

Employee commitment: the key to absence management in local government?

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Keywords

Absenteeism, Management, Commitment, Local government

Abstract

Employee absence has been widely acknowledged in recent years to be a growing problem for organisations, including local government organisations. This paper investigates linkages between organisational commitment, absence management policies and absenteeism in local government from three perspectives – those of human resource practitioners, line managers and employees – through a series of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The conclusion is reached that much employee absence in this sector can be attributed to the adoption of a “compliance”, or transactional approach, to employee commitment by both management and employees, and the absence of shared values between the employees and the organisation (internalised commitment). The implications which this holds for the management of employee absence are also examined.

Introduction

The issue of employee absence has attracted much attention in recent years, and from a variety of perspectives. Absence from work has been widely acknowledged to be a growing problem for organisations in general and for local government organisations in particular (CBI, 1999; Local Government Auditor, 1999). For example, IDS (1998) estimated the annual cost of absence to the UK economy to be around £13bn, an average of £581 per employee. These estimates are supported by the CBI (2001), which estimated that in 2000 around 192 million working days were lost through absence. This represents an average of 7.8 working days per employee – 3.4 per cent of working time – at an estimated cost to the economy of £10.7 billion.

Other authors have concluded, however, that the true cost of absence is even greater, once indirect costs such as lower quality products or services and lower customer satisfaction are included. For example, Ho (1997) argued that the economic impact of employee absenteeism derives mainly from the costs of decreased productivity because of absence from work, less experienced replacements and the additional expense of hiring substitute labour. On the basis of data collected by the CBI (1999) it is estimated that when indirect costs are included, absenteeism costs British employers around £1,092 per employee per year.

The importance of issues such as employee absence and their need to form a focus for management attention are especially significant when organisations are being pressurised to achieve enhanced levels of performance. At such times, their detrimental effects upon organisational well-being will be most keenly felt, and their incompatibility with desired improvements

most apparent. Furthermore, employee absence and its manifestations may represent a significant threat to change management in circumstances where organisational systems, structures and processes, and management practices, are contributing to the level of absence. Within the UK local government context there has been much pressure for change over the past decade. For example, Benington (2000) noted local government to have been warned that it is in “last chance saloon” and that failure to improve will cause the Government to take over, privatise or bypass poor services and authorities. Davis and Geddes (2000) have further highlighted the need for change within local government, noting the lack of a clear sense of direction, lack of coherence, and variability in service standard as being important drivers of change in the eyes of central government. Much of the pressure for change has been exemplified through a suite of initiatives over the past decade (and longer) such as the financial management initiative (FMI), compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) and more recently best value (BV). The outcome of such initiatives has been increased emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness. In consequence, many local authorities have been forced to embark upon often far-reaching programmes of change which have required fundamental changes to organisational systems and processes, including the way in which operations and people are managed. These new approaches have often required a shift in the mindset, attitudes and beliefs of organisational members, and highlighted a need for a breakdown of the rigid bureaucracy which has been the hallmark of public sector organisations in the past (McHugh and Bennett, 1999).

Local government organisations in Northern Ireland have been subjected to the

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same pressures for enhanced performance, efficiency and effectiveness as those in other parts of the UK. Within the region, much concern has been expressed with regard to the level of employee absence within district councils (Local Government Auditor, 1999). Indeed, the CBI (2001) estimated public sector absenteeism in Northern Ireland to cost the local economy £250 million per annum, while the average number of days lost per employee across the Province was 11, compared to an average of just under eight days across the UK as a whole. Responding to recent concerns, research was carried out into employee absenteeism within local government on behalf of the Local Government Staff Commission for Northern Ireland in an effort to gain an insight into the scale and causes of the problem, and to address the issue of how absence might be managed more effectively. Drawing on this research, this paper investigates the role of organisational commitment as a key moderating variable in employee absence, and examines relationships between employee commitment and absence from three perspectives – those of human resource managers, line managers and employees. Adopting employee commitment as a moderating variable requires that, initially, relationships are examined between absence and organisational processes and procedures, since these processes and procedures underpin commitment. The nature and consequences of employee commitment are then examined. Subsequent to this, relationships between commitment and absence are examined within the Northern Ireland local government context and conclusions drawn and recommendations made as to how absence might be better managed within the context of ongoing organisational change and development.

