

Absenteeism and Overtime: Double Jeopardy

Absentéisme et surtemp

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Article abstract

This study investigated factors leading to absenteeism in a large auto plant employing about 1,000 workers. The hypotheses examined dealt with the effect on absenteeism of: the skill required for the job, the worker's age and health, and the base pay rate. The initial analysis proved opposite of what is usually found. An additional factor was examined: the ability of the worker to control the amount of overtime he worked. The data then showed that the worker who is able to achieve a set income for the fewest days in attendance by working overtime, uses this device to spend less time on the job. Ideas were also presented to show that positive reinforcement of good attendance can result in decreased absenteeism.

Absenteeism and Overtime: Double Jeopardy

**A. Mikalachki
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This study investigated factors leading to absenteeism in a large auto plant employing about 1,000 workers. The hypotheses examined dealt with the effect on absenteeism of: the skill required for the job, the worker's age and health, and the base pay rate. The initial analysis proved opposite of what is usually found. An additional factor was examined: the ability of the worker to control the amount of overtime he worked. The data then showed that the worker who is able to achieve a set income for the fewest days in attendance by working overtime, uses this device to spend less time on the job. Ideas were also presented to show that positive reinforcement of good attendance can result in decreased absenteeism.

It is always somewhat baffling, albeit exciting, to discover that one's research findings are in opposition to previous research results. Such was the position we found ourselves in after doing a literature survey of absenteeism followed by a study based on company records of automobile plant workers. Our sample consisted of 1024 male employees whose ages ranged from eighteen to sixty-seven.

Our initial results indicated that certain variables long-held to be determinants of absenteeism did not correlate as expected. In some cases, the results proved to be the opposite of what was expected. Re-examination of our data from a different viewpoint led us to the discovery that one parameter dominated all the others, thus changing the form of absenteeism. This overriding parameter is overtime; more specifically it is the worker's ability to control the amount of overtime he works.

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Absenteeism has been defined as «one symptom of the individual's total adjustment to the job situation» (Yolles et. al., 1975, p. 2). It can further be classified as excused or unexcused; however, it is commonly understood as unexcused, meaning that the worker does not attend work and does not give prior notice to his supervisor. This paper reports on the factors affecting unexcused absenteeism, hereafter referred to as absenteeism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In today's industrial organizations, absenteeism is commanding the attention of all management levels. A recent study estimated the costs of absenteeism to be between \$110 and \$300 per employee per year (Johnson and Peterson, 1975). Another study estimated the costs to increase at the rate of \$150,000 per year for each percentage increase in the absentee rate in a plant of 1,000 employees (Hawk, 1976). These costs are constantly rising due to the effect of inflation and increasingly-generous benefit plans. The cost of absenteeism is a function of lost productivity, the hiring of extra help, the training of extra help, overtime, fringe benefit plans and loss of sales and profits (Hawk, 1976; Shore, September, 1975).

The factors affecting absenteeism can be grouped under three broad headings (Yolles et. al., 1975): the environment, the organization and the individual.

The Environment

Of the three factors, the environment is probably the most important. Absenteeism is significantly affected by society's attitudes towards work. Over the past two decades, absenteeism has increased due to such attitudinal changes as the growing importance of the individual in contrast to work, the increasing amount of emphasis on leisure time and activities and the increasingly-pervasive value of «to get more for less» (Yolles et. al., 1975).

Work is viewed as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Work is only one of many ways in which the individual's ego can be expressed (Yolles et al., 1975). In conjunction with the relatively declining value of work, leisure time activities grow in importance. The do-it-yourself vogue and the upsurge in sporting and camping activities attest to the growing importance of non-work activities which are socially-approved and ego satisfying. Success in non-work activities

has become increasingly more important than success at work (Yolles et. al., 1975).

The attitude to get more for less is affecting the work place and contributing to absenteeism. Contract negotiations will reflect this attitude in that fringe benefits are gaining increasing importance, as are demands for increased paid vacations, a shorter work week, longer coffee breaks, guaranteed sick leave and the like. The demands are supported by society's belief that the worker has an inalienable right to get more for less.

The reduced value of work, the increased value of leisure time and activities and the belief that the worker is owed something reflect an anti-work environment (Yolles et. al., 1975). Absenteeism is accepted and even expected by North American society.

The Organization

Organizational variables such as size, job content and relations, and reward system affect absenteeism. Studies have shown that as organizational size increases, absenteeism also increases (Ingham, 1970).

