

THE IMPACT OF UNHEALTHY WORKERS ON ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE: A STUDY OF ABSENTEEISM, PRESENTEEISM, AND HEALTHCARE COSTS

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Abstract: *In this modern era, employees' physical and mental well-being have become very important for a company's overall success. This is because poor employee well-being will cost money to the company. Many employees around the world have faced the same problems with their health, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and cholesterol, and obesity. However, absenteeism, presenteeism, and rising healthcare expenditures are major and increasing concerns that firms must manage to retain productivity, financial stability and organizational performance. Thus, the objective of this study is to understand absenteeism, presenteeism and healthcare cost and to investigate their impact on organizational performance. This study is using a qualitative method where the information is gained from journals and articles. The result indicates that absenteeism can cause negative impacts such as overwork among employees, a decline in quality, and operational difficulties, while presenteeism can cause disease transmissions, increase errors in work, and lead to workplace accidents. Both will have an adverse impact on the productivity of individuals, team members, and organizations and also cause an increase in healthcare costs. This study also recommends that companies should provide workplace wellness programs, enhance employee health benefits, and establish a positive work environment to deal with absenteeism and presenteeism.*

Keywords: *Absenteeism, Presenteeism, Healthcare Cost*

Introduction

Nowadays, worker physical and mental health are crucial indicators of a company's general success. While companies have continuously concentrated on measures to increase efficiency and productivity, they have often overlooked the impact on worker health, particularly absenteeism, presenteeism, and the growing healthcare cost that can jeopardize a company's success. Poor employee welfare costs firms and the economy money (Bryan et al., 2021). This is because of health issues leading individuals to engage a shorter time at work, such as by being unemployed, decreasing hours, and absenteeism, as well as reducing the workers' productivity in doing their job. Organizations that emphasize their workers' happiness and well-being seem to have positive outcomes on their company productivity, morale, and their overall company result (Khanna, 2024).

In the United States, five primary health concerns, which are diabetes, high blood pressure, smoking, not doing enough exercise, and obesity, have cost companies roughly \$36.4 billion in missed days of work each year (Chang, 2024). While in Malaysia, 59.59% had been confirmed with high levels of cholesterol (hypercholesterolemia), 23.52% were obese, 20.45% suffered high blood pressure, and 19.91% were diagnosed with diabetes, according to the medical examinations that were participated in by 175,526 employees in Malaysia (The Star Online, 2024). The most common health issue faced by employees in the first quarter of 2024 is also shown in Figure 1.

