

## Causes and remedial measures of presenteeism in the post Covid-19 era workplace: Insight from job demands-resources theory

### *Penyebab dan tindakan perbaikan presenteeism di tempat kerja era pasca Covid-19: Wawasan dari job demands-resources theory*

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#### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has put many organizations under pressure to remain active and profitable despite the compulsory long break it gave everyone. There is growing concern that many employees are under pressure to be present at work to fulfil job demands that were not met at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation has given rise to presenteeism, where workers do not work to their maximum potential. Several theories account for the reasoning behind presenteeism. This paper examines the job demands-resources theory of presenteeism related to the causes and remedial measures that can be put in place in coping with the consequences of presenteeism in any given organisation. Secondary data sources were adopted for this study. The data collected were analysed based on the research questions and presented thematically. The findings reveal that most organizations continue to increase the workload without the required resources necessary to accomplish the job demands. The study recommends that those at the helm of affairs should note the job demands assigned to their employees and make available all the resources to attend to the job demands in order to achieve the overall good of the organization even in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; employee performance; job demands; job resources; sickness presenteeism

#### Abstrak

*Pandemi COVID-19 telah menempatkan banyak organisasi di bawah tekanan untuk tetap aktif dan menguntungkan meskipun ada jeda panjang wajib yang diberikan kepada semua orang. Ada kekhawatiran yang berkembang bahwa banyak karyawan berada di bawah tekanan untuk hadir di tempat kerja untuk memenuhi tuntutan pekerjaan yang tidak terpenuhi pada puncak pandemi COVID-19. Situasi ini telah memunculkan presenteeism, di mana pekerja tidak bekerja secara maksimal. Beberapa teori menjelaskan alasan di balik presenteeisme. Tulisan ini membahas job demands-resources theory dari presenteeisme terkait dengan penyebab dan tindakan perbaikan yang dapat diterapkan dalam mengatasi konsekuensi presenteeisme di organisasi mana pun. Sumber data sekunder diadopsi untuk makalah ini. Data yang terkumpul dianalisis berdasarkan pertanyaan penelitian dan disajikan secara tematik. Temuan mengungkapkan bahwa sebagian besar organisasi terus meningkatkan beban kerja tanpa sumber daya yang diperlukan untuk menyelesaikan tuntutan pekerjaan. Makalah ini merekomendasikan bahwa mereka yang memimpin urusan harus memperhatikan tuntutan pekerjaan yang diberikan kepada karyawan mereka dan menyediakan semua sumber daya untuk memenuhi tuntutan pekerjaan untuk mencapai kebaikan organisasi secara keseluruhan bahkan di era pandemi COVID-19.*

**Kata kunci:** COVID-19; kinerja karyawan; tuntutan pekerjaan; sumber daya pekerjaan; kehadiran saat sakit

## Introduction

The need to achieve more outputs with fewer inputs has characterized the current economic status. Many businesses go to great lengths to maintain productivity and remain competitive, despite the significant negative effect on workers' wellbeing, health, and job outcomes. Presenteeism is common in a variety of professions and industries, which has been proven to be more costly than absenteeism, according to studies conducted by scholars (Arronson et al. 2005, Baker-McClearn et al. 2010), which most

organizations try to deal with. This cost could be in the form of finance, failed employees and reduced organizational performance, individual health and wellbeing (Garrow 2016). The high incidence and high costs of presenteeism allow for a thorough understanding of the phenomenon. Presenteeism has attracted significant research attention from a variety of disciplines and viewpoints as a result of the situation as mentioned earlier (Johns & Miraglia 2015, Pohling et al. 2015, Bakker & Demerouti 2017, Jensen et al. 2019).

It has also been observed over the years, especially during the height of COVID-19 and currently termed as “the new normal,” that presenteeism contributes more negatively toward employee performance, and toward the actualization of the organization’s goals and meeting job demands accurately. Presenteeism is so damaging that workers who come to work sick have lower levels of performance and productivity, and feel more depressed and tired (Robertson & Cooper 2011). This happens a lot in most organizations, and even the public organizations are not insulated from this; employees come to work when ill, instead of them going for and are not able to attend to their job demands at optimum capacity. Simply put, presenteeism is the practice of reporting to work despite being sick (Arronson et al. 2005).

