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ILR Impact Brief - Deconstructing
Absenteeism: Satisfaction, Commitment,
and Unemployment

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IMPACT BRIEF

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Deconstructing Absenteeism: Satisfaction, Commitment, and Unemployment

Research question: How do levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment within work units interact with local unemployment rates to explain the variability in absenteeism among work units and within units over time?

Conclusion: Group attitudes about satisfaction and commitment are negatively associated with absenteeism and interact in predicting absenteeism at the unit level. The effects are particularly strong in areas where jobs are plentiful but fade away where jobs are scarce. In other words, higher levels of absenteeism in a work group are associated with lower levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment in labor markets with low unemployment, and vice versa. Organizational commitment is the crucial factor: absenteeism is higher in work units with low levels of commitment regardless of the level of satisfaction. Group norms about absenteeism and other contextual factors, such as work processes, contribute to the variance among work units. Satisfaction and commitment are not related to changes in absenteeism over time.

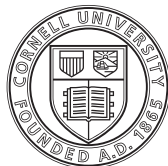
Workplace impact: The link from work-unit measures of job satisfaction and organizational commitment to absenteeism gives managers a strategic pathway to curbing excessive and/or unnecessary absences. Data gathered to assess satisfaction and commitment can

also help managers diagnose workplace problems that negatively affect outcomes (absenteeism, for example). Unit-level interventions, such as group incentives, may be more efficient and less resource intensive than tactics aimed at individuals.

Abstract: Absenteeism imposes heavy costs on the workplace: productivity falls, profits decline, and co-workers have to pick up the slack. In trying to understand why employees fail to show up for work, most research has focused on individual behaviors and motivations. But there is a group dimension to absenteeism that researchers also recognize and frame in the context of group culture. This view posits that common surroundings, group size, shared experiences, and social interactions lead co-workers to reach consensus on norms concerning the appropriate level of absenteeism. And because the culture of each work unit is distinct, so too are the informal rules about missing work.

This study assesses whether shared (aggregate) attitudes about job satisfaction and organizational commitment within work units, along with labor market conditions, explain differential rates of absenteeism among units and rates of change in absenteeism from year to year. Using data derived from employee surveys over a six-year period, the researchers constructed unit-level measures of satisfaction (shared positive feelings associated with non-tangible benefits, such as norms of cooperation and a sense of belonging) and commitment (attachment to the organization and its goals). As expected, they found that both measures are negatively related to unit-level absenteeism. That is, when people

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within the work unit are satisfied with their jobs and the surroundings, and feel emotionally connected to the organization, they tend to rein in their short-term absences. Conversely, when they are not satisfied or committed, absenteeism climbs.

The researchers next looked at the effect on absenteeism of the four combinations of high and low satisfaction and commitment. Building on findings by other researchers, they established that the two factors interact in predicting absenteeism. They further found that high levels of organizational commitment are associated with lower levels of absenteeism (and vice versa) regardless of the level of job satisfaction. Commitment, then, may be the primary clue to unlocking the absenteeism conundrum.

Unemployment is yet another factor that bears on absenteeism and similarly moves in the opposite direction. The researchers here wanted to know whether local labor market conditions affect the relationship between work unit attitudes (commitment and satisfaction) and absenteeism. They found that unemployment does indeed moderate the negative relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism; that is, the relationship is stronger where unemployment is lower. Put differently, high absenteeism is associated with low job satisfaction and low rates of unemployment: in an environment where jobs are plentiful and workers scarce, workers may not worry about losing their jobs if they are absent while employers may tolerate some absenteeism because replacement workers are hard to

find. Although the data revealed a stronger negative relationship between commitment and absenteeism in work units where unemployment is lower, a more complex analytic model produced more tentative results.

The researchers also tested whether changes in work-unit attitudes correlate with changes in the rate of absenteeism over a period of years. They found that absenteeism increased from year to year during the study period but these changes were unrelated to unit levels of job satisfaction or organizational commitment. Methodological factors may account for these findings.

Methodology: For this project, the researchers collected five waves of data, from 1998 to 2003, through surveys administered to approximately 12,500 employees in 115 work units of a state department of transportation. They then built a multi-step longitudinal model to test the relationship among the unit-level variables of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and absenteeism, and local unemployment rates.

Source publication: “Work Unit Absenteeism: Effects of Satisfaction, Commitment, Labor Market Conditions, and Time” is forthcoming in *Academy of Management Journal*.

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