

Swazi workers and absenteeism

Causes and recommendations

Absenteeism is a huge factor for employers. **Ian van Zuydam** and **Ruan van der Walt** tell of a study to examine reasons for absenteeism in workplaces in Swaziland where no previous studies have been conducted.

Absenteeism is a major human resources problem and it is costly to an employer.

Researchers differ on the reasons for absenteeism. Some give reasons for absenteeism as medical, stress-related, motivational problems, domestic or family-related, unavoidable absence, and planned and agreed absence. These can be grouped into personal, organisational, social and attitudinal factors.

Estimating the cost of absenteeism is a challenge as there are both direct and indirect costs involved. The more often workers are absent, the more costly the preparation and delivery of goods and services to the marketplace.

McFarlin and Fals-Stewart estimate the cost of absenteeism in the USA at \$52.7-billion per annum. In South Africa Moodley estimates the annual costs of absenteeism at R12-billion. Of this figure R1.8 to R2.2-billion is attributed to HIV/AIDS, which is probably one of the leading causes of absenteeism.

Although absenteeism is a major and costly management challenge, there is limited empirical evidence on absenteeism in countries in southern Africa.

We were unable to find any published studies of absenteeism on

the Kingdom of Swaziland so we embarked on a study.

RESEARCH METHOD

Swaziland's Central Statistics Office has divided the country into 12 economic sectors. In these 12 sectors we chose 22 organisations that were willing to participate in the study and were representative of the following sectors: agriculture, banking/financial, construction, education, energy, forestry, state health, textile, manufacturing, retail, tourism and transport.

We designed a survey questionnaire and gave it to senior or HR managers in the 22 participating organisations to complete.

The number of employees in these organisations ranged from seven to 2 000 with an average employee complement of 314; 55% of the employees were younger than 35 years. The majority of employees were females and unmarried; 48% of the employees had an educational level of grade 11 or lower. The majority of employees had ten or less years of work experience.

The three most frequently used methods to manage absenteeism in these organisations were helping sick employees return to work, providing health and safety training to employees and training managers to

deal with absenteeism issues.

The majority of organisations used policies to discourage absenteeism. Most managers believed that absenteeism was increasing; that employees saw absenteeism control measures as fair; and that poor employee motivation caused absenteeism.

The participating organisations indicated that absenteeism ranged from two to 25 days with an average of ten days per year. Of the non-illness related reasons for absenteeism, 41% was due to personal and family-related issues.

RESULTS

The sectors that employed more male employees had lower absenteeism rates.

The study also found that absenteeism decreased the higher the rate of married employees.

It was found that the higher the number of employees in the 18 to 35 age category, the higher the absenteeism rate. This finding concurs with other studies.

From the results of the study it was found that those sectors of the economy that had lower levels of absenteeism were also the sectors with higher levels of tenure. Again this is found in other studies.

Another interesting finding was