Culture as an Environmental Context for Absenteeism

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Abstrak

Absensi karyawan merupakan salah satu masalah serius yang dihadapi oleh banyak perusahaan. Absensi karyawan menimbulkan dampak yang negatif bagi perusahaan berkaitan dengan besarnya biaya yang ditanggung, penurunan produktivitas maupun efek psikologis terhadap karyawan lainnya. Artikel ini membahas problem absensi karyawan dari perspektif organisasinal, budaya, lingkungan dan karakteristik individual dan sosial, kemudian mengajukan model diagnostig untuk memahami problem absensi.

Key Words :
Absenteeism, culture and absenteeism, cross-cultural management

Absenteeism has been and continuous to be one of the most serious problem facing organizations both in developed countries and developing countries. It also becomes severe problem encounter by private and public organizations as well. Absenteeism presents a problem because of its disruptive effects and its subsequent reduction in employee productivity and organizational performance. Employee absenteeism has always been a headache for employers. According to a recent survey by Watson Wayatt Worldwide, a human resource consulting firm, direct disability and absence management costs represent 7.1 % of payroll, up from 5.6 % four years ago. And short-term absence cost has doubled from 2 % to 4%. The survey of 281 larger organizations in Canada (with an average of 2.580 employee) and asked them about their absence and disability management program shows that long term disability cost as a percentage of total payroll, have risen by 8% since 1997, and the average direct cost of employee absenteeism is $3.550 per employee per year (Chigbo, 2001).

In a joint survey by a consulting firm William M. Mercer, Marsh Inc., 433 participants from midsize to large employers reported that direct cost of unplanned absence such as sick days, salary cointinuence, short and long term disability and worker's compensation on average equal 14% of a company's average payroll budget. It also reported that direct cost to compensate for the absence of one employee with annual salary of $ 40.000 equal $ 5.600 on average. Employers with a sizable workforce of about 5.000 employees at this salary could see annual cost climb close to $ 30 million, based on the survey figure, according to the report. (Michel, 2001). Whereas, in United Kingdom, according to CBI's annual absence survey, workplace absence averaged 7.8 days per employee, a total of 192 million days or 3.4% of working time.

The average cost of absence per employee is 434 (pound sterling). Projected across the entire workforce, this gives a cost to British business of 10.7 million pound sterling – up from 10.5 billion pound sterling in 1999. Manual employee continues to head the absence with an average of 9.5 days lost per person, with non-manual employees at 6.3 days. Small firms still have lower absence rates –just less than six days per employees for firms with 500 or more employee (Miller, 2001).

The economic consequences of lost work time are indeed staggering. Companies must spend much more money on absenteeism resulting from lost of wages and salaries, fringe benefits, increased over time, and the often-sizeable cost associated with the use of temporary replacement personnel. Individual firm also suffer significant losses due to employee absenteeism, particularly those companies that employee larger number of blue collar and clerical personnel –the labor group that have traditionally claimed the lion's share of excessive absenteeism.

Much has been written about absenteeism, its causes and the requisite policies to resolve to problem, but relatively little attention has been given to the cultural context within which the problem of absenteeism occurs (Goodman, and Atkin ed., 1984, Steers, 1991) . Yet even some experts have found that the absenteeism rate varies from country to country (Drago and Woodan, 1992; Stephen and Greer, 1995).

It is understandable that in different countries, it will have different notions about what rate of absenteeism will be tolerated and what people think of how one should have in the workplace. This paper will explore several dimension of culture within environmental context fro absenteeism and try to how that absenteeism is inevitably culture-bounded. Four separate areas will be discussed. 1) The Concept of absenteeism; 2) The Social dimension of absenteeism; 3) Organizational dimension of the absenteeism, and 4) A Diagnostic model.

The Concept of Absenteeism

Absenteeism as a concept has been given many different definition. As Lyons (1977) observed, the concept of absenteeism is "hodge-podge of conceptually and operationally differing definition. Cascio (2001) stated that the concept of absenteeism is undergoing a profound change, largely as a resu of the knowledge work characterize more and mor jobs in our economy. Knowledge work has more of professional flavor, where professionals are measure not by the task they perform but by the result the achieve.

Absence in itself, of course, is not an analytica concept. It is given different definition. It is measure in different ways, and analyzed from many differen perspectives. Absence, in other words, has becom a popular expression but an unclear and ambiguous concept. If one take the content literally, the behavior act being away from work, the one can understanc those who have called it clear act of behavior. In the English language, one finds two concept that to a certain extent refer to the same phenomenon: Absence and absenteeism. Absence is defined as 1) state o being away or not being present, 2) failure to attenc or appear when expected. Absenteeism is defined as absence from duty or work or station especially such absence when deliberate or habitual (Webster's Encyclopedia Unabridged Dictionary, 1989, p. 5).

