

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MINIMISING EMPLOYEE ABSENCES BASED ON THE ANALYSIS OF ABSENTEEISM IN A GIVEN ENTERPRISE

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Purpose: The aim of this paper is to analyse employee absences in a selected enterprise and suggest methods or solutions helping to determine the causes of absenteeism.

Design/methodology/approach: Some actions intended to minimize the problem of employee absences are described. The methods of interviews, observations, and data and document reviews are applied. The impact of frequent employee absenteeism on social relations in a selected production enterprise is examined.

Findings: The results confirm the levels of sudden absences are minimum in social groups characterized by strong cooperation and transparent communication among colleagues and direct supervisors.

Research limitations/implications: The topic of absenteeism is a very sensitive topic. Statistical data was easy to obtain. However, during direct interviews with employees, there were people who did not want to talk and did not want to fill out surveys, which constituted minor limitations.

Practical implications: The tools and methods suggested in this study provide some exceptionally useful knowledge to employers, helpful with identifying the existence and background of employee absenteeism in their organizations.

Oryginality/value: Some selected practical and optimum methods of examining employee absences are presented that help to identify the causes of employee absenteeism.

Keywords: human capital management, absence management, employee absenteeism, employee.

Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Human capital management has now become a strategic part of every organization's policy (Juchnowicz, 2010). The dynamic job market, shortages of specialist and production personnel, and heavy competition have compelled employers to contend with one another at creating progressive, modern, as well as more productive work environments (Zajac, 2014). In this context, they implement the processes of employee monitoring to take particular care of their workers and to improve the productivity of their organizations (Kozioł, Wojtowicz, 2016). Following trends in the job market is essential as well in order to continue updating strategies and manage enterprises in up-to-date and innovative ways (Arendt, Fraszyńska, 2019).

The growing rank of the personnel management process has naturally given rise to indicators assessing its effectiveness (Lachiewicz, 2010). A continuous monitoring helps managers track progress on the realization of business objectives, promptly respond to any major deviations from assumed standards, and introduce streamlining efforts (Wilczyński, 2014). All such actions are ultimately expected to allow enterprises to reach their overarching objective of becoming profitable (Łochnicka, 2015). The monitoring of employee absences is a key indicator of personnel management (Farrell, 2005). It has recently become very important to employers, since high employee absenteeism generates considerable costs both to enterprises and the state (Pecillo, 2013). The insufficient numbers of workers, absent for a variety of reasons, results in the unplanned costs of extra pay to those working overtime (Gajdzik, 2015) and greater spending on the recruitment of temporary staff (Przywojska, 2014).

From the viewpoint of employees, high overtime initially has the positive effect of boosting their domestic budgets. In the longer run, however, those constantly working in excess of monthly time standards become fatigued and frustrated, which may impair their productivity and social working conditions (Kroik, Malara). A chronic fatigue and greater responsibilities may produce demotivation and high personnel dissatisfaction. It may also result in unexpected conflicts among employees and between employees and their bosses. According to the author (Walentek, 2019) claims a reduced work satisfaction and motivation, or the lack of work and private life balance, can be expressed with more unplanned absences. Firms have recently become worried by the trend of employees becoming less loyal to their employers as attractive job offers are readily available in the market (Lewicka, 2017). A clear division emerges between those identifying with and highly committed to their workplace regardless of their firm's position and those who find it easy to switch jobs and are indifferent to the fates of their firms (Świątek-Barylska, 2013).

When exploring the sources of absenteeism, good working time management and effective reporting models are important. Employers who tend to downplay the issue of absences experience grave interferences with the operation of their businesses. Excessive absenteeism in a single period, both scheduled (e.g., holidays) and not (e.g., sickness leaves), may halt

production processes. To prevent such situations, employers must prepare appropriate action plans for emergencies (Sierpińska, 2013). It is reasonable to compare and analyze most cases of absenteeism to accurately diagnose their causes or factors affecting them. Some records of this information will become starting points for identifying and implementing actions designed to safeguard processes and minimize the additional costs of absenteeism (Badubi, 2017).

