

An Assessment of Factors Affecting Absenteeism: Case Study of a Major South African Manufacturer

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Abstract

Absenteeism is a major problem globally and, in South Africa, costs the country and companies millions of rands each year. Given the financial constraints on businesses at present, it is necessary to understand the causes of absenteeism in order to determine possible interventions to reduce these causes. A quantitative research design was used to investigate the factors that influence absenteeism at a major South African manufacturer. An exploratory factor analysis was used to reduce the number of factors. The study found that there were seven major factors that had an impact on absenteeism, namely, external factors, management factors, illness, family responsibilities, personal development, working conditions, and motivation. These factors were found to affect different employees differently, and were mainly dependent on the demographic characteristics of the employees. This study provides insights into absenteeism in a typical South African situation. The study finds that because factors that have an impact on absenteeism are different for various employees and are dependent largely on demographic and related attributes, organisations need to develop diverse strategies to deal with the absenteeism issues of different employees in organisations. Future research should investigate the efficacies of various interventions to determine which are most likely to meet the needs of the various groups of employees and thereby reduce absenteeism levels.

Keywords: absenteeism, manufacturing, employee relations, South Africa, developing countries

Introduction

Employee absenteeism is a worldwide phenomenon that is costly, and its consequences are widespread, hence it has become an important subject on the international agenda in

the human resources field. In South Africa, although the effect of absenteeism on industrial production cannot easily be measured, the issue has become a crisis for many industries, thereby distressing the national economies of the country (Mishra & Verma, 2017). A report that studied Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation economies such as Australia, China, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and the United States of America and which focused on the impact of absenteeism on productivity, estimated that the economic cost of absenteeism was in the region of 4 to 6 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of those economies (Rasmussen et al., 2015). Resultantly, absenteeism in the workplace is receiving increasing attention, as it leads to both direct and indirect costs for all the stakeholders of an organisation, such as costs regarding low productivity and ineffectiveness (Rauf, 2015). Excessive absenteeism involves a considerable production loss to the organisation because scheduled work is interrupted and delayed, and management has to pay overtime wages to meet production delivery dates. The overtime rates are normally double that of the normal rates (Adegboyega et al., 2015).

The South African economy loses between R12 billion and R16 billion a year as a result of employee absenteeism, and many companies are affected. It has been estimated that an average of 15 per cent of staff is absent on any given day in South Africa (OCSA, 2017). Absenteeism remains one of the most significant obstructions to productivity and many companies do not have a clear understanding of the magnitude of their absenteeism problem (Mishra & Verma, 2017). Wananda et al. (2015) stated that absenteeism of employees signals organisational ill health and is one of the main sources of financial waste for organisations, as some continue to pay workers regardless of whether they report to work or not. In South Africa, it is estimated that sick or unhealthy employees take nine times more sick days than healthy employees and that personal financial issues distract approximately 20 per cent of employees at work, thereby affecting their productivity (PWC, 2015). Employers in South Africa also expressed that absenteeism is among the top five most significant factors (including wages, transport, worker morale, employee benefits) that affect labour productivity in the economy (CIBD, 2015). The extent of the impact on the economy and companies implies that absenteeism is worth researching to establish the factors that are causing it, with the objective of highlighting areas for interventions that can reduce it and/or mitigate the impact.

For this research, a major manufacturer is selected that is currently experiencing high levels of absenteeism, which affects the organisation's productivity. The organisation estimated its absenteeism rate at between 3.9 per cent and 4.4 per cent per annum over the past five years, costing between R52 million and R65 million per year, owing to hiring extra people as replacement labour and high overtime, as employees worked longer shifts to cover the work (Company X HR report of 2018). As the manufacturer is currently experiencing financial difficulties due to economic pressures, it has become critical to seek ways to reduce some of its unnecessary costs, including excessive human resource costs (Company X HR report of 2017). The research seeks to determine typical

reasons for absenteeism in order to identify areas for the reduction of the human resources costs associated with employee absenteeism. The following section considers current literature on absenteeism in the workplace.

Literature Review

Absenteeism is probably one of the biggest problems that an organisation has to handle on an ongoing basis. Employees who are absent from their work responsibilities create major issues in the relationship between the employer and the employee. Absent employees also negatively affect the costs and sustainability of the company and also the broader economy (Akgeyik, 2014). Thirulogasundaram and Sahu (2014) acknowledged that absenteeism has long been considered a significant and pervasive problem in industries and, in simple terms, it relates to the frequent and habitual absence from work or voluntary non-attendance at work by employees. Absenteeism is defined as the failure to report for work as scheduled (Johns, 2008). Absenteeism reflects something essential about the relationship between the worker and the organisation, therefore, absenteeism as a behaviour is variously viewed as a manifestation of worker deviance, a result of a labour–leisure trade-off, a product of labour strife, an indicator of stress, an implied contract violation or a reaction to illness (Johns, 2008).

Absenteeism is often used as an alternative to quitting work because it provides employees with a mechanism to express their objections to unfavourable conditions or circumstances in the organisation (De Reuver & Van Woerkom, 2010). This notion emanates from the view that absenteeism is sometimes termed withdrawal behaviour, because it is an action that allows employees to physically or psychologically escape the work environment for a short or long period, as they start to dislike their jobs owing to various organisational factors in their working environments (Erdemli, 2015). In conclusion, absenteeism is a habitual pattern of absence from a duty or obligation or an indicator of psychological, medical or social adjustment to work that is indicative of poor morale or workplace hazards among employees in an organisation (Thirulogasundaram & Sahu, 2014).

