conflictual.

Implicit in Nicholson & Johns' analysis is that individual workers are motivated by the "work" relationships they perceive, which are captured by the two dimensions upon which their typology is based; trust in the psychological contract and cultural salience. The level of trust reflects a worker's perception of his or her relationship with the organization, which, as explained by Halbesleben, et al. (2014) is primarily the result of interactions between the worker and his or her immediate supervisor. Cultural salience reflects the network of relationships a worker has with other members of the workgroup. Nicholson & Johns' labels for each of their absence cultures can be interpreted as describing the nature of these relationships. For example, the Type I culture is described as dependent because, given a high level of trust, worker's feel they can depend on the employer for support in a setting in which individual members of the workgroup expect very little support from others. To the converse, low trust and high cultural salience means that workers experience strong, positive, and supportive relations with other workers but weak and untrustworthy relations with the employer.

For this analysis I will retain Nicholson & Johns' approach as based upon two organizational dimensions that imply a four-way typology of settings within which attendance decisions are made, but with several differences. First, I use the concept of high and low climate strength rather than high and low cultural salience, where climate strength is "... the degree to which people in a unit agree in their perceptions." (Schneider, et al., 2013: 381) As noted above, given the evolution of organizational research since 1980s, the contemporary concept of culture refers to the larger organization rather than specific processes that explain employee decisions within the workgroup. Since contemporary understanding of organizational climate refers to these specific processes, the dimension adopted for the analysis in this paper is climate strength, where a key determinant of high climate strength is a high degree of interdependence among members of a workgroup. Comparing the current definitions of climate strength with Nicholson & Johns' 1985 definition of cultural salience indicates that they are referring to very similar processes within workgroups. Therefore, in keeping with the evolution documented in the organizational behavior literature, climate strength rather than cultural salience is clearly the appropriate concept for describing each of the four contextual settings in which workers make their attendance decisions.

Second, this analysis will address how each of the four workgroup climates has simultaneous implications for presenteeism and absenteeism. Where Nicholson & Johns defined four absence cultures, I will instead adopt the comparable concept of an Attendance Climate, which will allow us to identify a taxonomy of attendance behaviors.

Third, for each of the four attendance climates, predictions for absence and presence motivations and outcomes are presented. The types of absence indicated for each attendance climate are those defined by Nicholson & Johns for comparable levels of trust and cultural salience/climate strength. In addition, based upon this analysis Table 2 further defines the type of presence implied by each attendance climate. Moreover, for each attendance climate predicted orders of magnitude for the rates of absenteeism and presenteeism are indicated in Table 2. Also indicated are the expected variances of the rates of absenteeism and presenteeism across members of a workgroup. The entries for each attendance climate are ordinal and should be taken as relative to the comparable entries for the other three attendance climates.

TABLE 2
Attendance Climates and Attendance Behaviors

		<u>DEPENDENT</u>		<u>MORAL</u>		
		Rate	Variance	Rate	Variance	
High Trust	<i>Deviant Absence</i>	Low/Mod	Mod/High	<i>Constructive Absence</i>	Low	Low
	<i>Compliant Presence</i>	Mod/High	Mod/High	<i>Constructive Presence</i>	High	Low
		<u>FRAGMENTED</u>		<u>CONFLICTUAL</u>		
		Rate	Variance	Rate	Rate	Variance
Low Trust	<i>Calculative Absence</i>	Mod/High	High	<u>Case I</u>	<u>Case II</u>	
	<i>Defensive Presence</i>	Low/Mod	High	<i>Defiant Absence</i>	High	Low
				<i>Duty-Driven Presence</i>	Low	High

Low Climate Strength

High Climate Strength

The Dependent Climate

Deviant absence

Workers in a dependent climate are expected to exhibit deviant absence. Where workers are dependent upon the employer, discretionary absence is deviant because it would violate the trust the employer has in them and so induce feelings of guilt in workers who choose to be absent. Such absence conflicts with management expectations and will be chosen only to the extent that individuals can assuage their guilt by concluding that they have a “legitimate” reason for it. For example, to choose absence one needs to answer “yes” to the following question: “Am I sick enough not to attend work?” Only a legitimate reason in the mind of the absent worker can justify their absence as not cheating on the psychological contract.

Therefore, since workers wish to avoid feeling guilty, moderately low absence rates are predicted. But since there is little homogeneity or interdependence among workers they will differ in deciding how much absence they can take without feeling guilty, which implies that the variance of individual absence rates across the workgroup is expected to be moderately high.