The COVID-19 pandemic can be traced back to Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (Wang et al. 2020). It was a widespread virus that caused severe illness, death, and social disruption around the world; because of its rapid spread, it eventually led to the invention of the lockdown curfew and people were compelled to remain at home, causing significant economic losses in a wide range of sectors, such as the educational sector, oil sector, health sector and the aviation sector, which was disrupted by travel bans, cancellations of sporting activities, the prohibition of meetings and many more restrictions placed by the government (Elliot 2020, Horowitz 2020). It also affected jobs, education, religion, prices of goods and services, and individual lives. The recent economic instability caused by COVID-19 had spillover effects because it has created disrupted in the demand and supply of goods and services (El-Erian 2020). In subsequent times, employees’ attendance has been the focus of most researchers and organizations because of the notion that when employees do not show up at work it leads to higher costs and lower profits. The question then was, “Why do employees absent themselves from work?” When this question was answered, another problem then surfaced, namely employees showing up at work at all cost even when they were sick, which made presenteeism prevalent. Linking the situation of showing up at work irrespective of the circumstances faced by employees during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations were under pressure to remain active and profitable despite the compulsory long break it gave everyone. The current concern is that many employees are under pressure to be present at work to fulfil job demands that have accumulated during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic period irrespective of their state of health.

It is on this premise that this study investigates what motivates workers to come to work when they are sick, in line with the scenario depicted above and how can the act of presenteeism among employees in Nigeria be mitigated by hinging it on the job demands-resources theory of presenteeism as espoused by Bakker and Demerouti (2007) as the theoretical framework of analysis. This theory was deemed suitable for this study due to its assumptions that provide answers to the objectives of the study. Consequently, the importance of this study lies in the fact that it will help organizations to know how to achieve optimal employees’ performance drawn from the abnormalities the act of presenteeism would have brought; it will provide insight to the Heads of Human Resource Management Department in the workplace on the causes, consequences and remedial measures to deal with presenteeism based on the job demands-resources theory that assumes that employees’ happiness is linked to a variety of workplace characteristics that comes in the form of job demands or job resources. This means that presenteeism can also be seen from the positive side when job demands and resources appeal to the employees in the workplace. Also, by this study, the policies in most workplaces will be re-examined to meet the present realities of dealing with attendance management for a more strategic performance. Most importantly, the gap identified in literature would be filled and enhance the frontiers of knowledge in Human Resource Management, Organizational Behavior and allied disciplines. In other words, this study will serve as a body of reserved knowledge to be referred to by researchers on the subject matter.

Presenteeism has been defined in a variety of ways by different scholars, but it is majorly referred to as a situation where people go to work being ill to the detriment of their health and not even functioning to

their full capacity (Çetin 2016, Karanika-Murray & Cooper 2018, Donohoe 2019, Kinman 2019). Çetin (2016) viewed presenteeism as being present at work, the opposite of being absent. Likewise, Abasilim et al. (2015) opined that presenteeism is the combination of being present and absent. This implies that employees can be present at work and be absent in that they are not productively engaged or their performance is below the standard of work quality when present at work.

The philosophy behind presenteeism is that employees prefer to be at work despite everything around them telling them that it is not the best option at the moment (Çetin 2016). This reason is baffling that people always look out for opportunities and excuses to be absent from work to take a rest from work or do other things they might have in mind. What then makes them present at work when sick or when they do not have the best frame of mind to be at work or when they would rather prefer to be somewhere else rather than being at work. Employees' presence at work they do not want to affect their performance and it is more costly than absenteeism (Karanika-Murray et al. 2015).

