

Sickness presenteeism in SMEs: a critical review

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Abstract

Presenteeism is becoming a major issue in the workplace. Many organisations are facing employees who are at work, but because of illness, are less productive. Presenteeism occurs when “people, despite complaints and ill health that should prompt them to rest and take sick leave, go to work in any case” (Aronsson and Gustafsson, 2005, p.958). Recent research has provided evidence that presenteeism is a silent and growing phenomenon that eats away at productivity. The economic cost of presenteeism exceeds that of absenteeism (Biron et al., 2006; Holt and Powell, 2014). In Canada, presenteeism costs businesses around 15 to 25 billion dollars per year. Presenteeism has also many health-related impacts such as increased exhaustion and cardiovascular disease. Thus, today, organisations and academic researchers are increasingly concerned about presenteeism.

Presenteeism is not always as apparent as absenteeism and researchers have identified many causes for it. Health issues, personal, work, and occupational characteristics cause the phenomenon. Employees working in certain occupations are seemingly more prone to presenteeism. For instance, Aronsson and Gustafsson (2005) find that employees in service sectors such as healthcare and education report higher rates of presenteeism. Indeed, it is widespread in the public sector (Baker et al., 2010).

Despite growing research on presenteeism, its occurrence in SMEs remains an understudied research issue. In fact, the SMEs' work environment may stimulate presenteeism due to limited financial and material resources, lack of labor force, difficulties in retention and recruitment of qualified staff, workloads and job demands, health and safety problems, and simple, informal, and traditional practices of human resources management (Holt and Powell, 2015; Legg et al., 2015; Masi and Cagno, 2015).

In order to fill the gap in the literature, the aims of this article are threefold. First, it presents an overview of research on presenteeism. Second, it develops a conceptual framework relating presenteeism to its determinants and consequences (e.g., productivity and health issues) in SMEs. Finally, it proposes future research avenues to deepen knowledge about presenteeism in the SMEs' specific work environment.

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