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EXAMINING THE REASONS OF PRESENTEEISM AMONG ACADEMIC STAFFS: A FOCUS GROUP STUDY

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Abstract

This study centres on the reasons of presenteeism among academic staffs in a private university in Malaysia. It was discovered that vast and explorative research is required on the area of presenteeism and the motive behind it. Knowledge on the reasons of presenteeism would help curb and bring awareness on this issue. A detailed and comprehensive understanding is needed and therefore a qualitative methodology was chosen for this study by using the focus group. Findings of this research have revealed that carrying out responsibilities seems to be the biggest reason educators are present at work when they are ill. The research may help educators to comprehend the reasons why they are attending work when they are actually in an unhealthy state of being. As the biggest reason for presenteeism identified in this study is responsibilities, perhaps then employers should consider rewarding these educators with more rest days or leaves to compensate for the heavy responsibilities they carrymes in this research finding.

Keywords: Presenteeism, academic staff, reasons, private universities, Malaysia.

1. Introduction

In light of many existing debates on Malaysian education system and its prominence in the coming years, it is especially important to focus on the educators, academicians, lecturers and teachers who contribute a great deal to this industry. One integral topic that has surfaced for many years is the issues of health and its impact on academic staffs. Of late the subject of detrimental health caused by presenteeism was brought to attention. Presenteeism has been a topic which has been mentioned this past decade due to its consequences of lowering productivity. There are a number of papers done on this matter, however there are limited research on the reasons why staffs engage in presenteeism. According to Kinman and Wray (2018), More research is needed to help organizations in different sectors frame interventions to encourage staff to take time off sick when necessary. Qualitative methodology would allow a more in-depth examination of the reasons why people work while sick and their motivations for doing so'. Despite the fact that numerous tries at theory development pertaining to presenteeism has been put forward, yet proper whole frame that can explain reasons employees go forward with presenteeism or absenteeism has yet to be fixed.

A clear understanding needs to be set of what presenteeism entails. Presenteeism is the act of bringing oneself to work even though one is in an unhealthy condition; be it physical, emotional or mental. Lohaus and Habermann (2019) explains that a common definition of presenteeism is being available at work sick and currently this subject matter is a global phenomenon. Galvão et al. (2016) describe presenteeism as attending work but unable to deliver much due to being unwell and hence potentially damaging productivity of work greater than an absenteeism act would. Presenteeism becomes something disturbing mentally and physically.

The main cause or motive for presenteeism at work is highly contributed by the fact that employees are driven to complete their responsibilities. Often times, these responsibilities are accompanied with demanding working conditions which at the end of the day off-put employees from applying their sick leave because of worry of unfinished work. In specific industries like higher education institutions like the universities and colleges; specialized task are given to individuals who can carry them, making it difficult to find replacements if the individual is on sick leave. This appears to be a particular problem in higher learning institutions (Kinman & Wray, 2018). Prater and Smith (2011) says that several workers have mentioned that instead of monetary setbacks and fewer medical off days, the call of duty is a reason for them attending work ill. In addition to this, some staffs come to duty as they refuse to burden or upset their co-workers. Having high regards, working together and true hearted commitment among team members, topped with the feeling of refusing to disappoint them are indicative of strong presenteeism likelihood (Kinman & Wray, 2018). For instance, Rhodes and Collins (2015) gave some suitable example when they discovered radiologist professionals having guilty emotions if their teams and patients at work had to be burdened if they were absent thus making them opt for duty though they are ill.

2. Problem Statement

One of the other reasons of presenteeism among academic staffs which is quite prevalent, is the pressure they receive from managers or superiors for them to be at work. According to Prater and Smith

(2011) these superiors create a competitive environment, in which employees are placed in pressure cooker situations where they face long hours and take up intense detailed projects that may eventually impact their health. Nonetheless, these employees are present at work due to the focus which is required on the projects that have taken. Another concerning factor is the fact that the staffs and superiors have not established the same understanding of what entails the meaning of unwell or sick. Managers or superiors cease to think from an employee's viewpoint as they are focused on achieving results and outcomes for the organisations. Managers are always driven by additional work and economic pressures, which pushes them to plunk unnecessary pressure on their employees to perform well (Prater & Smith, 2011). This pressure may have great influence on employee's decision to being present at work while being sick. Hence we may then conclude that managers who behave appropriately well towards their staffs may stand a chance of reducing their employees stress levels and decrease their presenteeism as oppose to managers who treat their employees poorly (Gilbreath & Karimi, 2012).

