

## *Introduction*

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The cost of absenteeism in organizational functioning has been widely acknowledged and extensively examined in the management disciplines of organizational behavior, organizational theory, and strategy (Cascio & Boudreau, 2011). Yet, its alleged flip side “presenteeism” (working while sick) has only recently attracted scholarly attention as a byproduct of organizational restructuring in the wake of the global economic recession, and subsequently as a factor in explaining worsening employee well-being, loss of productivity, strained team dynamics, hampered implementation of business strategies, and depressed organizational functioning. In the past decade, the rapid advance of digital technologies, i.e., Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), has facilitated agile working and flexibility, but also fueled the “always on” culture (McDowall & Kinman, 2017), which may be more potent in Asian societies working in harmony with the social values of diligence. Alongside this global transformation of “work taking over life, any time anywhere,” presenteeism may have ceased to be *just* a work issue: cultural forces, social factors, managerial practices, employees’ self-concept, values, motivations, psychological resources will all conspire to make it into a sociocultural as much as an individual personal act (of attending work given the circumstance). Unfortunately, the existing work on presenteeism is scattered across a wide range of academic disciplines and under a variety of topics, lacking the coherence and comprehensiveness to address the complexity underlying the phenomenon. This pioneering volume thus aimed to collect and update the work of early starters in this emergent yet eclectic research field of “presenteeism and organizations” to inform scholars and practitioners about the powerful role presenteeism can play in explaining individual well-being, work attitudes, productivity, team dynamics, organizational performance, and management practices.

Charting a not very long history of the field, the study of presenteeism is first championed by Cooper (1996), who construed presenteeism

as when people are physically present in the workplace but are functionally absent. The succinct depiction of a prevailing phenomenon in the workplace quickly captures the imagination of the popular press as well as raising the awareness of academia. A subsequent article entitled “Presenteeism: At work – but out of it” in *Harvard Business Review* helps to further bring home the message of “hidden costs” of presenteeism to organizations to the executives and human resource managers (Hemp, 2004). Mirroring the early interest in absenteeism in management studies, presenteeism is initially examined for its possible associations with loss of productivity and reduced performance. For example, the medical field approaches presenteeism as “lost productive time,” and focuses also on the detrimental effects of presenteeism on health, both immediately and over a longer term (e.g., Collins et al., 2005; Turpin et al., 2004). The state-of-the-art approach to presentation in this line of research still follows the same logic of controlling absenteeism to protect productivity. In a recent HR textbook chapter entitled “the hidden costs of absenteeism,” Cascio & Boudreau (2011: 72) potentially introduced presenteeism as a source of low productivity due to illness that needs to be treated via human resource management tools. Yet since the earlier start by the medical and public health scholars, studies of presenteeism have gathered momentum in the management and organization field, which focus more on the individual and organizational *correlates* of presenteeism, as well as its consequences, other than financial/productivity outcomes (e.g., Johns, 2010; 2011). The first meta-analysis on studies along this line of research presented a state-of-the-art summary of empirical findings encompassing a wide range of work and personal antecedents to both presenteeism and absenteeism (Miraglia & Johns, 2016).

Presenteeism could be costly as researchers have found that when employees come to work sick, they often demonstrate lower levels of performance and productivity, feeling more depressed and exhausted (Robertson & Cooper, 2011). Although presenteeism seems to diminish immediate absenteeism and demonstrate employee perseverance, in the long term, presenteeism causes more serious problems in employees’ physical and mental health, thus incurring more damage to organizational functioning (Demerouti, Blanc, Bakker, Schaufeli & Hox, 2009; Lu, Lin & Cooper, 2013).

In addition to unraveling antecedents of presenteeism at the firm level (work contexts) and the individual level (personal circumstances,

personality traits), divergent motives for attending work while ill have also attracted research efforts (Lu et al., 2013, see also Chapter 4, by Ma, Meltzer, Yang & Liu, in this book). Scarce but valuable longitudinal data further corroborate the “bad presenteeism” phenomenon, that is, sickness presenteeism leads to subsequent emotional exhaustion, burnout, mental ill-health, physical ill-health, and job dissatisfaction (Demerouti et al., 2009; Lu et al., 2013; see also Chapter 8, by Miraglia and Johns, in this book). The importance of presenteeism to work adjustment and employee well-being is reflected in the academic literature, popular press, and is the foundation of organizational interventions.