Relationships between organisational processes and procedures and employee absence

Employee absence can be categorised into various types. The most obvious is where the employee is prevented from attending work due to actual illness or injury. While it is convenient to absolve the employing organisation of any responsibility for such occurrences, it is, however, important to acknowledge that in some cases the root cause of such illness or injury may be partly attributable to the way in which the organisation is managed. In other instances, aspects of organisational management may

result in employee absence where no physical illness or injury actually exists, and where the absence is attributable to low job satisfaction in some or other manifestation.

Aspects of organisational and managerial practice which may contribute to employee absence (whether through inducing illness or injury or through contributing to low levels of employee motivation) include the way in which tasks or the work context are organised, the structure of the organisation and nature of the management hierarchy, and low levels of employee responsibility, autonomy, job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Dalton and Mesch, 1990; Rentsch and Steel, 1998; Cotton and Tuttle, 1986; Clegg, 1983). This view is further supported by Saratoga (1998) who argues that from a management perspective, high employee absence is a very clear indicator of some form of organisational misbehaviour, often indicating dissatisfaction with the organisation, which requires analysis and action. Further, it is frequently argued that absence levels within organisations are subject to cultural influences. For example, Gellatly and Luchak (1998) report a common research finding to be that individual absence is affected to varying degrees by the collective behaviour of others – through the process of employee socialisation individuals learn how much absence is expected by co-workers and management. Thus, individuals may experience social pressure to raise or lower their level of personal absence to a norm that has been established in the work group or organisational culture.

Regardless of the reason, absenteeism from work clearly represents an enormous cost for organisations and can be argued (in cases) to be indicative of deeply rooted organisational problems embedded in organisational structures and management practices. Such problems are likely to adversely affect the ability of the organisation to cope effectively with the challenges presented by its environment, and in particular the effective and efficient introduction of programmes of organisational change. Indeed, much evidence exists that the path of organisational transformation is rarely smooth, and various authors have contended that the degree of success achieved is highly dependent upon the commitment and support of employees (see, for example, Bennett and Durkin, 2000; Burnes, 1996; Senior, 1997; Balogun and Hope-Hailey, 1999; McHugh *et al.*, 1999). Advocates of change management frequently argue that commitment to change is likely to be influenced by the commitment of the individual to the organisation; this

commitment in turn, it may be argued, influences factors such as morale, motivation and job satisfaction (Martocchio, 1994; Johns and Nicholson, 1992). The literature further highlights linkages between these aspects of organisational life and behavioural outcomes such as levels of stress, absenteeism and labour turnover (Dalton and Mesch, 1990; Martocchio, 1994; Ho, 1997). Within this context, and given the continued pressures for change within local government, this paper examines linkages between employee commitment and absence within the context of Northern Ireland local government, and assesses the prospects for the future successful management of change within the sector in the light of the findings presented.

Organisational commitment

The ways in which tasks or the work context are organised, the structure of the organisation and the management hierarchy, together with low levels of employee responsibility, morale, motivation and job satisfaction, have all been shown to be associated with employee absence (Dalton and Mesch, 1990; Rentsch and Steel, 1998). It can be argued that aspects such as these are all reflected within the extent of an individual's organisational commitment. This is a construct which has attracted many definitions. Jaros *et al.* (1993, p. 989) noted that:

For over two decades, researchers have persistently and gradually refined the meaning of organisational commitment. It has evolved into a complex concept that can serve as a summary index of work-related experiences and as a predictor of work behaviours and behavioural intentions.

Morrow (1983) identified over 25 commitment related concepts and measures. Porter *et al.* (1974, p. 604) defined commitment as "the strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organisation", having based this assessment on measures of motivation, identification with the values of the organisation, and employees' intentions of remaining members. Buchanan (1974, p. 53) took this definition one stage further and described commitment as being "a partisan affective attachment to the goals and values of an organisation, to one's roles in relation to the goals and values, and to the organisation for its own sake, apart from its purely instrumental worth".

Porter *et al.*'s definition distinguishes between attachment based on exchange (involvement in return for extrinsic reward)

and that based on a moral attachment where involvement is based on value congruence (between the individual and the organisation). This distinction is one which has been made by many researchers in the area, going back as far as Kelman (1958), Becker (1960) and Etzioni (1961). Indeed, Kelman (1958) distinguished between commitment based on compliance (where the individual adopts specific patterns of behaviour and attitudes in return for specific rewards and to avoid costs associated with quitting/withdrawal from the organisation), identification (where attitudes and behaviours are adopted in order to gain association with a valued third party) and internalisation (in which individuals adopt specific behaviours and attitudes because their content is congruent with the individuals' value systems).

