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# The management of absence: why it matters

## An analysis of absence management issues, with a case study based in a UK academic library

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper seeks to give an overview of some ongoing research into absence management practices in a UK university library. The aim of the research in question is to evaluate the effectiveness of current management practices.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research collected quantitative data over time and the present paper presents a summary of findings and recommendations to practitioners in the same field.

**Findings** – The research findings indicate that the use of return to work interviews after each absence through illness contributes to the reduction in absence levels. The research recommends that firm guidelines be used to ensure consistency in approach; that employee awareness is increased of their own responsibility to attend for work wherever possible. Where a culture of absenteeism exists, it is suggested that appropriate management strategies can produce a culture of attendance. Within academic libraries, this is possible where there is an involvement of human resource departments, with a structure for referring employees, where applicable, to occupational health. This work highlights the need for employers to get value for money from their library resources and recommends absence management as an important component in any agenda for change.

**Research limitations/implications** – Given the potential sensitivity of the subject area, the anonymity of members of staff had to be a priority, therefore, some of the data analysis could not be carried out as in-depth as may have been optimally desirable.

**Practical implications** – The present research provides case study experience for other practitioners, and suggests some recommendations for library managers.

**Originality/value** – The present research highlights the dearth of literature or benchmarking facilities on absence management within library and information services (LIS). The research is therefore exploratory in nature and goes some way to address the research gap.

**Keywords** Human resource management, Libraries, Higher education

**Paper type** Research paper



### Introduction

The analysis, measurement and optimisation of employee work inputs has been a core function of management throughout the industrial age. The term “employee work inputs” can in practice denote any of a range of quantifiable activities that go towards creating institutional or company outputs. For example, the number of sales interviews conducted by an employee, the number of books which a cataloguer catalogues, or the quantity of students taught by a lecturer, are all indicators that quantify the level of input by employees to organisational activity.

Such inputs are thus quite distinct from organisational outputs: sales interviews as distinct from actual “sales” (which are outputs of employee labour), and similarly books catalogued are distinct from items borrowed (“loans” constitute an aggregate organisational output indicator). Inputs are thus only part of the story of organisational success or failure, but they are a definable entity in themselves which, historically, have been treated in a distinctive managerial fashion.

Partly in recognition of this historical pattern, this paper is concerned with the input not the output of labour. And we focus on one type of employee input only: the amount of time contributed to the work cycle in one particular organisation, the academic library.

The library world is a particularly suitable context in which to conduct such an investigation: the findings of one piece of research show that in fact librarians are “more likely than other professionals to be absent from work” (Hamilton, 2006). Why is this of note? Because attendance is considered “normal” behaviour in employment, and therefore the management of employee absence should be a key element in an organization’s human resources (HR) agenda.

#### *Why absence matters*

A high level of absence is understood to be costly and disruptive. High absence may indicate low morale or wider organizational problems (Incomes Data Services, 2005). Howarth (2005) describes the importance of quickly addressing issues of absenteeism within organizational contexts as a critical factor in organizational success. The management of library resources, and therefore by inclusion, absenteeism, was addressed by Professor Sir Brian Follett in his Report in 1993.

The Follet Report, the Joint Funding Council’s Libraries Review Group Report, was a Report for the UK Higher Education Funding Councils and was the result of a Review of Library and related provision in higher education in the UK, chaired by Professor Sir Brian Follett. Amongst the Follet Report’s conclusions was that “spending on staff accounts for over half the total spend in libraries in most institutions ... each institution should review its deployment of resources ... to ensure that value for money is being obtained” (Joint Funding Council’s Libraries Review Group, 1993, Summary of Conclusions, point 16).

In a time when cost-effectiveness and excellence is being sought in higher education strategic plans, value for money, in this case in academic libraries, should be under scrutiny. However, despite the recommendations of the Follet Report in 1993 little research has been conducted within the area of LIS to determine the degree to which absenteeism affects library service provision or finances.

Most directly, absenteeism damages library effectiveness because service delivery is undermined when staff are not at work to do their job. Of course, staff should not feel pressurised to come to work when unfit or indisposed. The entitlement to take “sick leave” when genuinely unwell is enshrined in law and is an entitlement that also protects well staff from infection by unwell staff who are inappropriately present at work.

However, absence costs, as will be shown in a later section, and paying for temporary staff to provide cover adds additional expense to the monthly staffing bill. It may be instructive to ask what if, like local government organizations (McHugh, 2001) and directors who are held accountable (Moir, 2006), higher education (HE) libraries

had to prove to the funding councils that they had met performance targets, relating to cost effectiveness and use of resources. What if the receipt of grants was conditional on being seen to target absence levels?

Although a lot has been written about absence management in general (for example: ACAS, 2006; CIPD and HSE, 2007; Bennett, 2002; Berry, 2006; Griffiths, 2007; Dunn, 2002) there is a dearth of LIS literature in the area of absence management. This research is therefore exploratory in nature. The case study shows what can be achieved, with wide ranging consequences.

This paper goes some way to addressing the research gap by exploring absenteeism within a UK academic library environment, and by showing the strategic importance of absence management to librarianship and library management.

This paper, based within LIS and therefore of relevance within the library community, will look at some of the issues surrounding absence management and look towards ways of reducing absence levels, and so reducing the costs to the employer.

