

## Conscientiousness and Perceived Organizational Support as Predictors of Employee Absenteeism

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**Abstract:** This study examined the influence of conscientiousness and perceived organizational support on employee absenteeism. A total of 251 workers were randomly drawn from among the non-teaching staff of the University of Ado-Ekiti, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria. The study employed the multiple regression analysis and the t-independent test analysis for the testing of the hypothesis. Results revealed that conscientiousness and perceived organizational support did not predict employee absenteeism. Also, results showed that there was no significant effect of sex on conscientiousness, perceived organizational support and absenteeism among the employees. The findings were discussed in light of previous literature.

**Key words:** Conscientiousness, perceived, organizational support, predictors, employee absenteeism

### INTRODUCTION

Absenteeism is a phenomenon that is present in organizations that are large and small, public or private, urban or rural. Over 400 million workdays have been observed to be lost in the United States due to employee absenteeism.

According to Steers and Rhodes (1991), absenteeism yields an estimated annual cost of \$26.4 billion in the United States alone. This amount is worrisome particularly when we consider how much more money is being lost annually in developing countries, where absenteeism is not taken seriously. Workers in developing countries such as Nigeria see no need to be queried or even disciplined for absenting themselves from work or coming late to work several times a week. According to Lawler (1971), absenteeism runs as high as 10-20% of the workforce. Hence, the phenomenon of employee absenteeism has become an important area for empirical research and management concern.

Absence behaviour has been studied for decades by many researchers using different methods. Consequently, their efforts have also produced varied findings regarding the effects of absence on organization and the individual (Dalton and Mesch, 1991). Unfortunately, reasons for absence are not well understood because influencing factors are so varied.

The consequences of absence can be positive or negative (Rhodes and Steers, 1990). Nevertheless, organizations are more focused on negative organizational consequences of absence rather than the positive

consequences. Some negative consequences include productivity loss, increased cost due to overtime and staffing replacement. Individuals on the other hand may face loss of pay, discipline and altered job perceptions. In spite of these, Dalton and Mesch (1991) have observed that some organizations' policies do not only tolerate but truly reward employee absenteeism. Indeed, 60% of total absence appeared to be avoidable.

Rhodes and Steers (1990) and Hammer and Landau (1981) have argued that employee attendance is influenced by the employee's motivation to attend as well as ability to attend. Pressures to attend may include economic, social or personal reasons. These have caused to proposed that, when employees find accomplishment, pride and internal gratification in work there is increased motivation to attend (Hammer and Landau, 1981).

Attitude towards attendance at work could also be traced to (affective) organizational Commitment, job involvement (Brook, 1986), relative job satisfaction (Rosse and Miller, 1984) or personality characteristics.

The Big Five, or Five-Factor Model of personality proposed by Costa and McCrae (1985) has received extensive empirical support for predicting work behaviour (Barrick and Mount, 1991). Conscientiousness, which is one of the 5 factors, has received particular attention. Individuals exhibiting high conscientiousness are known to be punctual, organized, reliable, hard working, self-directed, scrupulous and perseverings. Person low on conscientiousness tend to be lazy, careless, lax, impulsive and irresponsible (Costa and Widiger, 1994; Hogan, 1991). Also, researchers have suggested for decades that

enduring personality traits account for absenteeism (Harrison, 1988). In the same vein, studies have related conscientiousness to dysfunctional behaviours such as theft, disciplinary problems and absenteeism (Hogan and Ones, 1994; Sackett and Wanek, 1996).

Organizational theorists and researchers have frequently alluded to employment as the trade of effort and loyalty for such impersonal benefits as pay and fringe benefits and approval (Levinson, 1965; Mowday *et al.*, 1982). Individuals tend to form global beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well beings. This is referred to as Perceived Organizational Support (POS) (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986).

Eisenberger *et al.* (1986) argued that individuals evaluate the behaviour of organizational agents towards them. Workers are often sensitive to environmental and organizational constraints which limit the ability to provide them with desired rewards (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1997). And so employees who experience a strong level of POS theoretically felt the need to reciprocate favourable organizational treatment with attitudes and behaviour that in turn benefit the organization (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). In support of this, research has revealed that POS is positively related to job attendance and measures of job performance (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1990), the tendency to help co-workers (Shore and Wayne, 1993) and the tendency to offer constructive suggestions for organizational improvement (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1990). Also, POS is associated with a greater tendency to experience positive daily mood at work as well as a lessened tendency to experience negative feelings such as tension or stress on a daily basis (Lamstro, 2000). Negative daily mood at work is more likely to lead to employee absenteeism.

