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## Article

# Factors contributing to work-related absenteeism during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Factors Contributing to Work-Related Absenteeism during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:** Workplace absenteeism is a complex issue that can be caused by various factors which include job dissatisfaction, organizational environment, or personal problems. The study aims to create a brief profile of absenteeism in companies operating in Iasi in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. A quantitative study was conducted to shape the profile of absenteeism, using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. Findings revealed that employees working in Iasi are prone to absent as a result of attitudinal factors, in particular, autonomy linked to decision making. Organizational factors did not have a significant contribution regarding absenteeism because managers offered support when employees faced difficulties. Working for a living was the personal factor that stood out; this thing being mainly influenced by the current pandemic period. The stress of being laid off or displaced led many employees to ignore professional development. COVID-19 influenced the employees' decision to miss a workday, the fear of getting infected, or the stress related to the pandemic outlined a behavior known as presenteeism or digital absenteeism for those that worked from home. Implementing social distancing rules prevented physical absenteeism, employees perceived the workplace as a safe environment.

**Keywords:** absenteeism; presenteeism; workplace; teleworking; pandemic; COVID-19; Human Resource Management.

### Introduction

Human resources management is receiving increased importance in business over time, with many studies showing that there is a strong link between the performance of the organization and human resources practices. In addition to recruitment, selection, and retention of staff, HR plays a crucial role in formulating policies, implementing practices and systems that influence employees' behavior, attitude, and performance. Human resource practices also encourage the development of long-lasting relationships based on trust between the employee and the employer, which can strengthen the benefits that the organization has. In the current economic context, companies are required to increase productivity while reducing costs. Absenteeism, low job performance, low wages, and distrust shown by managers are shaping behaviors that negatively affect the productivity and the efficiency of organizations (Ozimek, 2020).

Absenteeism is a problem that has been affecting organizations for many years, causing companies costly problems that led to delays in production or low-quality services. Previous research on absenteeism focused on variables that lead an employee to be absent from work, such as motivation and satisfaction in the workplace. Absenteeism generates higher labor costs, reduced productivity, and can lead to increased indiscipline among employees. The absenteeism rate is influenced by the morale of the employees and employers should worry when absenteeism increases in frequency or duration. (Johns, 2002). The importance of studying absenteeism comes from the fact that a better understanding of this behavior will lead to better management of it (Mathis & Jackson, 2004). This is reflected in the changes to presence policies. Absence management policies outline issues related to attending, ways of informing the manager when the employee is

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late at work, triggers of absenteeism, and methods applicable to spontaneous, voluntary absenteeism.

This study focuses on the phenomenon of absenteeism in terms of factors that may cause employees to be absent from work: organizational, attitudinal, and personal (Muchinsky, 1977). It also takes into account absenteeism and presence in the context of the pandemic, as well as how absenteeism management policies have changed to support companies' efforts to ensure the safest possible working environment. The study aims to create a brief profile of absenteeism in companies operating in Iasi in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. Focusing on the problem of absenteeism during the pandemic led to the following research question:

*What are the factors contributing to employees' work-related absenteeism during the Coronavirus pandemic?*

## **Literature review**

### ***Perspectives on work-related absenteeism***

Since 1950 researchers have analyzed absenteeism from the workplace, which is one of the most common and oldest incidents that could arise at work. Researches regarding this behavior support the management of companies in an attempt to minimize the effects of absenteeism on the company, productivity, and profits (Gosselin, Lemyre & Corneil, 2013). There is no universal definition of workplace absenteeism. This phenomenon is defined differently, each passing through their perspective the profile of the absent employee, what caused the absenteeism, and the impact on companies, individuals, and communities. A large proportion of researchers characterize absenteeism as a lack of employee presence from working hours. (Kristensen, Juhl, Eskildsen, Nielsen, Frederiksen, & Bisgaard, 2006).

Cooper and Locke (2007) define absenteeism as a lack of physical presence from the workplace while there is a social expectation for the employee to be there. Absenteeism is a universal problem that affects all organizations, although it differs from case to case. According to Johns (2002), an absence refers to the period during which an employee is not at work while working hours or is granted sick leave. On the other hand, absenteeism in Mason and Griffin's vision (2003) represents a failure to be present or to remain at work, depending on how the work program is carried out, for whatever reason. Sikorki (2001) defines absenteeism as an employee who is not present or participating, absent, inattentive, or concerned with other tasks within an organization. The definitions provided by the first three authors have in common the physical absence of the employee from the workplace, while Sikorki (2001) considers that absenteeism can also occur when the employee is physically present at the workplace, outlining a behavior that will be noticed in a few years as presenteeism.

Absenteeism generally damages companies, but in some cases, the absence of an employee brings a more significant benefit than their presence. An example could be a pilot or doctor who is physically or mentally unable to carry out the job at work or to concentrate.

Employees use a variety of reasons to excuse their delay or absence, and it is up to managers or group leaders to distinguish whether the reason invoked is genuine. Senel and Senel (2012) consider that in any case, when the employee consciously makes this decision for other reasons than their health or wellness that constitutes absenteeism. "Planned" absences are those absences that are brought to the attention of the employer at least two days in advance and which do not cause breaks in working hours. It is essential to distinguish between the type of absences mentioned above and unplanned absenteeism, which can be unpredictable both in terms of the duration of the incident, its frequency, and the person who will be absent. Spontaneous absenteeism causes

disturbances in the working patterns, confusion among employees who have to take charge of another person's tasks, and not least, it is costly. This type of absenteeism is also referred to as 'culpable' absenteeism, reflecting the employee's full fault for a situation in which he is entirely in control (Nel, Gerber, Haasbroek, Schultz, Sono, & Werner, 2008). According to Nel et al. (2008) planned and excessive absenteeism is evidence of a permissive organizational culture, in which employees often abuse the increased level of flexibility. In this case, 'culpable' medical absenteeism may also be mentioned, which occurs when the individual contacts the manager and brings to his attention medical problems arising after long weekends or after certain holidays, as a result of which he or she cannot go to work on that day. In the same tone, 'delinquent' absenteeism tends to follow a repetitive pattern, which can be easily recognized, taking place on certain days of the week or in the extension of holidays or weekends, while medical holidays with justified reasons occur occasionally and take longer. Creating and maintaining records allows the employer to distinguish between justified sick leave and the abuse of this.

