

# Determinants of Presenteeism and Intention to Stay: A Two-Wave Study

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** To examine a research model which specifies that workload and job insecurity affect presenteeism, which in turn influences intention to stay.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A quantitative study was employed to gather data from 126 academics in a Malaysian private university at two different points of time (i.e. *Time 1* and *Time 2*) that were three months apart.

**Findings:** The analysis showed that only workload was related to presenteeism at *Time 1*. Employees who exhibited high presenteeism showed low intention to stay at *Time 2*.

**Research limitations/implications:** This paper empirically establishes the significance of workload as a predictor of presenteeism, which consequently causes low intention to stay.

**Practical implications:** The study suggests that practitioners and managers should pay considerable attention to the impact of workload on presenteeism in designing retention strategies for business sustainability.

**Originality/value:** The authors extend prior research on the link between presenteeism and intention to stay, which has received relatively scant attention.

**Keywords:** Intention to stay, Retention, Presenteeism, Workload, Job insecurity, Academic.

## Introduction

Undoubtedly, humans are one of the most vital resources for an organisation. Human resources act as a valuable strategic weapon that can be utilised for business sustainability (Ulrich, 1998; Yean, 2020). Hence, employees' health and well-being warrant serious attention from employers to ensure they can work productively and contribute to long-term organisational success. Recognising the importance of employee well-being, in 2015, the United Nations listed "good health and well-being" as one of the top three sustainable development goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030 (Economic Planning Unit, 2017).

Prior research (e.g. Ismail & Warrak, 2019; Wu et al., 2017) has suggested that employee health and well-being is a significant work-life balance issue that strongly relates to employee retention. However, to date, studies have solely focused on the predictors of intention to stay while overlooking the antecedents of employee well-being, such as presenteeism, that may indirectly impact such intention. Presenteeism is the condition in which an employee, despite ill health that demands rest or medical leave, still shows up at his/her workplace (Aronsson et al., 2000). Johns' (2010) review of the extant literature indicates a widely agreed consensus

that presenteeism is a poor state of well-being that causes high productivity losses and poor employee retention.

Of the numerous occupational contexts, academicians are not exempt from the issues of presenteeism and low retention. The Malaysian Employers Federation reported that 30 percent of academics from private universities had left their workplace in the past 12 months (Goh, 2012). This figure is unexpectedly high for the academic profession, which is generally perceived as a relaxing one. However, evidence suggests that this perception is far from true. Kinman (2017) revealed that almost half of the 5,000 academics surveyed reported that they often come to work when ill; citing job insecurity and heavy workloads from their diverse academic roles as reasons for continuing to work during periods of sickness. Prolonged presenteeism with no practical solutions from university management is likely to urge academicians to leave their university to seek a healthy work-life balance. It can thus be surmised that presenteeism may decrease academics' intention to stay. Therefore, it is imperative that these two issues, i.e. presenteeism and retention, be combated immediately to ensure universities have sufficient academics in good health to deliver high quality teaching to students.

Accordingly, this research was carried out to advance the understanding of presenteeism and retention using evidence-based data. Specifically, this study examined the potential risk factors (i.e. workload and job insecurity) for presenteeism that indirectly discourage private university academics' intention to stay.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Intention to Stay***

An employee's willingness to remain in and maintain an employment relationship with his/her current employer is referred to as intention to stay (Kim et al., 1996). From the management perspective, intention to stay can also be called retention, which is an individual's voluntary action to continuously serve as an employee for a particular organisation. Studies have found that intention to stay is highly impacted by several personal and work-related factors such as personality, job satisfaction, work engagement, organisational human resource policies, and working conditions (Branham, 2005; Hom et al., 2017; Johari et al., 2012). Despite these studies, there remains a dearth of research on the connection between presenteeism and intention to stay. Therefore, the factors that affect presenteeism as well as the ways presenteeism affects intention to stay are still unclear. The following sections explain the hypothesised links that investigated in this study with the aim to contribute to the limited empirical research on the presenteeism-retention nexus.