Compliant Presence

With regard to presenteeism, workers for whom health or other issues emerge that diminish their productivity need to ask: “Am I well/able enough to go to work?” In a high trust climate workers will have relatively strong incentives to go to work even if they are not fully able due to their high commitment to organizational goals and consequent allegiance to authority. Given high trust and commitment, not attending work will lead to feelings of guilt that stem from a sense of letting down the employer. Again, in an effort to assuage guilt associated with staying home, a partially incapacitated worker will choose to attend. Workers are motivated to do their best to *comply* with the employer’s expectations regarding their commitment to organizational goals. Therefore, in a dependent climate, moderately high rates of presenteeism are expected. And given that climate strength is low, it is likely that the variance of presenteeism across heterogeneous members of a workgroup is expected to be moderately high.

The Moral Climate

Constructive Absence

Given a psychological contract characterized by a high level of trust and high climate strength, the employees and the employer are in agreement over the amount of discretionary absence that is acceptable, which is seen as a moral outcome. The employer accepts the need for some amount of discretionary absence to be available to employees, and high climate strength implies clear absence norms that are well understood by employees. Such norms allow workers to choose amounts of discretionary absence within parameters acceptable to the employer. Discretionary absence in the moral climate is constructive since it serves the needs of both individual workers and the employer. Given high levels of commitment to both the employer and the workgroup, we expect workgroup absence rates implied by moral climates to be low, and given high climate strength, to occur with a low variance across a given workgroup.

Constructive Presence

With high trust and high climate strength, workers are strongly committed to both the organization and its goals as well as meeting their responsibility to other members of the workgroup. As shown by Baker-McClearn, Greasely, Dale, & Griffith (2010), where the employer recognizes that some measure of presenteeism is beneficial to both employees and the employer, they will be in agreement over an acceptable amount of presenteeism. Individual workers will have strong incentives for presenteeism; feelings of guilt in letting the team down if they choose not to attend will motivate workers to attend even if they are not fully productive. This is *constructive* presence such that it meets the needs of both the worker and the employer. This suggests that the rate of presenteeism for a workgroup will be high, but will occur with a low variance across members of the workgroup.

The Fragmented Climate

Calculative Absence

In the fragmented climate, since trust and climate strength are both low, workers are isolated and privatized. How much absence one chooses is meant to assure equity in exchange of time for compensation. If workers do not feel that they are being equitably compensated for the time they give to the employer, then equity can be restored by being absent; this is the result of deliberate calculation. Since workers feel little obligation to the employer, absence rates will be moderately high and with the lack of climate strength where individual decisions would not be guided by norms, the variance across workers in a given workgroup is expected to be high.

Defensive Presence

In a fragmented climate characterized by low trust, there are several incentives for workers to choose to attend work even if they are partially incapacitated. First, workers may fear disciplinary action such as dismissal or some lesser action if the employer is dissatisfied with the worker's absence record. Second, workers may engage in presenteeism if they want to conserve on the number of sick days to which they are entitled, and third, workers may do so simply because they cannot afford to or do not want to give up a day's pay. In this climate, workers are not going to engage in presenteeism to assuage guilt, but they will do so to *defend* their well-being. Presenteeism will be chosen only as needed for personal reasons and is most likely to be moderately low, but with high variance across members of the workgroup.

The Conflictual Climate

Defiant Absence

In this culture workers do not trust and cannot depend on the employer but they are highly integrated with each other. With high climate strength group norms will emerge that reflect a collective view of what workers are entitled to from the employer. If the group perceives a maximum absence rate acceptable to the employer that workers think is inequitable (i.e., too low), then the workgroup as a whole will take a defiant stance. Workers may even engage in high absence as retaliation against actions taken by the employer seen as detrimental to them. In the conflictual climate workers are detached from the organization but united as a collective force. Discretionary absence is conflictual where workers as a group are resistant to the employer and regard some amount of absence as an entitlement.

Duty-Driven Presence

Even in a culture where workers are collectively in conflict with and feel little commitment to the employer, a worker whose productivity is compromised may still be motivated to attend work. Where there is high climate strength, where individual workers possess unique skills upon which others depend, and where a group provides a critical service, individual workers are likely

to feel a strong *sense of duty* to their coworkers, clients, and/or customers, and therefore, they will be motivated to attend work even if they are not functioning at full capacity. Given that a conflictual climate is the result of low trust and high climate strength, predicted rates of absenteeism and presenteeism both occur over a range of possibilities. For purposes of this analysis we can identify two polar cases that become apparent when we consider the distribution of absenteeism costs as implied by the nature of the product for which group members are responsible.