Given the prevailing nature of presenteeism in modern day work settings, its central place in employee behavior and popular awareness, the recent endeavors of research on the role of presenteeism on employee well-being, employee work engagement and organizational commitment, work ethics, career management, work team management, organizational restructuring and change, multinational company strategic implementation, and cross-cultural management are timely and important. From across the wide range of organization and management topics scholars are increasingly turning to presenteeism to account for empirical findings. These scholars, all focusing on differing problems, have come to the conclusion that the act of presenteeism is an important explanation of their empirical observations.

Yet these works remain scattered across the various scientific disciplines and management and organization sub-disciplines. The diversity of subfields in which presenteeism is introduced means that scholars working in these fields focus on their specific problems. While they find that presenteeism is informative in understanding their problems, they are yet to be made more aware of one another’s work, so that we may deepen our understanding of presenteeism in organizations and across diverse cultures. What is more, the extant research on presenteeism has been atheoretical, and approaching it as merely an overt behavior, the explanatory power of presenteeism may thus be underestimated (Johns, 2010). Although there have since been some theory-building efforts in the field – for example, Cooper & Lu (2016) advocated delineating the underlying psycho-social mechanisms under the overarching framework of social cognitive theory (SCT), Miraglia & Johns (2016) proposed a two-path model – testable hypotheses are yet to be derived and tested. The lack of sustained

theoretical conversation about the underlying psycho-social and/or team-organizational processes of presenteeism and integrative theoretical accounts for the antecedents, consequences, and variability of presenteeism in these disciplines means that sporadically directed research efforts are in need of better coherence and consolidation for the field to stride ahead.

Though the significance of presenteeism as a fact of modern day work life has been established with large-scale surveys in the developed economies of North America and Europe, research of presenteeism in non-Western countries is almost non-existent. The only exception is Quazi (2013) reporting three Singaporean studies of presenteeism. As employees in East Asia on average work much longer hours than do North Americans and Europeans, is presenteeism more prevalent in Asian countries than in the West? If so, are Asian employees compelled by the social norm of hard work to attend work yet just doing “face time”? More importantly perhaps, does presenteeism compounded with long working hours bring more damage to the well-being of East Asian workers than their Western counterparts? Answers to these queries will be informative for multinational companies in formulating their strategies and better managing their culturally diverse workforce.

The present volume brings together leading international scholars on presenteeism in diverse scientific disciplines. Part 1 explores general theoretical and methodological issues in the study of presenteeism, while situating it on the current global stage: cultural and economic. The three chapters also provide state-of-the-art reviews of the growing literature on presenteeism from different yet complimentary perspectives. Part 2 focuses on understanding the behavior of presenteeism, its driving forces within (individual motivation), and those in the environment (organizational attendance-pressure factors, macroeconomic factors). To reflect upon the initial groundbreaking interest in the field, the intricate dynamism of assiduity at work between presenteeism and absenteeism is also explored with a fresh, more contemporary insight. Part 3 attempts to understand the consequences of presenteeism, for individual well-being, stress, and adaptation, as well as team innovation. Part 4 zooms onto presenteeism in cultural contexts, specifically collectivistic (Chinese and Latino), in contrast to individualistic culture (European and North American, where most of the existing research has been conducted).

International scholars in this volume present the state-of-the-art research from all corners of the world and diverse cultural backgrounds. Synthesizing and integrating research on presenteeism in management and organization helps to build a panoramic view of presenteeism encompassing antecedents, mechanisms, and consequences, across multiple levels (e.g., cultural, organizational, individual). This volume is the first to link presenteeism as an employee work behavior with work well-being, team process, and organization strategy. We hope that this initiative will lead to the further development of this eclectic research field, and attracting an even wider audience of scholars' attention as well as practitioners' interest to the role of presenteeism in work well-being and organizational performance.

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PART I

*Situating Presenteeism on the  
Global Stage*

*Theoretical and Methodological Approaches*

# 1 *Presenteeism: An Introduction to a Prevailing Global Phenomenon*

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In the current economic climate and the need “to achieve more with less,” many organizations strive to maintain productivity and a competitive edge. This has a substantial impact on employee health, well-being, and work outcomes. One relatively recent phenomenon that is receiving increasing attention from a range of perspectives is presenteeism. Studies abound that not only show how prevalent presenteeism is across a range of occupations and sectors (Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005; Baker-McCleary, Greasley, Dale & Griffith, 2010; Biron, Brun & Ivers, 2006; Vézina et al., 2011) but also position it as more costly than absenteeism (CIPD, 2016). This cost can take many forms, including financial impact, performance and productivity, and individual health and well-being (Cooper & Dewe, 2008; Kivimäki, Head, Ferrie, Hemingway, Shipley & Vahtera, 2005; Stewart, Ricci, Chee, Morganstein & Lipton, 2003b). The combination of high prevalence and high cost renders a comprehensive understanding of presenteeism and its damaging but also potentially beneficial outcomes necessary.

