

# Too scared to go sick? The management and the manifestations of workplace attendance in the food retail sector

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## Abstract

This article is a response to Taylor et al's (2010) call for further research regarding workplace attendance. It examines the new politics of absence management in the UK and Cyprus in food retail sector, identifying a dual approach in managing attendance across the two countries. The first approach suggested the penalization of absence, whilst the second focused on the prevention of absence through accommodation. The article argues that 'coercion' is not the sole vehicle to tackle high absence in food retailing rather it suggests the development of other practices to enhance cooperation to regular attendance. The research identifies significant differences regarding the formality of these processes between the two countries, and suggests the generation of a particular attendance culture within the organisations, one that is not merely a culture of fear, as Taylor et al (2010) suggest, but rather a culture that includes accommodation and cooperation.

## 1. Introduction

This article is a response to Taylor et al's (2010) call to re-evaluate our understanding of attendance within the sociology of work and employment. Indeed, we need to re-examine attendance control and to understand this behaviour within the labour process and particular shop floor regimes. Similarly to Taylor et al. (2010), the article refers to the influential work of Paul Edwards and his colleagues (Edwards and Whitston, 1993; Edwards and Scullion, 1982) and their contribution in the area, locating and discussing attendance within workplace regimes and managerial control systems. In particular, it explores the new politics of absence management in food retailing, providing a comparison between the UK and Cyprus. Overall, the research shows that 'coercion' is not the sole vehicle to tackle high absence in food retailing, but also suggests the development of other practices to enhance cooperation to regular attendance. In other words, the case study organizations in both countries do not aim to solve the problem of the indeterminacy of labour's attendance only through coercion, as Taylor et al (2010) suggest, but also through cooperation and accommodative approaches. Nevertheless, the research identifies significant differences regarding the (in)formality of these processes between the two countries.

The article is organized as follows. Firstly, an overview of the literature is presented, providing a sociological discussion regarding the structural dynamic of the sector, the attendance management and the manifestation of attendance in the labour process. Next, the methodology is outlined, with the findings presented in the third section. Finally the article discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the research.

## 2. The lean food retail market and attendance

Consistent with authors (Edwards, 2010; Taylor, 2010), this article argues that scholars on employment should not focus on the workplace alone, as this does not take account of the interrelationships between the workplace, the political economy and sectoral dynamics. These connections should indeed be taken into consideration when researching employment (Taylor et al., 2010; Thompson, 2010). This research recognizes the lean regime of food retailing and the competitive dynamics of the sector, and the influence on work organization and absence control.

The escalating power and domination of the supermarkets in the contemporary service economy has been subject to increasing public policy and academic attention. The growing research on retail employment suggests that food retailers imitate Wal-Mart's labour

practices and organize work following neo-Taylorist principles, mainly in an attempt to keep costs low (Lichtenstein and Johansson, 2011). This is a trend that Tilly (2007) calls ‘Wal-Martization’, and which suggests that that Wal-Mart is today the new corporate prototype (Lichtenstein, 2005, p.21), and a paradigmatic representation (Adams, 2006, p.213) that sets the standards for a new age in the history of capitalism (Lichtenstein, 2006).

A large volume of published studies describes the adoption of a similar low-road strategy by global food retailers to strive against the domestic and global competition (Bernhardt, 1999; Bianchi and Swinney, 2004). These strong competitive pressures, fashioned by food retail internationalization (Alexander and Myers, 2000) and the global economy (Appelbaum et al., 2005; Carré et al., 2010), as well as the involvement of grocers in a ‘retail [price] war’, make attendance a crucial element to be managed (Patton and Johns, 2012). As Taylor et al (2010, p.284) conclude, in highly competitive conditions within which organizations are pressured to keep labour costs low, attendance becomes critical, especially because staffing levels become leaner. The authors suggest that more research is required within a broader sectoral range to gain a better understanding of absence control, with retail identified as an ideal case to be examined. This article adds to this argument, highlighting however that the national context is also crucial to better understand absence control.

Research shows that in different national contexts, the degree to which retail can be described as either high or low road might vary (Andersson et al., 2011). Yet, as Carre et al. (2006) report, limited examples of food retail organizations adopt high road strategies, presenting them as the exceptions within the sector, rather than the rule. Hence, although it could be misleading to argue that the organization of food retail work is identical across boundaries, as Lichtenstein (2006) and the Wal-martization schema infers, it remains true that in the majority of food retailers jobs are organized in a leaner environment based on a low road strategy.

The international experience of this research is sensitive to the national frameworks of the UK and Cyprus, but at the same time accepts the Wal-Martization trend as a dynamic that impacts on the work organization and the organization of the labour process. Overall, the article argues that low road strategy remains central in food retailing, although both national and institutional variations are present. In this global era for food retailers, the intense competition leads to the leaner organization of the labour process, within which attendance receives increasing attention by management (Edwards and Whitston, 1993). As MacLean

(2008) similarly reports, high levels of absence are costly and disruptive, and this is particularly important in the lean and highly competitive food retail market.

### 3. The social meanings of workplace attendance and absence controls

Non-attendance at work has received a great deal of attention in the field of organizational research and is perceived as a major issue for organizations, and one of the biggest concerns for managers (Edwards, 2005). It has been described by labour process scholars as a classic resistance strategy (Collinson, 1994), whilst others have suggested that 'it remains true that people go absent for different reasons' (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999, p.25). For example, absence can be a mechanism to relieve tension and frustration with a workplace incident, rather than an attempt to change the situation (Bycio, 1992; Edwards, 1986).