Much has been written about job content and relations. Workers need challenging tasks to maintain interest in their work and thus be induced to avoid absenteeism. The more boring, repetitive and machine-paced the tasks, the greater is the job dissatisfaction and absenteeism (Beatty 1975; Ingham, 1970; Legge, 1974 and 1975; Shore, October 1975; Mikalachki, 1975; and Herzberg, 1966). In addition to challenging tasks, workers demand greater participation in decisions which affect them. Participation in decision-making results in recognition for the worker and a feeling of personal worth and self respect on the job. Thus worker recognition leads to job satisfaction and reduced absenteeism (Yolles et. al., 1975).

Being well-integrated in his work environment also leads the worker to work satisfaction. Open communications with supervisors and peers can result in job satisfaction and group cohesion both of which contribute to reduced absenteeism (Mikalachki 1969; Ingham, 1970; and Hawk, 1976).

The organization also provides economic rewards which significantly affect absenteeism. These rewards take the form of wages and fringe benefits. They are further augmented for absent employees by unemployment insurance, supplementary unemployment benefits, health and sickness insurance and workmen's compensation payments. Eco-

nomic rewards affect absenteeism positively and negatively. On the one hand, as rewards for attending work, such as hourly pay increase, and each day means a greater loss in earnings, absenteeism will decrease (Ingham, 1970). On the other hand, as the rewards for not attending work, such as health and sickness benefits, increase, the employee is encouraged to be absent (*The Economist*, August, 1976).

The Individual

The social conditioning, the physical and mental stress encountered and the financial independence of the individual affect his absenteeism. In terms of social conditioning, age and education are related to absenteeism. The greater the worker's education (Shore, September, 1975) and the younger his age (Beatty, 1975, Yolles et. al., 1975), the greater the absenteeism. It would appear that younger, more educated workers develop values which reflect negatively on work (see above, leisure time activities).

Physical and mental stress also affect absenteeism. The individual's home life and living style is often reflected on the job. Such issues as family conflict, leisure activities, moonlighting, alcohol and drug abuse will affect attendance patterns (Beatty, 1975). In addition, the physical health of the worker has an obvious inverse relation to absenteeism (Johnson, and Peterson, 1975; Yolles et. al., 1975). More specifically, females are found to experience greater health problems, due in part to menstrual cycles, and consequently are absent more often (Hedges, 1975; Yolles et. al., 1975).

The individual's financial independence affects absenteeism. Individuals in desperate need of the financial rewards accruing from the job exhibit low absenteeism. Those with greater financial independence have considerably higher absenteeism (Yolles et. al., 1975).

Figure 1 diagrammatically represents the configuration of individual, organizational and environmental interrelations which affect absenteeism. It essentially points out that young, educated workers who want more for less, who experience mental and physical stress, who are financially secure and rewarded for absence through auxiliary payments, and who experience boring jobs and poor management and peer relations will tend to be absent.

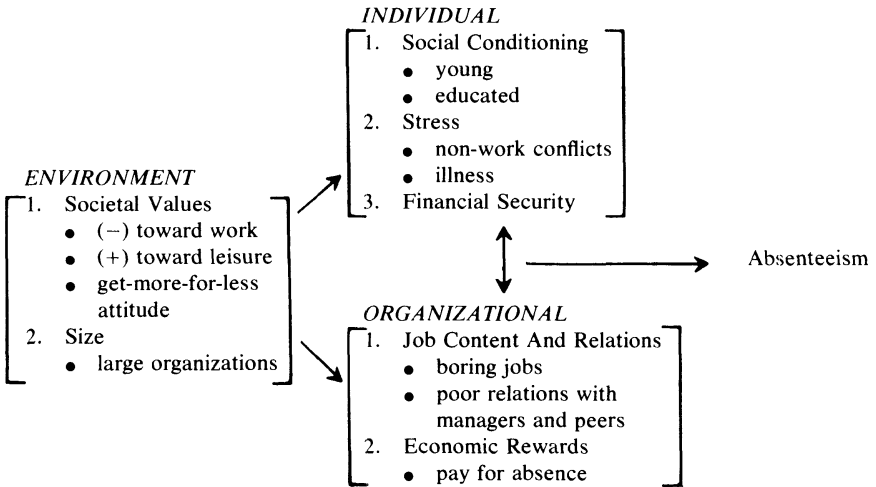
FOCUS OF EMPIRICAL STUDY

To add to the literature survey, we conducted an empirical study of absenteeism in a large automobile plant employing about 1,000 workers. The minimum estimated cost of absenteeism in this plant is over \$680,000 per year; a more realistic estimate, including inefficiencies and opportunity costs, would be in excess of \$1 million.

