

# **High Sickness Absence among Part-time Workers in the U.K Food Retail Sector- Unravelling the Truth**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper aims to address two main issues; firstly if it is indeed possible to manage absence due to sickness to the advantage of both the employer and the employee and secondly, to examine if it is indeed possible to use 'SICK PAY' to attract and retain part-time workers. This research was undertaken in two stages. A model of motivation theory (Hertzberg 2000) was used to provide a framework upon which to study and answer the research questions. The first stage was conducted by the principal researcher. This involved an informal discussion between the researcher and a group of seven part-time retail assistants of Iceland foods to determine their feelings and opinions about sick pay. This stage of the research provided very important themes and opinions that were used to provide a discussion guide during the second stage of the research. During the second stage of the research a total of twenty part-time retail assistants comprising of Tesco, Sainsbury's and Marks and Spencer stores were informally interviewed using a combination of different techniques. This was conducted by the two researchers over a period of two months using random sampling technique. During the interviews the researchers were particularly interested in their account of events using a discussion guide prepared in advance of the interviews. This helped the researchers to explore several themes. This research was undertaken from a broadly phenomenological and interpretive point of view that lend itself towards qualitative methods. By applying the theories of motivation, the paper has been able to examine whether sick pay can indeed be used to attract and motivate part-time workers. The results obtained were then analysed to determine whether the reasons given for sickness are genuine.*

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## **Introduction**

'You must be sick not to take a sick pay'. This was a comment passed by a colleague at work during an informal discussion between the researcher and two of his colleagues on the shop floor of a retail supermarket when the researcher lamented of not taking a sick pay for the past three years of working even though he was entitled to four weeks sick pay annually. 'I have twenty five days sick pay this year. I have already taken twenty days. I will make sure I take the remaining five days before April. I don't care if they discipline me'. This was another remark by a second colleague during the same

discussion and a manager once said to the researcher: I thought of you last night. What do you eat? I've not heard of you falling sick.'

The issue of sick pay has long been a concern for the researcher having worked within a food retail environment for nearly three and a half years. The researcher's personal experience of the effect of employee's sickness absence on the rest of the team, the varied reasons employees give when they phone in sick, the comments that are normally passed when they return to work among many others have been a motivating factor to embark on this research.

The very last comment: 'You must be sick not to take a sick pay' was what triggered the researcher to put this piece together. This paper employs employee motivation framework to examine why people normally phone in sick at work, and in particular examines its effect on other members of staff. The study includes an examination not only of the reasons for absence due to sickness but also includes genuineness of such reasons. It concludes by suggesting practical ways of managing sickness absence to the benefit of both the employer and the employee.

### **Key Issues**

The debate on sickness absenteeism has assumed different dimension within academic and businesses literature. Several researchers have carried out research on this issue looking at it from different angles. Colin (2006), for instance looks at it from a good leadership style while Melchior et al (2005) tackles the issue from work characteristics (physical and stress related). Others have also looked at it from gender perspectives, sickness rate among part-time/full time workers (See Barmby et al (1995) and Edgerton et al., (1996). This paper aims to address two main issues; firstly if it is indeed possible to manage absence due to sickness to the advantage of both the employer and the employee and secondly, to examine if it is indeed possible to use 'SICK PAY' to attract and retain part-time worker

### **Theoretical Framework**

The cost of sickness remains a major concern for many businesses and governments all over the world even though there are a range of absence management techniques in place to manage absence. This for instance led the Swedish government in October 2004 to present a bill on measures to reduce the current high sickness absence rate which includes co-financing of sickness costs, sick pay cuts and greater employee contribution. One current estimate also puts the cost of sickness absence at more than £600 per employee per year and also female workers were found to have a higher rate of sickness absence. Another study also finds out that sick leave-real and feigned-currently costs U.K businesses an estimated £11billion a year. Such is the cost of sickness to employers that some companies have amended their sick pay arrangements for new staff to help contain cost. For example Tesco like any other major employer of part-time and casual workers has amended its company sick pay policy which reads: 'New starters from 4<sup>th</sup> July 2004 will be eligible to receive Company sick pay after the first three days of each period of

sickness' Whilst reminding its existing staff of the company's right to withhold company sick pay in certain circumstances.

