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Cultural Determinants of Absenteeism and Presenteeism in a Multinational Environment

The aim of this article is to present the primary cultural factors that differentiate the level of absenteeism and presenteeism in a multicultural society. The indicated factors are related to both the inner motivation of the employee and the work environment itself. The article also attempts to answer two questions that are important from the perspective of managing human resources: How does culture influence the level of absenteeism and presenteeism at work and how can absenteeism in a multicultural environment be managed? In order to achieve this aim, a review of literature covering absenteeism in a multicultural society was performed. The results of research related to the factors creating a culture of absenteeism were analyzed and an attempt has been made to determine how differences in aspects of national cultures influence it.

Keywords: absenteeism (*absencja pracownika*), presenteeism (*prezenteizm*), absence climate (*klimat absencji*), international management (*zarządzanie międzynarodowe*).

Introduction

Absenteeism and presenteeism are issues that have gained importance over recent years and provoked great public interest due to the rate of costs that they generate, both at macro- and micro-economic rates, for employers and employees alike. This is the reason for which they are studied from the point of view of multiple scientific disciplines, including psychology, sociology, economy, management, medicine, rehabilitation, law, public health, and ergonomics. However, scientific research attempting to explain how these phenomena are shaped in multicultural organizations are rarely undertaken. Both absenteeism and presenteeism are negative phenomena in the workplace. Absenteeism is an employee's deliberate or habitual absence from work. Presenteeism is the reverse phenomenon—an employee works and is present at work, despite being ill or should stay home for some other reason.

Employee absence is included among concepts whose definition as well as measurement of its general rate in organizations operating within one country is relatively easy and raises no controversy. The issue raised by the researchers is the fact that although absenteeism appears to be a homogeneous phenomenon, it is in fact not so. This primarily results from the enormous variety of reasons causing it. Moreover, an additional obstacle is the perception of absenteeism as a negative phenomenon, occasionally even dysfunctional and socially undesirable. Consequently, there exists reluctance on the part of the studied subjects to disclose the actual rate and reasons for absences.

Determinants behind absenteeism are varied and include, apart from the impossibility of presence at work (short-term and long-term illnesses, accidents at work, family commitments, and commuting difficulties), factors dependent on the organizational culture. Such factors include the style of management, procedures applied in the company, organization or group standards concerning an accepted rate of absenteeism, also referred to as the culture of absenteeism, and values important to the worker—work ethic and rate of responsibility. In this article, it is the last element of those listed differentiating the rate of absenteeism that is of main concern. This is derived from the assumption that absenteeism is a social phenomenon, determined by culture. In the international work environment, studying the cultural factors behind absenteeism and presenteeism is essential. The results of such studies ought to become a prerequisite for employers undertaking actions connected with absenteeism that would aim at optimizing rates of absenteeism and presenteeism. These include specifying current absenteeism policy, talks between immediate subordinates and their superiors after the former have returned to work, undertaking disciplinary actions, and introducing programs that would eliminate the causes of absence and excessive presence, for example.

The aim of this article is to present the main cultural factors that differentiate the level of absenteeism and presenteeism in a multicultural society. The indicated factors were related to both the inner motivation of an employee and the work environment. The article also attempts to answer two questions that are important from the perspective of managing human resources: How does culture influence the level of absenteeism and presenteeism at work and how can absenteeism in a multicultural environment be managed? While searching for answers to these questions, the results of research related to the factors creating the culture of absenteeism were analyzed and an attempt has been made to determine how differences in various aspects of national culture influence it.

In order to achieve this aim, a review of the literature concerning absenteeism in a multicultural society and in multicultural enterprises was conducted. The initial

literature review revealed very few studies specific to these settings. Therefore, further research was extended to encompass all publications in English published between 1980 and 2013 and included in the EBSCO (Academic Search Complete and Business Source Complete) host databases that are available in electronic form. The search terms used were “absenteeism” or “presenteeism” and “management.” In total, from among the 2,422 discovered publications, all those concerning medicine and the economy (in such areas as public health, labor medicine, and macroeconomics) were excluded. Ultimately, 568 titles and abstracts, and 67 full texts of articles were analyzed for the use of this article.