#### *The cost to the employer*

The currently available statistics in the UK for 2006 show that the average level of sickness absence fell by 0.2 per cent since the previous year 2005, to 3.5 per cent or 8 days per employee per year (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2006, p. 3). This is estimated to cost, in 2006, on average, GBP 598 per employee per year, compared to the figures for 2005 of GBP 601 (CIPD, 2006, p. 3).

There are other costs as well: absence can be a serious drain on a business. The direct cost to business includes lost days, money, productivity and reduced service provision. Indirect costs include an additional burden on present colleagues, resulting in poor morale if the issue is not seen to be tackled (CIPD, 2006; Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), [www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)). As commented by Gale (2003, p. 75), "costs (of absenteeism) won't go down until employers make greater efforts to manage their impact".

#### *Theoretical assumptions*

Broadly speaking, the commentators whose opinions are collocated above, make assumptions that can be summarised as "Fordist" in their conceptualisation of the value of the industrial worker's labour time to the organisation.

The earliest theorists of the working of industrial capitalism focused much of their attention on the concept of labour time as a key component in the creation of value within an economy. Most famously, Marx created a theory of economic value in which the value of a product to a consumer was directly equivalent to the labour time crystallised in the product by the worker (Marx, 1898). Profit was seen as inextricably linked to surplus value – that is, to the under-rewarding of workers by paying them less than the value of their labour time.

Crucial to the classic Marxist analysis of value is the concept of the intrinsic value of labour time. Many of the depressions of early capitalism did seem to conform to this model, supporting a view of labour time as being the core driver of industrial wealth creation.

However, later, more enlightened industrialists – chief among them, the US automobile entrepreneur Henry Ford, broke out of this Marxist model of cyclic capitalist collapse. They did so in a way that still relied fundamentally on the concept

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of labour time, and the efficient management of this resource, as a key engine of wealth and measure of organisational value.

Rather than depress wage levels to create profit margins, "Fordism" was based on increasing efficiency and productivity to enhance the yield of the given input unit of labour. Thus, if an hour of employee time in an unprofitable factory only created a single saleable unit of output, Fordist theories warned against creating a short-term profit margin by lowering pay to create a gap between selling price and the costs of hourly pay rates. Ultimately this would indeed destroy the ability of a workforce to consume the products of its own labour in a crisis of over-production.

Instead, Fordist solutions recommended the use of efficiency measures, such as investment in highly productive machinery, linking of production processes, division of labour, and many other productivity enhancing measures, to ensure that each hour of employee time created more saleable units of output. The value of increased production levels could then be shared between the employee and the entrepreneur, some being given back in generous pay rises, some being taken as profit. Henry Ford's workers were famously well paid, reversing Marxist stereotypes of under-paying factory owners.

However, ironically, the Fordist industrial model, like the Marxist model, is based on the sanctity of employee work-time. The intensification of labour means that work-time must not be wasted, if profit is to be derived from the maximum yield of a given, finite pool of labour-time, rather than the depression of wage rates which destroys the ability of markets to consume the outputs of production. In that sense, all absence management procedures are "Fordist" in their intentions.

### **Working with the Fordist model**

Having taken this Fordist assumption (rightly or wrongly) as a given for the framework of this investigation, we can proceed to elaborate further on contemporary understanding of the nature of absence from work and its management.

Looked at in this way, absence is seen as a complex but definitive issue that attracts a range of definitions and a still greater range of solutions. To clarify this, the incomes data service (Incomes Data Services, 2005) has described sickness absence as falling into several categories: self certified, medically certified sickness, industrial accident or injury, short term absence and long term absence (more than 20 days).

#### *Identifying the problem*

Before any action can be taken, the patterns of absence should be identified (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), 2007a, b). Any patterns are influenced not just by levels of health, but by management style and working conditions. Patterns of behaviour that emerge may include Friday/Monday absences. Such a pattern should be handled differently to genuine illness. Also, with short term and long-term absence there has to be a difference in approach. Short-term absences have to be managed flexibly to show reasonableness on behalf of the employer, whereas long term absences are more complex (Confederation of British Industry (CBI), 2003) (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), 2006).

Bolton and Hughes (2001, p. 27) have listed employers' views on the causes of absence for workers. These are ranked from the highest incidence to the lowest as:

- minor illness;
- serious illness;
- home/family responsibility;
- personal problems;
- absence seen as entitlement;
- lack of commitment;
- work-related accidents;
- poor workplace morale;
- workplace stress;
- unauthorised holiday;
- impact of long hours;
- drink or drugs; and
- leisure accidents.

Bolton and Hughes (2001) explored further the individual influences that can cause non-attendance. These fell into five categories: sickness; personality and background; relationships at work; relationships and responsibilities outside of work, including care responsibilities; the individual and the job, including perception.

Hamilton (2006) reports on research by psychologist Saqib Saddiq, who interviewed 300 people in five occupations, fire fighters, police officers, train operators, teachers and librarians. Saddiq's conclusion was that the most stressful work environment was the supposed calm of a library. His responding librarians made the following observations:

- they were unhappy in the workplace;
- they complained about their physical environment;
- they were sick of being stuck between book shelves all day;
- libraries were dull and uninspiring places in which to pursue a career;
- there was no job satisfaction;
- they found the job repetitive, unvaried and unchallenging;
- they did not have enough control over their working day or their career;
- they were not being allowed to put skills to full use; and
- they were unhappy over earnings.

