

Fit, Misfit and Short-Term Absenteeism

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This paper offers a brief literature review on fit and short term absenteeism in the workplace; it then offers proposals for further studies on the subject. Thank you for taking the time and trouble to read it. I welcome comments, questions and critique.

The CBI claim during 2007 [latest figures available] sickness absence in the UK cost the economy £19.9 billion (Leaker 2008); the latest CIPD absence report (CIPD 2009 p 12) states 69% of absence can be accounted for by absences up to and including seven days, with the remainder being evenly split between absences of eight days to four weeks and four weeks and longer. Due to inherently different causes between short and long term absence, e.g. heart attack for long term and a cold for short term (CIPD 2009), and with long term absences often being suitably medically supported, research is intended to concentrate on short term absence only.

In an attempt to keep in line with prior research on absence with a similar approach, Blau and Boal's (1987) four taxonomy model will be used, medical, normative, calculative and career enhancing. Barham and Begum (2005 p 157) in their report for the office of national statistics claim "most employers believe the majority of reported sickness absence is genuine; however, they also offer findings from the CIPD who claim "20% of absence is not genuine" (2005 p 157). This report is not investigating whether absence is genuine or not, as this is too subjective an issue, this report is interested in any absence, of a short term nature unrelated to annual leave.

Causes of short-term absence vary considerably in both reasons given, and research approaches; the CIPD offer minor illness and musculoskeletal injuries as the prime cited causes; they offer no possible alternative reasons for absence, e.g. commitment or attitude, fit or misfit. Research in Dutch call centres by Schalk and van Rijckevorsel (2007) offer contract characteristics and workplace attitudes as main causes of absence [not reported solely on short-term absence], Gellatly's (1995) research in a Canadian hospital offered social norms and affective commitment. Rhodes and Steers' (1990) model, referred to and referenced by myriad researchers on the subject of absence, offer absence is influenced by a number of facets, ranging from job situation and personal characteristics to pressures to attend and ability to attend, expanded upon by Burton, Lee and Holtom (2002) where they concur and expand on Rhodes and Steers; ability to attend and motivation to attend are relative factors determining absence, namely, ability to attend is directly linked to absence due to family issues, and motivation to attend is linked to absence *allegedly* due to illness; [allegedly has been highlighted to infer findings of other research].

Somers (1995) research, based in a USA hospital identified affective commitment, defined by Mowday, Steers and Porter (1982) in Gellatly (1995) as "acceptance of values and by willingness to remain in organisation", as the sole predictor of absenteeism (and turnover). Randall (1990) in Somers (1995) claims organisational commitment is not a predictor of

absenteeism. In addition to Somers' work, Wegge et al (2007) claim work attitudes are important predictors of absenteeism; their research investigated correlations between job involvement and job satisfaction.

Many different aspects exist on the subject of fit, namely, P-O, P-G, P-V, P-S, P-E, P-P and P-J; all seemingly offering various implications with regards outcomes, job satisfaction, job involvement, motivation etc, however, little research exists that directly compares which aspect of fit or which combinations of fit have the biggest influence on absenteeism in the workplace; the majority of research links consequences of fit with absence, rather than the antecedent of these consequences.

In addition to simply looking at fit or a variant of fit, should short-term absence be investigated using a complementary or supplementary or combination of both approach: Rhodes and Steer's (1990) model clearly distinguishes between needs (supplementary) and values (complementary), they also claim job involvement and job satisfaction as determinants, as does Nicholson's (1977) model cited in Rhodes and Steers (1990 p 44), however, Popp and Belohlav (1982) in Rhodes and Steers (1990 p 35) claim overall satisfaction is a predictor of absence frequency (relevant to short term absence).

Fit has a multitude of research available, P-O fit can be found in Ng and Sarris (2009), Valentine, Godkin and Lucero (2002), Schneider (1987), Kristof (1996), Chatman (1989) and Amos and Weathington (2008). Research linking multiple fit perspectives can be found in Bowen, Leford and Nathan (1991) P-O and P-J, Carless (2005) P-J & P-O and Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman and Johnson (2005) P-O & P-J. P-E fit can be located in Cable and Edwards (2004); value congruence has been researched by Ucanok (2008) and research by Carless (2005) concentrated on P-J fit, however, they all concentrate solely on fit; little if any of the research looks at misfit as a separate entity or causal effect of short-term unauthorised absence.

As discussed above, a plethora of research exists on absenteeism; however, the majority of practitioner research concentrates on personal and situational characteristics to predict absenteeism, e.g. Leaker (2009) offers data inferring age, gender, race, plus sector and tenure etc, with the research leading towards a reactive approach to absence management. Research which looks at absence from an attitudinal perspective includes Gellatly (1995) who researched justice, tenure and commitment as predictors and Van Vianen, Nijstad & Voskuil (2008) researched P-E fit as a predictor of turnover (often directly linked to absence), Cassidy and Sutherland (2008) investigated absence and turnover with commitment and impact of the operations manager, whilst Deery, Erwin, Iverson and Ambrose (1995) researched the influences of motivation, routinization of work and supervisory support. A slightly different approach was taken by Mowday and Spencer (1981) who investigated influence of task and personality characteristics, whilst Prottas (2007) explored perceived behavioural integrity.

Whilst all the above have credence, is now the time when absenteeism is investigated via fit/misfit theory? Could absence be researched in the same vein as Herzberg's hygiene theory, whereby fit leads to attendance, but an absence of fit does not lead to absenteeism (apologies for the lexical knots) and vice versa for misfit? In other words, fit is not connected to absence, but misfit is.

Finding a correlation between misfit and absence could be researched whereby absence is analysed via the forms of calculative, normative, career enhancing and medical (Blau &

Boal's 1987 taxonomy) categories, in that employees level of fit or misfit is measured against the type/frequency of absence.

Linking all the above together, the following hypotheses are offered.

- H1: Misfit leads to absenteeism above that acceptable within any given organisation (this will negate absence management measures and absence norms within any given organisation).*
- H2: Employees moving towards misfit (low fit?) will result in normative absenteeism, followed by career enhancing absenteeism.*
- H3: Employees classified as misfits will result in calculative absenteeism followed by career enhancing absenteeism.*
- H4: Calculative absence is greater amongst misfits than people with low fit.*

Comment

I would welcome comments or questions on any aspect of the above report. I have just started a PhD on the subject of misfit and absenteeism and would also welcome views and advice as to the precise direction the research should/could follow. Views and comments are particularly welcome and sought from individuals involved in the study of misfit.

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