The ratio of absent days (or hours) to the nominal working days (or hours) of all employees is the most common method of measuring absences in manufacturing firms (Goetzel, 2004). It can be computed in different ways in various countries and corporations subject to diverse regulations and other conditions, of course (Egan, 2011). Regardless of the method of calculation, however, minimizing absenteeism is a key objective of organizations (Work, 1996). Examining absences on the basis of available data seems relatively easy, yet the great variety of their causes can hinder it substantially (Striker, 2013). Basic monthly data as numbers or percentages related to absence indicators give but a rough overview of a firm's situation. Employers should monitor the indicator to respond promptly to any adverse trends and introduce corrective actions (Carraro, 2021).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyse employee absences in a selected enterprise and suggest methods or solutions helping to determine the causes of absenteeism. Employers are aware a regular monitoring of absenteeism levels is of paramount importance to a proper operation of their organizations (Walton, 1985). A pragmatic approach to the issue is a major part of management. In this work, the hypothesis was put forward that a high percentage of absences is directly related to the situation and relations in a given area. This is a new approach to the topic, because employers mainly focused on finding the causes among absent employees and rarely examined this problem in a broader aspect of management.

The article provides an original perspective and suggestions on the topic of absence in a very modern, specific and simple way.

2. Material and Methods

Description of the enterprise

Employee absenteeism was studied in 2022 in a motor enterprise in south Poland, with a staff of more than 200. The firm is part of an international corporation where Human Resources Management and employee development are key parts of the strategy.

All the employees are on long-term contracts and belong to two chief groups: direct production workers, 80% of the entire population, and office staff (20%). Direct production employees work in 4 teams as part of a 3-shift system (the 1st shift: 06:00-

14:00 hours; 2nd shift: 14:00-22:00 hrs; 3rd shift: 22:00-06:00), while office staff works a single daytime shift from 8 to 4 pm. Women account for 54% and men for 46% of the workforce.

Daily absence reporting is the fundamental method of controlling working time, expressed as percentages or numbers according to need. A SAP working time system is implemented and managers are able to check the staffing of their teams on an ongoing basis.

The absence data presented and analysed here are the enterprise's proprietary material. Around 700 employees were reviewed. Employee interviews, statistical analysis, documents including correspondence with the National Insurance Company, post-absence surveys, and observations constituted the research materials.

The interviews were conducted by direct managers in cooperation with Human Resources on the first day following absences. A dedicated questionnaire was prepared to this end, so that the dialogue was professional and in compliance with Polish law. The questions to employees are listed below:

- Was your absence related to work?
- Could it be caused by factors present at work?
- Can absences be in any way prevented in future?
- What actions do you suggest to prevent absences?
- How can the employer help prevent the reasons for absences?
- How can sickness absenteeism be reduced in the company?

This paper focuses on 4 types of absences with maximum impacts on the company operation:

- ordinary sickness (affecting a given employee),
- benefits (e.g., to care for children or other family members),
- accidents (at work and on the way to work)
- sudden absences (certified or not).

Rest leaves are excluded as employers and employees normally work to schedule their dates, so that they can be planned for well in advance.

Data derived from the working time system were used in the statistical analysis. Correlations were sought between such factors affecting absenteeism as gender, age, and work experience. In search for their specific and direct causes, factors characteristic of the enterprise were analysed in depth from the perspective of employee and organisation structure. To this end, 175 anonymous surveys completed by employees after absences were reviewed and 146 individual interviews were conducted. 35 written responses from the National Insurance Company checking the reasons for employees' sickness benefits were verified in addition. Based on observations and dialogue with employees, the effectiveness of preventive campaigns organised by the employer was examined to determine their impact on the firm perception by employees and their motivation to work.

3. Results and discussion

A list of employee absences by duration in 2022 is included in Table 1. Most arise from causes named ‘ordinary own sicknesses’ (85.88%). These may be described as sensitive due to the employee’s right to the protection of sensitive health data (Nerka, 2010). Ordinary sicknesses are the source of most problems and controversies among employers, since they pay sickness benefits until the 33rd calendar day (Article 92 of the Labour Code). The obligation is assumed by the National Insurance Company only from the 34th calendar day (Striker, 2016).

Table 1.

Days of employee absences by type

Absence type	Days
Sickness	28971
Benefits	4291
Accidents	171
Non-certified absences	300

A comparative analysis of absences in the particular months was carried out (Fig. 1). They soared substantially in winter months: February – 11.12%, January – 9.60%, and December – 9.29%. The increased absenteeism during that period has been corroborated by other research (Jurek, 2021; Groenewold, 2019). Winter, with its low temperatures and adverse weather conditions, has an adverse effect on health and boosts the risk of viral and bacterial development (Lindner-Cendrowska, 2021). Prevention of cross-infections in both the work environment and private life seems difficult to control (Luyten, 2013). This has an unfortunate influence on absenteeism.

