

Institution: King's College London
Unit of Assessment: 19, Business and Management Studies
Title of case study: Metropolitan Police Absenteeism
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>King's research on interactive service work changed understanding of the causes of absenteeism at the Metropolitan Police's Central Communications 999 emergency call centres in London. This led to the implementation of new human resource policy initiatives to tackle the problem and, as a result, reduced absenteeism by approximately one third, from 17.47 days per staff member in April 2011 to 11.13 days in April 2013 and saved the emergency 999 Service in excess of £1 million in sick leave payments. The Metropolitan Police commissioned this research on the basis of long-term, continuing research on interactive service work at King's. The human resources initiatives associated with the marked reduction in absenteeism included an extensive training programme to facilitate a more participative form of supervision and the introduction of new shift arrangements.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Employee absence is a major human resource problem costing British organizations an estimated £9 billion per annum. Call centres have the highest absence levels of all industry sectors. Research by Deery and colleagues (Refs 7, 6, 5, 4 and 3) has made a significant contribution to the understanding of absenteeism. This has taken the form of extensive citations to the published work (more than 1000 citations, Google Scholar September 2013) and a wide and varied body of research in industries including telecommunications, banking and airlines in the UK, North America and Australia. The research has made three distinctive contributions. Firstly, it has identified causes of absenteeism that are specific to call centres including emotional exhaustion, job routinisation, abusive customers, and call monitoring (Ref. 5). Secondly, it has signalled the importance of engaging employees in identifying both the causes of absence and the intervention strategies that should be initiated to reduce it. Participative solutions to absence management have been shown to yield more positive and sustainable results (Ref. 7). This is relevant to the ways in which the causes of absence are identified (through extensive surveys) and the means of formulating and implementing absence management initiatives (through the use of employee and union consultation and focus groups). Thirdly, the research (Refs 4 and 3) has demonstrated how social relationships at work – and particularly those developed with supervisors – can shape a culture of attendance or a climate of absenteeism. Strictly enforced absence management policies which emphasise punitive sanctions and disciplinary action can force employees to attend work in the short-term but impair health and raise absence levels in the long-term (Ref. 2). This research has helped to inform practical solutions to the problems of employee withdrawal both within the Metropolitan Police and in other organizations such as Barclays in the UK and Qantas in Australia and North America.</p> <p>Deery and co-researchers were approached by the Metropolitan Police Service in 2010 to undertake research into the causes of absenteeism at the organization's three call centres and to assist them to develop appropriate strategies to reduce workplace absence. The research team at King's College London was invited to undertake this research because of its established expertise in this area of interactive service work (Refs 7, 6, 5 and 4). The study drew insights from industrial relations and occupational psychology and explored both the motivational factors underpinning the</p>

absence behaviour and the appropriate design of an organizational response which could help to address the reasons for absence.

The project involved a study of the London Metropolitan Police Service's three Central Communications Command (CCC) 999 emergency call centres at Lambeth, Bow and Hendon. These centres employ over 1700 staff who take emergency calls from the public involving incidences that range from burglaries and assaults to domestic violence, murders and suicides. The emergency call centres handle more than two million calls per year. They operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year - and until recently – ran on a 12 hour rotating shift. The work is highly stressful.

The research identified two types of absence. The first involved involuntary or unavoidable absence. This resulted from stressful work demands such as overwork which led to longer-term stress-induced illnesses. It corresponded to what we termed the medical or health model of absenteeism (Ref. 2). Our analysis disclosed that involuntary absence resulted from a number of factors. These principally related to the twelve-hour shift arrangements that operated at the call centres, emotional exhaustion, work-to-family conflict and perceptions of poor supervisory skills.

The second type of absence was voluntary or discretionary and represented a form of withdrawal that involved short-term absences, which we could call 'mental health days' (Ref. 5). This reflected a coping strategy through which employees took time off work to minimize the effects of work strain. The study found that employees who worked while ill had higher levels of subsequent short-term absences (Ref.1). This was associated with managers strictly enforcing the organisation's attendance rules. Indeed statistical analysis showed that strongly enforced attendance rules were actually associated with **higher** rather than lower absence rates (measured over a subsequent 12 month period). This appeared to be related to employee perceptions of managerial unfairness and a higher motivation to subsequently report in sick.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Where a DOI or URL is not given, hard copies are available on request.

1. Deery, S., Iverson, R. and Walsh, J. (2012) Why do employees work when ill? A study of the antecedents and outcomes of presenteeism. Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management, Boston.
2. Deery, S. and Walsh, J. (2011). Absenteeism and presenteeism in an Emergency Services' Call Centre. Paper presented to the Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand, Auckland.
3. Deery, S., Iverson, R. and Walsh, J. (2010). Coping strategies in call centres: Work intensity and the role of co-workers and supervisors, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 48: 181-200. Doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8543.2009.00755.x
4. Deery, S., Iverson, R. and Walsh, J. (2006) Towards a better understanding of the psychological contract: A study of customer service employees, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91: 166-175.
5. Deery, S., Iverson, R. and Walsh, J. (2002). Work relationships in telephone call centres: Understanding emotional exhaustion and employee withdrawal, *Journal of Management Studies*, 39:471-496. Doi: [10.1111/1467-6486.00300](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00300)

Impact case study (REF3b)

6. Iverson, R. and Deery, S. (2001). Understanding the 'Personological' basis of employee withdrawal: The influence of affective disposition on employee tardiness, early departure and absenteeism. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86: 856-866.

