

# Absenteeism—A new approach to combat it

By  
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The rash of strikes, gheraos and alarming rates of absenteeism in our country is a symptomatic of deep despair of various classes of workers & employees in the face of extreme insensitiveness on the part of management & employers in both private & public sectors. Unfortunately, the management, barring a few cases, has a peculiar tendency to sleep over even the genuine demands of the workers. It is only when the normal life in the factories or in the organisations is completely or substantially disrupted by the workers' strikes and consequently causing colossal loss of production that the management wakes up from its deep slumber to take the necessary remedial measures. In the wake of spate of strikes by the workers almost everywhere in the country the management and the researchers have been attempting an anatomy of the problem. It is a pity that absenteeism—a major problem in the work force today continues to elude the attention of the Government, the managements & the trade unions & the researchers. And this is despite the fact that the cost of absenteeism is quite high for the society, the affected organisation & the individual employee. A high rate of absenteeism adversely affects the industrial growth. For a country like India which is on its way to rapid industrialisation the cost of absenteeism is quite high. Absenteeism is also harmful for an organisation because of its costs and operating problems. It not only leads to decline in production & profits but also in reduced productivity. In the case of frequent absenteeism, either casual or temporary workers who are comparatively inexperienced are appointed. If the existing staff is asked to do extra work on overtime basis which often results in the case of factory workers mishaps & accidents. That is why in India textile mills which have a very high rate of absenteeism also have the highest injury rates amongst the workers. In 1981, incidence rate of industrial injuries in textile mills was 156.66 per 1000 workers followed by the next highest rate of 75.87 in metal products



industry. In India, figures relating to the cost of absenteeism with reference to total mandays lost and losses in production are not available but it is not difficult to imagine them. In the United States, it is estimated that absenteeism results in over 400 million workdays lost per year. Combining the average number of workdays lost per year with an accepted estimate of the daily cost of absenteeism per worker (\$ 85 including wages, fringe benefits, and loss in productivity) yields an estimated annual cost in the United States of 30 billion dollars.

In India, there has been considerable increase in the rate of absenteeism during last two decades in various industries, particularly in Cotton textiles, plantations & coal mines. While it was 11.9% in Bombay textile mills in 1961, the figure in 1983 rose as high as 22.9%. However, this rate declined to 16% in 1984. In Sholapur textile mills the rate of absenteeism is alarmingly very high. As compared to the rate of 16.7 per cent in 1960, the rate increased to 44% in 1984 in Sholapur textile mills. The plantations industry is the next worst hit with 19.4 per cent rate of absenteeism. In the public sector, coal mines suffer the most on account of absenteeism which was 21.7% in 1978. While the figures for the periods after 1978 are not available, it is believed to be quite high. In other industries & organisations, both in private & public sector, the yearly rate of absenteeism ranges from 13% to 17%.

Though the available literature discusses in general terms the problem of employee absenteeism & ways and means to check it, yet few systematic diagnosis of this problem exist. Most of the researchers have suggested a few measures to combat the menace of employee absenteeism based on two questionable assumptions : (i) that the main reason for high rate of absenteeism is job dissatisfaction—often not the case and (ii) the employee's discretion & freedom to decide whether to come to work—again often not the case.

### **Major influences on Absenteeism**

To deal successfully with the problem of absenteeism, one must consider it within a comprehensive and systematic framework that attempts to identify the major causes of absenteeism as they interact to influence such behaviour and then as a result of this analysis suggest methods of solving the problem. Before suggesting remedial measures to fight the menace of employee absenteeism, an attempt shall first be made to answer two vital questions having a significant bearing on this problem. These questions are : (i) what causes attendance motivations, i.e. a desire or willingness to come to work, and (ii) what causes actual attendance, i.e. what influences an employee's ability to come to his workplace ?

### **Attendance Motivation**

Two factors which greatly influence an employee's desire or willingness to work are (i) job satisfaction, and (ii) pressure to attend. It has been observed that there is a greater willingness to work on the part of such employees who enjoy their jobs and the tasks associated with them. One would expect an employee to be more likely to come to work because he likes his job & derives pleasures in performing it as compared to one who finds his



job to be monotonous & dull. However, even when an employee does not like his job he is under several pressures to go to his work place. He knows fully well that in the situation prevailing, he cannot afford to absent himself from his workplace so frequently or for a longer duration. Thus, job satisfaction & pressure to attend are the two major factors which greatly influence an employee's attendance motivation.