Many organizations resort to disciplinary action trying to solve absenteeism problems, while others offer incentives, facilities, or flexible working hours. With a fast-changing working environment, some employees can work from home or in virtual offices, which means that the measurement of absences will become increasingly difficult (Kristensen et al., 2006). Most literature highlights that organizations should have presence or absence policies that explain how they should be reported and how the absence should be managed (Whitaker, 2001). Summing up the points of view presented above, it can be emphasized that the problem of absenteeism is a multi-directional phenomenon, involving several specialists from different areas of management.

In contrast to absenteeism, presenteeism has been recently seen as a significant factor affecting organizational performance (Gosselin, Lemyre & Corneil, 2013). Presenteeism can be defined as the decision to go to work ill or with a deteriorated mental state. It can be attributed to the fact that presenteeism is not registered in any way in the organizations and is more difficult to determine (Hansen & Andersen, 2009). Hemp (2004) considers that presenteeism is a much costlier problem than absenteeism and suggests that anticipating and limiting this phenomenon is a source of competitive advantage. The only way to distinguish absenteeism from presenteeism is the decision whether or not to come to work, taking into account that the employee has health problems. In both cases, whether it is present or absent, the individual perception of his or her state of health has an important role to play. Kristensen et al. (2006) point out that health problems have a far more significant effect on companies than absenteeism. Employers often fail to recognize signs of depression, anxiety, and other disorders or they underestimate the extent to which employees experience stress or other forms of mental illness, as well as the impact they can have on the business. Companies need to take into account that not only the health problems of employees but also the attitude to the working environment and values promoted by the organization.

COVID-19 changed the meaning of absenteeism in companies, the causes of absenteeism, and the way absences were managed during this crisis. Teleworking or virtual offices contributed to this fact, making absenteeism harder to record. This had an important impact on businesses, whether they had used teleworking in the past or not (OECD, 2020). The managers had to ensure they log staff off sick with associated timings and symptoms and to find the appropriate way to inform others in the team whether they may be at risk. This was a major change because in "normal times" it wasn't easy to track the vacations, sickness, parental and other kinds of leaves. COVID 19 added new forms of leave including self-isolation and changed the meaning of sick leave (Wainewright, 2020).

Speaking of tracking absence, many employers found out that it is useful to keep a record of what employees have had Coronavirus and won't need to isolate, in case they had acquired immunity. Employees were no longer missing work from culpable and planned absenteeism, and they started to fear losing their job due to the pandemic, as a result of cost-cutting and downsizing. The absence level decreased during the pandemic and the

reasons for missing work were genuine, employees thinking twice when taking a day off (Wainewright, 2020).

In any case, the experience of teleworking during the Coronavirus crisis may be mostly transferable to telework when returning to “normal times”: teleworking usually requires all work-related tasks to be done from home, while teleworking before this crisis was limited to few tasks to be done remotely. In addition to this, many of the employees were constrained to telework during these times, even though they were never trained regarding this. Beyond the Coronavirus crisis, many employees may continue to telework in the following years, and only time can tell if this method is a productive one and one that can hinder absenteeism (Brynjolfsson, Horton, Ozimek, Rock, Sharma & Yi Tu Ye, 2020).

However, employees experienced presenteeism, teleworking accentuating this phenomenon. Stress and anxiety – which are very common these days caused trouble focusing on tasks, therefore productivity and work quality decreased. When working in virtual offices taking an hour off or even a day off can be hidden very easily, no matter the reason for absence (Ozimek, 2020). COVID 19 challenged the managers to rethink sick leave policies, a supportive attitude towards the crisis driving down presenteeism incidences. Also, engaging with staff, restructuring workload, and balancing work and personal life have had the same impact on reducing presenteeism (Ozimek, 2020).

### ***Factors influencing the work-related absenteeism***

Most absenteeism related studies that take into account organizational factors count on the size of the organization as a responsible factor in this phenomenon. In studies conducted by Whitaker (2001), or by Hemp (2004), an increase in working group size has been reported to increase the level of absenteeism in the group and implicitly in the organization. Steers and Rhodes (1990) explain this by the lack of communication and the existence within a group of more experienced individuals who could replace members. Levy (2006) attributes this to the fact that individuals working in organizations with more than 100 employees experience a feeling of impersonalizing due to the company's bureaucracy and procedures, leading to a problem resolution rather than consulting a manager or a colleague.

An essential aspect of identifying the causes of absenteeism is the analysis of the job description. McHugh (2001) identifies a higher rate of absenteeism for employees whose tasks were not correctly assigned, were repetitive, or certain aspects of the job responsibilities that were unclear from the time of employment. Clark and Oswald (1996) show through his research that those who are absent were very little involved in work tasks and were very difficult to integrate into group projects. In the case of new employees, absenteeism can be seen as a “break-away” from work, given the lack of work experience, the perception that the received tasks are difficult, or the lack of integration into a group.

In the studies of Clark and Oswald (1996) or McHugh (2001) it is noted that some individuals have a predisposition to absent regardless of the nature of the work or the situations to which they are exposed, which shows that certain socio-demographic characteristics may lead to absenteeism. They found out from studies that the most likely to be absent are those with higher education, who cannot accept routine and lack of autonomy in decision making. Research of Levy (2006) compares the personal characteristics of employees who have little absence to those who are frequently absent from work. Although no detailed statistical analysis showed a link between the two elements is presented in these studies, they suggested that there are several personal factors associated with absenteeism: distance from home to work, number of family members, frequency of off-the-job accidents, and anxiety. Levy (2006) points out that employees who are frequently absent have a long distance from home to work, as well as a precarious financial situation or significant debt compared to employees who have

rarely been absent. Employees traveling by bicycle or by their car have lower rates of absenteeism than those who use public transport.

