

Managing Attendance at Work: An Evidence-Based Review

**Dr Anne Spurgeon
Institute of Occupational Health
The University of Birmingham**

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Executive Summary

Introduction and scope

In recent years a broad consensus appears to have developed regarding the recommended core elements of effective attendance management policies. These elements are for example reflected in the resource document, produced by the Cabinet Office in 1999, which is intended to provide guidance to the public sector on managing attendance at work. Essentially they consist of the following: management training; accurate recording and monitoring of absence; early management contact with absent individuals; return to work interviews; trigger points for action and review; review of individual cases. There is an assumption that recommended ‘best practice’ in any field is based on evidence of proven effectiveness. However, recent application of rigorous evidence reviewing processes in a variety of fields, including those related to health, has revealed that in many cases such assumptions are unfounded. The objective of the current report therefore was to provide such a review of the evidence on which current “best practice” in the field of attendance management is based. The review was carried out using standard evidence-based review methodology comprising systematic and transparent literature searching, paper selection according to pre-determined criteria and critical evaluation of each paper in terms of the standard of scientific methodology employed.

Method

In accordance with the evidence-based review process three specific questions to be addressed were identified, (i) are the objectives of policies clear? (ii) how feasible is the implementation of policies? (iii) how effective are policies in terms of their stated objectives?

Specific search terms were identified to reflect the subject area and an extensive literature search was conducted on eight databases, four library catalogues, relevant electronic journal sites and the World Wide Web. Initially 214 pieces of literature were identified. Pre-determined criteria were then applied to select those papers to be included in the final review. The first criterion concerned the subject area. A wider model of attendance management is assumed to encompass a consideration of the individual and organizational determinants of absence, the use of intervention strategies to address those determinants and a management policy which is reactive to the actual occurrence of absence. The content of the guidelines indicated that only the last of these three approaches constituted the subject of the current review. Only papers concerned with this aspect were therefore selected. Sixty-five papers were discarded at this stage. Those retained were then inspected to determine whether they contained quantitative or qualitative data. Eighty-eight papers which were found to contain only comment or opinion were discarded. A final criterion concerned whether the remaining papers contained policy elements detailed in the Cabinet resource document. The majority were found to contain various other types of management policies predominantly those involving financial reward schemes. A further 49 papers were therefore discarded at this stage, reducing the relevant literature to 12 papers.

Results

Of those papers selected 8 were examples of purpose-developed scientific studies, 2 were surveys carried out by umbrella organisations and 2 were case studies. Thus the relevant data set was found to be extremely small. In addition, in terms of the quality and detail of data only the 8 scientific studies were judged to be of good quality methodologically.

Conclusions

Specific conclusions which can be drawn from this paucity of data set are very few and are limited to the following tentative statements.

- ◆ All policies regardless of their form and content are dependent on accurate and detailed monitoring of absence statistics.
- ◆ The system employed for this should be based on the pre-determined needs of the organization and congruent with that of other organisations with whose data the data may need to be compared.
- ◆ Before implementing an attendance management policy it is important to be clear about its objectives in terms for example of target figures and groups, which have been identified from previous analysis of absence statistics.
- ◆ The results of attendance management policies appear to be frequently unpredictable, with unintended consequences and this is particularly likely where objectives have not been clearly identified at the outset.
- ◆ In general attendance management policies appear to be most effective in increasing the attendance of those with very poor attendance records.
- ◆ There is some evidence that policies involving early contact with absent individuals can reduce the duration of absence, particularly among those with longer term absence.
- ◆ The use of trigger points for review is widespread but there would appear to be little useful information or agreement on the pattern of these or actions to employ.
- ◆ There is an absence of data relating to the usefulness of return to work interviews, the content and effectiveness of management training and the feasibility of implementation of various programmes.

In general it should be noted that the published literature in this field is primarily concerned with identifying the determinants of absence or with evaluating intervention programmes such as health promotion to address those determinants. In terms of actual attendance management, the field is dominated by papers which adopt an “advocacy” approach, unsupported by evaluative evidence. Current good practice would appear to be consensus-based rather than evidence-based. There is a tendency in much of the published literature to assume the proven validity of certain approaches and to focus any evaluation entirely on the extent of frequency of use i.e. to evaluate the extent of consensus, rather than the effectiveness of the policies themselves. Such consensus is not necessarily inappropriate and may be adequately based on reputable anecdotal report, but it is important to be clear that a scientific evidence-base is currently lacking. Further it should be noted that (i) few scientific studies have been carried out in the last five years (ii) few organisations appear inclined to publish the results of their own evaluations in sufficient depth to provide information for others (iii) surveys carried out by interested umbrella organisations tend to be methodologically poor and thus provide only limited useful information. Any decision to improve the evidence-base for current practice will therefore require attention to all three areas.

Recommendations

Three possible approaches to addressing the data gaps in this field are therefore recommended, namely (i) to conduct more purpose-developed experimental studies to evaluate the effectiveness of particular aspects of attendance management policies, (ii) to institute more surveys of perceived effectiveness based on good epidemiological practice and (iii) to encourage organisations to publish results of their own evaluations as case studies,

paying attention to better description of the measures employed and more detailed recording of quantitative data.

Specific areas requiring investigation include (i) the use of different schedules of trigger points for review, in terms of addressing different absence patterns and the needs of different groups of workers (ii) the content and use of different types of return to work interviews (iii) the effect of early and subsequent contact on different groups of workers with different absence patterns (iv) the content of management and supervisory training (v) the perceptions and attitudes of employees towards different elements of policy and the effect of these on attendance patterns (vi) information on the feasibility of implementing certain policies.

In all these areas, but particularly in respect of (v) and (vi) the use of qualitative as well as quantitative approaches is suggested.

In summary, application of a rigorous scientific reviewing process to guidelines on attendance management reveals that these are not evidence-based. This does not imply that the approaches advocated are ineffective but that there is currently no evidence to show whether they are effective or not. The adoption of consensus-based guidelines appears to be widespread and increasing. Although this is concerning at one level, it also provides the opportunity for more systematic evaluation to take place, thus ensuring that future development and improvement of guidelines is carried out within a rational framework, which rests on a sound evidence-base.

Report Structure

The following report contains six sections.

- ◆ Section I contains an introduction to the subject area and the methodology employed and also defines the framework and scope of the review.
- ◆ Section II describe the methodology in terms of the search strategy and criteria for selection of the published literature to be included.
- ◆ Section III describes the results of the search and the justification for the inclusion of selected literature.
- ◆ Section IV discusses the results of selected literature in the context of both the quality and quantity of the published evidence.
- ◆ Section V contains conclusions from the dataset as a whole and from the selected papers.
- ◆ Section VI provides a summery of data gaps and consequent recommendations.
- ◆ Section VII contains references referred to in the main body of the report.