During the time of the study, the company was in protracted contract negotiations. The delicate nature of negotiations resulted in management's not allowing the authors to conduct interviews with plant workers. Consequently, the study was restricted to record card information.¹

FIGURE 1

Factors Affecting Absenteeism



The study's general focus was to gather more information on the factors contributing to absenteeism. More specifically the following hypotheses were investigated:

- (i) The greater the skill required in the job, the lower the absenteeism. (Ingham, 1970; Mikalachki, 1975, Herzberg, 1966, Beatty, 1975; Shore, October, 1975).

¹ This information was augmented by the intimate knowledge of the plant possessed by one of the authors who worked there for six years.

- (ii) The younger the worker, the higher the absenteeism. (Beatty, 1975; Yolles et. al., 1975).
- (iii) The better the worker's health, the lower the absenteeism. (Johnson and Peterson, 1975; Yolles et. al., 1975).
- (iv) The greater the economic rewards from the job, the lower the absenteeism. (Ingham, 1970; Legge, 1974; Legge, 1975).

The above hypotheses, the general research question of what factors contribute to absenteeism, and the limitation of access to only recorded data served as parameters for this study.

FINDINGS

The data collected and reported upon is for the year 1975. Absentee rates were calculated by dividing the hours absent by the total hours that should have been worked and then multiplying by 100. Each hypotheses will be reported upon.

Skill Required in Job and Absenteeism

The skill required in a job was determined by the worker's control over his task — does he set the work pace? Is he responsible for making important decisions? These skill options are designed into jobs. The automobile plant can be classified into three skill groupings: Production, Support Staff and Skilled Trades. These groupings can easily be ranked according to the degree of skill required. The Production group requires the least skill; the work pace is predefined, highly repetitive and requires few decisions by the workers. In contrast, the Skilled Trades require the most skill. The tasks are man-paced, continually changing and require frequent decisions by the workers. The Support Staff ranks somewhere between Production and Skilled Trades in terms of skill required.

Given the hypotheses that the greater the skill required in the job content, the lower the absenteeism, it was predicted that the Production group would have the highest absenteeism and Skilled Trades the lowest. Table 1 shows just the reverse. Production has the lowest absenteeism rate at 5.20% and Skilled Trades the highest absenteeism rate at 7.63%.

Age and Absenteeism

The record cards provided birth dates for plant workers. From this raw data, weighted averages for each department were determined and then related to the respective absenteeism rates.²

TABLE 1

Skill Required in Job Content and Absenteeism

<i>Department</i>	<i># employees</i>	<i># hrs. Worked</i>	<i># hrs. Absent</i>	<i>% Absent</i>
A. Production				
1. Machine Operations	189	85867	2976	3.35
2. Machine Operations	207	94982	4664	4.68
3. Assembly Room	310	127540	9284	6.78
Total	706	308389	16924	5.20
B. Support Staff				
1. Inspection	51	25985	1304	4.78
2. Janitors	56	24052	1880	7.25
3. Material Handling	49	21465	1096	4.86
4. Stores	17	8618	576	6.26
Total	173	80120	4856	5.72
C. Skilled Trades				
1. Maintenance	60	27863	2128	7.10
2. Tool Room	30	13906	1248	8.97
3. Tool Grinding	25	10826	728	6.30
4. Machine Repair	30	13671	1376	9.14
Total	145	66266	5480	7.63
D. Total Plant	1024	454775	27260	5.66

Given the hypothesis that the younger the worker, the higher the absenteeism, Production would have the greatest absenteeism and Support Staff and Skilled Trades the least (Table 2). This is not borne out by the data. Production has the least absenteeism at 5.20% followed by Support Staff at 5.72% and Skilled Trades at 7.63%.

Health and Absenteeism

Data regarding health is very difficult to obtain. After many false starts, we determined health by the number of visits made to First Aid, the assumption being that the poorer the worker's health the

² Individual correlations were not made because of the difficulty of obtaining individual absenteeism data. Absenteeism data is recorded by department. The task of breaking it down to individual workers was prohibitive.

more frequent the visits. A weighted average for such visits was calculated and then related to absenteeism (Table 3).