Conflictual Climate, Case I: For this case we assume that the costs of absenteeism fall most heavily upon the employer and minimally, if at all, on others. In such a scenario workers are free to engage in defiant absenteeism and would engage in presenteeism only for defensive purposes. But since workers are unified in defying the employer, the rate of absence is likely to be high and the rate of defensive presenteeism is likely to be low, both occurring with low variance across the workgroup. We can look to assembly line manufacturing for evidence of this type of outcome. The most obvious example can be taken from the auto industry where there is a history of adversarial labor-management relations and poor working conditions that fostered low or nonexistent levels of trust, and where high climate strength was facilitated by a strong union, which served as a unified and powerful institution for workers in conflict with management.

Conflictual Climate, Case II: For this case we assume that a given worker's absence imposes costs not only on the employer but on other constituents as well. Even though workers are united in conflict with the employer, they may choose not to act defiantly through absenteeism if they are committed to their team members, customers, or clients. Where workers are committed to responding to the needs of their coworkers, customers, or clients, in contrast to the outcome for Case I, the rate of presenteeism will be high and the rate of absenteeism will be low, both with a low variance. For example, this behavior is common among nurses who feel responsible for the health of their patients even when they are collectively in conflict with their employers. High presenteeism is most likely to occur when workers are committed to the task of the group—as in patient care—and it is particularly likely if individual workers have unique skills that are critical to serving customers or clients.

These two cases imply that there are substitution possibilities between absenteeism and presenteeism in organizations that foster conflictual climates where the extent of substitution between presenteeism and absenteeism depends directly upon the extent to which absences are injurious to parties other than the employer.

The taxonomy of attendance climates presented in Table 2 suggests the following four-part proposition that indicates the relative attendance rates expected across attendance climates.

Proposition

1a: A dependent attendance climate implies moderate to high attendance rates.

1b: A moral attendance climate implies high attendance rates.

1c: A fragmented attendance climate implies low to moderate attendance rates.

1d: A conflictual attendance climate may imply high or low attendance rates depending upon how costly absence is to those other than the employer.

Where this analysis indicates expected behaviors for four precisely defined types of attendance climates, actual attendance climates in many organizations are not necessarily going to be perfectly consistent with one of the four attendance climates shown in Table 2. However, this taxonomy of attendance climates and outcomes should still provide useful insights into understanding attendance behaviors for organizations with varying degrees of trust and climate strength.

Within Workgroup Absence and Presence Decisions

To arrive at the taxonomy of attendance behaviors shown in Table 2, I began by characterizing workgroups by the levels of trust imbedded in the psychological contract between workers and the employer and the level of climate strength within the workgroup. This then led to the identification of four different types of attendance climates within which workers make attendance decisions. Recall that the employer, as motivated by economic considerations, chooses the technology workers use and the associated social ecology of the workgroup, which imply the levels of trust and climate strength that determine the type of attendance climate that will prevail. Several implications regarding the within workgroup determination of attendance outcomes flow from this analysis.

First, focusing on the type of attendance climates observed across organizations serves to simplify and clarify our perceptions of causality. Research to date has led to the identification of bivariate correlations of both absenteeism and presenteeism rates with numerous seemingly determining factors. But, consistent with the analysis in this paper, the attendance climate of a workgroup can simultaneously determine the magnitudes of a number of individual factors that are correlated with absenteeism and/or presenteeism. For example, greater levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and work engagement can simultaneously result from greater climate strength or trust. Therefore, beginning with an assessment of the prevailing attendance climate of the workgroup provides a more comprehensive understanding of attendance behaviors than looking at bivariate correlations separately; in the words of a familiar analogy, this approach allows us to better “see the forest through the trees.”

Second, analysis based upon the alternative types of attendance climates that may prevail implies that absenteeism and presenteeism rates are not independently determined. Incentives for absenteeism and presenteeism in a given workgroup flow from the same antecedents as dictated by a given attendance climate. Absenteeism and presenteeism rates for a given workgroup are therefore jointly determined.

Third, given that absenteeism and presenteeism rates are endogenously determined leads to the question of substitutability between them. While individual workers make their own attendance decisions, the above analysis implies that in some ways the employer has the ability to influence the relative rates of absenteeism and presenteeism for the workgroup. This can be

seen by considering the outcomes for each type of attendance climate. Consider, for example, the moral climate for which we expect to see a low rate of absenteeism and a high rate of presenteeism. *Ceteris paribus*, if the employer wished to reduce the rate of constructive presence this could be accomplished by implementing more lenient absence controls, which would result in more constructive absence and less constructive presence. Following the same logic, such a substitution would also be the likely result of more lenient absence controls in organizations that exhibit the other types of attendance climates. Similarly, consider the case in which job design was altered to increase the intrinsic reward workers receive from their efforts in the context of a dependent climate. In this case, job satisfaction will increase, which would likely decrease the rate of deviant absence and increase the rate of compliant presence.

