

# Presenteeism and Its Conceptualization: A Literature Review

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## **Abstract**

Presenteeism is a comparatively new phenomenon in the study of occupational behaviors which evolved throughout the past few decades. Increasing interest in managing presenteeism effectively emerged as a new source of competitive advantage in current organizations. With definitional confusion, the most scholarly conception of presenteeism involves the employee's attending to work while being ill. However, the definition has been more recently extended to include other conditions and events that limit productivity. Now focus is moving from single dimension to multiple dimensions of presenteeism. Accordingly, this conceptual paper traces the development of interest in presenteeism with consideration of its various conceptualizations which are important theoretically and practically. The paper may be useful to those who are interested in understanding the concept of presenteeism for future research studies.

**Key Words:** Conceptualization, Presenteeism, Sickness Presenteeism

## Introduction

Presenteeism has become as one of the prominent feature of today's organizations which has increasing interest with the systematic studies and the theoretical background. Managing presenteeism effectively is one of the important components of an organization to achieve higher level of productivity. Cost of sickness presenteeism is higher than the cost of sickness absenteeism in relation to both direct and indirect costs (Garrow, 2016; Hemp, 2004). Thus, cost saving of sickness presenteeism is more economical than cost saving of absenteeism.

The concept of presenteeism has evolved over time through geographically distinct sources. Johns (2010) reviewed two independent research traditions of the presenteeism which based on geographically distinct sources as European and American. European researchers (Aronsson, Gustafsson and Dallner, 2000; Simpson, 1998) are focusing on the understanding of the presenteeism by exploring the factors driving to personal decisions. American researchers (e.g., Koopman, Pelletier, Murray, Sharda, Berger, Turpin, Hackleman, Gibson, Holmes, and Bendel, 2002) are focusing on the consequences of these behaviors with the quantification of productivity losses related to various illnesses that are due to presenteeism. However, European researchers concerned the job insecurity and levels of attendance that result in stress and illness. American scholars were concerned with the impact of illness in general and specific medical conditions on work productivity. According to Johns (2010), European scholars were mainly interested in the occurrence of the presenteeism as a reflection of occupational characteristics and the American scholars were mainly interested in the productivity consequences of the act of presenteeism and they consider it as a function of various illnesses while ignoring the causes of illness.

Further, sickness presenteeism provides adverse consequences which can be divided according to employee and employer perspective. Consequences from employee perspective are stress, depression, headaches, injury, back problems, arthritis, anxiety, sickness absence, long-term inability in work engagement, drug addiction, early retirement and work family imbalances while consequences from employer perspective include ineffective work environment, heavy losses, loss of productivity and lower performances (Garrow, 2016; Hemp, 2004; Johns, 2010).

There are several antecedents of sickness presenteeism presented by previous researchers. Factors contributing to sickness presenteeism mainly include organizational or contextual or job-related factors and individual or personal factors (Aronsson and Gustafsson, 2005; Garrow, 2016; Hansen and Anderson, 2008; Johns, 2010; Rantanen and Tuominen, 2010; Yıldız, Yıldız, Zehir, and Aykaç, 2015). However, most researchers have focused on contextual factors such as job demand, job security, reward system, absence policy, absence culture, teamwork, replacement, adjustment attitude, work hour, responsibilities, work control, supervisor support, peer support and personal factors such as work attitude, personality, perceived justice, perceived absence, stress, job satisfaction and commitment (Aronsson and Gustafsson, 2005; Garrow, 2016; Hansen and Anderson, 2008; Johns, 2010; Rantanen and Tuominen, 2010; Yıldız et al, 2015). Baker-McCleary, Greasley, Dale, and Griffith (2010) interpret presenteeism as a 'complex problem' that is continually being shaped by individual and organizational factors. The

complexities of what drives presenteeism are considered in the decision-making process. Garrow (2016) emphasized that the decisions on whether to 'present' or 'absent' are, however, rarely based on simple health or task information and both organizational and personal factors come into play.

### **Purpose Statement**

This conceptual paper is to reveal the conceptual clarification of presenteeism for future systematic empirical investigations in the field of Human Resource Management (HRM). Accordingly, the inquiry question of this conceptual paper is: What is the conceptual clarification of presenteeism? Review and analysis of literature provide answer to this inquiry question.

### **Methods for Collecting Literature**

This conceptual paper is based solely on a review and analysis of research from the literature. The method for collecting literature was using HRM databases: Emerald Insight, Sage Journals Online, Science Direct (Elsevier), and Wiley Online Library, where a number of articles were deemed useful for the topic of presenteeism.

### **Findings from Literature**

The conceptualization of presenteeism has become debatable on the definition of the concept. Oxford English Dictionary Online stated that, the term 'presentee' was originally used by Mark Twain in 1892 in his book, 'The American Claimant' (Johns, 2010; Werapitiya, Opatha and Fernando, 2016). The Oxford Dictionary Online defined presenteeism as the practice of working more hours than required by one's job, as a reflection of one's job insecurity.