Section I - Introduction

Absence from work has been the subject of wide debate in recent years with a number of issues coming under discussion. These include the nature and causes of absence, how to measure it, what constitutes an acceptable level and the relative responsibilities of different sections of the organisation for managing it. Emerging from these discussions has been a consensus view that managing attendance should be carried out within a clearly defined policy which sets out the roles and responsibilities of employers and employees and the procedures to be adhered to. In addition there appears to be general agreement on what should constitute the core elements of such a policy. These elements are clearly reflected in a resource document produced in 1999 by the Cabinet Office with the purpose of providing guidance on managing attendance in the public sector. This document draws on the experience of several large private sector organisations and is intended to reflect current thinking on best practice in the field. The details of this guidance are described in a number of current publications (for example Bevan and Hayday, 1998) and will not therefore be detailed here. However, it contains, in particular, a series of specific management actions considered to be essential parts of a comprehensive attendance policy. In brief these are:

- ◆ management training
- ◆ accurate recording and monitoring of absence
- ◆ early management contact with absent individuals
- ◆ return to work interviews
- ◆ trigger points for action and review
- ◆ review of individual cases

Such actions are now widely advocated in the general management literature and are presumed therefore to be derived from an established knowledge base. During the last few years however it has become clear that in a number of areas of policy and practice such a knowledge base is often much more limited than is generally assumed, and on occasions is lacking altogether. These concerns have arisen as a result of the application of what is known

as the “evidence-based approach” to the evaluation of knowledge in a particular field. This approach, initially developed in the field of medicine to provide more rational evaluation of the efficacy of certain treatments, has subsequently been applied more widely to diverse areas which include occupational health practice and human resource management. Given the considerable human and financial costs of high levels of absence from work it would seem essential that any attendance policy is based on elements which are demonstrably effective. The objectives of this report therefore are to provide a systematic review of the evidence underpinning best practice as described in the Cabinet Office resource document, to assess the strength of this evidence and to identify any knowledge gaps in the field. The review has been carried out in accordance with the standard principles of evidence-based methodology.

The evidence-based approach

This methodology is now widely used in many areas of healthcare and related fields. It involves a structured, systematic and transparent approach to the review of available information on a particular subject. The advantages include significant reductions in reviewer bias, conclusions based on actual evidence rather than opinion or hearsay and an acknowledgement of areas of uncertainty where important data gaps exist. Typically the review is aimed at answering one or more specific questions. The processes involved are as follows:

- a) identification of the specific questions to be addressed by the review
- b) identification of all relevant databases or sources of information
- c) definition of search terms
- d) initial search of the literature
- e) selection of papers from the initial search according to pre-defined criteria
- f) critical appraisal of selected papers

- g) summary of evidence in terms of the pre-stated questions
- h) identification of data gaps and recommendations for future work required.

Framework and scope

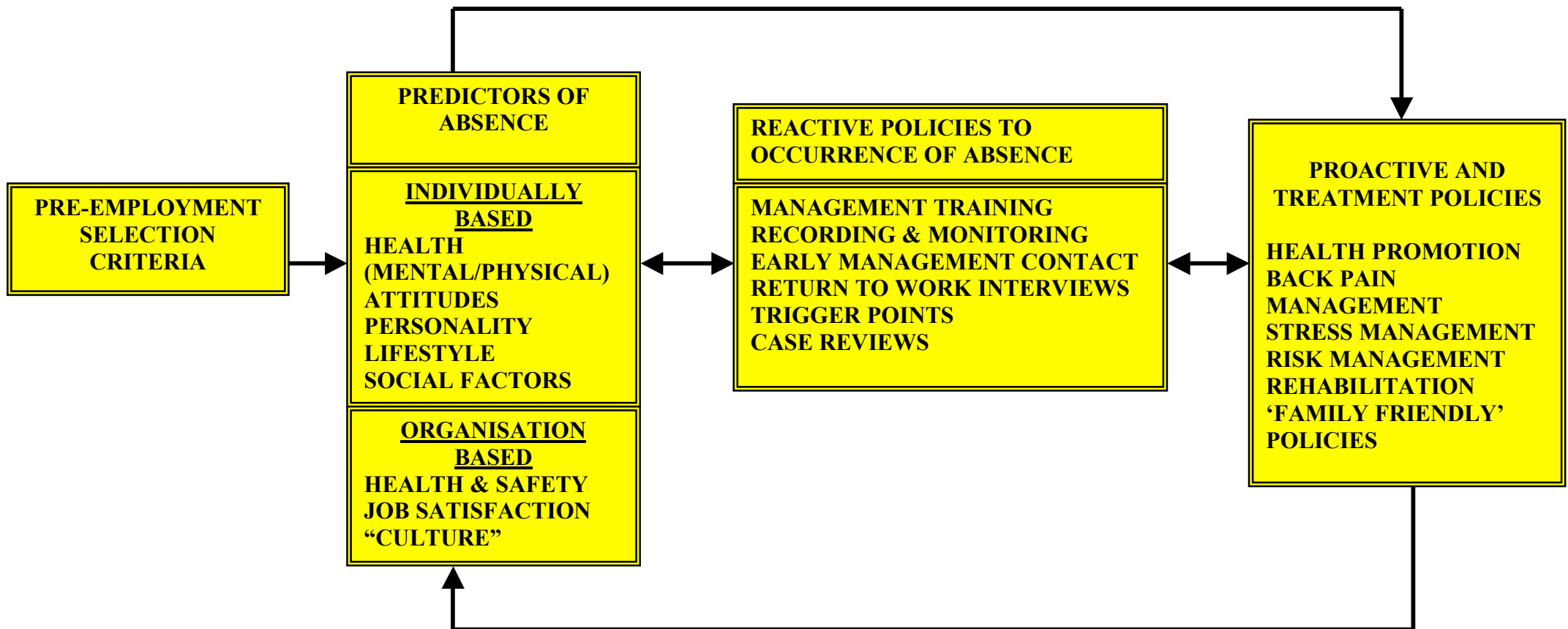
In order to define the scope of the current review a wider framework is proposed which covers the various factors and processes which are thought to influence attendance at work (Figure 1). This framework includes (i) factors regarded as determinants or predictors of absence, (ii) processes which are reactive to occurrences of absence, and (iii) processes which are proactive in terms of addressing the identified causes or determinants in order to reduce future occurrences. Within this framework it can be seen that the processes under review here are largely those which may be considered under (ii) reactive to occurrences of absence. However, such processes do not operate in isolation from (i) the determinants of absence or (ii) the proactive processes to address those determinants, since the objective in carrying out a specific action will be directly linked to other elements of the wider policy. For example, in one organisation the objective of recording and monitoring absence data may be to gather information about the amount of absence associated with a specific workplace hazard. For another the purpose may be to assess the effectiveness of a particular intervention such as the introduction of a back pain management programme, while for a third it may be aimed at changing a negative absence culture by informing workers that their attendance is being closely monitored. Thus the effectiveness of certain actions can only be assessed within the context of the stated objectives of those actions and how they relate to the organisation's wider policy on attendance management.

In the current review therefore the evaluative evidence relating to the process contained in (ii) i.e. those reactive to occurrences of absence, will be considered in relation to three aspects,

namely their objectives, their feasibility and their effectiveness. Feasibility of implementation is included in addition to objectives and effectiveness as a standard element of any conventional audit or review process.

Figure 1

Some processes involved in attendance management



Section II - Method

Given the framework and scope described above the following questions were defined as those to be addressed.

- ◆ are the objectives of policies clear?
- ◆ how feasible is the implementation of policies?
- ◆ how effective are policies in terms of their stated objectives?

Search strategy

1. The topic encompasses a range of subject disciplines namely Occupational Health, Medicine, Personnel, Management and Social Science. Discussion with the Information Scientist at the Institute of Occupational Health identified the following relevant databases:

CINAHL [Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature]

Producer: CINAHL Information Systems

Subject: Nursing & Allied Health Literature

Content: Reference to books, journal articles in the field of nursing and other specialised health care areas including behavioural science and management.

CISDOC

Producer: International Occupational Safety and Health Information Centre (CIS) of the UN International Labour Organization (ILO):

Subject: Occupational Safety and Health

Content: Contains citations and abstracts to occupational health and safety literature published in over 35 countries.

EBSCO Business Source Premier

Producer: EBSCO

Subject: Business database

Content: Citations, abstracts and full text articles from international academic and business journals covering management, economics and business.

