# Absenteeism and Presenteeism in an Emergency Services' Call Centre

Stephen Deery and Janet Walsh

Department of Management, King's College London, Franklin-Wilkins Building
150 Stamford Street, London SE1 9NH
Email: stephen.deery@kcl.ac.uk; janet.walsh@kcl.ac.uk

## Introduction

Absenteeism appears to be an almost universal feature of call centre work (Frenkel et al. 1999; Grandey 2004; Saxton et al. 1991). In the UK, for example, call centre workers have absenteeism rates that are nearly double the national average (CIPD 2009). Evidence suggests that this may result from the pressure and intensity of the tasks that are performed (Zapf 2002). Work involving frequent face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions with customers has been associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion (Maslach and Jackson 1981), absence taking (Deery et al. 2002) and employee turnover (Batt 2002). In this context, absenteeism has often been represented as a form of withdrawal from the strains of emotional labour requiring what Hackett et al (1998) have termed "mental health days". It can be seen to reflect a coping strategy through which the employee takes time off work to minimise the effects of work strain. Darr and Johns (2008) have called this the restorative model of absence. Short bouts of absence are said to help to restore or replenish an individual's physical or psychological resources. Absenteeism may also result from stressful work demands such as over work where an employee's absence is involuntary and attributable to stress-induced illness. This has sometimes been called the medical or health model of absenteeism (Johns 2009).

Not all call centres perform the same type of work or operate under the same service delivery requirements (Batt and Moynihan 2002). Some have work regimes that are relatively benign while others place intense demands upon their staff (Russell 2008). Call centres that are engaged in emergency services such as those that respond to 999 calls could be expected to be particularly stressful working environments for employees. The calls are often emotionally charged and the service providers are not infrequently required to deal with life and death situations. Callers are normally distressed and the operator is required to obtain accurate information on the nature of the emergency, assist the caller with their immediate situation and ascertain the need for appropriate services. Not only must the service providers be empathetic, sensitive and resourceful they must also be able to make appropriate judgements about how to respond to the emergency. Moreover, the tasks must be executed with the maximum of speed. Role stressors of this type normally are associated with greater burnout (Cordes and Dougherty 1993) and with poorer employee health and higher levels of withdrawal from the workplace (Holman 2004).

However, there may also be reasons to think that employees engaged in these types of interactive service jobs may be reluctant to be absent from work. Research indicates that service workers

who interact closely with vulnerable clients or those with whom they feel they have a duty of care often feel obligated to provide those services and can be unwilling to take time off work even when they suffer from emotional strain (Aronsson et al. 2000). Attending work when unwell or 'presenteeism' is said to be more common than absenteeism in a number of care-giving or helping occupations in the health services sector (Elstad and Vabo 2008). This could well extend to call centre workers providing medical advice via the telephone (Collin-Jacques and Smith 2005) and to those in emergency services although the same close bond with the client may not be quite so evident (Sanderson et al. 2007).

Studies have shown that presenteeism is not only associated with a commitment to the client or service recipient but is also affected by the culture of the workplace and by perceived obligations to fellow team members or colleagues not to burden them further with extra work (McKevitt et al. 1997).  Presenteeism is thought to raise the risk of longer term ill health for employees because it restricts opportunities for recuperation (Aronsson and Gustafsson 2005). Employees suffering from mental exhaustion have a greater susceptibility to the common cold and longitudinal research has shown a relationship between presenteeism and serious coronary events (Kivimaki et al. 2005). Presenteeism can also be associated with productivity and efficiency losses for organisations (see Johns 2009a: 17-18). Sick employees can spread illness, they can be less attentive to safety matters and they can deliver poorer quality service.

This paper has two objectives. Firstly, it seeks to examine the factors affecting absenteeism among call centre staff employed in emergency services work. The study looks in particular at the effects of compressed work schedules, work to family/life conflict and emotional exhaustion on absenteeism. Secondly, it seeks to identify the determinants of presenteeism in this organisational context. It is expected that the level of presenteeism will be affected by organizational attendance norms and by perceived obligations to the public and colleagues to attend work. The paper initially examines the literature on call centre work before looking at the research on compressed working schedules, work to family/life conflict, emotional exhaustion and absence. We then discuss the literature on the likely antecedents and outcomes of presenteeism and outline our research hypotheses. This is followed by a description of the research context, details of the study and an analysis of our empirical findings.


**Call centre work**


The work environment of a call centre is stressful. Employees are required to interact continuously with customers or clients while simultaneously working with sophisticated computer-based systems that dictate both the pace of their work and monitor their performance (Deery and Kinnie 2004). Call centre workers also face contradictory demands. They are expected to deliver personalised service quality at the same time as they process calls with a maximum of speed and efficiency (Korczynski 2002). Their jobs are often highly scripted and tightly controlled and yet employees are often required to be spontaneous and caring and exercise judgement and discretion (Batt 2002). In their interaction with customers employees are often forced to express emotions they do not feel (such as being friendly or happy) or suppress emotions that they genuinely do feel (such as anger or frustration).