Karanika-Murray et al. (2015) further reiterated that presenteeism results from decision-making process on whether to be present at work or not. To them, an individual is confused contemplating whether to be present or absent at work and arrives at a conclusion that instead of being absent, let them be present. Their coming to work is not because they want to come; it is simply because they do not want to be absent on duty. In a similar vein, Kinman (2019) defined presenteeism as working while ill and not functioning to their full capacity. He further went ahead and proposed two views of presenteeism; the first is that presenteeism is not always associated with going to work when you are sick; rather, it is been used to describe people who are not sick but come to work and don't give it their all. The second point of view is that people have a tendency to stay at work longer than is necessary for successful job performance because they want to be on the record of overtime. Presenteeism is either in the form of sickness presenteeism or non-sickness presenteeism; sickness presenteeism is the act of coming to work despite of illness, injury and anxiety, which leads to reduced productivity (Çetin 2016, Karanika-Murray & Cooper 2018, Donohoe 2019, Kinman 2019). Non-sickness presenteeism is every other reason for presenteeism that is not sickness-driven; the practice of working long hours when there is no compelling reason to do so, going to work when there are other places you would rather be (Arronson et al. 2005). Presenteeism can also be classified into two categories, voluntary and involuntary presenteeism (Karanika-Murray et al. 2015). This type of presenteeism is concerned with the decision-making process that leads to presenteeism. This decision is based on the individuals' current conditions, which include their health constraints and job obligations.

Garrow (2016) observed that the decision to be present or absent is rarely based on simple health or task information. Individuals not only tend to ignore ill-health symptoms and doctor's orders, but also self-medicate (Lu et al. 2013), and take absurd or risky decisions which may have further consequences (Gerich 2016). Furthermore, he proposed that the relative importance of these presenteeism drivers is highly context-dependent, despite evidence suggesting that work factors are more important. As a result, it is critical to comprehend how one's decision-making processes around being present or absent are affected. Presenteeism is voluntary if it is of the will of the individual to decide to be present but involuntary presenteeism occurs when they are other factors from the organization or conditions of the employer compelling the presence of the individual (Gerich 2016).

Furthermore, reviews abound on the causes and suggestions for dealing with presenteeism in the post-COVID-19 workplaces and stress that COVID-19 came with adjustments which increased the rate of presenteeism depending on the type of job and the job demands associated with it (Ishimaru et al. 2021, Ruhle & Schmoll 2021, Matsuda et al. 2022). In support of the foregoing, Hadjisolomou and Mitsakis (2021) opined that, due to the wave of COVID-19, people had to start working from home, and this gave rise to virtual presenteeism. They highlighted the following causes of presenteeism: job insecurity and presenteeism culture, lack of sick pay, work life imbalance, job demands, job attitudes, feelings of high obligation and work engagement. Some of these causes were also listed by Santos, Carreiras, Ambrosio, and Miguel (2021) in their study that focused on the psychological perspective of presenteeism. They argued that too many job demands could affect the mental wellbeing of an individual and also the high level of commitment and sometimes satisfaction of the employee caused employees to always show up at work.

They further concluded that psychological wellbeing in the form of mental health would work as a mediator between organizational demands and the act of presenteeism exhibited by workers in an organisation. Ruhle and Schmoll (2021), their study conducted in Germany responded to the level of presenteeism compared with those who work at home due to the increase of the COVID-19 pandemic from those who work on-site. Their study indicated that 68.4% of those working at home lead to a higher rate of presenteeism than the 27.5% of those who work on-site. Job demands such as heavy workloads, understaffing, team support, overtime working arrangements, shifts or excessive working hours alongside job resources were identified as the causes of presenteeism. In the same vein, Khuzaini and Zamrudi (2021) posited that, in Indonesia, workers working from home exhibited a higher level of presenteeism than those working on-site and their reason was tied to the fact that working on-site duration is controllable, but at home, working duration is not controllable, and this results in increasing tasks leading to more work hours.