Deery, S., Iverson, R., Erwin, P. and Ambrose, M. (1995). The determinants of absenteeism: Evidence from Australian blue-collar employees, *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 6: 825-48. Doi: 10.1080/09585199500000049

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

King's research changed thinking and led to new approaches being adopted regarding absenteeism at Metropolitan Police 999 Call Centres, and, as a result, to significant reductions in absenteeism. Longer-term research on interactive service work by the King's researchers, led the Metropolitan Police to commission research on absenteeism at its emergency call Centres.

There was engagement from the outset with the benefitting organisation and there was continuing dialogue throughout the project, from research design to the presentation of results. A number of presentations and meetings were held with senior management at which policy options and organizational initiatives were proposed. The research team emphasised both the health-related causes of absenteeism – the 12 hour shift arrangements, emotional exhaustion, work-to-family conflict and the role of poor supervisory skills – as well as the more discretionary forms of absence which appeared to serve a restorative function. Consistent with our earlier research (Ref. 7) we also sought active employee participation in the development and formulation of possible approaches to the better management of absence. The imposition of senior management 'solutions' are invariably unsuccessful because of the lack of 'buy-in' from the workforce. Our project therefore placed considerable emphasis on the involvement of front-line employees and team leaders in the analysis and consideration of the survey results and the development of strategies to reduce absenteeism. A report was prepared for the employees and discussed within the centres. This generated a wide range of policy ideas including proposed changes to management style, modifications to work practices and a widening of the processes of communication.

Research findings presented to the Metropolitan Police focused on three issues: 1. The 12-hour rotating shift arrangements, which were clearly associated with high levels of work fatigue; 2. The 'command and control' style of attendance management, which prevented the development of a more engaged and responsive form of supervision; 3. Active employee participation in the development and implementation of absence management strategies.

As a result, there was a transformation of thinking, which resulted in three new approaches and initiatives being adopted. 1. Senior management initiated an extensive training programme for its supervisors to improve their people-management skills. A strong emphasis was placed on the development of more constructive interpersonal relations. 2. The Metropolitan Police also undertook an examination of the 12-hour rotating shift arrangements. 3. In association with our work a consultant's report was commissioned and following the organizational involvement of employees and their unions the Met Police introduced a new eight hour shift arrangement to assist with work-family issues and to help reduce work fatigue.

King's research and the associated policy initiatives undertaken by the Central Communications

Impact case study (REF3b)

Command had a significant impact on absence. The level of absenteeism was substantially reduced, by around one third, across the entire emergency services operation involving the three Metropolitan Police Service 999 call centres. The major changes to the shift patterns were implemented in the period May – August 2011. The table below provides information on the pattern of absence in the period April 2011 – April 2013.

Table: Police staff absence per head April 2011-April 2013 (in days) (Source A)

April 2011	17.47
January 2012	18.98
April 2012	14.41
January 2013	13.30
April 2013	11.13

In this two year period absenteeism was reduced by 36 per cent. This added over six working days to the yearly attendance of the average police staff member and involved very major budgetary savings of over £1 million to the Central Communications Command's operations at its three centres – Bow, Lambeth and Hendon. It is also important to note that during this period service levels (the percentage of response units that arrive at emergencies within 15 minutes) improved (April 2011: 86.0%; April 2013: 94.2%). (Source A). Reduced sick leave and more consistent attendance levels enabled the Metropolitan Police to deliver a safer and better performing service to its customers. In this context it should be pointed out that the 999 emergency call centres deliver services to over seven and a half million London residents potentially and many more tourists and visitors, and are part of one of the largest emergency service operations in the world.

The research project undertaken for the Metropolitan Police Service was associated with a substantial improvement in employee attendance. The emergency call centre operations employ 1700 staff and deliver a 24-hour service to more than seven million people. Reduced absenteeism enhanced organisational productivity and contributed to improved operational performance. These outcomes also yielded very important cost savings for the Metropolitan Police and benefits to the general public across the whole of London.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- A. Metropolitan Police Service, CCC Attendance Management Performance, May 2013 (internal document, confidential)
- B. Deputy OCU Commander, Central Communications Command, Metropolitan Police Service [confirms impact of research within Met Police call centres]
- C. Organization Development Consultant, Metropolitan Police Service [confirms impact of research within Met Police call centres]
- D. Human Resource Manager, Metropolitan Police Service [confirms impact of research on staff absence, in particular sick leave]