Absenteeism has been considered almost exclusively from the point view of company growth or productivity and it is almost never considered from the individual perspectives in the company. In a number of research, absenteeism is presented as negative factors such as a lack of motivation, or a failure to act (Harrison and Martocchio, 1998). In fact, the concept of absenteeism is a social phenomenon that express rules or norms to which individuals collectively refer. In other words, individuals tend to refer to the norm or rules prescribing how much absence they may have, what forms it can take (e.g. one-two days, sickness, no sickness), and whether it will be accepted by colleagues or tolerated by management or superiors. I this context, the absence of one person affect others, and absences are taken only in term of what is usually allowed by the occupational culture. In addition, absences can be interpreted as part of an exchange among the employees as a group and between them and the employing organization.

First, among employees themselves, absence may well be shared out, allocated: "who was absent last week?". "Is anyone absent today?". "It is

herefore, O.K. for me to absent tomorrow ?". Some rom of alternating behavior may occur here, collusion, ıo doubt take place with supervisors and nanagement. Second, between the employees and he employing organization, absenteeism is a specific rom exchange, a negative exchange. In the sense that ıositive exchange involves giving something and eceiving something in return, negative exchange equires taking away or with holding something. Thus, ıbsence is understood in relations to the constrains ıf the work situation. Absence, may for example, be reated against negative factors such as over workload, ıoredom, rigid work schedules, or even as a form of ırotest to management .

For the purpose of the research, however, one nay use the definition of absenteeism that considered ıppropriate such as proposed by Cascio (2001), ıbsenteeism is defined any failure to report or remain ıt work as scheduled, regardless of the reason. The ıse of word as scheduled is significant for they ıutomatically exclude vacation, personal leave, jury duty leave, and the like.

Societal Dimension of Absenteeism

To understand how social dimension influence ɔn absenteeism, it is necessary to understand the ɔrimary ways in which culture varies in the society. Anthropologists have defined culture in many ways. Culture is a way of life of a group of people, the ɔonfiguration of all the more or less stereotyped ɔatterns of learned behavior, which are handed down from one generation to the next through the means of anguage and imitation. Kroeber and Kluckhon (1961), offer one of the most comprehensive and generally accepted definition. According to them, culture consists of patterns, explicit, implicit of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifact; the essential of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. Culture system may, on the one hand, be considered as product of action, on the other as conditioning elements of future action.

The cultural orientation of a society reflects the complex interaction of the values, attitudes and behaviors displayed by its members. Individuals express culture and its normative qualities through values that hold about life and the world around them. These values in turn effect their attitudes about the form of behavior considered most appropriate and affection in any given situation. The continually changing patterns of individual and group behavior eventually influence the society's culture and the cycle begins again.

Research has shown that personal values effect corporate strategy and that managerial values effect all form of organizational behavior, including selection and reward system, supervisor-subordinate relationship, group behavior, communication and leadership and conflict level. Differences in work related attitude and behavior exist across a very wide range of culture. Hofstede (1980), found that there are significant differences in the behavior and attitudes of employees and managers from different countries who worked within multi national corporations. He also found that national culture explains more of the differences in work-related vales and attitude than did position within the organization.

Coming (attending) or not coming (absence) to work are behaviors and therefore a function of environmental consequences. Workplace environment which closely related to the culture in a certain country results in weakening or strengthening employees' behavior. Most attendance is not the result of a daily conscious decision but is behavior executed in accordance with the established norm, routines and custom. Therefore, an employee will learn the workplace culture and behaves as other employees do. In different societies and in different organizations within a given society norms develop around legitimate for absenteeism behavior. The society and organizational dimension interact to determines the workplace culture.

On an intuitive basis, one would probably detect easily a cultural element in the workplace in the following examples ((Johns, 1985).

1. In a South Wales town, bus driver exhibited a high degree of absence. However, they were willing to go to work when the transportation company sent a car to their home to pick them up. This become common operating procedure for the company.
2. In an Indian University, students in large

engineering laboratory sections would regularly "given proxy" by saying "present" for an absent fellow student the allowing him to copy their note for that day. It was understood by all student that proxy would given as long as the process was freely reciprocated.

3. In a Midwest University, US, a professor of the management department comes in to work every weekday as well as Saturday morning. Those who were absent on Saturday received much good-natured but not-so-subtle razing on Monday morning.

In addition, research has found that due to the differences in workplace environment related to the national culture, the absenteeism rate varies across the countries (Drago and Wooden, 1992).