*Job Satisfaction.* Generally, a person prefers to take up a job suiting his qualifications and aptitude and which is likely to make use of his talents, professional knowledge & qualifications, and also at the same time providing him ample opportunities of career advancement. Besides, he also looks for congenial working environment where he can work in freedom and with dignity. Every job is characterised by many factors such as scope, organisational level, role, stress, opportunities for promotions, quality of work life, i.e. working conditions, personnel policies, employer-employee relationship, relationship with the supervisors etc. These characteristics are evaluated by the employee in the light of his values & job expectations. Where an employee finds that his job fulfils his expectations fully or substantially, he develops a positive attitude towards the job. He, in such cases, would have higher degree of willingness or desire to work. It has been observed that employee's attendance is better in those jobs which offer greater degree of autonomy, responsibility & opportunities for career advancement. A person's expectations about the job of his liking are, in turn, influenced by several personal factors, e.g., academics & professional qualifications, age, ambitions, marital status, sex, family background, etc.

*Pressure to attend.* Another factor which influences the attendance motivation is pressure to attend; pressure to attend from the employee's point of view means existence of certain circumstances & operations of one or more factors which actuate employee's attendance even if his job itself is unattractive. Factors which put pressure on an employee to go to his workplace have been identified. These include.

(i) Employment opportunities. The greater the opportunities for alternative jobs, higher may be the rate of absenteeism. This partly explains for comparatively higher rate of absenteeism not only amongst unskilled workers but also amongst technically skilled people. It has been observed that some skilled persons earn more in a day by doing outside jobs than getting one day wage by attending their duties. Absenteeism rates amongst such workers is always high.

(ii) Sense of economic insecurity. People who feel financially insecure are less likely to be absent from their jobs for the fear of being sacked.

(iii) Incentives & reward systems, i.e. rewarding good attendance in the form of increased pay & promotions, recognition etc. Absence of intrinsic reward in the form of recognition or appreciation of employee's contributions also causes absenteeism.



(iv) Work-group size. Some empirical studies have revealed that greater absenteeism is associated with larger work groups amongst the industrial workers. For example, increase in size could result in lower group cohesiveness, higher task specialisation & poorer communications

(v) Organisation size. Studies have also shown a positive relationship between organisation size and absenteeism. Employees working in a large organisation would experience a greater degree of impersonality caused by the increased bureaucracy associated with large organisation. This impersonality would reduce the employee's identification with the organisation which would, in turn, result in increased absenteeism in a large organisation.

(vi) Personal work ethic. A non-committed worker lacks moral obligation to come to work. Such a worker invariably develops apathy to work and to his organisation and shows keener interest in being away from his work. The rate of absenteeism is found to be almost negligible in the case of employees occupying responsible positions, such as supervisor, executives & administrators because of their higher sense of responsibility, loyalty & commitment to their duty & the organisation. These employees identify themselves with the organisations & its goals & want to contribute towards the attainment of these goals.

Thus, the attendance motivation is primarily influenced by the combination of extent of employee's satisfaction with his job and the various pressure factors. However, it may be stated here a pressure factor which has a strong influence on an employee's desire to work may be of lesser significance for another employee. For example, an employee with sound financial background may not give much weightage to a financial incentive scheme.

#### **Ability to come work-Some causes of absenteeism.**

High rate of attendance in any factory/organisation depends not only on attendance motivation, i.e. an employee's willingness or his desire to come to work but also on another significant factor i.e. employee's ability to come to his work-place. It has been observed in several cases that even if an employee has high attendance motivation, he finds it either impossible or nearly impossible to attend his office due to several reasons such as illness, non-availability of transport family problems & tensions, etc. Work related accidents in the case of industrial workers & illness have been found to be major causes of employee absenteeism. In India the total number of reported injuries in factories were 333572 & 296027 in 1981 & 1982 respectively. The rate of these injuries in the various types of industries ranges from 62 to 77 per 1000 workers. Textile mills and metal product industries are highly prone to workers' injuries. Thus, illness and work related accidents & injury together represent major cause of absenteeism.



Family problems, tensions and responsibilities also cause absenteeism. Generally, employees who are deeply depressed over domestic discords, strained relations with spouse, disputes over property, indebtedness, etc. are more prone to absenteeism. Absenteeism in many cases is traceable to bad habits of the workers, such as gambling, drug taking & excessive drinking. Most of the studies have shown that women have higher rates of absence both in frequency and duration as compared to men. British Institute of Management in its survey found that overall rates of absence for women was 6.5% while that of men was 4.1%. The high rate of absenteeism amongst women employees is due to the fact that society has traditionally assigned more family responsibilities to women than men. For example, it is usually the mother and not the father who stays home to look after the sick children.

Another important factor in absenteeism is transport problem. Studies have revealed that chronic absentees travel longer distances than average employees. Mode of transport used to reach workplace also influences rate of absenteeism. Employees having their own transport like scooter, bicycle, etc., have been found to be less absent than those dependent on public transport. Studies carried out by the National Productivity Council of India in 1973 indicated strong relationship between mode of transport and absenteeism.

