

# Determinants of Presenteeism: A Study on Non-Academics in State Higher Educational Institutions in Sri Lanka

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## **Abstract**

Presenteeism was defined in this research as the extent of engaging in personal works while being at work by non-academics. Existing literature reveals a deficiency in theoretical and empirical knowledge on antecedents of presenteeism. This study explores the determinants of presenteeism of non-academic staff in State Higher Educational Institutions in Sri Lanka. Participants were university administrative officers and they were asked to report on the presenteeism behaviour of non-academic staff, as supervising officers. A technique called Nominal Group Technique was applied for determining the factors which contribute to presenteeism of non-academics and prioritizing the identified factors. 15 experienced university administrative officers were participated. 24 factors were identified and they include Lack of work, Family commitments (Childcare/Eldercare), Inadequate supervision, Long distance of travelling between home and workplace, No punishment/restrictions imposed for engaging in personal work, Family/Personal problems, Bad office culture, Job stress, Unavailability of performance-based pay scheme, Conflicts with supervisor, etc. Prioritizing resulted in Lack of awareness on ethics being the most important determinant of presenteeism of non-academics, Unavailability of performance-based pay scheme being the second most important determinant, and Wrong attitudes about the work being the third most important determinant. Implications were discussed.

**Key Words:** Presenteeism, Determinants, Non-academics, State Higher Educational Institutions

## Introduction

Presenteeism is an evolving challenge faced by the employers in the recent past. In the international context, increased attention has been drawn to the term Presenteeism as a result of the reported heavy cost associated with presenteeism, which in fact exceeds the cost of absenteeism as well (Hemp, 2004). Whereas, in the case of Sri Lanka, notice on the concept of presenteeism is yet minimal (Werapitiya, Opatha, and Fernando, 2015).

Presenteeism has been defined mainly as working of employees while they are sick by majority of the scholars, and as not fully engaged in work or working more than the time assigned on a particular job by some scholars (Werapitiya et al, 2015). When employees who are at work, spend a portion of the workday engaging in personal business on the job, also, a form of Presenteeism called as nonwork-related presenteeism occurs, which may have serious implications for both individuals and organizations (D'Abate and Eddy, 2007). So far, this aspect of presenteeism has not been studied extensively (D'Abate, 2005; D'Abate and Eddy, 2007; Johns, 2010), since most researchers focus on illness-related presenteeism or medical aspect of that (Aronsson, Gustafsson, and Dallner, 2000; Hemp, 2004; Sanderson and Cocker, 2013), even though it has been proposed that nonwork-related presenteeism can financially impact organizations more than absenteeism (Wan, Downey, and Stough, 2014).

Findings suggest that employees spend approximately five hours or more in a typical workweek for engaging in wide variety of personal activities such as using the internet, phone, conversing with co-workers, paying personal bills, making personal appointments, shopping by phone, and playing computer games (Gurchiek, 2009; Eddy, D'Abate, and Thurston, 2010; Prater and Smith, 2011), costing organizations an average productivity loss of \$8,875 per year per employee (D'Abate and Eddy, 2007). Men's spending of time while at work for personal business per day is 1.2 hours more than women's (Prater and Smith, 2011). Such that these nonwork-related activities negatively affect the amount of time available for an employee to spend focusing on work related tasks. To bring higher results, managers need employees who are focused and productive (Gilbreath and Karimi, 2012). Hence, effective management of presenteeism could be a distinct source of competitive advantage (Hemp, 2004).

The construct of engaging in personal business on the job, i.e., nonwork-related presenteeism incorporates three life realms as, work issues pertaining to an individual's career or job, family issues with home life, and leisure issues surrounding personal interests, social life, or recreational activities (D'Abate, 2005). As revealed by various researchers, D'Abate and Eddy (2007) mentioned that imbalance among the life realms could lead to conflicts of poor time management, preoccupation with home or leisure while at work, and emotional strain; where such life realm conflicts can result in negative consequences of psychological problems, physical health problems, stress, lower life satisfaction, familial problems and burnout, for individuals, and lower job satisfaction, higher turnover, increased absenteeism, less productivity, less career success and satisfaction, lower organizational commitment and loyalty, and increased health care costs, for organizations, while helping employees balance their work and personal lives can lead to greater organizational commitment, organizational trust and loyalty, work effort, and performance.

