

Presentism: Facts and Figures

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Presentism is when employees come to work despite their physical or psychological illness, resulting in them being unable to execute their duties fully. The notion of presentism prompts why an individual would come to work even when they are feeling incapacitated. Most organizations have been criticized for creating breeding grounds for presentism because of the policies that they make. The effects of presentism have proven to be more harmful than absenteeism. In the USA presentism costs \$3118.8m annually, while medical treatments and prescriptions, absenteeism, and disability costs added up to just \$176.2m annually. This article will look at what presentism is, why it is there, what the effects of presentism are, and how the issue of presentism can be dealt with in a way that benefits the employee and the employer.

What Presentism Is

[In research done by the Institute of Employee Studies, 67.7% of employees in the USA reported coming to work when they were mild to highly sick, whilst 70% of employees reported coming to work whilst they were psychologically ill.](#) The main reason why presentism exists is first because of job insecurity.

Job Insecurity

Most employees report fear of losing their jobs or being replaced if they fail to report to work. Generally, these fears are evident in economies with high unemployment rates and markets with an extremely high competition where an individual is easily replaceable. In cases like the ones mentioned before, there is a trend in how managers and supervisors communicate with their subordinates. There is an emphasis on noting how that employee is lucky to have a job and how easily they can be replaced. This kind of communication only creates insecurity in employees, resulting in them reporting for work even when they are not well.

Company Policies

Some company policies on absenteeism foster presentism. Companies, especially in the mining and manufacturing industry, are known to be the worst culprits in the issue of presentism. An excellent example in the manufacturing industry is factories. If an employee fails to report to work for three days, their contract will be terminated even when they report being sick. The policy in factories is that employees produce a medical certificate to prove that they are sick. However, the majority of these

workers have no access to healthcare as their wages are too low.

In most cases, these workers take home remedies to deal with their illnesses. It is unethical for factories to demand a medical certificate when they know that their employees cannot afford health care. Due to these circumstances, workers will come to work even when they are unwell. Often presentism results in work-related accidents and detrimental errors.

Lack of Knowledge or Ignorance of Mental Health Challenges

Whilst the western world is enlightened about mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety, this remains a controversial and stigmatized area in the African context. Countries such as South Africa have made great strides in the past years to address mental health issues in schools, institutions of higher education, and organizations. However, in the Zimbabwean context, there is still a significantly huge gap in addressing these issues. There is a stigma when people express that they are depressed. Most people don't know how to react when someone comes, and they say they are depressed. The lack of education and enlightenment about these challenges is evident in the rising cases of suicide in Zimbabwe. There are a few companies in the country that have a resident psychologist. Most HR personnel in the country are not trained to deal with employees who have depression or other mental health challenges. Because of the stigma and lack of awareness by management and HR personnel, people who go through these challenges will come to work despite being unwell.

The effects of presentism

Many adverse effects come from presentism that affects the organization as well as its people. These effects will be listed below.

Workplace Accidents and Errors

When a person is sick and comes to work, regardless, chances that person will take medication to alleviate the pain. Most medication will impact an individual's psychomotor functions as well as their cognitive abilities. When this happens, a person is no longer functioning at optimum. A plethora of things can go wrong when an individual is not working at optimum. For example, a person operates delicate machinery in a mine whilst under the influence of drugs. The number of things that could go wrong there are countless.

In some cases, this has resulted in the loss of life. Even in the cooperate world, accidents can happen that can cost an organizations millions of dollars. In that case, the only person to blame is the organization for not making the employee secure enough to stay home when they are not well. No one would opt to come to work when they are sick. So presentism is absolutely an organizations fault

High Staff Turnover

Any organization that creates policies that promote presentism will create a sense of job dissatisfaction in its people. Employers want to feel wanted and valued. They do not want to feel replaceable, even if they are. This creates loyalty in the people and helps in creating job satisfaction. If the culture and policies encourage presentism, employees will have one leg and one leg out. If an opportunity is presented to them, they will leave without thinking twice.

How can organizations remove presentism in a way that they will remain productive?

The debate of presentism has always been centered around the issues of productivity. Every organization wants its staff to be productive so that they remain relevant and competitive in the market. As we have already discussed, the cost of presentism in an organization is much higher than absenteeism. Below are some ways of maintaining productivity even when employees are not well.

Working from home

The issue of working from home was very unpopular before 2020. However, the Covid 19 pandemic showed people could work productively from home. If an employee is unwell, they might find it easier to work whilst they are home. However, this depends on the depth of illness.

Working Half Days

Cutting down on the usual work hours can also have a positive impact. If a person goes home earlier than expected after having done some work, chances are when they come to work the next day, they will be feeling better. This also depends on the level of sickness. In patients who are depressed, you may find that waking up early will be difficult, so if you let them start work at 12 and finish at regular times, this

may significantly help.

Offering Counselling

This should, in fact, be compulsory in all organizations. An individual may go for a therapy session whilst at work if they have a mental health challenge. This will most certainly help and increase their levels of productivity.

Compensating on non-working Days

Working on weekends to compensate for lost time. This may help the employee work less under pressure and still maintain the organization's productivity.

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