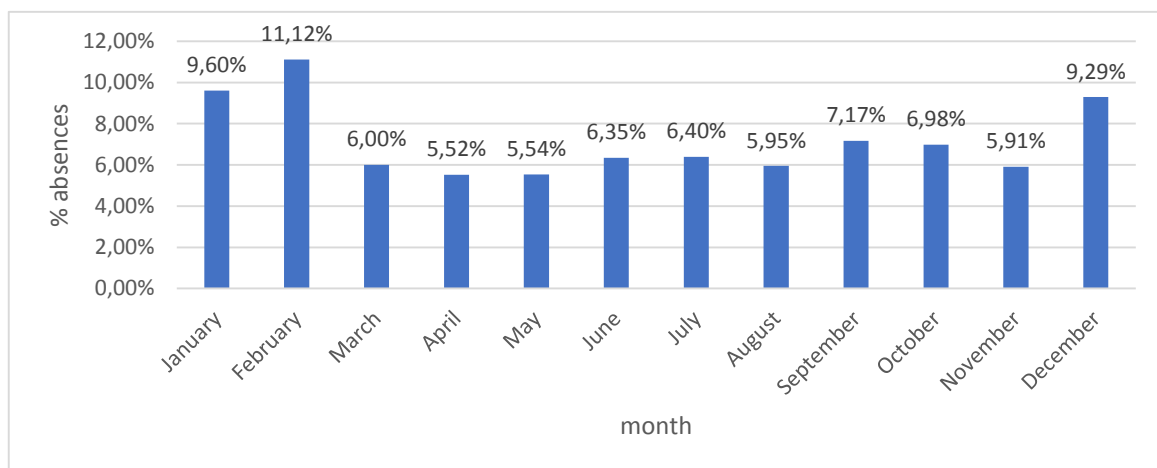


Figure 1. The percentage of employee absences in 2022.

The data in Table 2 clearly show more women than men were absent during the year. There were 33733 days of absences including 21922 days taken by females. There is a range of studies showing women are absent more than men (Jurek, 2021). The absences identified in this study can be approached from another angle, though. Namely, females represent a larger share

of employees in the firm under discussion. The results imply absences taken to care for children or family members were far more frequent than in the case of males. This ties in with the prevailing behaviour and choices. Pungello says women shoulder the bulk of caring for children or other people needing support. Females were absent a monthly average of 1768 days (65%) and males 971 days (35%).

Table 2.

The distribution of men's and women's absences in the particular months of 2022

Gender	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII
Female	2398	2507	1769	1388	1363	1631	1633	1495	1993	1816	1457	2472
Male	1155	1787	883	714	847	891	865	949	922	920	745	1133
Total days	3553	4294	2652	2102	2210	2522	2498	2444	2915	2736	2202	3605

Legend: I-XII months in a year.

Another determinant addressed was the employees' age. It is a major factor when studying employee absences as there is a sequence of stages in life that differentiate not only motivation and commitment to work but also the determination to appear at work. In addition, there are some stereotypes at work, not always fair. (Jurek, 2021) notes one of them is the belief older people take sickness leaves more often. This study denies this claim. The results suggest those aged 56-59 and above 60 seldom took sickness leaves (Fig. 2). This is aligned with the findings of (Gilga, Jurek 2022), who report similar results in this population.

Table 3.

The distribution of employees' absences in the particular months of 2022 depending on age

Age	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII
18-25	175	200	37	60	68	106	65	161	94	129	101	181
26-30	400	489	257	218	245	177	219	240	267	232	180	352
31-35	567	649	317	370	279	352	399	405	520	514	366	418
36-40	612	760	530	323	396	522	535	376	530	412	373	638
41-45	726	781	686	478	469	493	404	469	667	649	509	774
46-50	551	681	392	311	417	411	399	397	463	352	417	620
51-55	335	426	294	248	156	230	298	221	249	262	117	284
56-59	176	252	128	55	145	203	156	160	102	140	116	299
60>	11	56	11	39	35	28	23	15	23	46	23	39
Total days	3553	4294	2652	2102	2210	2522	2498	2444	2915	2736	2202	3605

Legend: I-XII months in a year.