The negative effects of call centre work may be more evident in some types of work situations than others. Sustained contact with customers with few opportunities either to vary the pace of work or the nature of the tasks can result in greater burnout (Morris and Feldman 1996). Moreover, the nature of the interaction between the service provider and the customer can affect job stress. Calls from customers who are hostile, rude, aggressive or distressed are likely to be more tiring and emotionally exhausting (Macdonald and Sirianni 1996). Working time arrangements and issues relating to work to family/life balance can also affect the well-being of employees. Many call centres operate around the clock to meet the needs of their customers. In the United Kingdom call centres are said to have some of the longest operating hours in Europe. A survey found that almost a third of all call centres operated 24 hours a day (Call Centres 2002). Of these, more than three-quarters were open 365 days a year. In these types of work contexts flexible and compressed working week schedules have been identified as a means of providing more discretionary time to employees to balance better their work and non-work demands (Baltes et al. 1999).

**Research propositions**

Flexible working arrangements allow workers greater control over the management of their out of work responsibilities. Compressed work week schedules in particular enable employees to enjoy larger periods of time off work and greater opportunities to harmonise work and non-work activities. It is not uncommon for organizations providing a 24-hour service to adopt alternative compressed work schedules such as a 12-hour day with employees working four-days-on and four-days-off (Pierce and Dunham 1992). Some studies have reported that compressed working weeks have been associated with increased job and life satisfaction and with reduced stress and burnout (see Baltes et al. 1999; Grzywacz et al. 2008). Although there has been little research on the effect of a compressed workweek on work to family/life conflict Facer and Wadsworth (2008) provide some support for the view that employees on compressed working hours experience lower levels of work to family/life conflict than those who work on regular hours. In our study we would therefore expect to find that perceived work to family/life conflict would be lower for employees who were satisfied with working a compressed workweek schedule. Thus

*Hypothesis 1: Satisfaction with compressed workweek will be negatively associated with work to family/life conflict.*

Emotional exhaustion is a particularly common phenomenon in call centres (Holman 2004). Job demands such as high work pressures and role overload have been widely identified as important predictors of this form of job strain (Bakker et al. 2003). Less attention has been paid to the effect of demands outside the workplace and in particular to the effect of inter-role stressors between the domains of work and family on emotional exhaustion in call centres. In the context of high job demands work to family/life conflict may place additional pressures on an employee's resources and increase the likelihood of emotional exhaustion, ill-health and absence. Studies of inter-domain (work-family) conflict indicate that it is often difficult to successfully perform multiple roles and that invariably conflicting time demands and incompatible behaviours among roles are associated with stressful outcomes (Grandey and Cropanzano 1999). The wider participation of parents and dual-career couples in the labour force

3

can create greater potential for conflicts to occur between work and non-work roles for both women and men (Cooper et al. 2001: 52). Thus

*Hypothesis 2: Work to family/life conflict will be positively associated with emotional exhaustion.*

There is evidence to indicate that emotional exhaustion is associated with higher absence. Studies conducted at the organizational level have found a positive relationship between emotional exhaustion and absenteeism among call centre workers (Deery et al. 2002), production employees (Bakker et al. 2003) and managers (Schaufeli et al. 2009). At the national level epidemiological research has similarly identified a relationship between burnout (including emotional exhaustion) and sickness absence (Ahola et al. 2008). These findings are consistent with Johns' (2009) medical or health model of absenteeism in which sickness absence is seen as a response to workplace strains. By depleting an employee's coping resources emotional exhaustion can lead to illness and consequently absence. Darr and Johns (2008) found a positive but small strain-absence relationship in their meta-analysis of research on work strain, health and absenteeism. Thus

*Hypothesis 3: Emotional exhaustion will be positively associated with absence.*

Perceptions of organizational justice may affect an individual's response to emotional exhaustion. It is evident that feelings of fairness and justice can shape individual attitudes and behaviour within organizations (Cole et al. 2010). Masterson et al. (2000) argue that acts of supervisory fairness can develop a sense of employee obligation to reciprocate in ways that preserve and enhance the social exchange relationship. This may involve voluntary actions such as extra role behaviour that benefit the work unit and the supervisor. Employees who feel more justly treated may be more willing to cope with stress symptoms like fatigue and tiredness without taking time off work. Where supervisors are supportive of their staff and sensitive to their needs and demonstrate interactional justice employees may be less willing to withdraw from the organization in situations of psychological strain (Gellatly 1995). This is highly relevant in situations of absenteeism where supervisors normally manage the disciplinary process. Therefore we would expect that employees' perceptions of greater interactional justice would reduce the effect of emotional exhaustion on absenteeism.

*Hypothesis 4: The relationship between emotional exhaustion and absence will be weaker (less positive) to the extent that employees perceive high interactional justice.*

Presenteeism has been defined as "attending work while ill" (Johns 2010). Although there has been considerable interest in the loss of productivity that might occur when employees come to work ill and perform at less than full capacity there have been few studies that have examined either the antecedents of presenteeism or its consequences (Demerouti et al. 2009). It has been suggested that there may be a number of reasons why employees may turn up for work when they are ill. Caverley et al. (2007) believe that individuals who work in jobs that provide services to other people may be more reluctant to take time off when sick because of their sense of obligation or responsibility to their clients or customers. This may be particularly relevant in care giving occupations (Elstad and Vabo 2008).