HSELINE

Producer: UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Information Services:

Subject: Occupational Health and Safety

Content: Contains citations and abstracts of occupational health and safety literature both nationally and internationally. Also includes citations to all HSE and Health and Safety Commission (HSC) publications,.

MEDLINE

Producer: US National Library of Medicine

Subject: General medicine including occupational medicine

Content: Citations and abstracts to world wide medical literature.

NIOSHTIC US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

Producer: NIOSH Technical Information Centre

Subject: Occupational Health and Safety

Content: Citations and abstracts

RILOSH [Ryerson International Labour Occupational Safety and Health Index]

Producer: Ryerson Technical University Library, Canada.

Subject: Health and safety, labour relations, employment practices and personnel management topics.

Content: Citations to articles in the area of health and safety and employment practices.

SOCIAL SCIENCE CITATION INDEX

Producer: ISI Web of Science.

Subject: Social science and humanities

Content: Citations and abstracts to articles published in international journals in the field of social science and humanities.

Other sources of information identified were as follows:

(i) **Library catalogues**

Institute of Occupational Health, University of Birmingham
Department of Public Health and Epidemiology, University of Birmingham
University of Birmingham Main Library
University of Birmingham Barnes Medical Library

(ii) **Websites**

Association of Chief Police Officers
<http://www.acpo.police.uk>

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
<http://www.cipd.co.uk>

Managing Sickness Absence
<http://www.managingabsence.org.uk/>

(iii) **Various full text electronic journal sites**

2. Most of the databases have a thesaurus or controlled vocabulary and these were consulted to obtain the terms that had been used by the database indexer. However, free text searching was also used. Boolean logic was used to combine search terms or to exclude search terms.

Search terms were as follows:

Sickness absence **or** sick leave **or** absentees **or** absenteeism **or** attendance

and

Management **or** monitoring **or** training **or** policy **or** policies **or** policy making **or** referrals **or** back to work **or** return to work

References were limited to those published in English since resources did not permit use of translation facilities.

Dates were set at 1970 onwards. Material published before this date was regarded as likely to be of limited relevance to current occupational situations.

3. Following the initial search, selection criteria were determined to identify papers and documents to be included in the final review. These criteria were as follows:-

Papers and documents which:

(i) were concerned with one or more of the six elements of the Cabinet Office document and (ii) contained actual data (quantitative or qualitative) relating to one or more of the following:

- ◆ objectives
- ◆ method of implementation

- ◆ feasibility
- ◆ method of assessment of effectiveness
- ◆ effectiveness

Thus papers which were concerned solely either with determinants of absence or with proactive interventions to address identified causes of absence, were excluded from the review. These topics can be seen listed in Figure 1, but would include, for example, the role of attitudes and personality in predicting absence and the effectiveness of stress management or health promotion programmes.

Papers which contained simply policy description, advice or comment unsupported by quantitative or qualitative evidence were also excluded.

Policy documents developed for specific organizations were retained where they contained qualitative or quantitative data.

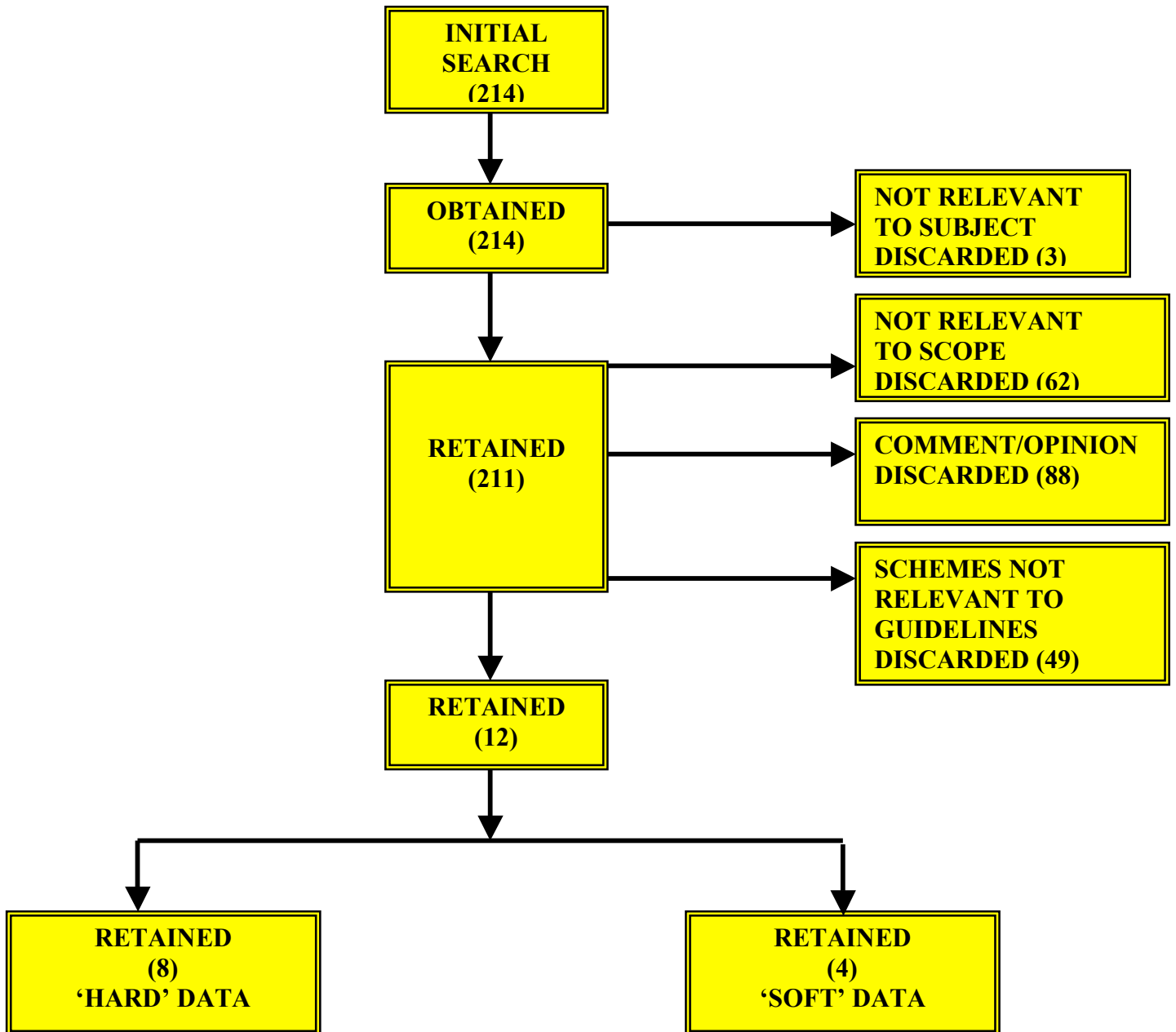
4. Information from selected papers and documents was recorded and appraised to produce summaries in tabular and narrative form of the available data and data groups.

Section III – Search Results

Using the search strategy described in the Method section, a total of 214 papers were originally identified. The subsequent selection process is described below. A summary of this process is contained in Figure 2.