Similarly rare absences were recorded for employees aged up to 25. The study has shown they seldom take sickness leaves. This diverges from the prevailing view of 'Generation Z'. An overwhelming majority of employers believe those born after 1995 are irresponsible and take advantage of medical leaves even for mild infections (Muster, 2020). Our research has demonstrated employees aged about 40 take ordinary medical leaves most frequently. The absence results in the diagram below correspond to the Gaussian curve, with middle age as the median. This is also due to the relatively smaller numbers of those aged below 25 and over 56 in the organization.

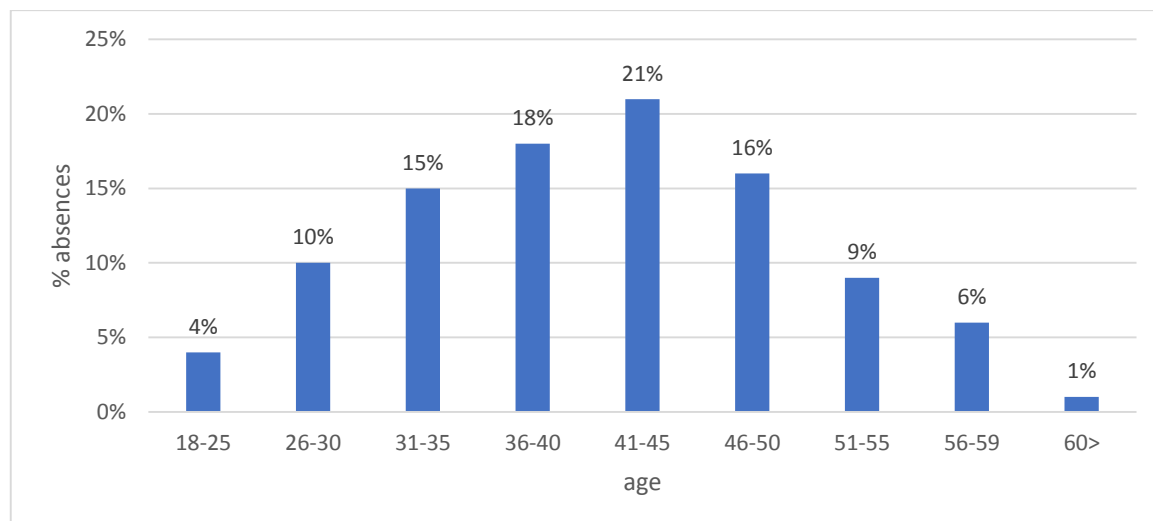


Figure 2. The percentages of employee absences depending on their age.

Years of service, closely related to productivity, were another major determinant of work absences (Batóg et al., 2002). Employees with a long work experience are convinced they are not about to suffer disciplinary consequences if they often take unreasonable and non-certified absences as employers accept more absenteeism from employees with more years of service (Borgogni et al. 2013).

The comparative analysis of statistics (Table. 4, Figure 3) upholds a strong correlation between absences and work experience. This means individuals with more than 11 years of service are more often absent (as much as 39% annually), whereas employees with less than 2 years in work account for merely 2% of the absences. The results are comparable in the age groups 'above 2-5 years' and 'above 5-8 years' (Figure 3) and total 22% and 23%, respectively.

Table 4.

The distribution of employees' absences in 2022 depending on work experience

Work experience	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII
Up to 6 months	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7 months - 2 years	12	51	59	33	44	75	74	101	70	58	66	132
2-5 years	995	1119	528	447	447	495	562	612	607	547	443	705
5-8 years	770	991	678	489	469	575	577	590	648	656	476	792
8-11 years	423	547	345	254	279	290	239	268	452	489	354	588
11 years	1353	1586	1042	879	971	1087	1046	873	1138	986	863	1388
Total	3553	4294	2652	2102	2210	2522	2498	2444	2915	2736	2202	3605

Legend: I-XII months in a year.