At this stage there is no way of knowing, outside this research population, how widespread these feelings are amongst the profession. These particular respondents could be the result of a "wrong fit" in a job, and there is no way of knowing what sorts of librarians were interviewed, whether they worked in a public, school, academic, special or national library or some other form of information providing service. Also, their level of employment is not stated. The term "librarian" is often used for anyone who works in a library, from the security control staff, technicians and Library Assistants, to the Head Librarian and Director. However, all of these factors listed can lead to stress, a reason often cited for absence. The role of perception in absenteeism

can often be neglected. Examples of how individual perceptions could affect a working environment are therefore provided for clarity:

- *Example 1.* There could be two people working in the same area. One likes a warm ambient temperature in which to work and does not like having to dress in layers to keep warm. The other prefers a cooler working temperature and prefers to be able to put on another layer of clothing if necessary. Both are working in an area where the temperature is outside their immediate control, indeed outside the immediate environment, as it is remotely set to be between 20 degrees Celsius/68 degrees Fahrenheit and 22 degrees Celsius/72 degrees Fahrenheit, a range deemed optimal for the working environment. The first member of staff would say it was too cold and would ask for the temperature to be raised. The second member of staff would say it was too warm and ask for the temperature to be lowered. Both are working in the same place with the same temperature but their perceptions and preferences vary.
- *Example 2.* There are two members of staff working in the same area doing the same job. One finds it hard to cope with the pressure of the work, whereas the other thrives on it. One complains that they feel stressed by the work: the other is able to cope. This could be a training issue, where with proper support the unhappy member of staff is taught coping strategies. It could be a “mis-fit” and after proper consultation and agreement it could be possible to move that person into a role to which they are better suited. Both scenarios demonstrate that every individual has their own experience of a job, and it is for the employer to understand and manage their staff in order to get optimal performance for the benefit of both the organization and the individual.

Green (2007) also notes the emergence of “absenteeism seen as entitlement”, whereby employees consider the use of sick days as a legitimate form of leave and something to which they are entitled. Green reported the following comment from one of his interviewees: “Sick days are extra days to sort out your life. I take about seven a year”. Bolton and Hughes (2001) commented that such “taking sick leave” is an oxymoron. One may be either on leave or sick but not both at the same time.

Clearly absence levels must be known and monitored in order to identify problems, and to try to alleviate any work-related stressors, and/or any work-life imbalance. A healthy workforce is a more productive workforce (Persaud, 2007).

#### *Absence as a symptom*

The question of why absence occurs reveals more than physical symptoms alone. The odd day off may be indicative of problems in supervision and that better management may be required. Absence behaviour may reflect a disjuncture between the individual and the work environment. At this level, absence is an indirect indicator of conflict (Van Dierendonck, 2002). Employees stay away from work for one of two reasons: they are either too ill or incapacitated, or because they chose to. Poor motivation or care responsibilities could be further reasons for non-attendance. During a training seminar Gribbon (2007) commented “watch the behaviour, it is the barometer of what is going on”. Flexibility in work practices and patterns may help people come in to work when they would otherwise have chosen to phone in sick. Symptoms of illness should be treated, but also the causes of absence. This view continues to be reflected in the



literature. As Simms (2007, p. 7) states “don’t just cure staff, stop them from getting sick in the first place” and Johnson (2005, p. 47) “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”.

*Measurement*

Companies and organizations measure absence in a number of ways. IDS identifies that the cost and disruption of persistent short spells are greater than for occasional longer spells of absence. The Bradford points system,  $S \times S \times D$ , where “S” is the number of occasions of absence, and “D” is the number of days lost, gives extra weighting to repeated short term absences, and so takes a position on its relative problem (Incomes Data Services, 2005; Bolton and Hughes, 2001; Seccombe, 1995). For example, a member of staff who is absent from work on 16 occasions, with 26 days lost, would have the formula  $16 \times 16 \times 26 = 6656$  Bradford points. This point is further illustrated in the case study where the issue of how absence is measured determines the subsequent relative position of an individual’s absence level. However, this method may discriminate against short-term absence, where an individual suffers, for example, from migraine or asthma. There are other measurement tools available to practitioners, the following are proposed by ACAS (2006) and CIPD (2006):

- Percentage days lost are calculated by:

$$\frac{\text{Work days lost}}{\text{Possible days worked}} \times 100.$$

- Days lost per employee are calculated by:

$$\frac{\text{Work days lost}}{\text{Average number of employees}}$$

In addition, there are other ways of looking at absences. Torrington and Hall (1991, p. 626) classified absences to facilitate analysis. Their classification, was by numbers of days lost, and by number of absence spells. This resulted in the range of “low”, “fairly low”, “fairly high” and “high”. Torrington and Hall’s figure is reproduced below, in Tables I and II, with slight alteration:

Employer surveys in the UK, such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) allow employers to benchmark company absence rates against comparable organisations. However, this has to be like-with-like. Are all lost days recorded, including weekends, or just

Range	Number of days lost	Percentage of workforce (cumulated)
Low	0-2: no absences	0
	1	
	2	25 Lower quartile (2 days)
Fairly low	3-8	50 Median (8 days)
Fairly high	9-22	75 Upper quartile (23 days)
High	23 and over	100

**Table I.**  
Classification of employees by number of days lost

Range	Number of absence spells	Percentage of workforce (cumulated)
Low	0-2: no absences	0
	1	25 Lower quartile (2 spells)
	2	
Fairly low	3-4: 3	
	4	50 Median (4 spells)
Fairly high	5-6: 5	
	6	
High	7-24: 7-8	
	9-10	75 Upper quartile (7 spells)
	11-24	100

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**Table II.**  
Classification of  
employees by number of  
absence spells

workdays? Should long-term absences be recorded or only short-term absences? Table III shows absences by regions in the UK.