Clark and Oswald (1996) considered that the level of education and the years spent studying, even if they were done in an informal environment, were negatively related to the period of absence. The higher the level of education for an individual, the lower the number of days and frequency of absenteeism, with a more serious reason for absence than in the case of those with secondary education.

Other studies looked at the relationship between the employee's age and his/her predisposition to absenteeism. Clark and Oswald (1996) show in their studies that young people and those over 55 years old tended to be absent for a short period but at a higher frequency. This can also be attributed to medical conditions that require a longer period for recovery but also to factors independent of the individual. Marital status and family size are two personal factors that can contribute to absenteeism. Clark and Oswald (1996) identify that married women were absent from work at a frequency that could not be predicted most of the time. Muchinsky (1977) concludes that in predicting absenteeism, the company can take into account personal factors, especially the number of family members, rather than factors related to the workplace.

Among the variables most often associated with absenteeism is satisfaction generated by the work type. In most studies, job satisfaction is inversely proportional to the frequency or number of absences. Nel et al. (2008) explain this by the fact that employees can have different expectations of developing their skills in the workplace, as well as receiving equal treatment and respect from the employer. If these expectations are not met, the employee may resort to abusive sick leave as a way of withdrawing a period from the workplace. Levy (2006) considers that staff who is 'chronically' absent reflect the company's indifference to the employee's views on a task or management decisions. The forms by which the company requests the opinion of the staff and the psychological support were considered only formalities and actions the company performs to improve its image. Tenure in an organization is considered to involve loyalty and responsibility in the workplace, which is reflected in a low rate of absenteeism. Levy (2006) shows that there was an inverse relationship between absenteeism and seniority in the company, the long-term individuals in the company absented twice as much as those who were recently employed or worked in the company for less than three years.

### ***Causes of work-related absenteeism***

A wide range of reasons can lead to an employee being absent from work. These causes are often complex and difficult to understand by the organization's managers. A study by Bolton and Hughes (2001) identifies the following reasons as the most common causes of absenteeism from the workplace. Their order is determined as a result of the most common causes mentioned by employees:

- *Medical conditions and routine controls:* Minor conditions such as colds, headaches, or back pain can make it difficult to concentrate, so the employee seeks medical assistance. In most cases, employees could come to work after handling the problem with a simple remedy. This can be related to the Theory of attachment (Harvey & Nicholson, 1999) in which it is mentioned that the employees' perception of their health and the severity of the illness can cause the employee to come to work or to absent. Acute medical conditions may require an employee to perform medical examinations or treatments whose side effect prevents the individual from working.
- *Accidents:* Regardless of where they happen, during leisure or work, employees will often not be able to do their job properly or even reach the organization's premises.
- *Family responsibilities:* Employees may be required to stay at home and take care of a child or an elderly when special situations arise (for example, the person caring for the old is sick or school closures due to weather conditions) or if a child/an elder is ill.
- *Alcohol or drug problems:* Drug-dependent workers can experience a temporary inability to concentrate, which could prevent them from going to work. They can also be out of

work to avoid a manager detecting their problem, taking refuge in taking frequent sick leave.

- *Interview for another job*: Employees can say they do not feel well or leave without leave to attend an interview for a new job, to participate in a job fair, or to work on their CVs.

- *Transport conditions and problems*: Extreme weather conditions, such as flooding or heavy snow, can make roads impracticable or isolate employees at home, making it impossible to get to work. Failure of public transport or some strikes can cause delays or absenteeism from work.

- *Stress*: Greenglass and Burke (2003) defines occupational stress as the difference perceived by the individual between the tasks distributed to him and his ability to carry them through. The stress caused by workplace conditions strongly influences the satisfaction level of the company's employees. The feeling of stress can be worsened by the demands of managers, colleagues, third parties with which the organization works, and the behavior of family members. Over time, the effect of stress and negative emotions leads the employee to absenteeism as a way to recover and restore his physical and mental energy.

- *Burnout*: Burnout can result from continuous overloading due to the nature of work or prolonged working hours without rest. Organizations with a reduced number of employees or with employees performing work tasks in more than one area may have a higher incidence of burnout and staff fatigue.

- *Participation in training, conferences, or congresses* (Nel et al., 2008): Employees participating in workshops and training courses contributing to their professional development will be excused from work to attend these events. This type of absenteeism is planned and is considered to be absenteeism that generates more benefits than losses.

- *Organizational culture*: If the organization encourages a tolerant work environment concerning absenteeism, its employees can see it as a hidden benefit and an opportunity they do not dare to miss.

- *Remote work/Virtual office* (Mukhopadhyay, 2020): When working in a virtual office several factors can contribute to absenteeism: outdated equipment and programs, poor internet connection, informal setting, incomprehensible tasks, and low morale from the lack of social interaction.

Organizational, attitudinal, personal factors, as well as presenteeism, have been associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, so the following assumptions were made regarding absenteeism in the companies from Iasi:

*H1*: Satisfaction with the way the organization managed its activity in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic is negatively correlated to employee absenteeism.

*H2*: There is a negative correlation between physical distance measures implemented at the workplace and absenteeism.

*H3*: There is a positive link between absenteeism and the employee's fear of infecting their families with the coronavirus from the workplace.

*H4*: The stress generated by the COVID-19 pandemic is negatively correlated with the level of achievement of work-related objectives during the pandemic.