Apart from these, work place policy such as insufficient leaves may also lend to incidences of presenteeism. Insufficient annual leaves will prod staffs to reserve their leaves for difficult emergency situations and as a consequence preventing them from using it when they are unhealthy. Henceforth, if possible, employers should provide employees the choice to work from home when they are not able to be at the workplace (Schaefer, 2007). Johns (1997) cited in Johns (2010) states that there are indeed research work that has revealed that stringent sick pay plans will contribute to minimising absenteeism. This most definitely encourages incidences of presenteeism among staffs. Developing a workplace sickness policy and educating employees can provide guidance for employees when they need sick time (Schaefer, 2007 cited in Lack (2011). Besides the work place policy such as leaves, the work place policy on permanent employment, contract and temporary employment status may also influence presenteeism. It was indicated that contract status employment workers and temporary workers have higher chances being present on duty while ill compared to permanent employees (Johns, 2010).

Other than the above reasons, the reason of chasing deadlines has also been identified as contributing to presenteeism. For instance, knowledge workers are used to working under pressure with tight deadlines in today's competitive working conditions and they need to be motivated by organisational. In spite of being aware that being present at work when sick might cause decrease in productivity and other things but due to avoid missing timelines, employees are prone to presenteeism in order to cope with work (Hobfoll, 1989 as cited in Dietz & Scheel, 2017).

In addition to these reasons, the access they have towards the facilities in the universities also appears to be a reason for presenteeism. The provision of mobile devices such as laptops and telephones, and software video conferencing facilities, together with technical infrastructure like high quality wifi may influence whether staffs are able to utilise different task spaces to their full or work from home and remote locations. For instance, presenteeism or close supervision and allocation of work may place constraint on where and when to work (Ayoko & Ashkanasy, 2019). Academicians and lecturers sometimes require system access to student profile and online grading system to complete tasks and as a result, they are tied down to attend work for such reasons even if they may be unfit or unwell.

Besides that, staffs may also be driven to establish a strong performance culture and hence falling ill will not be tolerated as an excuse to not be present at work. Baker-McClearn et al, 2010 cited in Garrow

(2016) identified a perception that taking time off sick was a sign of under-performance, particularly in private sector organisations. This sort of performance culture has been deemed as normal because it has been transmitted from one generation of employees to the next. Several workers have pointed out that when one takes leave of absence, they are then seen as performing poorly and this may influence their promotion and incentives (Baker-McClearn et al., 2010). In private sector companies, bonuses and other compensations are primarily rewarded to staffs that have few leaves of absence. On the other hand, public sector companies were known more for their promotion prospects and performance driven wages.

The next reason for presenteeism among staffs is the genuine and pure motive of being passionate about work. Oluyemi et al. (2019) in their study on presenteeism have discovered that 19.6% of their respondents from the banking industry in Nigeria have stated passion to be reasoning for their presenteeism. This seems to be a clear indication that if employees are satisfied and happy with what they do on a daily basis then falling ill will not prevent them from attending work.

Lastly another reason which may correlate to presenteeism is single status discriminatory among employees. Discriminatory practices against single people in the workplace are often not intentional or personal, as it is deemed as normal for companies to expect singles to work longer hours or cover holiday shifts for married employees and those with children. The reality of this is glaringly true as single unmarried individuals tend to sympathise and volunteer to stand in for married colleagues who want time off (Today online, 2019).

3. Research Questions

The main question that this study seeks to is what the reasons of presenteeism among staffs are

4. Purpose of the Study

There are limited research on the reasons of presenteeism especially in the education industry. It is critical to examine educators, academicians and lecturers on this matter in order to prevent stress and other illnesses which surface due to presenteeism.

