

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews some of the research done on absenteeism. Most of this research has focused on the causes and correlates of absenteeism and utilises the conceptual model of Steers and Rhodes (1978). Although it has been the concern of both social and industrial psychologists for several decades and despite a great deal of work in this area, the relationship between absenteeism and job dissatisfaction on the one hand and sociocultural pressures on the other is far from clear.

#### 2.1 Major Influences on Employee Attendance

Steers and Rhodes (1978) developed a process model of employee attendance. This model incorporates both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism and is based on a review of 104 empirical studies on absenteeism.

The model attempts to examine in a systematic and comprehensive fashion the various influences on employee attendance behavior. Briefly stated, it is suggested that

an employee's attendance is largely a function of two important variables : (i) an employee's motivation to attend and (ii) an employee's ability to attend. Both of these factors are included in the schematic diagram presented in Figure 1.

A fundamental premise of the model is that an employee's motivation to come to work represents the primary influence on actual attendance, assuming one has the ability to attend (Herman, 1973; Locke, 1968). Based on available data, attendance motivation appears to be influenced by a combination of (i) satisfaction with the job situation (Box 4), and (ii) various sociocultural pressures to attend (Box 5). If an employee enjoys the work environment and the tasks that characterise his or her job situation, the employee is more likely to have a strong desire to come to work since the job is a pleasurable one. In addition, even if the job is not a pleasurable one, there are many conditions (pressures) under which it would be in the employees' best interest to attend. Both of these factors will be considered separately.

### 2.1.1 Satisfaction With the Job Situation

Employees are more satisfied when the job and the surrounding work environment meet their personal values and job expectations (Locke 1976, pp. 1279-1349). The job

