

Presenteeism - what to do when your employees are present but not productive

 By [Michelle Moss](#)

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'Presenteeism' was initially defined as the practice of going to work despite being unwell, leading to reduced productivity. The term was coined by Dr Gary Cooper in the mid-90's to describe the instances where employees show up for work even if they are too sick, stressed, or distracted to be productive.



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Our understanding of presenteeism has expanded now to being at work even when you are healthy but, for whatever reason, are not sufficiently productive.

How do you identify them - and how do you manage them?

Absenteeism is easy to identify because the employee is simply not at work. Presenteeism is much more difficult to identify.

Very few people wake up in the morning and deliberately aim to go to work but not be productive, unless there is a very good reason behind this. There can be as many reasons for this as there are people.

Here are some possible symptoms of presenteeism to watch out for:

- **Slow delivery** – taking longer than can be reasonably expected to complete a task.
Many excuses are given and there is a lot of finger pointing when these people are asked about slow delivery. Understand the real reason for slow delivery, for example:
 - It could be because of admin overload (forced to spend too much time on the paperwork rather than doing the actual task).
 - Or it could be because of technology overload (people spending too much time connected to social media and not enough time focusing on their work).
- **Poor quality of work** – the task is eventually done, but with a ‘don’t care’ attitude and the quality is not up to standard. The employee’s work cannot be trusted and somebody else needs to check the work before it can be submitted or sent to a client.
- **Disinterest in their work** – being in the right company but in the wrong job, or being in the right job but in the wrong company.
- **Compensation** – the employee may feel they are not getting paid enough for the amount of work they are expected to do.
- **Personal / family problems** – an employee may be experiencing tremendous personal problems outside the workplace such as a sick child, or a divorce and they are unlikely to be able to maintain their level of performance during such a time. They still need their job, however, and the result may be presenteeism.
- **Burn-out** – a prolonged experience of too many responsibilities, not enough time to complete everything; always working overtime; inability to say ‘no’ to requests for assistance; no recognition for the extra effort they have put in. It eventually becomes too much and they give up.
- **Fear in people who are genuinely sick but come to work anyway** – there has been a drive to lower absenteeism and give rewards for not taking sick leave. This could create, in genuinely ill people, a fear of losing their job (the economy is merciless and the perception is that sick people are a liability), fear of falling behind with the workload, fear of looking uncommitted to the company and a constant need to prove themselves to managers.

It is critically important to avoid assumptions and to ‘do your homework’ when faced with a suspected case of presenteeism.

Be sure the presenteeism is not being confused with lack of ability. It is important to understand if the individual is able to do the job. It may be that they are underskilled and cannot do the job, and not necessarily that they are presenting with ‘presenteeism’ symptoms.

How do you work with them to improve their performance?

The focus has shifted to employee engagement – the emotional commitment an employee has to the organisation. As the global war for talent continues, companies are competing to attract and retain top talent. The competition is fierce and just as it makes good business sense to focus externally on who your customers are and what your customers want, so it is now imperative to also focus internally on employee engagement.

To have engaged and productive employees, first identify the culture of your company. Many companies will write in their

annual reports and splash all over their website that 'our people are our greatest asset' and yet the reality is that their employees are disempowered, disregarded, dislocated and disengaged because of the way things are done in the company (this is one of the definitions of organisational culture).

Employees are likely to feel most valued and engaged when:

- They understand how their job adds value, fits into the greater organisation and aligns with the business strategy;
- When they are given decision making responsibility;
- When they are encouraged to contribute;
- When they have a good relationship with their manager and their colleagues;
- When they are given the opportunity to grow and develop their competencies leading to promotion and career advancement.

What to do?

Communicate with your employees, conduct a culture survey, or be even more specific and conduct an employee engagement survey. If you are going wrong at a culture level, some work will need to be done to start changing the culture of the company and making it more conducive for highly productive, engaged employees.

Second, connect personally with your employees. Understand their strengths and their blind spots. Understand their unique contribution to the business, and which positions in the organisation suit their skill set best. But also understand what specific factors would foster their engagement and thus their productivity. Flexible working hours for the talented marketing director with small children, praise and recognition for the millennial who revamped your corporate social responsibility programme, a challenging stretch assignment for a young specialist, financial reward for the mid-career manager who is building his nest-egg for retirement.

Of course these are stereotypical examples but research shows there is a business case for employee engagement. As employees become more engaged, their productivity and performance increases and the bottom line of the business as a whole benefits.

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