4

It has also been argued that employees may feel compelled to attend work when ill because of feelings of obligation to their co-workers and their desire not to impose an additional burden upon them (Johns 2008). This may be especially acute in situations of understaffing and where there is a lack of back up support when absence occurs (Aronsson and Gustafsson 2005). Another factor that could contribute to presenteeism is the approach taken by management to absenteeism. Strict or punitive enforcement policies could make employees reluctant to take time off sick in cases when they are genuinely sick. Grinyer and Singleton (2000: 7) have argued that fear associated with tacking sick leave can make it a 'risk-taking' activity rather than a health promoting one thereby encouraging presenteeism. High absence levels can also affect promotional opportunities and even trigger dismissal. On the basis of the extant literature we would therefore propose the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 5: Perceived obligations to service recipients and work colleagues will be positively related to presenteeism.*

*Hypothesis 6: Perceptions of strict attendance enforcement will be positively associated with presenteeism.*

It is generally believed that presenteeism has negative consequences for employee well-being and can lead to longer term illness and increased health problems (Kivimaki et al. 2005). It has been proposed that presenteeism can limit opportunities for recuperation and reduce the ability to recover from an illness thereby depleting an individual's resources and increasing the likelihood of fatigue and burnout Aronsson and Gustafsson 2005). In a longitudinal study of nurses Demerouti et al. (2009) found that presenteeism was positively associated with emotional exhaustion. The authors argued that a lack of recuperation after sickness can result in enhanced feelings of exhaustion and lead to a deterioration in an employee's mental and physical condition. Thus

*Hypothesis 7: Presenteeism will be positively associated with emotional exhaustion.*

**Research setting**

The study was conducted in a 999 emergency call centre in the United Kingdom. The site takes around 6000 calls a day and is one of three which manages all emergency calls in a large urban conurbation. Operators receive emergency calls from the public about incidences that can range from motor car accidents, burglaries and assaults to domestic violence, murders and suicides. Staff are required to obtain information on the reported incident, assist the caller and provide assistance at the scene of the incident. The average call duration is approximately six minutes but some calls can last to up to 20 minutes. The work is characterised by difficult and often challenging interactions with members of the public. Moreover, all calls are recorded and any errors or misjudgements that involve a loss of life can result in a public coronial inquiry. The centre operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year on a 12 hour rotating shift. Several years earlier staff had worked a more conventional eight-hour five days a week shift arrangement but a new rotating four-days-on four-days-off  48 hour, eight-day week work schedule was introduced to

provide a more efficiently run service, reduce travelling time for employees and enable staff to have longer blocks of time off work.

In 2009 surveys were distributed to 476 'first contact and despatch'staff who work in the centre. Staff were provided with a questionnaire, an information sheet on the purpose of the study and a postage-paid envelope. They were asked to supply their payroll number so that the questionnaire could be matched to their absence data held in the organization's personnel records. A total of 274 surveys were returned. Of these 18 surveys could not be used because they were missing employee identification numbers. This resulted in 256 usable questionnaires with matching absence data, giving a 54 per cent response rate. We tested for differences between the usable and non-usable survey groups and found no significant differences for age, education or tenure although females were more highly represented in the non-usable group. A majority (57 per cent) of the respondents were female, 89 per cent worked full-time, the mean age was 39 years (SD = 10.2) and the average tenure was 6.4 years (SD = 4.3). Education levels were high with almost a quarter of the respondents holding a university degree or diploma. The average level of education was 13.85 years (SD = 2.0).

## Measurement

*Absence* was calculated as the total number of days lost through sick leave in the 12 month period up to the administration of the survey. Data for each respondent were collected from the organization's personnel records. The mean absence time lost was 13.71 days (SD = 27.17). *Emotional exhaustion* was a three-item scale from Wharton (1993). Sample items included 'I feel emotionally drained from my work' and 'I feel burned out from my work'. *Attendance enforcement* was measured by three items adapted from Iverson and Deery (2001) and included 'Management is very strict about unscheduled days off' and 'When you are scheduled for work management really expects you to be there'. *Interactional justice* was assessed through three items from Moorman (1991) including 'My supervisor considers my viewpoint' and 'My supervisor treats me with kindness and consideration'. *Satisfaction with compressed workweek* was a two-item measure developed by the researchers consisting of 'I am happy working 12 hour shifts' and 'I am generally satisfied with my working hours'. *Work to family/life conflict* was a five-item scale from Netemeyer et al. (1996) and included 'My job produces strain that makes it difficult to fulfil family/personal obligations' and 'The demands of my work interfere with my home and family/personal life'.