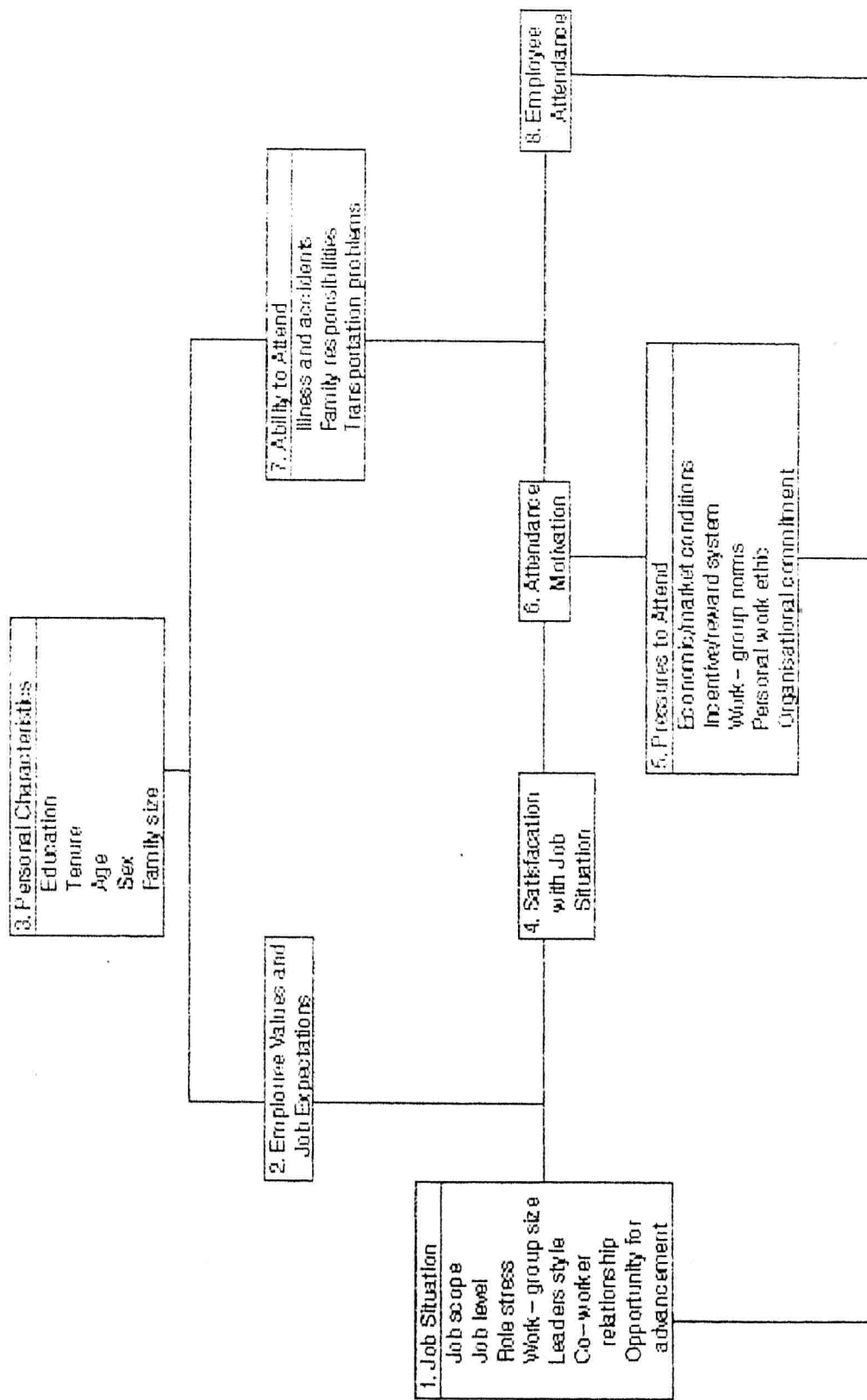


Figure 1: Major Influences on Employee Attendance

Source : Paul S. Goodman, Robert S. Atkin and Associates (1984), Absenteeism, San Francisco : Jossey - Bass

situation (Box 1) consists of those variables that characterise the nature of the job and the surrounding work environment. Included in the job situation are such variables as (a) job scope, (b) job level, (c) role stress, (d) work group size, (e) leaders style, (f) co-worker relations, and (g) opportunities for advancement. In essence, such variables strongly influence one's level of satisfaction which, in turn, influences attendance motivation.

### 2.1.2 Role of Employee Values & Job Expectations

A major influence on the extent to which employees experience satisfaction with the job situation are the values and expectations they have concerning the job (Box 2). It has been noted that as people come to work with differing values and job expectations, they value different features in a job and expect these features to be present to a certain degree in order to maintain membership.

To a large extent, these values and expectations are influenced by the personal characteristics and backgrounds of the employees (Box 3). For example, an employee with a high educational level may value and expect greater rewards than one with a low education level. Also, an employee with considerable seniority often values and expects certain perquisites because of his long tenure on

the job. These expectations may include higher grade jobs, greater status, or being first in line for promotion. Under such circumstances, we expect the individual to be satisfied when these expectations are met by the job situation. When expectations are not met, satisfaction with the job situation diminishes.

### 2.1.3 Pressures to Attend

The second major influence on attendance motivation relates to pressures to attend. These pressures may be economic, social, or personal in nature and are represented by Box 5.

Specifically, at least five major pressures can be identified:-

#### (i) Economic and Market Conditions

The general state of the economy and the job market place constraints on one's ability to change jobs. Consequently, in times of high unemployment, there may be increased pressure to maintain good attendance for fear of losing one's job.

#### (ii) Incentive/Reward Systems

Several aspects of the incentive/reward system have

been found to influence attendance behaviour. Lundquist (1958), Fried et al. (1972), Beatty and Beatty (1975), and Bernardin (1977) all found an inverse relationship between the wage rate and absenteeism. The rewards offered by the organisation must be seen as being both attainable and tied directly to attendance.

Lawler and Hackman (1969, pp. 47-471) experimentally introduced a bonus incentive plan to reward group attendance among a sample of part-time blue-collar employees. They found that employees working under the bonus plan had better attendance records than those not working under the plan. Hence, the adoption of a bonus incentive system to reward attendance appears to represent an important influence on subsequent attendance.

Studies which examined the role of punitive sanctions by management in controlling absenteeism showed mixed results. Baum and Youngblood (1975, pp. 688-64) and Seatter (1961, pp. 16-29) found that the use of stringent reporting and control procedures (for example, keeping detailed attendance records, requiring medical verifications for reported illnesses, strict disciplinary measures) was related to lower absence rates. On the other hand, Rosen and Turner (1971, pp. 296-301) found no such relationship.