Studies on presenteeism mainly focused on three types as 'sickness presenteeism' (Aronsson and Gustafsson, 2005; Aronsson, Gustafsson and Dallner, 2000; Caverley, Cunningham and MacGregor, 2007; Garrow, 2016; Hansen and Anderson, 2008; Hemp, 2004; Johns, 2011; Nuhait, Harbi, Jarboa, Bustami, Alharbi, Albekairy, and Almodaimegh, 2017), 'working employees more than the time assigned' (Simpson, 1998) and 'not fully engaged in work' on the way that the term presenteeism is defined (Gilbreath and Karimi, 2012). 'In a general way revealed literature has elicited the idea in a very simple manner stating that working while they are sick and few scholars defined it as working of employees more than the time assigned on a particular job' (Werapitiya et al, 2016, p.1489).

The concept is named in literature as 'sickness presenteeism', which provides foundation for majority of studies on presenteeism (Aronsson and Gustafsson, 2005; Aronsson, Gustafsson and Dallner, 2000; Caverley, Cunningham and MacGregor, 2007; Garrow, 2016; Hansen and Anderson, 2008; Hemp, 2004; Johns, 2011; Nuhait et al, 2017). These studies named the concept as 'sickness presenteeism' or 'impaired presenteeism' or only as 'presenteeism'. Johns (2010) summarized nine definitions from literature and variously portrayed as good, somewhat obsessive, at odds with one's health status and often less than fully productive. Six definitions out of nine portrayed presenteeism as a phenomenon relate to health status. Werapitiya et al (2016) reviewed forty articles to develop a comprehensive working definition of presenteeism. Twenty three articles out

of forty defined presenteeism as being at work despite being sick. These evidences emphasized that majority of studies defined most similarly presenteeism as attending work while ill. Johns (2011) has defined presenteeism as attending work while sick. Hemp (2004) defined presenteeism as people hanging in work while they get sick and trying to figure out ways to carry on in spite of their symptoms. Aronsson and Gustafsson (2005) implied that sickness presenteeism as the phenomenon of employees who present at their work with the ill health that requires absence from work and rest. Accordingly, presenteeism always ignored the benefits of being at work, causes for negative consequences, sociability and adequate support from the organization. Some definitions recently include the productivity loss to describe presenteeism as a behavior of individuals who are present but not working to full capacity due to their impairment. Aronsson, Gustafsson and Dallner (2000) explained presenteeism as attending to work even when one feels ill. Johns (2010) stated that this definition is one the most organizational scholars used and also more related to studies published in the occupational health literature. Further, Johns (2010) argued that the definition does not ascribe motives to presenteeism.

However, the definition has extended to include other conditions that bound productivity. It is also named as 'working employees more than the time assigned' and 'non-work-related presenteeism' which means that employees are mentally absent while they are healthy and present at work. Simpson (1998) defined presenteeism as the tendency to stay at work beyond the time needed for effective performance on the job. The concept of presenteeism defined with the dimension of working employees more than the time assigned. 18 percent of forty articles reviewed by Werapitiya et al (2016) defined most similarly presenteeism as stay at work beyond the time assigned.

Another category of defining presenteeism relates with the dimension of 'not fully engaged in work'. According to Gilbreath and Karimi (2012), presenteeism occurs when employees are at work, but their cognitive energy is not devoted to their work. Gilbreath and Karimi (2012) further explained that employees will be going through the motions of work while their attention is focused elsewhere and they will not be working at all. 8 out of forty articles reviewed by Werapitiya et al (2016) defined presenteeism most similar to this conception.

Other than these three types literature stated another two types of presenteeism as, job-stress-related presenteeism and non-work-related presenteeism (Gilbreath and Karimi, 2012; Wan, Downey and Stough; 2014). 'Non-work-related presenteeism' means that employees are mentally absent while they are healthy and present at work. Job-stress-related presenteeism occurs when employees fail to focus their mental concentration on work due to job stress (Gilbreath and Karimi, 2012) and non-work-related presenteeism arises when employees involve in their personal events instead of working activities at job (Wan, Downey and Stough, 2014).

Then focus is moving from a single dimension to multiple dimensions of presenteeism. Werapitiya et al (2016) stated that these three dimensions are not sufficient to present all dimensions of presenteeism and two other domains were added to existing domains perceived from 13 observations in Sri Lankan Context as present but not in work assigned

and overactive and hyperactive in the assignment. Accordingly, Werapitiya et al (2016) developed a comprehensive working definition of presenteeism. "Presenteeism is being at work despite being sick, working more than time assigned on a particular job, not fully engaged in work, recorded as present but not in work assigned and overactive and hyperactive in the assignment" (Werapitiya et al, 2016, p.1502). It involves five domains as an employee working while being sick, working more than the required time, working without engaging in works fully, working on something else, not the work assigned and working over actively or hyperactively in the assignment. Werapitiya et al (2016) stated that this comprehensive definition will make the accuracy of operationalization of the presenteeism to conduct future empirical studies by avoiding confusion of the meaning of the concept.

### Conclusion

Studies on presenteeism still suffer from differences in conceptual clarification of its definitions. The concept of presenteeism evolved as single dimension to multiple dimensions and therefore no single definition exists to define it. Johns (2010) explained that according to existing literature there is no single definition of presenteeism. The complexity of defining the concept results in difficulty to define it and to measure it. Although presenteeism is increasingly gaining its interest for human resource management practitioners and scholars, more studies need to be done to clarify the conceptualization of the concept.

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