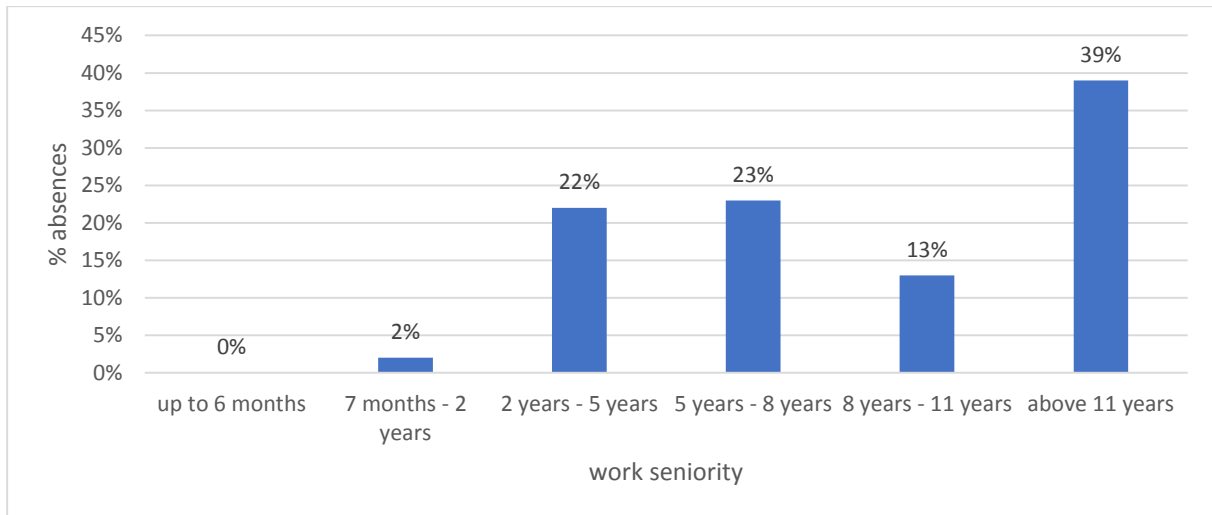


Figure 3. The percentages of employee absences depending on their work experience.

The duration of work absences is another key aspect to be examined, since frequent and brief absences greatly disturb the realization of production plans (Kłos, Nalewa, 2021). Medical leaves between 2 and 5 days were most commonly recorded in the enterprise studied (Fig. 4). This result suggests which absences should be analysed and addressed by management in the first place. In this case, the employer ought to focus on leaves taking up to 5 days (Fig. 4). It's difficult to look for their causes as they are short, therefore, the employer must react quickly.

Table 5.

The distribution of employees' absences in the particular months of 2022 depending on their duration

Absences [days]	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII
1	51	46	21	30	28	19	50	30	28	25	20	20
2-5	264	231	168	127	123	149	112	169	201	170	156	193
6-10	173	225	96	83	69	90	95	88	118	116	101	146
11-15	46	66	35	24	34	28	29	31	33	35	21	63
16-20	35	34	12	32	15	20	12	13	19	7	29	26
Above 21	1	1	24	1	25	25	32	21	22	27	1	22

Legend: I-XII months in a year.

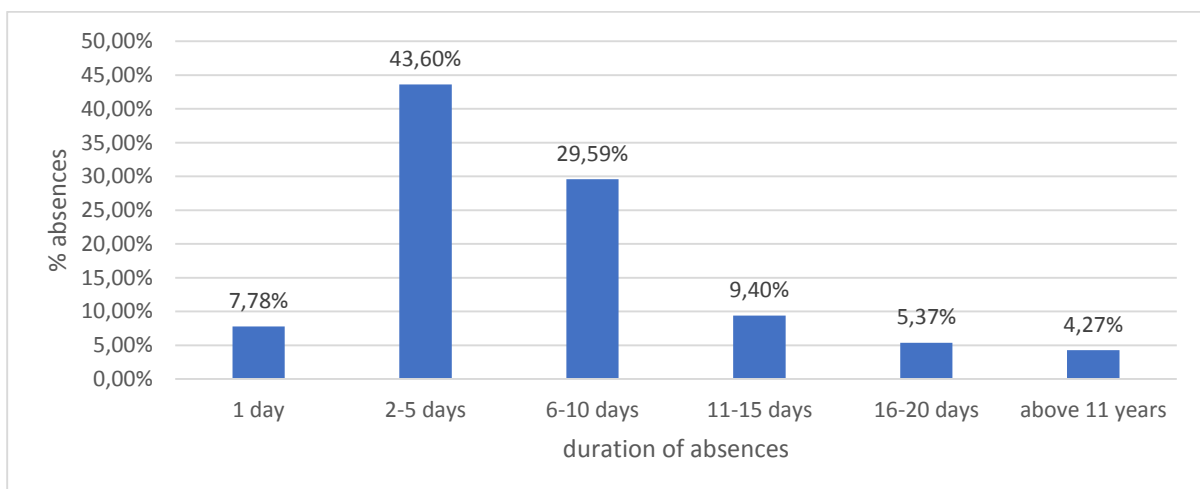


Figure 4. The percentages of employee absences depending on the duration of absences.