## **Methodology and data**

This research aims to create a brief profile of absenteeism in companies that operate in Iasi in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. In shaping the absenteeism profile, the influence of the personal, attitudinal, and organizational factors mentioned in the literature will be taken into account. To analyze the problem of absenteeism in detail and to outline the course of the research, specific objectives have been formulated:

- Identifying the extent to which personal, attitudinal, and organizational factors are responsible for the level of absenteeism in the company.

- Addressing presenteeism challenges during the pandemic.

- Identifying the impact that epidemiological factors have had on employees' decisions to absent.



- Analyzing the features of the presence policies implemented in the context of the coronavirus pandemic.

The analysis of several data collection methods under the quantitative approach has led to the conclusion that an online questionnaire was the most appropriate method to choose for this study. In the current context, sharing the survey online was justified by recommendations for social distancing and protection against coronavirus. The questionnaire was distributed to those who worked in multinational corporations, mainly in outsourcing and IT companies, in Iasi. The distribution of the questionnaire was carried out only through the LinkedIn platform, a personalized message being sent to 300 employees who were working in Iasi. Following the two-week questionnaire administration (1/07/2020 – 15/07/ 2020), 233 valid responses were obtained, the sampling technique being systematic random sampling. Although I expected people not to be willing to reply to the questionnaire, given the fear of being held accountable for providing internal aspects of the company, people answered questions in a short time and provided further details on certain situations regarding absenteeism. Some of the respondents were curious about the results of the study, given the fact that a study regarding absenteeism had not been carried out by that time.

The questionnaire consisted of 15 closed questions, many of which are structured as a Likert scale. Some of the questions (4 out of 15) were adapted from ILO (2020) to match the subject of the study. Within, the independent variables can be identified: organizational factors (work environment, leadership style, employee-employer communication, company' size), personal factors (gender, age, educational level, company age, distance to work) and policy factors (degree of satisfaction with rewards, promotion potential, and independence in decision making). The dependent variable of the study is absenteeism.

## Results of the study

A total of 233 responses were collected and a brief description of the sample of the study is shown below:

**Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	95
	Female	138
Age	18-24 years	92
	25-34 years	122
	35-44 years	12
	45-54 years	7
Education	High school	16
	Bachelor	128
	Master	76
	PhD	13
Years of experience	<1 year	37
	1-3 years	116
	4-6 years	64
	>6 years	16

Source: Data processed using Excel



Table 1 shows that the majority of respondents are female (59%), and 41% of the respondents are male. Respondents to the questionnaire fall within the 18-54 years category, the most representative one being 18-24 years (52%), followed by 25-34 years (40%). In terms of educational level, 55% of respondents have high education, followed by 33% of whom have a senior high school. The last demographic variable analyzed was tenure, and it can be easily seen that half of the respondents (50%) have between one and three years of experience in the company where they currently work, followed by 28% with 4 to 6 years of experience in the company. The least represented tenure category is the one over six years of experience in the company; in this case, 7% of the respondents.

For the present study, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) based on factor analysis was used, and the results are presented in the table below:

**Table 2. Rotated Factor Matrix**

Items	Components			
	1	2	3	4
Support from supervisor	0.873			
Hostile workplace	0.738			
Absence without leave	0.682			
Repetitive tasks	0.651			
Dissatisfaction regarding promotions		0.846		
Autonomy regarding procedures		0.769		
Unfair recognition of experience/skills		0.732		
Carrying supervisor		0.611		
Stress affecting relationships			0.851	
Called in sick when not sick			0.795	
Working for a living			0.669	
Fear of infecting family members				0.957
Social distancing rules				0.913
Stressed during pandemic				0.873
Satisfaction regarding crisis management				0.788
Giving up activities				0.773
Technical support				0.693
Focusing on tasks				0.688
Meeting the deadlines				0.652

Extraction method: principal axis factoring. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

Rotation converged in eight iterations.

Source: Data processed using SPSS

The factors derived outline the different elements of employee absenteeism, five factors out of 24 being eliminated. Referring to Table 2, Factor 1 has a variance of 14.76% and represents the elements of the organizational absenteeism, being labeled as 'Organizational factors'. Factor 2 with a variance of 15.33% has all the statements related to the satisfaction of the employees regarding workplace aspects and therefore has been named as 'Attitudinal factors'. The statements that load into factor 3, having variance 16.03% all were concerned with the stress affecting relationships and the living standards of the employees and thus was called as 'Personal'. The last factor (4) having a variance of 17.09% consisted of the epidemiological factors and how employees deal with the COVID-19 crisis. It has been named as 'Epidemiological factors'. There has been considered a threshold of 0.600 and all variables with factor loadings higher than the value of the threshold.

To study the internal consistency of the questionnaire, the coefficient Cronbach Alpha was calculated using the SPSS program. In the case of the present research, the Cronbach

coefficient is 0.836, which shows a good consistency of the questionnaire. All of these are presented below, in table 3:

**Table 3. Internal consistency of the questionnaire**  
Cronbach's Alpha      N of Items\*

.836	23
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\*Items related to demographic variables as well as additional ones were excluded.

Source: Data processed using SPSS

Absenteeism has become a point of interest for researchers but also company management, this phenomenon has been growing since the COVID pandemic. Respondents were asked to indicate the number of days absent this year, 84% of them saying they had been absent from work in the past 12 months.

**Table 4. Number of days absent from work**

Item	Percent	Frequency
1-3 days	38	88
4-6 days	19	44
7 – 9 days	24	57
10 days or more	3	7
Not absent in the last 12 months	16	37

Source: Data processed using Excel

The above table (table 4) presents the number of days absent from work, for which the respondents provided information. The most representative category (38%) is those who have been absent between one and three days from work, followed by seven to nine days (24%), then by 19% of respondents who have been absent for four to six days. The lowest percentage was for employees who were absent ten or more than ten days (3%).