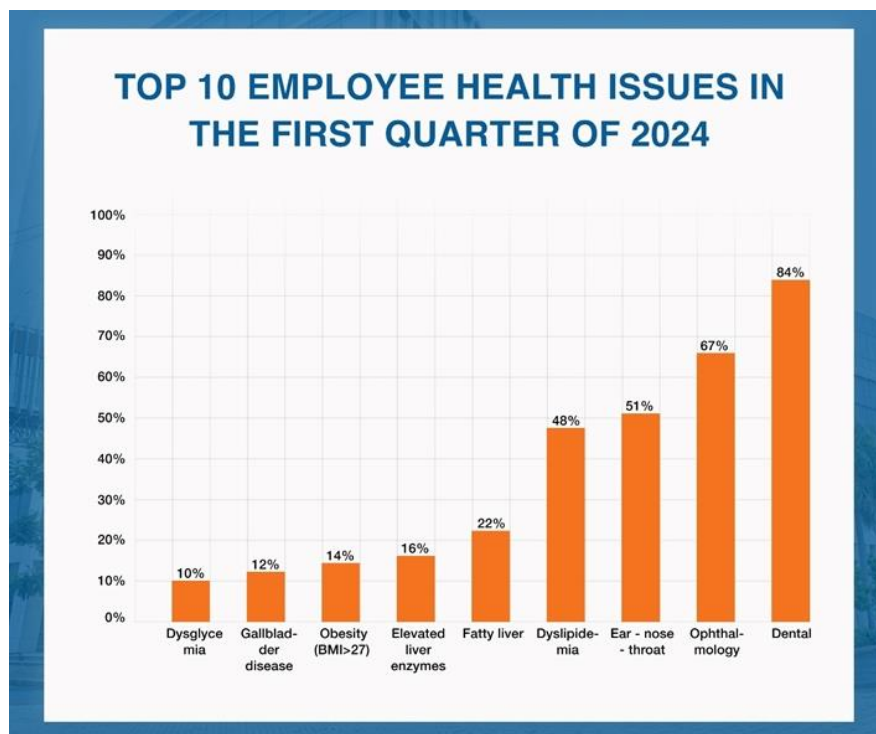


Figure 1: Top 10 Employee Health Issue in the First Quarter of 2024

Not only that, mental health well-being is also one of the aspects other than physical well-being. For example, a study by Tangchareonsamut et al. (2021) discovered that stress and job exhaustion which is related to mental health were linked to decreased work performance. Poor health also may negatively impact both physical and mental health, which makes it more difficult for employees to carry out their duties successfully.

Severe health issues and bad habits of living also have a negative influence on both worker wellness and performance. According to Section 60A of the Employment Act 1955, an employee should not exceed 45 hours per week, which means 8 hours a day (Jabatan Tenaga Kerja Semenanjung Malaysia, 2023). Nevertheless, due to the workload, some employees work overtime (Mawardi, 2024). Some employees assume that working more hours is helpful, but if a person is swamped with work, they may neglect their physical and mental well-being. This is a poor situation since it will cause a lot of problems in the future. According to research, spending endless hours working does not boost productivity at the corporate level but rather decreases production per hour. Extended hours of work are also linked to a slightly increased risk of cardiovascular disease (Life Health Solutions, 2024).

Several industries in Malaysia are most affected by worker health issues, particularly the manufacturing, service and healthcare sectors (Awaluddin et al., 2023). The manufacturing industry often suffers from physical health problems due to heavy workloads, exposure to hazardous substances, and long working hours. This has led to an increase in chronic health problems such as high blood pressure and repetitive strain injuries (Cunningham et al., 2022). The service sectors, including hospitality and retail, also face challenges in terms of workers' mental well-being due to work pressure, irregular working hours, and high workloads. In addition, the healthcare industry itself has experienced high rates of fatigue and stress among workers, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused many healthcare professionals to suffer from burnout syndrome (Ariza-Montes et al., 2019).

Although there are several policies aimed at protecting workers' health, many have failed to address this issue effectively. For example, the Employment Act 1955 limits working hours to 45 hours a week, but implementation and monitoring of compliance remain weak, resulting in many workers having to work overtime without adequate compensation. In addition, existing occupational health policies focus more on physical safety in the workplace, but pay less attention to workers' mental well-being. In developed countries such as Germany and Sweden, there are more comprehensive employee health policies, including flexible working hours, workplace mental health support, and longer paid sick leave to promote work-life balance.

A healthy worker results in reduced direct labor expenses, such as lower individual insurance premiums and decreased claims for compensation for workplace injuries. With that, a healthier worker could make greater contributions and boost performance compared to an unhealthy person. Thus, the health of the workers is a significant factor influencing organizational success.

Literature Review

Absenteeism

Absenteeism is defined as the habitual leave from work or duties without a valid justification (Shyam, 2020). Absenteeism also refers to a situation where employees are absent from work due to various factors, especially health problems (Mohamed et al., 2022). This absence can occur in the short term such as daily sick leave or in the long term such as sick leave requiring special treatment. Absenteeism is frequently caused by several kinds of circumstances, such as avoidable workplace accidents, serious medical concerns, and employee mental health issues (Folger, 2024). Absenteeism has a greater impact on small companies, as one staff member who misses work because of sickness accounts for a bigger proportion of the company's workforce. Figure 4 shows the statistics of employee absences due to illness, injury, medical problem or

appointments from January 2012 to January 2022. It can be seen that the number increased significantly from 2020 to 2022 with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

