



## **Work-life Balance: The effect on Absenteeism among Employees in a Malaysian Utility Company**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Employees spend at least one-third of their day at their work place. Since most of the time is spent at the work place, excess in working hours can cause the employees to feel burned out at the end of the week. These high emotional exhaustion and less personal time will cause the employees to adjust their own time in order to achieve preference hours of work. The utility company involves in this study practices 5.5 working days. Feeling overemployed, this will lead the employees to adjust their behaviour into choosing to be absent from work. Thus, this study focus on to examine: (i) Whether working 5.5 days in a week currently implemented by the company has stimulated the employees to be absent from work as one of their effort to achieve a balance in their work-life style, (ii) the relationship of work-life balance (WLB) and absenteeism in a utility company in Malaysia. A survey was conducted among the employees to explore their response towards absenteeism and WLB. The findings of this study highlighted the understanding of the WLB and absenteeism concept from the employees' perspective. Based on the findings of this research, working excessive hours stimulated the employees to be absent on the last working day of the week. The findings of this study also offer new perspectives which the company may need to consider in order to have employees who are more efficient.

**Keywords:** Work-life Balance, Absenteeism, Malaysia, Utility Industry, Burned Out

**JEL Classifications:** M10, M50, M54

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Absenteeism is an important study of organizations aspect because they are believed to have a direct negative impact on the organization's effectiveness in relations to the employees' productivity. Cole and Kleiner (1992) stated that the frequent 1-day absence reflect "mental health" where workers preferred to do something else rather than spending time at the work place. Although various researches on absenteeism have been done extensively, much of the research done are general.

The Malaysian Government has implemented the 5-days Work Week starting on 1<sup>st</sup> July, 2005. Since then, Saturday and Sunday are the most common off-days for working people. As for certain workers in this utility company, they have to work another ½ day on Saturday to complete the standard working hours implemented

by the company. Low on free time, workers may abandon good habits that counteract the negative effects of high-stress lifestyles, choosing to skip the workout or choose for frequent absenteeism such as taking 1-day leave or MC. Working during weekends certainly cut into focused time for personal and with family and friends. In a study by Bryson and Forth (2007), they found out that between Mondays to Fridays, the productivity rates vary from 73% to 80%. However, the percentage plunges to 31% on Saturday and 22% on Sunday. The productivity may decline over the week as a result of increasing tiredness. The two off-days in the weekend, then provides the opportunity to rest before beginning the working week again on the following Monday. As absence can be extensive costs to the employer, this research will expose new insight into how management can help to reduce the absenteeism in the organization and thus help to ensure the employees can achieve work-life balance (WLB) in order to create an efficient and healthy

mind worker. The objectives of this study are (i) To examine whether the 5.5 working days in a week currently implemented by the company has stimulated the employees to be absent from work as one of their effort to achieve a balance in their work-life style, (ii) to examine the relationship of WLB and absenteeism in one of the utility company in Malaysia.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Absenteeism

Over the years scholars had defined absence as the non-attendance of a worker for scheduled work (Brook and Price, 1989). Many studies had been conducted to determine the factors that contribute towards absenteeism and how to manage it efficiently. This is because the impact of the excessive absenteeism is direct to the organizational performance and income and may lead to inefficiency (Nicholson and Martocchio, 1995). Cole and Kleiner (1992) stated that the absence of a worker not just result in loss of productivity but also losses in an organization in which the cost of the benefit to employees still run even if the employee is absent from work. An interesting research by Lippert (1986) stated that one type of absenteeism that always worries an organization is a frequent 1-day absence that always happens on Monday or Friday in which these days are focused on before or after the weekend. In labor economics term, absenteeism occur when workers feel being overemployed where standard working-hours implemented by the organization is more than the workers want.

Not only absenteeism is still a poorly understood topic in many ways even though the extensive awareness of the theory and organizations desires to reduce it, it also lack of current research. Johns and Nicholson (1982) observed absenteeism as a workplace problem to be solved. For the last 20 years, researchers have attempted to expose the complexity and variety of absence behaviour. Martocchio and Harrison (1993), in their study, believe that absenteeism should be observed as more of an outcome than behaviour. There are almost never-ending lists of possible causes of absenteeism. Transportation trouble, illness, work-life imbalance, job frustrations, the chance to engage in leisure activities, eldercare duties, childcare duties, other domestic responsibilities, and meetings during work hours are just a few of the reasons why someone might absence to the work place. Additionally, scholars have been considered that there has been an increasing acknowledgment that absenteeism is not only an individual behaviour, but a social phenomenon that changes the meaning depending on the content and context of its occurrence (Harrison et al., 2000; Nicholson, 1993).