Cultural Determinants of Absenteeism and Presenteeism

Since the 1970s, studies have been conducted that were aimed at pointing out factors that shape the rate of absenteeism. A review of research on the rate of absenteeism made by Kaiser (1998) presents three approaches in the scientific studies—individual, psycho–social, and economic.

At first, the predominant assumption in the individual approach was that absenteeism was primarily correlated with the rate of personal job satisfaction. Motivation to be absent from work is determined internally and individually by each employee. Thus, employers should concentrate on an individual approach to every worker. The model of employee attendance, created in the late 1970s by Steers and Rhodes, and modified in further empirical studies, brought to light many relevant elements in research into employee absenteeism. Brook (1986) emphasized two major points of this model: a multi–dimensional approach to factors determining motivation to be present at work (attendance motivation) going far beyond job satisfaction itself, and differentiating voluntary and involuntary absence. Attendance motivation influences the rate of voluntary absenteeism and is shaped by such factors as area of tasks to be completed, level of stress, size of the work group, the remuneration system, work standards, and personal work ethic. The ability to attend, which determines the rate of involuntary absenteeism, depends on such variables as illness, accidents, family commitments, and problems involving transportation.

The psycho–social approach is based on social absenteeism theory that emphasizes the fact that the rate of absenteeism is primarily influenced by mutual commitments among colleagues, subordinates, and supervisors (Kaiser, 1998). These determined a culture or climate of absenteeism. Johns and Nicholson defined absence climate and culture as “the set of shared understandings about absence legitimacy in a given organization and the established ‘custom and practice’ of employee absence behavior and its control” (Johns and Nicholson, 1982:136 following Markham and

Mckee, 1995). Acceptable behavior connected with absence at work is thus varied, depending on the size of the group. Individual factors shape the decisions undertaken by an employee within limits set by this group (Kaiser, 1998). The climate of absenteeism may be different depending on the department, organization, type of work, etc. Identifying the types of social groups and understanding the directions of their influence on employee absenteeism became the crux of Nicholson and John's concept of absence climate salience. A salient absence climate determines the rate inside of a group within which there is a certain acceptance of convictions and practices of presenteeism. It is salience that decides to what extent the group members share views concerning certain norms and the degree to which individuals have the autonomy to take decisions. Groups with a high salience climate seem more homogenous. They influence the individual behavior of their members more directly and are characterized by clearer and more obvious norms concerning absenteeism (Kaiser, 1998).

There are three ways (Rentsch and Steel, 2003) in which social interactions may influence the rate of absenteeism. Firstly, absence is a very public behavior that is easily noticed. It thus becomes a subject of talk at the workplace. Secondly, if the group loses its ability to function as a consequence of absenteeism, it may influence its members so that they rationalize their rate of absenteeism. Thirdly, this climate conditions the line managers' ability to apply certain socially acceptable tools to manage absenteeism.

Gallatly (1995) studied the relationship between individual and group factors that condition employee absence. What he included in the individual factors were age, seniority, type of commitment (affective, continuance, and normative commitment) and the way that justice is perceived (distributive and procedural justice). Distributive justice (all else equal) is determined by the degree to which employees believe that their individual results (awards) as achieved in the workplace are adequate with respect to the effort they put into achieving them. High absenteeism appears in organizations where employees have a sense of injustice in the way awards are allocated. Among the group factors, Gallatly (1995) mainly included the rate of absenteeism accepted by coworkers. On the basis of achieved results, it was found that this group factor, which primarily appears in the analysis of the rate of absenteeism among coworkers, was one of the strongest factors determining the individual rate of absenteeism.

Thus, among factors influencing employee decisions concerning appearing at work or not, there is also the manner of managing absenteeism, which is culturally determined. It is pointed out that the solutions applied in organizations should be based on a policy of absenteeism that is clear to everyone and that determines

the rate of absenteeism, principles of justification, and the consequences resulting from not abiding by the rules (Beesley).