Some absences related to organization and management structure in the enterprise have been detected as well. Exploring the particular elements of work organization helps to define the foci of absenteeism.

To limit the scope of research and concentrate on the groups with maximum absenteeism, the results for direct production and office employees were compared (Table 6). Significant shortages of production personnel cause grave consequences to employers, such as more quality complaints, failure to produce orders or even retain clients (Kłos, Nalewa, 2021). The data for the enterprise under discussion suggest 91.25%, or 2565 days a month on average (Table 6), of all the absences are noted for production employees. The low level of absences among office staff was a result of the extensive opportunities for remote working, among other things. This solution allowed these employees to work from home even when they were not fully available or when those in their direct care required assistance. They didn't take medical leaves and remained in employment even when their availability was restricted.

Table 6.

The distribution of employees' absences in the particular months of 2022 depending on employee status

Employee status	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII
BPP	3231	4004	2435	1976	2026	2355	2273	2182	2572	2425	1994	3307
BP	322	290	217	126	184	167	225	262	343	311	208	298
Total days of absences	3553	4294	2652	2102	2210	2522	2498	2444	2915	2736	2202	3605

Legend: I-XII months in a year. BPP – direct production employees. BP – office employees.

As the percentage of absences was highest in the population of direct production employees, the analysis continued to focus on the areas where only such employees work, in order to determine the locations of maximum occurrence. The production part of the enterprise studied is divided into 8 units which form distinct organizations. Direct production employees also work in Internal Logistics and Maintenance, which are added to the analysis. The results in Figure 5 indicate two production areas of maximum absences, namely, 'Production Unit 4' and 'Production Unit 1'.

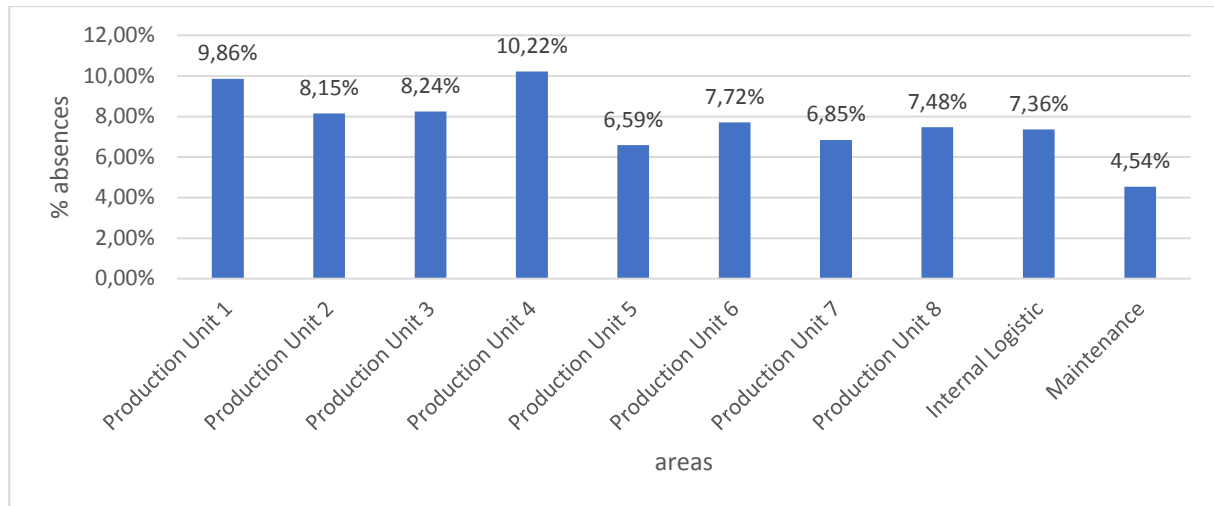


Figure 5. The percentages of employee absences divided into the areas of direct production.