The role of the presence policies is to provide an objective framework to analyze when employees are absent and to identify the most appropriate method for the situation. Thus, 68% of respondents confirmed that employees who are absent without leave are penalized, outlining the existence of a presence policy (Figure 1). According to Liu and Ramsey (2008) the existence of absenteeism policies in companies decreases the rate of voluntary absenteeism considerably, but it can lead employees to identify ways of circumventing procedures and absenteeism "involuntarily" in a conscious manner.



**Figure 1. Organizational factors influencing absenteeism**  
(Own processing)

According to the literature, lack of management support leads to absenteeism, the employee feels that it is not important enough to get help. For almost 80% of respondents, the manager helps when they encounter a difficult problem, only 20% of respondents said

they did not get help from supervisors or that it was rare (Figure 1). The rate of absenteeism can be increased if the working environment is one that does not encourage relationships between colleagues and where teamwork is underestimated for its role in building relationships. The sense of isolation and the perception of the organizational environment as unfriendly and unsupportive indicates a tension between the employee and his job, which will manifest itself in absenteeism. In the case of current research, absenteeism cannot be caused by the working environment, as 77% of respondents mentioned. The working environment in companies from Iasi is one that focuses on the well-being of employees, managers are concerned about how employees feel at work, and teamwork is encouraged. Repetitive job tasks are the organizational factor that weighs the hardest in the decision to absent. Most of the time, employees are absent as a result of the fact that their work does not require very much involvement or they think that their effort does not matter and the company can easily replace them. This is not the case of the employees in Iasi, 68% of respondents saying that situations involving repetitive tasks are rare or not at all.

Work satisfaction research shows that a work environment that provides positive recognition and appropriate rewards for the effort stimulates professional development and leads to greater employee involvement. More than half of the respondents (54%) denied that the management of the company was concerned about how satisfied the employees are in the workplace (Figure 2). This may lead to the absenteeism of staff for whom the job is not just a way of ensuring their lives. 61% of respondents considered that employees are not given adequate recognition for their effort, and the reward is not determined according to their work experience and skills. In the case of employees who feel they are not rewarded according to their experience or ability, the motivation to absent comes from the fact that if they were in the same position in another company, they would be better paid or that absenteeism compensates for not being paid at the expected level.



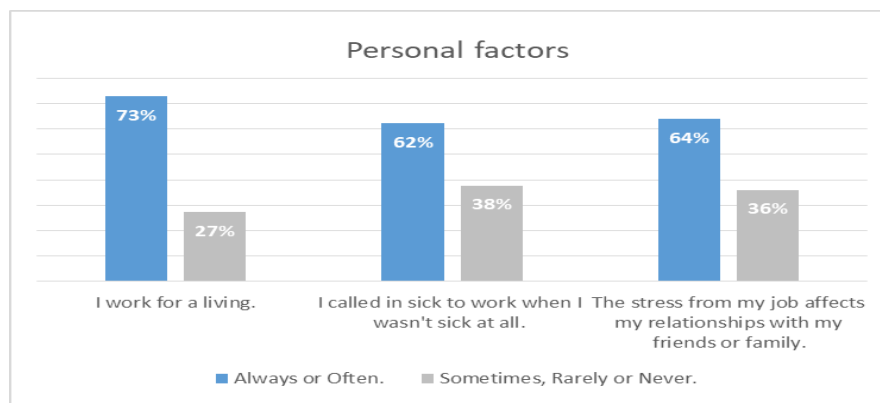
**Figure 2. Attitudinal factors influencing absenteeism**  
(Own processing)

Job development and promotion opportunities allow employees to develop new skills, diversify their work, and experience autonomy in their tasks. 67% of respondents are dissatisfied with the opportunities for promotion. Sikorki (2001) shows in its studies that organizations that do not offer real opportunities to promote have had a much higher rate of absenteeism and the time absent by dissatisfied employees has been used to identify a new job or participate in interviews.

69% of respondents said they had no opportunity to make decisions on the procedures used to carry out work tasks. (Figure 2). Steers and Rhodes (1990) point out that case of employees who have been able to make decisions about the instruments used in their work or even decisions relating to the order of their tasks, the absenteeism rate was

lowered by 30% compared to employees who have imposed a particular way of working or where companies were inflexible about the order of performance of their duties.

Working for a living was considered by researchers (Pousette and Hanse, 2002) as an idiom of anti-absenteeism. Although the working environment is changing and jobs are diverse, some of the individuals are still guided by the statement mentioned above. In this study, 73% of respondents considered that the only reason for going to work is only to make a living and not to develop a professional career and gain experience (Figure 3). Employees who consider this are the least absent category of the company. Nel (2008) considers the above to describe a relationship of dependency between the employee and the workplace, maintained by the material side of the work, which can hardly be interrupted by factors such as dissatisfaction with the incentives, working conditions, or the manager's attitude. This can also be influenced by the current pandemic period, where the stress of being laid off or closing the business has led many employees to see only the material benefits from the work, ignoring the professional development opportunities.



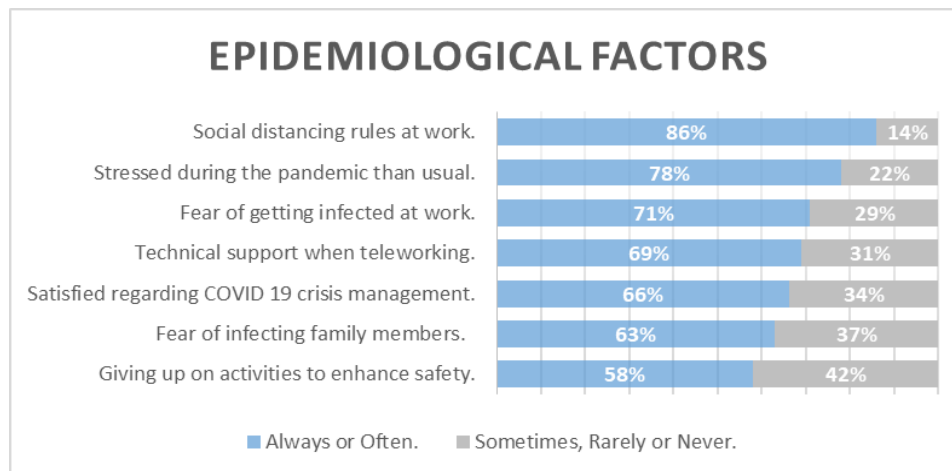
**Figure 3. Personal factors influencing absenteeism**  
(Own processing)