 *Presenteeism* was measured by a single item 'How many times during the past 12 months have you gone to work despite feeling that you really should have taken sick leave because of your state of health' and was modified from Aronsson and Gustafsson (2005). The mean for presenteeism was 2.46 times (SD = 4.31). *Obligation to colleagues*  was a three-item scale developed by the researchers and included 'If I'm absent from work I am concerned that it would create problems for my colleagues' and 'I feel a moral responsibility to my colleagues to attend work'. *Obligation to the public* used a three-item measure formulated by the researchers and included 'I feel that I have a moral obligation to the public to attend work even if I am not well' and 'I do not feel I have a responsibility to the public to be at work when I am not well' (R). *Positive affectivity* was a three-item scale adapted from Agho et al. (1992) and measured the

6

degree to which an individual held a positive disposition towards life and work: 'For me life is a great adventure' and 'I usually find ways to liven up my day'.

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations and scale reliabilities where appropriate.

**Table 1: Scale Means, Standard Deviations and Reliability Alphas**

| Variable | Mean | SD | Cronbach's α |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive Affectivity | 3.53 | .80 | .73 |
| Satisfaction with Compressed Hours | 3.94 | 1.15 | .90 |
| Work to Family/Life Conflict | 3.18 | 1.07 | .93 |
| Emotional Exhaustion | 3.25 | 1.15 | .92 |
| Interactional Justice | 3.41 | .98 | .90 |
| Attendance Enforcement | 4.53 | .53 | .64 |
| Colleague Obligation | 3.32 | .99 | .86 |
| Public Obligation | 3.15 | .98 | .82 |
| Presenteeism | 2.46 | 4.31 | - |
| Total Absence | 13.71 | 27.17 | - |

The control variables of age, sex, education, tenure and full-time were single items (age: years; male = 1; female = 0; education = years; tenure = years; full-time = 1; part-time/reduced hours = 0).

## Results

Information on the correlations among the variables is presented in Table 2.  It can be noted that satisfaction with compressed workweek is negatively associated with work-life conflict (r= -.496, p< .01) and that work-life conflict is positively associated with emotional exhaustion (r = .566, p< .01). Emotional exhaustion is positively associated with absenteeism (r = .219, p< .01) and negatively related to interactional justice          (r =. 277, p< .01). Presenteeism is positively associated with perceptions of attendance enforcement (r= .168, p< .05) and with emotional exhaustion (r= .180, p< .01).

7

**Table 2: Correlation Matrix of Control and Scale Variables**

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Age | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Sex | .146* | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Education | -.264** | .117 | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Tenure | .314** | .044 | -.111 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Full-time | -.008 | .071 | .001 | -.100 | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Positive Affectivity | -.024 | .080 | .048 | -.016 | -.082 | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Satisfaction with Compressed Hours | .109 | .108 | -.008 | -.013 | .142* | .139* | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Work to Family/Life Conflict | -.008 | .001 | .056 | .080 | -.061 | -.207** | -.496** | | | | | | | |
| 9. Emotional Exhaustion | -.010 | -.117 | -.096 | .041 | -.073 | -.213** | -.392** | .566** | | | | | | |
| 10. Interactional Justice | -.169** | -.005 | .082 | -.174** | .052 | .100 | .121 | -.282** | -.277** | | | | | |
| 11. Attendance Enforcement | -.056 | -.105 | -.040 | -.115 | -.096 | -.041 | -.037 | .184** | .189** | -.124* | | | | |
| 12. Obligation to Colleagues | -.056 | -.026 | .099 | -.008 | .091 | .166** | .210** | -.024 | -.036 | .047 | .110 | | | |
| 13. Obligation to Public | -.052 | .011 | .066 | -.024 | .028 | .167** | .161* | .038 | -.015 | -.019 | .120 | .562** | | |
| 14. Presenteeism | -.056 | -.092 | .091 | .000 | -.019 | -.007 | -.228** | .171** | .180** | -.101 | .168* | -.096 | -.092 | |
| 15. Total Absence | .028 | -.084 | .007 | .103 | -.027 | -.173** | -.214** | .184** | .219** | -.195** | .143* | -.153* | -.125* | .305** |

The multivariate results are provided in Table 3. The first column of the table presents information on the statistical relationships between the control variables, compressed workweek satisfaction and work to family/life conflict. Consistent with Hypothesis 1 we found that employee satisfaction with a compressed workweek was negatively related to work-life conflict (B = - 0.50). In the second column it can be seen that work-life conflict had a positive association with emotional exhaustion (B = 0.53). This provides support for Hypothesis 2. The third column provides information on the determinants of absenteeism (without the effect of the interaction term). Emotional exhaustion had a positive effect   (B = 0.17) on absenteeism which was consistent with our expectations in Hypothesis 3. Interactional justice (B = - 0.15) and positive affectivity (B = - 0.13) had a negative effect on absenteeism. Finally we can turn to the effect of the moderator on absenteeism. It can be seen in column four that perceptions of high interactional justice weakened the effect of emotional exhaustion on absenteeism (B = - 0.15) thus confirming Hypothesis 4.