If striving to achieve lower absenteeism at all costs becomes an aim in itself and the employer uses the absenteeism management system solely for the purpose of applying disciplinary means and financial penalties (lowering remuneration, eliminating bonuses, terminating employment agreements), this results in the creation of a phenomenon that is the opposite of absenteeism, i.e. presenteeism—presence at work despite being ill. In contrast to absenteeism, presenteeism is much harder to notice. The employer is usually aware of his employee being absent from work, but hardly ever can indicate when an illness lowers employee performance. Research carried out in the United States proves that the costs of such “extra” presence are higher than those of absenteeism as a result of lowered work efficiency, a longer period of time needed to recover from an illness, and its spreading to other workers (Hemp, 2004).

In the studies carried out in several European countries among managers from the financial sector, it was shown that few people are aware of their cultural values until they are threatened by some culture from outside. Every culture emphasizes its basic expectations concerning what employers and employees may or may not expect of each other. Performing in-depth analyses of values presented by employees and managers of different cultures is of key importance if certain management programs in international companies are to be successful (Segalla, Fischer, and Sandner, 2000).

Absenteeism: An International Study

Carrying out analyses concerning absenteeism on an international scale is very difficult. It is for this reason that this subject is undertaken relatively rarely in scientific publications. In some countries, data on the rate of absenteeism can hardly be obtained, whereas in other countries data are random and may come from various sources, depending on the system of data collection applied in the given country.

An additional obstacle to carrying out international studies is the different definitions and measures. In the OECD report, it is emphasized that absenteeism is defined differently in almost every country and that there is no unification in information sources concerning absenteeism (OECD, 2007). As can be seen from studies carried out by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, the average rate of absenteeism noted in European countries ranges between 3% and 6% of working time and costs are evaluated around 2.5% of gross national income (Eurofound, 2010). Differences in rates of absenteeism

observed nationally result mainly from differences in the structure of the working population, both sex and age. The rate of absenteeism is also highly dependent on legal regulations and the economic and social situation.

Three groups may be distinguished among factors differentiating the rate of absenteeism in international analyses:

- The nature of the social security system – the more extensive the system of benefits and the higher the social security, the higher the absenteeism (Irvine, 2011);
- Unemployment rates – the higher the rate, the lower the rate of sick leave, where during redundancies it is always those most frequently absent from work who lose their jobs, and additionally, fear of losing a job limits the instances of sick leave (Kaiser, 1998);
- Working habits created by cultural values characteristic for a given country (Kaiser, 1998).

A representative survey carried out by the OECD (2007) looking at the rate of absenteeism showed significant differences between individual countries. The highest rate of absenteeism occurs in countries such as Sweden, Norway, Finland, the Czech Republic, Spain, and Belgium, whereas the lowest occurs in the United States, Slovakia, Poland, Ireland, and Hungary.

In the majority of studies, it was confirmed that absenteeism differs according to sex (Eurofound, 2010). Women are on sick leave more frequently. However, the OECD (2007) studies point out countries where these differences are relatively high (Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and Slovakia) as well as countries where the rate of absenteeism for women and men is almost equal (Great Britain, Germany, Austria, Canada, Portugal, Italy, and Poland). According to the authors of studies into absenteeism differentiation according to sex (Beblo and Ortlieb, 2012), these differences result primarily from cultural conditioning shaping the combination of social roles within the household and professional duties of women and men, and from the fact that men and women may react in a similar or different way to the regulations introduced by employers concerning lowering remuneration, threat of being made redundant, lower interim evaluation, and social pressure.

In studies (Cohen and Kirchmeyer, 2005) carried out among nurses of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian origin working in Israeli hospitals, the influence of national and religious culture on decisions concerning absenteeism was clear. There was another rate of absenteeism among women with similar demographic characteristics—the same age, the same number of children, the same family status, the same organization, and type of position held. On the other hand, Scheridan (2004) draws attention to cultural factors shaping the level of absenteeism among men, pointing

out the commonly held idea that illness is a sign of weakness and men ought to work long hours and never use sick leave.