The CIPD (2006, p. 6) lists the rates of sickness absence by sector in the UK. Their table is summarised in Table IV.

Research by Barmby *et al.* (2001) shows that the number of days lost due to absence can often be taken as an indicator of the effectiveness of the personnel policies in a given organization.

### Managing absence: What can the practitioner do?

There would appear to be a number of different approaches to managing absence: negative incentives or the stick approach, positive incentives or the carrot approach and the pro-active approach, the promotion of the health and welfare of employees, a wellness strategy (Jack, 2004). However “presenteeism”, that is the attendance at work of sick employees is in the interests of no-one, and a balance has to be found. Suggested best practice is listed below.

Region	Days lost per worker
Yorkshire/Humberside	8.9
Wales	8.4
Southern England	7.7
East Midlands	7.2
South West	7.2
Scotland	7.1
South East	6.5
West Midlands	6.4
Northern England	6.2
North-West England	6
London	5.1
Northern Ireland	4.7

Notes: CBI (2006, p. 12)

**Table III.**  
UK regional days lost per  
worker



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**Table IV.**  
Rates of sickness absence  
by sector in the UK

	Average working time lost per year (%)	Average days lost per employee per year
<i>Public services</i>	4.3	9.9
Education	4.1	9.1
Central government	4.6	10.5
Local government	4.8	11
Health	4.6	10.4
<i>Private services</i>	3.0	6.8
Hotels, restaurants, leisure	2.3	5.1
IT services	2.6	5.9
Legal and property services	2.8	6.2
Media and publishing	2.3	5.4
Retail and wholesale	3.5	7.8
Transport and storage	4.1	9.4
Telecommunications	2.5	5.6
Call centres	4.1	9.1

Bolton and Hughes (2001) suggest that:

- The aims of any strategy need to be very clear and understood by all members of an organization.
- Any strategy should go beyond simple control procedures, and deal with the more fundamental issue of creating a working environment that encourages high levels of attendance.
- Any strategy should emphasise the employer's commitment to developing and maintaining a positive working environment, and motivated staff.
- It should emphasise responsibilities, not just of line managers and overall managers, but also of the individual.
- Statements made in support of a positive strategy must be demonstrated and supported by the actions of management.
- Strategy may involve reviewing organizational structure and management style.

Keep (2007) take further Bolton and Hughes' comment, stating that "employees are ultimately responsible for their own well-being . . . that it is tempting to rely on a policy . . . rather than allow employees to choose to blame their surroundings and evade personal responsibility, HR, line managers and Occupational Health (OH) could promote a new form of self-care and self-nurture . . . this would involve encouraging employees to consider how much choice and control they have in achieving a better balance of well-being".

In addition, the CBI suggests:

- Benchmarking company performance against comparable sized organizations in the same sector.
- Developing an absence management strategy that recognises the variety of causes driving workplace absence and implementing solutions targeted at specific individual and organizational factors.

- Addressing long-term absence through early intervention and rehabilitation where possible.
- Giving responsibility for overseeing absence policy to senior management.

There can be unforeseen consequences of any absence management procedure. Reducing the absence problem may create problems elsewhere. For example it may lead to resentment and reduced levels of job performance, or staff may leave if they do not like the procedures in place (Confederation of British Industry (CBI), 2003).

Such is the interest in absence management, that it is frequently the subject of workshops or seminars. For example the 2006 CIPD Annual Conference had a seminar entitled “In Sickness and in Health”. The programme states “HR has a real role to play here, providing managers with guidelines and advice, and looking at practical approaches . . .” (CIPD, 2006, p. 19). Awareness of the issue is a good starting point.

Similarly it has been reported that levels of sickness absence can be lowered in organizations where there is HR involvement (*People Management*, 2006, p. 12; and where HR managers take responsibility, CBI, 2006, p. 21). Scott (2007) reported that “absence and turnover levels at Britannia Building Society . . . dropped as a result of its flexible working policy . . . absence levels dropped from 3.06 per cent in 2004 to 2.35 per cent in 2006”. Hamilton (2006) states that support systems have to be in place to train staff how to deal with stress. Fire fighters and police are trained to deal with stress in their jobs. Librarians are traditionally thought of as the least stressful occupations, however, they are also in need of this support. There clearly has to be a partnership with HR and where applicable, a referral procedure to OH services.

### What has been tried in other industries?

*The Scottish Executive: the devolved government for Scotland*

The Scottish Executive (2003) takes a rigorous approach to absence management. It stresses that for an organization to monitor the impact of its absences effectively and to maximise its resources it must ensure that:

- managers are actively involved in attendance management;
- staff and managers are aware of their responsibilities;
- guidance on attendance management is available to all staff and managers; and
- managers are able to plan cover and minimise the impact of absence on business delivery.