Employee absences were also divided as per work schedules in the particular settlement periods. This information enables to take actions restricted to employees of specific shifts (Figure 6). The schedules include the days and hours an employee must work in a given settlement period, too.

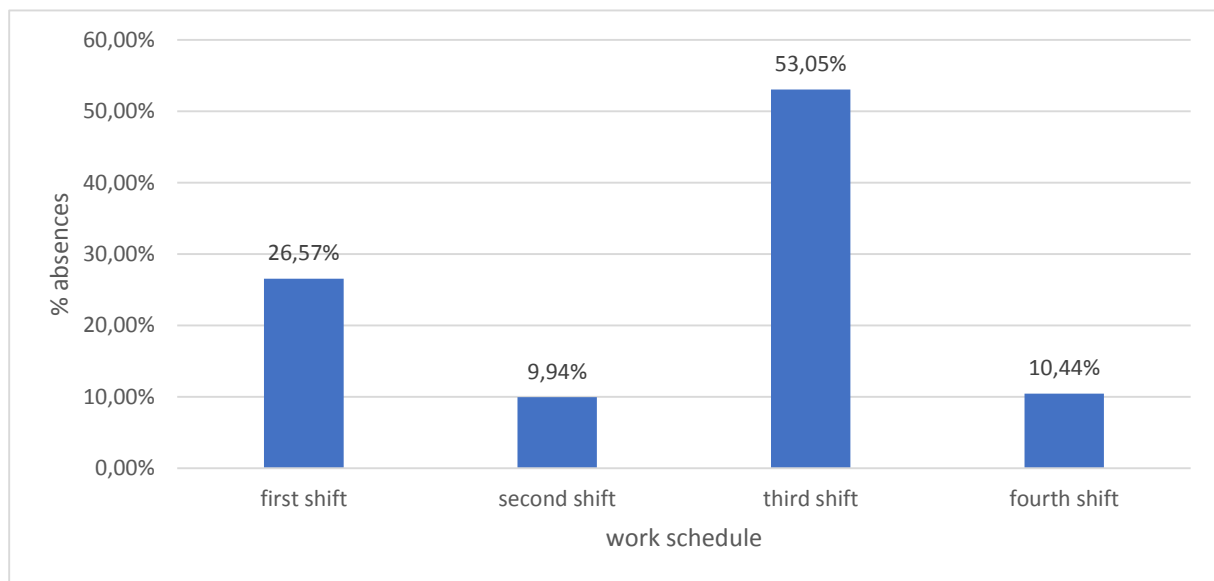


Figure 6. The percentages of employee absences versus the work schedule (shifts).

This analysis shows the third shift experienced the most absences (53%). Actions were therefore taken to determine the causes of these absences and to reduce them.

All the employees with absences were interviewed and asked to complete anonymous surveys in order to have a most realistic view of the situation. The employees identified several causes of their absences from work. They complained about high temperatures in the production area, inter alia. They pointed to bad working conditions, unacceptable from the EH&S perspective, namely, inadequate ventilation and air-conditioning. They reported their work was too hard and they suffered from back pains as a result. They additionally mentioned terms of payment, complaining against the lack of bonuses, low pay allowances, inadequate tools,

and excessive duties. They also signaled a lack of respect in their managers' treatment (Badubi, 2017).

The surveys were supplemented with direct conversations with employees, on the one hand intended to make them aware their frequent absences adversely affect the organization and their teams and to bring information about the actual causes of their absences, on the other hand. Employees were quite open about the causes persuading them to take advantage of benefits. They complained about the poor spirit in their teams and relations with managers. The following most common reasons for sudden absences were cited:

- Lack of understanding by managers, who didn't follow the principles of compromise.
- Lack of teamwork and bad relations with managers - intimidation and threats of consequences.
- Lack of an adequate and open dialogue with employees that could let them feel the necessary parts of work.
- Inadequate working conditions – overwork and risks to health.

The dialogue between the employer and employees has affirmed the relations in the organizations experiencing most absences, both within teams and with immediate supervisors, were not optimal. The employees stressed bitterly managers failed to treat them with due respect or solve day-to-day problems, managing their teams badly. Managers vented their frustration on employees, who rebel, resort to medical leaves or even quit as a result.