There are several conceptual frameworks and models that provide insights into a range of factors that influence or determine absenteeism behaviour in organisations, particularly in relation to voluntary and involuntary absences (Magee et al., 2016). Despite a comparatively long history of the study on absenteeism, the foremost causal factors and mechanisms of absenteeism are still open for further investigation (Satpathy & Rath, 2015). The causes of absenteeism are complex and interrelated, however, some of the most widely quoted models of absenteeism are the Steers and Rhodes (1978) employee attendance model and the Nicholson (1977) absence behaviour and attendance motivation model (Thirulogasundaram & Sahu, 2014; Torrington et al., 2014).

The primary assumption of the Nicholson model is that attendance is normal behaviour in most forms of employment, even in those where absence levels are high (Nicholson, 1977). In other words, people attend work regularly without any conscious decision-making until proximal events impel absence (Nicholson, 1977). The theory focuses on the forces that impel the individual to attend or not attend work (Nicholson, 1977). The theory also referred to what is termed the attachment and attendance motivation whereby, for an employee to be absent, the pressure to be absent has to exceed the threshold of inertia to stay or attend (Nicholson, 1977). This means that the attendance motivation is largely a result of the way the employee needs to balance the properties of work and non-work environments (Nicholson, 1977). The model outlined that contextual factors such as personality traits, orientation of the work, work involvement and employment relationships all influence the employee's level of attachment to the work, which in turn affect how well motivated the employee becomes to attend work (Nicholson, 1977). Nicholson's attendance motivation model managed to conceptualise absenteeism behaviour and provided a framework to explain voluntary and involuntary absenteeism (Magee et al., 2016).

Much of the management literature on absenteeism has been guided by the Steers and Rhodes employee attendance model that was published in 1978 (Thirulogasundaram & Sahu, 2014). The model sought to identify the major sets of variables that influence absence behaviour and their interrelationships, by attempting to fit together the array of findings from a review of over 100 previous studies on absenteeism. Steers and Rhodes (1978) postulated that the attendance of employees is directly influenced by two primary factors which are (a) attendance motivation and (b) the ability to come to work. They added that attendance motivation is predominantly influenced by satisfaction with the job situation and various internal and external pressures to attend. They stated that, other things being equal, when an employee enjoys the work environment and the tasks that characterises his/her job situation, it is expected that the employee has a strong desire to come to work and the work experience would be pleasurable (Steers & Rhodes, 1978). The job situation includes variables such as job scope, job level, role stress, work group size, leadership style, co-worker relations and opportunities for advancements (Steers & Rhodes, 1978). The "pressure-to-attend" variables include economic and market conditions, incentive or reward systems, workgroup norms, personal work ethic, and organisational commitment. Grossbard-Schechtman and Clague (2016) explained that the ability to attend is driven by an individual's personal characteristics and the state of the person's health on that particular day, whereas the motivation to attend is a function of job satisfaction, which is determined by the extent to which the job they do meets the expectations that the person has from the employment.

There are a number of reasons why people need to take time off from work, of which the majority are genuine reasons, and these absences need to be handled sensitively and fairly through carefully managed company procedures (Gangai et al., 2015). If the absences are found not to be genuine, it can be demoralising to other employees who attend work regularly and see their co-workers getting away with it (Gangai et al., 2015).

In order to understand absenteeism, it is useful to consider employee attendance decisions in a more general sense because employees' ability and the desire to attend work determine their attendance levels (Steve & Britt, 2014). Based on the above models, the next sections consider the factors that have an impact on absenteeism.

The principal reason for unscheduled absences in organisations is usually owing to personal illness and family issues because if an employee is ill and has serious problems, he/she is unable to perform his/her job or to come to work (Kocakulah et al., 2016). Health problems and particularly physical illnesses are regarded as some of the most common reasons for non-attendance in organisations (Dunn et al., 2016). The relationship between high absenteeism levels and home circumstances has been identified, particularly where family obligations produce split loyalties for employees who exhibit robust attachments to their jobs and a strong work ethic (Richbell & Minchin, 2011).

Several studies have indicated that emotional health is linked to absenteeism, and stress in particular has been implicated as a determinant of increased absenteeism. Stressful life events at home such as financial and marital problems, personal circumstances and other family-related problems have also been identified as factors that have an impact on productivity and absenteeism as employees tend to carry their stress to work (Netshidzati, 2012). Absences can also be caused by the stress experienced by the workers as a result of a tense atmosphere at work; for example, stress in the workplace can be enhanced by factors resulting from improper organisation (Gajda, 2015).

Past research has shown that job satisfaction has an impact on absenteeism (Yousef, 2016). Increased job satisfaction leads to reduced unplanned or unscheduled absence (Torrington et al., 2014). Thirulogasundaram and Sahu (2014) indicated that although absenteeism may be caused by the employee's inability to come to work, motivation to attend work is assumed to be a major factor in determining how often an employee is absent. High job satisfaction leads to lower absenteeism because satisfied employees come to work (Froome et al., 2012).

Leadership style has been linked with absenteeism, but the relationship is not always clear (Froome et al., 2012). When a leader uses a transactional leadership style, the leader gives rewards in exchange for effort and good performance (Elshout et al., 2013). With a transformational leadership style, it is a personal style involving charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, individualised consideration and extensive delegation; that is, the leader motivates people to participate in the process of change and encourages the foundation of collective identity and efficacy (Elshout et al., 2013). Froome et al. (2012) postulated that when immediate supervisors are perceived to be transformational, employees report greater satisfaction and illegitimate absenteeism decreases. When employees perceive their leaders as passive-avoidant (transactional), their job satisfaction decreases and illegitimate absenteeism increases.

