
Review

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Absenteeism: New Approaches to Understanding, Measuring, and Managing Employee Absence.

Paul S. Goodman, Robert S. Atkin, and Associates. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1984. 436 pp. \$24.95.

The promise of this book is that it will answer the questions it sets out before the reader. For example, can we theoretically specify absenteeism so that a clear definition can be linked to the psychological process explaining absence taking? Instead of measuring absenteeism as a convenient dependent variable, can we step back and view the fundamental properties of absenteeism with an eye toward measurement theory? Are current statistical models for assessing relationships between predictors and absenteeism appropriate? If not, which are? Can we broaden the construct of absenteeism to understand the various relationships among different forms of withdrawal? Can we predict absenteeism? If we treat absenteeism as an independent variable, what are its consequences on the individual, group, and organization? Given the enormous costs of absenteeism, what incentives, controls, and disciplinary practices can research findings suggest to practitioners? The answer to all these questions is attempted in ten chapters by sixteen authors. Only two chapters are written by the same authors, yet integration across all chapters is visible. The book was planned by its organizers, experts were selected, and feedback mechanisms (conference minutes, shared drafts, etc.) were exploited. Other colleagues were also a part of the critique process. The final product focuses squarely on the questions raised above. The promise is fulfilled, variously, for this reader. Here's why.

Chapter 1, by Fichman, begins the quest by attempting to map alternative theoretical frameworks for studying absenteeism. Basically an overview chapter to the book, it scans and selectively reviews the absenteeism literature. The quality of the chapter is uneven, which may be a reflection of the literature on absenteeism itself. Nevertheless, Fichman correctly isolates a number of shortcomings in previous studies, such as a lack of theory specification that permits, for example, disconfirmable predictions. Also, does theory permit viewing absenteeism as a dynamic or static construct? Can theory explain instabilities and consequences of absenteeism? This chapter also introduces what becomes a major theme across most chapters — problems in defining absenteeism. Those readers familiar with models of withdrawal (cf. Gupta and Jenkins, 1980, 1983) can readily recognize that absenteeism may be understood and defined by conceptualizing multiple motives and behavioral alternatives.

Chapter 2, by Atkin and Goodman, continues and expands considerably the methodological discussion of how to operationalize and measure absenteeism. As such, this chapter sets the stage for later chapters on estimation models of absenteeism (chap. 4) and, in part, a general examination of reliability and validity of measures of absenteeism (chap. 3). They go far beyond measuring absenteeism by magnitude, frequency, and duration. They suggest looking into the content of absenteeism (type of event, timing, number, and sequence), then cross-tabulating it with generic absence-event measures such as occurrence, duration, magnitude, etc.

Chapter 3, by Landy, Vasey, and Smith, deals with methodological problems and strategies for predicting absenteeism. They clearly discuss the problems associated with low-base-rate phenomena like absenteeism. Since, as they argue, absenteeism is uncommon, base rates may run as low as 4 percent in most organizations. Parametric statistics are of little value. They then expound on whether absenteeism is stable enough at the individual level for statistical analysis. This chapter is particularly clear and thought-provoking.

Chapter 4, by Avery and Hotz, builds on the preceding, but it is not for the faint of heart. Given that the absence process could reflect a wide range of infrequent, discrete, dynamic, individual differences and random processes, the authors present no simple models, yet they do offer a sort of contingency approach to modeling absenteeism.

Chapter 5, by Rosse and Miller, explores the relationship between absenteeism and other employee behaviors. An exhaustive review of relevant literature leads the reader to a model entitled the behavior-adoption-cycle. In many ways, this model is indicated by what we think we know about absenteeism and its research. This particular model requires the researcher to define the range of adaptive behaviors associated with absenteeism. Also, it stresses the importance of a within-subject design in a longitudinal research setting. This chapter also begins to introduce material on practical implications. It is refreshing to see the inclusion of suggestions for practicing managers. Serious journal articles would, of course, eschew this.

Chapter 8, by Latham and Napier, extends the practical implications of absenteeism and describes ways to increase attendance. It is chock full of good ideas and insights. While it may be a normative interpretation of the literature, chapter 8 exudes some enthusiasm, as well as concern for dealing with absenteeism.

Chapter 6, by Steers and Rhodes, due to its placement, appears a trifle redundant. While it does develop different information about our knowledge of absenteeism, much of the same literature found in earlier chapters has been cited and worked over. In many ways, this chapter has a more useful and comprehensive review of the literature of absenteeism than previous ones. Nevertheless, after 228 pages, the marginal gain of this chapter seems slim.

Chapter 7, by Goodman and Atkin, looks at the effects of absenteeism on individuals and organizations. Given the criticism of chapter 6, one would think effects of absenteeism were handled well by 275 pages. Far from it. Goodman and Atkin enumerate many consequences of absenteeism, both good and bad. They demonstrate across different units of analysis how these consequences may vary. They then entertain an idea on a network of interrelationships for testing many of the consequences generated in the first part of the chapter. The chapter ends with a series of strategic designs for assessing absenteeism effects — some seem highly innovative.

Chapter 9, by Johns, delves into unresolved issues in the study and control of absenteeism. The chapter attempts integration of much of what has gone on before (it is not the last chapter). One might consider reading it first. There is a certain amount of

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reviewing across the previous chapters, but it is held to a necessary minimum. Johns cites a potential deficiency of the other chapters, involving what he terms the social dynamics of absenteeism. Specifically, he means that there may be a culture surrounding absence that gives it legitimacy. While an interesting point, it isn't new and it isn't linked theoretically in any way that the book promises. The chapter ends with a short discussion on managing absenteeism. Ironically, his conclusions suggest that absenteeism can't be managed.

Chapter 10, by Hulin, focuses on suggested directions for defining, measuring, and controlling absenteeism. The reader might ask if it is still possible to further plumb these depths. The answer for me was that this is easily the best chapter in the book. Just when overload should have been occurring, style, wit, clarity, and fresh insight on absenteeism are revealed. Not really a summarizing chapter for the book, Hulin's chapter manages to get the reader to digest most of the approaches suggested earlier. For example, he argues that correlations derived from low base rates of absenteeism and a latent variable underlying absenteeism will be low. Thus, there is little information garnered. He states, "Limiting our empirical studies to the observable manifestations of the underlying theoretical variable severely limits what we can learn about the theoretical construct latent absence propensity" (p. 408). This chapter connects with many of the key ideas found earlier yet interprets in ways that make them more understandable.

There is an unevenness to the book as a whole, which I believe is demonstrated in the summary above. Complete integration across diverse writers is, perhaps, impossible. Overall, the book is readable and keeps its promise to answer what we know and should know about absenteeism. I sincerely doubt if most practitioners would find the book useful. Save for two or three chapters, *Absenteeism* is targeted primarily at researchers. As such, I consider it a contribution and a valuable resource.

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1980 The Structure of Withdrawal: Relationships Among Estrangement, Tardiness, Absenteeism and Turnover. Springfield, VA: National Technical Information System.</p> | <p>1983 "Behavioral outcomes in organizational research: A reconceptualization." Unpublished paper, The University of Texas at Austin.</p> |
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Down from the Ivory Tower: Graduates and Their Jobs.

Peter Herriot. New York: Wiley, 1984. 221 pp. \$29.95.

"Both these approaches [psychometric and developmental] center upon the person. . . . Both approaches largely ignore the fact that psychology is social. It is an indictment of the insularity of different branches of psychology that the empirical and theoretical advances in one field have had little effect upon the development of others" (p. x). With these words, Herriot embarks