While recognising that employee commitment can be approached from a number of perspectives, O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) developed Kelman's (1958) theme and identified psychological attachment (the psychological bond linking the individual and the organisation) as a central theme in all the various approaches to commitment. Psychological attachment, according to O'Reilly and Chatman (1986, p. 493) "reflects the degree to which the individual internalises or adopts characteristics or perspectives of the organisation". The basis for an individual's psychological attachment to an organisation falls into three categories according to O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) (reflecting those identified by Kelman (1958)). These are:

- 1 compliance, or instrumental involvement for specific, extrinsic rewards;
- 2 identification, or involvement based on a desire for affiliation; and
- 3 internalisation, or involvement predicated on congruence between individual and organisational values (O'Reilly, and Chatman, 1986, p. 493).

This approach to employee commitment has been subsequently adopted by other researchers in the area (see, for example, Jaros *et al.*, 1993), and provides factor analytic support for the idea of a multi-dimensional approach to the study of commitment. Indeed, Jaros *et al.* (1993, p. 970) conclude that "single factor models do not represent the conceptual and empirical domain of organisational commitment".

Each of these dimensions of commitment – internalised, identification and compliance (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986) – can be argued to be threatened by any process of organisational change. Movement into new

products, services and markets may result in changes in identification commitment as the core nature of the business (which attracts identification commitment in the first place) changes. It is also fair to argue that organisational development which results in changes in the organisation's core underlying values poses a significant threat to internalised commitment on the part of employees – by its very nature such change will dissolve the shared values on which internalised commitment is based.

Compliance commitment can be affected by organisational change in a number of ways. The obvious case is where organisational change results in economic changes to terms and conditions of employment. Even where terms and conditions of employment are not altered, changes in tasks and duties can still impact on compliance commitment. It can also be argued that compliance commitment may be affected by changes in identification and internalised commitment – for example, the dissolution of shared values between the individual and the organisation, or changes in the nature of the organisation's business, may lower individuals' internalised and identification commitment, thereby leaving compliance commitment as the main basis of employee attachment.

Many strategies identified for overcoming barriers to change (see, for example, Smither, 1994) emphasise the need to ensure continued employee commitment in times of change. Indeed, it can be argued that employee commitment plays a central role in the management of change process, both from the perspective of consolidating change and also from that of the likely future success of ongoing change programmes.

Relationships between employee commitment and individual behaviour

Commitment to organisations has variously been found to be positively related to such organisational outcomes as job satisfaction (Bateman and Strasser, 1984; Mowday *et al.*, 1982), motivation (Mowday *et al.*, 1979) and attendance (i.e. lower rates of absenteeism) (Dalton and Mesch, 1990; Ho, 1997; Martocchio, 1994; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Steers and Rhodes, 1978). At the same time, commitment has been found to be negatively related to outcomes such as absenteeism (again) and labour turnover (Cotton and Tuttle, 1986; Clegg, 1983). Mowday *et al.* (1982) concluded that highly committed employees wish to remain with their employing organisations.

That is not to say, however, that such relationships are straightforward and directly observable; indeed, it appears that other variables moderate these relationships to an extent (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990). For example, and in keeping with this, Jaros *et al.* (1993) found that commitment affects turnover only indirectly, through withdrawal intentions. However, what is important from the perspective of the present study is that such relationships do exist, and are associated with potentially positive outcomes for the organisation.

Adopting the theoretically sound approach of multi-dimensional commitment (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986; Jaros *et al.*, 1993), a number of studies have illustrated the importance of having employees whose commitment is based on more than simple compliance. Smith *et al.* (1983) argue that many key behaviours in organisations rely on acts of co-operation, altruism and spontaneous unrewarded help from employees. O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) found commitment based on internalisation to be significantly related to both intrarole behaviour (behaviour expected as part of the job, including attendance for work) and extrarole behaviour (prosocial acts beyond what is outlined in the job description; actions for which the individual receives no immediate reward but which benefit the wider organisation, including higher attendance levels), tenure intentions and turnover. Attachment based on identification or pride in affiliation is also related to extrarole behaviour, tenure intentions and turnover. Compliance attachment, on the other hand, was not found to be significantly related to either intrarole or extrarole behaviour (i.e. to have no direct relationships with attendance rates) or turnover, but was negatively related to intention to remain with the organisation.

