

## ABSENTEEISM AT WORK IN HOTEL EMPLOYEES

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Registered absenteeism has a psychosocial basis in which there are problems between the individual, the job and the quality of service requirements of the company. This paper analyzes the research studies that evaluate absentee behavior in the hotel and catering industry. The studies consulted usually use registered temporary sick leave (TSL) as an indicator of employee absentee behavior. The results show that the impact of absenteeism can be minimized using different strategies: improving the processes of recruitment, selection and training of employees as much as possible and assessing individual differences and their contextual variables that are related to a better quality of service. The information obtained describes a situation similar to the one prior to the economic crisis.

**Key words:** Absenteeism, Quality hotel trade work, Absentee behavior, Quality of service.

El comportamiento absentista en el trabajo registrado tiene una base psicosocial ya que en el aparecen reflejados problemas de adaptación entre el individuo, el puesto de trabajo y los requisitos de calidad de servicio exigidos por la empresa. El presente trabajo analiza los estudios y trabajos de investigación que evalúan el comportamiento absentista en el sector hotelero y de la restauración. Los trabajos consultados emplean habitualmente registros de las incapacidades temporales (IT) como indicador del comportamiento absentista de los empleados. Los resultados ponen de manifiesto que se puede minimizar el impacto del absentismo a partir dos estrategias, mejorando los procesos de reclutamiento, selección y formación de los empleados y, evaluando las diferencias individuales y variables contextuales que se relacionan con una mejor calidad del servicio. La información revisada nos describe un escenario similar a la situación anterior a la crisis económica.

**Palabras clave:** Comportamiento absentista, Calidad del servicio, Absentismo laboral, Trabajo de calidad hostelería.

### CONTEXT

Work absenteeism is an employee's behavior of breaching their work duties, characterized by abandoning or being absent from their jobs, whether due to justifiable causes or not. From the definition in the dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy of Language (2001) we can determine the two characteristics that define absenteeism behavior. The first is related to the "custom of abandoning the performance of functions and responsibilities of the job" and the second, to "deliberately refraining from going to work". Both meanings are useful in understanding that the habit and the intentionality are the two behavioral components of work absenteeism.

Absenteeism is classified into two basic types, based on the abovementioned parameters: regulated absenteeism (RA) and unregulated absenteeism (UA). Regulated absenteeism (RA) is characterized by predictable absences, has objective reasons and has been previously reported or reported at the time of occurrence (paid legal authorization, common illnesses with temporary sick leave, work accident leave or unpaid leave due

to personal matters) (Molinera, 2001; Villaplana, 2012). In unregulated absenteeism (UA) absences are not predictable and have no justification (they usually refer to abandoning or missing work without authorization from the company).

With the economic crisis a new kind of absenteeism behavior has emerged in the workplace: presenteeism, characterized as behavior where the employee comes to work, but devotes some of the time to tasks that are not related to the work activity (Martín-Molina, 2005). Usually common to all of the classifications and types of work absenteeism is the reference to individual intentional behavior as the main reason for the occurrence and spread of absentee behavior in an organization.

In Spain, legislation on absenteeism is being introduced, with the consideration that action must be taken on individuals who are absent from their work without justification (Europa Press, 2013). Thus, in the chapter III, section four, art. 52 "termination of contract of work" paragraph d) of the Statute of Workers, 1980 (2013) there appears a paragraph stating that "...the contract may be terminated due to absence from work, even if justified, if it is intermittent and reaching 20 percent of the working days in two consecutive months, or 25 percent in four discontinuous months within a period of 12 months, provided that the rate of absenteeism of the total workforce at the workplace exceeds 5% in the same period of time..." This

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regulation defines and contains unregulated absenteeism, i.e., absenteeism which is beyond the control of the organization (Molinera, 2001).

To measure absentee behavior, the records of temporary sick leave (TSL) have traditionally been used, i.e., the number of subsidized absences caused by common contingencies (common illnesses or non-work related accidents) or professional contingencies (accidents at work and occupational diseases) due to the mandatory recording and the relative ease of obtaining data. The tabulation and analysis of quarterly and annual TSL data provide the researcher with a baseline from which to compare the TSL results of the company under study and to compare the impact of absenteeism with the sector (Villaplana, 2012; UNIVALE, 2013).