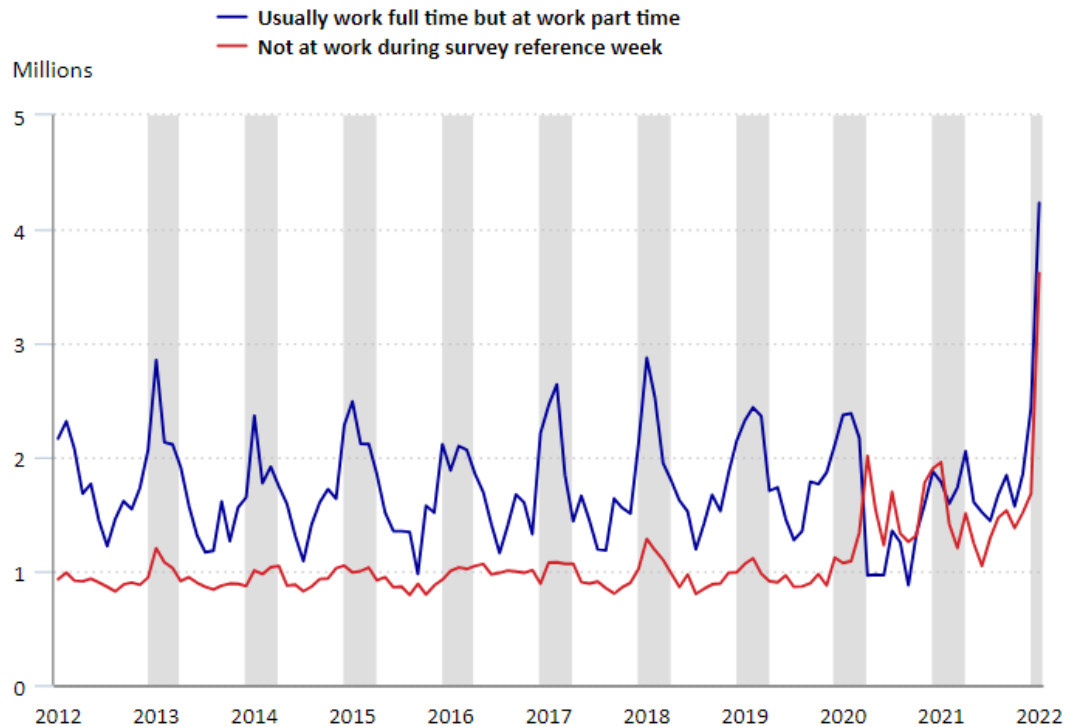


Figure 2: Employed people who missed work because of illness, injury, or medical problem or appointment from January 2012 to January 2022

According to Section 60F of the Employment Act 1955, an employee has the right to take medical leave of:

- i. 14 days in a year if the employee has been working for less than two years.
- ii. 18 days in a year if the employee has been working for more than two years but under five years.
- iii. 22 days in a year if the employee has been working for five years or more.

These will be applied if it does not involve hospitalization, but if hospitalization is required, then the employee is entitled to an extra 60 days of leave (Jabatan Tenaga Kerja Semenanjung Malaysia, 2023). In this period, the employee will still get paid by their employer.

Absenteeism can also be influenced by psychological and social factors. For example, employees who experience high work stress, workplace conflict, or lack of social support from colleagues and employers are more likely to take frequent leave (Saleh & Shahidan, 2023). In addition, restrictive work policies and lack of health benefits such as medical insurance can make it easier for employees to take sick leave, especially if they do not have access to quality health care (Mohamed et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important for organizations to understand the factors that cause employee absenteeism and take appropriate preventive measures.