The impact of absence management policies

While employee absence can be shown to be rooted in various sources, the literature is reasonably consistent in the view that more stringent absence management policies can mitigate against high levels of absence. Dalton and Todor (1993, p. 207), picking up on a number of earlier studies, argued that "organisations can drastically reduce the extent of employee absenteeism by adopting policies which deter, not encourage, absenteeism", and further that "it should be noted that these policies do not include punishing an employee for being absent or

direct discipline of any kind; rather, the reductions in absenteeism may merely reflect the existence of some reasonable policy which does not encourage employee absenteeism”.

In similar vein, Leigh (1981) found liberal sick leave policies to lead to higher rates of absenteeism; Winkler (1980) noted a requirement to report absence directly to line management and provide certified evidence of the reason for the absence to be associated with lower absence levels, findings also supported by Dalton and Perry (1981). Finally, Farrell and Stamm (1988, p. 222) concluded absence control policies to be a “strong and stable correlate” of the level of absenteeism.

Findings such as these led Dalton and Todor (1993, p. 207) to the conclusion that “organisational absence rates may be highly related to the control policies related to absenteeism”. Furthermore, “absence rates are much higher for the more lenient policies”.

Summary

In summary, having established that employee absence is a major issue within the Northern Ireland Local Government sector (Local Government Auditor, 1999) and public sector absence in Northern Ireland incurs a major cost to the local economy (CBI, 2001), and that absence is associated with a range of features pertaining to the individual’s relationship with the organisation, it was considered appropriate to examine the perceived causes of absence within local government in order to establish the extent to which employee commitment (associated with employee morale and motivation, and indirectly with all aspects of organisational systems and processes) is, or is perceived to be, causing employee absence. This is particularly relevant within the context of the ongoing, and often far-reaching, organisational change which is characteristic of the sector, since change is dependent on commitment for success and yet simultaneously constitutes a major threat to that very commitment. The establishment of relationships between employee commitment and absence would also have significant implications for attendance management within local government organisations. Given the role played by absence management policies in moderating the extent of employee absence, the impact of such policies is also considered in the analysis.

Methodology

A multi-method approach was adopted to gather data from participating local government organisations within Northern Ireland. Initially, secondary statistical data was sought from all 26 district councils within the region in an attempt to quantify the scale of the absence problem. Semi-structured interviews conducted with human resource management practitioners within each local council served to confirm the findings of the statistical analysis, thus facilitating internal validation of the data.

To examine relationships between perceptions about employee commitment and employee absence, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were sought within each local council. This involved convening semi-structured interviews with human resource managers, and group discussions with line managers and also groups of high and low absence employees within each local council area. These interviews provided the three groups of respondents – human resource practitioners, line managers and employees – with the opportunity to discuss a variety of issues which they considered to be relevant to the issue of employee absence and its management. After initial identification of line management and employees, selection for participation in the focus group discussions was carried out on a random basis across councils. Random samples of ten line managers and up to ten employees with both low and high absence records were selected within each local council area and were invited to participate in the focus group discussions.

Semi-structured interviews with human resource practitioners from 25 out of the 26 district councils were used to ascertain the views and opinions of human resource personnel on a range of issues associated with employee absenteeism, including the perceived level and cost of absence, and the causes and effects of absence. This was followed up with focus group discussions with line management representatives from 23 of the 26 councils, and with two focus groups of employees drawn from each council – one consisting of “high” absence employees and the other “low”. The inclusion of these three groups of respondents provided a unique insight into the absence issue and a number of common themes emerged from the responses relating to the issue of employee commitment and perceptions about organisational practices and procedures.

Results

Statistical information was provided by 25 out of the 26 local councils and covered the reporting year 1998-1999 only. The data collected indicated that the levels of absenteeism within district councils in Northern Ireland showed a mean loss of 3.85 per cent (8.7 days) in the 1998-1999 year. The direct cost of this absence is estimated at £4.5 million.

As might be expected, the statistical information highlighted variations in absence levels between councils; this concerned both the level of absence and the employee groups most affected. To illustrate, total time lost across councils ranged from a low of 2.5 per cent to 8.9 per cent, while total days lost varied from an average of 5.6 days to 18.9 days. Similarly, average days lost varied across employee grade – ranging from 6.8 days (senior management), to 9.4 days (clerical workers) and 10.5 days (manual workers).

