

PRESENTEEISM AT WORK: THE INFLUENCE OF MANAGERS

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—Abstract—

The global purpose of this article is to analyze how the individual behavior of a manager can influence his team’s members in terms of presence at work. Our main assumption is that the manager’s example, personality and values have an effect on his subordinates. Thus, in order to meet managerial and organizational expectations, some employees place professional duty above their own healthcare, by attending work even if the situation justifies sick-leave. Our paper focuses on that kind of behavior, commonly called presenteeism.

Key Words: *Presenteeism, Manager-Employee Relationship, Health at Work*

JEL Classification: *J22, J28, M5*

1. INTRODUCTION

Within firms, the status of local manager is quite singular. He is a link between the organization and the employees working in his team. That’s why his

personality and values, which are reflected by his words and deeds, influence the decisions of his subordinates.

However, in order to meet his manager's expectations, would an employee go so far as to neglect his own health? The main assumption of this paper is that the behavior of a local manager constitutes an example and strongly influences the collective standards concerning attendance. Thus, if the team manager is present at work, even sick, employees will be fostered to act similarly. Such behavior, called presenteeism appears when an individual attends work even if his health status could justify a few days off. A growing literature describes this kind of extreme commitment and underlines its effects: risk of accidents or mistakes due to fatigue or inattention, further health damages, but also a possible contagion for colleagues, resulting in increased absences in the team.

These negative consequences on the health of employees – but also of the firm –, raise a new question: what are the real causes of this kind of behavior? Financial reasons should not be forgotten. Sickness absence can be very costly; if they are not or only partially compensated, employees could give up their right to leave, whatever the severity of their disease. But presenteeism also occurs when absence is financially neutral. In this case, how is it justified? The aim of this paper is to show that managerial example is a major cause of presenteeism. The manager's behavior and attitudes are the expression of his position towards presence or absence, and constitute incentives for employees to behave as well.

After a short literature review, we will shed some light on presenteeism in an empirical perspective. Based on the case of a French regional bank, we propose a relevant statistical analysis to measure this phenomenon and to identify its explanatory factors, including the manager's exemplary role.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Concerning absenteeism, several articles have already showed a link between the level of sickness absence of a manager on one hand, and the behavior of his subordinates on the other hand. To our knowledge, no such investigation exists about presenteeism. Obviously, the major results of these studies will be considered. But at first, we provide some conceptual elements on our topic.

2.1. What is presenteeism?

A theoretic consensus does not exist about presenteeism (Johns 2009), but many authors define it as the fact of attending work while ill. This meaning has already been accepted in an oft-cited article by Aronsson et al. (2000). We have also adopted this stance in this paper.

This complex phenomenon affects labor in many different ways. Aronsson et al. (2000) highlight that the most concerned employees are rather middle-aged, have children at home and work in sectors such as care, welfare or education, in other words, in sectors where attendance is clearly fundamental for other people. This latter point is particularly important.

Indeed, presenteeism is related to the work environment and to organizational demands, not only to individual factors. They also find that managers are particularly affected. Caverley et al. (2007) achieve the same result: they argue that team responsibility is an essential reason of presenteeism. Workload accumulation and ease of replacement are other oft-cited factors (Johns 2009). In addition to the financial issue (if the sick pay is lower than the wages), one should be aware that teamwork has an evident effect on attendance. Collective standards and perceptions influence individual decisions. For instance, if an employee knows that absence will cause a bad image of himself, or, more simply, in order to save his colleagues from an additional workload, he might decide to turn up for work despite being ill.

2.2. Manager and subordinates

Johns (2009) points out the social character of this phenomenon in terms of “culture of presenteeism”. Such culture is evident in very supportive teams, for instance (absence is avoided in sympathy with colleagues), in a context of strong competition among team members (assiduity conveys a positive image), or through the decisive influence of managers.

As we said above, several articles have already identified a correlation between the manager’s level of absence and those of the employees he supervises. For Nielsen (2008) the absence frequency of local managers significantly influences his working unit. This finding is consistent with the results of many other studies (Aronsson et al. 2000, Kristensen et al. 2006, for example).