### ***Antecedents of Presenteeism***

Presenteeism occurs when an employee comes to work despite being ill (Aronsson et al., 2000; Johns, 2010). According to Hemp (2004), employees who exhibit presenteeism do not take their job lightly and continue working even when suffering from serious health problems. This implies that there are specific reasons that urge them come to work in their unwell condition. One potential reason may be a heavy workload which needs to be completed within a certain time frame. Due to these job demands, employees might feel reluctant to take time off to rest and recuperate at home. They may also endure feelings of guilt for missing work deadlines. Hence, they choose to come to work while sick to fulfil their responsibilities. Accordingly, it was hypothesised that:

H1: Workload has a significant positive effect on presenteeism.

Job insecurity may be another potential cause of presenteeism. Job insecurity is a situation wherein employees feel a lack of assurance that their job will remain stable over time (Elst et al., 2014). Today’s business environment is rife with impermanent jobs, especially in private firms. Employees who fear losing their job would thus be more motivated to engage in presenteeism (Mokhtar et al., 2019). This is because insecure employees are less inclined to take medical leave as they worry about being replaced by another employee. As a result, employees who cannot afford to lose their job are more likely to work while ill (Heponiemi et al., 2010) under the belief that being present grants a positive impression to their immediate superiors that they are not using their sickness as an excuse to avoid job responsibilities. Thus, it was hypothesised that:

H2: Job insecurity has a significant positive effect on presenteeism.

**Presenteeism and Intention to Stay**

Past studies (e.g. Hemp, 2004; Johns, 2011) have discovered that presenteeism does not contribute to organisational productivity. Though a sick employee is physically present at work, he/she may not be able to focus on and perform his/her job at full capacity. In the long term, this impacts employees’ well-being at work and deters their intention to stay. A survey by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in 2019 revealed that most organisations have done nothing to discourage the unhealthy phenomenon of presenteeism (CIPD, 2019). Hence, the problem of presenteeism remains a potential threat to productivity, especially in terms of talent loss (CIPD, 2019). Exhibiting presenteeism for an extended period of time makes employee feel psychologically tired and less willing to stay. They may subsequently leave the organisation to seek a better work situation. Presenteeism, as a poor state of well-being, is therefore believed to be a negative determinant of employees’ intention to stay. Therefore, it was hypothesised that:

H3: Presenteeism has a significant negative effect on intention to stay.

**Research Framework**

Guided by the literature, the following theoretical framework (Figure 1) was proposed.

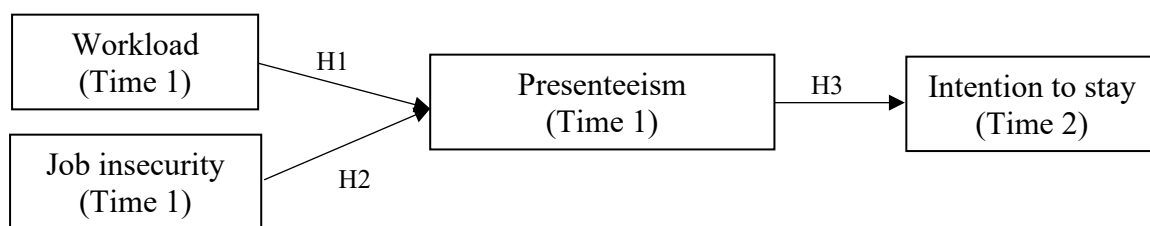


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

The framework was underpinned by Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory. This theory posits that hygiene factors, such as workplace policies, spur employees to act positively or negatively (Chiat & Panatik, 2019; Herzberg, 1987). Consistent with this, workload and job insecurity may be considered as workplace factors that encourage presenteeism at *Time 1*, consequently impacting employees’ intention to stay at *Time 2*. This is because an excessive workload demands that employees work continuously with limited rest. To avoid being burdened with incomplete tasks, employees are more likely to engage in presenteeism. Moreover, company policies that fail to promise job security would also drive employees to attend work when sick

as they would aim to secure a position within the organisation. In the long term, these two factors may possibly decrease employees' intention to stay via presenteeism.