Given the hypotheses that the better the worker's health, the lower the absenteeism, Support Staff should have the least absenteeism and Production the most. The data shows that Skilled Trades have the most absenteeism at 7.63% and Production the least absenteeism at 5.20%.

TABLE 2
Age and Absenteeism

<i>Department</i>	<i># Employees</i>	<i>Absent Rate (%)</i>	<i>Average Age</i>
A. Production			
1. Machine Operations	189	3.35	44.9
2. Machine Operations	207	4.68	41.5
3. Assembly Room	310	6.78	34.6
Total	706	5.20	39.7
B. Support Staff			
1. Inspection	51	4.78	45.7
2. Janitors	56	7.25	42.7
3. Material Handling	49	4.86	49.8
4. Stores, etc.	17	6.26	49.6
Total	173	5.72	46.3
C. Skilled Trades			
1. Maintenance	60	7.10	41.0
2. Tool Room	30	8.97	45.2
3. Tool Grinding	25	6.30	52.0
4. Machine Repair	30	9.14	43.3
Total	145	7.63	44.2
D. Total Plant	1024	5.66	41.5

Economic Rewards and Absenteeism

Part of the economic rewards are made up of base rates of pay. These base rates are determined periodically through contract negotiations between management and the union. A weighted average of these base rates was calculated for each grouping and related to absenteeism rates (Table 4).

Given the hypotheses that the greater the economic rewards in the job, the lower the absenteeism, Skilled Trades should have the least absenteeism and Support Staff the most. The data shows that Skilled

Trades have the most absenteeism, 7.63%, and Support Staff the second most, 5.72%

TABLE 3

Health and Absenteeism

<i>Department</i>	<i># Employees</i>	<i>Absent Rate (%)</i>	<i>1976 # Visits per Person</i>
A. Production			
1. Machine Operations	189	3.35	16.68
2. Machine Operations	207	4.68	18.87
3. Assembly Room	310	6.78	22.96
Total	706	5.20	20.04
B. Support Staff			
1. Inspection	51	4.78	14.96
2. Janitors	56	7.25	15.83
3. Material Handling	49	4.86	13.53
4. Stores, etc.	17	6.26	11.67
Total	173	5.72	14.48
C. Skilled Trades			
1. Maintenance	60	7.10	19.16
2. Tool Room	30	8.97	17.70
3. Tool Grinding	25	6.30	13.20
4. Machine Repair	30	9.14	21.29
Total	145	7.63	18.20
D. Total Plant	1024	5.66	18.94

A RE-EVALUATION

The fact that none of the hypotheses were supported by the data necessitated a re-evaluation.³ Here is where the experience in the plant by one of the authors was most helpful. He felt that the data were being contaminated by the economic rewards of overtime available to skilled workers. Overtime is paid at a rate of 1 ½ times the base rate for all time in excess of 40 hours worked. For Sundays the rate is double time. Skilled workers had a major say as to when and how often they would work overtime. We felt that the rate of absenteeism for skilled workers could be explained by their working overtime in lieu of regular hours. If this were so, there would be a correlation between rates of overtime and absenteeism. Overtime was defined as:

³ Whenever work groups within departments could be used to correlate to absenteeism, the same lack of support was found for the hypotheses.

TABLE 4

Base Rates and Absenteeism

<i>Department</i>	<i># employees</i>	<i>Absent Rate (%)</i>	<i>Average Base Rate (\$)</i>
A. Production			
1. Machine Operations	189	3.35	5.57
2. Machine Operations	207	4.68	5.47
3. Assembly Room	310	6.78	5.44
Total	706	5.20	5.48
B. Support Staff			
1. Inspection	51	4.78	5.52
2. Janitors	56	7.25	5.18
3. Material Handling	49	4.86	5.45
4. Stores, etc.	17	6.26	5.43
Total	173	5.72	5.38
C. Skilled Trades			
1. Maintenance	60	7.10	6.74
2. Tool Room	30	8.97	6.93
3. Tool Grinding	25	6.30	6.82
4. Machine Repair	30	9.14	6.84
Total	145	7.63	6.81
D. Total Plant	1024	5.66	5.65

$$\text{Rate of O.T.} = \frac{\text{number of man hours worked on Saturday and Sunday}}{(\text{Number of employees in department}) \times (8 \text{ hours per day}) \times (2 \text{ days})}$$

The overtime was calculated and related to absenteeism (Table 5).