In Iceland, the message is, 'In all cases of absence, the payment of Company sick pay is discretionary and managers are entitled to withhold payments if they are not satisfied with either the reporting of or the reason for the absence'. This points to the fact that entitlement to company sick pay is a benefit not a right. There is no doubt that all these measures have been motivated by the budgetary constraints. In the run up to the world cup in Germany 2006 as reported by BBC news 24, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2006, there were concerns that one in seven men may skive to watch matches and one in twenty women may take a 'sickie'. This concern has called for a recommendation that matches should be shown at work places. Most permanent full time workers and part time workers are entitled to a number of days per year in which they can call in sick and still receive their wages under the STATUTORY SICK PAY scheme or the CONTRACTUAL SICK PAY. The contractual sick pay policy for instance is used by most employers as a competitive advantage to attract and retain employees. As such many employees provide written contracts of employment that makes provision for the payment of sick pay. Where no such provision is made for in the contract, the employee is entitled to the statutory sick pay (SSP). Its application however, varies from company to company. In the US for instance some companies even offer accrued sick leave pay when employees quit or get laid off.

### **Previous Research**

Like any other environment, the environment in which an individual works to some extent has a predictive effect on the performance of an individual. By nature of their job managers, have a duty to motivate a diverse and unpredictable group of staff. This diversity makes the managers motivational work very challenging. As Ivancevich and Matteson (2002) agree, Maslow's theory assumes that a person attempts to satisfy the more basic needs (physiological) before directing behaviour towards satisfying upper-level needs. As such unsatisfied needs can cause frustration, conflict and stress. From a managerial perspective, unsatisfied needs are dangerous because they may lead to undesirable performance outcome.

In a study on sickness absence as stated by Eek and Rikner (2005), Brose (1995), concludes that improvement in working environment would significantly reduce sickness absence. Furthermore, Klevonmarken (1995) also regards the work environment as the most important factor in determining the sickness absence rate. In their study, Melchoir et al (2005), conclude that work conditions contribute to sickness absence, particularly among manual workers and clerks. Policies that decrease ergonomic constraints and work stress also could reduce the burden of ill health and sickness absence among the lowest strata of working populations. On their part, Eek and Rikner (2005) believe that people's decision to phone sick does not only depend on health status. Rather, the decision should be regarded as a rational choice based on health status and economic calculations. A research by Colin (2006), shows that managers who provide good leadership dramatically improve staff retention and staff absenteeism.

## **Research Method**

This research was undertaken in two stages. A model of motivation theory was used to provide a framework upon which to study and answer the research questions. The first stage was conducted by the principal researcher. This involved an informal discussion between the researcher and a group of seven part time retail assistants of Iceland foods to determine their feelings and opinions about sick pay. This stage of the research provided very important themes and opinions that were used to provide a discussion guide during the second stage of the research. During the second stage of the research a total of seventeen part time retail assistants comprising of Tesco, Sainsbury's and Marks and Spencer were informally interviewed using a combination of different techniques. This was conducted by the two researchers over a period of two months using random sampling technique.

During the interviews the researchers were particularly interested in their account of events using a discussion guide prepared in advance of the interviews. This helped the researchers to explore several themes. This research was undertaken from a broadly phenomenological and interpretive point of view that lend itself towards qualitative methods. By applying the content theory of motivation the paper has been able to examine whether sick pay can indeed be used to attract and motivate part-time workers. The results obtained were then analysed qualitatively to determine the motivating factor for sickness absence whether the reasons given for sickness are genuine.

## **Empirical Findings**

The nature of the research questions, aims, objectives and the methods of data collection means that the collected data is qualitative in nature. Thus as Saunders et al., (2000) pointed, there is no standardized approach to the analysis of qualitative data. The discussion guide and the questions that were used during the interviews were grouped into categories derived from existing themes and the literature review. This allowed the answers that respondents gave to be grouped into the various categories. Responses were therefore rearranged and analysed systematically after each interview were categorised. The first stage of the interviews gave rise to a number of common themes under which the findings are presented. These were used to serve as an initial analytical framework for analysing the results

It is not surprising that the entire respondents appear to be aware of the existence of company sick pay. However, what was not consistent was the extent to which others are abusing the system. When asked about the reasons given for sickness, this provoked a lively discussion among the respondents. Most of the respondents agreed that the reasons they give when they phone sick could be avoided if the business was their own suggesting that not all reasons given for absence are genuine and there are other motivation factors or motives that triggers such behaviour. Whilst such behaviour can lead to lost human hours and productivity, it also de-motivates and puts pressure on other members of staff. The thought of it makes others at work not to do their best. The result also shows that people's decision to fake sickness is affected by decisions made by

others. People who believe that others frequently report sick falsely and get paid will be more willing to fake sickness themselves. Other such reasons include:

- To avoid monotony at work
- Have another shift to do somewhere where they pay more
- Not motivated at work. Needs rest
- No money for transport
- To punish supervisor or manager who do not recognise or appreciate performance

The relative importance of people's past experience and how it affects their opinions on faking sickness was also highlighted by the results. As one female respondent put it, 'I quite remember as a child I once lied at school that my mum was ill so I could go home. The following day my mum fell sick to the verge of death. That bad experience is one that will not make me lie about sickness again'. It can be argued that the desire to fake sickness at times is motivated by the need to satisfy personal and family obligations which could be triggered by any aspects of an individual's situation. Such unsatisfied needs can lead to poor performance on the part of the individual when forced to work (See also Ivancevich and Matteson 2002).