## **Method**

### ***Sample and Procedure***

As explained in the 'Introduction' section, academics are not exempt from the trends of presenteeism and low retention. Thus, the sample of academics in Malaysian private universities was suitable for this study to examine the causes of presenteeism and intention to stay.

Using purposive sampling, the first questionnaire (i.e. only including items for workload, job insecurity, presenteeism, and socio-demographic information) was administered to a sample of 150 academics in a private university at *Time 1*. Of these, 140 academics completed the questionnaire. Three months later, at *Time 2*, a second questionnaire assessing intention to stay was administered to the same 140 academics who returned the questionnaires at *Time 1*. A total of 126 academics responded to the second questionnaire, while 14 failed to return the questionnaire at *Time 2*.

A majority of the 126 academics were male (60.3%). More than half of them were between 35 and 50 years old (63.5%), while less than half had graduated with a PhD degree (42.1%). Lecturers and senior lecturers/assistant professors dominated the sample (71.4%). All the sampled academics were Malaysian citizens and were employed based on at least a one to three year contract. Their minimum tenure with the current university was one year.

### ***Measures***

Workload was assessed via a six-item scale by Houston et al. (2006). The four-item Job Insecurity Scale (JIS) was sourced from Elst et al. (2014) to measure job insecurity. Six items were adapted from the Stanford Presenteeism Scale developed by Koopman et al. (2002) to measure presenteeism. Finally, a three-item scale by Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel (2009) was used to measure intention to stay. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

### **Data Analysis**

The data set for this study was analysed using the two-step Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The first step was the measurement model assessment and the second step was the structural model assessment, which are explained in the following sections.

## **Findings**

### ***Measurement model***

Prior to validity and reliability assessments, Harman's single factor test was performed to ensure the data was free from common method variance (CMV). The test found that the first factor only accounted for 18.35 percent of the total variance, which is less than the threshold of 50 percent suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003). Hence, the data was free from the issue of CMV. Next, the data was analysed as a reflective measurement model to establish the convergent and discriminant validity of each variable. As depicted in Table 1, three items were omitted from further analysis due to poor loadings. However, items W4 (0.619) and P2 (0.696) were retained since they significantly contribute to the theoretical conceptualisations of workload and presenteeism. Based on the results, all the criteria for convergent validity, i.e. loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE), were met (refer to Table 1).

Discriminant validity for each variable was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT). Table 2 shows that all the correlation values between variables were lower than the threshold value of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015). Therefore, discriminant validity was confirmed.

Table 1: Convergent validity results

Construct	Items	Loadings > 0.70	CR > 0.70	AVE > 0.50
Workload	W1	0.845	0.850	0.590
	W2	0.870		
	W3	deleted		
	W4	0.619		
	W5	deleted		
	W6	0.710		
Job insecurity	J1	0.756	0.904	0.703
	J2	0.908		
	J3	0.862		
	J4	0.820		
Presenteeism	P1	0.777	0.872	0.577
	P2	0.696		
	P3	0.837		
	P4	0.724		
	P5	0.757		
	P6	deleted		
Intention to stay	ITS1	0.845	0.838	0.634
	ITS2	0.829		
	ITS3	0.709		

Note: CR = Composite reliability; AVE = Average variance extracted

Table 2: Discriminant validity results

Constructs	1	2	3	4	Mean	SD
1. Worload	-				3.733	0.579
2. Job insecurity	0.151	-			3.718	0.730
3. Presenteeism	0.441	0.146	-		3.968	0.584
4. Intention to stay	0.471	0.201	0.632	-	1.899	0.543

Note: Discriminant validity is established at HTMT 0.85; SD = standard deviation.