Given the belief that overtime significantly affects absenteeism, we expected that Production would have the least absenteeism and Skilled Trades the most. The data supported this assumption: Production had the least absenteeism, 5.20% and Skilled Trades has the most, 7.63%.

Has overtime so affected the absenteeism data that it has overshadowed the variables of job skill, age, health and economic rewards? To answer this question, we neutralized overtime as a factor by doing a sub-analysis of the Production Department. This department is made up of 706 employees whose opportunity for overtime is determined by their supervisors and the work flows, not by the workers themselves.

A review of the Production Department absenteeism data and skill required in job content, age, health and base rates (tables 2, 3, 4, and 5) shows:

- (i) The greater the skill required in the job⁴, the less the absenteeism.
- (ii) The younger the worker, the greater the absenteeism.
- (iii) The greater the visits to first aid (illness), the greater the absenteeism.
- (iv) The greater the base rate (economic rewards), the less the absenteeism.

With the opportunity for worker-determined overtime neutralized, the hypotheses guiding this study and documented in the literature survey were supported.

TABLE 5
Overtime and Absenteeism

<i>Department</i>	<i># employees</i>	<i>Absent Rate (%)</i>	<i>O. T. Rate (%)</i>
A. Production			
1. Machine Operations	189	3.35	39.01
2. Machine Operations	207	4.68	35.98
3. Assembly Room	310	6.78	18.27
Total	706	5.20	29.14
B. Support Staff			
1. Inspection	51	4.78	43.92
2. Janitors	56	7.25	42.06
3. Material Handling	49	4.86	37.92
4. Stores	17	6.26	38.47
Total	173	5.72	40.72
C. Skilled Trades			
1. Maintenance	60	7.10	58.94
2. Tool Room	30	8.97	50.22
3. Tool Grinding	25	6.30	60.56
4. Machine Repair	30	9.14	53.19
Total	145	7.63	56.74
D. Total Plant	1024	5.66	34.43

Thus, the most significant finding in this study is the effect of overtime on absenteeism. A number of explanations can be made for this phenomenon. The one that appears most useful combines societal

⁴ The assembly jobs are less skilled than the machine operations.

values with the opportunity to avoid work at no cost. In a society which values work negatively and leisure activities positively, it is not surprising that workers will want to spend the least amount of time on the job for a fixed income. By working overtime and taking regular days off, the skilled worker achieves the goal of earning a set income for the fewest days in attendance.

This pattern is well-known in other cultures. In Peru, for example, a North American manager doubled the agricultural workers' daily salaries, believing that it would increase productivity and morale. The workers were paid daily, and the result of the wage increase was that no one showed up for work on Thursday: there was no need, as the workers earned the money needed during the first three week days. A similar problem occurs in Sweden, where unemployment insurance and sick benefits are so generous that at times it is more economical to stay home than go to work (*The Economist*, August 1976). It now appears in North America that the worker's alienation from the job, the rewards available even if the worker is absent (overtime) and the interest in non-work activities is stimulating absenteeism.

The second general finding of this study is the incongruence between workers' values and organizational demands. Young, educated workers do not want to engage in repetitive, machine-paced and non-involving tasks. Their avoidance of these tasks can be as simple as going to First Aid (a temporary withdrawal) or as complex as devious overtime practices and union pressures for reduced work weeks and increased fringe benefits.

CONCLUSION

One of the major problems facing managers is to determine how absenteeism is reinforced by company and governmental practices. Managers dealing with absenteeism should assume that it is a behavior that is intensified by either organizational or environmental forces. Some managers have worked within this assumption and have set up practices that reinforce attendance (Luthans, 1976), such as:

- (i) *Lottery System*: All employees with perfect attendance and punctuality records receive one chance on a monthly draw of \$100. In this company, the absenteeism rate decreased 30% in less than one year (Johnson and Wallin, 1976).
- (ii) *Poker Game*: Each departmental employee chooses a single card from a deck for each day of the week he arrives on time. Each

week, the highest five-card poker hand in each department wins \$20. In this company, absenteeism dropped from 3.01% to 2.31% in just three months (Pedalino and Gambro, 1974).

- (iii) *Hat Trick*: Names are drawn from a hat-full of all departmental employees' names at the end of each week. The draw continues until the name of an employee with a perfect record is drawn. That employee receives a \$100 award. In several months, absenteeism dropped from 10% to 5% (*Financial Post*, October 1975).

Thus, positive reinforcement can significantly affect attendance patterns.