1. Three papers were judged irrelevant to the subject and discarded.
2. 62 papers were judged to be relevant to the subject of managing attendance and sickness absence but not relevant to the scope of this review. The majority of these were concerned with other aspects of the model (Figure 1). Specifically they addressed either (i) predictors/causes of absence, or (ii) the effectiveness of interventions designed to address those causes. For reference, a recent in-depth review of the literature on potential predictors of absence and the theoretical bases for these can be found in Johns (2001). Similarly a large number of studies can be identified which evaluate interventions based on improving workers health, well-being and job satisfaction as a means to improving attendance and, as an extension of this, various programmes have been evaluated which deal with specific work-related health problems, notably back pain and stress. These are not strictly attendance control policies as defined here but it should be noted that several authors emphasize the importance of instituting such policies alongside those which are designed primarily to be reactive to absence as it occurs.
3. The remaining 149 papers were of four types. (i) papers which report purpose-developed experimental studies to evaluate attendance control policies or elements of such policies (ii) papers which report evaluations by organizations of their own

Figure 2
Search Results



policies (iii) surveys of a number of organizations of the use and effectiveness of particular policies or elements of these (iv) papers which describe and advocate certain policies.

Of these four types, those contained in (iv) represent the overwhelming majority. Essentially these papers represent a restatement and advocacy of what is currently designated “best practice” in this area. As such they appear to be based on an assumption that such practice has proven validity and thus they contain no evaluative data. The pervasive nature of this assumption can be illustrated by reference to a number of papers and documents in the field. Several researchers have carried out surveys which investigate the use and nature (but not the effectiveness) of attendance management programmes in private and public sector organizations. Data which simply indicates low usage is interpreted as providing support for their more widespread introduction. For example, Smith and Reid (1991) carried out a survey among certified occupational health nurses in the USA and found that many companies did not have absenteeism control programmes. Their conclusion that a large proportion of American companies could reduce the costs associated with absenteeism by the introduction of such programmes, and notably programmes led by occupational health nurses, does not appear to be warranted by the data. This is especially since, of the 37 companies who reported having a programme, only five believed them to be effective and none provided any supportive evidence for this. Similarly Buchan and Seccombe (1995) analysed sickness absence data among UK nurses in order to investigate levels of absence, reasons for it and its impact on organizational costs. Although conducting a useful systematic analysis the authors then include a series of recommendations which contain details of accepted ‘best

practice' in attendance management. Again this does not follow from the results of the analysis, unless one assumes *a priori* the proven validity of such practice.

The strong tendency towards consensus in this field is further demonstrated in the most recent studies which focus not on evaluating the effectiveness of the universally advocated approach but on the extent to which a given organization has succeeded in implementing it. Hence a survey by the Institute for Personnel Development (2000) of sickness absence policy and practice in the UK notes that one third of respondents had *improved* their sickness absence practices in the last two years most commonly by introducing return to work interviews. Essentially the objective of surveys of this type is the provision of information to allow companies to benchmark their current policy against that of other organisations. As such they contain implicit assumptions about the proven effectiveness of the policies in question. A further example is provided by the National Audit Office Report "Managing Sickness Absence in the Prison Service" (1999) which devotes a large section to a systematic assessment of the Service's performance in terms of its level of compliance with "good practice". Most recently a paper by Dibben *et al* (2001) has examined the ways in which public sector organisations manage sickness absence. This again frames the conclusions in terms of the extent of compliance with best practice. Their primary focus of concern is with the general lack of integration evident in the way such policies operate although, unusually, in their section on future action and research, they do make passing reference to the question of whether such policies will actually reduce absence from work.

The documents quoted above represent examples of a substantial section of the literature in this field which appears largely to endorse a consensus view of best practice. Many of these papers reference each other rather than any sources of evidence of effectiveness. At best this is anecdotal. Although consensus-based as opposed to evidence-based practice is not in itself untenable it would seem important to be clear about the difference between the two, i.e. frequency of use does not equate to proven effectiveness.

The evidence-based approach by contrast is concerned with basic quantitative (or occasionally qualitative) data relating to the question to be addressed. Thus only papers which fall into categories (i), (ii) and (iii) are subject to detailed evaluation in this report.

Papers which fall into categories (i) and (ii) essentially represent two forms of evaluative data. The first (i) consists of data derived from purpose-developed experimental studies. From a scientific point of view these data may be termed “hard” data in the sense that they are gathered to test a specific hypothesis within the context of a purpose-developed study design. Study samples are selected as far as possible to be representative of the wider population to which the data may apply. In addition attempts are made to control for potential sources of bias in the interpretation of the results. The objective is to produce data which is valid, reliable and generalisable to the wider population. Very few examples of this type of data were found in relation to attendance management with the majority of papers describing the evaluation of specific financial incentive schemes rather than the policies under

consideration here. The number of papers directly relevant to the current review was limited to 8.

The second type of data (ii) is that gathered by organizations for their own evaluative purposes. While these data play a useful supportive role in the evidence base they are termed “soft” data in that they are not derived from a rigorous scientific study and are carried out within the inevitable constraints of an organisation’s on-going policies and practices. There is very limited published data of this type. The number of papers in this category was 2.

Finally 2 papers were identified in category (iii). These papers reported surveys of the usage of attendance management policies which also contained some data (qualitative or quantitative) on perceived effectiveness i.e. they did not simply report frequency of use.

Thus, following paper selection, it was clear that only a very small minority (12 papers) of the originally 214 papers identified fulfilled the selection criteria of the review. The data contained in these papers is discussed in the following section and is also presented in summary tabular form (Table 1).

Section IV – Evaluation of the Data

As noted in Section I the objective of the current review is to evaluate the evidence underpinning the guidance provided by the Cabinet Office resource document regarding attendance management in the workplace. Specifically the report aims to address the following questions:

- ◆ are the objectives of attendance management policies clear?
- ◆ how feasible is the implementation of policies?
- ◆ how effective are the policies in terms of their objectives?

The first point to note is that the original intention was to consider separately, different elements of attendance policies in terms of the three questions above, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of policies as a whole. This proved to be impossible because of (i) the paucity of the available data and (ii) the tendency to include more than one element in any evaluation. Although therefore an attempt will be made to discuss elements of policy separately the capacity to do this is severely limited by the data.

The quality of the data

The methodological quality of the scientific papers is generally high. Four of the eight studies identified however, were carried out more than ten years ago raising questions about the relevance of the data to current organizational practice. Nevertheless it should be noted that the policy elements under evaluation do not appear to be substantially different from those advocated in the current literature. In addition, while organizational climates tend to change, prediction of certain aspects of individual human behaviour tend to remain fairly constant.

Two case studies have been included in the data set which represent the only cases where data are included at a useful level of detail. One of these (Alcan) provides good information on the exact form of the attendance management policy, its feasibility and results. The other (Awl-Time) is much less informative on all of these aspects.

A number of surveys of the use of attendance management policies have been carried out, but very few include data on effectiveness, either perceived or in objectively measured terms. Two surveys were identified which did report this type of data, including data on some specific elements of attendance management. Both surveys however have methodological flaws, notably in terms of sampling methods and response rates and the results cannot therefore be regarded as necessarily generalisable to the wider occupational population. Results from these surveys and from case-studies therefore, while providing some supporting evidence, should be regarded with caution.

In all three types of studies (experimental, case-studies and surveys) there is very limited discussion of the objectives of a particular management strategy beyond the broader aim of increasing attendance or reducing absence. Similarly there is virtually no discussion of the feasibility of implementation which would normally be an integral part of any evaluation process. One of the case studies and one of the surveys provides some information on the nature of specific elements (notably in relation to the timing of trigger points and the type of ensuing action) but beyond this there is little information, for example on the nature of return to work interviews or the content of supervisory or management training.

Included below is a description and evaluation of the papers selected. A summary in tabular form is included at the end of this section (Table 1)

Description and evaluation of selected papers

This section contains a description and evaluation of each of the papers finally selected for the review. The papers are presented in three groups corresponding to the three types noted in Section III namely: (i) papers reporting purpose-developed experimental studies, (ii) papers reporting evaluations by organizations and (iii) surveys of use and effectiveness across organizations.