Human resource practitioners

As noted, human resource practitioners from 25 out of the 26 councils agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview. The extent of the absence problem was underlined by the fact that 68 per cent of those interviewed believed it to be either “very high” or “high”, compared with 32 per cent perceiving it as “medium” or “low”; 4 per cent indicated that absence levels were “very low”. All of the interviewees who considered absence to be high argued this to be due to the fact that the majority of employees do not lose out financially if they are absent from work. A total of 20 per cent of interviewees felt high absence levels to be related to the prevailing organisational culture which incorporates acceptance of a set level of absence. The 24 per cent of interviewees who felt absence levels to be low or very low attributed this to the full implementation of a good absence management programme (50 per cent) or the fact that the organisation is located in a small town or community where employees are exposed (33 per cent) – tending to make it more difficult for individuals to fake sickness. A total of 33 per cent attributed their low absence figures to a lack of tolerance within the organisation regarding sickness absence, reflecting strict absence management policies and a belief that the proactive management of employee attendance can help promote high attendance.

These findings can be interpreted as being indicative of a culture which emphasises compliance commitment, and which views

employees as being attached to the organisation primarily for financial reward. The majority of the human resource practitioner respondents argued that high rates of employee absence were to be expected as employees do not lose out financially if absent – indicating a belief that financial reward is the only outcome which employees are interested in receiving from the workplace. Even where absence was reported to be low, this was attributed to the rigorous management of absence (not to any desire on the part of employees to attend), or a belief that employees feel they would not be able to “get away” with absence. Again, both of these views lend weight to the contention that the basis of the employment relationship is perceived by human resource practitioners to be transactional and predicated on extrinsic rewards, as opposed to anything else.

With regard to the causes of sickness absence, an interesting dichotomy emerged on the part of human resource practitioners with regard to the reported cause and the perceived causes. Reported causes were heavily dominated by minor and major illness, work related accidents and work place stress (reported by 80 per cent of those interviewed). However, in contrast, perceptions of the actual causes of absence, while still recognising minor illness, also identified low morale (92 per cent), stress (88 per cent), home and family commitments (88 per cent), lack of commitment (48 per cent), lack of motivation (48 per cent) and “entitlement” (28 per cent). It can be argued that these all indicate a perceived lack of internalised commitment on the part of employees by human resource practitioners, since high morale and motivation have been found to be positively associated with internalised commitment (O’Reilly and Chatman, 1986). This serves to confirm the contention that human resource practitioners view the basis of employee commitment as being compliance commitment, and not any shared sense of value with the organisation. Furthermore, this absence of internalised commitment is clearly perceived by human resource managers to be associated with higher rates of absence (to be a significant cause of absence).

Line managers

Similar issues were explored in focus group discussions with line managers to those discussed with human resource practitioners. Line managers from 23 councils participated. These discussions revealed that many of the issues pertaining

to employee absence are common across district councils within Northern Ireland; although some differences emerged, the pattern of response and discussion was repeated systematically in the sessions held across the region. All participants indicated that they were aware of the absence management policy existing within their organisation. However, the level of awareness differed between councils, and it was only in a small number of cases that managers demonstrated complete familiarity with the policy. Where this was the case, this was attributed to the level of emphasis placed on absence management within the particular organisation, the frequency with which managers use the policy and/or the amount of training provided on policy implementation.

Initial discussions with line managers revealed confusion surrounding the issue of who is responsible for the management of employee absence – line managers or human resource practitioners. Within many councils it was implied that human resource departments should be doing more to manage absence in both a direct and indirect way. With regard to the latter, it was suggested that line managers require more support from their human resource management colleagues. In a minority of councils, managers indicated that absence management is the responsibility of line managers, or, alternatively, that it is the joint responsibility of human resource personnel and line managers. In the majority of councils, however, managers indicated that while they had some awareness of the policy, they considered the responsibility for policy implementation to lie mainly with the human resource department. In general, absence levels tend to be lower or improving in cases where line managers actively acknowledge their responsibility for absence management. It is worthy of note that 60 per cent of human resource practitioners contended that line managers are not implementing the existing employee absence policy, while 40 per cent believed absence to be high within their organisation because line managers are not taking responsibility for the problem.

Once again, the views of line managers can be interpreted as indicating a compliance perception of employee commitment. Absence management is seen as a distinct issue, separate from other aspects of organisational functioning such as task and context design, employee responsibility and autonomy and so on. Also, a rigorous procedural approach to absence management was found to produce positive results,

indicating a controlling, compliance approach to employee management.