The Survey of the Employment Situation of the Ministry of Labor (ECL) and the Quarterly Labor Cost Survey (LCI) of the INE (Spanish National Institute of Statistics) that are used to measure absenteeism in Spain are the two sources most referred to, as they are calculated based on the TSL records obtained from large samples in all sectors (for the ECL, the sample is 28,500 enterprises and the ETCL sample is 12,730 companies). The mutual insurance companies of work accidents also have tools to assess the extent of absenteeism (e.g. Reddis, 2003; Peiró, Rodríguez-Molina & González-Morales, 2008) based on the exploitation of their own records obtained from the companies they serve. In this case, they also deal with the TSL records but they develop more detailed statistical analyses that allow them to identify the distribution, according to the causes, frequency, duration and regularity of absence from work.

For an overview of the impact of absenteeism on the employed population we can turn to other sources, such as the studies that are periodically commissioned by consulting firms specialized in the recruitment and selection of staff to offer to other companies (Adecco Reports I and II on absenteeism, 2009; 2012) or employers' organizations (PIMEC Report, 2011). For the present case, there are studies published by trade associations of the hotel industry that analyze the distribution of TSL among the job profiles in hospitality. References of interest are published by the Business Association of Modern Restaurant Chains (FEHRCAREM, 2009), the Federation of Employers of Hotels and Restaurants (FEHR, 2008) or those commissioned by the Hotel Association of Salou-Cambrils - Platja de la Pineda (Reddis, 2003). Although the statistical analyses focus on the calculation and description of TSL and its causes, they are of great interest both for research and, above all, to sensitize companies regarding the costs of absenteeism behavior at work and the need to act on it (Villaplana, 2012).

Moreover, with the publication and implementation of the law on the prevention of occupational risks (LPRL, 1995), the analysis of absenteeism behavior at work is of great interest as it allows us to relate it to the working conditions of the job, with the possible relationship between illnesses and absences from work for health reasons and the physical and psychosocial risks that may arise in

the workplace, as suggested by the Regulations for Prevention Services in article 37.3.d. Consequently, the analysis of all TSL records as an indicator of absentee behaviors at work can be helpful to identify and correct certain risks of the job, listing the psychosocial symptomatology and, ultimately, to adapt them to the effective health status of each person (Vértice, 2008).

The working conditions in hotels play an important role in the process leading workers to absentee behavior. There are a number of specific factors in each company: time pressures, schedules, work organization, lack of recognition, etc., which must be known, to determine their possible influence on absentee behavior. Some categories of absenteeism may be directly related to accidents at work (e.g. high levels of physical demands can lead to absenteeism from injuries), while in other cases (short-term absenteeism or absenteeism without authorization) the relationships are less obvious.

### THE INDICATORS AND IMPACT OF ABSENTEE BEHAVIOR IN HOSPITALITY WORK

Although the indicator most commonly used to analyze the impact of absenteeism in the company is based on the record of lost hours associated with TSL, this indicator does not allow us to address the complexity of the absentee phenomenon, so it is necessary to use additional indicators that allow us to record and analyze unsubsidized absences, related or unrelated to health, which may or may not be justified and often go unregistered since effective recording mechanisms do not exist or have not been implemented in the companies.

In the latest official Spanish statistics (ECL, 2010; ETCL, 2012), it can be observed that 78% of total working hours lost are due to causes of temporary sick leave (TSL), of which compensated absences represent 11%. Absenteeism that is unregulated or related to unexcused absences represents only 3% of the total working hours lost. These results are quite similar to those published in the PIMEC study (Pimec, [Association of SME's in Catalonia] 2011) in which there appears the disturbing fact that absence due to temporary sick leave (TSL) represents 65% of the hours not worked due to occasional causes.

From the TSL records of a company, various parameters can be calculated that are of interest in comparing the frequency and distribution of absenteeism in each organization, the proportion of absent employees and its relevance in certain posts, centers or departments. The control of these parameters is carried out in most companies manually or automatically based on the data provided by the presence/absence monitoring instruments. The results obtained by this system reflect an overview of the percentages and the causes of loss of effective hours of work in each of the professional groups and sectors (AEDIPE, 2006).

Concern for absenteeism in the hotel sector arose after statistics were published stating that TSL accounted for 75.3% of all working hours lost or not worked (Reddis, 2003). These results provided the basis for initiating our research in the hotel industry.

Although most of the recorded cases were among the categories of predictable absenteeism, 24.7% belonged to the category of unforeseen absences without justification (Tous-Pallarès & Tintero, 2006). The percentage of hours lost due to such absences of the total hours that should have been worked represented an average of 8.7% in the 25 establishments that constituted the study sample. This rate is high because in some places it came close to 12%. We suspect that possibly, in these absences, there could be some other hidden reason that is difficult to assess from the statistics and records used.