### **Impact on Performance**

When asked about the impact when a team member goes off sick, this provoked a discussion putting the participants into two separate camps-those that see it as a problem and those that do not see it as a problem with comments such as: 'I like my job. I have a responsibility and the work load will pile up when I come the next day. Nobody is going to do it'; and 'my integrity will diminish and will affect me when they want to cut back the hours'. This puts pressure on the rest of the team and our targets for the week cannot be achieved. It's annoying.

Interestingly all the respondents agree that it has a knock on effect on both staff and customers. Staff relationship with others affects their decision to phone sick. The concern for others in terms of not putting pressure on other members of the team can have a predictive effect on staffs' willingness to phone sick or not. People who have a responsibility and feel the effect of pressure due to sickness by others will be less willing to fake sickness.

When a member of a team goes off sick, pressure is often on the remaining members to work harder to complete the absent staff's workload. Even if another person is called in to fill the gap, there is no guarantee that he/she will be an effective replacement as in most cases, managers in an attempt to fill the gap call on anybody even from a different department. This can result in overwork and exhaustion leaving others to work even harder as they spend some time explaining the work processes to the 'new' team member. A sickness cycle may eventually develop worsening the already desperate situation whose effect can last for some time. This current result supports the conclusion drawn by Ootim (2002) on sickness among nurses that the most precious resource or commodity possessed by an organisation is its staff. If high levels of sickness absence

persist then it might just be a sign that it is the organisation which is sick rather than the employees.

### **Effectiveness of Management Control**

Most respondents believe that it was the responsibility of the manager to bring the situation under control. Inflexibility around company policies on holiday request by managers was a motivating factor for some. When asked whether managers contribute to the high sickness rate among staff this is what one female respondent had to say:

“I asked for three weeks holiday to go to India. She refused to grant me the holiday saying my contract does not allow me to take more than two weeks off in a row. I pleaded but she said I should resign and reapply when I come back. A friend advised me to take the two weeks and produce a sick note when I come back. I got paid for the one week sick note I presented. She knew I was lying but she can't prove it”.

A second respondent had this to say:

‘My initial four weeks holiday was turned down by my manager. When I produced a sick note on my return to work he wanted to use my holiday hours remaining to pay me and I refused. In the end I got paid for sicknesses’.

Whilst it is important that holiday request should be granted taking into consideration the needs of the business, it is also important that managers should be a bit flexible in granting holidays to employees who go abroad to spend some time with their families. Considering the high cost of going abroad and the importance of family relationship to some people, human beings by their nature will like to spend some time with their families and friends and therefore following strict company policies on granting holiday requests will only add more cost to the business as employees can play around the law to their benefit. Checking the authenticity of such sick notes especially when people go abroad for holidays will not be an easy task in most cases.

### **Consideration during job search**

Evidence from the research suggests that inclusion of sick pay in contracts of employment is of secondary importance during job search among part-time workers. This could be of course, due to the limited size of the respondents. As most part-time workers are students, their motives for taking up part-time jobs is different in most cases from full time workers who consider their jobs as a career. In some cases they may even change job before the qualifying period for sick pay is due hence consideration of sick pay during job search is of secondary importance to them. Again, most part timers in supermarket retail take up jobs that are not related to their intended future career hence do not place much importance to their attendance record for reference purposes as voiced by one respondent. ‘Nobody prevents you from phoning in sick. It's up to you. Do what ever you want you need a reference I don't’.

### **Discussion**

When it comes to managing sickness absence, employers have never had it so good. Traditionally, the assumption has been that managers will use the range of absence management techniques at their disposal to manage absence. But the evidences from this research have shown that the picture is far from clear. The lesson from this research is

that, while generally managers will use these techniques to manage absence, the cost involved in terms of time and money normally discourages them. The research also demonstrates the extraordinary contribution of management team to absence rate and the impact it has on other members of the team as a result of strict compliance in most cases when it comes to granting holiday requests.

