

A NOTE ON THE FACTORS INFLUENCING ABSENTEEISM. A BRIEF COMMENT ON THE EFFECT OF UNCERTAINTY OF UNEMPLOYMENT

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ABSTRACT

Workmen's sickness absences are influenced by many factors. Measures such as well controlled working conditions, health protection at work, special incentives for workers, etc. tend to reduce the number of absences. At the same time, what are called social conditions such as sick pay schemes or the level of unemployment, influence the absence level in two directions.

In Japan, in the early 1960s the level of sickness absence of workmen depended almost totally upon the incidence of lung tuberculosis among them. However, by the late 1960s the problem of lung tuberculosis had almost been solved, and as a result the number of absences decreased sharply.

Long-term records of sickness absences in an electrical factory showed an almost constant rate (about 1.2%) until the world wide oil crisis occurred. As a consequence of the oil crisis, an economic recession set in all over the country, and the factory went through a period of severe depression which forced it to undertake special measures such as temporary closure and laying off part-time and temporarily employed workers, and finally even full-time workers.

Just after the introduction of these measures, the level of absence fell abruptly to 0.65%. Although nearly 5 years have passed since the oil crisis, the factory has not yet completely recovered from the recession and the absence rate has been fluctuating about 1%. The authors conclude that, especially in Japan, uncertainty of employment has the strongest direct effect on absenteeism.

The rate of absenteeism among workers depends on a variety of factors. Some of these are measures taken by the firms themselves – such as health protection for chronic disease patients in the factory, care of people showing proneness to absence, well controlled working conditions, and incentives for workmen – which tend to reduce the rate of absenteeism in factories^{2,3,4,5}.

At the same time social conditions such as sick pay benefit schemes and the level of unemployment also have an effect on absenteeism¹: in welfare countries workmen are liable to absent themselves even with minor diseases, while in times of high unemployment the absence rate diminishes¹.

In Japan, the lifetime-employment system and what is known as the loyalty of the employee to his firm have prevented, even during the recession, an

increase in the level of unemployment. Japanese industrial physicians have been making great efforts to protect workmen against diseases, especially the once prevailing tuberculosis, which resulted in a marked decrease of absences. They believe that by consistent medical examinations of the workers it should be possible to decrease the factory's absence rate and keep it almost constant.

After the oil crisis of 1973 the Japanese economy entered a period of recession, which has continued for nearly 5 years now. The recession made such a deep impact on the economy that the country's economic structure and its very employment system seemed definitely changed.

Records of absenteeism at an electrical factory clearly show that fear of unemployment is the factor most responsible for a low rate of absenteeism.

SUBJECTS AND METHOD

In preparing this paper, long-term records of absenteeism of an electrical factory were studied and analyzed. Situated about 35 miles north-west of Tokyo and thus belonging to the great Tokyo metropolitan area, this factory produces high quality safety switches, electrical relays and various kinds of automation equipment. Records of the employees' absences have been kept in this factory since the early 1960s. During the initial period of about ten years, absences attributable to tuberculosis were separately recorded. Since 1969 no T.B. patients have been recorded among the employees.

We calculated the percentage of days lost, studied the long-term trends of absenteeism, and considered the factors which appeared to have a crucial effect on the workmen's absenteeism.

RESULTS

In the early 1960s Japanese workmen began to be given regular treatment for lung tuberculosis. Most of those affected by T.B. had to stay in hospital for more than a year, but on their return to work spells of sickness absence were common. Workmen in the electrical factory were no exception from the general situation in the country's industry. As shown in Figure 1, days lost in 1962 and 1963 exceeded 2% and of this high percentage T.B. patients accounted for more than 10%; they resulted only with 7 in 1962 and 5 patients in 1963.

By the late 1960s, due to the vigorous efforts of industrial physicians encouraged by the nation's anti-tuberculosis policy, the problem of tuberculosis was solved and the incidence of lung T.B. was greatly reduced in Japan as a whole. With the number of patients decreasing, the percentage of days lost steadily diminished to settle – with slight fluctuations, about 1.3% until the time of the oil crisis.

In the early 1960s, Japan started expanding her economy with industrial development, new factories and increased employment. By 1970, the number of employees in the electrical factory had nearly doubled.

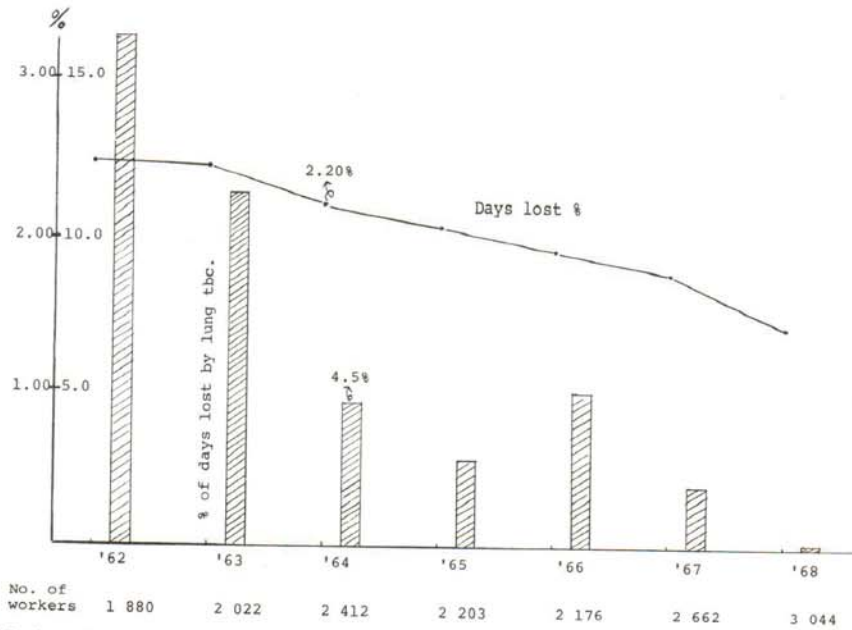


FIG. 1 - Annual average percent of days lost and percent ratio due to lung T.B.