Using the same recording systems, in 2007 the above study was replicated with same sample of establishments in the hotel industry. The most significant data registered was the decrease of 3% in the average hours of work lost out of the total number of hours of work. Despite being smaller than in the initial study, the rate of 5.7% can be considered a high rate if one considers the total number of hours that should have been worked (Tous-Pallarès & Tintero, 2007).

In other studies carried out in the hospitality sector (Tous-Pallarès, González-Massot & Tintero, 2008) temporary sick leave (TSL) due to common contingencies continues to lead the absenteeism records in all occupational categories, representing 61% of TSL. Differences are observed between the professionals in the sector who hold positions in the lower categories and those in higher occupational categories. In the first case, the common contingencies represent a greater amount of lost time in the organization, namely 8%.

In studies published subsequently (Tous-Pallarès, 2009; Tous-Pallarès, 2011), over 80% of companies in the hotel industry have systems for recording absenteeism, and they compare the rates of absenteeism per job, department, group and category of employees. This assessment is aimed at identifying the job and areas where there is a greater incidence of this phenomenon, with employees holding lower positions tending to have more accidents compared to higher occupational categories (González-Santa Cruz, Sánchez-Cañizares & López-Guzmán, 2011).

The economic crisis generates a lack of employment and an insecurity that increases in a seasonal industry such as restaurants and hospitality, in which often professionals with low qualifications are required for temporary contracts. The analysis of the data obtained in the field since the start of the crisis indicates that the impact of absenteeism behavior is reducing. This difference is observed comparing the two reports on absenteeism (Adecco, 2009, 2013) where the figure goes from 5.35% in 2009 to 4.3% in 2013. The difference is on average one per cent of the working hours lost from the total number of hours of work. Nevertheless, although there is a decrease in unregulated work absentee behavior, there appear patterns of presenteeism, which are indicative of a mismatch between the individual, the job and the context.

The most recent industry statistics (FEHT, 2012) indicate that 82% of companies of modern catering and hospitality have

control systems for absenteeism, although only 17% have absenteeism management plans that they use to improve not only the control strategies but also the impact on the business. 73% of companies in the hotel sector already employ some technique for reducing absenteeism, although in most of them the intervention rests primarily on the legal approach. The current agreement for the hospitality industry provides that, in order to prevent absenteeism (as specified in Article 52.d) of the Statute of Workers (2013), the use of objective parameters of measuring is recommended (Molinera, 2001). It is therefore considered absenteeism if the worker exceeds, intermittently, the number of eleven absences, even if these are justified, on working days within the calendar year. All other absences are not counted as absenteeism if they last more than four consecutive days and involve hospitalization and/or surgical intervention (Romay, 2003).

All these measures provide us with information about only one type of absenteeism behavior at work -regulated absenteeism-, it being more difficult to obtain information on unregulated absenteeism (Obeso, 2008). Other instruments are needed to obtain more information to act on prevention, in the case of professional contingencies (Adecco, 2013). In these cases, the lack of information will limit the possibilities of establishing mechanisms for health monitoring or corrective action. But in very few cases these measures will allow us to establish an objective relationship of the causes and consequences that lead to an effective assessment of stress-related disorders without the use of surveys or tests. There are surveys and tests that enable us to associate or rule out the psychosocial nature of TSL.

#### THE PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH OF ABSENTEEISM BEHAVIOR IN HOSPITALITY

Most of the research on absenteeism analyzed to date focuses on analyzing the data provided by registration systems and presence/absence monitoring that the company implements to monitor its employees. The use of records in hospitality is justified by the objective of minimizing costs for organizations and aiming to provide services of higher quality. It is considered that sporadic or continuing absences from work, whether they are justified or not, create a bad group atmosphere which reduces the quality of service of the professionals. Moreover, the absence of colleagues from the team will mean an increase in the workload of the employee who is not absent (Sánchez-Cañizares, López-Guzmán & Millán-Vázquez de la Torre, 2007; Tous-Pallarès, 2011a).

Over the period between 2001 and 2013, some new systems have appeared for assessing and recording absenteeism behavior at work, some of them based on new multi-tool technologies or apps (Egarasat, 2012). Despite employing sophisticated instruments and monitoring technologies, these are not yet effective enough to obtain relevant information that can relate the motivations for the absenteeism behavior with the skills, job content, context, and other individual and

organizational variables. Additionally, tests, self-records, external records and self-assessment surveys are useful for obtaining information on behavioral and individual variables, such as the skills required in the workplace, the climate of the team (Tous-Pallarès, Bonasa-Jiménez, Mayor-Sánchez & Espinoza-Díaz, 2011b), comprehensive leadership and individual differences (Vigil-Colet, Morales-Vives, Camps, Tous-Pallarès & Lorenzo-Seva, 2013). The application of these tools in the context of an organization of hotel services is often very complex given the highly culturally heterogeneous population that usually work in hospitality (Nova, 2010).