62% of employees called in sick to work when they were not sick at all. Managers should not be alarmed by this behavior, but this should not be encouraged, with employers having to carefully analyze the reasons for absences and the illness for which employees have been absent. This could be one of the few ways to quickly determine whether the employee frequently claims to be sick to get a day off. Medical 'culpable' absenteeism can be mentioned here, employees accusing medical problems and presenting exemptions to obtain an extended weekend or to take a day off after a holiday.

Stress from an unhealthy working environment does not remain in the workplace. It spreads over the home environment, influencing the employee's relationship with family members. 64% of respondents said that working hours and associated responsibilities affect their personal or family relations, with 36% of respondents claiming that work has never influenced the family climate (Figure 3). Conflicts of this kind, between work and family, threaten individual well-being, contributing to a greater sense of isolation and dissatisfaction, favoring involuntary absenteeism. This type of conflict also leads to presenteeism, even if employees are onsite, they cannot focus on work trying to find a solution to personal problems. Pousette and Hanse (2002) argue that in limiting absenteeism related to family responsibilities, managers must pay particular attention to the balance between the employee's personal and professional life.

In an attempt to identify the influence of the pandemic context on the employees' decision to absent from work, epidemiological factors were decelerated between organizational, attitudinal, and personal, along with presenteeism. The coronavirus pandemic has left its mark on how employees relate to their working environment and tasks, but also on mental health. The most frequent action taken by the companies and noted by the employees was the introduction of physical distance between the employees who continued to come to

work. This can considerably reduce absenteeism for employees because they feel safe in the workplace and are confident that the management of the company takes care to ensure that the working environment is healthy.



**Figure 4. Epidemiological factors influencing absenteeism**  
(Own processing)

According to the figure above, 78% of respondents felt much more stressed than usual in the context of the current pandemic, with no significant difference between age groups or tenure (Figure 4). This shows the complexity and unpredictability of the current situation, with the answers highlighting that the pandemic was a critical stress factor. According to Seymour and Grove (2005) when employees feel stressed as a result of personal or non-work-related factors, they will be absent to try to solve that thing or improve their mental health. In the context of the current pandemic, absenteeism due to the stress generated by personal factors should not be ignored by managers, as it may lead to isolation or resignation. The current pandemic has favored the emergence of online presenteeism, meaning the fact that the employee is online or logged into the working platform but does other things, like taking care of a toddler or an elderly person. Employees came to work virtually often having difficulty in concentration and at the same time, resolved personal problems or performed family duties (Robbins & Judge, 2004). This is also supported by current research, 73% of respondents said that at the workplace they had a difficult time focusing on performing tasks. In addition to the above, 72% of respondents admitted that they had difficulties in complying with the execution time of a task, failing to meet the deadlines because their attention was distracted by personal or family problems. They were also unable to meet the deadlines set as a result of the new measures implemented in the context of the pandemic (social distancing and enforcement of protection measures took longer to carry out tasks).

The stress of being infected from the workplace was observed by 71% of respondents, as well as the fear of infecting their families with the virus because of the workplace (63%), as seen in Figure 4. Often when employees perceive a workplace hazard, they will withdraw to protect themselves and their families. In the case of current research, employees have been out of work because the management of the company did not implement measures to protect employees, did not provide masks or other equipment, or did not oversee the implementation or enforcement of protective measures. The effort made by companies during this period can be highlighted by the satisfaction of the employees related to the way the organization dealt with the current situation.

Taking into account the current situation, some companies have moved their business online, 69% of respondents noted that technical support was offered to them during their work at home. Lack of technical support: laptop, tablet, phone and technical support (connection to specific programs/servers, access to certain applications, problems with software licenses) can encourage absenteeism. According to Nel et al. (2008), teleworkers

prefer to take a day off if they encounter technical problems, arguing that they don't know how to resolve them or because they report them late to the support team. It should be kept in mind that obsolete work equipment significantly influences the level of absenteeism (Liu & Ramsey, 2008). Poor or slow operation of technical equipment results in high absenteeism, with employees being often frustrated or dissatisfied.

Another measure taken by the companies in this pandemic was giving up certain activities at all or in specific departments. This was the case for 58% of respondents, with companies giving up some activities because they could not continue or because there was no demand for the product. Martin and Matiaske (2017) point out that in some departments where work continued although this was not justified, the employees showed a very high degree of presenteeism or even absenteeism, arguing that they were ill. It is therefore appropriate for organizations to restrict their activities where the situation requires or to reorganize it to avoid absenteeism.

Descriptive statistics were used to rank the reasons for work-related absenteeism, with some items using the Reversed Coding technique. Thus, the reasons for absenteeism at work during the pandemic include general stress caused by the pandemic ( $M=4.0901$ ), stress due to getting infected at work ( $M=3.6266$ ), employee concerns that they will infect their family as a result of going to work ( $M=3.2618$ ). The reverse coding technique has shown that the reasons why the employees did not absent were related to the introduction of methods of physical distance at work ( $M=2.2532$ ), the receipt of technical support ( $M=2.4635$ ), satisfaction with how the company managed the situation ( $M=2.5238$ ) and giving up some activities ( $M=2.5966$ ).