The most frequent causes of absenteeism among men are health problems. However, in international comparisons, especially in a situation where there are people of different nationalities working in one place, particular attention is paid to the non-medical factors that influence an employee's decision whether to come to work or not. There are differences observed at the level of an illness justifying the absence and in the actions undertaken by employers who encourage presenteeism. In this latter case, two contrary approaches may be distinguished in Europe at both the level of national policies and individual enterprises. The first one is based on promoting health and well-being in the workplace (this concerns such countries as Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and Norway). In the other approach, the emphasis is mostly put on the control of costs and applying tools that discipline employees and encourage them to come to work (Eurofound, 2010).

These two distinct approaches to the management of absenteeism are also seen in the way in which research problems concerning absenteeism are determined and also depend on the country where studies were carried out. In Scandinavian countries, such as Finland, Denmark, or Sweden, studies concentrate mostly on the level to which the absenteeism rate is influenced by such factors as employee engagement in the process of organizational changes (Baltzer, Westerlund, Backhans, and Melinder, 2011; Böckerman, Bryson, and Ilmakunnas, 2012; Soane, Shantz, Alfes, Truss, Rees, and Gatenby, 2013), applying appropriate motivators that create a high level of engagement (Thulesius and Grahn, 2007; Böckerman, Bryson, and Ilmakunnas, 2012), the level of employee satisfaction with psycho-social aspects of work (Rugulies, Christensen, Borritz, Villadsen, Bultmann, and Kristensen 2007; Munch-Hansen, Wieclaw, Agerbo, Westergaard-Nielsen, and Bonde, 2008; Davey, Cummings, Newburn-Cook, and Lo, 2009), the employer's investments in improving working conditions (Virtanen, Nakari, Ahonen, Vahtera, and Pentti, 2000; Nygaard, Arola, Siukola, Savinainen, Luukkaala, Taskinen, and Virtanen, 2005; Böckerman, and Ilmakunnas, 2008), and features of the performed work and the level of support obtained from coworkers and superiors (Vaananen, Toppinen-Tanner, Kalimo, Mutanen, Vahtera, and Peiro 2003). What is being studied is the correlation between long-term absence and mobbing at the workplace (Ortega, Christensen, Hogh, Rugulies, and Borg, 2011) as well as the influence exerted by the sense of justice and imbalance between the employee's effort and the reward that the employee is given for that effort (Head, Kivimäki, Siegrist, Ferrie, Vahtera, Shipley, and Marmot, 2007). Employer actions aimed at raising the level of respect and recognition sensed by the employee, security at work, and the possibility of development

lead to lowering the rate of absenteeism (Head, Kivimäki, Siegrist, Ferrie, Vahtera, Shipley, and Marmot, 2007).

However, the authors emphasize that the obtained results differ significantly from others described in literature that, in their opinion, may stem from the specific Nordic model of working relationships, which are based on cooperation and trust between a worker and an employer, not on a conflict between antagonistic parties to the contract work (Böckerman, Bryson, and Ilmakunnas, 2012). In studies carried out in France, it was noticed that the employer's approach to the issue of absenteeism depends on the applied managerial methods (Lanfranchi and Treble, 2010). In companies using task forces, disciplinary solutions are used more rarely (e.g. lowering remuneration) than in companies using, for instance, a method called just-in-time. There are also published results of studies that prove that absenteeism is definitely a more complex problem. The authors of these publications warn against a simple translation of results obtained in one country to another (Hoxsey, 2010).

On the other hand, in countries where absenteeism management is dominated by tools that discipline employees, researchers point out the outcome of applying such tools (Ivancevich, 1985; Balchin J. and Wooden M. 1995; Munir, Yarker, and Haslam, 2008; Hassink and Koning, 2009; Taylor, Cunningham, Newsome, and Scholarios, 2010; Gajdzik, 2014). For example, studies carried out in Japan show that in Japanese enterprises, it is rather difficult to measure the level of absenteeism due to the fact that employees commonly use paid annual leave even when they are seriously ill (Ishizaki, Kawakami, Honda, Nakagawa, Morikawa, and Yamada, 2006). In countries applying disciplinary measures to their employees who use sick leave, studies carried out (Munir, Yarker, Haslam, 2008) often present the idea that strict and rigid attendance management may have a harmful effect on the work of certain groups of workers and, paradoxically, may increase the rate of absenteeism or may cause excessive presence at work (presenteeism). Nevertheless, the dominant theme of work is tools allowing the costs of absenteeism and credibility of the applied indexes of absenteeism to be measured (Stone and Conlon, 1988; Harvey and Nicholson, 1993; Steel, 2003). It seems that employers, often driven by the wish to limit the high costs incurred due to employee absence, aim at achieving a state in which the absenteeism index is zero. This desire to lower absenteeism at all costs becomes an aim in itself and the employer brings the system of managing absenteeism solely down to applying disciplinary measures and financial penalties (lowering remuneration, eliminating bonuses, and terminating employment agreements).