One initial exploratory study on nonwork-related presenteeism has identified that out of number of factors as convenience, time constraints, timing, or boredom, the achievement of work-life balance is the key reason for individuals to engage in personal business while on the job (D'Abate, 2005). The flexibility between work and nonwork life realm boundaries may be enhanced by allowing employees to engage in some degree of personal business on the job, since organizations should take measures for work-life balance of employees (D'Abate and Eddy, 2007).

Despite the fact that employees who are engaged in personal matters tend to deliver lower productivity and poor quality of output, there are suggestions that letting such behaviours bring some benefits, as casual browsing of the internet may develop skills of employees that could be utilized by the organizations in future or may cause companionship or appreciation feelings among employees when they are able to satisfy certain personal work within working hours (D'Abate and Eddy, 2007; Wan et al, 2014).

Johns (2010) has proposed by way of the dynamic model of presenteeism and absenteeism that in addition to the nature of the illness, number of factors broadly categorized into two as work context factors (job demands, job security, reward system, absence policy, absence/presence culture, teamwork, ease of replacement and adjustment latitude) and personal factors (work attitudes, personality, perceived justice, stress, perceived absence legitimacy, proclivity for sick role, health locus of control and gender) influence the choice between absenteeism and presenteeism.

In contrast to absenteeism, presenteeism is not clearly visible, and the studies have reported that the time lost from the people staying at home is less than from those who show up but not perform at full capacity. Hence, presenteeism which causes critical effects than absenteeism (Hemp, 2004), has become a subject of interest, recently (Johns, 2010). Since, the employees suffering from presenteeism are not paying their full attention to the job, they are less productive, make more mistakes, provide poor quality service, and less innovative, which ultimately create negative repercussions for the organization and its managers (Gilbreath and Karimi, 2012). Presenteeism is argued to have a high negative impact on employee engagement which is a critical human resource management outcome (Opatha, 2021) and employee engagement has a significant and positive impact on employee job performance (Iddagoda and Opatha, 2020). Due to the reported adverse consequences of presenteeism, it is important for the organizations to understand the reasons as to why employees engage in personal activities while being at work: one aspect of presenteeism, in order to manage such presenteeism effectively.

### **Problem Statement**

Except few studies, to date, research directed towards identifying antecedents of presenteeism, in the context of engaging in personal work during work hours are minimal (D'Abate, 2005; Eddy et al, 2010; Gilbreath and Karimi, 2012; Wan et al, 2014). In that scenario, it is needless to emphasize that the Sri Lankan studies conducted in respect of determinants of presenteeism are non apparent. The necessity of exploring the types of behaviours employees engage in the job and the rationale or causes for such presenteeism, by way of empirical evidence, has been established (D'Abate and Eddy, 2007; Johns, 2010).

In a knowledge economy, Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) which mainly provide tertiary education play the vital role of generating and preserving, disseminating and transforming knowledge into wider social and economic benefits (Great Britain. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2009). To satisfy the demands of a knowledge economy, it is essential to build a highly educated community through development of a strong education system at all levels. At a time, knowledge accumulation is becoming a core competitive advantage of a country; during the last two decades, growing concern has been expressed about the quality of university education in Sri Lanka.

Productive contribution of non-academic staff as support staff to the works of HEIs, leads to improvement of quality of the services rendered by HEIs (Gunawardena, 2017). The contribution of non-academic staff highly impacts the student experience at a university. They provide many critical support and operational services such as guiding students through admission and registration processes, orient them to the University, supporting for student welfare facilities, monitor their completion progress, deliver innumerable non-academic learning opportunities, and support for administrative functions. Usually, non-academic staff members serving in academic departments or administrative divisions, are the first point of contact for numerous students who need assistance in one form or another. Thus, it is interesting to study on the presenteeism of non-academic staff.

There is a well established gap in both the theoretical and empirical body of knowledge in respect of factors which determine presenteeism of Non-Academics in State Higher Educational Institutions in Sri Lanka. Theoretical arguments or empirical research findings on the determinants of presenteeism of Non-Academics in State Higher Educational Institutions are untraceable.

The problem statement addressed in this study can be expressed as: what are the factors which determine the presenteeism of university non-academic staff according to the perception of the selected group of University Administrative Officers (UAOs), and the three most important factors according to their perception?