The executive states that employees should be aware of the organisation’s policy on managing attendance, and that they have a duty to attend work unless not fit to do so. It further states it is reasonable for an employer to expect a level of attendance from employees that allows the organisation to function efficiently and effectively. To this end, trigger points are used, a total of 11 working days absence (self or medically certificated) in any 12 month rolling period, allowing staff to know where they stand. Rather than seeing the use of triggers as a negative incentive the executive sees it as a positive tool.

When the trigger point is reached, HR will consult with the line manager to decide whether any action is necessary: action is not automatic. Factors taken into account

include the pattern, frequency and duration of absences, the types of illnesses stated, previous attendance record and the nature of the person's duties.

Initial action would be the issue of an advisory letter indicating the level of absence, and advising that a formal interview would be conducted if absences during the next six months brought the total sickness absence to 11 working days over the previous 12 months rolling period. A further similar breach of the trigger point would result in referral to the OH advisor. Subsequent action could include medical retirement or dismissal for inefficiency due to poor attendance (Scottish Executive, 2003).

There are available several sources of information on what other industries do, for example the research published by Dunn (2002) examined the practices of seven UK companies from three sectors, financial services, retail and manufacturing, to see what happened in practice as the organizations tried to cope with "the problem".

The following section, from Incomes Data Services (2005) shows further approaches in brief.

*British Airways: the global airline*

British Airways' absence management policy applies to all staff. Return to work discussions, a trigger review mechanism and improvement plans are important elements.

British Airways cabin crew staff threatened to strike in January 2007 over sickness absence management. The strike was averted just 12 hours before it was due to begin (Taylor, 2007).

*Eurotunnel Services: operator of the channel tunnel*

Eurotunnel Services has consistently achieved low absence levels. To help maintain the momentum it works in partnership with trade unions and its company council to update its absence management policy. It places greater emphasis than before on return to work interviews, now taking place after every single absence. It also uses vocational training and places emphasis on supporting staff.

*The Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education: in North East Lincolnshire, England*

The Grimsby Institute of Further and Higher Education halved its absence levels through a combination of initiatives, including a more proactive approach to absence management, the creation of an internal team of health specialists and the promotion of healthy living and well-being initiatives.

*HBOS Retail: Halifax Bank of Scotland, the UK's largest mortgage and savings provider*

HBOS Retail devolves the responsibility for driving up attendance to line managers. The company's initiatives to tackle absence have included more reliable information, access to speedier medical treatment and major campaigns to illustrate the negative effects of unwarranted absence on all employees.

*The Port of London Authority: a self-financing public trust*

The Port of London Authority achieved major reductions in absence levels by giving the issue a high priority, making line managers more accountable for managing absence in their own teams and by early intervention of the OH function.

*Brakes: the leading supplier of quality food to catering industry in the UK and France*  
Brakes has outsourced the recording and management of routine unplanned absence. Absent employees now call Brakes Healthline, a nurse-based helpline run by Active Health Partners. Line managers concentrate on managing attendance when a trigger mechanism suggests there may be a problem.

### Case study

#### *Structure of investigation*

Rather than producing a non-reflective or descriptive account of the introduction of absence management into a library environment, this exploration of absence management principles was designed to test the hypothesis that the use of return to work interviews after each absence through illness leads to a reduction in absence levels, and to see whether this was a robust enough conclusion to be applied in other library contexts. To do this, a case study methodology was taken and adapted from section 2, “methods”, in Williamson (2002).

In this model, a change is introduced into a given situation in parallel with another, which is not subject to that change, and which is used as a “control”. These two parallel contexts may be crudely expressed like this:

$$\begin{aligned} X &\rightarrow O_1 \\ \text{Not } X &\rightarrow O_2 \end{aligned}$$

...where  $X$  is the library context into which the change is introduced, and where  $O$  is an outcome of this change. Thus, the single library context “ $X$ ” was examined before and after the change (the introduction of absence management procedures) to see what effects could be detected and ascribed to this change. However, as in any real-life working library, it was difficult in practice to create an exactly parallel library context to act as control – that is, to replicate the conditions of the case study library but without the change agent of absence management procedures having been introduced.

Thus, the experimental “control” function had to be recreated by the use of general workplace statistics, that is, statistics which represented similar environments to the library under consideration but without specific absence management procedures in place.

In terms of informal symbolic logic, the hope was to find a set of two outcomes in which  $O_1 \neq O_2$ , rather than  $O_1 = O_2$ , where the identity of  $O_1$  and  $O_2$  expresses “no difference” between outcomes as a result of the experimental change introduced into one of the two contexts, as opposed to the desired result, a difference in outcome as a consequence of introducing the new management procedure.

#### *Single library context of case study*

The case study is based in an academic library in a UK University. The current Library staff population or profile is shown in Tables V and VI. The age band codings used in Table V are:

- A = under 30 years of age.
- B = between 30 and 50 years of age.
- C = over 50 years of age.

The coding for staff gradings referred to in Table VI refers to the result of a UK national framework agreement that resulted in the modernization of pay and grading structures. The result was a single pay spine. "OS" refers to Manual staff on Grades 1-2, "PR 3-5" refers to secretarial and clerical staff, and "PR 6-10" refers to professional and administrative staff.

