

Research Process and Data Collection for Workplace Absenteeism

Posted on March 22, 2019

Introduction

Workplace absenteeism refers to nonattendance when an employee is scheduled to work. The original essay described absence as usually intentional, but that assumption is too narrow. Employees may be absent because of illness, disability, caregiving, bereavement, unsafe working conditions, transportation problems, burnout, workplace conflict, approved leave, or deliberate withdrawal. Research must distinguish authorized from unauthorized absence, occasional episodes from chronic patterns, and absence frequency from total days lost. Excessive absence can disrupt staffing, increase overtime, reduce continuity, affect morale, and raise costs, but a punitive response may worsen the causes if employees attend while ill or fear requesting legitimate leave. A sound study should therefore investigate patterns, determinants, and organizational context before recommending solutions. This paper explains the research process and evaluates questionnaires, interviews, administrative records, focus groups, and observation as data-collection methods for studying workplace absenteeism (Cucchiella et al., 2014; Johns, 2010).

Stage 1: Define the Research Problem

The first stage is to define the problem precisely. “Absenteeism is high” is not yet a research question. The researcher should identify the organization, period, departments, employee groups, and type of absence. A useful problem statement might ask why unscheduled absence increased among customer-service employees during the previous twelve months or whether workload, supervisor support, and schedule flexibility predict absence frequency. Clear definition prevents authorized vacation, maternity leave, and occupational injury from being combined indiscriminately with unexplained nonattendance. The organization must also decide whether the objective is description, explanation, prediction, or evaluation of an intervention.

Stage 2: Review Existing Evidence

A literature review examines theories, previous findings, measurement choices, and interventions. Research commonly links absence with health, job demands, control, satisfaction, organizational commitment, leadership, work-family conflict, scheduling, workplace climate, and labor-market conditions. The review should include academic studies, internal reports, occupational-health data, policies, and relevant law. It helps the researcher avoid repeating weak approaches and identify

variables that require control. A review also reveals that attendance is not always desirable: presenteeism—working while too ill to function safely—can harm productivity and spread infection. The study should therefore avoid treating zero absence as the ideal (Johns, 2010; Ruhle et al., 2020).

Stage 3: Develop Research Questions and Hypotheses

Research questions translate the problem into answerable form. Examples include: What reasons do employees report for unscheduled absence? Do absence rates differ by shift, department, tenure, or supervisor? Is perceived organizational support associated with fewer avoidable absences? Did a flexible-scheduling policy change absence frequency? Quantitative studies may state hypotheses, such as higher workload predicting more absence after controlling for health and tenure. Qualitative studies may explore how employees and managers interpret attendance policies. Questions should be neutral enough to permit findings that contradict management assumptions.

Stage 4: Define Concepts Operationally

Conceptual definitions explain what terms mean; operational definitions specify how they will be measured. Absence frequency may be the number of separate episodes, while absence duration may be total days lost. A Bradford-type score weights repeated short episodes heavily, but such formulas can disadvantage people with recurring medical conditions and should not be treated as proof of misconduct. Job satisfaction may be measured with a validated scale; workload may combine staffing ratios, hours, and perceived demand. Definitions should be documented so results can be interpreted and replicated. Personal medical details should be collected only when necessary and handled confidentially.

Stage 5: Select the Research Design

A cross-sectional design captures variables at one point but cannot establish temporal order. A longitudinal design follows employees or departments over time and is stronger for examining change. A case study investigates one organization deeply. A quasi-experiment may compare outcomes before and after a policy or between similar units, while a randomized intervention is sometimes possible but may be impractical or ethically inappropriate. Mixed methods combine numerical patterns with employees' explanations. For absenteeism, mixed methods are often valuable because records show when absence occurred but rarely explain why (Cucchiella et al., 2014).

Stage 6: Identify the Population and Sampling Strategy

The target population may be all employees, one department, shift workers, supervisors, or employees with particular schedules. A census includes everyone, while probability sampling gives known chances of selection and supports generalization. Stratified sampling can ensure representation by department, role, or shift. Convenience samples are easier but may overrepresent people willing to speak. Researchers should estimate required sample size based on analysis, expected effects, and response rates. Participation in surveys or interviews should be voluntary, and managers should not be told which employees participated unless required for a properly consented operational study.