Prior absenteeism levels tend to be a determinant of absenteeism and can be used to predict future absence. Past absenteeism is considered a predictor of future absenteeism, particularly in an organisation in which absenteeism is an acceptable part of the organisational culture and normal working conditions, and the penalties are minimal for employees who exhibit excessive absenteeism (Adegboyega et al., 2015). Absenteeism is therefore a behaviour that might have a stable pattern of occurrence. The culture of absenteeism entitlement is concerning because employees perceive, for example, sick leave as a guaranteed entitlement that should be exploited when it accrues, rather than a benefit that must be used when the employee is really sick and thereby avoid unpaid leave days (HRassured, 2016). Adegboyega et al. (2015) outlined that organisational culture and systems play a vital role in the management of absenteeism in an organisation.

Torre et al. (2015) opined that the design of compensation systems in an organisation influences company-level absenteeism, that is, pay differentials tend to affect absenteeism and influence the way in which the employee perceives the equity of the compensation system. There is evidence that workers are less absent if they enjoy a higher absolute wage, and a higher relative wage (Pfeifer, 2010). They are also less absent if they are employed at a higher hierarchical level, that is, an unequal wage structure has the benefit that relatively well-paid workers are less absent, while the costs of higher absenteeism of workers at the lower end of the wage distribution scale are relatively lower (Pfeifer, 2010).

Firms who organise their workforce into teams for production purposes effectively enable the increase of the importance of the presence of a specific employee towards the attainment of team goals or targets (Dale-Olsen, 2012). As a result, organisations whose employees are organised into teams tend to monitor absenteeism more intensely than those who do not, thereby leading to less absence (Dale-Olsen, 2012). However, if a team is overworked as a result of increasing job demands, the team will experience team-level burnout, which has been proven to significantly predict team absenteeism (Consiglio et al., 2013). Johns (2008) highlighted the growing evidence that absenteeism is highest when social integration is low and social control has broken down in the workplace. There is also evidence that absence behaviours among team members are strongly interrelated since individuals adjust their behaviours according to the norms, attitudes and behaviours that prevail in their work teams (Consiglio et al., 2013).

For the purposes of development of the survey instrument, the factors that affect absenteeism were therefore grouped under the following headings:

- personal issues;
- work or job conditions;

- management and supervision;
- interpersonal relationships; and
- external issues.

Many studies have investigated the way in which demographic variables such as tenure, marital status and the number of dependants, level of education, age, and gender influence absenteeism (Akgeyik, 2014; Belita et al., 2013). Demographic variables such as gender are strongly related to employees' behaviour towards taking leave or being absent (Wang & Reid, 2015). Steve and Britt (2014) indicated that female employees are probably more likely than men to be in situations that constrain their ability to attend work, for example, it has been shown that even in dual-career situations, women tend to assume the primary responsibility for childcare and household chores. The different gender roles that men and women occupy in society, both in the private and professional domains, seem to be a major explanation for differences in relation to absenteeism.

Age is one of the demographic factors that can be studied in relation to absenteeism. Health deteriorates with age and as a result, as employees get older, it can be expected that they will be absent from work more often than younger employees (Aluko, 2015; Belita et al., 2013, Possenriede, 2011). Magee et al. (2016) highlighted that age has been found to predict the levels of absenteeism, for example, age is inversely associated with absenteeism. It has also been found that young employees tend to take short periods of sick leave compared to the sick periods taken by older employees, but at the same time older employees are normally in responsible positions and have a greater work ethic and commitment to their work, resulting in them being less likely to be absent from work (Singh & Chetty, 2016). In addition, older employees will exhibit lower levels of absenteeism because of a higher job commitment and a better person–organisation fit that emerges over time (Senel & Senel, 2012). There are thus conflicting views regarding the relationship between age and absenteeism.

The marital status or household context of an employee is likely to influence absenteeism, for example, single employees without children are more likely to be at work compared to married or employees living with partners and/or children (Possenriede, 2011). Aluko (2015) and Karlsson (2013) mentioned that the number of children and marital status are variables that represent kinship responsibilities and are considered a major contributor to absenteeism. Family responsibilities increase the probability of female employees being absent and work–family conflict among married female employees increased the odds of one resigning or being on long sickness absence (Belita et al., 2013). Kocakulah et al. (2016) also added that divorce can play a huge role in terms of time needed from work and sometimes divorce proceedings can take years to finalise thereby requiring many court appearances. In addition, because divorces take a toll on the family, the knock-on effects are often emotional issues that may cause the individual employee to need additional time off from work (Kocakulah et al., 2016).

There tends to be a negative relationship between education and absenteeism implying that employees with less education have more absences than those with a higher level of education (Aluko, 2015). Also, more educated employees are expected to occupy higher hierarchical positions (Belita et al., 2013), have better job quality with lower health risks and better working conditions and salaries, resulting in less absence from work than those employees who are less educated, even though they may have higher stress levels (Possenriede, 2011). Singh and Chetty (2016) argued that better-educated employees are more involved in their jobs and often experience more job satisfaction that will result in less absence cases.

The level of absenteeism is related to the tenure of work (Lattouf et al., 2014; Singh & Chetty, 2016). Satpathy and Rath (2015) outlined that employees with a higher tenure or longer service with the organisation are less likely to be absent. However, contrary to that view, there are indications that show that short-tenured employees tend to have lower rates of absenteeism because they do not feel that their jobs are secure and still have a positive working attitude (Magee et al., 2016; Singh & Chetty, 2016). In addition, in some organisations, absenteeism is low among new employees, but with time there is a gradual increase in absenteeism that is consistent with those with a longer tenure. This suggests that employees eventually conform to the dominant norms of the organisation in relation to absenteeism (Dello Russo et al., 2013).

There are a number of reasons why people need to be absent from work and these need to be handled with sensitivity and through a fairly managed processes, as absences generate huge losses of productivity resulting in financial losses for organisations (Gangai et al., 2015). Rauf (2015) highlighted that absenteeism is a multifaceted phenomenon which requires a multipronged approach because the causes are so varied. Organisations need to understand absenteeism and the driving factors, if they are to manage and reduce the impact on the organisation.