**Table 3:    Absence Model Regressions**

| | **Work to Family/Life Conflict** | **Emotional Exhaustion** | **Total Absence (Restricted)** | **Total Absence (Full)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Controls** | | | | |
| Age | .02 | -.03 | .01 | .03 |
| Sex | .03 | -.08 | -.06 | -.06 |
| Education | .08 | -.11 | .07 | .06 |
| Tenure | .06 | -.01 | .07 | .07 |
| Full-time | -.01 | -.03 | .00 | .01 |
| Positive Affectivity | -.11 | -.08 | -.13* | -.13* |
| **Direct Effects** | | | | |
| Satisfaction with Compressed Hours | -.50*** | | | |
| Work to Family/ Conflict | | .53*** | | |
| Emotional Exhaustion | | | .17* | .16* |
| Interactional Justice | | | -.15* | -.11 |
| EE x IJ | | | | -.15* |
| **Adj R$^2$** | .26 | .30 | .06 | .09 |

Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the interaction. It is evident that employees who reported high interactional justice took less absence when experiencing high emotional exhaustion than those employees who reported low interactional justice.

**Figure 1:  Moderating Effect of Interactional Justice on the Relationship between Emotional Exhaustion and Total Absence**
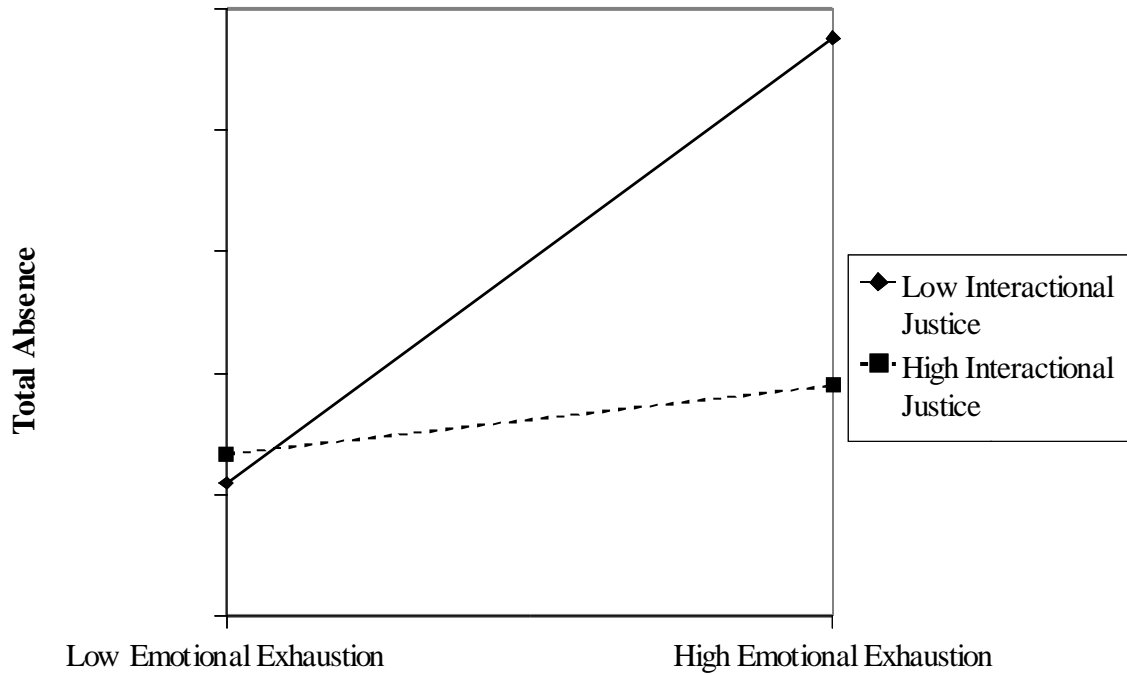


Hypothesis 5 and 6 predicted that presenteeism would be positively affected by perceived obligations to the public and to work colleagues and by the perceived strictness of the organization's attendance management practices. In Table 4 we can see that obligations to the public and to colleagues had no effect on presenteeism therefore disconfirming Hypothesis 5. However, we did find that perceptions of attendance enforcement had a positive effect (B = 0.19) which is consistent with our expectations in Hypothesis 6. Finally, as predicted in Hypothesis 7 presenteeism was associated with significantly higher emotional exhaustion (B = 0.19).

**Table 4:       Presenteeism Model Regressions**

|  | **Presenteeism** | **Emotional Exhaustion** |
|---|---|---|
| **Controls** |  |  |
| Age | -.04 | -.03 |
| Sex | -.09 | -.06 |
| Education | .14 | -.10 |
| Tenure | .06 | .02 |
| Full-time | .04 | -.07 |
| Positive Affectivity | .01 | -.15* |
| **Direct Effects** |  |  |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Attendance Enforcement | .19** | |
| Public Obligation | -.12 | |
| Colleague Obligation | -.08 | |
| Presenteeism | | .19** |
| **Adj R$^2$** | .04 | .05 |

## Discussion

This study sought to understand how particular attitudinal factors were related to both absenteeism and presenteeism in a 999 call centre. Frontline emergency service work can be emotionally demanding. Operators are required to respond continuously to crisis situations. They are obliged to make calm, accurate and informed decisions to dispatch emergency services at the same time as they must suppress their own private feelings or concerns about a caller's welfare. However, as one service operator said: "...if your job is other people's grief or other people's pain, you don't necessarily get to have closure with that....you carry it around with you" (Guy et al. 2008: 4).