On the contrary, a study by Hunter et al. (2021) in Australia and New Zealand revealed that lower presenteeism was exhibited by those working at home than those working on site. Also, part time employees are less likely to exhibit presenteeism, and those with the existing medical condition are less likely to report good job performance. In addition, Ishimaru et al. (2021) stated three major causes of sickness presenteeism: lack of managerial concern, disrupted care and exacerbation of the underlying disease, while Okawara et al. (2021) emphasized on interrupted medical care as the cause of presenteeism during the pandemic and suggested that early diagnosis and continuous treatment of non-COVID-19 patients to enable them to remain healthy and continue to work during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic was seen as a factor that affected not just individuals but also affected the economy; it was based on this that a study in Japan by Matsuda et al. (2022) examined the association between the socioeconomic condition and health status of employees. They pointed out that socioeconomic condition, uncertain employment status, individual health views, work attitudes and company leave systems are factors that prompt considering the option of presenteeism. Another thing the pandemic caused was the increase in the use of technology around the world, which led to technostress, which is the inability to cope with stress arising from the use of technology (Khuzaini & Zamrudi 2021). The study sought to examine what causes employees to be present at work when they are sick and how can the act of presenteeism among employees be mitigated by hinging it on the job demands-resources of presenteeism as espoused by Bakker and Demerouti (2007) as the theoretical framework of analysis. In addition, the paper is structured into research methods, discussion of findings, which include, causes of presenteeism, the reality of presenteeism and COVID-19, Job-demands theory of presenteeism in post-COVID era and conclusion.

## **Research Method**

This research adopted the qualitative research design. The article was also descriptive as it covers the various dimensions to job demand, resources, COVID-19 and performance. Data were secondarily sourced from internet sources and scholarly journals. The databases consulted were Google Scholar and Scopus. The steps used in ascertaining the papers to be reviewed were based on inserting the keywords of the title of the study (Presenteeism in the Post-COVID-19 Era).

Combined, the selected databases yielded about 1,960 scientific studies. The databases were chosen because of the large number of inter and multidisciplinary peer-reviewed publications that were deposited in them. The inclusion criteria were to select articles that had Presenteeism and COVID-19 in their topics. A total of 11 articles were considered for the study. The data obtained were analysed thematically in line with the objectives of this paper.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Causes and remedial measures of presenteeism in the post-COVID-19 era workplace**

The study sought to provide insight into job demands-resources theory of presenteeism as it relates to the causes and remedial measures that can be put in place in coping with the consequences in any

given organization. It was discovered that numerous factors account for presenteeism at work, ranging from workplace norms, perceptions and pressures, operational demands, competitive job markets, the increase of job demands that are not commensurate with the job resources made available to inadequate staff in an organisation, job and financial insecurity (Johns 2011, Karanka-Murray et al. 2015, Miraglia & Johns 2015, Garrow 2016, Gerich 2016, Kinman & Wray 2018). Below are the explanations for the identified causes of presenteeism at the workplace:

*First, Workplace Norms, Perceptions, and Pressures:* Workplace norms such as values and ethical code of conduct sometimes cause presenteeism. This can be seen as involuntary presenteeism (Garrow 2016). An organization employees must adhere to the workplace norms; even when sick, they will not want to breach the code of conducts. Also, the pressure to perform from supervisors or management and the feeling of being expected to work longer hours makes people exhibit presenteeism. *Second, Operational Demands:* Demands arising from the nature of the job demands brought forward by the mode of operation might require the presence of the employees at all times (Gerich 2016). For example, a secretary or a front desk administrator, being absent for a day can disrupt the organizational processes so the understanding of this makes such employees always show up at work no matter the genuine excuse(s) that would have made such employees absent at work. *Third, Reduced Job Security:* This is manifested when employees in organizations perceive that there is job insecurity, so the fear of losing their job is heightened and causes them to show up at work at all costs. According to Cooper and Lu (2016), when workers think they are in danger of losing their jobs, they feel compelled to put in more hours or, at the very least, appear to be working longer.