Some companies and groups in the hotel industry began intervention projects, starting in 2001, coinciding with the assessments of psychosocial factors required by law (Peiró, 2000; Peiró, Rodríguez & González-Morales, 2008) or focused on the management of the particular problems arising from working with people. They developed training programs to improve the quality of service their employees offered, created loyalty programs to prevent rotation and they enriched and added content to all the hotel jobs. However, with the onset of the economic crisis, around 2008, there was a high demand for employment in the sector, as it resisted the initial afflictions caused by the crisis (Adecco, 2009). The insecurity of employees in positions that often require a low level of qualification to be hired, and it being a very seasonal industry, led to the assumption that the absentee behavior would substantially decrease (Adecco, 2013).

The analysis of the data obtained in the hospitality industry on the economic crisis and its determinants demonstrate the prevalence of absenteeism behaviors at work that are more indicative of a mismatch between the individual-job-context than of personal intentionality. To complement the information obtained from these statistics and records, it will be necessary to develop instruments to record the behavioral characteristics of the absentees, i.e., the application of tools for self-evaluation and colleague-evaluation of absenteeism behavior at work by the employee who displays this behavior and by his or her co-workers (Tous-Pallarès, 2013). This way, the information can be contrasted and completed to configure convincing explanations linking the causes, reasons, duration and justifications of absence from work. These results allow for a more thorough analysis of the most frequent reasons for absence and the context in which the causes are justified, than those obtained with the analysis and comparison of absenteeism data for each of absences that are recorded in the sector (Jiménez-Galindo & Romay-López, 2005).

We can organize the research regarding the psychosocial intervention on absenteeism behavior in hospitality, in a series of action springboards upon which it is based:

A first springboard is the degree of alignment between the individual and the job, with the redesign of jobs in the hotel industry being the most used and effective prevention strategy for psychosocial intervention, the results indicating that for jobs

or groups of jobs with low status, with precarious conditions or wages, without promotion opportunities, or positions that are poor in content, absenteeism behavior is more frequent (Tous-Pallarès, 2009; 2011a). This element represents a key indication in explaining the match or mismatch between working conditions, worker expectations and the satisfaction experienced (González-Santa Cruz, Sánchez-Cañizares & López-Guzmán, 2011). The absenteeism records obtained in various studies reflect, in some way, people's potential problems in adapting to jobs that are considered poor or with high psychosocial demands of work (Tous-Pallarès, González-Massot & Tendero, 2008). Relationships can also be established between high physical demands of the workplace, and absenteeism due to injury, and between short-term absenteeism and the medical justification for it, that many authors relate more to the lack of job satisfaction and motivation (Rhodes & Steers, 1990; Rodríguez, Samaniego & Ortiz, 1998; Rodríguez, 2004).

A second springboard to action is based on considering absentee behavior as another form of counterproductive behavior at work and is related to both the perceived group atmosphere and individual differences (Ones & Viswesvaran, 2001). Work absenteeism usually reflects errors in the assignment to a position, as poorly contrasted competencies in the selection process, the resulting job dissatisfaction, a lack of training or inadequate training for the tasks to be carried out, or group or collective conflict listed by several authors as causes of poor job and professional performance (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Schmidt, 2003). To intervene on absenteeism in hospitality from this perspective, analysis of the individual differences of employees must be made and the results incorporated into the development of procedures for recruitment, selection and classification that serve to detect the most suitable profiles (Tous-Pallarès, 2013). If the work experience of the selected employees represents a positive experience, with opportunities for promotion and tenure with the company, the phenomenon of absenteeism behavior is reduced. In high-level positions, in which the recognition and experience of work are rewarding and meaningful, absenteeism can be non-existent.