5. Research Methods

This study conducted by using qualitative method and the information derived is from the technique of a focus group discussions which was conducted among staff in a private university in Malaysia. The interview centers on seeking reasons of presenteeism among the staff. In order to proceed with the initial steps in a research design, collecting data using a focus group helps (Barbour, 2007). According to Barbour (2007), the benefits of a focus group is determined by the freedom it allows the participants have when indulging in distinct views. Participants are able to communicate animatedly and lengthy information are gathered in this process. Therefore, five FGDs have been selected to gain input on the reasons of presentism among academic staff in private university.

6. Findings

The questionnaire addressed participants' reasons of presenteeism, and it encouraged them to discuss this in groups

Table 01. Reasons of Presenteeism Among Academic Staffs

| NO	Themes	Reasons	Frequency
1	Responsibilities	• Accountability towards specific task (1) • Time constraint to reschedule for the replacement class hence classes continue as usual. (3) • Syllabus need to be covered (2) • Responsibility towards our job (4) • Commitment to work (3) • Do not want to disappoint team members (2) • Pre-set appointments with students (2)	17
2	Workplace policy	• Limited leave available (2)	2
3	Access to facilities	• System restriction outside campus hence only can be accessible in the campus (1) • Internet connection (1) • Conducive office with air condition (1)	3
4	Chasing deadline	• Certain task to be done based on deadlines and fixed submission dates (3)	3
5	Passionate about work	• Passion to meet the students (1) • Passion to work (1) • Work is a hobby, which we love to do it without force (1)	3
6	Performance	• To satisfy students in order to receive favorable evaluation from them (3) • Aware and afraid of managements observation of performance, attendance (3) • Afraid of creating bad impression among boss, top management and colleague (3)	9
7	Pressure from superior/management	• Superiors discourage applying leave or difficult to approve the leave (1) • Being afraid of reprimanded e.g. cut allowances, bonus and increment (4) • Pressure from boss, management colleague (3)	8
8	Single status discrimination	• Perception that unmarried workers have less commitment outside of work therefore have ample time to spare at work (1)	1
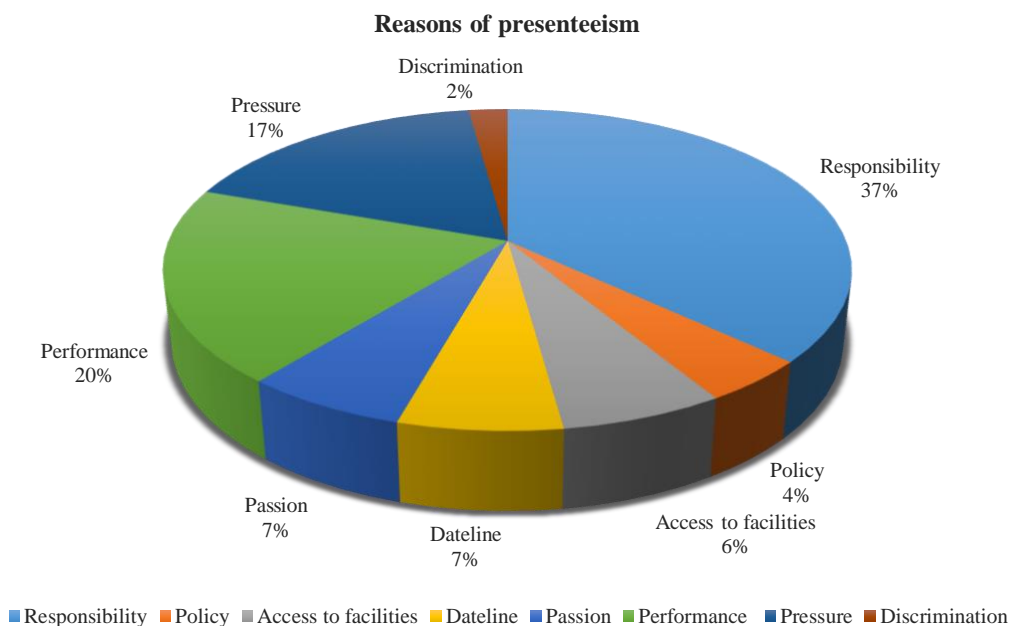
Figure 01. Reasons of presenteeism among academic staffs