A striking feature of absence management in local government is the lack of consistency that operates both within and between councils with regard to policy implementation concerning absence. Many managers reported that differences exist in the implementation of absence management policies between departments, as well as between councils. The level of consistency that operates within councils appears to be linked to the overall level of absenteeism within the organisation. The discussions revealed variations across councils in the level of emphasis placed on the issue of absence management. Where the issue of absence is acknowledged by senior management as being an issue that impacts upon the efficient and effective management of the organisation, and where this is supported by a well developed absence management policy which is fully implemented, supported by training, widely communicated, and where a high level of co-ordination exists between human resource departments and other operational units, the tendency in such cases is towards lower levels of absence. Such states of affair were reported to be the exception within local government in Northern Ireland. In short, lower levels of absence were observed to be associated with more stringent absence management policies. This procedural approach to absence management is in keeping with a compliance perception of employee commitment, in which employees are seen as a resource to be managed and controlled hierarchically.

The inconsistencies which characterise the awareness and implementation of absence management policies in local government extended to include the collection of absence management statistics. Many of the line managers felt this to be a function of human resources, and that such data are, and should be, collected centrally. However, the research showed that a more systematic approach to the collection of data is associated with lower levels of employee absence. Where it is organisational policy that line managers collect data and forward these to human resources there is a tendency towards the availability of more comprehensive and accurate information.

Specifically within Northern Ireland local councils, a majority of line managers were of the opinion that many of the difficulties which they face in relation to absence management stem from the fact that communication is poor within their organisation, and that in many cases the

Hadyn Bennett
*Employee commitment: the
key to absence management
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Leadership & Organization
Development Journal
23/8 [2002] 430-441

absence management policy within their organisation has not been communicated to them, or to other employees within the organisation.

With regard to specific employee groupings, the discussions with line managers made frequent reference to direct service organisation ("operating core", Mintzberg, 1983) staff (DSO Staff) – with comments suggesting absenteeism previously to have been a major problem with this particular employee group. However, developments such as CCT and the subsequent distribution of surplus share (efficiency savings) among employees were considered to have had a positive effect upon employee absence; it was noted, however, that the positive effects associated with the distribution of surplus share were transitory and not long term. It can also be noted, of course, that such payments in essence amount to "payment for attendance", and clearly reflect an emphasis on transactional, or compliance, commitment.

Leisure centre employees were consistently reported as being a problematic group with regard to absence, a fact attributed to the boring and repetitive nature of their work, the unpleasant working environment and lack of career opportunities.

Many commented on an increase in absence for clerical workers, particularly at lower employee grades. This was attributed in many instances to increased job demands, while changes in the reward structure and job grading system do not reflect the new levels of demands being placed.

These findings in relation to specific employee groups reveal much about line managers' perceptions of employee commitment. Improvements noted in the absence levels of DSO staff on the distribution of surplus clearly indicate a transaction, or compliance, view of employee commitment (while the employees' behaviour, in terms of improved attendance, it must be noted, also supports this approach). Similarly, increased absence rates on the part of clerical workers are attributed to the fact that these employees are now striking an inferior "compliance" deal to that which existed before – job demands have increased while reward structures and grading have not been amended to reflect the increased levels of demand.

An absence of internalised commitment is hinted at in the attribution of absence to boring and repetitive work on the part of leisure centre staff. Low internalised commitment is also reflected in that line managers identified employee morale as

being low in the majority of councils, a fact attributed to the many changes that have occurred within local government organisations. Organisational change has previously been found to be eroded by organisational development, as fundamental changes to the organisation dissolve the shared values on which internalised commitment is grounded (Bennett and Durkin, 2000). A majority of line managers also expressed the opinion that many of those working within local government are stuck with a legacy of the past, and find it extremely difficult to think or to act differently than in a previous era. This also supports the contention that internalised commitment is low, in that employees have not, as yet, internalised the new culture. This argument is further supported by the contention of many that the new demands being placed on councils necessitate a change in organisational culture involving a shift in the mindset, attitudes, values and beliefs of employees.

As well as being attributable to change, low levels of morale were also attributed to the style of management that prevails within district councils. Employee involvement in the decision-making process and the commitment of the organisation to the training and development of its employees were considered to have a positive effect upon morale and attendance; however, the view of managers participating in the focus group discussions would suggest that such practices are not the norm within Northern Ireland's district councils. Again, the absence of employee involvement and employee development is clearly indicative of the adoption of a compliance approach to commitment on the part of local government organisations – compliance in return for extrinsic reward summarises the extent of employee psychological attachment which is being sought. Involving employees in decision making, and involvement in employee development (personal and otherwise) would all represent important elements of a programme aimed at fostering internalised commitment.

Employees

As noted, two focus groups, comprising "high" and "low" absence employees, were convened within each council. While the level of participation in these discussions varied across councils, it was interesting to note that in four councils no high absence employees presented for discussions, and these sessions therefore had to be abandoned.

