



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research



Supervisor support, role ambiguity and productivity associated with presenteeism: A longitudinal study[☆]

Qin Zhou^a, Luis F. Martinez^{b,*}, Aristides I. Ferreira^c, Piedade Rodrigues^d

^a The York Management School, The University of York, UK

^b Nova School of Business and Economics, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal

^c Business Research Unit, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL), Portugal

^d ROFF Consulting, Portugal

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 February 2014

Received in revised form 26 January 2016

Accepted 8 February 2016

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Productivity

Presenteeism

Supervisor support

Role ambiguity

IT companies

ABSTRACT

Integrating the social informational processing perspective and conservation of resources theory, we proposed and examined the impact of supervisor support and role ambiguity on productivity associated with presenteeism and the mediating effect of role ambiguity on the link between supervisor support and productivity associated with presenteeism. The results based on the longitudinal data from 99 employees from an IT consulting company showed that role ambiguity was negatively related to productivity associated with presenteeism (SPS-6). In contrast, supervisor support indirectly influenced productivity associated with presenteeism via reducing role ambiguity.

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1. Introduction

Presenteeism (i.e., employees attending work while sick) has attracted increasing attention among practitioners as well as researchers (Aronsson, Gustafsson, & Dallner, 2000; Hemp, 2004; Whitehouse, 2005). Much research has predominantly seen presenteeism as a negative factor in the workplace due to the documented links between presenteeism and productivity loss (see Johns, 2010, for a review, also, Hemp, 2004; Hummer, Sherman, & Quinn, 2002; Turpin et al., 2004). Sponsored mainly by pharmaceutical companies, this line of research aims to identify medical interventions that may help reduce the occurrence of presenteeism. Little attention however has been given to organizational interventions that may help mitigate productivity losses among employees who have been affected by illness. This is particularly unfortunate given the prevalence of presenteeism in contemporary organizations (Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005; Gosselin, Lemyre, & Corneil, 2013; Jourdain & Vézina, 2014).

Meanwhile, some scholars have recently argued that presenteeism can be seen as employee's commitment or a type of organizational citizenship behavior (Demerouti, Le Blanc, Bakker, Schaufeli, & Hox, 2009; Johns, 2010), ultimately leading to organizational effectiveness. Therefore, to understand how to provide support for this particular group of employees is not only necessary but also important for organizations. Indeed, some promising research evidence has emerged suggesting that the organizational context may help employees' performance while being ill. For example, in their study of presenteeism, Patel, Budhwar, and Varma (2012) reported that organizational justice reduced productivity losses associated with presenteeism. Despite these efforts, many questions have been left unanswered. For example, research has yet to empirically test whether and how supervisor support, a critical contextual factor influencing employee's presenteeism behavior (Halbesleben, Whitman, & Crawford, 2014) may lead to employees' productivity when they attend work while ill. Drawing on the social information processing perspective (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978) and conservation of resources theory (Hobföll, 1989), we theorize and examine the impact of supervisor support on productivity associated with presenteeism.

Research on presenteeism has investigated this phenomenon mainly from two perspectives: (1) frequency of presenteeism and (2) productivity loss associated with presenteeism. For the former, the focus of research is to identify factors (e.g., job demands, social pressure, job insecurity) that may influence the act of presenteeism (e.g., Aronsson et al., 2000, Demerouti et al., 2009, Jourdain & Vézina, 2014). Presenteeism is assumed to always have negative consequences thus needs to be reduced – if not

[☆] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 16th Congress of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP), Münster, Germany, May 22–25, 2013. This research was partially supported by the Foundation for Science and Technology, Portugal – PEst-OE/EGE/UI0315/2011 and UID/ECO/00,124/2013.

* Corresponding author at: Nova School of Business and Economics, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Rua Marquês de Fronteira, 20, 1099-038 Lisboa, Portugal. Tel.: +351 21 382 2706.

E-mail address: luis.martinez@novasbe.pt (L.F. Martinez).

eliminated. Thus, productivity losses associated with presenteeism is implied rather than directly measured. For the latter, researchers examine productivity losses associated with presenteeism directly (Amick, Lerner, Rogers, Rooney, & Katz, 2000; Lerner et al., 2001) by asking study participants to estimate how their health has affected their work performance, especially their ability to concentrate and accomplish tasks (Koopman et al., 2002). The emergence of this line of research has been driven by pharmaceutical industries to understand the impact of certain drugs on people's performance. More recently, researchers have applied this approach in the organizational context (Patel et al., 2012). Given our focus on employee performance while ill in the organizational context, we investigated productivity associated with presenteeism rather than the frequency of presenteeism. It is important to note that we use 'productivity associated with presenteeism' rather than 'productivity loss associated with presenteeism' to avoid the negative implications.