It should be noted that the terms “absence control” and “attendance management” are both used in this section. The latter term has tended to replace the former in recent years. However, in this report the particular term used by the author of the paper in question will be adopted in each case.

(i) Experimental studies

Management Sanctions and Absence Control. N Nicholson. Human Relations, 1976; 29(2):139-151.

This is a very early study evaluating the effectiveness of absence control measures but remains one of the best studies in the field in terms of the methodological quality and the analysis and interpretation of data. The study was designed to evaluate the effects of a change in management absence control strategies in a UK food processing factory employing 330 female production workers. The workforce was extremely stable with virtually no turnover/recruitment during the two year period of the study. The change in absence control strategies was initiated as a result of management concern about high absence levels (annual time-lost rate was approximately 13%). Hence the primary objective of the management was to achieve a reduction in the total amount of absence with a secondary objective of achieving a reduction in 1-2 days absence spells. The new

strategy administered by the personnel department consisted of systematic monitoring of employee absence records, trigger points for various actions which consisted of a series of verbal and written warnings which occurred after a given number of spells of absence, culminating for a limited number of cases (8 employees) in dismissal. No indication is given about the content of the warnings or whether there was scope for discussion of reasons for absence or the particular problems of employees. The system appeared to be simple to administer and was implemented with the full agreement of the trade union concerned.

Outcomes were recorded in terms of monthly aggregates, percentage days lost and absence frequency data for each employee. A breakdown of frequency of absence spells by spell length was also calculated. The results showed no reduction in the total amount of absence but a significant change in the pattern of absence. The frequency of long-term spells (3+ days) increased, while the frequency of 1-2 day spells fell sharply. Thus employees appeared to be maintaining the same level of absence but converting this from more short-term to fewer long-term spells in order to avoid the consequences of the system. In this sense the secondary objective could be said to have been achieved although this clearly did not address the real concerns of the company.

Although this study was carried out many years ago and within the context of a different self-certification process than that operating today (up to 3 days absence only) it nevertheless draws attention to some general principles. Firstly, it is important to be clear about the sources and patterns of absence within a company before embarking upon a control strategy and to be clear about the objectives of that strategy. In this case the management appeared to assume that a reduction in short-term spells would equate

to a total reduction in absence. In fact, as the authors note, the results of the study tend to confirm the view that changes in the system often produce systematic changes in the form rather than the level of absence. This was also illustrated in an early study in an oil refinery by Taylor (1966) who noted that the introduction of the self-certification system for up to 3 day spells produced a sharp rise in short spells of absence but a fall in intermediate length spells. This translated into an overall fall in time-lost rate of approximately 15%. Thus it would appear to be important to determine which aspect of absence is the primary target of control strategies and whether the predicted consequences of a particular strategy are likely to address that target.

Perceived Consequences of Absenteeism. LG Morgan and J Herman. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1976; 61(6):738-742.

This study was also carried out over 25 years ago but similarly is of good methodological quality. The objective was to determine whether certain organizational policies and practices acted as a deterrent to absenteeism. The study population consisted of 60 employees of an automobile-parts foundry in the USA who were randomly selected from the total workforce. The age range was 21 to 59 years and 98% of the sample were male. The response rate was high with only 2% of those originally selected to participate declining to do so. Twelve workers were lost to the final analysis due to being laid off during the period of the study. The study employed questionnaires to investigate workers' perceptions about absenteeism in terms of motivators to be absent and deterrents to absence, namely organizational policies. Actual absence, in terms of number of spells, was collected from company records over a period spanning 17 months preceding and 7 months following the questionnaire survey.

The results showed (i) past absenteeism was highly predictive of future absenteeism (ii) workers with high absenteeism perceived organizational deterrents to be just as important and just as likely to occur as did workers with low absenteeism. Thus there was no evidence that this perception of importance or likelihood acted as a deterrent. Workers with high absenteeism differed from those with low absenteeism not in terms of their attitude to deterrents but in terms of their perception of factors which justified absence, (motivators). For those workers such factors outweighed the effects of deterrents.

In this study therefore all the workers had similar attitudes towards the absence control measures but this had no effect on behaviour. It would appear that what accounted for the difference between workers with high and low frequencies of absence was their attitudes towards absence in general, how acceptable it was and what they considered to be justified reasons for taking it. The absence control measures detailed in this study were in many ways different from those described in current documents on best practice. They did include such elements as trigger points and disciplinary interviews with supervisors. However, most elements were significantly harsher in nature, for example loss of wages and benefits. In this sense the results tend to support the view that even harsh deterrents may not achieve an objective of reducing the frequency of absence spells. In general they again underline the need to identify the causes of absence, including the perceptions and culture of the workers, prior to instigating particular control strategies. Although relatively old research, this study does provide useful generalisable data in terms of describing behavioural responses to particular systems.

**Effectiveness of an Attendance Control Policy on Reducing Chronic Absenteeism.
JF Baum. *Personnel Psychology*, 1978; 31:71-81.**

This study was carried out in a large motor components factory in the USA. The objective of the study was to evaluate the effect of implementing an attendance control policy on groups with existing high, medium and low absence rates. The study population consisted of 336 full-time male workers randomly selected from three departments concerned with production and maintenance. The median age of the workers was 39 years and they had an average of 11 years employment with the company. The turnover rate at the company was very low during the 2 year period of the study, (1%). In one department a new absence control policy was implemented which consisted of a 6-step procedure (i) detailed attendance records kept by supervisors (ii) written excuses from legitimate outside sources required for non-certified absence (iii) questionable excuses to be independently investigated (iv) management counselling of workers with uncertified absence (v) progressive discipline system with trigger points (vi) maintenance of discipline and attendance records by company managers. Thus this policy contained many of the elements contained in current guidance. The other two departments, where existing attendance policies were maintained, acted as controls. These policies delegated attendance control to the immediate supervisors who had considerable latitude in dealing with absence on a flexible case-by-case basis. Although various measures of absence were collected, the outcome of interest was described as “casual absence” i.e. absence of less than five continuous days with no proof that it was medically related. Workers were divided into three groups (i) a chronic absence group who had missed 30 or more days in the pre-study year, (ii) an average absence group who had missed between 7 and 29 days and (iii) a low absence group who had missed 6 days or less.

Comparison of absence rates in each group pre and post introduction of the new control policy showed that attendance improved for all groups in both the experimental and control groups, with the exception of the low absence group in the experimental group. Here attendance actually deteriorated slightly, although the difference was not statistically significant. The authors note that worsening economic conditions during the period of the study probably accounted for the reduction in absence overall, by creating exogenous pressure for attendance. The outcome of interest therefore was the difference in size of attendance improvement between the experimental and control group. This comparison indicated that the implementation of the control policy had the effect of significantly improving the attendance of the chronic absence group in that they reduced their mean absence from 47.5 to 24.5 days per year. The policy had no discernible effect however on the attendance of the low or average absence groups.

These results therefore provide some support for the view that a formally instituted and consistently applied attendance management policy can significantly reduce absence levels. However, it should be noted that the group where this occurred were exhibiting excessively high absence rates. Where absence rates were more moderate, although in fact in the “average group” quite high, there was no effect. This again brings into focus the importance of defining objectives and target groups when designing an appropriate policy.

The Effects of Sick-Leave Policy on Teacher Absenteeism. DR Winkler. International and Labor Relations Review, 1980 (Jan); 33(2):232-240.