In part recognition of these types of workplace stressors some organizations have altered their patterns of working both to meet employees' preferences for longer and more 'recuperative' periods away from work and to make more productive use of their physical resources (Latack and Foster 1985; Venne 1997). Compressed workweeks have also been viewed as providing employees with greater opportunities to harmonise their work and non-work/family demands (Pierce and Dunham 1992). Our study found that employee satisfaction with compressed workweek schedules was associated with less work to family/life conflict. Although few studies have established this relationship it is broadly consistent with literature that suggests that both flexible work scheduling and compressed workweeks are associated with reduced stress and burnout (Grzywacz et al. 2008).

 A number of respondents in our survey commented positively on the working hour arrangements: "I, for one, find the 12 hour shift pattern extremely beneficial to my home life" while two other staff members wrote: "12 hour shifts suit my needs as a carer, as it leaves me more time to arrange appts [appointments] etc on rest days" and "the current 12 hour shift pattern gives me the best life/work balance by far". It was also felt that the compressed workweek had recuperative benefits. One respondent wrote that they liked the 12 hour shifts "because you get enough rest days to recover and have a social life" while another two staff members commented that "it allows me plenty of rest between shifts" and it "works very well and  ... gives sufficient time to recover for the next set of shifts". These comments are consistent with Pierce and Dunham's (1992) argument that employees will display more positive job attitudes when their work-schedule preferences and non-work demands are more closely matched to their actual work schedules.

The study also identified a positive relationship between work to family/life conflict and emotional exhaustion which in turn was positively associated with absence-taking. Our results

11

attest to the organizational benefits of assisting employees to balance their demands from work to family by providing them with opportunities for alternative working arrangements such as a compressed workweek. It should be noted however that compressed workweeks are a form of 'inflexible flexibility' and are a less useful means of managing work and non-work responsibilities than flextime arrangements where working hours can be modified around a core set of hours (Grzywacz et al. 2008). Nevertheless, our study shows that satisfaction with compressed working hours does act to reduce emotional exhaustion (through work to family/life conflict) and indirectly affect the level of absence taking. Although few studies have linked either the use of compressed workweek schedules (see Baltes et al. 1999) or work-family conflict (see Kelly et al. 2009) to decreased absenteeism our study suggests that such relationships may exist.

Organizational justice has been identified as a possible cause of absenteeism. de Boer et al. (2002) found that both distributive unfairness and procedural unfairness predicted absenteeism and argued that employees may feel stressed from perceived unfairness and consequently report sick. Johns (2008) has suggested that notions of equity and justice may also help shape employee's perceptions of their relationship with their organization. Where an employee feels unfairly treated he or she may reciprocate by withholding effort and withdrawing from work. The issue of interactional justice is particularly relevant to this decision-making process. Masterson et al. (2000) found that employees' perceptions of fair treatment from their supervisor became integrated into their experiences and was associated with extra role behaviours such as being conscientious and displaying a greater willingness to help co-workers. We argued that employees may respond to perceptions of interactional justice by taking less absence when they experienced emotional exhaustion. Our findings supported this contention and indicated that supervisory behaviour can affect employee absence. If supervisors show fairness and sensitivity in dealing with absenteeism it is possible that employees will reciprocate in ways that seek to preserve that relationship and take less time off work when they are tired, weary and fatigued.

The study also sought to identify the antecedents and outcomes of presenteeism. It has been argued that employees may attend work while sick for a number of organizational, job-related and personal reasons (Johns 2010). Our research in particular looked at organizational policies concerning attendance control and job-related factors pertaining to a sense of responsibility to the public or to colleagues to attend work. We were also interested in investigating the possible effect of presenteeism on emotional exhaustion as it has been pointed out that employees who attend work while ill may suffer from greater burnout and longer term health problems (Aronsson and Gustafsson 2005; Demerouti et al. 2009; Grinyer and Singleton 2000). We found no evidence that perceived obligations to the public or to colleagues affected the level of presenteeism. Any concern that emergency call centre workers may have had about members of the public or their work colleagues did not seem to shape their decisions on whether or not to attend work while ill.

In contrast, perceptions of strict attendance enforcement were associated with greater presenteeism. This was consistent with written feedback we received from respondents who complained of being forced back to work despite being ill. One respondent wrote of "Management 'bullying' people not to take time off even when they are genuinely ill" while another commented: "I believe one of the reasons for high levels of sickness is the fear of

disciplinary measures used against people. This leads to people coming in sick/injured and not recovering properly". In a further observation a staff member noted: "There is too much pressure to not go sick ....This often leads to people working when sick, spreading germs and resulting in more people being sick" while another wrote: "The systematic harassment by management to lower sickness levels means staff are attending work when they shouldn't be".

Finally, the study revealed that presenteeism was associated with higher emotional exhaustion. This finding was consistent with Demerouti et al. (2008). It is evident that presenteeism can lead to greater strain which in turn can result in a deterioration in an employee's mental and physical health (Aronsson et al. 2000; Caverley et al. 2007). Organizational policies that act to reduce absenteeism by forcing employees to attend work while ill may actually contribute to lower productivity and poorer operational performance. Employees who are emotionally exhausted can make mistakes and commit important errors of judgement. In the context of an emergency call centre this may have serious consequences for the quality of the service provided.