Organizational Dimension of Absenteeism

The cross national differences in days lost because absenteeism probably reflects in part differences in social consensus or culture concerning the legitimacy of absence as work or no work behavior. In an organization, pressure for or against attendance can also emerge from one's colleagues in the form of work norm group. Because the absence of one person affect others, the amount absence taken is influenced by prevailing absence culture; the absence culture set limits on the appropriate level of absence. Although interindividual variations in absence do occur, these differences operates within the limit prescribed by the particular culture. In other words, absence culture can be defined as the belief and practices influencing the totality of absence i.e. their frequency, and duration, as they currently occur within an employee group or organization.

Employees are aware, albeit imperfectly, of the nature of this culture. The Absence culture influences the absence norm, which is what employees collectively recognize (usually with management collusion) as suitable and appropriate for people in the job, their unit, their organization, given the particular condition both physical and social, of task, pay, status and discipline. Absence culture can be imagined to operate and influence attendance motivation and subsequent attendance in at least three ways.

First, they may exert a very direct effect on the level and patterning. When the content of culture involves a specific norm regarding the level of absence that is tolerated. Such norm may be responsible in part for common observation of restricted variance in absence within group (department, plants, faculty or occupations). Second, absence cultures also may operate directly but subtly through less obvious social information processing mechanism. For instance, workers may observe the absence behavior of others and the reactions of various constituencies to his behavior and then a adopt a pattern or level of absence that reflects these observation. This way occur even though the transmission mechanism are transitory and the enforcement mechanism negligible. This form of absence culture may less tangible than that of involving specific norm, but nonetheless it reflects social influence.

Finally, absence culture may operate indirectly to facilitate or constrain the extent to which individual level variable effectively influence absence. Given some abstract, natural base rate at which job dissatisfaction or personal characteristics might be expected to influence on absence behavior. Variations in culture (organization or group norm) may set the limits on the extent to which this influence is realized in particular setting. For example, some cultures may contain norm that effectively dictate good attendance regardless of how satisfied one with his job. Other cultures my signal that absence is a legitimate responses to dissatisfaction. The ultimate task is to determine which cultures generates which effects.

Absence culture can be distinguished both in their cultural salience (that is, the degree to which all members of the group share similar or divergent belief about absenteeism) and in their trust (that is, the amount of discretion provided employees by their management). Cultural salience is influenced by organization's control system, its technology and social ecology. High culture salience means that group members have similar views about what constitute an acceptable level of absence, on the other hand, low salience means that far less homogeneity exist. It is important to note here that high salience does not imply a norm of low absenteeism. Rather, it denotes a shared sense of what level of magnitude of absence (high or low) is acceptable.

High trust, on the other hand, occurs when

eople experience high job discretion (for example, ı professional jobs: doctor, architecture, consultants, tc.) leading to high a trust psychological contract ıat reinforces the work ethic and internalized o:mmitment to the organization. Low trust, when ıeople experience lower jib discretion (for example ıssembly line workers, low skill and repetitive jobs) ınd typically leads to a more detached view of ırganizational participation and commitment.

These two aspect of culture combine to letermine which of four kind "culture" emerge in ırganization. The four types of absence culture are 1) he dependent culture (low salience, high trust), :haracterized by deviant absence; 2) the moral culture high salience, high trust), typed by constructive ıbsence; 3) the fragmented culture (low salience, low rust) characterized by calculative absence; 4) the :onfliction culture (high salience, low trust) with its esultant defiant absence. Based on the previous ɜlaboration, to better understand the problem of ıbsenteeism, the diagnostic model is proposed.

A Diagnostic Model of Absenteeism

Two main themes have dominated research concerning absence from work. One of these theme involves the relationship between organizational influences such as job dissatisfaction and absenteeism. The other involves the association between personal characteristics such as age, sex, etc. and absence. For different reasons, each of these conventional themes or paradigm is slowly losing its dominance.