#### Hypotheses:

- Age, gender, working experience, marital status, job position and perceived organizational support will significantly, independently and jointly predict employee absenteeism.
- Male employees will report significantly higher level of conscientiousness than female employees.
- Male employees will perceive significantly higher organizational support than female employees.
- Female employees will score significantly higher on absenteeism than male employees.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Design:** The study is an Ex-Post Facto (EPF) investigation. The major independent variables of the

study were conscientiousness and perceived organizational support. Other salient independent variables were age, gender, educational level, organizational position, marital status and working experience. The dependent variable is absenteeism.

**Subjects:** A total of 251 subjects (132 males or 52.6% and 119 females or 47.4%) participated in the study. They were randomly drawn from among the non-teaching staff of the University of Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria ( $X = 33.57$ ,  $S.D = 6.13$ ). Their ages ranged from 22 years to 50 years.

**Measures:** Absence data was collected using the attendance register of the various Departments in the study of organisation. The absence data three months prior to the investigation was used.

Conscientiousness was measured using the NEO 5 factor 12-item scale developed by Costa and McCrae (1985). Five alternative responses are provided for each item; Strongly Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree and are rated 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, respectively.

Costa and McCrae (1992, 1992b) reported test-retest reliabilities of 0.83 and  $\alpha = 0.88$ , respectively, while Colquitt and Simmering (1998) and Martocchio and Harrison (1993) reported cronbach alphas of 0.79 and 0.90, respectively.

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) was measured using the POS scale developed by Eisenberger *et al.* (1986). It has 16 items, with 7-point Likert-format response alternatives viz: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Slightly Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Slightly Agree, Agree and Strongly Agree. It is capable of measuring the extent to which individuals perceive the organization as caring for their well being. Eisenberger *et al.* (1986) reported a reliability of 0.93 for the scale.

**Procedure:** The researcher used the nominal role and call numbers of the employees to stratify the population into 10 departments. From these, three hundred subjects were randomly selected for the study. On the whole 300 questionnaires were distributed but only 251 were properly filled. The participants were given the conscientiousness and POS scales to fill. Each set of questionnaires had the participant's code inconspicuously written at the back of the questionnaire. At the end of the administration the absence data were then matched to the participant's questionnaires.

#### RESULTS

The multiple regression analysis was used to analyse the independent and joint influences of the independent variables on employee absenteeism while

Table 1: Summary of the Zero-order correlation showing the correlation of the study variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Age	-						
Educational level	0.15.*	-					
Working experience	0.70***	0.18**	-				
Gender	-0.02	0.11	0.07	-			
Marital status	0.57**	0.12*	0.39**	0.11	-	-	
Conscientiousness	0.07	-0.01	0.12*	0.05	0.06	-	
POS	-0.03	0.04	0.03	-0.30	0.06	0.20***	-
Absenteeism	0.14	0.01	0.14*	0.11	0.14*	0.08	0.07

P significant at \* = 0.05, \*\* = 0.01, \*\*\* = 0.001, N = 251

Table 2: Summary of the multiple regression analysis showing the independent and joint influences of age, gender, working experience, marital status, job position, conscientiousness and perceived organizational support on absenteeism

Variable	B	T	p	R	R2	F	p
Age	0.07	0.68	>0.05	0.21	0.04	1.58	>0.05
Gender	0.05	0.56	>0.05				
Working experience	0.10	1.53	>0.05				
Marital status	0.06	0.76	>0.05				
Job position	0.02	0.33	>0.05				
Conscientiousness	0.05	0.73	>0.05				
POS	0.06	0.88	>0.05				

Table 3: Summary of the t-independent test analysis showing the effect of gender on conscientiousness, perceived organizational support and absenteeism

Variable	Gender	N	X	s.d	df	t	p
Conscientiousness	Male	132	38.39	2.71	249	-0.74	>0.05
	Female	119	38.66	3.04			
POS	Male	132	64.67	3.43	249	0.45	>0.05
	Female	119	64.67	3.41			
Absenteeism	Male	132	2.59	2.53	249	-1.71	>0.05
	Female	119	2.92	1.47			

the t-independent test was used to analyze the effect of sex on conscientiousness, POS and employee absenteeism.