In South Africa, the impact of absenteeism and presenteeism on the economy in 2015 was estimated to be 4.7 per cent of the GDP (Rasmussen et al., 2015), indicating that absenteeism added substantial costs to the economy and to organisations. Even though it is known that employee absenteeism is costly, it is still a poorly understood organisational phenomenon (Viswanathan et al., 2013). The company under review operates in an environment characterised by low productivity and has not made profits in the past few years (Company X HR report of 2017). The company is labour intensive and one of the reasons the organisation is not meeting its production targets is owing to employee work-attendance issues (Company X HR report of 2017).

The absenteeism rate is approximately double that of the industry norm of 2 per cent and management seeks to reduce that significantly (Company X HR report of 2017). In 2016, a single site had an average of 20 per cent of its employees that were absent owing to various reasons, costing the company an estimated R5 million every month (Company X HR report of 2017). The organisation is negatively affected as

management has to maintain productivity when employees are absent from work by hiring outside labour, or making present employees work excessive overtime, for which they pay a higher hourly rate. This increases the company's operating costs, particularly the total cost of employment in relation to the budget. To reduce human resources costs, to increase productivity and to maintain operational stability, it has become imperative for management to understand the causes of the high levels of absenteeism and determine methods for reducing the problem.

Research Objectives

The research objective of this study was to identify the factors that cause high employee absenteeism at a large South African manufacturer.

Secondary objectives were to determine major causes of absenteeism in the organisation, to establish whether demographic variables have an impact on absenteeism levels, and to assess if there is a relationship between demographic variables and the factors that affect absenteeism.

Research Design

The manufacturer employs just under 5 000 staff at a single site and, in order to obtain a holistic perspective of the factors driving the high rates of absenteeism in the organisation, a quantitative approach was used to access a representative sample of the population. A quantitative approach allowed for the generalisation of the results to the total population and provided data that were easy to measure. The quantitative approach allowed for the most dominant factors determining absenteeism to be distinguished from the less dominant ones. A descriptive approach was adopted.

The questionnaire development was centred on the overall framework of the study and the research objectives. The literature review played a critical role in identifying some of the common factors that affect absenteeism. The questionnaire was adapted from Sichani et al.'s (2011) "Workplace Satisfaction Survey" in which the objective was to identify the primary causes of absence. Factors of absenteeism from the Steers and Rhodes (1978) model of employee attendance were also incorporated in the questionnaire. Permission to use and adapt parts of the questionnaire was obtained from the developers of the questionnaire.

The final questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section A sought biographical data as aligned with the findings of the literature review on the demographic factors that have an impact on absenteeism. Section B was composed of five broad subsections on the causes of absenteeism, that is, personal issues, work or job conditions, management or supervision, interpersonal relationships, and external issues. The respondents rated factors on a five-point Likert scale (anchored from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly

agree) indicating their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement. Section C comprised suggested interventions that can be adopted by the organisation in order to reduce the levels of absenteeism.

The population was the staff employed at one of the manufacturer's sites. The site had an estimated total staff complement of just under 5 000 permanent employees comprising production employees, maintenance employees and managerial employees. The combined number of production and maintenance employees in non-managerial roles was approximately 85 per cent of the staff complement whereas managerial employees constitute approximately 16 per cent. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure that appropriate representation was obtained from both the non-managerial and managerial employees. A sample size of 357 was required (Saunders et al., 2015). Overall, 500 questionnaires were sent out. The data were collected on-site using a self-administered questionnaire. The final sample size was 312, representing a 62 per cent response rate. The sample comprised 86 managerial and 226 non-managerial employees. The sample size was considered adequate, given the homogeneous composition of the workforce.

Ethical Considerations

To receive honest answers from the respondents and to comply with research ethics protocols, the purpose was clearly stated on the questionnaire and the researcher also explained it before the distribution of the questionnaire. The questionnaires were administered anonymously, voluntarily and no compensation was paid to the respondents. The information obtained was treated as confidential. The respondents had the right to withdraw at any time during the process.

Statistical Analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25, was used to analyse the data. The respondents were asked to rate, on a five-point Likert scale (anchored from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), the extent to which they believed each of 35 factors had an impact on their own absenteeism levels. The factors were grouped under the following headings:

- personal issues (11 items: child care or illness of child or school responsibilities; other family responsibilities (illness, elder care, family conflict); personal illness or injury; personal appointment (medical or non-medical); bereavement leave (death in the family); need a day off for personal time; personal distress (for example, depression, divorce, phobia); alcohol- or drug-related issues; not worried about losing your job; lack of motivation to come to work; and personal safety reasons at work);

- work or job conditions (4 items: occupational illness or injury; poor working conditions; long working hours; and tired from working overtime or many consecutive days worked);
- management and supervision (11 items: unchallenging or repetitive work; inability to get approved time off; lack of flexibility regarding the work shifts; lack of adequate resources (for example, no replacement labour); lack of monitoring and consequences of being absent; excessive rework or changes; excessive pressure from supervisor or manager to meet scheduled deadlines or production targets; unclear work assignments or instructions; lack of development opportunities; lack of recognition or incentives (for example, time off, money or appreciation); and low wages or salaries);
- interpersonal relationships (2 items: issues or poor relationships with supervisors or manager or subordinates; and issues or poor relationships with co-workers, for example, poor team spirit, bullying); and
- external issues (7 items: transport issues (traffic congestion, delays, bad weather, car or bus or taxi breakdown); long commuting hours or distance to work; poor transport system to and from work (crowded or overloaded, long waiting time for another bus); missed bus or carpool to the plant; inadequate parking facilities at work; bad weather for working; and unreliable car-share arrangements).