### 2.2. WLB

According to Munn (2009), WLB is defined as a person who prioritizes their work, family, individual, and community responsibilities. The means and way to prioritize individual work, family, personal and community responsibilities are influenced by the availability and knowledge of work-life initiatives as well as the organizational culture. Therefore, WLB can be broadly defined as the degree to which individuals attain equal levels of engagement and satisfaction in work performance and life (Clark, 2000; Guest, 2002; Greenhaus et al., 2003; Deery, 2008). There are

many factors that affect the performance of employees, and one of which is the balance of their personal life. Employees who obtain a balanced life and career usually have better performance compared to those who don't. To balance a career with personal or family life can be challenging and it has a great impact on a persons' work and life satisfaction (Hill et al., 2001). Dundas (2008) and Greenhaus (2003) contended that WLB is about managing and juggling efficiently between job and all aspects of personal matters. Thus, employees who experience a balance in work-life are those who show a similar investment of time and commitment to work and non-work domains (Virick, 2007; Omar, 2013).

In more recent study, according to Haar et al. (2014), WLB as an individual's perception of how well his or her life roles are balanced, which is consistent with studies from various scholars (e.g. Frone, 2003; Greenhaus and Allen, 2011; Haar, 2013; Kossek et al., 2014). As proposed by Drago et al. (2009) increases in work hours and work demands would affect WLB of a worker. Although there is no widely-accepted definition of WLB, the term has often been used to refer to individuals' assessments of their abilities to effectively manage and fulfil the core responsibilities associated with personal, family, and work roles. Since the optimal system of "balance" is both a personal and subjective assessment, the measurement of satisfaction with WLB recognizes that "more time at work and less time at home" might create balance for one person. Whereas "more time at home and less time at work" might create balance for another person. Golden (2006) added that if an employee works for long hours, it might trigger work-family conflict and therefore leading to more absence from work. In order to reach WLB, working hours play the most important aspect (Tucker and Rutherford, 2005). What would be the case in this company? In this study, working 5.5 days a week makes the employee spend more time at work and less time at home. Therefore, this study explores the extent of working on Saturday affect absenteeism due to imbalance of work-life among employees in one of the utility company in Malaysia.

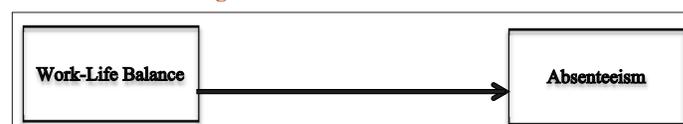
Based on Figure 1, the hypotheses are as follows:

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a relationship between WLB and absenteeism.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

For this study, researchers chose quantitative method using standardized questionnaires for conducting a causal study in order to identify the relationship between WLB and absenteeism. Descriptive study was undertaken to describe the employee's intention to be absent on the last working day of the week. It is also to describe the characteristics of respondents (age, gender, education, year of employment, etc.). The unit of analysis for this study is the individual employee in the utility company. The

Figure 1: Theoretical framework



population will be the workers who work 5.5 days in a week. For the purpose of this study, researchers chose a non-probability sampling designs of convenience sampling. The total of sample size is 94. There are eight (8) departments in this company with employees comprising from the Plant Manager to the general workers. The population size is 94. According to Roscoe (1975), if the population is 94, the sample size would be 76. However, researchers decided to distribute as much as possible to increase the response rate.

#### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Questionnaires were distributed to the selected population of employees that work 5.5 days in a week. Based on the position in the organization chart, the sample size is supposed to be 94. However, a few positions remain vacant. The final sample size was 88. The questionnaire distributed was 88 and the rate of response is 96.6%.

Table 1 demonstrated the five (5) statements with the highest mean. Having 3.89 as the mean (D3), this shows that most of the employees in the organization always took leave in a week. The second highest mean is 3.87 (D7) in which the employee agreed that burnout can cause absenteeism. The statement with the third highest mean (D10) showed that employees feel burnout at the last working day of the week and decided to not to come to work. The mean calculated is 3.80 and this value shows that the employees agree that they do feel burnout on Saturday, thus choose not to come to work. Approaching to the weekends, the employees do feel burnout. While most companies do not work on Saturday, the employees sometimes choose to do personal things rather than to be at the work place.