#### **Weather conditions too affect attendance levels**

Actual attendance of an employee is the function of two factors—attendance motivation and employee's ability to come to work. Higher attendance motivation becomes ineffectual if the employee falls sick or has some transport problems. Thus, both these factors must be present simultaneously for high attendance levels.

It may not be out of place to mention here that though job satisfaction and pressure to attend the two factors responsible for attendance motivation play an important part in influencing absenteeism rate, are in turn, over a period of time, get affected by attendance rate. For instance, an employee with praiseworthy job performance and superior attendance rate has better chances of upgradation and promotion—a situation highly favourable for better attendance motivation. On the other hand, a chronic absentee incurs the wrath of the management and fails to enjoy cordial relations with the superiors and fellow employees. Consequently, such an employee would further be distracted from his workplace. Also, because of high rate of absenteeism, the management may be forced to review its existing personnel policies.

#### **Remedies**

Complete elimination of absenteeism appears to be rather difficult but it can be reduced substantially through some suitable measures.

Before taking action on absenteeism problems, it is advised that a systematic study be carried out in each organisation/department, particularly those which are most



affected by this problem, to find out : (i) the rate of absenteeism (ii) the number of absentees in a particular period, usually a year, (iii) number & names of chronic absentees, and (iv) the part of the year in which most of the absenteeism takes place. Such a study would facilitate the proper diagnosis of the problem and which in turn would further help the management in taking suitable & specified remedial measures instead of more general & costly efforts.

In the light of the factors influencing the rate of absenteeism, the following are some of the important steps which may be taken to reduce absenteeism.

1. Increase job satisfaction. If job dissatisfaction has been found to be a major cause of absenteeism, the human resources manager must take necessary measures to raise the job satisfaction levels of the employees. Some of such measures are : (a) Reducing task repetitiveness, (b) offering greater degree of autonomy & responsibility in the job, (c) Reducing job stress & strains, (d) Implementing job enrichment, (e) Providing employee career counselling, (f) Increasing work-group cohesiveness, (g) Improving communication system, (h) Bettering relationship with the management & the fellow employees, (i) Improving the work environment and physical appearance of the office/factory premises. Attractive physical appearance of the office/factory premises is conducive to developing a sense of identification with the company. Employees feel more pride in their work in attractive work environment, (j) Entrusting responsibility to supervisors to help the workers overcoming the factors which prevent them from being regular. In fact, major control on absenteeism can be exercised by the immediate supervisor of the workmen as he remains in the direct contact with them and is in a better position to learn their problems. Supervisors should be made to realise that solving absenteeism is also one of their jobs.

2. Increase pressure to attend. This can be done by : (a) Introducing more rewards for attendance, such as encashment of unavailed leave, attendance bonus, recognition or appreciation of the most regular employees. K.DowScott, Steven Marbham and Richard. W.Roberts had conducted a study titled "Rewarding good attendance, a comparative study of positive ways to reduce absenteeism". In the comparative field experiment they put several major attendance programmes against each other for a substantial period of time within a single company under similar conditions. The programmes they observed were a financial incentive programme, a recognition programme, a lottery programme and an information feedback programme. Their conclusion was that recognition programme had the most dramatic impact.

(b) Reviewing leave & employment policies. An employee who seeks extension of his leave for overstaying at his native village should be refused the grant of extra leave. If he still overstays, his wages for that period be not paid to him. If the number of such employees is quite large, the management is advised to stop or reduce the employment of such people.



(c) Inculcating a sense of belonging and loyalty amongst employees, particularly, those in the lower category through counselling, etc. The help of trade unions can also be sought in educating the chronic absentees.

(d) Introducing disciplinary measures for chronic absentees who fail to respond to other positive measures.

(e) Encouraging an attendance oriented work group norms.

3. Increase Ability to attend. The following measures are advised to be taken to improve employees' ability to attend.

(a) Providing more medical facilities for the employees. Extra medical care be given to such employees who are prone to occupational diseases.

(b) Bettering safety measures for factory workers.

(c) Providing transport facilities for employees living in far off places.

(d) Providing houses to employees near factory/office premises. This would do away with transport problems of such employees.

(e) Instituting employees counselling programmes for fostering mental health of employees afflicted to personal evils like, gambling, drinking, drug taking, etc. Counselling in such cases can help in creating an awareness in them as to what is happening to them & how they themselves are responsible for their malady. Gradually, through the process of introspection & encouragement they can find out the solution to their problems. Counselling also helps a great deal in changing the work habits of irregular workers. However, counselling programme would yield the effective results if (i) it is a continuous process, (ii) commands the full support of the top management, & (iii) is entrusted to trained counsellors.

To conclude, the problem of absenteeism should be taken more seriously by all—the management, the trade unions & the Government. The management should take specific steps to reduce absenteeism only after indentifying the factors responsible for it. The management must also take into consideration socio-economic needs of the employees while taking action check absenteeism. Disciplinary action like dismissal of an employee should be the last remedy.