According to us, such correlation is also true for presenteeism. Owing to this real influence held by a local manager on his subordinates, the relationship between the two protagonists should be reconsidered as a fundamental issue. If a manager is present at work, regardless of his health, a real demand is conveyed to his team. This demand is not necessarily verbalized, but appears through his behavior and creates a standard to achieve. This point is precisely the object of our article

2.3. Presenteeism and its effects

The measure of presenteeism is often related to its effects on productivity (Johns 2009). Even if it could seem to be a form of commitment, presenteeism is not necessarily beneficial to the organization. One can observe “presenteeism costs” as a corollary to an ill employee’s human errors or ineffectiveness. The implications appear to be genuine: Gosselin and Lauzier (2011), in a recent review in regard to presenteeism, emphasize its costs and extent, which could be much more considerable than for absenteeism.

Presenteeism also implies a deterioration of the health status for employees, and thus, becomes a source of further absences. In their Swedish study, Bergström et al. (2009) point out that individuals reporting, at the beginning of the investigation, that they frequently attend work being sick, have a significantly higher risk of absence 18 months as well as 3 years later. They also underline that the perceived health status clearly deteriorated at the same time.

Aronsson et al. (2000) also find a positive correlation between presenteeism and absenteeism. Another recent study, by Baker-McCleary et al. (2010), explores presenteeism through semi-structured interviews. They indicate that presenteeists are fully aware of the risks of infection or deterioration of their own health.

3. METHODS

This paper’s particularity is to measure presenteeism on the basis of a firm’s absence records. Before explaining how this methodological problem has been solved, we yield an overview of our database.

3.1. Data presentation

The database which we used contains information extracted from the social audit of 2008 of a French regional bank which we will keep anonymous. The database contains four types of information for each employee: variables linked to the individual characteristics (age, gender, children, etc.), variables linked to the post

occupied (seniority, job, hierarchical level, etc.), variables linked to the wages, and variables describing his working team. We have also introduced a variable taking into account the time spent at work: undeniably, a full time employee will have a higher chance of being absent than a part-time employee.

In this article, absence is measured by gravity (duration), i.e. by the number of business days of sickness absence. Our study only takes into account certain types of absences: we only included employees who were absent for less than seventy business days. Lengthy sick leaves were excluded from our study: this type of absence is mainly correlated to the health of the employee and does not depend on his individual decision.

Table 1 : *Descriptive statistics*

	Subordinates			Managers		
	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
Number of employees	1220	1015	2235	108	274	382
Average number of days absent	10,2	6,3	8,4	4,9	3,2	3,6
« Never absent » rate	58,4%	59,7%	53,5%	58,3%	74,1%	69,6%

3.2. Statistical processing

Analysis of absence data traditionally relies on models called count data models. The easiest one is the Poisson model which shows the probability that a given number of events occur during a time period. But the Poisson distribution does not really suit absence data: it supposes equality between “expectancy” and “variance” whereas absence data is very often over-dispersed meaning characterized by variance which is significantly higher than the expectancy.

This over-dispersion can firstly be explained by a wild diversity of absence behavior: this effect could be taken into account by a negative binomial model which does not imply equality between expectancy and variance, thanks to an additional parameter of heterogeneity (Carayol 2006). The second cause of over-dispersion is related to the definition of presenteeism. In our database, the dependent variable, namely the number of days absent, is very often a nil value (see Table 1). This wealth of nil values unbalance the distribution: they can be generated jointly by two processes (and so two types of individuals).

A first type of behavior shows an employee who doesn't hesitate to take sick leave. This attitude generates all values possible for absences, nil or not. To explain a nil value for those individuals, one may simply say that no illness occurred during the period. A second type of behavior, described as "presenteeism", consists of an employee never being absent even when it could be justified (for illness). This behavior leads the employee who is never absent to have only nil values when counting absences.

Zero-inflated count data models (a negative binomial model here) allow the analysis of these two attitudes towards absences. They estimate jointly (with iterative process) two equations. A "counting equation" that characterizes the multi-values process and an "inflation equation" that evaluates the process generating only nil values (Lambert 1992). At first, the counting equation gives an outline of a normal absence behavior. The significant variables are identified, and the absence expectancy (i.e. expected duration of absence if it actually occurs) is calculated for each individual. Next, the inflation equation allows us to characterize presenteeism behavior (through a presenteeism probability). For instance, if the first step of the model expects a large number of days absent for a given employee, and that his observed value is zero (he was actually not absent), one can assume that this individual has a presenteeist behavior.