Presenteeism

Different from absenteeism, presenteeism is the condition in which employees actually show up at work but are not completely invested or productive because of health problems (Perci, 2024). In another definition, Biron et al. (2022), defined presenteeism as the habit of attending work

when feeling unwell. Naturally, when a person is physically unwell and incapable of executing his duties, he ought not to be at work. Attending work when not in good shape can help with healing, and being unwell may not always result in diminished job performance (Bryan et al., 2022). Unlike absenteeism, presenteeism is difficult to detect because employees are still at work, but their performance and productivity are reduced due to poor physical or mental condition (Ho et al., 2022). This problem often occurs in organizations that have a work culture that emphasizes physical presence without considering the health and well-being of employees (Hoo et al., 2024). As a consequence, presenteeism will affect on job output and productivity, which is classified as dysfunctional (Karanika-Murray & Biron, 2019). For example, a study reported that nurse presenteeism has been linked to more patient falls and errors in medication, as well as lower quality of service. Therefore, in North Carolina, presenteeism among nurses results in a yearly per capita economic loss of \$1,346 to \$9,000 (Li et al., 2019). According to Kinman (2019), 50-70% of employees in the United Kingdom work while sick at least once a year.

The factors determining presenteeism usually fall into unwanted traits relating to individual traits like poor health, work-related elements such as high role demands, and organizational considerations such as restricted absence policies (Waeyenberg, 2024). Acute diseases like the flu or colds, mental health conditions, anxiety, and other chronic illnesses like diabetes can all contribute to presenteeism. Besides, workers also develop presenteeism as a concern of ending up behind on their task load. Also, presenteeism is also caused by workplace culture. Even if they are unable to do their best job, employees may feel pressured to look strong and dedicated by working despite illness. This situation not only reduces the productivity of the employee, but can also affect the entire organization when more employees fall ill due to the unhealthy environment in the workplace (Sharkawi, Suhaimi & Razali, 2021).

Healthcare Cost

Employee healthcare costs are an important aspect that employers need to pay attention to, especially in organizations that provide health benefits to their employees (Mustard & Yanar, 2023). These costs include expenses for medical insurance, medical treatment, health screenings, and employee wellness programs. An increase in the number of employees experiencing health problems can lead to increased healthcare costs for companies, thus affecting their operating expenses (Voordt & Jensen, 2023). The growing cost of medical treatment in Malaysia is a worrying trend that reveals major issues in the healthcare industry (Parzi, 2024). According to the Aon Global Medical Trend Rates Report 2023, healthcare expenses in Malaysia are on a considerable increasing pattern, at an average annual rise of 14.2% in medical expenses (AmMetLife, 2024). This increase is the result of a number of causes, such as advances in medical technology, a growing elderly population that requires more intensive treatment, and rising medical insurance expenses. The implementation of fresh, expensive medical technology and treatments, along with a rising demand for continuous treatment for serious illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, and obesity, puts even more financial strain on the health care system.

With medical prices being at the highest level in history, many companies are anxious about how this shift would impact their capability to provide employees with a competitive and reasonable healthcare plan. If employers' benefit costs rise, they may face additional labor-related expenses in addition to regular salary inflation. These healthcare costs are rising across all sectors of the service business, which means there are no exceptions in the industry. Among the most obvious and apparent effects of growing medical expenditures on firms is the cost of offering insurance for health and other medical advantages to employees. Therefore, organizations need to plan well

in providing health benefits that not only protect employees but also control expenses related to employee health (Noorazem, Md Sabri & Mat Nazir, 2021).

The Impact of Unhealthy Workers on Organizational Performance

Unhealthy employees have a major impact on organizational performance as they are unable to work optimally. One of the main impacts is reduced productivity, where employees with health problems tend to work at a lower efficiency rate (Mohamed et al., 2022). Fatigue, physical illness, or mental problems such as stress and depression can reduce their focus and ability to complete tasks effectively. In the long run, this can affect organizational performance as production decreases and the quality of work does not reach the expected standards. This is supported by a study of Brouwer et al. (2024) indicated that both absenteeism and presenteeism can have an impact on coworkers' productivity. When a worker is regularly absent from work, their duties and responsibilities must be reallocated to other team members. This may end up in increasing tasks for their coworkers, which may contribute to extra stress, exhaustion, and less concentration on their particular job. Therefore, the productivity of the whole group or division may suffer, as coworkers feel obligated to substitute for the missing individual. In the case of presenteeism, an employee who is dealing with a medical condition can become less effective, slower, or more likely to make errors. This will lead to the disruption in the progress of work and add to colleagues' workload (Hoo et al., 2024).