Cronbach's alpha value for the items was 0.946, which exceeds the recommended value of 0.7, suggesting good internal consistency (Pallant, 2016). An exploratory factor analysis was conducted in an effort to summarise the factors which affect absenteeism into structured and more manageable components. The factorability of the data was assessed by making use of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity.

Results

The results are organised into three sections, a description of the sample, an analysis of the causes of absenteeism, and the differences in the results between various groups.

Description of the Sample

The demographic profile of the sample provided an appropriate representation of the composition of the employees at the organisation and is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic profile

Category	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Male	254	81.4
Female	58	18.6
Age		
18–25	52	16.7
26–35	131	42
36–45	42	13.5
46–55	64	20.5
Over 56	23	7.4
Highest qualification		
Below matric	15	4.8
Matric	109	34.9
Trade certificate	56	17.9
Diploma	60	19.2
Degree	34	10.9
Postgraduate	38	12.2
Years of service with the company		
0–1	37	11.9
1–5	101	32.4
5–10	63	20.2
10–15	28	9
15–20	17	5.4
More than 20	66	21.2
Marital status		
Single	124	39.7
Divorced	18	5.8
Married	135	43.3
Living with partner	35	11.2
Dependants		
None	112	35.9
1–2	89	28.5
More than 2	111	35.6

The majority of the respondents were men owing to the heavy labour requirements in this manufacturer's processes. This is also reflected in the age profile, with most respondents being between the ages of 26 and 35 years. The size of the 18 to 25 age group is a result of the steady intake of new employees who are recruited and trained to replace the ageing workforce and resignations. A few respondents have less than a matric, owing to the organisation's current requirement that employees have school-leaving certificates. The young respondent profile is also reflected in the high number

of single people with no or a few dependants. Most participants have been in the organisation for one to five years. This is because the company is constantly recruiting people, partly owing to high labour turnover rate as well as to the company having a large pool of personnel that could be undergoing training at any given time. The second largest group is employees who have been with the organisation for more than 20 years, which can mainly be attributed to limited opportunities in the industry for older persons, thereby resulting in employees staying at the company for a reasonably long time.

To establish absenteeism patterns in the organisation, the respondents were requested to indicate how often they had taken leave in a nine-month period (year to date at the time the survey was conducted). The results are reflected in Table 2.

Table 2: Leave taken in nine-month period

Type of leave	Never %	1 to 3 times %	4 to 5 times %	6 times or more %
Sick leave	37.2	55.1	5.8	1.9
Special leave – study	76.0	15.4	4.8	3.8
Special leave – compassionate	80.4	17.6	1.9	0.0
Special leave – social responsibility	89.4	9.3	1.3	0.0
Special leave – special circumstances	83.7	14.4	1.9	0.0
Special leave – paternity	90.7	9.0	0.3	0.0
Maternity leave	95.8	4.2	0.0	0.0
Vacation leave	29.5	54.2	9.3	7.1
Unpaid leave	92.9	6.1	0.3	0.6

Vacation leave is expected to be relatively high as most respondents had taken some form of vacation over the period, however, sick leave was also particularly high, with almost 62 per cent of the workforce having taken some sick leave over the period.

Exploratory Factor Analysis: Causes of Absenteeism

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted in an effort to summarise the factors which affect absenteeism. The factorability of the data was assessed by making use of the KMO measure of sampling adequacy, which was 0.930, higher than the recommended value of 0.6; and Bartlett's test of sphericity, which reached statistical significance (Pallant, 2016). The items were then subjected to a principal component analysis (PCA). The PCA revealed the presence of seven components with eigenvalues above 1, explaining 37.1 per cent, 8 per cent, 7.3 per cent, 4.6 per cent, 3.6 per cent, 3.4 per cent and 2.9 per cent of the variance respectively, as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Initial factor analysis – Total variance explained

Factor	Initial eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loadings				Rotation sums of squared loadings	
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %
1	12.991	37.117	37.117	12.603	36.009	36.009	5.206	14.874	14.874
2	2.765	7.900	45.017	2.340	6.686	42.696	3.816	10.903	25.777
3	2.551	7.289	52.306	2.207	6.305	49.001	3.299	9.426	35.203
4	1.627	4.648	56.953	1.256	3.590	52.590	2.964	8.467	43.670
5	1.276	3.647	60.600	0.809	2.312	54.903	2.451	7.004	50.673
6	1.215	3.471	64.071	0.717	2.050	56.952	1.479	4.227	54.900
7	1.011	2.889	66.960	0.575	1.642	58.594	1.293	3.694	58.594
8	0.857	2.450	69.410						
9	0.813	2.324	71.734						
10	0.804	2.296	74.030						
11	0.759	2.168	76.198						
12	0.711	2.031	78.229						
13	0.605	1.728	79.957						
14	0.592	1.690	81.647						
15	0.528	1.508	83.155						
16	0.510	1.458	84.613						
17	0.474	1.353	85.966						
18	0.409	1.168	87.134						
19	0.404	1.155	88.289						
20	0.381	1.088	89.376						
21	0.367	1.049	90.425						
22	0.342	0.978	91.404						
23	0.318	0.907	92.311						
24	0.304	0.869	93.180						
25	0.294	0.840	94.020						
26	0.269	0.768	94.788						
27	0.254	0.727	95.515						
28	0.243	0.696	96.210						
29	0.235	0.671	96.881						
30	0.216	0.616	97.497						
31	0.209	0.597	98.094						
32	0.201	0.576	98.670						
33	0.175	0.501	99.171						
34	0.160	0.457	99.628						
35	0.130	0.372	100.000						
Extraction method: Principal axis factoring									

The scree plot also indicated that there was a clear break after the seventh component. In conformity with the Cattell's scree test approach and principles (Pallant, 2016), it was decided that the seven-component solution would be used for further investigation. The factors were rotated using the varimax method with Kaiser normalisation in order to retain them and the items converged into seven factors, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Varimax with Kaiser normalisation results