Table 1 and Figure 1 shows that the analysis of the FGDs resulting in eight major themes with several descriptions, which covered the topics spontaneously discussed by the FGD participants, as well as discussions related to direct questions posed from the semi-structured interview guide. The eight most significant themes that emerged from the FGDs were, responsibility, policy, access to facilities, chasing deadline, passionate about work, performance, pressure from boss, management colleague and discrimination of being single.

Based on the table, participants expressed the highest similar reasons of being presenteeism, which is responsibility with a percentage of 37%. The main reason for staff's presenteeism in the workplace is because of their responsibility towards job or task been given. Some of the supporting motives for this reason are time constraint to reschedule for the replacement class hence classes continue as usual and the commitment to work. Next point to be noted here are syllabus need to be covered, do not want to disappoint team members and pre-set appointments with students. According to Krane et al. (2014), the organization of work, e.g., how work tasks were distributed among employees, was strongly affected by absence or sickness vice versa and also reflecting due to poorly determined of work task (Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005).

This reason is followed by the second highest reason of presenteeism; 20% which is performance culture. The staffs are concern about their performance due to expectations and deliverables that have been set at the work place to be adhered. The reasons academic staffs are concerned about their performance due to three main realities which is to satisfy students in order to receive favorable evaluation from them, being aware of management's observation of performance, attendance, and the third of afraid of creating bad impression among boss, top management and colleague. If the staffs do not perform in their job, they will face problems in areas of bonus received, increments and many more.

The third main reason of staff's presenteeism is pressure from superiors and management with a total of 17%. Pressure from boss and top management will lead to staffs presenteeism at work as they may

be afraid of being reprimanded e.g., in aspects of allowances cut, bonus and increment. Some superiors even discourage applying leave or difficult to approve the leave.

Next is passionate at work and chasing deadlines which both stands at 7% each. This is followed closely by the reason of access to facilities with 6%. The access to facilities is a unique reasoning but one that is prevalent in the current technology age. Staffs feel the need to be present at work due to system restriction outside campus hence only can be accessible in the campus with internet connection at the office and conducive office with air condition.

The next reason identified through our findings is that staff's presenteeism is due to workplace policy and this denotes 4%. The last reason of staff's presenteeism which is marked at 2% is single status discrimination. Superiors tend to put heavy load of work on employees who are single by assuming that since they are unmarried, they would then have less commitment outside of work and would be able to spare ample time at work.

With all these reasons there, presenteeism seems to be a growing challenge. However, by understanding the reasons of presenteeism among academic staffs, at least it sets apart some of the reasons given by other industries with regards to this topic. This will enable us to focus on how to discard presenteeism as a culture among academic staffs. The extensive research observing that stress levels was highest among academic staffs, the reason of presenteeism could be further examined as a contributor of this. It will be fascinating to indulge further on this discussion in the future

7. Findings

By undertaking this research study, we have gathered that future research should be directed at conducting a comparative study between academic staffs from the younger generation and the older generation on their motives of presenteesim. We believe that there may exist some differences in their reasons of presenteeism. Their experience and background may contrast and as a consequence it will be interesting to observe and pay attention to their reasoning on presenteeism and distinguish if it's dissimilar. This study involves academic staffs, lecturers and educators alike and their insights are valuable to this study. The research may help educators to comprehend the reasons why they are attending work when they are actually in an unhealthy state of being. As the biggest reason for presenteeism identified in this study is responsibilities, perhaps then employers should consider rewarding these educators with more rest days or leaves to compensate for the heavy responsibilities they carry. Educators are interactive with their customers; whether its students or management and hence providing a service like none other and their interactions with their customers make it crucial for this research to be conducted among them as they have been cited as one of the groups highly involved in presenteeism behaviour. The generated results may help the education industry in the future to find ways to uplift and better accommodate educators to serve students; our future generation.

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