Stage 7: Create the Instrumentation Plan

The original essay correctly emphasized an instrumentation plan explaining who participates and how, when, and where data are collected. The plan should list each variable, its source, instrument, scale, collection frequency, responsible researcher, quality checks, and confidentiality safeguards. It should explain how employee IDs will be coded, how survey data will be linked to records if linkage is necessary, and who will access identifiable information. A pilot test can identify unclear questions, excessive length, and technical problems before full deployment.

Stage 8: Obtain Ethical and Organizational Approval

Absenteeism research can affect employment and privacy, so ethical review is essential. Employees may fear that honest responses about stress, illness, harassment, or supervisors will be used against them. Consent materials should explain purpose, voluntary participation, risks, benefits, confidentiality, and withdrawal. Administrative data should be used under lawful authority and minimized. Reports should suppress small groups where individuals could be inferred. Researchers must also plan how to respond if interviews reveal immediate safety concerns, discrimination, or serious health risks.

Stage 9: Collect Data

Data collection should follow the plan consistently. Survey invitations, reminders, interview guides, record extraction, and coding rules should be standardized. Researchers should document deviations and monitor missing data. Timing matters: a survey administered immediately after layoffs or a policy

dispute may capture a temporary climate. Multiple waves can distinguish short-term reactions from stable patterns. Collection should not burden employees so heavily that it contributes to the problem being studied.

Stage 10: Prepare and Analyze Data

Quantitative preparation includes checking ranges, duplicates, missing values, coding, and consistency. Descriptive analysis summarizes absence distribution, because averages can be distorted by a small number of long cases. Inferential methods may include regression, count models, survival analysis, multilevel models, or interrupted time-series analysis depending on the question. Qualitative interviews are transcribed, coded, compared, and interpreted for themes and variation. Analysis should distinguish correlation from causation and consider confounders such as age, job type, season, health, and organizational restructuring. Results that blame individual motivation while ignoring working conditions are incomplete (Cucchiella et al., 2014).

Stage 11: Interpret Findings

Interpretation asks what the results mean in context. A department with more absence may have dangerous work, understaffing, a high proportion of caregivers, or a manager who encourages employees to stay home when sick. A fall in recorded absence may reflect improved well-being or fear of discipline. Researchers should compare alternative explanations and limitations. Employee representatives and occupational-health specialists can help interpret patterns that managers might misunderstand. Findings should be reported in a way that separates evidence from speculation (Johns, 2010; Ruhle et al., 2020).

Stage 12: Recommend and Evaluate Action

Recommendations should match identified causes. If unpredictable scheduling is associated with absence, punitive attendance points will not solve the problem. Possible interventions include schedule flexibility, staffing review, health support, supervisor training, workload redesign, transportation assistance, fair leave policy, return-to-work planning, and attention to bullying or safety. Each intervention needs measurable outcomes and a follow-up evaluation. The research cycle continues because action can create new effects that require assessment (Cucchiella et al., 2014).

Questionnaires

Questionnaires are useful for collecting standardized information from many employees at relatively low cost. They can measure job satisfaction, stress, supervisor support, work-family conflict, attendance motivation, and policy knowledge. Online distribution allows quick collection across

locations, and anonymity may reduce embarrassment. Questions should use validated scales where possible, avoid moralizing language, and distinguish reasons for absence. Open-ended items can capture unanticipated issues. Translation and accessibility may be necessary. A long or intrusive questionnaire can reduce response quality.

Advantages of Questionnaires

The original essay correctly noted cost, scale, email distribution, and privacy as advantages. Standardization supports comparison, and respondents can answer at a convenient time. Anonymous surveys may reveal concerns that employees would not discuss with supervisors. Automated systems reduce data-entry error. Repeated surveys can track change. However, anonymity should not be promised if demographic combinations or links to personnel records make identification possible. Researchers must state the actual protection.