### **The Concept of Presenteeism**

The concept of Presenteeism, a recent subject of interest, is with definitional confusion (Johns, 2010), due to the absence of the one unified definition (Australian Public Service Commission, 2012) nevertheless of reported many repercussions of presenteeism including health hazards and low performances (Werapitiya et al, 2015). Johns (2010) and Gosselin, Lemyre, and Corneil (2013) mentioned two main sickness related research traditions, distinct by geography, that stem to frame the term Presenteeism, i.e. the British and European scholars are focusing on understanding the frequency of the act of presenteeism as a reflection of job insecurity and other occupational characteristics (causes of presenteeism) and the Americans are focusing on understanding the productivity consequences of this behavior as a function of various illnesses while ignoring the causes of showing up ill (consequences of presenteeism). However, Johns (2010) asserted that the causes and consequences of presenteeism must be established by empirical evidence, not by definition, and defined presenteeism as attending work while ill (Gosselin et al, 2013).

Although Hemp (2004) defined presenteeism as the problem of workers being on the job, but because of illness or other medical conditions not fully functioning; in disagreement with such narrow view, Gilbreath and Karimi (2012) mentioned that Presenteeism happens when employees are at work, but their cognitive energy is not devoted to their work, may be due to variety of antecedents.

Werapitiya et al (2015) developed a comprehensive working definition in a broader spectrum of the term presenteeism, as “presenteeism is being at work despite being sick, working more than the time assigned on a particular job, not fully engaged in work, recorded as present but not in work assigned and overactive and hyperactive in the assignment”. Accordingly, Presenteeism is conceptualized as a construct composed of five domains. In line with one of the aforesaid domains: recorded as present but not in work assigned, D’Abate and Eddy (2007) argue that presenteeism also occurs when employees go to work but spend a portion of the workday engaging in personal business while on the job, called as nonwork-related presenteeism. While sickness has received the most attention of the research on presenteeism (Aronsson et al, 2000; Hemp, 2004; Hansen and Andersen, 2008; Demerouti, Le Blanc, Bakker, Schaufeli, and Hox, 2009) only limited number of scholars have attempted to research another aspect of presenteeism: the engagement of personal activities while being at work (D’Abate and Eddy, 2007; Gurchiek, 2009; Eddy et al, 2010; Prater and Smith, 2011; Wan et al, 2014). Henceforth, there is lack of literature on this perspective of presenteeism.

Provided that University Administrative Officer (UAO) perceives that a non-academic staff member heavily involves with personal activities during work, then it can be considered as significant level of presenteeism. On the other hand, if a non-academic staff member rarely involves with personal activities during work, it can be considered as minor level of presenteeism. The working definition of presenteeism formulated for this study is *the extent of engaging in personal works while being at work by non-academics*.

Only non-academic non-administrative staff were considered for this study, although the other staff categories such as academic, non-academic administrative, academic support etc. are available in the university system. This working definition reflects presenteeism as a behavioral aspect of non-academics.

Past researchers had suggested numerous dimensions of presenteeism on the aspect of engagement of personal activities while being at work. For instance: personal phone calls, e-mails to friends, office betting pools (D’Abate, 2005); paying personal bills, making personal appointments, shopping by phone, and playing computer games (D’Abate and Eddy, 2007); talking with a teacher from their child’s school, making doctor appointments and talking with an aging parent’s caretaker (Gurchiek, 2009); using the internet, email, phone, or conversing with co-workers (Eddy et al, 2010); debit/credit problems, vehicle purchase or vehicle repairs, childcare, teacher conferences, and home purchase or home repairs (Prater and Smith, 2011).

### **Determinants of Presenteeism**

Determinants of presenteeism are the factors which determine presenteeism. In the context of handful of studies on Presenteeism, on the perspective of engagement of

personal works while being at work; few research studies exist on the antecedents of the same as well (D'Abate and Eddy, 2007). An exploratory study conducted by D'Abate, (2005) to examine the relationships and meshed boundaries among work, home and leisure life realms revealed that achievement of work-life balance, various justifications people construct to rationalize this behavior, and the importance people place upon home, work, and leisure, are the factors affecting engagement in personal business whilst on the job. Middaugh (2007) highlighted an indication in a report in Risk and Insurance that the root causes of presenteeism include issues of childcare, financial worries, addiction, divorce, or family problems. Boredom, convenience, emotional intelligence, procrastination, negative work environment and supervisor behaviour are determinants of presenteeism found by research (Eddy et al, 2010; Gilbreath and Karimi, 2012; Wan et al, 2014). A survey reported that employees waste time due to the believe that short breaks increase productivity, boredom, lack of incentive, job dissatisfaction, and insufficient payments (Salary.com, 2014). Employees use the Internet for non-work-related purposes as a consequence of employee job attitudes (lack of job involvement and intrinsic involvement), organizational characteristics (managerial support for Internet usage and perceived cyberloafing of coworkers), participation in non-Internet loafing activities, and employee attitudes toward cyberloafing (Lieberman, Seidman, Mckenna, and Buffardi, 2011).