Such contradictory results concerning the use of punitive sanctions suggest that more effective results may be achieved through positive reward systems rather than through punishment.

Other approaches to incentives and rewards relate to modifying the traditional work week. Golembiewski, Hilles, and Kagno (1974, pp. 503-532) reported a moderate decline in absenteeism following the introduction of "flexitime", in which hours worked can be altered somewhat to meet employee needs.

(iii) Work Group Norms

Pressure for or against attendance can also emerge from one's colleagues in the form of work group norms. Gibson (1966, pp. 107-133) concluded that if the norms of the group emphasize the importance of good attendance for the benefit of the group, increased attendance could be expected.

Likewise, the findings from Ilgen and Hollenback (1977) support this conclusion. Whyte (1969) stressed that this relationship would be expected to be particularly strong in groups with a high degree of work group cohesiveness. Lawler (1971) in his job-attractiveness model of employee motivation points out that members of highly cohesive groups

view coming to work to help one's co-workers as highly desirable; hence, job attendance is more attractive than absenteeism.

It should be remembered, however, that work group norms can also have a detrimental effect on attendance when they support periodic absenteeism and punish perfect attendance.

(iv) Personal Work Ethic

A further influence on attendance motivation is the personal value system that individuals have (Rokeach, 1973). Feldman (1974), Goodale (1973), Ilgen & Hollenback (1977) and Searls, Braucht, & Miskimins (1974) in their investigations noted a direct relationship between a strong work ethic and the propensity to come to work.

(v) Organisational Commitment

Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulin (1974) concluded that the concept of organisational commitment is related to the notion of a personal work ethic. Commitment represents an agreement on the part of the employees with the goals and objectives of an organisation and a willingness to work toward those goals.



In short, if an employee firmly believes in what the organisation is trying to achieve, he or she should be more motivated to attend and contribute toward those objectives.

This motivation may exist even if the employee does not enjoy the actual tasks required by the job (for example, a nurse's aide who may not like certain distasteful aspects of the job but who feels he or she is contributing to worthwhile public health goals). Steers (1977) and Smith (1977) in two separate samples of employees found commitment and attendance to be related.

#### 2.1.4 Ability to Attend

An employee's attendance motivation is quite different from his or her ability to attend. As shown in Figure 1, actual attendance is a result of both factors : attendance motivation and ability to attend.

At least three unavoidable limitations on attendance behaviour can be identified : (i) illness and accidents, (ii) family responsibilities, and (iii) transportation problems (Box 7).

(i) Illness and accidents

Poor health or injury clearly represent a primary cause of absenteeism (Hedges, 1973; Hill & Trist, 1955). Both illness and accidents are often associated with increase age (Baumgartel & Sabol, 1959; Cooper & Payne, 1965; del la Mare & Sergean, 1961; Martin, 1971). The influence of personal characteristics on ability to attend is shown in Box 3.

(ii) Family responsibility

The second constraint on attendance is often overlooked, namely, family responsibilities. As with health, this limitation, as it relates to attendance, is largely determined by the personal characteristics of the individual (sex, age and family size). In general, women as a group are absent more frequently than men (Yolles et al., 1975). It is found that much of the difference in absence rates can be attributed both to differences in the kinds of jobs women typically hold and in the traditional roles and responsibilities assigned to them (Beatty and Beatty, 1975). It is generally the wife or mother who stays home and cares for sick children. Hence, we would expect female absenteeism to increase with family size (Nicholson and Goodge, 1976).

It is interesting to note, however, that the available evidence suggests that the absenteeism rate for women declines throughout their work career (possibly because the family responsibilities associated with young children decline). For males, on the other hand, unavoidable absenteeism apparently increases with age (presumably because of health reasons), while available absenteeism does not (Nicholson et al., 1977).