In general terms, participants indicated that they were aware of the existence of an

Hadyn Bennett
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Leadership & Organization
Development Journal
23/8 [2002] 430-441

absence management policy, but few respondents indicated a comprehensive knowledge of its outworkings. Those within high absence groups demonstrated a higher level of familiarity, while, interestingly, those in lower absence groups tended to be much more relaxed in their views and attitudes towards absence and its management. However, in the case of councils where attendance management is made a priority, all employees indicated a higher level of awareness of the policy.

It became apparent from the discussions that there exists much inconsistency within councils regarding the implementation of the attendance management policy. This inconsistency appears to apply particularly to the practice of carrying out return to work interviews. Greater consistency with policy implementation in respect of return to work interviews, and absence policies generally, is found where the council places more emphasis upon attendance management. For employees, the perception was that the occurrence of return to work interviews depended on the nature of the relationship between manager and employee – where the relationship is good, the interview is less likely to occur. Further, employee attitudes to the return to work interview were influenced by the quality of the relationships between management and staff. Where employees felt the relationship to be good and where employees are valued (the minority of cases), a positive attitude was expressed towards these interviews, and they were considered to be a signal of care for the employee on the part of the organisation. In other cases – the majority – they are seen as intrusive and an unnecessary control mechanism.

Employees appear to be fearful of their employment record in cases where attendance management is given a priority by the organisation. Coupled with the finding that making attendance management a priority produces lower absence rates, it appears that prioritising is useful in driving down absence through fear – again, indicating a compliance approach to securing employee commitment.

Many of those in low absence groups were of the opinion that malingering occurs, with low absence groups being of the opinion that about 60 per cent of illnesses fall into this category. Many also believed that where trade unions are active they tend to encourage sickness absence as an entitlement, suggesting a compliance approach to the organisation on the part of employees.

For the most part, participants showed little awareness of the extent to which absence affects the organisation's performance or the costs associated with it. This clearly indicates low levels of commitment other than compliance in return for payment – employees appear to be interested only in their own personal circumstances and not in the wider organisation.

The absence of internalised commitment on the part of employees as a cause of employee absence was further indicated by a number of findings. The overwhelming majority of respondents commented that employee morale within local government is low; however, support and co-operation among groups of co-workers was reported to be high. Low morale was attributed to a number of factors, and was commonly seen as being a root cause of many organisational problems including employee absence. However, despite the low morale, terms and conditions of employment were generally regarded as being good, and, especially in more remote areas, desire to leave the organisation is low.

Employees in general do not feel valued by management or the organisation (a classic symptom of low levels of internalised commitment) and noted this as a cause of absence. Many reported an absence of praise for a job well done, but criticism for failing to meet targets. A "them" and "us" attitude was reported between management and staff, and between "blue" and "white" collar workers. Participants frequently spoke of a "blame" culture and identified an unwillingness to accept responsibility across all grades of employees, coupled with high efforts to find scapegoats for problems. Employees reported little or no emphasis to be placed upon staff development (indicating a perception that mechanical compliance is all that is required from employees). Many believed managers to have no interest in their staff or their development, and inequalities were perceived in terms of development opportunities for management and staff.

Much work is considered to be boring, and employees feel that while management are aware of this nothing is done to improve the design of the job and enhance its motivating potential. Management was not perceived as being encouraging of staff to be innovative or act of their own initiative. Senior level vacancies were reported as being filled by "outsiders", on the basis that such individuals are more likely to be innovative and bring an approach to management which is more in keeping with the new demands being placed upon local government

organisations. However, these are the very skills and practices which existing employees feel they are not being allowed to develop – in their view, creativity and innovation are stifled at more junior levels within local government organisations. This further erodes employee morale, contributing both directly and indirectly to increased absence levels.

Good relationships between management and staff foster a higher level of attendance. However, the view was expressed on many occasions that poor quality relationships frequently exist. Many also perceived a lack of trust between management and staff, and a lack of mutual respect – all aspects which were perceived to have a negative impact upon absenteeism.

The high level of bureaucracy which exists within local government was perceived to be an impediment to rapid response and innovative problem-solving activity. Management was perceived to be conservative in outlook and as having fixed views – many organisations were described as being over managed and under-led. Communications were commonly perceived to be poor within local government organisations; management was perceived to be hoarders of information which is only released in a limited and controlled way. This adds further to fostering distrust and low morale.