Besides, presenteeism can also cause unsafe working environments because the sick employees are less focused on doing their jobs correctly and safely. Because of that, they are more inclined to experience or cause workplace accidents (Simpson, 2024). This will also put them and their colleagues in danger. Not only that, if they arrive at work with an infectious sickness, they are capable of passing it on to their coworkers, resulting in others becoming sick as well (Sharkawi, Suhaimi & Razali, 2021). This may result in increased absenteeism and presenteeism also. Next, presenteeism can also lower the quality of work. Even if someone does the same amount of work when sick, their output is likely to degrade, and they might commit errors that cost them time and money. This may have an indirect impact, affecting the work of others who rely on this individual or are part of their team. For example, a sick worker working in a production line will cause a bottleneck to their line, and this will affect the others productivity. With that, the process will become slower and the output will be lower than usual.

On the other hand, if absenteeism is not handled, employees may believe that they are entitled to take any time off without facing repercussions. In addition, other employees may grow overworked and begin taking sick leave too. Furthermore, with frequent absence, according to the employee's degree of expertise, their absence may potentially lead to a decline in quality. This would lower customer satisfaction (Sayed, 2022). Besides, when substituting in for absentees, employees are not as productive. It also affects supervisors, who in order to keep everything going, spend hours each week handling absences and planning and modifying operations (Sayed, 2022). For example, when a worker who is involved in a project takes a long leave because of illness, they will disrupt the timeline of the project. As a result, the project will be delayed because the worker cannot finish his work due to sick leave, and some of the team members cannot continue with their process because of him. Thus, absenteeism and presenteeism, which are caused by unhealthy workers, not only affect individuals but also team members and organizations.

Discussion on Policy Responses in Malaysia

In Malaysia, several policies have been introduced to address employee health issues and their impact on organizational performance. However, their implementation and effectiveness remain major challenges. Among the major issues faced are absenteeism, presenteeism, and rising healthcare costs, which have a negative impact on organizational competitiveness.

Malaysia has a legal framework to protect employee health through the Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994 (OSHA 1994), which requires employers to provide a safe and healthy workplace. In addition, the Employment Act 1955 stipulates maximum working hours and paid sick leave for employees. Although these policies aim to safeguard employee well-being, monitoring and enforcement are still weak, especially in sectors involving high-risk jobs such as manufacturing and construction (Wong, 2023). In addition, the Department of Occupational Safety and Health (DOSH) has introduced guidelines to reduce occupational risks that can affect employee health. However, many companies, especially in the private sector, still lack emphasis on employee well-being holistically, including aspects of mental health and work-life balance (Ling, Ngoo & Tan, 2021).

The Social Security Organization (SOCSO) plays an important role in providing protection to workers who experience work-related health problems (Abd Samad et al., 2023). Programs such as the Health Screening Programme (HSP) were introduced to detect non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure early. Although these programs benefit workers, participation rates are still low due to lack of awareness and access to more widespread health screening programs. In addition, SOCSO also introduced the Return to Work (RTW) Program to help workers who have suffered work-related injuries or illnesses return to work productively. However, this program focuses more on workers who have suffered injuries, rather than on preventive efforts to reduce the risk of occupational diseases in the first place.

Despite policies aimed at reducing the impact of unhealthy workers on organizations, there are still several major challenges. Among them is the lack of focus on mental health. Most policies only focus on physical health, while the mental health of workers is often neglected. Studies show that work stress and burnout are among the main causes of presenteeism, where workers are present at work but are unable to function optimally. Countries such as Japan and Germany have implemented more comprehensive mental health programs, including specific sick leave for psychological stress and structured counseling sessions in the workplace (Mishiba, 2021). Malaysia is still lagging behind in this regard, with only a handful of companies providing mental health programs to their employees.

In addition, policy enforcement is also weak. Although the Employment Act 1955 sets a limit of 45 hours per week for working hours, many employers still ignore this regulation, leading to fatigue and health problems for employees. Countries such as Sweden and the Netherlands have introduced flexible work weeks and shorter working hours to improve employee well-being without compromising productivity. Malaysia could consider similar measures to reduce the negative impact of long working hours on employee health.