The negative attitude towards work, coupled with the notion of getting more for less is resulting in greater demands for fringe benefits from companies, and non-work pay from governments. As well, this study has shown that workers who can determine their own overtime sometimes manipulate the situation to obtain more money for less regular work.

These worker attitudes affect organizational efficiency. The greater benefits paid out to workers may occur with no increase in productivity, with disastrous consequences for inflation and international trade. The challenge for managers then, is to determine and eliminate the rewards for absence while developing and instituting rewards for attendance.

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Absentéisme et surtemps

Une étude récente (Johnson et Peterson, 1975) estime le coût de l'absentéisme pour les employeurs entre \$110.00 et \$300.00 par employé par année. On peut regrouper les facteurs qui affectent l'absentéisme sous trois grandes rubriques: l'environnement, l'entreprise et l'individu. La valeur positive du travail décline et l'intérêt pour les loisirs s'accroît. Le succès dans les activités libres apparaît plus important que le succès au travail. Ainsi, il s'est créé une ambiance peu propice au travail. Certaines variables à l'intérieur de l'entreprise, comme ses dimensions, le contenu des tâches, les relations entre les employés et le régime de rétribution influence l'absentéisme. Il en est de même de l'âge de l'employé, de son degré d'instruction et de son conditionnement social.

Se fondant sur les points précédents et les conclusions inspirées par les études sur l'absentéisme, les auteurs ont utilisé les cartes de présence des salariés pour formuler les quatre hypothèses suivantes:

- 1° Plus la tâche exige de qualifications, moins l'absentéisme est marqué. (Ingham, 1970; Mikalachki, 1975; Herzberg, 1966; Beatty 1975; Shore, octobre 1975.)
- 2° Plus l'employé est jeune, plus l'absentéisme est élevé. (Beatty, 1975; Yolles et autres, 1975.)
- 3° Plus la tâche est rémunérée, plus l'absentéisme est bas (Ingham, 1970; Legge, 1974; Legge 1975.)

Les données ne confirment aucune des hypothèses précédentes.

Celles-ci ont été analysées de nouveau en se fondant sur la variable suivante: la possibilité pour l'employé d'exercer un contrôle sur les heures supplémentaires qu'il lui est possible d'exécuter.

Lorsque les travailleurs n'ont que peu à dire en matière d'heures supplémentaires, l'hypothèse ci-dessus se vérifie. C'est quand les travailleurs peuvent influencer les heures supplémentaires que les données deviennent faussées.

Le contrôle du travailleur sur les heures supplémentaires exerce un poids considérable sur l'absentéisme. Dans une société où la valeur du travail décline et où l'intérêt pour les loisirs s'accroît, les travailleurs ne veulent que passer le moins de temps possible au travail en vue d'en retirer un revenu fixe. En faisant des heures supplémentaires et en s'absentant les jours de travail régulier, le travailleur atteint le but recherché, c'est-à-dire qu'il touche un meilleur revenu pour une période de travail plus courte.

Les chefs d'entreprise, qui ont à affronter le problème de l'absentéisme, reconnaissent qu'il s'agit là d'une façon d'agir qui est renforcée par l'entreprise elle-même, par l'attitude individuelle et par les circonstances ambiantes. Quelques-uns ont compris le problème et mis au point des trucs qui raffermissent l'assiduité. En voici quelques-uns:

Le système loterie: Tous les employés qui ont un dossier d'assiduité et de ponctualité parfait courent la chance d'obtenir une récompense mensuelle de cent dollars. Dans cette entreprise, le taux d'absentéisme a baissé de trente pour cent en moins d'un an. (Johnson et Wallin, 1976).

La partie de poker. Chaque employé d'un service choisit une carte dans un paquet chaque jour de la semaine, celui qui a la meilleure main dans chaque service gagne vingt dollars. Dans cette société, l'absentéisme a baissé de 3.01 à 2.31 pour cent en trois mois. (Pedalino et Gambro, 1974).

Le truc du chapeau. On tire les noms des employés de tous les services à la fin de chaque semaine. Le tirage continue jusqu'à ce que l'on tombe sur le nom d'un employé dont le dossier est parfait. Cet employé touche cent dollars. En un certain nombre de mois, l'absentéisme est tombé de dix à cinq pour cent. (Financial Post, octobre 1975).

Ces méthodes montrent que le renforcement pratique de l'assiduité bien comprise peut avoir une influence certaine sur les habitudes de présence et de ponctualité au travail.