In 1999, as in the preceding years, manual records were used for recording absences, and there was no management of absences through illness, only reporting absences retrospectively to the university's central administration. The library's concern at this time was that the absence level was unknown but it was felt that it could be a problem. In 2000 it was suggested that the implementation of an in-house database would facilitate information manipulation. This was designed based on the department's own requirements, and implemented by a member of staff in the library's systems division.

There followed a year when absence data was entered into the database. After that year it was possible, through the reports that could be generated by the database, to produce reports on 12 month roll-back periods on individual members of staff, to identify problem areas. Another report available was the Daily Absence Report, which listed all staff away from work on a particular day. This facilitated the monitoring of absences, facilitated information manipulation and enabled absence management. The library chose triggers of ten occasions or more of absence, and/or 30 days lost in any 12 month roll-back period, to record problem areas. These triggers were chosen as being reasonable, and not too severe. The process highlighted problem areas and senior management in the library were regularly updated on the situation. The main highlighted problem area was short-term absences, which proved the most disruptive as they allowed no planning for continued service provision. Other highlighted areas were recurring short-term absences for the same reason and the "one-off" long term absence. In order to carry out any formal process in the library consistently, training was provided by HR to the line managers who would routinely undertake return to work interviews following every absence through illness. In September 2001 return to work interviews were introduced, with the possibility of referral via HR to OH if this was considered beneficial.

**Table V.**  
Population by age and gender

Age band/gender	Male	Female	Total
A	2	8	10
B	7	39	46
C	10	16	26
Total	19	63	82

**Table VI.**  
Population by grade and gender

Grade/gender	Male	Female	Total
OS	6	7	13
PR 3-5	3	40	43
PR 6-10	10	16	26
Total	19	63	82

When the library's absence level patterns became discernable, the senior management of the library proposed to the university's personnel office (now human resources) that the library's initiative might be treated as a pilot programme, with a view towards an institution wide policy, since absence management should be tackled on an organisation wide basis. It is now anticipated that the success of the library's scheme will be reflected in an institution wide absence management policy.

The library's procedure has since been demonstrated to various interested departments within the university, has been rolled out to at least one other department and is under consideration in another area.

Table VII shows the library annual absence rates from 1999 to 2006.

Comparing the case study figures shown in Table VII with those cited in Tables I to IV, the following could be noted.

Looking to general statistical patterns as an informal control mechanism, we note the following: compared with the Scottish absences rate (Table III) of 7.1 days lost per worker, the public services sector rate (Table IV) of 9.9 days lost per person, and the educational sector rate (Table IV) 9.8 days lost per person, the latest case study figures compare favourably at 7.75 days, and compared with Torrington and Halls' classification, (Table I) the latest case study figure of 7.75 days would be considered "fairly low".

Compared with the figures in Table IV showing public services sector rate of 4.3 per cent working time lost and the educational sector rate of 4.1 per cent working time lost, the latest case study figures are low at 3.08 per cent work days lost.

A compilation of the CIPD's UK Absence Management Survey Statistics, taken from www.cipd.co.uk, is shown in Table VIII, showing average percentage of working time lost, average days lost per employee per year and the average costs per employee per year.

	Average percentage of work days lost	Average work days lost per person
October 1999-September 2000	5.70	13.18
October 2000-September 2001	3.96	10.7
October 2001-September 2002	4.67	12.15
October 2002-September 2003	3.15	8.18
October 2003-September 2004	2.37	5.88
October 2004-September 2005	4.93	11.73
October 2005-September 2006	3.08	7.75

**Table VII.**  
Annual absence rates

	Average percentage of working time lost	Average days lost per employee per year	Average cost per employee per year GBP
2002	4.4	10	522
2003	3.9	9	567
2004	4.0	9.1	588
2005	3.7	8.4	601
2006	3.5	8	598

**Table VIII.**  
CIPD UK absence  
management survey  
statistics

Tables IX and X compare the case study figures, in Table VII, against CIPD's figures, in Table VIII starting in 2001-2002 and then comparing most recently in 2005-2006.

As can be seen between Tables IX and X the case study institution has managed not only to reduce its absence figures, but, in the latest figures for 2005-2006, the case study figures are lower than the UK average figures reported by CIPD.

As can also be seen there have been fluctuations in absence levels over the years. This was not a gradual reduction. This could be due to "problem" staff leaving or arriving, health issues of individual members of staff or the impact of the return to work interviews, or may even be a result of the smoking in the work environment ban.

A more in-depth analysis of data on individual staff members was carried out for the period 1999 to 2006, the seven years covered by this research so far, see Figures 1, 2 and 3. For reasons of data protection details of individual members of staff are not shown. Individuals identified all met the set triggers, 30 days lost and/or 10 occasions of absence.

Codings used in the following staff grades section, and Figure 1 are:

- OS = manual staff on grades 1-2 (these grades cover stack attendants and library attendants).
- PR 3-5 = secretarial and clerical staff (these grades cover library assistants and senior library assistants).
- PR 6-10 = professional and administrative staff (these grades cover technicians, chief library assistants, assistant librarians, sub-librarians, senior librarians, depute librarians, directors).

