

# ABSENTEEISM — A PROBLEM SOLVING APPROACH

K. G. DESAI\*

## INTRODUCTION

Many organisations complain that absenteeism amongst their employees is one of their major problems. One often reads impressive articles in periodicals and journals about absenteeism. This is also a topic discussed at various seminars and symposia. One gets an impression that our industries are genuinely suffering because of these problem and that they badly need help in tackling this problem.

Really speaking one is not quite convinced about the seriousness of this problem for our industrial organisations. Quite a few organisations have permanent arrangements for replacing the workers who are absent by other workers e.g. the system of Badli workers which is prevalent amongst the textile mills in Bombay. There are other organisations which allow the work to be accumulated if the employees are absent e.g. clerical workers in government offices. Apparently the work which these employees are doing is not urgent or important enough.

The definition of absenteeism adopted by quite a few organisations is itself quite revealing. These organisations regard an employee as absent only when he exhausts all his permissible leave (casual leave, sick leave, etc.) and then stays away from his work. When an employee has some leave to his credit he is automatically given leave even when he stays away from work without prior information.

Observations such as these make one wonder whether absenteeism is a serious problem at all in our organisations. However, in this article we would try to discover ways and means of systematically combat-

ing this problem.

Before discussing the contributory factors to absenteeism amongst the employees, let us be quite clear about the meaning of the term absenteeism. There are many definitions of absenteeism. I would prefer the following definition: - When an employee fails to attend to work when he is expected to attend, he may be regarded as absent. In other words, when an employee stays away from work and fails to inform the management about his intention of staying away, he would be regarded as absent. When an employee informs the management well in advance about his intention of staying away from work the management can presumably do something about such a situation. And hence it is not a problem for the management. But when an employee does not give any prior intimation of his staying away and fails to turn up for his duties, he poses a problem for the management. Therefore, the above definition has an advantage in enabling the management to identify the problem. By this definition, casual leave or earned leave or sick leave taken by the employee without prior intimation would be regarded as absence. I am stressing this implication because many organisations do not regard this as absence. To them the employee is absent only when he has exhausted all the available leave and who is staying away without intimation. So we may adopt such a definition and use it in maintaining our attendance records.

Now the next step is to consider the possible reasons as why the employees would remain absent. There are a number of reasons why an employee would remain absent. These possible rea-

sons can be considered under the following three categories: i) The Socio-cultural background of the employees, ii) The job related factors and iii) Personal difficulties. We will elaborate them one by one.

#### THE SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE EMPLOYEES

Many of the employees who are now residing in the cities and working in organisations like ours still have a stake at their native place. By this I mean they have some of their family members and also their land at the native place. And therefore they would like to go back to their native place and be amongst their family members as often as they can. This is a typical pattern amongst the workers in our textile mills in Bombay. Many of them hail from the coastal districts of Maharashtra and have their family members and homes (as well as cultivable land) at their native places. They stay here alone and send regular money orders to their family members. They would visit their native places fairly regularly, on an average once a year and try to be with their family members whenever the family has any difficulty. In Bombay we have a large number of workers who hail from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar who are in similar situation. They come to Bombay to seek work but they do not wish to stay in Bombay permanently. They cherish a dream of returning to their native places after they have accumulated a fortune. Such employees would go back to their native place as often as they can. Usually in certain periods we find a large number of employees remaining absent in the months of May and June; during Ganpati festival, holi festival and so on. Now such workers would also have a tendency to over-stay their leave when it is sanctioned and this would be absence as per our definition. So this typical back-

ground of some of our employees can be an important contributor to absenteeism.

#### THE JOB RELATED FACTORS

There may be a number of reasons as to why an employee may not quite like his job. He may believe that the salary that he is getting is quite inadequate. He may feel that the work that he is doing is not sufficiently challenging. He may not like to work in shift duties. He may regard his immediate boss as tyrant who is always trying to harass him. One may go on adding to such a list of possible reasons as to why an employee may not like his job.

In such a situation, the employee would like to avoid attending the job. He attends the organization because he has to. By remaining present he can get his salary which he needs rather badly. So such employees work only because of the financial returns. They work for the sake' of money. Such employees would like to avoid work as and when they can. And even when they remain present they are not at all enthusiastic about the work that they have to do.

So given a choice such employees prefer to stay away from the work situation. For them any excuse to stay away from work-situation is welcome. Even when they have a slight head-ache they would remain absent.