Rotated factor matrix ^a							
	Factor						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B32	0.810						
B33	0.795						
B36	0.769	0.250					
B34	0.741						
B31	0.739						0.255
B30	0.727						
B35	0.723						
B19		0.688			0.311		
B20		0.680		0.285			
B22	0.313	0.625					
B21	0.261	0.601					
B18		0.565			0.280		
B17		0.484		0.380		0.288	
B23	0.315	0.474		0.414			
B24		0.473		0.384			
B3			0.715				
B4			0.705				
B5			0.665				
B1			0.610				
B2			0.607				
B7			0.541		0.300		
B13	0.278		0.415		0.338		0.263
B26		0.265		0.791			
B27				0.732			
B25				0.709			
B15		0.268			0.789		
B16		0.345			0.586		
B14			0.265	0.257	0.537		

Rotated factor matrix ^a							
	Factor						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
B12	0.314	0.305			0.470	0.273	
B9						0.573	
B10				0.354		0.568	
B6						0.389	
B8						0.309	
B28		0.278		0.271			0.592
B29	0.271			0.288			0.552
Extraction method: Principal axis factoring							
Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalisation ^a							
^a Rotation converged in seven iterations							

Although only two items (B28 and B29) loaded onto the final factor, these were retained as they were a separate section in the survey instrument and could thus be explained as a contained factor. The factor rotation produced seven factors which were categorised as follows:

- external factors (for example, transport issues, long commutes, unreliable car share, bad weather for working);
- management factors (for example, flexibility, ability to get time off, excessive rework, lack of consequences for absenteeism, lack of monitoring, excessive pressure from management to meet deadlines);
- illness and family responsibility;
- personal development (for example, lack of development opportunities, lack of recognition, low wages);
- working conditions (for example, safety, long hours, excessive overtime);
- motivation (for example, alcohol or drug related, need personal time, not worried about losing job); and
- interpersonal relations.

The seven factors' data were further assessed by making use of the KMO and Bartlett's test of sphericity again. The Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p = 0.000$, $p < 0.05$) indicated that the data were appropriate for factor analysis. The KMO of 0.87 is above 0.6, thereby indicating that the factor analysis was appropriate. The results comply with

recommendations required to support the factorability of the correlation matrix. The correlation matrix of the seven factors indicates their strength in relation to each other and the results indicated that all seven factors are adequate and therefore reasonable to use. The communalities were extracted using principal axis factoring and the results indicate that the values of the components were all above 0.3 indicating that all the items fit well with other items in the components.

After the seven factors were established, a further extraction was conducted using principal axis factoring. Components with an eigenvalue of one or more were checked. The results indicated that factor 1 was the only factor with an eigenvalue that exceeded 1 and it explained the total of 56 per cent of the variance on causes of absenteeism. The results of the exploratory factor analysis indicate that absenteeism is influenced by 35 variables, which are represented by seven latent factors. The strong loading on component 1 reveals that there is one primary driver of the causes of absenteeism in the organisation. However, the results of the factor analyses showed that there were seven factors that resulted in absenteeism, that is, external factors, management factors, illness and family responsibilities, personal development, working conditions, motivation, and interpersonal relations. This is supported by the literature of factors affecting absenteeism (Dale-Olsen, 2012; Dunn et al., 2016; Elshout et al., 2013; Yousef, 2016). The results of the factor analyses are supported by the findings from some open-ended questions that cited family responsibility and childcare, personal illness or sickness, and personal time to fix personal issues as the three most dominant reasons why respondents become absent from work. This indicates a convergence on the factors of absenteeism between absenteeism literature and the opinions of the participants.

The reliability of the survey instrument's internal consistency was assessed by using the Cronbach's alpha. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Cronbach's alpha results for the factors of absenteeism

No	Factor	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
1	External factors	0.93	7
2	Management factors	0.91	8
3	Illness and family responsibility	0.84	7
4	Personal development	0.88	3
5	Working conditions	0.84	4
6	Motivation	0.62	6
7	Interpersonal relations	0.75	2

The Cronbach's alpha results of all the seven factors were considered acceptable. Although the value of the motivation factor was relatively low (0.62), Taber (2018) asserts that this is still acceptable. This suggests that the seven factors of absenteeism have good internal consistency.

Group differences were then assessed based on the demographic variables defined for the study. Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests were used to check for normality in each demographic grouping and, based on the results, the Mann-Whitney U test, the Kruskal-Wallis test or independent samples *t*-tests were used to determine whether there were differences between demographic groupings. The results are summarised in Table 6. Significant results are shown in bold.

Table 6: Comparisons of absenteeism factors according to demographic variables

Demographic variable	Factors of absenteeism - Test for normality and significant differences						
	External factors	Management factors	Illness and family responsibilities	Personal development	Working conditions	Motivation	Interpersonal relationships
Age (35 years or younger and older than 35 years)	0.000	0.094	0.003	0.210	0.121	0.443	0.003
Qualifications (matric and below, trade certificate or diploma, degree or higher)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.035	0.001
Marital status (single or divorced and married or living with a partner)	0.003	0.703	(Yes for single or divorced. Not for the rest of the groups) 0.219	0.346	0.026	0.035	0.007
Number of dependants (one or none and two or more)	0.782	0.102	(Yes for one or none dependants. Not for the rest of the groups) 0.135	0.056	0.700	0.008	0.529
Organisational tenure (0–5 years, 5–20 years, more than 20 years)	0.000	0.025	0.001	0.125	0.033	0.032	0.000
Current job level (management and non-management)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.022	0.000	0.489	0.000
Current job level (senior or middle management and junior management)	0.396	0.169	0.044	0.001	0.238	0.364	0.975