(iii) Transportation problems

Some evidence suggests that difficulty in getting to work can at times influence actual attendance. This difficulty may take the form of travel distance from work, travel time to and from work, or weather conditions that impede traffic (Smith, 1977). Nicholson and Goodge (1976), however, found no relationship between either travel distance or availability of public transportation and absence. In general, however, increased difficulty in getting to work due to transportation problems does seem to represent one possible hindrance to attendance behaviour for some employees, even when the individual is motivated to attend.

## 2.2 The Revised Employee Attendance Model

The Steers and Rhodes model is difficult if not impossible to test in its entirety. A number of attempts have been made to examine empirically various aspects of the model. Hammer et al. (1981) found satisfaction and voluntary absenteeism to be positively related. Terborg, Davis and Smith (1980) found little support for the Steers and Rhodes model in a homogeneous population of retail stores. Frechette (1981) found some support in an explicit partial test of the model. Watson (1981) found mixed support for the model, with job satisfaction showing little effect on a time-lost measure of absence, while some demographic characteristics did show the anticipated effects.

Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson and Brown (1982) reviewed the Steers and Rhodes model and concluded that it failed to recognise the role of groups and organisations as a function of cultures and norms.

In order to attempt to overcome such problems and to recognise more recent research, Steers and Rhodes have formulated (see Figure 2) a simplified model that attempts to highlight what they believe to be the major clusters of variables that can affect attendance.

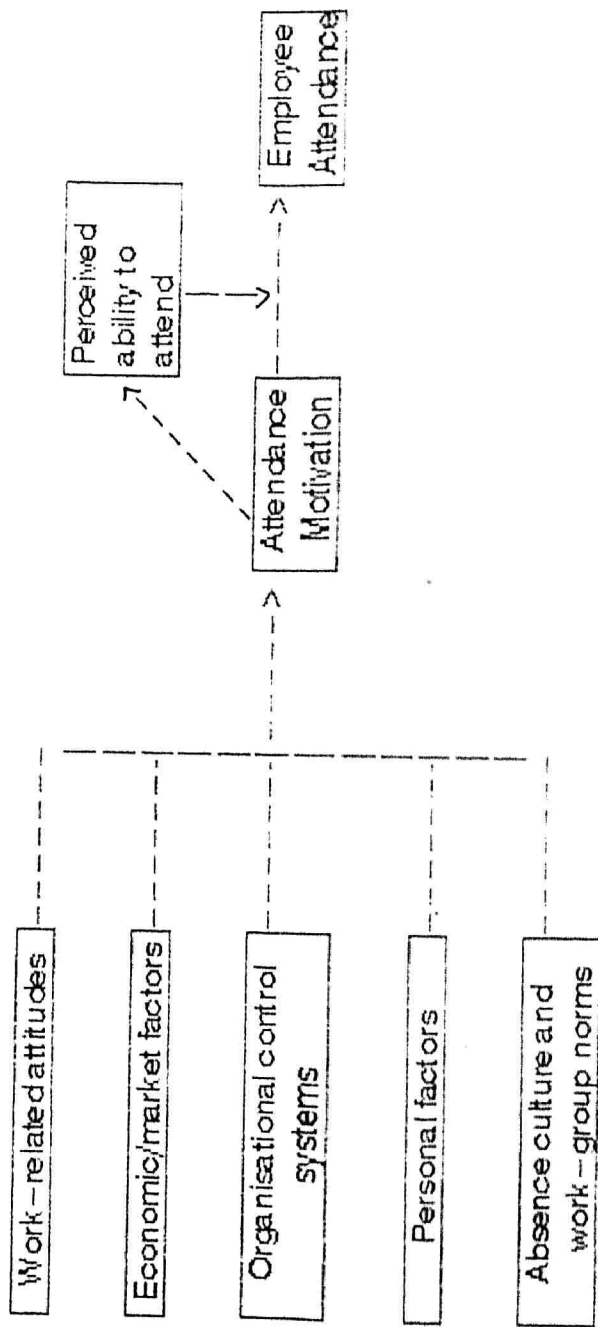


Figure 2 : An Organising Framework for Understanding Absence Research

Source : Paul S. Goodman, Robert S. Atkin and Associates (1984), Absenteeism, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Inc. Publishers, 261.