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Uncertified absence from work and the Big Five: An examination of absence records and future absence intentions

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Abstract

Uncertified absence from work has traditionally been difficult to link to personality. The present paper argues that personality is best conceptualized as influencing an individual's intention to be absent from work because of reasons that are within their control. This was investigated in an employed community sample of 128 individuals. These individuals used a self-report measure to express their future intentions to be absent from work as a result of several reasons. These reasons for absence were categorized as "being absent because of external pressure or commitment" (ABCo) and "being absence by choice" (ABCh). The Big Five personality factors were found to be unrelated to objective uncertified absence records and unrelated to ABCo. Three of the Big Five were related to ABCh. Agreeableness was negatively related to ABCh whereas Extraversion and Openness demonstrated a positive correlation. It was concluded that the results should be viewed tentatively, but that this study may provide a useful framework for conceptualizing the association of personality with uncertified absence.

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Keywords: Absence; Absence intentions; Big Five; Extraversion; Agreeableness; Openness; Greek Big Five measure

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1. Introduction

When does personality affect whether someone is absent from work? This question has traditionally been difficult to answer for three reasons. First, until the early 1990s, researchers tended to disagree about how the personality side of the relationship should be assessed. Second, absence is influenced by situational and organizational factors outside of the influence of dispositions, meaning that effects are likely to be confounded. Third, the autonomy of workers to decide to be absent from work is limited to only a small proportion of absence antecedents. This article argues that personality is best conceptualized as influencing an individual's intention about whether he or she will not turn up for work because of reasons within their own control.

1.1. *Absence and personality*

There is a recent trend in organizational research to study absenteeism from a “dispositional point of view”, meaning that enduring personality traits explain absenteeism's stability over time and across situations (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998). Earlier studies have uncovered that extraverts (Cooper & Payne, 1967; Judge, Martocchio, & Thoresen, 1997) and employees with high levels of emotional instability, anxiety and aggression (Bernardin, 1977; Ferris, Youngblood, & Yates, 1985; Porter & Steers, 1973) are more frequent absentees, whereas employees with strong self-discipline and a self-reported need for achievement are less likely to be absent (Bernardin, 1977; Modway & Spencer, 1981). Although all these early studies seem to be in favor of the role of personality in relation to absenteeism, studies prior to around 1990 were difficult to examine jointly because there was no common framework for assessing personality. The emergence of the Five Factor Model provided a common framework for assessing the association of personality and organizational criteria. The generally agreed Big Five factors are: (a) extraversion, (b) agreeableness, (c) conscientiousness, (d) emotional stability, and (e) openness to experience. These five factors emerged from research based on both lexical (Goldberg, 1990) and questionnaire approaches to personality assessment (e.g. Costa & McCrae, 1992). The Big Five have been researched extensively, are found to subsume many other personality measures (e.g. Conley, 1985; Costa & McCrae, 1988; McCrae & Costa, 1985, 1987, 1989), and are found in studies in different cultures (Garcia, Aluja, & Garcia, 2004; Noller, Law, & Comrey, 1987).

Studies examining the links between the Five-Factor Model and employee absence have provided mixed evidence. Judge et al. (1997) found that conscientiousness and extraversion predicted absence, suggesting that the sociable nature of extraverts could have lead them to view the workplace as another place to socialize or as an obstacle to spending time with friends, whereas the contrary was found for conscientious employees. Intuitively, the strong self-control (Costa & McCrae, 1992) of employees high on conscientiousness and their achievement-oriented nature, may lead them to avoid being absent (Digman & Takemoto-Chock, 1981). However, Judge et al.'s (1997) expectation that emotionally unstable employees would be absent more frequently was not supported. Additionally, a recent meta-analysis, reviewing the relationship of the Big Five and counterproductive behaviors (Salgado, 2002) found no relationship between any factor of the Big Five and absenteeism.

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