Because of its nature and impact, presenteeism has attracted substantial research attention from a range of disciplines and perspectives, including work psychology, business and management, occupational health, public health, and economics. Research on presenteeism has exploded in the last few years. A cursory search on Google Scholar of journal papers with “presenteeism” in the title alone yielded 236 publications in the last three years, 137 in the previous three years, and 72 in the three years before that, with the first studies emerging around 1996, when Cary Cooper (1996) first introduced the term.

This chapter offers an overview of current research and thinking on presenteeism. Because of the broad scope and high volume of available research, our exposition will necessarily be selective, focusing on the major issues that sketch the field. We draw from the rich evidence to explore



definitions, theoretical models, antecedents, and outcomes of presenteeism, and in the process pinpoint needs for future work.

### **Definitional Issues**

The term presenteeism is used to describe “the phenomenon of people turning up at their jobs despite medical complaints and ill-health that would normally require rest and absence from work” (Aronsson, Gustafsson & Dallner, 2000: 503; also see Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005; Vingård, Alexanderson & Norlund, 2004; Hemp, 2004; Johns, 2008). Cooper (1996: 15) first defined presenteeism as: “being at work when you should be at home either because you are ill or because you are working such long hours that you are no longer effective” – essentially describing a combination of physical presence and functional incapacitation in the workplace. Johns (2010) offered a more concise definition of presenteeism as “showing up for work when one is ill.”

The proliferation of definitions that have been offered reflect two main perspectives on presenteeism (Johns, 2010). Broadly speaking, European scholars tend to focus on presenteeism as the behavior of attending work when one is sick and an outcome of job and occupational factors, whereas US scholars tend to be more concerned about productivity loss due to health problems (Schultz & Edington, 2007; Burton et al., 2004). Juxtaposed to the European perspective that defines presenteeism as “the phenomenon of people, despite complaints and ill health that should prompt rest and absence from work, still turning up at their jobs” (Aronsson, Gustafsson & Dallner, 2000: 503; also see Dew, Keefe & Small, 2005; and Johansson & Lundberg, 2004), is the definition offered by the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine of presenteeism as “the measurable extent to which health symptoms, conditions and diseases adversely affect the productivity of individuals who choose to remain at work” (Chapman, 2005: 2). The different approaches can be understood by looking at broader societal and economic differences. For example, the health care system in the USA places more weight on private health insurance, whereas in Europe there has been a historical emphasis on social care, with governments providing health insurance, and a focus on wellness and rehabilitation into work (e.g., Ridic, Gleason & Ridic, 2012). The range of definitions reflects the range of

disciplinary perspectives as well as research and practice priorities. As Ashby & Mahdon (2010: 13) note, “it is important to highlight that the concept of presenteeism has been understood in different ways.” A third but not popular perspective views presenteeism as “the tendency to stay at work beyond the time needed for effective performance of the job” (Simpson, 1998: S.38).

Consensus is now emerging that presenteeism describes attending work when one is unwell. Consensus in the field is important for three reasons. First, defining the behavior of presenteeism (attending work when ill) in terms of its outcomes or consequences (performance loss) risks conflating cause and effect (Johns, 2010; Karanika-Murray & Biron, under review). Association is not causation and an observed relationship between poor health and productivity loss does not imply that poor health causes productivity loss; it is possible that third factor or factors can explain this association. Such definitional ambiguities are problematic in terms of measuring productivity loss, as in most cases it is difficult to know exactly when work is not being completed and there are numerous reasons for lost productivity which cannot be attributed to health.

Second, although different perspectives can offer rich and complementary understandings in an emerging field, they also often determine the research questions and possible solutions prescribed. The risk is that without regular integration of knowledge and consensus building, this process may lead to the field splitting. It is unclear, for example, how findings from studies that use different building blocks (definitions and measures) of presenteeism can be integrated. This is also a gap that welcomes future research.

Third, definitional consensus is important for ensuring the rigor of measurement tools. Existing measures focus on the frequency of presenteeism or job productivity and also range from a single item to multiple-item scales. A popular self-report single-item measure of presenteeism, developed by Aronsson & Gustafsson (2005), asks respondents to indicate the frequency of attending work when ill within a recent time window (Hansen & Andersen, 2008; Johansson & Lundberg, 2004; Munir et al., 2009). Measures of presenteeism as the extent to which ill-health interferes with job productivity (productivity loss) reflect a number of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of accomplishing work, with reference to being ill.