The objective of this study was to examine the effect of a number of variables, both individually and organizationally-based, on absenteeism. Included in the organizationally-based variables were aspects of the sick-leave policy namely the amount of salary and benefits likely to be reduced, the requirement to provide proof of illness and the requirement to report all instances of absence to a manager. The influence of these organizational variable was assessed alongside factors such as prior absenteeism, distance from work, salary and aspects of the job with the potential to increase stress and dissatisfaction. The study population consisted of all school teachers in two states in the USA. The response rate was 84%. The absenteeism outcome was measured in terms of the number of short-term absences defined as ½ day and 1 day absences, Monday or Friday absences and total days absent.

The results showed that after controlling for personal and social variables, the three elements of the sick-leave policy all influenced aspects of absenteeism significantly. Requiring teachers to demonstrate proof of illness had a significant effect on Monday and Friday absences and requiring them to report every absence directly to the school principle resulted in a large reduction in short-term absences. This study is notable for its control of potentially confounding variables such as school and staff size, salary and distance from work. It effectively demonstrates that certain actions can be successful in addressing specific problems which have been identified in a particular occupational group. Again the need to be clear about the specific nature of the problem is underlined.

Reducing Direct-Care Absenteeism: Effects of a Combined Reinforcement and Punishment Procedure. RM Briggs. *Mental Retardation*, 1990; 28(3):163-168.

This study evaluated the effect of combining progressive discipline for poor attendance with a reward system for good attendance. The former consisted of a meeting initiated at a trigger point between the employee and the immediate supervisor to review the employee's absence record and possible reasons for it. A progressive series of meetings and written warnings culminating in either suspension or dismissal were instituted at certain points. The reward system consisted of letters of commendation for good attendance and an explicit statement within the organization that attendance represented a significant factor in promotion and the granting of increases in salary. The study was carried out in a residential care home where staff absence represented a significant problem. Prior to implementation of the scheme the 130 staff averaged an absence rate of 1.18 days/month. For the same four month period, 12 months after the implementation, this had fallen to .86 days/month. Comparison of the absenteeism of those staff members who were present at both periods showed that the average number of days absent over the four months fell from 4.81 to 3.49. This difference was statistically significant.

Interestingly however only 73 staff were included in this analysis since, following the implementation of the scheme, there was a significant rise in staff turnover, from 34% to 45%. The authors note that 80% of the staff who left at that time had received some level of reprimand for poor attendance as a result of the implementation of the scheme. This raises the question of whether the improved attendance figures result from the removal from the population of a high absence group rather than improved attendance overall. This represents a presumably unintended consequence of the attendance control

policy and once more underlines the complexity of this area. Absence levels in this group, although improved, remained relatively high post-implementation (almost 5%) and alternative approaches would appear to be required to reduce this level further.

The Effects of a Policy Change on Three Types of Absence. JB Lee and Lillian Eriksen. *Journal of Nursing Administration*, 1990; 20(7/8)July/August:37-40.

This paper describes the results of removing an existing disciplinary policy on absenteeism and replacing it with a more flexible approach. The study was conducted over a two year period in a USA hospital and involved all nursing staff in 56 nursing units (1,193 qualified nurses and 616 nursing assistants of various types). The existing policy involved progressive disciplinary action after three absence incidents. Hospital staff had voiced considerable dissatisfaction with this policy. It was therefore replaced with one which allowed supervisors to use their discretion in deciding when to initiate disciplinary action regarding the use of sick leave. Changes in three types of absence were recorded (i) compensated (ii) uncompensated excused leave (iii) unexcused (uncompensated) leave. Comparisons were made between qualified nurses and assistants. There was no significant change in the amount of uncompensated leave (excused or unexcused) but compensated leave increased significantly, averaging slightly more than 14 days per employee. This represented a considerable financial loss to the hospital. It was also noted that the level of compensated leave was significantly higher in qualified nurses than in nursing assistants, a finding which was unexpected. The authors speculate that this may represent higher levels of stress-related illness in the qualified nurses. No marked changes in the surrounding social or political environment or in the structural organisation of the hospital occurred during the period of the study and the employee group remained largely stable. Thus there is a strong case for

concluding that the change in absence rates was linked to the removal of the disciplinary system. This provides some evidence for the efficacy of the use of trigger points within a consistently applied and well-understood system. It may also reflect the difficulties experienced by supervisory staff when such a system is removed and they are required to exercise discretion in numerous complex situations.

Effects of Changing the Pattern of Sickness Absence Referrals in a Local Authority. RM Malcolm, J Harrison and H Forster. Occupational Medicine, 1993; 43:211-215.

This study is essentially an evaluation of a referral system for those with long-term sickness absence. As such, although concerned with a specific group of absentees, it can be said to include three central elements of an attendance management policy, namely early contact with absent individuals, trigger points for action and review of individual cases. The new system which was introduced in a Local Authority in the north of England was developed because of concerns about the high cost of sickness absence and the apparent absence of care for those on long-term sick leave. The study was conducted over two years and involved the referral to the occupational health department of anyone absent for more than 60 days. Clearly this depended on accurate recording and monitoring of absence data. Following an interview with an occupational health physician a report was made regarding work prognosis to the organization's personnel department.

As a result of the implementation of this system there was a marked decrease in the number of workers declared permanently unfit, from 38% to 25% of those on long term sick leave, and a significant reduction in time off sick for those who returned (from an average of 40 weeks to 25 weeks). Follow-up of those who had returned to work

showed that 92 out of 98 were subsequently working normally and only six had been referred back to the occupational health department, largely dispelling concerns that the new system might be pressurizing unfit employees back to work. This approach is essentially concerned with one particular group of absentees but nevertheless draws attention to the possible advantages of active involvement with absentees at an early stage. This is reiterated in the following paper which is concerned with a “case-management” approach.

Absence Monitoring. A Case-Management Perspective. VY Denton and NJ Leinart. American Association of Occupational Health Nurses Journal, 2001;49(10):465-470.

The approach described in this very recent paper represents an extension of the above in that it involves regular contact with and review of workers' cases and is initiated at a much earlier stage i.e. when the employee has been absent from work for 10 days. In this approach the occupational health nurse contacts the employee by telephone, subsequently visits and then monitors treatment and recovery. Evaluation was carried out after one year using questionnaires to assess both management and employee satisfaction with the scheme. In both cases satisfaction ratings were high. Cost savings of employees returning to work earlier were also calculated and shown to be substantial when set against the cost of the programme. The authors stress the importance of careful planning before implementation and the essential requirement to gain prior acceptance of all interested parties. In addition there is a need to ensure that occupational health staff are well-trained. While clearly this programme has been instituted in the context of a large American company its evaluation provides useful evidence of the potential benefits of elements of an attendance control policy which focuses on early and regular contact with absent staff. Interestingly the programme's

success has encouraged its extension to employees after 5 days of absence rather than the original 10 days.

(ii) Case studies

Although a number of case studies exist in the published literature it is rare for these to include any useful data. The majority are largely descriptive and contain narrative statements of effectiveness rather than quantitative evidence. The following two case studies have been identified as containing some limited data, although they are relatively old.

The Absenteeism Culture: Becoming Attendance Oriented. RF Allen and M Higgins. Personnel, 1979 Jan-Feb; 21-39.

The paper describes an attendance management programme which is aimed at changing a negative absence culture into a positive attendance culture. The elements of this are as follows:

- ◆ accurate analysis of data and record keeping to identify goals and monitor performance
- ◆ emphasis on positive reward for good attendance rather than on disciplinary action for poor attendance
- ◆ a systematic and consistent approach
- ◆ on-going follow-up and periodic review
- ◆ management commitment

The author reports that in the year following the introduction of the programme absenteeism at the company dropped from 5.9% to 4.7%, although no further details on, for example, the method of measurement or patterns of absence are given. This is

essentially an article designed to advocate a specific policy which contains some very limited data to support the claims for effectiveness of the approach.