## Acknowledgement

## References

Agho, A. O., Mueller, C. W. and Price, J. L. 1992. Discriminate validity of measures of job satisfaction, positive affectivity, and negative affectivity. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 65:185-196.

Ahola, K., Kivimaki. M., Honkonen, T., Virtanen, M., Koskinen, S., Vahtera, J. and Lonnqvist, J. 2008. Occupational burnout and medically certified sickness: A population-based study of Finnish employees. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 64:185-193.

Aronsson, G., Gustafsson, K. and Dallner, M. 2000. Sick but yet at work: An empirical study of sickness presenteeism. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 54:502-509.

Aronsson, G. and Gustafsson, K. 2005. Sickness presenteeism: Prevalence, attendance-pressure factors, and an outline of a model for research. *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 47:958-966.

Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E., de Boer, E. and Schaufeli, W. B. 2003. Job demands and job resources as predictors of absence duration and frequency. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 62: 341-356.

Batt, R. 2002. Managing customer services: Human resource practices, quit rates and sales growth. *Academy of Management Journal*, 45:587-597.

Batt, R. and Moynihan, L. 2004. The viability of alternative call centre production models. In S. Deery and N. Kinnie (eds.), *Call Centres and Human Resource Management: A Cross-National Perspective*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.25-53.

Baltes, B. B., Briggs, T. E., Huff, J. W., Wright, J. A. and Neuman G. A. 1999. Flexible and compressed workweek schedules: A meta-analysis and their effects on work-related criteria. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 84: 496-513.

Call Centres. 2002. *Reward and Work-life Strategies*. Philip Pearson and Michael Thewlis, London: Industrial Relations Services.

Caverley, N., Barton Cunningham, J. and Macgregor, J. N. 2007. Sickness presenteeism, sickness absenteeism, and health following restructuring in a public service organization. *Journal of Management Studies*, 44: 304-319.

Chadwick-Jones, J. K., Nicholson, N. and Brown, C 1982. *Social Psychology of Absenteeism*. New York: Praeger Scientific.

CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development). 2009. *Absence Management: Annual Survey Report 2009*. London: CIPD

Collin-Jacques, C. and Smith, C. 2005. Nursing on the line: Experiences from England and Quebec (Canada). *Human Relations*, 58: 5-32.

Cole, M. S., Bernerth, J. B., Walter, F. and Holt, D. T. 2010. Organizational justice and individuals' withdrawal: Unlocking the influence of emotional exhaustion. *Journal of Management Studies*, 47: 367- 390.

Cooper, C. L., Dewe, P. and O'Driscoll, M. 2001. *Organizational Stress*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Cordes, C. L. and Dougherty, T. W. 1993. a review and an integration of research on job burnout. *Academy of Management Review*, 18: 621-656.

Darr, W. and Johns, G. 2008. Work strain, health, and absenteeism: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 13:293-318.

de Boer, E. M., Bakker, A. B., Syroit, J. E. and Schaufeli. 2002. Unfairness at work as a predictor of absence. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, 23:181-197.

Deery, S., Iverson, R. and Walsh, J. 2002. Work relationships in telephone call centres: Understanding emotional exhaustion and employee withdrawal. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39:471-496.

Deery, S. and Kinnie, N. 2004. Introduction: The nature and management of call centre work. In S. Deery and N. Kinnie (eds.), *Call Centres and Human resource Management: A Cross-National Perspective*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.1-22.

Demerouti, E., Le Blanc, P. M., Bakker, A. B., Schaufeli, W. B. and Hox, J. 2009. Present but sick: a three-wave study of job demands, presenteeism and burnout. *Career Development International*, 14: 50-68.

Elstad, J. I. and Vabo, M. 2008. Job stress, sickness absence and sickness presenteeism in Nordic elderly care. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 36: 467-474.

Facer, R. L. and Wadsworth, L. 2008. Alternative work schedules and work-life balance. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*,

Folger, R. 2004. Justice and employment: Moral retribution as a contra-subjugation tendency. In J. A. Coyle-Shapiro, L. M. Shore, M. S. Taylor and L. E. Tetrick (eds.), *The Employment Relationship*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 29-47.

Frenkel, S., Korczynski, M., Shire, K. and Tam, M. 1999. *On the Front Line: Organization of Work in the Information Economy*. Ithaca: ILR: Cornell University Press.

Gellatly, I. R. 1995. Individual and group determinants of employee absenteeism: Test of a causal model. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 16: 469-485.

Grandey, A. A. and Cropanzano, R. 1999. The conservation of resources model applied to work-family conflict and strain. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 54:350-370.

Grandey, A. A., Dickter, D. N. and Sin, H-P. 2004. The customer is *not* always right: Customer aggression and emotion regulation of service employees. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 25:397-418.

Grinyer, A. and Singleton, V. 2000. Sickness absence as risk-taking behaviour: a study of organisational and cultural factors in the public sector. *Health, Risk and Society*, 2: 7-21.