**Table IX.**

Average percentage of work days lost

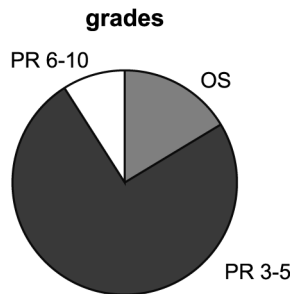
	Case study (%)	CIPD (%)
2001-2002	4.67	4.4
2005-2006	3.08	3.5

**Table X.**

Average days lost per employee per year

	Case study	CIPD
2001-2002	12.15 days	10 days
2005-2006	7.75 days	8 days

**Figure 1.**  
individuals identified by grade



Grade	Number
OS	7
PR 3-5	32
PR 6-16	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>



Figure 1 shows that those members of staff who mostly hit the triggers are in grades PR 3-5.

Codings used in the following gender section and Figure 2 are: M = male and F = female.

Figure 2 shows that those members of staff who mostly hit the triggers are female.

Codings used in the following age band section and Figure 3 are: A = under 30 years of age; B = between 30 and 50 years of age; and C = over 50 years of age.

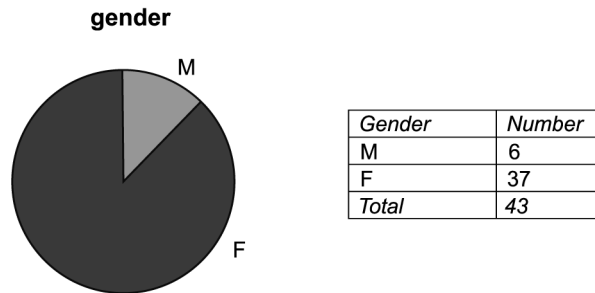
Figure 3 shows that those members of staff who mostly hit the triggers are aged between 30 and 50.

Therefore these figures show that those members of staff who mostly hit the triggers are in grades PR 3-5, are female and aged between 30 and 50. This is also the main staff profile in the library (see Tables V and VI). It could be prudent to use health, welfare and lifestyle information campaigns for all staff, with the hope that this group specifically benefits.

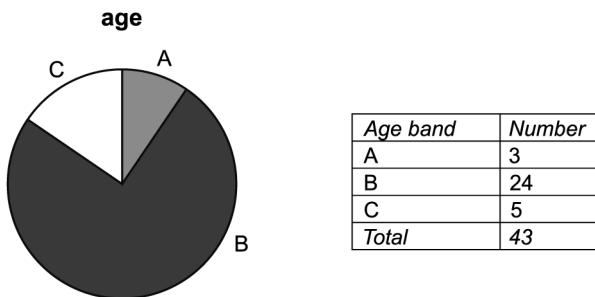
Analysis also shows that between 1999-2000 when there were no management procedures in place, and 2005-2006 when there were management procedures in place, the number of staff hitting targets has reduced by a third.

Three members of staff repeatedly hit triggers, one for five consecutive years. Repeated short-term absences for the same reason require intervention, and possible referral to OH services. Repeated short-term absences for different reasons should be investigated to discover any underlying causes.

Rankings within each category are determined by how the data is arranged. It was mentioned earlier, in the section on measurement that the way absences are measures dictates how absences are relatively recorded. Tables XI and XII, using



**Figure 2.**  
Individuals identified by gender



**Figure 3.**  
Individuals identified by age

fictitious examples, each follow the absence record of three members of staff (A, B and C). Their absence is recorded in three ways: days lost, occasions of absence and Bradford points.

Table XI shows the results in descending order of days lost. Table XII shows this listed in descending order of occasions.

This same Table XII serves to show ranking by Bradford points. In this case the order would be BAC.

It is noteworthy that these results show how the manipulation of statistics, and how data is presented, can affect how results are depicted. In this fictitious case it would greatly influence where an individual would be ranked. Statistics can also be uncharacteristically skewed when one member of staff experiences an isolated and genuine long-term absence, for example a broken limb. However, record taking has to be consistent and such absences should not be omitted from any record keeping.

At the start of the process, 1999 there were no management procedures in place. These procedures (which constituted the change required by the research methodology: Williamson, 2002) were firmly in place by 2001. Since that time, that is to say, since implementing an absence management procedure, which includes the use of Return To Work Interviews and possible referrals to OH, in one department of the University, there has been a decline in absence rates. However, it should be pointed out that although absence rates may decrease when sickness is managed, maybe this would have happened anyway. This reduction could arguably be explained by a number of factors, for example, "problem" staff sought alternative employment, "healthier" staff were recruited, environmental factors which were perceived to contribute to illnesses were remedied. It may not be possible to positively prove a direct correlation between absence levels and the many contributory factors. In this case study no other causal factors altered, the staff were largely the same staff and there were no other significant changes in working practice.

Only by continuing this cumulative research over subsequent years could it be proven that there is an improving trend.

**Table XI.**  
In descending order of days lost

Member of staff	Days lost	Number of occasions	Bradford points
A	100	5	2,750
B	50	8	3,584
C	30	5	750

**Note:** It can be seen that in this list the order is ranked ABC

**Table XII.**  
descending order of number of occasions

Member of staff	Days lost	Number of occasions	Bradford points
B	50	8	3,584
A	100	5	2,750
C	30	5	750