### **Determinants of Presenteeism as Perceived by Sri Lankan UAOs**

A popular technique called Nominal Group Technique (NGT) was applied in this study, in order to explore and identify determinants of presenteeism of non-academics in State HEIs and to prioritize them according to the perception of a selected group of Sri Lankan UAOs. NGT is a method for structuring small group meetings that allows individual judgments about a topic or issue to be pooled effectively and used in situations in which uncertainty or disagreement exists about the nature of the problem and possible solutions (Moore,1987). From far back as 1960's NGT has been applied in a wide range of fields (Potter, Gordon, and Hamer, 2004), since the technique is helpful in identifying problems, exploring solutions, and establishing priorities (Moore,1987). When comparing the NGT with other group processes such as delphi, focus groups and brainstorming, the NGT has number of advantages over other group processes, including minimal pre-meeting preparation required by participants, and participants input is limited to a single meeting lasting up to two hours, task completion and immediate dissemination of results to the group promotes participation satisfaction, and researcher-bias is minimised due to the highly structured nature of the process (Potter et al, 2004). The NGT can be viewed as a process that has five steps: the purpose of gathering of the group of competent persons, silent idea generation, giving ideas in round-robin fashion, comments and clarification, and voting (Opatha, 2015). The NGT was observed to have been used for several Sri Lankan studies (Opatha and Perera, 2017; Opatha and Rathnayake, 2018) recently done.

This study was conducted by using NGT based on a group of fifteen Sri Lankan UAOs working for different state owned universities (six) and higher educational institutes (two) coming under the purview of the University Grants Commission (UGC), and the UGC. The respective UAOs are holding the posts of Deputy Registrar, Senior Assistant Registrar/Secretary and Assistant Registrar/Secretary. Initially, they were requested to identify the factors that would contribute to presenteeism of non-academics in State HEIs

according to their perception, and to list out such factors independently. The names of the respective universities and higher educational institutes are University of Peradeniya, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, University of Moratuwa, University of Visual and Performing Arts, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, Wayamba University of Sri Lanka, Postgraduate Institute of Medicine and Gampaha Wickramarachchi Ayurveda Institute, and the UGC as well. Even though the designations and the attached HEIs of the respondents are revealed, their names were not disclosed, to assure the securing of confidentiality of information provided by the respondents. Initially, they were requested to identify the factors that would contribute to presenteeism of non-academics in State HEIs according to their perception, and to list out such factors independently. Thereafter, the collected data were examined, adjusted, and a final list compiling all factors was prepared. The list developed by NGT comprised of the following factors:

1. Wrong attitudes about the work
2. Lack of work
3. Family commitments (Childcare/Eldercare)
4. Inadequate supervision
5. Long distance of travelling between home and workplace
6. No punishment/restrictions imposed for engage in personal work
7. Family/Personal problems
8. Bad office culture
9. Job stress
10. Unavailability of performance-based pay scheme
11. Conflicts with supervisor
12. Unavailability of time specific targets to achieve
13. Easy access to technological tools (Eg: social media, mobile phones, computer games, YouTube)
14. Poor workplace conditions
15. Improper supervisor behavior
16. Influence of trade unions
17. Less awareness on the work obligations
18. Job security of public sector
19. To delay the work to claim overtime
20. Addiction
21. Supervisor reluctant to grant leave
22. Bored/lack of interest on work
23. Lack of awareness of ethics
24. Personal affairs

Then, each group member was requested to prioritize the identified factors of the list and five options were given and they were weighted as 5 for the first option, 4 for the second option, 3 for the third option, 2 for the fourth option, and 1 for the fifth option. The list developed by NGT comprised of twenty-four factors. Such twenty-Four factors of presenteeism of non-academics identified and prioritized based on the NGT, are given in the Table 1, according to the order of ranking of the factors as per the percentage scores. According to the results of prioritizing given by the NGT members, out of the above identified twenty four factors, the most important three factors of presenteeism were no.