### Structural Model

Following the assessment of the measurement model, a bootstrapping procedure with 5000 resamples (Hair et al., 2017) was performed to test the hypothesised relationships. Based on the results presented in Table 3, only one (H2) out of the three hypotheses was not supported. As shown in Table 4, the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) results revealed that workload and job insecurity explained 17.2 percent of the variance in presenteeism, while presenteeism explained 25.4 percent of the variance in intention to stay. Moreover, the effect size ( $f^2$ ) results indicated a medium effect size for workload (0.189) and a small effect size for job insecurity (0.012) in predicting presenteeism. The model's predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ) was measured via the blindfolding procedure with an omission distance of 11 for the sample size of 126.

According to Hair et al. (2017), if the  $Q^2$  value for a dependent variable is more than zero, the model can be considered to have adequate predictive relevance. The results, as presented in Table 4, confirmed that this study's model met this criterion (presenteeism = 0.074; intention to stay = 0.234).

Table 3: Hypotheses testing results

Hypotheses		$\beta$	t-value	Supported
H1	Workload → Presenteeism (Time 1)	0.396	4.025**	Yes
H2	Job insecurity → Presenteeism (Time 1)	0.098	0.779	No
H3	Presenteeism → Intention to stay (Time 2)	-0.504	5.280**	Yes

Note:  $\beta$  = Path coefficient; \*\*Significant at  $p < 0.01$

Table 4: Results of model predictive power

	$R^2$	$Q^2$	$f^2$
Workload	-	-	0.189
Job insecurity	-	-	0.012
Presenteeism	0.172	0.074	-
Intention to stay	0.0254	0.234	-

Note:  $R^2$  = R-square;  $Q^2$  = Predictive relevance;  $f^2$  = Effect size.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Underpinned by Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory, the present study proposed that the workload and job insecurity experienced by an academic will encourage him/her to exhibit presenteeism at *Time 1*, which would later deter his/her intention to stay at *Time 2*. The empirical results have shown that only workload has a significant relationship with presenteeism, suggesting that academics engage in presenteeism when they are burdened with heavy workloads. This supports the findings of Huyghebaert et al. (2018) and Kinman and Wray (2018). On the other hand, it was found that job insecurity does not significantly predict presenteeism, which is consistent with prior studies by Heponiemi et al. (2010) and Mokhtar et al. (2019). The reason for this finding may be the fact that academics are knowledge-based employees who are highly employable and can easily secure job opportunities in other organisations. Hence, they are not likely practise presenteeism as a means to secure their position within the university. Finally, the empirical results confirmed that presenteeism experienced by academics at *Time 1* significantly discourages academics' intention to stay at *Time 2*.

These empirical findings fill the gap in the literature pertaining the linkages between workload, job insecurity, presenteeism, and intention to stay. Specifically, this study has demonstrated that academics' intention to stay can be predicted by their presenteeism, which in turn is initiated by their workload. The findings also provide insight that not all hygiene factors affect an employee's behaviours, exemplified by the insignificance of job insecurity in this study. Hence, to some extent, the current study contributes to the propositions of Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory.

Notably, this study has important implications for Human Resource (HR) managers in universities, given that private universities currently face high turnover among academics. Workload has emerged as a prominent factor that motivates presenteeism, which leads academics to quit their job. To retain talent for long term sustainability, universities' management must therefore strategise relevant interventions to discourage presenteeism and effectively improve retention among academics.



Nevertheless, the present study has limitations that should be addressed in future research. Data collection was limited to the context of one Malaysian private university. Future studies should expand this study's framework to different contexts and industries with a more diverse sample. Upcoming research can also incorporate other relevant factors into this study's model to better understand what impacts presenteeism and intention to stay.

As a conclusion, this study has presented empirical evidence to contribute to the limited literature on the link between presenteeism and intention to stay, especially in a private university.

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