A third route would opt for overall actions of multilevel assessment of the organizational context related to the psychosocial basis of absenteeism behavior at work (Salanova, 2009). This approach is of great importance in hospitality as it serves to identify the reasons for the unequal involvement in absenteeism among employees holding different positions in the organization and among employees who belong to different groups despite occupying similar positions in the organization. Surveys can also be good indicators of the problems and conflicts of interpersonal relationships, problems in locating the role to be played in the team, which impact on the occupational health of workers, their quality of life and the quality of the product or service the company provides (Tous-Pallarès, 2011). Consequently, the evaluation of absenteeism from this perspective should incorporate tools to assess the climate

perceived in the organization, motivation and job satisfaction (Litwin & Stringer, 1968; González-Romá, Väinänen, Caballer, Peiró & Kvimäki, 2005) and to measure the difficulties in professional development. Moreover, high rates of absenteeism in an organization can spread to the group or team as they may perceive an increase in workload, difficulty in organizing free time, etc. and thus influence their cohesion.

## BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

At this point, we can say that there is a degree of agreement determining that absenteeism from work in the context of services and hospitality is a behavior caused by multiple causes that can be learned by simply being in contexts in which the group or organizational climate has a facilitating effect, where there is little integrity or a culture of permissiveness and little control. Regardless of the cause of the absenteeism at work, having information on absenteeism behavior is, for the prevention of occupational hazards and human resources, a key indicator that enables occupational problems to be associated to objective causes, upon which to develop corrective measures or functional preventive actions (Díaz-Muñoz, Arroyo & Rodríguez, 2000).

Knowledge of the possible influencing factors facilitates effective action pathways, since a generic action will never get results because it does not act on the cause of the problem. Before undertaking corrective action, it is necessary to determine the causes in order to act effectively. Generalized or uncontrolled absentee behavior in a company can have consequences for both the organization and the individuals that comprise it, becoming a psychosocial problem, in which both the problems of adjustment of the individual to the job and other organizational problems are reflected.

So far we have seen how absenteeism behavior at work in the hotel sector has consequences for both the organization and the people therein, so it will be essential to intervene based on prevention mechanisms (Cooper, Quick & Schabracq, 2009). Policies of reduction can be initiated based on prevention, reduction or facilitating the readmission of individuals who have been absent from work (Jiménez-Galindo & Romay-López, 2005).

First, from a perspective of risk prevention, it is necessary to consider a reduction in absenteeism as a reaction to inadequate working conditions (Markussen, Røed, Røgeberg & Gaure, 2011). The importance is evident of the role of proper management of the prevention of occupational risks, enabling the identification of risks and the implementation of the necessary measures to minimize them, thus reducing their impact on the health of workers (Benavides, Benach & Moncada, 2003). The role of health surveillance in this process should not be forgotten, so as to allow early detection of the effects of working conditions on health, the detection of workers that are especially sensitive to certain risks (Bardera, Osca & González-Camino, 2002; Cárcoba-Alonso, 2005; Campos-

Soria, Ortega-Aguaza & Roperó-García, 2009). All this information will facilitate decision-making related to the appropriate design of the tasks, the teams and the environment, based on the reflection on the adaptation between the organization of work and its determinants (Díaz-Muñoz, Arroyo & Rodríguez, 2000).

Another aspect to consider in second place are the demands of work and these should be designed so that the demands are balanced and these parameters should be considered in the process of recruitment, selection and assignment to the job (Tous-Pallarès, 2013) which means attending to the physical environment and both the physical and psychological work demands. For prevention it is necessary to identify how workers experience the work situation, to "take the measurements" of the job demands and to favor the balance between the demands and resources of individuals to respond to these (Tous-Pallarès & Nogareda-Cuixart, 2013). The recommendations for action are based on the principles of psychosocial intervention, i.e., designing tasks and organization, as well as the environment in which the work is carried out, taking into account the human element of the system, and based on an analysis that enables the identification of the main sources of stress (Bardera, Osca & González-Camino, 2002).

Some specific areas for improvement in the hotel sector are; increasing the intrinsic interest of the work, facilitating the defining of motivating career paths, establishing pathways for the recognition of work, adapting the physical environment, ensuring a good work-life balance, adjusting the tasks based on the age or education levels of workers, increasing the effective control over the work and ensuring time flexibility (Sánchez-Cañizares, López-Guzmán & Millán-Vázquez, 2007; Tous-Pallarès, 2011).

Summarizing the principles of prevention of absentee behavior, we can build on the concept of well-being at work and cite the five categories of healthy practices in the workplace: reconciliation, personal development, health and safety, recognition and employee involvement (Tous-Pallarès & Nogareda-Cuixart, 2013). Both at the organizational and individual levels, bad habits should be avoided and changed, and instead healthy behaviors should be promoted and acquired (Salanova, 2009; Tous-Pallarès & Nogareda-Cuixart, 2013).

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