To bring about productivity while overcoming illness can be a stressful situation for employees as being ill constitutes a threat to one's performance (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Employees who are exposed to such a situation are likely to experience psychological stress (Demerouti et al., 2009) as they are prone to be worried about how their illness may affect the quality and quantity of their work. Although the literature on the impact of stress on performance has predominantly suggested that stressful circumstances have a linear negative effect on performance (Gilboa, Shirom, Fried, & Cooper, 2008; see Kahn & Byosiére, 1991, for a review), some researchers have observed that such an effect is more consistent in laboratory settings than in organizational settings (cf. Sonnentag & Frese, 2003). It is possible that individuals in the real-life settings can be more flexible dealing with their tasks than those in laboratories (Hockey, 2000) and adopt different strategies to achieve their tasks (Sperandio, 1971). For example, individuals may achieve desired performance by giving priority to their most relevant job responsibilities (Jex, 1998; Sonnentag, 2003). This is in line with conservation of resources theory which suggests that people use resources conservation strategy in stressful situations and invest available resources on priority tasks. However, literature has been quiet about the external support one may draw on in order to identify those important tasks. In light of the social information process perspective, we argue that supervisors provide critical and salient social cues in the work environment regarding what to achieve at work (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Such social cues serve as informational support resources (Cohen & Wills, 1985) helping employees adopt effective coping strategy in accomplishing their tasks. In other words, for employees who work while ill, supervisor support helps reduce uncertain performance expectations or vague daily tasks and responsibilities (i.e. role ambiguity). In turn, employees are more likely to conserve their resources for their priorities and be productive at work (Ayyagari, Grover, & Purvis, 2011; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Therefore, we propose and test the impact of supervisor support on productivity associated with presenteeism via the mechanism of role ambiguity.

For social support to have its effect on role ambiguity and the consequent productivity, a temporal dimension need to be considered as to draw a causal link (Sonnentag & Frese, 2003; Zapf, Dormann, & Frese, 1996). Meanwhile, scholars have called for longitudinal studies in order to understand the impact of organizational factors on presenteeism (Johns, 2010). Consequently, we seek to contribute to the literature by testing our model with data collected at two points in time with an interval of six months. A schematic representation of the hypothesized relationships is presented in Fig. 1.

There are two primary theoretical contributions of the present study. First, by examining the impact of supervisor support on productivity associated with presenteeism, our research extends the presenteeism literature to include social support as a contextual factor to reduce the adverse impact of presenteeism on productivity. Second, by integrating the social information processing perspective and the conservation of resources theory, we identify the

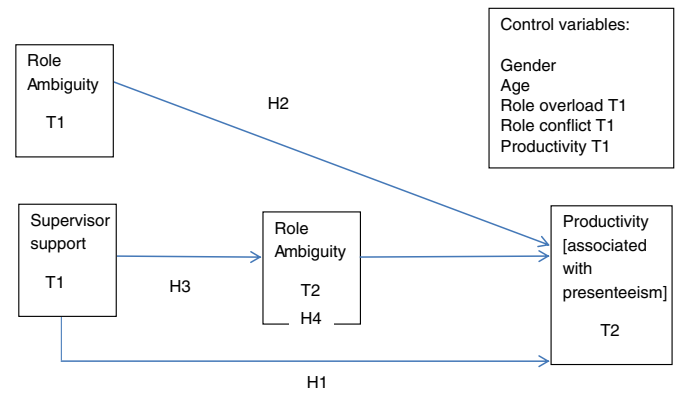


Fig. 1. A schematic representation of hypothesized relationships.

circumstances in which employees may still function effectively despite health problems and what organizational interventions can be employed. The findings of our study will provide useful and actionable knowledge to managers who are to reduce productivity loss associated with presenteeism.

1.1. Theoretical background and hypothesis development

According to the social information processing theory, employees rely on significant others (i.e., supervisors) as the main sources of information cues about their role expectations (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Thomas & Griffin, 1983). This is particularly important for employees who work while ill. Illness may impair affected employees' cognitive, physical and psychological resources. In order to preserve their limited resources, employees with health problems will have to draw on external resources such as social support in order to accomplish their tasks (Hobföll, 2001).

So far, the research on the impact of supervisor on employee performance has predominantly drawn on social exchange theory (e.g., Aryee & Chen, 2006; Blau, 1964; DeConinck, 2010; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). That is, employees will reciprocate supervisor support by bringing out better performance so as to return the favor. The social exchange perspective contributes significantly to our understanding of the impact of supervisor support on employee outcomes. However, the assumption that employees are always in a position to improve their performance may not necessarily be sustained in the presenteeism context. In such a scenario, employees are not in their full capacity to accomplish what have been expected of them and are less likely to repay supervisor's support by enhanced performance. Instead of expecting reciprocal behavior on the part of the employees, supervisors may need to focus on how to help the affected employees function effectively. We posit that supervisor support constitutes an external support resource that helps employees with health problems achieve desired performance by reducing role ambiguity (Kessler, Price, & Wortman, 1985). In turn, employees who attend work while ill can focus on their priorities and achieve their work goals.

In the following paragraphs, we first explain the impact of supervisor support and role ambiguity on productivity associated with presenteeism. We then explain how role ambiguity may mediate the impact of supervisor support on productivity associated with presenteeism.

1.2. Supervisor support and productivity associated with presenteeism

To bring about productivity while ill, employees need to deal with the cognitive, emotional and behavioral challenges entailed by their

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