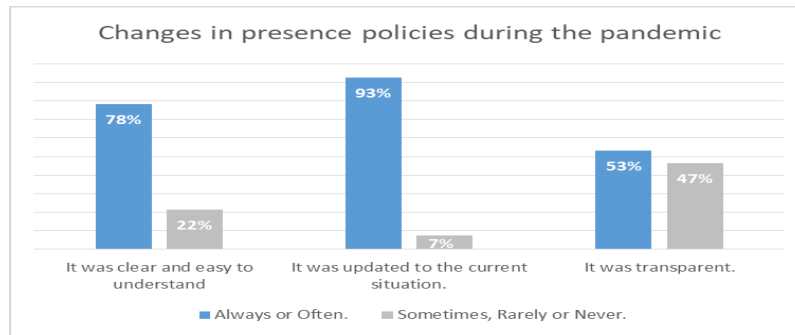
Factors related to presenteeism were analyzed separately (Table 5) because they target a different behavior which does not involve physical absence from work, but a mental or mental absence. Thus, presenteeism has been manifested mostly by finishing their tasks on time ( $M=3.5923$ ) and then because they could not concentrate on their tasks ( $M=2.2403$ ). Ozminkoski et al. (2004) point out the following: the presenteeism caused by health problems (in the case of the study, fear of infection with COVID-19) has a far more significant effect on companies compared with absenteeism and, secondly, mental disorders manifest themselves in presenteeism rather than in absenteeism. The last situation is because employers often fail to recognize signs of depression, anxiety, or underestimate the impact that these factors can have on meeting job responsibilities.

**Table 5. Descriptive statistics regarding presenteeism**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Focus on the task	233	1.00	5.00	3.5923	1.32331
Meeting the deadlines	233	1.00	5.00	2.2403	1.36858

Source: Data processed using SPSS

The presence policy decreases the level of absenteeism as employees realize that the action of missing work unmotivated or without credible evidence can be penalized (Nel et al., 2008). Presence policies are also an objective guide for how to act when an employee is in the situations mentioned above. 85% of the respondents said that their organization changed their company presence policy, taking into account the Coronavirus pandemic, while 15% said it had not been changed (Figure 5). In terms of clarity and ease of being understood, nearly 80% of respondents mentioned that the organization's policy was clear, and its terms were easy to understand by all employees. 93% of respondents said that the policy is updated with the context of the pandemic, and 53% said that the policy is transparent.



**Figure 5. Changes in presence policies during the pandemic**  
(Own processing)

Thus, updated and transparent presence policies that provide clear guidance on protection measures and steps when an employee is detected positively with Coronavirus are effective in managing the pandemic properly. The efforts of companies should be directed toward providing resources to protect employees who continue their work from the company and providing technical support to those working from home, these being the main measures that could limit work stress and absenteeism. During the coronavirus pandemic, the workplace framework plays a role as important as any other company's development strategy or plan. The present study revealed that in most cases companies had implemented a presence policy that contained up-to-date and precise information and that allowed employees to discover how the company responds to absenteeism during the pandemic.

### Testing Hypothesis

In this study, testing and validating the hypothesis was done using the Pearson correlation coefficient. In the next paragraphs, the results of the correlation analysis will be presented below.

The first hypothesis targeted the satisfaction level of the employees regarding the way the company managed the situation from the beginning of the pandemic, as well as during the pandemic, and the impact of this on absenteeism. The H1 hypothesis is validated with a correlation coefficient of  $-.682$ . The p-value (lower than 0.05) shows a significant correlation between the analyzed variables. This shows that there is a negative and moderate link between absenteeism and employee satisfaction regarding how the company handled the COVID-19 crisis. In other words, the more satisfied were the employees, the lower the absenteeism. Employee satisfaction with the job can weigh more than the working environment or organizational factors and lead to longer periods of absences, which are followed by resignation. The COVID-19 crisis was a test for companies that focused on the ability to adapt to new situations, as well as the proper management of human resources. Pousette and Hanse (2002) claim that if an individual feels in difficulty or overwhelmed by the pressure at the workplace he reacts by taking a day off. In the current situation, the companies acted properly and promptly, considerably reducing the danger of infection, so the employees were pleased that the management of the company gave importance to staff concerns about COVID-19.

For the H2 hypothesis, there is a negative correlation between physical distance measures implemented at work and absenteeism. This hypothesis outlined the link between absenteeism and organizational factors, taking into account the Coronavirus social distancing rules. The analysis of the data showed that there is a negative and strong link between the days absented and the physical distance measures implemented in the context of the pandemic. As shown by the correlation analysis, the value of the Pearson coefficient was  $-.735$ , thus the level of absenteeism decreased with the implementation of social distance measures. This is justified by the fact that employees perceive the work



environment as a safe one, where the risk of coronavirus infection is low. Taking into account the situation above, hypothesis H2 is validated. During the coronavirus pandemic, distance measures were taken in organizations to increase the safety of employees and limit the risk of virus spreading. According to previous studies, employees will be absent when they feel a job-related hazard - equipment, policies, and regulations to protect them, pressure, or conflicts with colleagues. This behavior is one of preservation and defense, often appearing as an unconditional reaction.

The results of testing the H3 hypothesis indicated that there is a positive link between absenteeism and the employee's fear of infecting their families with the Coronavirus from the workplace. The present hypothesis refers to personal factors, i.e. the relationship with the family. Pearson coefficient is .695, therefore, the correlation between the two variables is a significant one. After testing this hypothesis, it is evident that absenteeism increases at the same rate the employee fears of infecting his family with Coronavirus. Thus, the H3 hypothesis is validated. Muchinsky (1977) reports employees feel responsible for the well-being of their family, so when a problem appears at work they hide it thinking that it will cause close ones to worry too much. Martin and Matiaske (2017) shows in their study that, during the SARS epidemic (2002-2003), the employees took additional measures to protect their family from infection if the individual had taken the virus from work, although they had not taken the same measures to protect themselves.