As Reichheld (2001), advises that; firms should keep their values and rules simple since complexity is the enemy of speed and flexibility. By keeping the rule on absence and holiday bookings simple, managers will be in a position to encourage staff to swap shifts, request unpaid leaves at short notices, ask for extended breaks and request for odd days off to the benefit of both parties. Whilst it is evident that not all reasons for sickness absence are genuine, it can be argued that most of the reasons are motivated and attributed to the inconsistency in the use and compliance of the various absence management tools by managers.

Given all the excitement surrounding the payment of sick pay, it is surprising that most part time workers do not consider it when looking for job. Even more surprising is that when some of the respondents were asked whether sick pay can be used to motivate them not to change job, the response was no. This is bad news for employers because contractual sick pay that is used by most employers to attract and retain workers has the opposite of the intended effect. Without further qualitative data to explain this, it can only be postulated that full time professional workers probably will consider sick pay when looking for job hence a means for employers to attract and retain them using sick pay. So contractual sick pay is not always a good thing, but with increasing competition for casual and part-time workers as a means of cutting cost and meeting legal requirements, employers will continue to make provision for sick pay, although the increasing cost associated with it will make this ever more challenging. With overhead costs soaring for employers, and particularly given the need for labour flexibility, employers will continue to include sick pay in their contracts of employment alongside the application of modern techniques of managing absence.

It became evident that employees have become very clever by using the law to protect themselves. This is what one respondent had to say: 'I know my right they can't sack me'. It is therefore imperative that employers should equally become clever by insisting on a doctor's report for sicknesses. Whilst it is appreciated that in some cases sickness absence is genuine; there should be a consistency in the application of all absence management techniques so that employees generally are not disadvantaged by these measures. To encourage managers at the store levels to recognise managing sickness as imperative to the future and continued success of the business, budgets should be allocated for carrying out such disciplinary work. This will make managers feel a little more challenged to set up the pace and the required standards. This is important considering the general feeling among managers as expressed by one respondent: following such disciplinary path is a waste of time as it involves a lot of paper work which takes away extra time that could have been used on the shop floor'

Leaving one environment to the other may result in changes in climatic conditions. As such when people travel abroad their body adjusts to the new environment and

readjusts when they return. This can result in people falling sick through contaminated water or food poisoning. Evidence from the study points to the fact that sickness absence has two levels of effect at the work place i.e. level one effect or the individual effect which occurs immediately staff hear of a colleague phoning in sick. The thought of the extra workload and its intended pressure de-motivates the existing staff and affects team spirit. This leads on to the level two effect or the group effect which occurs during the course of interacting and carrying out their duties, staff develop an ideology which affects the attitudes and actions of other staff and the degree of satisfaction. The impact of this group interaction can however be negative or positive depending on how quickly they can overcome the situation and form a 'can do' attitude towards the workload.

When people's holiday requests are denied and forced to work, they tend to be less productive due to the frustration. They tend to follow usually strict health and safety procedures and fundamental work processes which they had previously ignored in the work place. The aim is not the concern they have for their health but they do this to upset their superiors and delay team work (A staff who will normally not wear protective clothing when picking an item from the freezer will wear it before going in the freezer, a staff who will not normally use a ladder to pick an item from a height will use a ladder, a staff who normally carries more than one box at a go will turn to picking one box at a time) all of which are directed towards time 'wasting' and showing their dissatisfaction.

## **Conclusion**

Moving forward therefore, has to be a real determined effort on the part of employers to make the sick pay policy beneficial to both parties. This will mean a dedicated and a willingness to anticipate and advise employees against phoning sick around weekend and holidays. Such discussions prior to holidays or weekends will discourage and make people feel guilty if they intend to as post hangovers prevent staff from coming to work the following day. The key to tackling the issue is anticipation and planning rather than kicking against it or relying on afterwards disciplinary procedures since it will be too late due to the fact that service level and customer expectations will not be upheld.

Knowing that people may have unexpected and unplanned yet very important situations to attend to which may normally last for few hours, provisions should be included in contractual sick pays where employees can return to work after attending to the situation and still get paid for the whole contracted hour or be taken as part of their holiday. This will discourage staff from phoning sick whilst the employer will make savings on sick pay. As in all cases, the researchers appreciate that in some cases sickness absence is genuine and we do not want to disadvantage employees as a result of our findings by concluding that the reasons given by part-time workers are not genuine. For the reasons stated above, employers cannot avoid sickness cost, it can only be minimised through flexibility and consistency in absence management. Changing incentives (amending contracts of employment) to reduce sickness absenteeism is addressing the symptoms rather than the causes of sickness absenteeism. What is needed is to ask the question 'What are the causes'. When these are identified then appropriate steps can be taken to address the causes of the problem.

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