

The Problem of Presenteeism – An Expanded Definition of the Topic

By Colm McCormack, February 2009.

What is Presenteeism?

Absenteeism is being sick and staying at home. Presenteeism is being sick but still coming to work. We all go to work at some point not feeling 100% but it is when we go to work and are so ill as to be useless, dangerous, or a source of contagious infection for everyone else that the problem arises. People who feel awful cannot work to their full potential. In a team environment this can rub people up the wrong way. In such circumstances, people are present but should be absent.

Presenteeism: Expanding Our Criteria

For me, there is very little written on the other type of presenteeism that has nothing to do with illness or injury. This occurs when employees:

- Take too many cigarette breaks
- Spend all day surfing the web
- Make too many personal telephone calls
- Spend long periods of time gossiping and backstabbing
- Take several trips to the store or coffee shop
- Wander the corridors aimlessly
- Spend all day online looking for a new job
- Spend large amounts of time sending and reading personal emails.

Why shouldn't this be viewed as presenteeism? After all, these employees are present but are useless in terms of productivity. They are being paid in circumstances where they wouldn't have been missed had they stayed at

home instead. Many workers would prefer if such people opted for absenteeism since their presence can irritate, frustrate, and infect others with their sense of do-nothingness.

Why Continue to Allow This Behavior?

How do employees get away with this? The answer is simple: ineffective management! If you are walking the halls and chatting with people, you should be alert to oddities such as those listed above. However, frog-marching people to their desks or cutting their internet connection is simply tackling the symptoms. The underlying truth is motivation, management, job design, and more.

In truth, we are all guilty of presenteeism at one point or another. If any one of us working in the white collar environment could spend a full six hours fully present, focused, organized, doing what we should be doing, etc, we would probably only have to work two days per week!

Boredom and a Sense of Being Lost

Presenteeism – the expanded form used here – can also come about via boredom. I have watched managers make the mistake of assuming that boredom comes from not having enough to do. But this is not always the case. Very often employees are bored despite having a full desk: they are

bored with the job, not the lack of things to do in the job.

This one can be a real problem because it highlights the need to dig deeper, to look at an array of areas and approaches. People are *always* motivated: when presenteeism raises its head, they are simply motivated to do something other than work on the job.

The second point here is that of feeling lost. This was a theme in the first chapter of, *If You Cannot Manage Yourself You Cannot Manage Others* – the first book in the “Just Manage It!” series.

Too many people simply go with the flow in life. This can have nasty knock-on effects in the work setting.

Are You Sure it's Your Job You Hate?

When a person's life is not as they would like it to be – whether they realize or accept it to be so – they can often mistake their job as the source of their unhappiness. We see this quite often with the question of money and motivation: very often, demands for more money are not actually about money – whether the person making the demand realizes this or not. For example, employees will often say things like, “I hate this place. They better give me a good pay raise or I'm out of here”. Giving such employees more money simply creates richer unhappy people: you didn't get to the source of the complaint.

Today, there are more people who feel a sense of loss, that their lives are going nowhere, than ever before. This can have nasty implications for the work setting. Managers are grumpy before they even get to work. People arrive in

bad mood. Sunday night is a real nightmare as their last day of “freedom” draws to an end.

As I have stated time and time again: if you cannot manage your own life you should not even think of trying to manage other people. All you will do is get in your own way, alienate people, project your unhappiness onto them, and more.

Does Your Business Have the Presenteeism Problem?

If you don't manage by walking around, if you fail to observe, if you don't manage, then how can you know if you actually have a presenteeism problem? Don't take this too lightly. Some estimates point to presenteeism causing American businesses more than \$150 billion per year.

You must also be careful not to confuse other activities for presenteeism. Employees *must* be allowed to chat with each other to share problems, brainstorm solutions, spread knowledge. They must also be allowed time-outs, to socialize, bond, and behave as a normal group.

What Are You Looking For?

The expanded version of presenteeism we are looking at here can be spotted by symptoms such as employees free loading off others, forcing others to do their share of the work for them, gambling online, spending too much time on the phones on personal calls, going missing for extended periods of time, and more.

It is for you as an observant and alert manager to spot these things as and when they arise. You must also look

for the *reasons* these behaviors arise if you are ever to tackle them in a way that leaves the business in better shape and the relationship between the employees and the business enhanced. You are not out to simply stamp out these behaviors. A failure on your part to see why such behaviors manifest themselves will only see other undesirable behaviors arise in their place or the current behaviors lock themselves in to spite you.

Get to Know Your Employees

The rush to tackle the kind of presenteeism I have been talking about here very often sees managers dealing with the symptoms and not the cause. They tell people to stop talking, to get off the phones, to stay at their desks and stop wandering around. They cut their internet connections, their expenses, and – believe it or not – they “ground” their employees: no more traveling to meetings, conferences, and the like.

There is a golden rule of management and business: *Always* listen to your employees. Nowhere is it stated that you should become a doormat or spend your days listening to whining, moaning, and complaining. Your job as a manager is to manage what you hear. Guide your employees in their communications.

Active listening is a concept covered in *If You Cannot Manage Yourself You Cannot Manage Others*.¹ There, you will see that the use of active listening not only improves what *you* hear, it also improves what others say.

¹ Book one in the “Just Manage It!” series. Go to www.ColmMcCormack.com for further details, FREE chapter download, and to order your copy.

Start With YOU!

One of the key principles and guidelines in **Just Manage THEM!** *Effective People Management for Today's Manager* – the second book in the series – centers upon the manager always starting with herself. Might *you* be the cause of your own employees engaging in presenteeism? Have you failed to manage them to-date? Did you hire the wrong people? Have you failed to motivate them? Are their jobs too limited in scope? Should you give them extra responsibilities?

As I pointed out in a previous article on Management and Ego, every manager must face the reality that not only must they be part of any solution: they may be a part of the *problem* too!

Management is the Answer

Absenteeism, presenteeism, bullying, and more: they all have their roots in ineffective and unsuitable managerial practices. You will see from a previous article – and from the first book in the “Just Manage it!” series - that I have broken consistency into three parts. It is when there is a total lack of consistency, or when a manager consistently does the wrong things (e.g. failing to tackle the root causes of presenteeism) that a fresh approach is required. If *you* inherited the problem, fine: that will only grant you *temporary* respite. Sooner or later, you must manage yourself, your organization, and your employees out of the presenteeism. You must break the lack of consistency or the consistently bad managerial approach - which ever is in existence - that has allowed the problem to fester.

Always start with yourself. Don't rush in or rush to judgment. Investigate first. Manage yourself before you try to manage others. Be pro-active, energetic. View managing as a verb.

Then take a look at the desired end result and the things employees have to do to reach that result. Listen to the workers: they might just have the answer!



Colm McCormack has lectured in Management, Strategic Management, and Leadership on MBA and continuing education programs. He has consulted for numerous companies and Mentored business owners. He is the author of the "**Just Manage It!**" series of Business & Management books. Visit www.ColmMcCormack.com to download FREE chapters and FREE web articles, to view key concepts and models, and to purchase Books from the series.