

The Effect of Sickness Absence on Workplace Performance in Nigeria

Princewill Abumere

Lagos, Nigeria

ABSTRACT: Sickness absence remains a significant issue in Nigerian workplaces, affecting productivity, employee engagement, and overall organisational performance. Building on prior research related to employee wellness and wellbeing in Nigeria, this paper examines how sickness absence affects individual and team performance in key sectors, including healthcare, education, and technology. The study employs the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and the PERMA framework to investigate the relationships among employee health, organisational support, and job outcomes. The findings show that sickness absence has a negative correlation with job satisfaction, productivity, and engagement. However, effective wellness programs can significantly reduce these adverse effects. Recommendations are made for organisations to enhance health management systems, integrate wellness initiatives, and adopt flexible work policies to minimize sickness-related absenteeism and sustain high performance.

KEYWORDS: sickness absence, employee performance, absenteeism, wellness programs, occupational health, Nigeria

I. INTRODUCTION

Sickness absence refers to the time employees are absent from work due to illness, injury, or medical conditions. In Nigeria, where access to healthcare services and comprehensive occupational health policies are still evolving, the impact of sickness absence on workforce efficiency is significant. Organisations are increasingly recognizing the link between employee well-being and overall productivity. As a result, organisations view absenteeism not just as a routine administrative issue but as a crucial strategic challenge in managing their workforce (Obodoechi et al., 2021). This shift in perspective emphasizes the need for organisations to implement proactive measures that create a healthy work environment, ultimately aiming to reduce employee absenteeism and improve both engagement and productivity.

Recent evidence from organisations in Nigeria underscores a significant connection between employee wellness and performance outcomes (Abumere, 2024; Ajayi et al., 2024). When employees enjoy better physical and mental health, they tend to be more engaged, exhibit greater loyalty to the organization, and have lower absenteeism rates. Frequent absences due to illness can lead to decreased productivity, lower morale, and higher employee turnover (EA Journals, 2025).

This study explores the impact of sickness absence on performance across different sectors. It draws on insights from employee wellness research and applies established theoretical models within the Nigerian context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sickness Absence and Performance

Global studies confirm that frequent sickness absence reduces both individual and team performance (Hansen & Andersen, 2008). Absence leads to workflow disruptions, reduced service delivery, and increased workload for present employees. Nigerian organisations—especially in public administration and healthcare—are heavily impacted due to limited staffing and high job demands.

Data from Abumere (2024) demonstrate that wellness initiatives significantly improve productivity metrics: 64% of employees reported enhanced physical fitness, and 56% reported improved stress management. The inverse is equally true—poor wellness or sickness absence directly correlates with fatigue, presenteeism, and reduced work efficiency.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, proposed by Bakker and Demerouti in 2007, suggests that the balance between job demands and job resources influences employee well-being. Job demands can include factors like workload and stress, while job resources encompass support and autonomy. When employees face excessive demands without sufficient resources, it can lead to burnout and increased rates of sickness absence.

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Similarly, the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) identifies five pillars of well-being: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Sickness absence undermines each dimension, while wellness programs enhance them, leading to improved job satisfaction and resilience.

2.3 Employee Wellness and Absenteeism in Nigeria

Research from Nigerian workplaces (Abumere, 2024) indicates that organisations investing in integrated wellness programs experience lower absenteeism rates and enhanced job satisfaction. For example, work-life balance initiatives showed 68% participation and correlated with higher engagement scores. Employees with improved health reported greater focus and reduced stress—highlighting the preventive role that wellness programs play in reducing sickness absence.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating data from previous wellness research with new survey responses from 200 employees and 20 HR professionals across Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt.

3.1 Data Collection

Quantitative: Structured questionnaires capturing absenteeism frequency, job satisfaction, and productivity ratings.

Qualitative: Interviews with HR managers and focus groups discussing workplace health management and absence policies.

3.2 Variables

Independent Variable: Sickness Absence (days absent per quarter)

Dependent Variables: Employee performance, engagement, and productivity.

Control Variables: Sector, job role, and years of experience.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Quantitative Findings

Correlation analysis revealed a strong negative relationship ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.01$) between sickness absence and employee performance. Employees with more than 10 days of absence per quarter experienced a reduction of up to 20% in individual performance and delayed project delivery.

Cross-referencing with Abumere's (2024) wellness data, organisations that have active wellness programs reported an average absenteeism rate of 4.3 days per quarter, compared to 10.5 days per quarter for those without such programs. This suggests that proactive wellness management can significantly mitigate the decline in performance associated with sickness-related absences.

4.2 Qualitative Insights

Interviewees emphasized three key themes:

1. Wellness Gaps: Organisations lacking structured wellness programs experienced higher sickness-related absences.
2. Cultural Attitudes: Employees often fear disclosing illness, leading to presenteeism and eventual burnout.
3. Leadership Role: Active managerial support and communication were cited as critical for reducing health-related absences.

5. DISCUSSION

Findings confirm that sickness absence has a strong negative impact on performance ($r = -0.62$), but the presence of wellness programs mitigates this relationship. In workplaces where physical and mental health initiatives were implemented (Abumere, 2024), job satisfaction rose by 70%, and engagement increased by 64%. These figures underscore the protective effect of wellness on attendance and performance, a conclusion supported by broader international research (Ganu et al., 2017).

The results also validate the JD-R model, illustrating how improved resources (wellness programs, support systems) offset job demands, reducing sickness absence and enhancing performance. Specifically, in Nigeria, factors like poor remuneration and family obligations have been identified as key contributors to overall absenteeism (Ajayi et al., 2024; RSIS International, 2025), indicating that holistic wellness and support initiatives are crucial resources for reducing health-related time off. Similarly, from the PERMA perspective, wellness initiatives foster positive emotions, meaning, and engagement—all of which reduce the risk of absenteeism.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Institutionalize Wellness Programs: Organisations should adopt holistic wellness strategies (physical, mental, and financial) as preventive tools against sickness absence.
2. Enhance Flexibility: Hybrid and remote options can help employees manage short-term illness without complete absence.
3. Improve Data Management: Track sickness absence metrics and link them to productivity KPIs.
4. Train Managers: Encourage empathetic leadership that promotes psychological safety and supports recovery.
5. Integrate Health Policies: Align HR policies with national occupational safety standards to reduce preventable illnesses.

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7. CONCLUSION

Sickness absence remains a performance-limiting factor in Nigerian companies. However, evidence from employee wellness research suggests that proactive health and well-being programs can significantly reduce absenteeism, improve engagement, and enhance performance. By integrating structured wellness frameworks into their HR strategy, Nigerian employers can transform sickness absence management from a reactive to a proactive approach—strengthening organizational resilience and productivity.

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