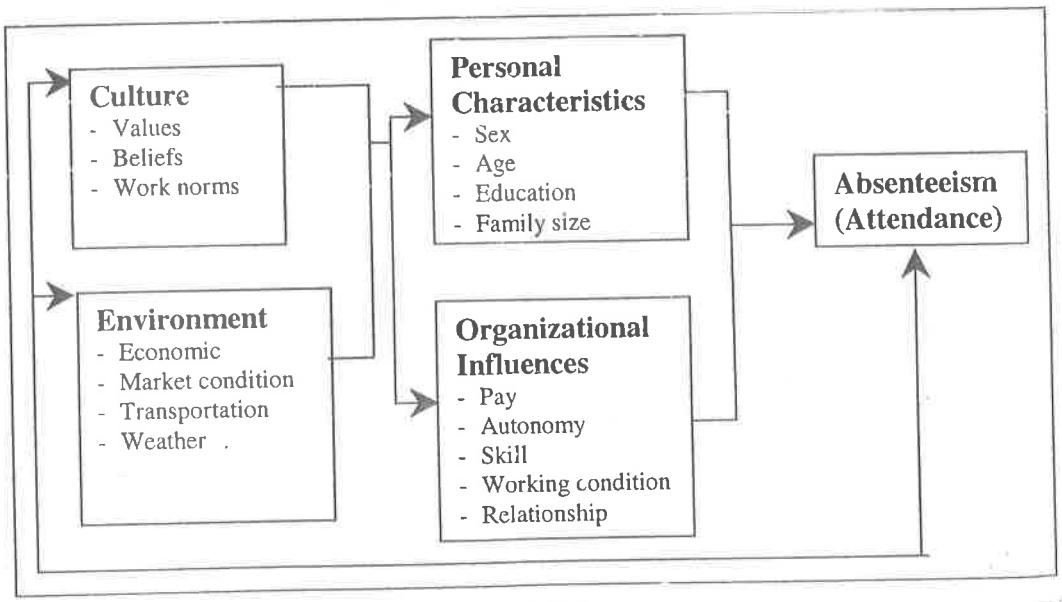
The organizational influences paradigm is grounded in the plausible theory that people will absent themselves from social obligation that prone aversive or dissatisfying. Significant relationship between job dissatisfaction may exist, and the relationship between absence and personal characteristic such as age, sex, tenure seem to be more universal but the relationship is not completely understood. Therefore, in order to explain the accuse of absenteeism it seems necessary to use another approach to absenteeism and view absenteeism as a social phenomenon rather than an individual one. In fact, any model that is based on the abstract notion of an "individual employee" irrespective of the industrial and occupational contact, is entirely defective. As a result, it will be more appropriate to analysis absenteeism as part of social behavior.

In addition, by doing so, one may know more about the barriers to attendance and the incentive to absence that may exist beyond organizational boundaries and outside the sight of management control.

The proposed model, Figure 1. attempt to

Figure 1.

A Diagnostic Model of Absenteeism



examine in a systematic and comprehensive factors that influence employee attendance. Briefly stated, it suggests that an employee's attendance is influenced by the following factors:

1. **Culture**
   Fundamental premise of the model is that culture affect the employee's attendance motivation to come to work. Values and belief of the larger society and its subculture that are shared by virtue of membership in particular organization or subunit set the limits on work norm, work behavior or acceptable level of absence in the organization.
2. **Environment**
   A primary factor capable of influencing employee's attendance motivation is the environment that includes economic, market conditions, transportation, and weather. Economic and market factors largely relate to attendance motivation and subsequent attendance through their effect on one's ability to change job. When general economic conditions are deterioting, employee may less likely to be absent for fear of reprisal.. Transportation and weather problem also may influence employee attendance. In general, increased difficulty of getting to work due to transportation or weather problem does seem to be represent one possible impediment to attendance behavior for some employees.
3. **Personal characteristics**
   Although personal characteristics probably do not have significant on employee attendance in a certain society or organization or occupation. Harrison, D. A. and Martocchio, J.J. (1998) reported that personal characteristic seems to dominate research absenteeism. Absence is widely predictable from measures of personal characteristics and the direction of association is predominantly with only suffers instance of positive and non correlation. Therefore, it may be concluded that personal characteristics do affect attendance in another society or organization.
4. **Organizational influences**
   One of the ways in which the organizationa effectiveness can be measured is in term oi willingness of the workers to stay in the organization and attend to his work regularly. This dimension of worker behavior has been found to be closely associated with employee satisfaction to various aspects in the organization such as pay, relationship with supervisor and peer, promotion, working condition, etc. Broadly speaking, it may be asserted that if a worker finds various satisfaction in his work, he will have greater urge to attend to work. AS far as the work itself and the individual performing it are concerned, there are occasion when a worker subjected to various obstacle at home, in his social environment or in the job itself that may act as negative incentive for his going to work. To illustrate, either the worker's or his dependent's illness or inclement weather may require him to exert an extra effort to work. In such case, job satisfaction help to provide that extra effort and makes the worker attend rather than keep away from his work.

Conclusion

The issue described in the previous section is to illustrate that in each of four areas how cuiture serves as environmental context for absenteeism, and how absence behavior are essentially culture bound. This framework provides a significant way to better understand absence behavior in an organization by recognizing how constraint can be placed on individual behavior by the collective reality of organization and its environment.

The most important implication is that managing employee absenteeism is crucial for management due to disruptive effect caused by absenteeism. However, management should design policies and programs that fit with the culture and organizational environment. Finally, it is essential to recognize that within a given country, organization or occupation, absenteeism is varies along with these culture dimensions within the cultural limits provided by the broader societal culture.

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