Costing Absenteeism: New Controls at Alcan Foils. Anonymous. Pay and Benefit Bulletin, 1982 (Aug); 70:6-11.

This case study was described within the context of the then relatively new self-certification procedure for absence of seven days or less. It describes details of procedures which employees must follow on each day of absence starting on day 1. Essentially these involved regular contact, submission of relevant forms and an interview with the supervisor within two hours of return to work. The personnel department also kept detailed records of absence and noted those with poor attendance records who were referred for an interview either with their supervisor or with the occupational health nurse. The author notes that the scheme was relatively straightforward to run and that the personnel department reported that it involved a maximum of two hours per week of their time. The time costs for other staff however, notably the security staff responsible for taking calls and completing and dispatching absence forms and the supervisors responsible for interview and follow-up are not recorded. Further it is noteworthy that following the introduction of the scheme total absence levels were shown to increase from 3.8% to 5.2%. Although in the absence of a control group it is difficult to draw the conclusion that this was entirely due to the scheme, the figures nevertheless provide little support for the effectiveness of the approach.

(iii) Surveys of use and effectiveness

Absenteeism Control Methods: A Survey of Practice and Results. D Scott and S Markham. Personnel Administrator, 1982 (June); 73-84.

The objectives of this survey were to determine (i) the prevalence of absenteeism programmes (ii) the effectiveness of programmes as perceived by administrators (iii) the relationship between absenteeism control methods used and absence rates.

A questionnaire was sent to members of the American Society for Personnel Administrators. It is not stated that all members were included, but simply that they represented every region of the country. In addition the response rate from those sent a questionnaire was only 20%. In epidemiological terms therefore this sample cannot be said to be representative or generalisable. This said, some characteristics of the 987 organisations which returned questionnaires are included. These showed that the overwhelming majority were manufacturing industries (metal, rubber and textiles) employing between 100 and 500 people. Other organisations represented included electronics, food processing, service, health-care, insurance and sales. A substantial number (296) did not report their absenteeism rates but of those that did, 306 companies reported a rate of less than 3%, 277 between 3% and 7% and 158 higher than 7%. Companies were asked about a total of 34 possible absence control methods in terms of whether they used it and how they rated its effectiveness on a scale of 1 to 4 (4 = high). Those control methods which approximate to what are now considered to be elements of accepted good practice have been extracted from the table provided by the authors and are detailed below, (Table 1).

Table 1

Absenteeism Control Methods Ranked by
Rated Effectiveness

Control Method	Average Rated Effectiveness	% in Use	Absence Rate Non-Users	Absence Rate Users
A consistently applied attendance policy	3.47	79%	4.8%	4.2%
Progressive discipline for excessive absenteeism	3.43	91%	4.8%	4.3%
At least monthly analysis of daily attendance information	3.38	57%	4.7%	4.1%
Employee calls in to give notice of absence	3.36	48%	4.6%	4.1%
A clearly written attendance policy	3.33	76%	4.2%	4.4%
Employee interviewed after an absence	3.26	35%	4.4%	4.2%
Supervisory training in attendance control	3.15	39%	4.4%	4.2%

Information derived from Scott and Markham, 1982

The difference between the absence rates of users and non-users (i.e. lower in users) was statistically significant in respect of:

- ◆ a consistently applied attendance policy
- ◆ at least monthly analysis of daily attendance information

Only very limited interpretation of these data is possible. The already stated difficulties with the sample size are compounded by the failure of a large section of the sample to provide absence data. This may have been because such data were not available or perhaps because it reflected poorly on the companies concerned. Thus it is impossible to estimate the size or direction of the bias in these results and they should therefore be viewed with extreme caution. In so far as they are interpretable however they provide some support for what appear to be the two central elements of attendance control, namely a consistently applied policy and recording and monitoring of data. Evidence about the effectiveness of other details of such a policy remains equivocal.

Sickness Absence Monitoring and Control: A survey of Practice. ACAS. IRS Employment Trends, 1994 (Sept); 568:4-16.

ACAS reports a survey of 75 organisations in which they sought information about (i) methods of absence monitoring employed, (ii) use of return to work interviews, written guidance for supervisors and trigger and review procedures and (iii) absence levels and whether/how these had changed since a previous survey in 1991. The authors provide no information on the construction of the sample or the response rate and again therefore raising questions about its representativeness and generalisability.

Within these limitations however the following information has been extracted from the tables provided by ACAS.

Table 2

Absenteeism Control Methods and Absence Levels

Action	Use	Absence level increased since 1991	Absence level decreased since 1991	Absence level unchanged since 1991	Not stated
Records monitored monthly	56%	13%	58%	22%	7%
Records monitored daily or weekly	25%	7%	59%	34%	0%
Return to work interviews used	75%	14%	57%	18%	11%
Written guidance to supervisors	55%	13%	60%	15%	12%
Absence review triggers	73%	18%	58%	18%	6%

Information derived from ACAS, 1994

As the authors note the majority (60%) of organisations in this survey felt that absence levels had decreased overall since the previous survey, although these are fairly general statements lacking in any detail of absence patterns. The figure of 60% however corresponds fairly closely to the % of organisations using each policy element who felt their absence levels had fallen. The figures for increases or lack of change in absence are perhaps more interesting in terms of evaluating the effectiveness of certain actions. For example there is heavy usage of return to work interviews and absence review triggers, yet substantial percentages (32% and 36% respectively) of organisations using these approaches reported that their absence levels were either unchanged or had increased. The timing of the survey is, however, an important and unreported factor, since adoption of certain approaches may represent a recent response to rising or unchanged sickness absence levels, which had not yet had sufficient time to make an impact on attendance. Overall these data have many limitations and can only provide a very crude assessment of the use and effectiveness of certain policies.

Table 3
Papers selected for evaluation *

Author & Date	Organisation Type	Study Type	Policy Elements Included	Outcome Measure(s)	Feasibility	Summary of Results	Comment
Nicholson 1976	Food processing factory (UK)	Evaluation of attendance control policy (10 months pre 10 months post)	2,5	(i) Time lost (ii) Spell frequency	Not discussed	(i) Small increase in total time lost (ii) Decrease in 1 day spells (iii) Increase in 5+ day spells	Well-conducted study with detailed analysis
Morgan and Herman 1976	Auto-parts foundry (USA)	Evaluation of attendance control policy in terms of employee perceptions and absence deterrence (24 months)	1,2,3,4,5,6	Spell frequency	Not discussed	(i) Employees aware of policy (ii) No deterrent effect	Well-conducted study with detailed analysis
Baum 1978	Auto-parts manufacturing (USA)	Evaluation of attendance control policy (24 months)	1,2,3,4,5,6	Days absent in high, medium and low absence groups	Not discussed	(i) No decrease in medium and low absence groups (ii) Significant decrease in high absence group	Well-conducted study with detailed analysis
Allen and Higgins 1979	Awl-Time Corporation (USA)	Case study (12 months)	1 (others not clear)	Not stated	Not discussed	Fall in absenteeism from 5.9% to 4.7% over 1 year	Limited information
Winkler 1980	Schools (USA)	Investigation of policy factors which affect absenteeism (12 months)	2 (requirement to report)	(i) Number of ½ day and 1 day absences (ii) Number of Monday or Friday absences	Not discussed	Fall in 1 day absences and Monday, Friday absences	Well-conducted study. Other aspects of work conditions also important
Anonymous 1982	Alcan Foils (UK)	Case study (12 months)	1,2,3,4,5,6	% employees absent % days lost	Ease of administration emphasised	Slight rise in absenteeism	Limited information

