Presenteeism, simply put, is when people come to work but aren’t functioning fully because they have physical or mental health problems or put in extraneous overtime for fear their career could suffer if they don’t.

This phenomenon is a sort of first cousin to employee absenteeism (named by Cary Cooper, Professor of Organizational Psychology and Health at Manchester University in England). Presenteeism means being at work when you should be at home instead, either because of illness or because you’re working such long hours that you’re no longer effective (Guthrie, 2001). The opposite of absenteeism, presenteeism is where employees are so afraid of losing their jobs that they work excessive hours or remain at work in the evenings in order to be seen there even when there is nothing to do (Quinion, 1996). In fact, studies sponsored by the Employees Health Coalition of Tampa, Florida, revealed that lost productivity due to presenteeism was, on average, 7.5 times greater than productivity lost to absenteeism.

The consequences of this changing workplace context are the anxieties and other problems that accompany feelings of job insecurity (Burchnell, Felstead, & Green, 1997; Reynolds, 1997). Employees are often afraid to be away from the workplace, and presenteeism takes its toll (Lewis & Cooper, 1996; Simpson, 1998). Far from the predicted increase in leisure time, many workers are spending more time in the workplace in response to job insecurity, workplace demands, perceived career needs, financial pressures, and, as Hochschild (1997) suggested, often to escape from the tensions at home created by these long working hours (Lewis & Cooper, 1999).

So far, many employers have not looked deep enough to understand the seriousness of the presenteeism problem and its adverse impact on employee performance, organizational productivity, and profitability. Generally, many managers assume that if an employee is absent, his or her productivity must be suffering. Conversely, if the same employee is putting in extra time and skipping vacations, he or she must be highly productive. But these assumptions are not always true. A recent study conducted by England’s Manchester University showed that overworking creates more stress and lessens personal time. This has a trickle-down effect, and employees are actually less productive than if they had just worked their assigned hours and taken scheduled vacation time.

What Can Employers and Employees Do?

Because data suggest that presenteeism is a larger productivity drain than either absenteeism or short-term disability, employers and employees need to take a proactive stance. Here are a few ideas that might help.

• Strive for work-life balance. A growing weight of evidence shows that employees who work extended hours end up producing less rather than more. Just as employees need lunch breaks, they also need a life outside the office. Employees need to get in touch with their values by setting priorities. It usually takes 15–20 minutes to shift gears.
from work to family. Clear work from your head and concentrate on family on the way home from work, perhaps by singing, humming, or listening to music. Achieving a balance means different things to different people, but it’s important to achieve a balance that is comfortable for you and your family.

- **Support and maintain regular work hours.** Whether fear of termination or ladder climbing keeps employees in the office, assure them that it’s O.K. to take a “mental health day” and stay at home once in a while.
- **Honor vacation time and sick leave provisions.** Employers should encourage staff to take their daily meal breaks and their full annual leave entitlement, while discouraging them from working long hours or taking work home on a routine basis.
- **Get organized—plan your day.** Work from a to-do list. Take 10 minutes each morning to identify those things that need to be accomplished. Handle a piece of paper only once and act on it immediately. Don’t move it from one pile to another. Follow an agenda. When a meeting or telephone conversation digresses, bring it back around. Limit phone calls. When extremely busy, accept only important/urgent calls. Call at choice times of the day. Initiate phone calls just before lunch or near the close of day when the other party is more likely to keep the conversation brief.
- **Recognize your peak energy times.** Do the tough tasks when your energy level is at its highest. Save routine work for low points of the day.
- **Confine work to your office.** Don’t bring work home. Practice working only within your designated working hours.
- **Preserve your days off.** Ignore errands and chores. Focus on yourself—relax and refresh.
- **Get plenty of sleep.** Make it a point to get at least eight hours of sleep. Your body cannot make up for lost sleep or rest time because it’s not physiologically possible.

- **Eat a balanced diet.** Workaholics are known to skip meals, thus eating poorly.
- **Exercise.** Set aside time each day to give your body the proper physical conditioning it needs.
- **Learn to say no.** Saying, “sorry, but I’m busy,” is never a lie—because you always have something to do. Practice saying it and then do it.
- **Work to live—don’t live to work.** Always keep in mind that you work so you can live and have a comfortable life. Remember that you don’t live to work. Don’t make work your life.

**References**


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