*Fourth, Competitive Job Markets:* Presenteeism could be a result of competitive job markets (John 2010). The rate of competition in the job market is increasing every day and graduates are being released every year, yet the number of job vacancies is not increasing; this makes the struggle tight. An employee who holds a position knows that, if he leaves that position, there are thousands of graduates waiting to jump at it, also if he leaves the position, he is going to go into that labor market and struggle to get another, and this struggle is not a nice place to be. This rings in their head and instead of being absent, they would rather be present at work. *Fifth, Economic Downturn:* A lot of staff in organizations become reluctant to take time off because of the recent state of the economy (Lohaus & Habermann 2019). The economy has taken a downturn of recent; things are not as great as they used to be, prices of goods and services are on the increase every day, even among those working many are still living with difficulty, let alone those who don't want to lose their job because of not being present at work.

Presenteeism has consequences on both the individual and the organization. One of the major consequences of presenteeism is productivity (Bakker et al. 2001, Johns 2010, Cooper & Lu 2016, Kinman 2019). The second is exhaustion and poor health in the near future for the employees. Miraglia and Johns (2015) discovered that sickness presenteeism is a determinant for future illnesses. Presenteeism, which includes going to work while ill, gives room for the accumulation of sickness in the body; in the process, other ailments begin to join in on the existing one, thereby leading to a future breakdown which could warrant a sick leave. Similarly, Demerouti and Bakker (2011) opined that presenteeism could lead to increased exhaustion. This happens when job demands are too much, and the workload is seemingly more than what an individual can cover, and such an individual is required to deliver, thus the "how" becomes a challenge leading to exhaustion, frustration and tiredness.

### **The reality of presenteeism and the COVID-19 era**

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a lot of pressure on businesses to stay productive and profitable. Despite the fact that lowering the expense of sick leave may appear to be a top concern, there is mounting evidence that sickness presenteeism (continuing to work when unwell) is an increasing problem (Garrow 2016). As a result, it is critical to emphasize the wide-ranging costs of presenteeism for individuals and organizations, as well as the factors that encourage it and the additional risks posed by the pandemic. It is also important to think about how organizations can lessen the occurrence of presenteeism and the damage it causes.

Exhibiting presenteeism during the COVID19 era can be very risky due to the nature of the coronavirus. In the heat of the pandemic, everywhere was tensed up because of how easy it was to contact the virus. According to the World Health Organization (2020), the disease is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which spreads among people in several ways and has been a global threat to public health. The virus can spread from an infected person's mouth or nose in small liquid particles when they cough, sneeze, speak, sing or breathe. These particles range from larger respiratory droplets to smaller aerosols.

Sickness presenteeism can be beneficial and therapeutic in certain cases, as a well-managed technique that allows individuals to return to work after a time of illness gradually, but COVID19 came with some long-term effects. Presenteeism could be affordable before now, but during the pandemic and aforementioned means of contacting the virus, presenteeism can no longer be afforded by organizations except the want to have their whole workforce infected.

People often engage in presenteeism as they are reluctant to let down managers and burden colleagues, especially when the labor force is on the low side of the organization and is struggling to survive (Kinman 2019). Employees may also continue to work during illness, or return to work faster than they should, as they believe their managers and colleagues do not consider them sick enough to take time off. This may be the case for those who have contracted a fairly mild COVID-19, experiencing symptoms such as chronic fatigue, weakness and cognitive difficulties several months later (Kinman & Grant 2020).

In addition, people need to stay away from work and refrain from other activities outside the home while sick or exposed to reduce the transmission of COVID-19. While many individuals innocently transmit the virus to others, there is also evidence that some individuals continue to work while knowingly sick or exposed and continue to engage in activities outside one's home, such as going to the supermarket, churches and other indoor spaces where there is a higher risk of virus transmission (Boiral et al. 2021).

The advantages of working from home are numerous. It allows for more flexible working, and meetings and cooperation may still take place efficiently even when individuals are dispersed. However, this working from home style can leave individuals feeling disconnected from their coworkers and the workplace as a whole. Employees may believe having a sick day is pointless because they are already at home and can still work at a reduced capacity on their laptop. However, this type of presenteeism might be more detrimental to total productivity since it increases the likelihood of oversights or costly mistakes.