The interviews with employees in teams with low absence ratios suggested partner relations with managers. Mindful of letting their colleagues and supervisors down, employees minimize their absences, because they know that might affect their whole team, the realization of goals or bonus levels. This tallies with what (Mazur, 2013) has to say about well-motivated, appreciated and respected employees, who do not consciously take steps harmful to their organizations. Belonging to a group and supervisors' appreciation, just after the satisfaction of basic needs, are some key factors influencing work satisfaction (Maslow, 1998).

Conversations with direct managers and with employees from the areas of high absence percentages led to the suggestion of additionally verifying reasons for some medical certificates issued. In the circumstances, the employer requested the National Insurance Company in writing to check whether the insured used their benefits according to purpose. The responses gave no reason to find any formally unfair usage of sickness benefits in 2022. According to (Mędrala, 2021), such a procedure remains very popular and used by employers as an official path.

Preventive campaigns staged by the employer were the final element to be addressed. A range of studies affirm such actions have beneficial impacts on employees' health, which in turn translates into their reduced absences (Kukawska, 2022). Such an action has been introduced to the business in question as well. In 2022, the employer organized two major campaigns promoting health prevention, called 'Pink October' and 'Movember'. The former involved breast cancer prevention in women, the latter, prostate cancer prevention in men.

Employees were happy to take part in various competitions relating to health, great numbers attended seminars with physicians, and have their pictures taken in special balloon frames. Our findings are in line with those reported by Namysłow et al. (2012), who state the promotion of a healthy lifestyle and preventive medical testing improves work satisfaction and productivity, thus helping to cut the costs of absenteeism. Similar issues are addressed by Hildt (2013), who reports prevention promoted by enterprises will in the long run have a positive influence on absence levels, commitment to work, and employees' productivity.

4. Conclusion

Our results show the issue of absences should be approached from a broader perspective of the entire management system, not mere numbers and statistics. An effective monitoring and control of absence frequency may assist with identifying all factors that affect absenteeism. A clear conclusion is the existence of a very strong correlation between the level of absences and relations between employees and their supervisors in an enterprise.

Any negative levels of the indicators, thus of absenteeism, are closely related to HR policies in an enterprise. It is reasonable, therefore, to introduce actions that might help to reduce the percentages of employee absences. Actions with impact on a whole organization are recommended, since disciplinary actions targeted at individual employees abusing leaves don't have any significant effect on absenteeism in an entire undertaking. Determining the causes of absences allows employers to prepare strategies to cut personnel absenteeism and thus improve a firm's performance.

The authors believe absences in enterprises should be studied over 5 main stages:

1. Defining the chief absence types with crucial impacts on enterprise operation.
2. The collection and monitoring of monthly data classified by gender, age, work experience, and duration of employee absences to arrive at the main sources of the problem.
3. Focus on factors connected to work organization itself to find and determine specific areas and employee groups showing maximum absence levels.
4. In-depth observations and detailed interviews with employees after they return to work.
5. Requesting employees to complete anonymous surveys that would imply the causes of their absences.

Founding corporate culture on strong values should be a major part of human resources policy. Mutual respect, genuine care for employees, team work, and cooperation should be promoted at all the levels of an organization. This will substantially improve employee loyalty and commitment to their firm, thus minimizing their negative behavior in the enterprise. To counter the high levels of absenteeism, therefore, employers should monitor and foster a good atmosphere and relations among employees.

It should also be added that while investigating the problem, certain limitations were observed that should be taken into account. Limitations may include looking for the sources of the problem, that employees who are often absent are not entirely open to talking about the real reasons. They are afraid to openly speak not good of their superiors or what is really happening in the team. Employers also have boundaries in checking the accuracy of information provided anonymously by employees. That's why employers should analyze them wisely and approach negative opinions carefully. Therefore, it is important to build relationships with employees on transparent and honest rules from the beginning. This helps in solving most problems in the company.

This study has demonstrated employers spend a lot of time analyzing the issue of absences, focusing on statistics, and adopting a variety of perspectives. These analyses and the diverse methods cannot be questioned as they are highly reasonable in some cases. The question should be posed, however, are not the fundamentals of management and motivation forgotten among all that activity? Where enterprises take a sufficiently good care of their employees in different dimensions, the commitment to business grows and employees are not compelled to make extreme decisions like escaping into absenteeism or even quitting their jobs.

The article complements the existing literature and can be an excellent guide in finding the causes of absenteeism in any company.

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