Substitution may also occur in response to changes that occur independent of any action taken by the employer. For example, the state of the economy will influence attendance decisions by workers. When an economy moves into recession workers are likely to feel more insecure in their jobs and may face more financial difficulties. Considering this in the context of a fragmented climate, this would create stronger incentives for more defensive presence and less calculative absence. Similarly, a weakening economy in which many firms experience diminished profits or losses, feelings of guilt over not attending work may increase. Therefore, in the context of a dependent climate, the onset of a recession would likely reduce deviant absence and increase compliant presence.

While there are many instances in which we can expect substitution to occur, in contrast, there are other change factors that would lead the rates of absenteeism and presenteeism to move in the same direction. Some programs implemented by employers are particularly important. For example, instituting or expanding a wellness program that succeeds in improving the general health status of a firm's work force will reduce the incidence of illness among workers and so reduce the rates of both absenteeism and presenteeism. The above logic suggests the following two propositions.

Proposition 2: Substitution between absenteeism and presenteeism will occur in response to any change that alters their relative benefits and costs as perceived by workers.

Proposition 3: The rates of absenteeism and presenteeism will change in the same direction in response changes that affect the general level of health among workers, and hence the ability of the average worker to attend.

Fourth, the substitution possibilities discussed above imply that employers face a tradeoff between the rates of absenteeism and presenteeism. Where experiencing unusually high rates of either absenteeism or presenteeism would impose very large and unacceptable costs upon the firm, there must exist some combination of those rates that would allow the firm to avoid such costs. More specifically, there must exist some ratio of their rates that would minimize the costs imposed upon the firm by the attendance decisions made by employees in the workgroup. This suggests the following proposition.

Proposition 4: Given substitutability between absenteeism and presenteeism, there must exist an optimal ratio of the rates at which they occur for a given workgroup.

Fifth, the ranges of choice over the rates of absenteeism and presenteeism are much larger for the employer than they are for workers. Since workers must make their attendance decisions within the context established by the organization that employs them, the ranges of choice perceived by workers are constrained by the type of attendance climate to which they belong. For example, considering the different attendance outcomes predicted for a moral climate as compared to a dependent climate, *ceteris paribus*, in the moral climate the rate of presenteeism will be greater, the rate absenteeism will be lower, and hence, the rate of attendance will be higher. As this example suggests, if an employer seeks a higher attendance rate, that could be achieved by taking actions to increase the level of climate strength, *ceteris paribus*. As this illustrates, the context set by the employer fundamentally limits the range of absenteeism and presenteeism rates that will most likely occur for a given workgroup. This suggests the following proposition.

Proposition 5: The employer exercises the dominant influence over workgroup rates of absenteeism, presenteeism, and attendance.

DISCUSSION

Implications for Future Research

First, absenteeism and presenteeism, because they are endogenously determined should not be studied separately. The above analysis implies that the rates of absenteeism and presenteeism differ systematically across different types of attendance climates. In order to test these implications, it would be useful to develop instruments to measure the levels of trust and climate strength in workgroups. Then researchers should test for statistically significant relationships between measures of trust and climate strength and the predicted absence and presence behaviors.

Second, longitudinal studies would enhance our understanding of these phenomena. Not only are absenteeism and presenteeism endogenously determined at a point in time, for a given firm they are endogenously linked over time as well. But how might this occur? Until recently, the major concern for management has been to control the costs of absenteeism. Beginning with a primary concern for absence rates, where they appear to be too high, an employer has a strong incentive to impose stronger absence controls. In response to doing so, workers will choose to engage in presenteeism at higher rates. But, the result may be higher rates of absence in subsequent periods, the costs of which may ultimately lead the employer to relax the absence control policies initially imposed. This suggests that for some workgroups we should observe an intertemporal cycling of the ratio of absenteeism and presenteeism rates. If this pattern is observed, it would serve as evidence that firms seek the optimal ratio of these two rates in order to minimize costs as expressed in proposition four.

Implications for Attendance Management

To effectively optimize the attendance behaviors of their employees, managers must first understand that absenteeism and presenteeism rates are endogenously determined. The effectiveness of any attendance policy directed at separately controlling either of the rates of absenteeism or presenteeism will be compromised because it will affect the other rate as well.