Additional job demands, a more pressing environment, poor relationships between management and staff and low morale were all perceived to be fostering an increasing level of employee stress, thereby contributing both directly and indirectly to high levels of absenteeism. This has been exacerbated by the level of change that has occurred and how the change process has been managed. In addition, employees are experiencing lower levels of job security.

In summary, employee views on morale, lack of involvement, autonomy and discretion, dissatisfaction with organisational structures and communication, and lack of opportunities for staff development, all indicate low levels of internalised and identification commitment. However, employees continue to express general satisfaction with their terms and conditions of employment, despite the low levels of morale which arise from various sources. The outcome of these two sets of findings is that local government organisations do not benefit from the performance outcomes associated with internalised commitment, while at the same time, relative satisfaction with terms and conditions and a perceived lack of

opportunity to strike a better deal elsewhere ensure relatively low staff turnover, and, it seems likely, a continuance of the status quo.

Discussion

Against a background of over a decade of change initiatives, employee absence has been identified as being a major problem for local government organisations (Local Government Auditor, 1999). The results of the present study indicate that for the reporting year 1998/1999 (the last year for which full data were available) district councils in Northern Ireland showed a mean loss of 8.7 days per employee (3.85 per cent of working days), at an estimated direct cost of £4.5 million. This estimate does not include the indirect costs of the absence, which many writers (for example, Ho, 1997) argue to outweigh the direct costs experienced. Recognising much employee absence to be rooted in organisational and managerial practices, including the way in which tasks or the work context are organised, the structure of the organisation and nature of the management hierarchy, and low levels of employee responsibility, autonomy and job satisfaction, this paper has examined perceptions of the causes of employee absence from three perspectives – those of human resource practitioners, line managers and employees. The primary objective has been to establish the extent to which such features may be causes of employee absence within local government in Northern Ireland. Approaches to organisational commitment have been utilised to examine managerial and organisational practices in relation to the impact which these might be having on employee absence. The commitment construct was considered to be particularly useful in this regard since it integrates all aspects of organisational and managerial practice.

While the interviews and focus group discussions provided three distinct perspectives on the absence issue, a number of common themes emerge. It is apparent that both human resource practitioners and line managers adopt a compliance view of employees' relationships with the workplace i.e. one in which the primary basis of employee commitment is extrinsic reward. This was evidenced, *inter alia*, by the views of human resource practitioners that employees are content to absent themselves since they do not lose out financially, and by the view of line managers that absence management is a distinct issue which should be managed by the human resources

department. Line managers also expressed the view that distribution of surpluses (effectively payment for attendance) could have a positive impact on attendance rates. Both human resource managers and line managers also concluded that the rigorous application of absence management policies could bring about positive improvements to absence rates, again indicating a controlling approach to management in which compliance in return for extrinsic rewards lies at the heart of the employment relationship.

That said, human resource practitioners and line managers both clearly recognised the absence of internalised commitment, evidenced by low morale, low motivation, and low job satisfaction, and generated by poor communications, lack of autonomy and little or no employee development, to be a major contributor to absence rates. An extensive diet of organisational change to date was also attributed as having helped to erode satisfaction and morale in the workplace. These characteristics were also identified by employees as being characteristic features of organisational life, indicating little or no internalised commitment, and fostering an environment in which the employee's only attachment to the organisation comes by virtue of extrinsic rewards.

On the basis of these findings, local government organisations in Northern Ireland appear to have reached an impasse in which both management and employees recognise the absence of internalised commitment, and are suffering from the consequences of this. In the case of the organisation, these consequences take the form of high absence rates and their attendant costs, and also reduced efficiency arising from low morale and motivation. For employees, the costs arise from workplace stress, lack of fulfilment, and other illnesses induced by poor quality of working life.

Within this context, local government organisations are faced with a number of options to address these costs. The results of the research indicated that the rigorous application of absence management policies can be successful in lowering absence rates; however, employees indicated that such practices instil fear, and within this context the prospects for long term success with such strategies are uncertain. It can be argued that seeking to control absence in this way would further cement a compliance/transactional approach to employee management, and would ignore the issues identified by both management and employees as lying at the root of the absence issue. An alternative

approach would involve the organisation attempting to re-establish (or in some cases – establish) high levels of internalised commitment, predicated on shared values between the organisation and the individual and mutual investment and trust by each party (management and employees) in the other. Establishing internalised commitment would enable both parties to benefit from the performance benefits associated with internalised commitment. Additionally, it can be argued that successful change management is dependent on high levels of employee commitment to both the organisation and the change process; without the establishment of high levels of internalised commitment the prospects for successful change within local government organisations (which the environment demands) are poor.

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