23 (Lack of awareness of ethics), no. 10 (Unavailability of performance based pay scheme), and no. 1 (Wrong attitudes about the work) respectively.

**Table 1. Ranking of the Factors of Presenteeism based on NGT**

No.	Factor of Presenteeism	Percentage Score	Overall Rank
1	Lack of awareness on ethics	12.44	01
2	Unavailability of performance-based-pay scheme	11.11	02
3	Wrong attitudes about the work	10.67	03
4	Family commitments (Childcare/Eldercare)	9.78	04
5	Unavailability of time specific targets to achieve	8.00	05
6	Inadequate supervision	7.56	06
7	No punishment/restrictions imposed for engage in personal works	7.56	06
8	Less awareness on the work obligations	7.56	06
9	Job security of public sector	5.33	07
10	Lack of work	3.56	08
11	Family/Personal problems	3.56	08
12	Easy access to technological tools (E.g. social media, mobile phones, computer games, YouTube)	2.22	09
13	Bored/lack of interest on work	2.22	09
14	Long distance of travelling between home and workplace	1.78	10
15	Addiction	1.78	10
16	Bad office culture	1.33	11
17	Improper supervisor behavior	1.33	11
18	Personal affairs	1.33	11
19	Supervisor reluctant to grant leave	0.89	12
20	Job stress	0.00	13
21	Conflicts with supervisor	0.00	13
22	Poor workplace conditions	0.00	13
23	Influence of trade unions	0.00	13
24	To delay the work to claim overtime	0.00	13

As per the Table, factors such as Job stress, Conflicts with supervisor, Poor workplace conditions, Influence of trade unions, and “To delay the work to claim overtime” have not been ranked. Family commitments (childcare and eldercare) and unavailability of time specific targets to achieve are important determinants of presenteeism among the non-academics.



## Conclusion

Deviating from the well-established focus on sickness aspect of presenteeism, this study empirically explored another surface of presenteeism with respect to the engagement of personal activities while being at work, which is called as nonwork-related presenteeism as well. Presenteeism appears to be a novel term to Sri Lankan context, although special attention to that concept is observable in international scenario (Werapitiya et al, 2015). This study was carried out to identify the factors which determine the presenteeism of university non-academics according to the perception of a selected group of UAOs and to find out the three most important factors. 24 factors which determine the presenteeism of university non-academics were identified and they were prioritized. The most important three factors of presenteeism were no. 23 (Lack of awareness of ethics), no. 10 (Unavailability of performance based pay scheme), and no. 1 (Wrong attitudes about the work) respectively.

The findings of this research are both theoretically and empirically of value, which can be used by the officials of the HEIs to effectively manage the presenteeism among non-academics serving at the State HEIs in Sri Lanka. It is suggested that a serious attempt has to be taken by the UGC and the HEIs to create and maintain a sufficient awareness of ethics. Lack of awareness on ethics denotes that the understanding and knowledge among the non-academics on the appropriate employee behaviour is insufficient. If the non-academic is not mindful about the work ethics to be ensured by him or her, then the possibility of involving unethical behaviours while at work is high. To formulate and implement a performance-based pay scheme becomes essential in this regard. Unavailability of performance-based-pay scheme denotes that a payment of variable pay or incentive, based on non-academics' individual, team or organizational job performance, is not in existence. If outcomes produced by the non-academics are considered for their payments, then there is high possibility that they will not involve in personal works during work time. Since, such involvement would badly impact the quantity and quality of the results generated by them and ultimately affect the payments that would otherwise be gained by them.

Another important implication is to improve the non-academics' attitudes about work. Wrong attitudes about the work denote that the non-academics' point of view or the perspective about the work is not favorable. Generally, a person's actual behaviour depends on his/her attitudes. The greater extent of negative attitudes about work among non-academics tends to encourage them to involve more in the personal works during working time. In reverse, non-academics with lesser wrong attitudes and more positive work attitudes will exhibit lesser presenteeism. Changing attitudes is not an easy task and one strategy that can be applied to change attitudes is persuasion (Opatha, 2015). Persuasion done by a person who has high expertise and high trustworthiness hopefully results in transforming negative attitudes to positive attitudes.

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