Grzwacz, J. G., Carlson, D. S. and Shulkin, S. 2008. Schedule flexibility and stress: Linking formal flexible arrangements and perceived flexibility to employee health. *Community, Work and Family*, 11: 199-214.

Guy, M. E., Newman, M. E. and Mastracci, S. H. 2008. *Emotional Labor*. New York: M. E. Sharpe.

Hackett,R. D., Bycio, P. and Guion, R. M. 1989. Absenteeism among hospital nurses: an idiographic-longitudinal analysis, *Academy of Management Journal*, 32:424-453.

Harrison, D. A. and Martocchio, J. J. 1998. A time for absenteeism: A 20-year review of origins, offshoots, and outcomes. *Journal of Management*, 24:305-330.

Holman, D. 2004. Employee well-being in call centres. In S. Deery and N. Kinnie (eds.), *Call Centres and Human Resource Management: A Cross-National Perspective*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 223-244.

Iverson, R. D. and Deery, S. J. 2001. Understanding the 'personological' basis of employee withdrawal: The effect of affective disposition on employee tardiness, early departure and absenteeism. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86: 856-866.

Johns, G. 2008. Absenteeism and presenteeism: Not at work or not working well. In C. L. Cooper and J. Barling (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Behavior*, vol. 1: 160-177, London: Sage.

Johns, G. 2009. Absenteeism or presenteeism? Attendance dynamics and employee well-being. In S. Cartwright and C. L. Cooper (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Well-Being*, (pp.7-30). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Johns, G. 2010. Presenteeism in the workplace: A review and research agenda. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 31: 519-542.

Kelly, E. L., Kossek, E. E., Hammer, L. B., Durham, M., Bray, J., Chermack, K., Murphy, L. A. and kaskubar. 2009. Getting there from here: Research on the effects of work-family initiatives on work-family conflict and business outcomes. In J. Walsh and A. Brief (eds.), *Academy of Management Annals*, Routledge.

Kivimaki, M., Head, J. and Ferrie J. E. 2005. Working while ill as a risk factor for serious coronary events: the Whitehall 11 study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 95: 98-102.

Korczynski, M. 2002. *Human Resource Management in Service work: The Fragile Social Order*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Latack, J. C. and Foster, l. W. 1985. Implementation of compressed work schedules: Participation and job design as critical factors for employee acceptance. *Personnel Psychology*, 38: 75-92.

Maslach, C. and Jackson, S. E. 1981. The measurement of experience burnout. *Journal of Occupational Behaviour*, 2:99-113.

Macdonald C. L. and Sirianni, C. 1996. The service society and the changing experience of work. In C. L. Macdonald and C. Sirianni (eds.), *Working in the Service Society,* Philadelphia: temple University Press, pp. 1-26.

Masterson, S. S., Lewis, K. Goldman, B. M. and Taylor, m. S. 2000. Integrating justice and social exchange: the differing effects of fair procedures and treatment on work relationships. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43: 738-748.

McKevitt, C., Morgan. M., Dundas, R. and Holland, W. 1997. Sickness absence and 'working through' illness: a comparison of two professional groups. *Journal of Public Health Medicine*, 19: 295-300.

Moorman, R. H. 1991. Relationship between organizational justice and organizational citizenship behaviours: Do fairness perceptions influence employee citizenship? *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 76:845-855.

Morris, J. and Feldman, D. 1996. Managing emotions in the workplace. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, 9:257-274.

Netemeyer, R.G., Boles, J.S., and McMurrian, R. 1996. Development and validation of work-family conflict and family-work conflict scales. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 81: 400-410.

Pierce, J. L. and Dunham, R. B. 1992. The 12-hour work day: A 48-hour, eight-day week. *Academy of Management Journal*, 35:1086-1098.

Price, J. L. and Mueller, C. W. 1986. *Absenteeism and Turnover of Hospital Employees*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Rhodes, S. and Steers, R. M. 1990. *Managing Employee Absenteeism*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Russell, B. 2008. Call centres: A decade of research. *International Journal of Management Reviews,* 10: 195-219.

Sanderson, K., Tilse, E., Nicholson, J., Oldenburg, B. and graves, N. 2007. Which presenteeism measures are more sensitive to depression and anxiety? *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 101: 65-74.

Saxton, M. J.,  Phillips, J. S. and Blakeney, R. N. 1991. Antecedents and consequences of emotional exhaustion in the airline reservations service sector. *Human Relations*, 44: 581-95.

Schaufeli, W. B., Bakker, A. B. and Van Rhenen, W. 2009. How changes in job demands and resources predict burnout, work engagement, and sickness absenteeism. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 30: 893-917.

Steel, R. P. 2003. Methodological and operational issues in the construction of absence variables. *Human Resource Management Review*, 13: 243-251.

Venne, R. A. 1997. The impact of the compressed workweek on absenteeism. *Relations Industrielles*, 52: 382-400.

Zapf, D. 2002. Emotion work and psychological well-being. A review of the literature and some conceptual considerations. *Human Resource Management Review*, 12:237-268