Limitations of Questionnaires

Response rates may be low or unequal. Employees with the strongest grievances or the most time may respond disproportionately. Questions can be misinterpreted, and researchers cannot always probe. Self-reports are affected by memory, social desirability, and fear. Poorly designed response categories force complex experiences into inaccurate choices. Nonresponse analysis and reminders can help, but coercive pressure should be avoided. A questionnaire should be piloted with employees similar to the intended participants.

Interviews

Interviews explore how employees understand absence, workload, health, management, and policy. Structured interviews ask the same questions in the same order; semi-structured interviews use a guide with flexible probing; unstructured interviews allow broader narratives. Semi-structured interviews often suit absenteeism research because they provide comparability while allowing context. Interviewers should be independent enough that participants feel safe and trained to avoid leading questions. A private location and clear consent are essential (Brinkmann, 2014).

Advantages of Interviews

Interviews can reveal motives, contradictions, emotions, and processes that records cannot show. A researcher can clarify language, ask for examples, and explore how events unfolded. Response and completion rates may be higher when contact is personal. Interviews are particularly useful for sensitive organizational problems such as bullying, caregiving, chronic illness, or distrust of policy. They can also reveal differences between official procedure and actual practice (Brinkmann, 2014).

Limitations of Interviews

Interviews require time, skilled personnel, transcription, secure storage, and systematic analysis. The interviewer's identity, tone, and assumptions can influence answers. Employees may still withhold information. Small samples limit statistical generalization, although qualitative research seeks depth and theoretical insight rather than population estimates alone. Coding can become subjective; researchers should document decisions, compare coders where appropriate, and include evidence for themes. Quotations must be edited carefully to prevent identification (Brinkmann, 2014).

Administrative Attendance Records

Records can provide dates, duration, department, shift, tenure, and leave categories without relying on memory. They support longitudinal analysis and show actual recorded absence. Their limitation is that they reflect organizational classification rather than the full reason. A record may show "sick leave" without revealing workplace stress, caregiving, or infectious illness. Records also contain errors and may differ across systems. Researchers should audit data quality and avoid inferring motivation from a code (Cucchiella et al., 2014).

Focus Groups

Focus groups allow employees to discuss shared norms and react to one another's experiences. They may reveal how teams interpret attendance, whether colleagues resent certain absences, and how supervisors communicate policy. Group settings are unsuitable for confidential medical information and can silence less powerful participants. Separate groups by role or power level may be needed, and facilitators must establish respectful boundaries. Focus-group data should not be reported in ways that expose individual comments to management.

Observation and Work-Process Analysis

Observation can identify workload, break availability, staffing pressure, ergonomics, or informal practices that participants take for granted. Researchers may map shift handovers, peak demand, or how absence affects colleagues. Overt observation is ethically preferable in most workplace research. Observation cannot establish private reasons for absence and may alter behavior temporarily. It is best combined with records and employee accounts. Process analysis shifts attention from presumed individual irresponsibility toward the design of work.

A Recommended Mixed-Methods Study

A strong investigation could begin with twelve to twenty-four months of anonymized attendance and staffing records, followed by a confidential organization-wide survey. Statistical analysis would identify patterns by shift, department, workload, and tenure without publishing small identifiable groups. Semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of employees, supervisors, and occupational-health staff would explain mechanisms. Findings would be integrated rather than treated as competing evidence. An intervention could then be piloted in one unit and evaluated against a comparable unit over time. This design supports both explanation and practical change (Brinkmann, 2014; Cucchiella et al., 2014).

Conclusion

Research on workplace absenteeism requires a systematic process: define the problem, review evidence, formulate questions, operationalize concepts, choose a design, sample participants, create an instrumentation plan, obtain ethical approval, collect and analyze data, interpret results, and evaluate action. Questionnaires provide scale and standardization, while interviews provide depth and context. Administrative records, focus groups, and observation add complementary evidence. Absence should not be presumed intentional or morally deficient. Researchers must distinguish legitimate leave, health-related absence, avoidable nonattendance, and presenteeism while protecting confidentiality. The best study identifies organizational as well as individual causes and produces interventions that improve health, fairness, continuity, and productivity rather than merely reducing a number (Cucchiella et al., 2014; Johns, 2010; Ruhle et al., 2020).

Works Cited

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