Job-related factors are likely to be operative in organisations where employees get good salaries. These employees are not so much concerned about fear of starvation and therefore they are in a position to exercise their choice of remaining absent. To such employees sickness benefit scheme of E.S.I. can be very useful. They may approach their E.S.I. doctor and claim a sickness certificate. Many managements believe that absenteeism amongst the workers has increased because of the E.S.I. scheme. These managements fail to realise the basic issue-viz. their employees would

like to avoid the work situation and therefore they make use of the E.S.I. doctors. In absence of E.S.I. scheme these employees would go to some other doctors and get a sickness certificate. These organisations should do a little soul-searching rather than blaming the E.S.I. scheme for the absenteeism amongst their employees.

In Western countries, the job-related factors are important contributors to absenteeism amongst their employees. A similar situation may exist in some of our prosperous organisations. But we will have to find out about this by research.

#### PERSONAL DIFFICULTIES

An employee spends more of his time outside the organization. His outside life viz., family and social life is quite important to him. And some of the difficulties that he is likely to experience in his family and social life may have repercussions on his 'on the job life'. There are quite a few difficulties in the family life of the employees which may force them to stay away from work. I will mention some of these:

One such difficulty is the sickness of the employee himself and/or his family members. Such a difficulty is more or less unpredictable. And even the most sincere employee may have to remain absent occasionally because of this difficulty. Married women employees are likely to experience this difficulty more often as compared to men employees. Women employees are forced to stay away when their husbands/children/or they themselves are sick. Men employees are a bit more fortunate in this respect.

Another difficulty that many employees are now experiencing is the shortage of essential commodities. One may have to spend many hours in various queues to secure ration, vegetable oil, kerosene, cooking gas and so on and so forth. Without

these commodities, the family cannot survive and therefore the employees will be forced to stay away from their jobs to secure these articles.

There are also a number of social/family obligations that an employee is expected to fulfil. Death in the neighbourhood or amongst his relatives friends can be one such obligation. Marriages of his family members/friends relatives etc. can be another such occasion. One can go on mentioning such family/social obligations. The employees have to fulfil these obligations and therefore they may have to stay away from their jobs.

Over and above these family and social obligations the employees may have some personal problems which may force them to stay away from work. Addiction to alcohol, drugs or gambling can be one such category of problems. Sometimes these vices and other difficulties together may get reflated in the high level of indebtedness amongst the employees. And indebtedness and absenteeism sometimes go together. The usual symptom of such employees is that they become 'chronic' absentees (those who remain absent far too often are regarded as chronic absentees) and come to the attention of the management.

Over and above the difficulties that I have indicated here, there can quite a few other difficulties in family and social life which may contribute to the absenteeism amongst the employees.

I have indicated the three broad areas which contribute to absenteeism amongst the employees. From among these possible contributors we will have to find out which are the operative factors in a given situation. Researchers have observed that factors operative in one organization may not be operative in another organization. In other words if one wants to find out the reasons as to why the employees remain absent in a particular organisation, he will have to

find out the reasons by conducting a study in that particular organization. Studies conducted elsewhere can at best give some 'leads' to the researcher. But the operative factors in an organization can only be unearthed through research in that organization.

Therefore, our next step will be to consider how a systematic study of this phenomenon can be conducted.

#### ORGANIZING A RESEARCH STUDY

Research in absenteeism in an organization can be conducted in three stages. The first stage would consist of analysis of attendance records of the employees. The second stage will include the interviews of a few employees and executives. And the third stage may involve an in-depth study of a few chronic absentees. I will explain the three stages in details.

#### ANALYSIS OF ATTENDANCE RECORDS

The organizations usually maintain attendance records of all the employees. By analysis of the attendance records we hope to understand the patterns of absenteeism in the organisation. And these patterns will enable us to locate the problem as well as to suggest remedial measures in some instances. I will explain what I am trying to say.

If we have a breakdown of absenteeism in terms of different departments we may discover that there is more absenteeism in certain departments and some are relatively free of absenteeism. This itself would be indicative of the possibility of some job-related factors playing an important role in absenteeism in that particular department. And we may then try to find out these factors. Some of the possibilities could be inadequate supervision, uninteresting work (as viewed by the employees), hazardous

operations and so on and so forth. And then, may be the management can do something about these situations.