Research (Kinman & Grant 2020, Boiral et al. 2021) has already shown that people are struggling to switch off from work during the pandemic. It is understandable that working and living in the same environment makes it tough to separate work and home life. An office space, office trips, or simply being with other people serves to model the workday and divide it from people's personal time for leisure, hobbies, or socializing. Instead, individuals are under pressure to respond to emails late into the evening; or just forget to take regular lunch breaks and leave work at the end of the day (Lewis 2020).

The reality of COVID-19, therefore, made workplace presenteeism progress into non-workplace presenteeism, people no longer had to feel pressured to go to work while sick but they began to exhibit presenteeism in their homes (non-workplace presenteeism). They now work from home with the pressure that they must work and COVID must not affect the organization, their clients or delivery of goods and services. To this effect, some individuals are present at the job, but most are not present, with too many distractions at home. At least if they are at work, there is this work atmosphere that motivates them, and they can also be monitored but at home, they can be doing other things like cooking, seeing a movie and attending to the children even while their laptops or gadgets are on and meant to be on office work.

### **Job demands-resources theory of presenteeism in the post COVID-19 era**

Bakker and Demerouti postulated the job demands-resources theory of presenteeism in 2007. It was formulated as an alternative to existing theories that focused on job design, job stress and employee wellbeing (Bakker et al. 2001, Bakker & Demerouti 2007). According to the theory, employees' happiness

is linked to a variety of workplace characteristics that can be thought of as either job demands or job resources (Hu et al. 2011). They also stressed that despite the workload of employees, the employees can still experience less stress if the organization provides enough resources to support them. This means that presenteeism can be caused by the stress and burnout that comes with unreasonable job demands, as well as the decreased work engagement and increased burnout caused by a lack of resources in the workplace (McGregor et al. 2016). Intervention programs should focus on teaching workers how to handle job demands and promoting the resources available at work as an innovative way to address the issue of rising presenteeism to address this problem caused by excessive job demands.

The job demands-resources theory states that, when certain job demands are high and specific job resources are limited, job strain emerges, regardless of the type of job or occupation. To put it in another way, presenteeism is the result form mismatch between work demands and available resources. Job demands are the aspects of a job that necessitate sustained physical or psychological effort or skills. Work pressure and emotional demands are manifestations of these job demands. The physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects of a job that are functional in achieving work goals are referred to as job resources. It was also observed that numerous factors account for presenteeism at work, ranging from workplace norms, perceptions and pressures, operational demands, competitive job markets, and the increase of job demands that are not commensurate with the job resources made available to inadequate staff in an organization, job and financial insecurity.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the findings mentioned earlier, this study concluded that numerous factors account for presenteeism at work ranging from workplace norms, perceptions and pressures, operational demands, competitive job markets and increased job demands. However, the job demands are not commensurate with the job resources available to an organization's staff.

This study suggested that, to address presenteeism, there must first be an equilibrium between job demands and job resources, and organizations must also allow greater flexibility in the workplace; that is to say, managers must allow workers to decide how organizational goals can be met other than by being present at all times. This can be accomplished by introducing more innovative approaches to flexible working hours, which would give workers more choice and control over their work patterns, resulting in lower presenteeism. Secondly, organizational leaders should realize that the employees also have a life of their own, encouraging employees to cultivate an attitude that enables them to take enough time off to recover from any form of sickness.

As a result, it is concluded that, if presenteeism needs to be eradicated totally, organizational policies should give allowance for enough sick time to recover from whatever illness. Also, the psychological wellbeing and mental health of employees should be of top priority when emphasizing employees' attendance at the workplace. In addition, country specific studies should be carried out to cater for the differences that may arise from different organizational settings. Finally, employee motivation is vital since no other resources apart from human resources can galvanize other resources to achieve organizational goals and objectives. The employees should be adequately motivated for the services they render, both within the working hours and the extra inputs offered in the cause of attaining the goals of the organization.

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