

## EDITORIAL

# Leaveism at work

The subject of workplace well-being has been open to a vast array of interpretation over the years, exploring factors that relate to ill-health, economic success and organizational and individual performance [1]. There is a well-established link between an employee's psychological well-being and organizational performance [2,3]. In the UK, the subject of well-being has become ever more topical as organizations, particularly among the public sector, look to respond to increasing economic pressures. The demands of the comprehensive spending review, a government response to austerity in the UK, have resulted in sweeping public sector reforms, in many cases resulting in large-scale redundancies, downsizing and radical changes to terms and conditions for remaining staff, including pay and progression freezes [4]. Clearly for organizations, the cost of employees being anything other than fully productive can have an enormous impact on operational effectiveness. In the UK, the average days sickness in the private sector is 5.8 days per year compared with 7.9 days per year in the public sector [5]. The overall cost of working age ill-health in the UK exceeds £100 billion every year, employers pay an estimated £9 billion in sick pay and associated costs, and the state pays £13 billion in health-related benefits, e.g. incapacity benefits [6]. There is a similar picture in the USA, with health-related productivity losses estimated to reach some \$260 billion annually [7]. These fiscal outcomes, in terms of absence costs and lost productivity, are often what eventually attracts the attention of senior managers, providing a persuasive argument for them to focus on improving aspects of working life that are proven to be detrimental to an employee's well-being.

Absenteeism, presenteeism and a concept labelled here as '*leaveism*' are used to provide a lens through which to view employee responses to feeling unwell or being overloaded. *Leaveism* is the practice of

- (1) employees utilizing allocated time off such as annual leave entitlements, flexi hours banked, re-rostered rest days and so on, to take time off when they are in fact unwell;
- (2) employees taking work home that cannot be completed in normal working hours;
- (3) employees working while on leave or holiday to catch up.

All of these behaviours sit outside current descriptions associated with absenteeism and presenteeism.

Traditional absenteeism measures have highlighted that general sickness trends have moved from complaints of musculoskeletal-related illness to those

of stress, anxiety and depression. In a report by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the leading voice for businesses in the UK, these are reported as *mental illness* [8] and have been largely attributed to the general working population shifting to a more knowledge-based labour force and away from the manual labour jobs of earlier years. The later introduction of presenteeism [9,10] clearly articulated that the issues of stress in the workplace may not be confined to those employees who were absent due to sickness, arguing the case for being present and sick, among other criteria. Therefore, to rely solely on traditional sickness absence as being the indicator for performance management does not present a full and an accurate picture of the overall well-being of the workforce. The established construct of presenteeism and *leaveism* also impact heavily on the true picture of workplace stressors, such as workload.

Although organizations largely ignore these, or effectively promote their use via absence policies and the effect they have on personnel records, they undoubtedly skew the true picture, significantly. As well as what is overlooked, some of the responses to absence management that organizations adopt may actually be counterproductive and effectively promote (or do little to discourage) employee behaviours that were never intended. These have a negative impact on the organization, in respect of both the relationship between the employer and employee and the bottom line. Examples of these include attendance at work policies, actionable attendance policies and the use of human resource management (HRM) departments to oversee and manage attendance. In some organizations, employees have a '*quota*' of sickness, that if exceeded somehow reflects poor performance. There are a number of ways employees can breach this threshold, for example, organizations set the indicators at runs of three or more day's sickness absence, three or more occasions of sickness absence within a set period (e.g. 6 months) and so on. In response to these '*measurement controls*', employees take allocated leave entitlements, flexi days and such, with the intention of avoiding a scar on their personnel record, *leaveism*. This personnel record is very often of vital importance to employees, it being the record that is '*forensically*' examined in consideration of any development opportunity, including promotions and opportunities for specialization or training courses, but also for any future downsizing. Hence, sickness absence leads to an unintended consequence for employees with advancement in mind, or who value an unblemished HR record.

Evading such consequences may involve taking work home that an employee cannot possibly complete within contracted hours in the workplace. Often employees do not want to appear that they cannot cope with the workload, which may extend to working while on annual leave or taking flexi days, etc. Therefore, managers and leaders need to have a considered approach. They need to engage, be resilient, and balance the need to portray a positive and an optimistic leadership outlook with reality. They need to create an environment where employees can find meaning and purpose in their working life. They need to identify and intervene, both efficiently and effectively.

*Leaveism* contributes to factors synonymous with the existent circumstances when this does not occur, in terms of inadvertently driving behaviours that may not reflect a true picture of organizational reality, and thus adding a further dimension to the study of performance measurement and management control. Identifying the costs of employees not working to their full potential, in relation to productivity, is not an easy concept to illustrate. However, most employers would 'know it when they saw it', and the difficulty lies in quantifying it. The use of measurement instruments may provide vital insight into issues that result in an employee response that falls short of being traditionally 'off-sick'. The world of HRM has become far more complex in relation to what is and what is not described as a fully functional workforce. This has been brought about by a number of external (mainly financial, through austerity) pressures that have been brought to bear, both on organizations and individuals.

These pressures include extremes ranging from government targets to personal pride in one's employment record.

Although absenteeism and presenteeism cover some of the human responses to workload and illness, *leaveism* provides the missing link. It defines the previously uncharted phenomenon that describes a situation where an employee uses their own time, in whatever guise, to avoid the workplace when they are in fact unwell, or take home work to complete outside contacted hours due to the sheer volume asked of them (overload). These unintended consequences may be brought about by organizations adopting counterproductive policies that were introduced with the [best] intention of reducing absence. Attendance at work policies, actionable attendance policies and the wider use of punitive and incentive-based HRM policies are all examples of schemes intended to reduce absence.

Together with increasing workloads, fewer staff and higher expectations, *leaveism* presents an additional

consideration for traditional employee monitors that cannot be overlooked. *Leaveism* also adds a further dynamic to human behaviours associated with responses to workplace well-being, and ought to be included in future discussions associated with workforce satisfaction and productivity measures.

It may be a counter-intuitive proposition, but organizations may wish to consider the economic loss should this practice cease as a means of measurement. Whatever the consequences and subsequent approach, *leaveism* presents a real issue when it comes to establishing the true picture of employee well-being and should not be ignored.

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