Employee Absenteeism, Organizational Commitment, and Job Satisfaction: Another Look

Abraham Sagie

School of Business Administration, Bar-Ilan University, 52900, Ramat Gan, Israel

Previous research suggested weak relations between work attitudes and indirect measures of employee absenteeism (e.g., frequency and time-lost; Hackett, 1989). In the present study, absences were regarded as voluntary or involuntary based on the reasons provided by the employees or supervisors. It was hypothesized that voluntary as opposed to involuntary absenteeism can be predicted by organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and their interactive effect. Intention to quit was expected to predict voluntary absenteeism as well. Subjects were 140 clerks in an Israeli municipality (average age was 41). Moderated multiple regression analyses of attitudes and objective (personnel records) or subjective (self-reported) absence data yielded support for the first hypothesis. Nonetheless, the intention to quit was not significantly related to either type of absence. Theoretical and methodological considerations were discussed and implications for continued research were outlined. © 1998 Academic Press

Employee absenteeism is a costly personnel problem attracting the attention of theoreticians and practitioners alike (Hackett, 1989). Considerable research on this topic has concerned the links between absence from work and work-related attitudes such as organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Hanisch and Hulin (1991) theorized that absenteeism and other withdrawal behaviors (e.g., lateness, turnover) reflect ''invisible'' attitudes such as job dissatisfaction, low level of organizational commitment, or an intention to quit. According to this view, an employee who is absent from work is consciously or unconsciously expressing negative attachment to the organization. Furthermore, for a lowly committed or dissatisfied employee, absence can have a positive role (Rosse & Miller, 1984). It may provide him or her an opportunity to avoid the negative emotions associated with work. Conversely, employees who are highly satisfied with their jobs or strongly committed to the organization will avoid withdrawal behaviors and maintain continued attachment to work (Blau & Boal, 1987).

Continuing with this line of reasoning, several causal models (Brooke & Price, 1989; Gellatly, 1995; Hanisch and Hulin, 1991; Steers & Rhodes, 1978) have included work-related attitudes and intentions among the determinants of absence behavior. Accordingly, higher organizational commitment or job satisfaction and a lower desire to quit imply lower absence rates. Yet research spanning almost half a century has shown little evidence that a meaningful and consistent attitude–absenteeism relation does exist (Hackett, 1989; Hackett & Guion, 1985; Mayer & Schoorman, 1992; Randall, 1990; Terborg, Lee, Smith, Davis, & Turbin, 1982). Unlike other withdrawal behaviors that have shown to be at least moderately related to job satisfaction or organizational commitment (Koslowsky, Sagie, Krausz, & Dolman, 1997; Lee, Ashford, Walsh, & Mowday, 1992; Randall, 1990), poorer correlations were observed between absenteeism and work attitudes.

Many researchers (cf. Clegg, 1983; Adler & Golan, 1981; Johns, 1994a,b) have proposed that the specific methods used for measuring absence may influence the magnitude of its relations with work-related attitudes. They suggested that the weak empirical relations are more a function of the poor absence measurement than of substantive causes. In light of this proposition, the aim of the present study was to use more efficient measures of absence in order to reassess these relations. Relevant classifications of absence behaviors and their measures are described below.

Measurement of Absence

March and Simon (1958) have distinguished between two basic types of absences: involuntary (e.g., certified sickness, funeral attendance) and voluntary (e.g., vacation, uncertified sickness). Voluntary absences are under the direct control of the employee and are frequently utilized for personal aims such as testing the market for alternative employment prospects (Miller, 1981). Conversely, involuntary absences are beyond the employee's immediate control. Hence, voluntary rather than involuntary absences from work may reflect job dissatisfaction and lack of commitment to the organization. Consequently, one may expect that work attitudes will be more negatively related to voluntary absence than to involuntary absence.

Yet, the research has yielded conflicting results regarding this hypothesis. Although several supporting results were reported (Dwyer & Ganster, 1991; Mathieu & Kohler, 1990a; Scott & Taylor, 1985; Zaccaro & Collins, 1988), the final conclusion of two comprehensive reviews of the literature was that ''little variation in reported correlations between absence and satisfaction can be attributed to the type of absence measure used, whether voluntary or involuntary'' (Hackett & Guion, 1985, p. 355; Hackett, 1989). Similar results were achieved with regard to organizational commitment. The relation between commitment and voluntary absence was not higher than the respective commitment–involuntary absence relation (Randall, 1990).

In this study, I proposed that better measurement of both voluntary and