3.3. Strategy

To analyze the relation of exemplarity between managers and employees, we proceed in two steps. Firstly, a regression is performed only for managers, the dependent variable being here the number of business days of absence for each manager. The explanatory variables which are included here are those that the literature mentions as being significant (age, gender, high responsibility, etc.). From the estimates, it is also possible to calculate presenteeism probability and absence expectancy.

Secondly, these two indicators are integrated as explanatory variables in a further regression of the same type. The dependant variable is again the number of business days of absence, but now, for each subordinate. The value and significance of these two reintroduced variables will allow us to draw conclusions about the existence of exemplarity. However, this factor alone cannot fully explain presenteeism: therefore, other individual and collective information need to be selected (see categories of variables detailed above).

4. RESULTS

The results of the second step of estimation are presented in Table 3. The counting equation (first block) outlines the firm's standard absence behavior, and the inflation equation (second block beginning by "Inf") infers presenteeism.

Table 3 : *Parameters estimation*

Parameters	Estimates	Std. Dev.	t-test	Pr(> t)
(Intercept)	0,953249	0,397281	2,40	0,0164
Manager's absence expectancy	0,075005	0,033631	2,23	0,0257
Working time	1,199290	0,243887	4,92	< 0,0001
Woman with one child	0,270264	0,141494	1,91	0,0561
Employee's age	0,034337	0,005357	6,41	< 0,0001
Manager and employee : same gender	-0,145206	0,094853	-1,53	0,1258
Average age of the team	-0,038324	0,008779	-4,37	< 0,0001
Inf (Intercept)	-3,061892	0,720481	-4,25	< 0,0001
Inf Competition between fixed term contracts	1,757274	0,862123	2,04	0,0415
Inf Bachelor's degree	0,599791	0,259562	2,31	0,0208
Inf Master degree	1,106716	0,273522	4,05	< 0,0001
Inf Intermediate hierarchical level	0,551776	0,194533	2,84	0,0046
Inf Working time	-1,973402	0,418694	-4,71	< 0,0001
Inf Employee with one child	-0,407243	0,226726	-1,80	0,0725
Inf Employee is a man	0,515463	0,189134	2,73	0,0064
Inf Employee's age	0,049945	0,010377	4,81	< 0,0001
Inf Job mobility	-1,205245	0,498246	-2,42	0,0156
Inf Proportion of men in the team	1,056233	0,420306	2,51	0,0120
Inf No wage compensation	1,113813	0,299773	3,72	0,0002
Inf Manager's presenteeism probability	1,061562	0,428094	2,48	0,0131
Alpha	2,921031	0,270870	10,78	< 0,0001

Although absenteeism is not the focus of this paper, several interesting results were found. They are consistent with other consensual results from literature (Hausknecht et al. 2008, for example): gender, age or children at home are clearly significant variables. As Nielsen (2008, p.1343), we find that low-level manager "absence has an effect on his department's absence frequency". Our main purpose was however to identify the underlying factors of presenteeism, including the influence of managers.

4.1. Presenteeism and the cost of absence

From a strictly financial point of view, an employee could consider a partial or total loss of salary during his absence as being too costly. Cost of absence becomes a factor of presenteeism. For this reason, linked to his social policy, the

employer could offer complementary financial compensation in order to assure a constant wage for his employees.

This is the case in the firm we studied, but only employees who have been with the firm for more than one year can benefit from this compensation. We have estimated the impact of full-paid sick leave on presenteeism. Our results show that employees who do not benefit from the wage compensation have a higher probability of presenteeism compared to others. This suggests that increasing the cost of absence is clearly deterrent, but even when absence is justified.

4.2. Presenteeism and the personal situation

The decision to be absent or not for an employee when an event could justify it, seems also correlated with a reflexion about the “social legitimacy” of this absence. In this way, an absence from an employee with children would be more acceptable. Our results show that having one child decreases the probability of presenteeism (this result was found for both gender). Nevertheless this trend is not relevant when the employee has two children: employees with two children (or more) aren't more absent than childless workers. A simple explanation could be given: for the first child, personal disorganisation is higher (childcare, habits...).

