



Absence from work

Executive summary

Introduction

This study addresses patterns of absenteeism in the EU27 and Norway, the costs involved, policies for dealing with absence and general developments in relation to promoting health and well-being. Average rates of absence across Europe are between 3% and 6% of working time and the cost is estimated to be about 2.5% of GDP. While some countries are attempting to control costs, others put the emphasis on promoting health and well-being. The purpose of this study is to outline the overall extent of absence from work and the policies that have been developed to deal with it.

Policy context

Absence is defined as non-attendance at work when attendance is scheduled or expected. The majority of absences are generally attributed to sickness or incapacity, but there may be other reasons. It is important to consider the pressures that lead to absence or attendance in order to discover what level of illness justifies absence to an employee, whether the employer shares this view and how employers encourage attendance, particularly in the context of a recession. Promoting good health and attendance instead of penalising absence has become a growing policy issue. Recent work by the OECD estimates that the costs of disability and sickness benefits are 2.5 times those of unemployment, and that those costs are rising.

Key findings

The research has uncovered two fundamental findings. The first is the limited amount of knowledge of the extent, causes and costs of absence. The second is a shift in policies regarding its management and control. Data on absenteeism scarcely exists in some countries and is patchy in others. In addition, the different definitions and means of measurement make international comparison difficult. There are few clear patterns in the data and no overall trend in the rate of absence, though the recent recession might exert a downward effect.

National differences in absence rates may reflect differences in the structure of the working population, e.g. a low proportion of women in the workforce, such as in Malta, or an ageing workforce, such as in France. Trends also vary between countries. Countries reporting a decline in absenteeism slightly outnumber those with increases, but there is no common pattern. It is commonly argued that rates of absence for women are greater than those for men and the present data generally confirm this pattern. In relation to age, the general pattern is for older workers to be absent more than younger ones. Absence rates are not strongly determined by the kind of employment involved and there are no clear patterns for sectors.

The most common causes of absence are health problems, although broader issues such as monotony and work-related stress are also mentioned in some countries. Musculoskeletal and respiratory problems are commonly among the top two causes, as well as back pain and syndromes such as repetitive strain injury. However, simply knowing the causes for absence says little about the social context that leads people to see such problems as a sufficient reason to take time off work. An employee's commitment to the employer, the financial costs of going absent, pressures to attend work, sick pay arrangements and health promotion schemes all influence such decisions.

Presenteeism has emerged as a distinct concept in the last 10 years – an employee attending work even when they feel too ill to be able to work effectively. Reasons for presenteeism include a sense of duty to customers or colleagues, while the German data suggest that presenteeism may be more prevalent in small firms. Fears or pressure to attend did not feature strongly, except in one Czech survey. UK studies suggest that the costs of presenteeism may be greater than those of absence. Studies of its effects seem to be rare.

Various methods are used to calculate the cost of absence in different countries, with several countries unable to identify any methods at all: thus, any figures produced need to be considered cautiously. The evidence suggests that there are considerable costs for several stakeholders and this is well recognised in some nations, such as the UK, which has a number of studies of the costs of absence to the public purse.

Well-being has emerged in policy debates in recent years for several reasons: the ageing of the workforce and subsequent concerns about people's ability to work beyond the conventional retirement age; continuing concerns about productivity; and the European policy aim of improving the quality of work. This study attempts to categorise initiatives in relation to well-being at national and social-partner level. Overall, there is evidence of considerable and growing attention to the issue of well-being, together with targets and programmes promoting it. There is also some evidence that approaches promoting of well-being can have some impact. However, there is little information about how these work in practice.

Two broad trends emerge in this analysis regarding overall policy on managing attendance. The first trend is the emphasis on the promotion of workplace health and well-being. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Norway have made systematic efforts at national and company level to improve employee health and have developed specific laws and policies to deal with the issue. The second trend, which is most notable in eastern Europe, is an emphasis on cost control. This is reflected in a growing concern with the costs of absence, together with policies of controlling these costs (notably those to health insurance systems), mainly through reductions in sick pay coverage and payment levels. The remaining countries fall between these two patterns or have mixed pictures.

Policy pointers

- National data on absenteeism use many different definitions, making the extent of absence hard to assess. Labour force surveys of individual employees are one means of achieving comparable data, and their value could be addressed further.
- In analysing patterns, the research has followed the standard practice of considering mean rates of absence. But means hide a great deal of variation: within any one country, there is likely to be a wide distribution of patterns of absence. The distribution of absence, particularly the proportion of the total days of absence accounted for by spells of different lengths, merits further attention.

- A significant proportion of countries do not seem to be interested in calculating the cost of absenteeism. The difficulties of gaining reliable employer information and establishing the criteria for which costs are to be included can make this task an arduous one. Secondly, it is possible that absence is not seen as a primary concern. Ironically, this area may continue to be a low priority as long as the full costs remain unclear. Overall, the costs of absence are high, measurement of these costs remains highly variable and direct comparison between countries is risky.
- The lack of clarity on how cost statistics are compiled has certain implications. Firstly, it may mean there are no available data on the cost to employers or governments. Secondly, if the methods of computing costs are not given, it is extremely difficult to compare reported costs. Without clear definitions of what costs include and exclude, variances as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) are difficult to compare. Absenteeism is clearly costly, but just how costly it is in any one country is hard to establish.
- Promoting good health and attendance instead of penalising absence has become a growing policy priority. The fact that well-being has become institutionalised in some countries, with targets and programmes supporting it, suggests that the concept is effective. Nine countries have formal strategies for the management of employee health that include governments and social partners, yet well-being is not on the agenda at all in another nine countries.
- An approach in terms of well-being focuses on employees' health rather than the particular effects of ill health in terms of absence from work. Several examples exist from a wide range of countries. This is clearly consistent with promoting job quality, but it also implies a challenging agenda involving significant attention to work organisation, the design of jobs and the creation of a healthier workforce. How far examples go beyond the few truly committed organisations remains in doubt, as does the balance of costs and benefits. The potential gains are considerable.

Further information

The report on *Absence from work* is available at <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/studies/tn0911039s/index.htm>

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