Summary

Every employer must calculate the risk of absenteeism caused by an illness into his business risk. Research into literature showed that among the reasons of absenteeism, apart from the state of health that is independent of a person's place of work, there are also cultural factors listed, connected with values that are socially seen as positive or negative. The style of management is important, as are procedures implemented in the company, organization or group norms concerning the level of accepted absence, called the culture of absenteeism, and values important to the employee—work ethic and level of responsibility.

The studied outcome of the research showed that, depending on country, researchers pay attention to different issues connected with absenteeism. They are also often unable to confirm results obtained in other countries. In an international work environment, studying the cultural factors of absenteeism is of great importance. The results of such studies should become a prerequisite to the actions undertaken by employers when they manage absenteeism, the aim of which is to optimize the rate of absenteeism and presenteeism.

Applying tools in managing absenteeism that are inadequate as far as employee expectations are concerned may lead to dysfunction in the field of managing human resources—work overloading, inadequate remuneration, bad atmosphere at work, no flexibility and openness in building up rapport with employees, the threat of redundancy. The increasing rate of absenteeism in international companies may also be a source of information about occurring irregularities. It seems that a comprehensive system for managing absenteeism present in a company that is based on a talk with the worker following an absence should be aimed at understanding the real causes of this phenomenon, not only the formal ones. This may help not only to limit the costs directly connected with absenteeism, but also to diagnose hidden problems signaled by employees through their increased absenteeism.

Errors occurring in managing absenteeism in a multinational environment result from, among other things, an instrumental approach to human resource management tools. This may manifest itself in applying disciplinary measures in cultures focused on cooperation, communication, and improvement in the workplace, or tools improving the atmosphere in the workplace and increasing employee engagement in cultures focused on rivalry. This may result either in increased absenteeism, when employees find this way of waiting out the difficult situations at work best, or in appearing at work at the expense of their own or others' health. In both cases the employer loses an opportunity to recognize and solve the actual problem.

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Kulturowe uwarunkowania absencji i prezenteizmu w środowisku wielonarodowym

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie czynników kulturowych, które różnicują poziom absencji i prezenteizmu w środowisku wielonarodowym. W artykule starano się znaleźć odpowiedź na dwa pytania: jak kultura wpływa na poziom absencji i prezenteizmu w pracy oraz jak zarządzać absencją w środowisku wielokulturowym. Szukając odpowiedzi na te pytania, dokonano przeglądu literatury na temat absencji w środowisku wielokulturowym i w przedsiębiorstwach międzynarodowych oraz czynników tworzących kulturę nieobecności.

Wyniki badań pokazały, że w zależności od kraju, naukowcy zwracają uwagę na inne problemy związane z absencją w pracy, również często nie udaje się potwierdzić wy-

ników uzyskanych w badaniach prowadzonych w innych krajach. Na zróżnicowanie poziomu absencji wpływ mają nawyki pracownicze ukształtowane wartościami kulturowymi charakterystycznymi dla danego kraju. Stąd też można powiedzieć, że absencja jest zjawiskiem społecznym zdeterminowanym kulturowo. W międzynarodowym środowisku pracy badanie czynników kulturowych absencji i prezenteizmu ma więc duże znaczenie. Wyniki takich badań powinny stanowić przesłanki podejmowanych przez pracodawców działań związanych z optymalizacją rozmiarów absencji i prezenteizmu, uwzględniających zróżnicowanie kulturowe pracowników.

Słowa kluczowe: absencja pracownicza, prezenteizm, klimat absencji, zarządzanie międzynarodowe

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