$p \leq 0.05$ = significant difference

Discussion

When testing for differences in the causes of absenteeism, there were no significant differences between age groups regarding management factors, personal development, working conditions and motivation, implying that these were not influenced by age. External factors, illness and family responsibilities and interpersonal relationships did, however, show significant differences between the age groups. The difference in external factors is likely to be attributable to older employees having more responsibilities and therefore greater commitment to their jobs (Senel & Senel, 2012), and are therefore more likely to come to work even if there are external factors that have an impact on them. The younger participants generally scored illness and family responsibilities higher as a reason for absenteeism. This is likely attributable to older employees having a better work ethic, such that they still come to work when they are sick unless it is a major illness, whereas younger participants may decide not to come to work over minor illness, believing they should not come to work if they are not feeling well (Singh & Chetty, 2016). It is also likely that younger respondents may have younger families and the associated responsibilities may therefore be higher (Karlsson, 2013). Regarding interpersonal relations it is likely that the younger group members are still settling into their work settings and if they do not have good relationships with their colleagues or supervisors, it can negatively affect their attendance intentions. On the other hand, older employees, who are more mature and used to dealing with different people, still tend to come to work even if they have a negative working relationship with other employees (Bii, 2016).

There is a statistically significant difference across the different educational categories (matric and below, trade certificate or diploma and degree or higher) with regard to all seven factors of absenteeism. This might be because the group of participants with degrees are in higher level jobs with better job satisfaction compared to employees who do not have degrees who will be on the lower-level jobs in the organisation (Singh & Chetty, 2016). As a result, they have different organisational challenges that affect them; hence explaining the difference in perceptions on the factors of absenteeism.

The results showed that there is a significant difference between single or divorced and married or living with a partner regarding external factors, working conditions, motivation and interpersonal relations. The external factors such as transport issues and unreliable car sharing arrangements can affect single or divorced employees more because they might not have a partner to rely on when faced with such external factors. The results also revealed that there is a significant difference in terms of working conditions as a cause of absenteeism. The participants who are single or divorced are more likely to be affected by working conditions and can respond by not attending work, whereas those participants who are married or living with a partner are more likely to have dependants and thus more responsibilities and, as a result, are more likely to continue coming to work (Aluko, 2015). Thirdly, there is a significant difference in terms of motivation as a cause of absenteeism. The difference can be explained by

assuming that if the participants who are single or divorced are not motivated, it is easier for them to decide not to come to work whereas those who are married are more careful and consider the consequences of such a decision and the way in which it affects their families.

There is also a significant difference in terms of interpersonal relationships. The participants who are married or staying with a partner can still come to work even if there are negative interpersonal relationships at work because partners can encourage them to come to work even when they do not feel like it. Marriage or living with a partner imposes increased responsibilities that make a job more valuable, making it less likely for partnered people to miss work even if there are other factors that negatively affect their intentions to come to work (Bii, 2016). The single or divorced participants may not have the same pressure to come to work and regard interpersonal relations as an important part of the working culture and it therefore affects their attendance to work. Generally, the single or divorced participants seem to have fewer push factors that force them to come to work than the participants who are married or living with a partner; that is, their household contexts and influencers of absenteeism are different (Possenriede, 2011).

Literature on family and marital status indicates that the number of dependants that an employee has usually influences their attendance or absenteeism in that single employees without dependants are more likely to be at work compared to those with many dependants (Possenriede, 2011). Motivation is the only factor that showed that there was a significant difference between the groups. The participants with more dependants are motivated to come to work because they have more responsibilities and more financial obligations to look after their families than those who have fewer dependants and who are not too scared to lose their jobs as a result of absenteeism. This is in line with literature which states that there is a negative relationship between absenteeism and family size or family responsibilities (Akgeyik, 2014).

Organisational tenure affects absenteeism in an organisation and the extent of absenteeism is significantly related to the number of years the employee has been with the company (Lattouf et al., 2014). The participants were divided into three categories; those who have been with the organisation between 0 to 5 years, 5 to 20 years, and more than 20 years. The results indicate that there were statistical differences on all the factors of absenteeism in relation to the different categories of organisational tenure except for the personal development factor. This is aligned with some of the literature which outlines that absenteeism is significantly related to the number of years that the employee has been with the company (Lattouf et al., 2014; Singh & Chetty, 2016). The reason for the difference could be because the participants who have been with the company for more than 20 years have established themselves and are now secure in the company (Aluko, 2015). As a result, most of the reasons for absenteeism no longer relate to them, for example, people who have been with the organisation the longest select lack of recognition and/or advancement opportunities as the main causes of

absenteeism over other categories such as illness of the child, and poor working conditions (Sichani et al., 2011).

The employees who have the longest organisational tenure might have good relationships with management and supervisors. Greater organisational tenure is associated with employees being familiar with organisational culture, norms and goals and having acquired social acceptance and stable relationships in that organisation (Steffens et al., 2014). In addition, employees who have been with the organisation for a longer period are likely to have developed organisational loyalty, which could result in decreased absenteeism (Aluko, 2015). The longer they remain in the organisation, the more they commit, irrespective of the stressful circumstances they experience (Asrar et al., 2017).

When testing for differences, the results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between management and non-management participants in terms of how they perceive all the absenteeism factors except for the motivation factor. This view is supported by Belita et al. (2013) who outlined that absenteeism is usually associated with hierarchical levels in the organisation. One of the reasons for the differences is that management represents the organisation and is usually at the forefront of setting absence procedures, trying to improve the working environment, external factors, management factors and all other factors that affect employees' ability to attend work (Torrington et al., 2014). Absenteeism in an organisation reflects the competencies of managers and it is their responsibility to manage absenteeism in a structured and holistic way (Koziol et al., 2016). On the other hand, non-managerial employees will come to work to deliver a service and if they do not feel comfortable, it is easier for them to decide to be absent from work because their perceptions and commitment are often different from that of management employees. Because they are at different ends of the organisational structures, their views will differ significantly (Belita et al., 2013).