In the last hypothesis, the stress generated by the COVID-19 pandemic is negatively correlated with the level of achievement of work-related objectives during the pandemic. This hypothesis is intended to highlight the existence of presenteeism in the companies operating in Iasi. The hypothesis is validated, taking into account the Pearson correlation coefficient having a value of -.710. The link between the two variables is a negative, strong one. Thus, the higher the level of stress generated by the pandemic, the lower the level of achievement of the objectives or tasks assigned to the employees. In the case of this hypothesis, the entire sample of the study was used, including employees who indicated at the beginning of the questionnaire that they did not have any day since they were likely to be physically present at work, but their attention would be distracted by the pandemic situation.

## Conclusions and discussions

Although absenteeism is a complex problem, management of the companies only looks at this phenomenon in terms of employees' lack of productivity, presence, and financial losses caused by physically missing employees. Absenteeism is a challenge for managers, identifying and slowing down this phenomenon requiring knowledge from a variety of fields as well as experience in human resources management.

Employees who perceive their job as not meeting their expectations will show a growing tendency to work out of work. Objective evaluation of performance and real chances of advancement, as well as the variety of tasks, can limit the spread or repetition of the phenomenon, encouraging employees to participate in the development of the company actively. The management style affects the employee's willingness to go to work. A coercive manager will tend to demoralize his or her subordinates and create a work environment that will not grow. It also affects the colleagues of the employee that absents, as they will have to take over and resolve his duties, even if they sometimes do not have the necessary skills. However, there are unavoidable reasons for absenteeism, such as sickness of the employee or injury in the workplace. In short, absenteeism is often a sign of employees' dissatisfaction with the workplace or is manifested as a result of personal factors, which is why understanding the causes and trends of this phenomenon leads to solutions to limit the spread and limitation of absenteeism.

The period in which the respondents were absent was between one and three days, absence being a result of an illness or appointment with a doctor, stress, depression or anxiety, family responsibilities, and not least, the working environment. The data analysis

concluded that organizational factors are not a reason why the employees of companies in Iasi would decide to be absent, but rather the attitudinal ones. As for personal factors, employees only go to work to secure their living. Another aspect analyzed by personal factors was the absenteeism hidden in sick leave, with more than half of the respondents saying they had taken time off although the health condition was good.

The most important feature of the present research was highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the employees' decision to absent and the employees' behavior in this context. One reason that could be the reason for this decision was the fear of employees becoming infected with COVID-19, the fear of infecting their family as a result of going to work, and the general stress related to the pandemic. The methods of physical distancing, providing technical support, and giving up activities have supported the limitation of absenteeism in the workplace. Another feature is that the results of the present study could be compared to other available data that was collected using the same ILO (2020) questions.

The research included statements aimed at adapting presence policy to the current context, with changes being implemented for most employees. Presence policies during the pandemic have been clear and easy to understand by all employees, with problems reported only in terms of their transparency.

Satisfaction with managing the coronavirus crisis is the most important absenteeism predictor, due to the complexity of the factor being analyzed, it captures how the employees perceived the company's effort during the pandemic. In the present study, the level of absenteeism dropped while social distance measures were implemented and the company tried to comply with them. This is explained by the fact that employees perceived the work environment as safe and healthy, giving them the feeling that managers are concerned about the well-being and protection of their staff. The fear of infecting their families with Coronavirus as a result of going to work was a contributory factor in absenteeism from the workplace, with employees preferring to absent rather than putting their family at risk. Also, the level of stress generated by the pandemic is linked to the low achievement of the goals or tasks assigned to the employees. The study found that employees who worked during the pandemic experienced presenteeism – although physically present, the pandemic context has affected concentration capacity and led to a superficial performance of duties or hard times trying to meet the deadlines.

The research question formulated at the beginning of this study can be answered now, taking into account the results of the analysis. COVID-19 has been an important decision factor for missing a day of work. On the one side, employees feared losing their job and they missed a day for genuine and serious reasons. On the other side, there was a shift from attitudinal factors (for absenteeism) to epidemiological ones, talking about on-site activities. Employees missed a day because the company didn't comply with social distancing measures rather than lack of autonomy in decision making, for example. Regarding teleworking employees took a day off because of outdated equipment, slow internet connection, and informal home environment than as a lack of recognition from the manager. The Coronavirus made people aware of their physical absence, but not of their mental absence, employees experiencing presenteeism, and finding it harder to focus on the tasks.

The causes of absenteeism are unlikely to be explained by a single factor and current theories do not conceive this phenomenon as having a single cause. It is important to understand the leading causes of absenteeism before action is taken, as a late action is unlikely to lead to promising results. The impact of absenteeism on the company depends on the circumstances in which the employee's work is carried out and on the fast reaction when high absenteeism is observed. Also, an important practical implication is revealing the role of presence policies and the adoption of social measures in limiting and preventing absenteeism, and more importantly presenteeism. The actual context in which the study has been carried out proves that absenteeism is a complicated issue to address,

with management often being in a position to distinguish between a genuine reason for absenteeism and a fake one. Regardless of the approach used to control absenteeism, one aspect remains constant: employers should not ignore this phenomenon. Finally, limiting the spread of absenteeism is confined to the attitude of the company and the seriousness with which the problem is being addressed.

Initially, the present study should be carried out in one company and focused on the problem of absenteeism in that organization. Due to the nature of research data and the exposure of vulnerable situations to the organization through the study, and the current context, there were encountered difficulties.

Another limit is that employees can provide answers that do not show their perspective on work events as a result of distrust that the data will remain anonymous and confidential. The fear of saying something wrong about the company and bothering management by expressing their opinion often leads to a much too optimistic description of the working environment and a shift toward quite serious problems. This may also include respondents' perceptions of employment relationships or organizational factors. At the same time, the respondent may answer the questions wrong as a result of not having read the question completely or omitted certain issues. Additionally, a limit can also be considered the sample on which this research was carried out and the results cannot be generalized for all companies operating in Romania.

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