**Note:** The order would be ranked BAC or BCA, as A and C are in joint place

This case study research could have probed deeper. It could have analysed which locations of the library experienced high absence levels; whether “front line” staff were more susceptible to absences than “background” staff, or vice versa; or more specifically, for instance, if cataloguers were off more than staff providing direct service to the public. This could have provided invaluable insight for other practitioners, detailing implications for other libraries and providing practical advice on implementing management procedures. In this case, it would not be possible to apply such restrictive labels to staff, as, irrespective of where staff base themselves for most of the time, most staff work directly with the public at some time, whether this is in the evenings, at the weekend or providing cover for absences! So strict delineations such as “front of house” or “background” staff do not apply. However, for the purposes of this research, on what was regarded as a sensitive topic, it was decided to keep the results as anonymous as possible. So, for example, age band groupings shown in Tables V and XI were restricted to avoid any possible individual identification. For example staff were not divided into “in their 20s”, “in their 30s”, “in their 40s”, “in their 50s”, “in their 60” groupings. If there had been only one male in their 20s, this would have singled them out. In time, in the context of a widespread policy, it may be felt that such analysis, and others, could prove useful, but until then generalizations have been used. Future research could probe deeper, with the aim of providing a model of absenteeism within academic library contexts.

Based on the findings of this case study it is possible to provide a series of recommendations for library managers, as well as some conditions that will inform work into a more generic absenteeism model for LIS:

- The most affected group is PR3-5 (these grades cover library assistants and senior library assistants). Within this case study this includes females between the age of 30 and 50, reflecting the main staff profile.
- It could be prudent to provide all staff, not just this group, with health, well-being and lifestyle information.
- Arguably the most disruptive absences are short-term, which do not allow for planning of service provision.
- Repeated instances of short-term absence for the same reason are arguably indicative of an underlying health issue.
- In cases of long-term absence, planning can be put in place to provide cover.
- Return to work interviews appear to contribute towards the reduction in absence levels.
- Referrals to OH can be a useful resource.
- The problem is in the individual member of staff, irrespective of wherever they work in the library.
- Staff need to own the situation and be self responsible.
- Staff need to know that their absence is noticed and that their contribution makes a difference to service provision.
- Flexible working may allow staff to attend to private matters and help them to decide to come in to work, rather than take a day off.

## Discussion

Clearly many factors influence the rate of absenteeism but the most significant is management practices and the case study evidence outlined above does seem to demonstrate that these can be improved by the implementation of a form of policy or procedures.

The literature of absence management assumes that the effects of high absence levels are wide ranging and impact on everyone in the organisation, whether that is in an academic library or any business setting. Absence is expensive for any organisation, but savings can be made through a change from a culture of absence to a culture of attendance. This change requires a close partnership with HR and OH and clear and open communications between employer and employee.

It also requires employees to own the situation, to be responsible for their own health and well being, and perhaps this can only come about when employees feel they are valued at and in their work. If, as Follet recommended, employers should be looking for value for money, then perhaps they should have to prove they are taking measures to try to reduce absence rates as far as possible. Absence costs and absence matters: It is time to put absence management on the agenda for change.

However, we should note that the Fordist notions underlying this approach to absence management have been challenged in recent years. "Post-Fordism" is a theory of economic production that has evolved in recent years as part of the broadly "post-modern" debate about the nature of post-industrial society. Post-Fordism is a complex theoretical model (Ash, 1994). Many would say it has yet to be clearly defined and applied as a practical tool for organisational management. Even so, some of its insights are worth considering in the library context.

Post-Fordism focused on post-industrial phenomena such as the demise of the large factory in which all elements of the production process are centralised and linked, from the supply of raw materials to the production line with its massive on site inventories of parts and components. The gargantuan factories of the US automobile industry are now rust-belt dinosaurs: smaller, more flexible service-oriented companies have grown up in their wake.

Many of these companies are virtual organisations in which few of the employees work in a single physical location. Because distance working is more common, measurement of employee presence is a fruitless and empty exercise. Outputs are more important than inputs, and many employee outputs in the Post-Fordist "knowledge organisation" defy ready quantification. New tools for employee management have to be evolved for the Post-Fordist age: absence management is not one of these tools.

## Conclusion

Nevertheless, it remains the case that many academic and large-scale national or research libraries remain very "factory-like" in their nature, and are managed on a national scale in ways that resemble the management of a large-scale corporation engaged in country-wide mass production.

In the UK, the Follett Report summed up this view of the entirety of the Higher Education system as a single, nationalised education system in which production of graduates was to take place as efficiently as possible, with libraries playing their part in this single national corporation of universities. Having been set this agenda in the early 1990s, we too must manage our librarians' contribution to the national

educational effort as efficiently as possible, so that the maximum benefit can be extracted from their work-time. The subsequent commitment of successive British “New” Labour governments from 1997 onwards to increased investment in public services but with clearly measurable targets as the sting in the tail, has continued this national philosophy.

Our firm conclusion is therefore that absent management procedures provide an effective management tool with which to achieve the organisational aims of libraries within the model of Higher Education currently in place in the UK today.

Of course such a model, in which the minimisation of absenteeism is paramount, is not unique to the UK. For example, Eskildsen and Jensen (2007), highlights absenteeism in the Nordic countries. Their paper is of interest as a study of existing literature that also looks at the national effect of absenteeism. Such comparisons – cross sector and cross continent – could provide future reference tools for practitioners.

Future research developing this case study would focus on monitoring and evaluating the success of the current absence management strategy over coming years, and the results of this evaluation. A future sequel comparing statistics against comparable service departments, once the university policy is in place, is also likely to be fruitful. With wider implications, such future work could aim to provide a model of absenteeism within the academic library context that could help managers of absence management working in any comparable library environment.

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