Take another illustration. If we have a breakdown of absenteeism in terms of different months in a year, we may observe a peculiarity that absenteeism is more in certain months (say May and June) and almost negligible in others. This fact may be suggestive of some Socio-cultural factors operative in our situation. Many employees in B.E.S. & T. remain absent in these two months. This has been happening every year. Superficial observations have indicated that many of these employees go to their native places during these months. Having understood this phenomenon, the management may be in a position to do something to avert such incidents.

We can analyse the attendance records department-wise, shift-wise, category-wise, day-wise (different days in a week), date-wise and so on and so forth. We can also try to find out whether there are a few employees who make a substantial contribution to absenteeism. These would be our chronic absentees and we can do something about these employees.

There is one precaution that must be borne in mind. We may have to amend these records in order to follow our definition of absenteeism. Quite a few organisations mark the employees as on leave when he stays away without prior intimation and if he has any leave to his credit. Employees are marked absent only when they exhaust their leave and stay away without prior intimation. So we may have to amend the attendance records before we begin to analyse them.

Analysis of records for a period of three years would be quite adequate for our purpose. Such an analysis of attendance records can give us revealing information about the employees who remain absent. Some of the information can be used in

reducing absenteeism in the organization.

If our results indicate that absenteeism is concentrated in a few departments only, then we will have to carry out a further investigation into the job-related factors which could be operative in these departments.

If our results indicate that absenteeism is confined to say 2nd or 3rd shift we may have to find out why employees remain absent oftener during these shifts. One of the obvious reasons is lack of waiting rooms for the employees. An employee who has to work in 3rd shift which begins at midnight may have to come early to the factory because there are no convenient trains. And there is no place where he can wait for 2/3 hours. Providing a rest-room can be a solution. I am only trying to give some illustrations about the remedial measures that can be thought of when we have a peculiar pattern in our absenteeism records.

The second stage in our study will be the sample survey of employees supervisors and the executives.

#### THE SAMPLE SURVEY

Some of the purposes of the sample survey would be as under:

- (i) To secure information about the living conditions of our employees such as their place of residence, type of accommodation, time required to commute back and forth, number of dependants etc.
- (ii) To secure information about satisfactions and dissatisfactions about the work, salary and service conditions, supervision, working conditions etc. which we label as job-related factors.
- (iii) To secure information regarding views on leave facilities reasons for remaining absent and views on consequences of remaining absent.

- (iv) To secure information from supervisors regarding reasons as to why their subordinates remain absent.

- (v) To secure information from some executives regarding the leave policy and its implementation.

One can add to the above-mentioned list of purposes. In our survey we must have a sample representing employees in all the departments and all the categories some supervisors (especially, from important departments) and a few executives (who can tell us about the leave policy) Such a survey can throw light on some of the possible reasons as to why the employees remain absent and also indicate to us some remedial measures to reduce absenteeism.

#### CASE STUDIES OF CHRONIC ABSENTEES

In quite a few studies on absenteeism we come across the category of employees labelled as chronic absentees. Quite a few of them have genuine problems with which they cannot cope. They would need help and guidance to overcome them (for example persons suffering from mental ailments, chronic alcoholics, persons addicted to gambling, persons having chronic illnesses (the employees or may be their family members), persons heavily indebted and so on and so forth. Some of these can be helped to overcome their problems. Sometimes one comes across employees who have other commitments which they regard as more important than their jobs. (e.g. persons working for some political party, persons having some part-time business and so on). At times, there are individuals who are denied something in the organisation and out of resentment they remain absent off and on. (In one study I came across one such employee who felt that he was not given the promotion he deserved and was therefore quite resentful about the organisation). In dealing with these individuals one must

be prepared for surprises. But we can investigate their problems and some of them can certainly be helped.

### CONCLUSIONS

In the above paragraphs I have tried to indicate how one can study the phenomenon of absenteeism in an organisation. After having understood the reasons why the employees remain absent, the management can do something to minimise absenteeism amongst the employees.

Let us accept the fact that absenteeism cannot be totally eradicated. But through persistent efforts it can certainly be minimized. The step in this direction is to

understand the various contributory factors responsible for absenteeism. The remedial and preventive measures can, then, follow.

Many studies have indicated that factors responsible for absenteeism in one organisation may not be responsible in another organisation. In other words, the management will have to discover for itself the factors which are operative in its own organization. Studies in other organisation can, at best, give as some leads (i.e. ideas about possible factors) but we cannot assume that these very factors may be operative in our organization. So we will have to do our own spade-work in order to understand this phenomenon in our organization.