Figure 2 which demonstrated company’s analysis of “1 day absence” from January to November 2015 further supports the descriptive findings in Table 1. Based on Figure 2, absenteeism is tremendously high especially on Saturday. A study by Lippert (1986) stated that 1-day absence always happens on Monday or Friday in which these days is focused on before or after the weekend. In this research, Saturday is considered before the weekend and therefore has the highest absenteeism in the company.

Table 2 demonstrate the descriptive statistics of this study. The mean for WLB is 2.93 out of 5, while absenteeism is 3.32. Pearson correlation was used to analyse the strength of association between variables in this research study. WLB indicated that  $r = 0.377$  while  $P = 0.000$ . The result shows that there was a moderate positive and yet significant correlation between WLB and absenteeism. Therefore, the findings confirmed that increasing WLB will increase the absenteeism in the organization. This is because in order to have personal time, the employee would take leave especially on Saturday to have their own personal time. Referring to the all of the analysis above, it can be concluded that the extent of working on Saturday do affect absenteeism among employees in this company. Higher mean is shown where the employees are unable to sustain the level of the energy throughout the week. The mean for D9 (2.34) reveals that respondents are not willing to work on Saturday. At the end of the analysis, the researcher

**Table 1: Extraction for analysis of the first research objective**

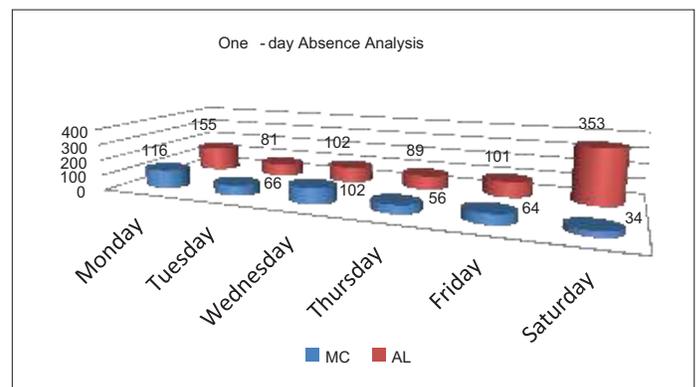
No	Question	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean±SD
D3	I usually take leave in a week.	85	1.00	5.00	3.8941±1.03537
D7	In my opinion, burn out causes absenteeism.	85	2.00	5.00	3.8706±0.86998
D8	I am able to sustain the level of energy throughout the week.	85	1.00	5.00	2.9294±1.11043
D9	I am willing to work on Saturday.	85	1.00	5.00	2.3412±1.18073
D10	I feel burnout on Saturday; therefore I choose not to come to work.	85	1.00	5.00	3.8000±1.28958

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics, cronbach alpha, and pearson correlation of all study variables**

Variables	Work-life balance	Absenteeism
Work-life balance		
Absenteeism	0.377**	
Mean	2.93	3.32

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed);

**Figure 2: One-day absence analysis from the HRIS data**



has found out that due to many consecutive days worked, nearly three-quarters of the respondents do feel burnout on Saturday and therefore has choose not to come to work.

#### 5. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study illuminated the responses of the employees in a utility company on absenteeism and WLB matters. While this company provides 5.5 working days in a week, the absenteeism on Saturday is high. The findings of this study offer new perspectives which the organization may need to consider in order to have employees who are more efficient. The utility company should consider

changing the working hours from 5.5 days to 5 days a week with 2 days off (Saturday and Sunday) each week. Not only that the employees could have a good rest and care for their families, this could eliminate the high absenteeism rate on Saturday as shown in the 1-day absence analysis. The benefits of working 5 days a week for employees include improve job satisfaction and morale, improve WLB, and increase in productivity. Employees with fewer family commitments can utilize their days off for further studies or to develop personal interests. As for the employers, the benefits include enhancing company's efficiency, reducing absence rate, enhancing company's competitiveness and promote the organization's corporate image. As a result, not only the employees can build up healthy and harmonies families, the management can also establish a positive image, thus creating a win-win situation for both parties.

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