The Table 1 showed that there was a significant relationship between age and absenteeism ( $r(249) = 0.14, p < 0.05$ ), Working experience and absenteeism [ $r(249) = 0.14, p < 0.05$ ] and marital status and absenteeism [ $r(249) = 0.14, p < 0.05$ ]. On the contrary, it was observed that educational level, gender, conscientiousness and perceived organizational support were not related to absenteeism.

Table 2 revealed that hypothesis one was not confirmed. Results revealed that age, gender, working experience, marital status, job position, conscientiousness and perceived organizational support neither significantly independently predict nor significantly jointly predict employee absenteeism.

Table 3 showed that hypotheses 2, 3 and 4 were also not confirmed. Results revealed that male employees did not report significantly higher level of conscientiousness, perceived organizational support and absenteeism. Indeed, there was no significant effect of gender on these variables.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study were unexpected. This study yielded results that were contrary to most of the

previous research that have attempted to relate conscientiousness, perceived organizational support and demographic characteristics to absence behaviour.

First, the findings of this study revealed that conscientiousness and perceived organizational support did not predict employee absence behaviour. This is contrary to research (Harrison and Martocchio, 1998), which have suggested that enduring personality traits account for absenteeism. Also, found that conscientiousness predict dysfunctional job behaviours among law enforcement officers. Their findings equally corroborate that of Ones *et al.* (1998) who reported that conscientiousness is valid in forecasting what they referred to as “counter productive behaviours including theft, absenteeism, tardiness and disciplinary problems.

Conscientious workers are more likely to maintain self-discipline (Colquit and Simmering, 1998), are also likely to be more effective at goal-setting (Barrick *et al.*, 1993; Gellatly, 1996) and persevere longer (Meyer and Cuomo, 1962) than low conscientious workers.

In support of these findings, however, Witt (2003) has argued vehemently that the other four factors of the Big five model of personality and other individual differences may moderate relationships between conscientiousness and work-related outcomes. For example, recent studies (Andrews *et al.*, 2003) have indicated that: extraversion moderates the relationship between conscientiousness and supervisor-related

counter-productive behaviours and supervisor-rated inter-personal deviance and conscientiousness was essentially unrelated to counter productive and deviant behaviours but negatively related among extroverts.

Also, contrary to the findings of this study Eisenberger *et al.* (1986) reported that POS is positively related to job attendance. In addition, POS is associated with a greater tendency to experience a positive daily mood at work as well as a lessened tendency to experience negative feelings such as tension or stress on a daily basis.

Second, there was no significant effect of gender on conscientiousness, POS and Absenteeism. The finding of this study corroborates those of Feingold (1994) and Costa and McCrache (1992) who reported absence of gender differences on conscientiousness. However, Marusic and Bratko (1998) in their study based on Croatian sample found that both masculinity and femininity are related to the personality dimensions of the five-factor model.

In spite of the dearth of literature on gender differences in POS, women are expected by society to be more helpful, courteous and conscientious than their female counterparts but unfortunately are not usually rewarded for appropriate behaviour. This subtle discrimination may have accounted for the higher mean score reported by the female subjects on the POS scale.

Again, although female employees did not differ significantly from their male counterparts on absenteeism, they (female employees) had a higher mean score ( $\bar{x} = 2.92$ ). This finding reflects Farrel and Stamm's meta-analytic review, which revealed that women tend to be absent more frequently than men. This may be because women involve in more instrumental, family-oriented behaviours when they miss work (Haccoun and Desgent, 1993) and they experience greater level of work stress (Higgins, 1986). Kinship responsibilities have also been found to be positively related to absence (Blegen *et al.*, 1988).

The implication of this study is that more research efforts should be geared towards increasing our potential understanding of conscientiousness and perceived organizational support as adequate predictors of work-related outcome among Nigerians. Finally, it is suggested that the influence of some salient variables including job satisfaction, human resource practices, economic factors, job characteristics and work-related stress be examined to see their effects on employees' absenteeism.

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