

PERFORMANCE ARCHITECT

RE-FRAMING ABSENTEEISM



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BY ANDREW SIMON

Many organisations across the public sector are grappling with the issue of unscheduled absences and the problem of absenteeism.

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Indeed, the 2013-2014 State of the Service Report published by the Australian Public Service Commission contains a whole chapter on 'managing attendance' and reports that in 2013-14, the median rate of unscheduled absence across all APS agencies was 12.0 days per year, an increase of 0.4 days per employee from 2012-13. This is a continuation of an upward trend since recording began in 2006-2007.

While some absences are certainly unavoidable, the causes of absenteeism are complex, varied and may be a consequence of unique circumstances within individual organisations. The conventional view is to see absenteeism as a result of a lack of engagement on the part of the absent employee. A lack of engagement can be due to many factors including: a lack of purpose or meaning in work, poor management, feeling undervalued, a lack of opportunity to develop and grow, and so on. A lack of engagement, so the argument goes, produces a loosening of commitment to work and to one's team. This results in the propensity for unscheduled absences and the development of a culture of absenteeism should lack of engagement become widespread.

The key strategy to counter absenteeism and unscheduled absences when viewed through the engagement optic is to help staff re-engage with their work and teams; to help them 'manage attendance' and to skill and equip managers with the necessary tools and techniques to engage and motivate staff.

As energy levels deplete, it is very difficult to perform well for long, even if we are fully engaged with our work. In such a context, taking unscheduled leave (in its various forms) can seem like the best option.

But what if we use a different set of optics and re-frame the absenteeism problem? What if we viewed the issue as a problem of energy, rather than engagement? In this lens, the difficulty is that people may actually be tired and exhausted from the intense and rapid pace of work and use unscheduled absences because they are the most available option to have some sort of reprieve. Or put another way, to be fully engaged, we must have the energy to do so and unscheduled absences, could at least in part, be due to depleted energy levels.

At a recent workshop for senior executives, I noticed that the group looked really tired and asked them if this was the case. Almost everyone said that they were exhausted because of the constant pressures and intensity of their work over sustained periods. I mentioned this to one of their senior leaders and while he admitted that there was a lot on-- he did not pause to consider what could be done to help! The implication is that having a lot on is just how it is and everyone is expected to get on with it, no matter how tired they might be. It is perhaps no wonder that this organisation has unscheduled leave issues!

It may seem to some to be a sign of commitment and indeed a badge of honour if employees are able to withstand long periods of intense work. Some people define this as resilience and as a way of building capacity. But one wonders if this is sustainable and if this attitude actually enables high performance and the building of capacity. After all, performance noticeably suffers as we get increasingly tired and capacity diminishes as a result.

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Biologically and physiologically, we are built with a fundamental energy equation: if we are to continue and progress, energy spent needs to be recovered. In other words, we need to equalise energy expenditure with energy renewal.

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However, the intensity of the contemporary workplace, expectations that we continue to 'get on with it,' and the demands of constant access enabled by smart communication technologies, mean that opportunities to recover and replenish are becoming harder to find. Once again, for some people, it could mean that an unscheduled absence is the accessible option to take.

When we consider viewing absenteeism through the energy optic, our intervention strategies could look quite different. These may include for example:

- **Assigning legitimacy to recovery** as a means to sustaining high performance, building individual capacity and providing permissions that will empower staff to manage their own energy better.
- **Shifting from managing attendance to managing energy.** Managing energy well will help manage attendance. There is a growing body of science around the effective management of individual and organisational energy which can be tapped to complement the management of engagement and motivation.
- **A focus on alignment** to ensure what units and teams do across the organisation is actually what is needed. The cutting of red tape, which is a drain on individual and organisational energy, can help ensure that valuable time is spent on things that actually matter.
- **Building a workplace culture** where employees can:
 - Plan for breaks and ensure work plans provide planned opportunity for recovery. Waiting for and hoping that things ease up is not a plan and neither is it a realistic aspiration in today's workplace.
 - Build recovery time into their workdays. Managers must see breaks as a productivity tool. Good breaks need not be lengthy. Rather they need to be able to allow staff to re-charge a little. For some, this may be a physical re-charge like a quick walk, for others it could be a relational re-charge such as having a coffee or a chat with a friend. Still others may prefer to browse the web or read a magazine for a few minutes to get a cognitive re-charge. Whatever it may be, employees need to feel that they can take breaks after intensive periods of work so that they can shift focus from achievement to recovery and be more productive moving forward. A constant achievement trajectory is not sustainable.

Allowing ourselves to re-frame unscheduled absences and absenteeism as consequence of a depletion of individual and organisational energy, could open up new, more effective ways of seeing and addressing the issues that underlie this vexing problem.

- Develop a greater degree of self-awareness and self-management, consider aspects like sleep, nutrition and hydration, and encourage physical movement while at work instead of immobility at the desk. All of which impact on energy levels through the workday.
- Chunk intensive work periods, meetings or forums up to a maximum of 90 minute segments where possible. Much research demonstrates that attention spans diminish and energy levels deplete after this time if there is no break.

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'Leaders are the stewards of organisational energy' (Loher and Schwartz 2005) and it is in the interest of our staff, organisations and the outcomes we seek to ensure that we have the energy we require to perform well in a world that is growing increasingly complex and busy. To not look at the problem from another perspective and with fresh eyes is to miss an important opportunity to better help our employees and the people who lead them.

Recommended Further Reading

Loher, J. and Schwartz, T (2005) The power of full engagement. Free Press. New York.

APSC (2014) State of the Service Report 2013-2014. Canberra.

<http://www.apsc.gov.au/about-the-apsc/parliamentary/state-of-the-service/state-of-the-service-2013-14>

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