Gender also changes the probability of presenteeism: other things being equal, it is lower for women. We also observe that when the team is mostly composed of men, (individual) presenteeism is more important. Thus, presenteeism is carrying a perhaps more typically male image of strength (Simpson 1998).

Finally older employees seem to work more often while sick. Two reasons could be given to explain that. The first one could be linked to their weaker capability to get hired: afraid of losing their present job and not confident of finding a new one, older employees want to appear as being fully productive. As their absences are generally longer than those of other, older employees compensate by coming to work more often even if they are sick. Another explanation is linked to the moral attitude of older employees: they make it a point of honor to be always at work.

4.3. Presenteeism and commitment

The behavior of presenteeism may also be due to the employee's belief that attendance is a way to show his commitment or his “loyalty” to the firm. This loyalty could be in danger if the employee feels betrayed or worried when there are organizational or economic changes. The bank which we have been studying

has just been through some significant reorganization: three independent units have merged in one. Certain “redundancies” were unavoidable and the bank obliged some of the employees to change their roles within the organization. These changes often result in some employees being transferred within the region. Results clearly show that these transfers have an impact on presenteeism: the probability is significantly lower for employees who underwent mobility.

Another variable allows identifying employees on fixed term contract, being surrounded by other employees in the same situation. The existence of a “competition” generated by the presence within a team of several employees on fixed term contract, clearly led them to be more present in the workplace, even during illness. Companies are inclined to offer a fixed term contract before proposing a permanent one, in order to test the employee. The employees know all about this practise and are completely aware that absence will be taken into account. To give evidence of their commitment and to differentiate themselves from their “competitors”, they seem to limit their absence, even if they are ill.

4.4. Manager’s presenteeism and its effects

Now, we have to answer our main question: if the manager's behavior is characterized by a constant presence at work, even in case of sickness, will his subordinates adopt the same attitude? What was already accepted for absenteeism is confirmed here for presenteeism: the manager’s behavior has a significant influence on the presenteeism of his subordinates. His renouncement to sickness absence clearly leads his team’s members to act similarly. When comparing with other variables, the effect of exemplarity is the same as the compensation of sickness absence.

Let us take the case of a 40-years old male employee (full-time worker, intermediate hierarchical level): an average worker, one may say. If his manager’s probability of presenteeism increases from 30% to 80%, his own probability moves in the same direction (from 25% to 36%). *A priori*, this effect could appear to be limited. But exemplarity is only one reason among many others, and the impact must be multiplied by the number of team members. Actually, by his example, the manager is able to highlight the organizational demand as a strong priority and, to an extreme degree, that it cannot give way to something else, including healthcare. Management methods accepting this human dimension and its hazards could have positive long-term outcomes, but these outcomes remain hidden if measured only in terms of immediate production efficiency. However,

one can notice that by adopting simply a correct personal attitude, the manager is in position to become an "absenteeism regulator" in his team, since absenteeism is a direct consequence of a maladjusted presence behavior.

5. CONCLUSION

Presenteeism is subject to a growing interest for some companies, which are more vigilant than others to the problem of well-being at work. In the first part of this article, we recalled that presenteeism is, indeed, a fundamental dimension, owing to his effects on health and on a work-unit's organization.

The employee's individual variables are often considered when analyzing the causes of presenteeism. Actually, they give indications about the everyday decisions of individuals and the factors involved (balance between private and professional realms, health, financial issues, responsibilities, etc.). But presenteeism should also be studied in a broader approach of the work environment, which is largely oriented by collective standards and by the responsibility holder demands. The main contribution of our paper is to show how the example given by the manager can become a major reason for his subordinates to attend work while sick. Thanks to the exemplarity of his own behavior, he is able to lead employees to meet the demands of the organization, sometimes to the detriment of their health.

This statement was confirmed by highlighting the correlation between the behaviors of the two protagonists. Thus, the presenteeism of a work-unit member is clearly related to the presenteeism behavior of his manager. Through this relationship, evidence about the importance for an individual to respond the organizational constraints is provided. Even justified sickness absence, which should be devoted to healthcare, is no longer safe from being sacrificed, in order to assume professional duties. Such conclusion should help companies to adopt a long-term perspective and to be aware that sickness absence is not necessarily a negative outcome: a healthy organization requires healthy employees.

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