A further test was conducted to determine if there are differences in the perceptions in the management category of the respondents. The results revealed that generally there is no significant difference between senior or middle management and junior management on most of the absenteeism factors except for illness, family responsibility and personal development factors. Part of the reason might be that junior managers are responsible for the actual absenteeism management in the organisation and are closer to the people who report to them and request absenteeism permission. This notion was articulated by Townsend and Dundon (2015) when they indicated that supervisors or first-line managers are more closely involved with their employees and are best placed to monitor and manage the attendance of employees who report to them, whereas senior managers are more detached from the shop floor and are committed to providing strategic direction on attendance management.

In relation to the personal development factor as a cause of absenteeism, junior managers were neutral about the reason that the lack of development opportunities can

negatively affect their attendance, likely because, at the organisation, for a junior manager to be promoted to a middle manager, the employee must have a degree and some work experience. If the junior manager does not have a degree, they can feel stagnant and this can be demotivating, resulting in absenteeism. Khoung and Chi (2017) said the glass ceiling affects the employees' commitment to the organisation negatively, decreases job satisfaction, and increases absenteeism and intentions to leave the organisation. However, management does not agree with these reasons, possibly because they think the organisation offers good personal development opportunities and invests a lot in training and development of employees. Junior managers have to manage a range of issues including personal development and coaching of employees which are often unseen by senior managers or business owners (Townsend & Dundon, 2015). Management spearheads such initiatives hence the unlikeliness of them to agree with the lack of personal development opportunities as an absenteeism factor.

Managerial Implications

The results firstly suggested that there were considerable differences across all demographic factors for illness and family responsibilities, particularly among younger employees, less qualified employees, employees with more dependants, and employees in non-managerial positions. This suggests that employees, mostly at lower pay grades, find it difficult to balance work responsibilities with family responsibilities, likely owing to a lack of alternative arrangements when family responsibilities intervene. Management should consider investigating the extent to which interventions such as family wellness days, clinics, and on-site day-care facilities are likely to have an impact on absenteeism levels.

Working conditions are also a major consideration in absenteeism decisions, affecting non-managerial employees more than managerial employees. This is expected, as non-managerial employees are generally engaged in manual tasks in difficult work environments. This suggests that management needs to consider investigating aspects related to safety and comfort in the workplace and the extent to which these would have an impact on absenteeism behaviour.

The strong focus on interpersonal work relationships across most demographic groupings suggests that this issue needs to be dealt with in the organisation. Management should consider investigating the efficacy of conflict resolution measures. Grievance procedures, conflict resolution forums and training across all employment levels to facilitate understanding of managerial and non-managerial responsibilities should all be considered.

An external factor such as transport to and from work is often an issue for non-managerial and younger employees, suggesting that management could consider the viability of providing transport services for certain employees.

Management factors tend to be an issue, which is significant for organisational tenure and job levels, in particular. Part of this relates to aspects such as excessive pressure from management, suggesting that workloads need to be considered to ensure that these are appropriate for each level of employment. This factor also considers aspects such as the lack of consequences for absenteeism, suggesting that management may not be effective in managing this aspect and training may be required to ensure that company policies are adhered to. It is also likely that company policies need to be reconsidered.

Motivation appears to be a consistent issue across all demographic groups, suggesting that the organisation consider the factors that motivate employees, such as wages and career development, and determine the effectiveness of such interventions in this environment. Personal development also needs to be considered within this framework.

Recommendations for Future Research

The research has considered the factors that drive absenteeism in organisations, as well as the way in which they are impacted by selected demographic variables. An extension of this study could consider testing which of these factors are likely to predict absenteeism, allowing organisations to identify and mitigate the current drivers of absenteeism.

An additional stream of future research would be the validation of the instrument, as defined by this research. The research could also be expanded to other manufacturing organisations to determine the generalisability of results, and extended to other types of organisation, to allow for comparisons. This would provide a comprehensive perspective of the issue within a developing economic environment. Comparisons with other countries would also be of value.

The findings suggest that a “one-size-fits-all” approach is unlikely to be successful. Although a broad range of intervention areas are suggested by the findings, including corrective and compensatory or non-punitive interventions, the usefulness of such measures would need to be considered before implementation. A future research area is thus to identify measures to minimise absenteeism and to test their effectiveness. This could also be considered at demographic level to identify the types of intervention that are most likely to be successful for various groups of people.

Contribution and Value of the Study

Absenteeism is a major issue in the South African economy (Mishra & Verma, 2017). Although the sampling method does not allow for generalisability, this work has highlighted some of the key drivers of absenteeism in a typical South African company, and also the way in which these factors have an impact on the different types of employee. The study provides a novel perspective on identifying the factors that drive

individual absenteeism behaviour, thereby allowing for the determination of focused interventions to reduce absenteeism in the overall organisation. Owing to the comprehensive nature of the questionnaire and the use of a pre-existing survey instrument, this methodology allows for replication across a wide range of industries to assist management in identifying the organisation specific drivers and thus areas for intercessions.

Conclusion

The study sought to determine the drivers of absenteeism, which showed that being on the lower rungs of the organisational hierarchy is more closely associated with higher levels of absenteeism. These higher levels of absenteeism can be largely owing to lower wages, lower levels of job satisfaction, less attractive working conditions, and being more affected by external factors, which is possibly associated with fewer available alternatives for childcare, transport, etc. The study thus demonstrates the necessity of understanding personal circumstances within the absenteeism narrative. Identifying root causes, from an individual as well as an organisational perspective, is thus critical to the success of management of absenteeism within the South African environment.

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