Second, managers should determine the type of attendance climate that prevails within their organizations. In other words, managers need to assess their organizations to understand the level of trust in the psychological contract that exists between them and their employees and the degree of climate strength that exists within workgroups. Only then will they be able to determine what to do in the long run to change attendance climates and achieve the outcomes they desire.

Third, to achieve the lowest rate of absenteeism and highest attendance rate of workers will not necessarily achieve the lowest cost, *ceteris paribus*. Rather, managers should seek to achieve an optimal relationship between the rates of absenteeism and presenteeism. However, this optimal relationship cannot be identified in the short run. To do so for a given workgroup the employer would need to compare how absenteeism and presenteeism rates vary over time with how the costs of absenteeism and presenteeism vary over time. Therefore, employers should devote resources to developing accurate and reliable measures of those rates and costs and then track them over a long period. Analyzing those data would then allow the employer to identify with some confidence the optimal rates of absenteeism and presenteeism for a given workgroup.

Fourth, managers should place the greatest emphasis on influencing presenteeism decisions rather than concentrating on actions to reduce rates of absenteeism. Given that current thinking holds that the costs of presenteeism far exceed those attributable to absenteeism, a given commitment of resources to managing presenteeism would lead to a greater payoff than if they were devoted to absence control. Even though there is endogeneity between presenteeism and absenteeism, it appears that the dominant causal link goes from presenteeism to absenteeism.

Finally, we might ask: What is the optimal situation for both employees within a workgroup and the employer? The analysis developed in the paper suggests that the moral attendance climate is likely to generate the best results. First, where a moral attendance climate appears most likely to facilitate the highest attendance rate, it is most likely to result in getting the greatest output from a given number of employees. Second, this is the attendance climate according to which the employer recognizes the value of and the need for some amount of discretionary absence to be available to employees without discipline, and that some acceptable amount of presenteeism is beneficial to employer as well as to employees. The resulting norms clarifying the acceptable amounts of absenteeism and presenteeism will assure that the rates at which they occur do not reach the extremes that would impose the greatest costs. Therefore, a moral attendance climate is the one that best meets the needs of both workers and the employer.

However, if a moral attendance climate for a workgroup is not already in place, a major caveat is that establishing a moral attendance climate cannot be accomplished quickly. To do so calls for the employer to take actions that will increase the level of trust in the psychological

contract between members of a workgroup and the employer and/or increase climate strength within the workgroup. While the employer may be able to institute policies to increase the level of trust somewhat expeditiously, the major impediment to achieving a moral culture is when climate strength is initially lacking. To increase climate strength the employer would have consider changes that would provide greater spatial and functional proximity of workers within a workgroup, which would lead to greater interdependence among workers. But, this is likely to require the employer choose an alternative production technology, which can only be implemented over a long period of time.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper provides a conceptual framework for understanding workgroup attendance outcomes. The analysis is based upon a four-way typology of attendance climates according to different levels of trust in the psychological contract between employees and the employer and climate strength within the workgroup. As the large body of absenteeism research and the recent and rapid expansion of research on presenteeism indicate, explanations of the attendance outcomes that we observe are complex. The analysis presented in this paper offers a conceptual framework for understanding absence and presence decisions as constrained by the attendance climate within which they are made. It implies that attendance climate plays a significant and causal role in jointly explaining bivariate correlations that have been identified between numerous job context and personal variables and both absenteeism and presenteeism. The taxonomy of attendance behaviors offered here will hopefully contribute to the theoretical and empirical analyses of these behaviors and provide additional insights for employers and managers who must deal with workplace attendance outcomes.

More specifically, implications that flow from the taxonomy of attendance behaviors developed in the paper include the following: 1) Rates of absenteeism and presenteeism will vary systematically across different attendance climates. 2) Rates of absenteeism and presenteeism are endogenously determined, both within and across different attendance climates. 3) Depending upon what precipitates a change in attendance behaviors, absenteeism and presenteeism may function as substitutes or they may change in the same direction. 4) Where absenteeism and presenteeism both impose costs, employers face a tradeoff; in other words, over time they should seek an optimal mix of absenteeism and presenteeism rates to contain costs and augment profits. 5) Employee discretion over absence and presence decisions occurs only within the context dictated by the climate of the workgroup, and hence, the influence of workers on workgroup attendance outcomes is marginal. Since a workgroup's attendance climate is the result of long run organizational decisions made by the employer, workgroup absenteeism and presenteeism rates are fundamentally determined by the employer.

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