* papers presented in chronological order of publication

Author & Date	Organisation Type	Study Type	Policy Elements Included	Outcome Measure(s)	Feasibility	Summary of Results	Comment
Scott and Markham (1982)	Various (USA)	Survey of attendance control policies (frequency and reported effectiveness)	1,2,4,5 (+ others)	(i) % use (ii) rated effectiveness 1 = ineffective 4 = very effective	Not discussed	1: 76% use Rating 3.5 2: 57% use Rating 3.4 4: 35% use Rating 3.3 5: 91% use Rating 3.4	Only 2 showed large difference in actual absenteeism between users and non-users Other elements identified as important
Briggs (1990)	Care staff in residential home (USA)	Evaluation of attendance control policy (15 months)	1,2,3,5,6 (+ reward system)	Days absent/month	Not discussed	27% reduction in absenteeism	Cannot discriminate between effects of control policy and reward system
Lee and Eriksen (1990)	Hospital (USA)	Evaluation of relaxation of attendance control policy (12 months)	Removal of 2,3 & 5	Days absent	Not discussed	Significant increase in all absence except excused, compensated leave	Recommend tackle causes of absence rather than return to previous policy
Malcolm <i>et al</i> (1993)	Local Government (UK)	Evaluation of referral system to Occupational Health for long-term absence (12 months)	5,6	Speed of decision regarding return to work	Not discussed	Reduction in (i) time to decision to return to work (ii) duration of absence, cost savings	Systematic evaluation Relates to long-term absentees only
ACAS (1994)	Various (UK)	Survey of attendance control policies (frequency of use and reported effectiveness)	1,2,3,4,5,6	% use % perceived effective (various criteria)	Not discussed	% of organisation using different methods recorded Effectiveness recorded qualitatively	Useful survey Highlights complexity of issue Selection criteria for sample un-stated
Denton and Leinart (2001)	Energy Company (USA)	Evaluation of a case management approach to long-term absence (3 years)	1,2,3,4,5,6	(i) Employee satisfaction (ii) Supervisor satisfaction (iii) Cost reduction	Need for careful planning, training and commitment emphasised	(i) High employee & supervisor satisfaction (ii) Significant cost reductions	Describes successful programme for managing 10+ days absences

Section V - Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the dataset as a whole.

1. The literature in this field is dominated by papers which provide guidance and advocacy but little supportive evidence for what they propose.
2. Scientific studies in this field are rare and there is no evidence of an increase in interest in conducting such studies.
3. The bulk of scientific interest in the field of absence from work appears to be directed at the determinants of absence, and interventions which attempt to address those determinants. While there is clearly a case to be made for these approaches it would seem reasonable to argue that they should exist alongside a soundly-based attendance management policy.
4. The apparent commitment to current guidelines would seem to be derived from consensus rather than evidence. If rigorous evidence-based methodology is applied to this field it is difficult to discover the basis for the advocacy of current best practice.
5. It may be argued that scientific studies in this field are both too difficult to perform and unnecessary and that, in practice, evidence of effectiveness from organisations implementing certain policies is all that is required. To counter this argument it should be noted that (i) the few studies carried out during the last 20 years have shown that there is a well-developed methodology in this area and that scientific evaluation does not present an insurmountable challenge and (ii) there is little

evidence that organizations are currently carrying out or publishing systematic evaluations of their attendance management policies which would be of use to other organizations. Where agencies have carried out surveys of current practice these are methodologically weak and consequently provide only limited information.

Specific conclusions from selected papers

It is difficult to draw specific conclusions from such a limited dataset but the following are provided on a tentative basis.

1. All policies, regardless of their form and content, are entirely dependent on accurate, and detailed monitoring of absence statistics. There are a number of approaches to this which are available in the literature (Gardiner, 1992; Hensing *et al*, 1998). The importance is emphasized of developing a system which is (i) based on the identified needs of the organization and (ii) congruent with that of other organizations with whose data the data might need to be compared.
2. Before implementing an attendance management programme it is important to be clear about the specific objectives of the programme both in terms of absence figures (including patterns) and target groups. Both of these are derivable from absence monitoring data. The results of attendance management programmes appear to be frequently unpredictable, with the emergence of unintended and/or unwanted consequences. This is more likely to occur where objectives have not been carefully specified at the outset.

3. Attendance management programmes are likely to produce the most significant effects on those individuals with very high absence rates and lesser effects on those with low or average absence rates.
4. There is some evidence that positive policies which involve early contact and maintenance of contact with absent employees can significantly reduce the time away from work in those with long-term absence. These policies may also be effective for those with relatively short-term absence (1 week +).
5. Although most organizations with an attendance management programme include trigger points for action there is wide diversity of opinion on the pattern of trigger points and the appropriate action to take. Many organizations in the ACAS survey who used trigger points reported that their absence levels had either increased or were unchanged. There is currently some limited data on the effectiveness of using trigger points within a consistently applied policy but virtually none on their appropriate form or content.
6. There is no strong evidence for the effectiveness of implementing return to work interviews in terms of the broad objective of increasing attendance. However, the main objective of these may vary for different groups. For example they may have a therapeutic intent for those with long-term absence, or a disciplinary intent for those with frequent short-term spells. Again the importance of defining objectives is underlined.

Section VI – Recommendations

As noted earlier current research effort appears to be directed at determining the extent of implementation of published guidelines rather than evaluating the effectiveness of their actual content. The data gaps in this field are therefore considerable. In order to fill these gaps there appear to be three broad options:

- (i) to institute more scientific experimental studies to evaluate the effects of attendance management policies and specific elements of these. Such studies would require definition of specific objectives and outcomes and control of potential sources of bias to produce generalisable data.
- (ii) to institute more surveys by umbrella organizations of the use and effectiveness of different approaches. However, careful attention should be paid to the methodological quality of these. They may require epidemiological input in order to derive most benefit from the data.
- (iii) to encourage more organizations to carry out systematic evaluations of their own attendance management policies and to publish these. Attention should be paid to improving the description of the policy measures employed, their feasibility (including problems encountered) and the attendance outcome data collected. Accurate detail in all these respects is required to maximize the usefulness of the data to other organizations. A number of journals appear to be suited to the publication of detailed case studies of this type but current emphasis appears to be weighted towards advocacy and comment rather than actual data.

Specific areas requiring research

In addition to general policy implementation there are a number of specific elements which require evaluation.

- (i) the use of different schedules of trigger points on different groups of workers with different absence patterns and the effectiveness of different review actions, both positive (reward or commendation) and negative (disciplinary).
- (ii) the content and use of different types of return to work interviews with different groups of staff with different absence patterns.
- (iii) the effect of early and subsequent contact including the effects of different contents of contact on different groups of workers.
- (iv) the content of management and supervisory training and its effectiveness.
- (v) the perceptions and attitudes of employees towards different elements of policy and the effect of these on attendance patterns.
- (vi) information on the feasibility (including negative elements) of implementing certain policies.
- (vii) the use of qualitative as well as quantitative methods, particularly in respect of (v) and (vi).

Conclusion

Application of a rigorous scientific reviewing process to the subject of attendance management shows that current guidelines on best practice are not evidence-based. This does not necessarily imply that such guidelines are inappropriate, but it does imply that there is no strong evidence to indicate whether the policies they contain are effective or not. The current widespread implementation of attendance management policies therefore raises some concern. However it also provides considerable opportunities for more systematic evaluation

of such policies, both scientifically and in the form of case studies. This would assist in the development of guidelines which rest on a sound evidence-base and create a more rational framework for on-going modification and refinement in the future.

Section VII – References from Text

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