The rapid increase in the price of oil in October 1974, seriously affected the Japanese economy. The electrical factory discussed above could not avoid being directly affected by the developments and had to resort to temporary factory closures and to the dismissal of workers (Table 1). In Japan it is the usual practice to take on employment for one's whole lifetime: to leave one's first job and more to another is rather exceptional. The electrical factory did not dismiss full-time workers, which would have brought vigorous opposition from the labour union, and only temporary employees were laid off. By the end of 1975 the number of employed decreased to 80% as a result of the retirement of old workers in addition to the dismissal of temporary workers.

Surprisingly, in December 1974, the month following the first temporary closure, the absence rate fell from 1.02 to 0.65%. For the following seven months the absence rate dropped below 1% - such a low rate had never been recorded before. In July 1975 the rate again rose above 1% and persisted even though temporary factory closures continued, except during December.

Despite greatest efforts the factory did not succeed in properly recovering from the recession, and so in December 1976, as a measure of rationalization, it decided to separate indirect divisions which resulted in a great decrease of the number of workers in the following month. In May 1977, with the agreement of the labour union, it took the final counter-measure: laying off even full-time workers according to their service performance for the following five months.

TABLE I
Influence of recession on rate of absenteeism.

Calendar month and year	Days lost (%)	Number of workers	Days of temporary closure of factory
November 1973	1.03	4 291	
December 1973	1.27	4 312	
February 1974	1.16	3 886	
April 1974	0.89	3 899	
June 1974	1.19	3 694	
August 1974	1.00	3 608	
October 1974	1.03	3 568	
November 1974	1.02	3 539	1
December 1974	0.65	3 521	3
January 1975	0.90	3 209	4
February 1975	0.98	3 206	7
March 1975	0.93	3 183	0
April 1975	0.68	3 029	5
May 1975	0.89	3 056	6
June 1975	0.72	3 043	9
July 1975	1.17	3 023	1
August 1975	1.10	2 995	3
September 1975	1.05	2 972	3
October 1975	1.23	2 924	2
November 1975	1.05	2 897	2
December 1975	1.17	2 875	0
February 1976	1.46	2 837	
April 1976	1.15	2 759	
June 1976	1.24	2 713	
August 1976	1.10	2 677	
October 1976	1.37	2 645	
December 1976	1.23	2 094	Separation of the factory's indirect division* sharply reduced the number of workers
January 1977	1.25	2 075	
February 1977	1.26	2 054	
March 1977	1.25	2 022	
April 1977	1.14	1 916	
May 1977	0.83	1 890	
June 1977	0.93	1 881	} Announced: based on the results of service performance during this period, even full-time workers were to be laid off
July 1977	0.73	1 860	
August 1977	0.96	1 807	
September 1977	1.01	1 827	
October 1977	0.93	1 745	
November 1977	0.93	1 718	150 workers with bad performance were laid off
December 1977	1.06	1 721	
January 1978	1.16	1 780	
February 1978	1.18	1 703	
March 1978	0.93	1 695	
April 1978	0.96	1 697	
May 1978	1.12	1 706	

* Indirect division: transportation, maintenance and repair of machines, printing, cafeteria, etc.

The absence rate again dropped below 1% in that month and remained the same for 7 consecutive months except one month. In October 1977, one hundred and fifty workers were dismissed due to their unsatisfactory services as shown in Table 1. By 1979 the factory may hope to get out of its difficult situation as the result of strenuous efforts made and the reduced number of employees which is now less than half that existing at the time of the oil crisis.

DISCUSSION

While the temporary factory closures continued, the absence rate increased above 1% from July 1975, and the authors presume that the increase was due to the fact that the workmen began to feel "at ease" after recovering from the stress of the sudden economic depression.

However, what made a far greater impact was the fear of becoming jobless which spread among full-time workers after the rationalization of the factory seemed almost finished, and which must have crushed the workmen's feeling of ease. The absence rate went down again and continued on the same level.

The factory belongs to the country's No.4 electric utilities industry, i.e. to one of the industries which have recently taken up the slack. Thus the drastic steps undertaken against the slack such as reducing the number of employees and other measures, may be expected being necessary to cease the slack. The latest rate of absenteeism in this factory (May 1978) exceeded 1% and, presumably, will continue at this level in the foreseeable future.

Japan has very stringent regulations regarding workmen's health and safety. Employees in all industries are ensured sick benefit schemes, protection against occupational diseases, and annual health checks, the exception is for minor, privately-owned factories or workshops and very small enterprises. Thus the rate of absenteeism in almost all industries is now about 1.5%.

The authors believe that the main and most persistent factor of reducing absenteeism is a high unemployment rate and a fear of losing their jobs arouses among workers.

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