Another major challenge is the rising cost of healthcare. The rising cost of medical treatment is putting pressure on companies to provide health insurance for their employees. While Malaysia has a subsidized public healthcare system, private sector workers often rely on company insurance that may not cover certain treatments (Abd Khalim & Sukeri, 2023). In developed

countries such as Australia and Canada, there are more comprehensive employee health care programs, including incentives for employers to invest in the well-being of their employees.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is crystal clear that unhealthy employees have a significant influence on company performance due to absenteeism, presenteeism, and increased healthcare expenditures. These obstacles not only influence staff productivity and efficiency, but they also impose a major financial cost on the firm. From this study, it can be seen that absenteeism, which occurs when workers skip work because of illness or medical problems, immediately interferes with company operations, causes employees to overwork, and decreases in quality of work, which results in lower customer satisfaction. Not only that, presenteeism, which occurs when employees are present in person but not functioning at their best as a result of mental or physical conditions, may be further harmful and is often overlooked but results in long-term productivity drops. It can also cause an increase in errors, disease transmission, and workplace accidents. In addition, growing healthcare expenditures related to curing both chronic and acute illnesses in employees are putting significant financial pressure on many firms, especially as medical expenses continue to rise.

Organizations may save expenses and encourage a better, more productive, and efficient workplace by recognizing the degree of the problem and executing specific measures such as healthcare initiatives, enhanced healthcare coverage, and creating a positive work environment. The study shows that the long-term advantages of making investments in staff well-being are much greater than the short-term expenditures. Healthier workers become more involved, productive and effective, and are less inclined to quit, resulting in a lower turnover rate, cheaper recruiting costs, increased satisfaction among employees, and enhanced overall organization performance.

Recommendation

Workplace Wellness Program

In order to lessen the effect of unwell employees on company performance, the company should encourage workplace wellness programs. Offering a well-being program that addresses physical as well as mental illness helps lower absenteeism and presenteeism. Companies might offer free health check-ups, memberships to gyms, dietary advice, mental health support, and stress management seminars. This is because prevention is better than cure. With the health check-ups, they can detect their health problems and take action early rather than knowing it when it is already incurable. Besides, the other programs such as gym membership can help their employees to become more fit by doing physical activity and exercising which can prevent problems like obesity. However, employee engagement may be minimal because some workers might not get the value at first and others may be concerned about their privacy when sharing sensitive health information. Companies can overcome these obstacles by customizing programs to fit the various needs of their workforce and protecting privacy by managing health data securely.

Enhance Health Benefit

Next, a company also may enhance their health benefits to the employee. Offering comprehensive medical coverage which covers preventative care, mental health assistance, and treatment of chronic illnesses may assist workers to maintain and manage their well-being and minimize absenteeism. As we know, medical costs are not cheap, especially for chronic illnesses which need operation such as surgery and chemotherapy, so some people tend to stay sick instead

of going to the doctor to get treatment. With the help of health benefits from the company, the employee can get treatment for their disease, which will reduce the burden of the employee. Nevertheless, increasing expenses, different healthcare requirements among employees, and lack of knowledge or underuse of benefits could all be the challenges to improve health benefits. Companies may resolve this by giving workers a variety of choices, outlining benefits in detail, and delivering training materials to help them make the best use of their health insurance.

Establish a Positive Work Environment

Not only that, companies should also establish a positive work environment. This means they have to promote a culture that values balance between work and life and lowers stereotypes associated with mental health. Workers who are encouraged are more inclined to take proactive measures to control their well-being. With this positive work environment, the stress levels among workers can be reduced which will contribute to a better mental health. Hence, this has the potential to significantly reduce the number of days missed caused by illness or stress. Even so, creating a healthy work environment can also be challenging, especially when there is an absence of trust, high stress or burnout levels among employees, and conflict in the workplace. Companies can develop a supportive environment by encouraging open communication, providing conflict resolution guidance, and ensuring that leadership reflects the appropriate behaviors.

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