Edwards and Whitston (1993, p. 256) report that employees rarely see absence as 'a way of getting back to the management'. Workers do resist their subordination but at the same time, they have to co-operate with employers because they rely on them for their livelihoods (Edwards, 1990). Cressey and MacInnes (1980) recognizing a complex interplay of antagonism and cooperation, similarly argue that workers have an interest in resistance to subordination, but they are also tied to the interests of the capital that employs them. As Edwards and Scullion (1982, p.107) report, 'most workers attend to work for most of the time', while similarly Nicholson (1977, p.242) note that 'most people...are on automatic pilot to attend regularly'.

How workers are persuaded to attend for work regularly is still a contemporary aspect within the labour process. Attendance however and its social meanings are connected to the system of control and it can only be understood by relating it to the pattern of control in which it takes place (Edwards, 1986). Williams (2014, p.297) suggests however that research often neglects the structural dynamics that affect attendance decisions, such as the absence control systems. Some authors have discussed a punitive and disciplinary approach as central to attendance management (Edwards, 2005; Johns, 1994, 1997; Taylor et al., 2010). As Edwards and Whitston (1993, p.66) found, 'there was a general tightening of attendance control and associated labour discipline'. Henry (1987) however, in addition to the punitive aspects of discipline, discusses an accommodative-participative model. This model 'refers to workers' ways of devising their own rules and the common tendency for managements to tolerate this practice and to contribute to the emergence of custom and practice rules' (in Edwards and Whitston, 1993, p.231). Edwards and Whitston (1993, 1988) have explored

these dynamics and the re-structuring of workplace relations, as well as the emergence of negotiation of order and customs on the shop floor. Their classic study revealed a variation in absence control systems across their case studies, and suggested different attendance cultures within the case study organizations. This suggests that attendance behaviour depends on a particular attendance culture, one which is shaped by the absence control system in place (Goodman and Atkin, 1984). This article stresses the necessity to update these arguments in order to understand better these systems within leaner regimes, such as food retailing, where attendance is an important behaviour to be managed.

This article applies and extends the above insights and suggests that coercion is not the sole explanation as to why employees attend work regularly, as Taylor et al suggest, but examines the importance of an accommodative and flexible approach to absence management. The choices made by employers are conditioned strongly by changing contexts and this article seeks to make a further contribution by exploring the link between the context and the contemporary discussions on new models of absence control.

Indeed, the market dynamics and the shop floor regimes are explored, as well as the impact this has on our understanding regarding workplace attendance. Therefore, the question here is how the absence control systems, the social relations of work, as well as the dynamics of the external environment such as the increasing unemployment and the recession, might affect attendance behaviour. Taylor et al (2010, p. 282) report that, ‘many employees were dragging themselves into work when sick, fearful...of losing their job’ and conclude that ‘it is true that regularity of attendance has characterised workers’ behaviour, whether through habit, [or] fear of sanction’. This article agrees with Taylor et al. but suggests that the authors overemphasize market discipline as the driver for attendance and the management of attendance through formal policies and coercion, neglecting the shop floor dynamics and the contemporary absence controls in organizations which do not aim to punish absence per se but may aim to accommodate and encourage attendance.

To sum up, this article contributes to the research agenda regarding workplace attendance, providing a broader sectoral range in the analysis as Taylor et al. (2010) suggest. It explores the dynamics of workplace attendance and absence management within the grocery-retail sector in the era of austerity, providing an international comparison between the UK and Cyprus.

### 3. Methodology

This article draws on qualitative data from four case study organizations, two in the UK and two in Cyprus. The selection of the case studies aims for consistency of comparison on the organizational level. In particular, the case studies were selected based on their size and their market share in the local and the global market.

The UK organizations are two of the main players in the global grocery retail sector and leaders in the UK market. UK1 is a British-grown multinational grocery retailer, whilst UK2 is owned by a multinational company that expanded its business around the world, including the UK. Similarly to the UK, the Cyprus case study organizations are leaders in the country's food-retail sector, whilst it is also worth noting that Cy2 is a world leader in the global and European food-retail market. Specifically, Cy2 is a multinational grocery-retailer with presence in 33 countries. The organization entered the Cyprus retail market in 2005 and today runs eleven stores around the island, where over 1500 individuals are working in the company. On the other hand, Cy1 is a smaller 'family-owned' organization with only seven stores and approximately 600 employees. Although this is a smaller organization, it is a developing company and is steadily increasing its market share. It is a leader in its region and over the last three years has invested and expanded its business to other areas of the island, becoming today the second biggest home-grown food retailer in the country.

The UK food retail market has received great attention by researchers (see for example Alexander, 2011; Burt et al., 2010; Grugulis and Bozkurt, 2011). This tradition in retail research recognizes the long history of the UK in food retailing, and the power of UK grocers who stand among the top global retailers. In contrast, limited research has examined this sector in Cyprus. Although some research includes Cyprus retailing in their sample (Alexander and Doherty, 2008; Myers and Alexander, 2007), limited attention has been given to the emerging market of Cyprus food retailing, while limited research has explored the employment relationship within this market.

Clearly the two countries have a different history in grocery retailing. The UK is a developed market and the 'home' of grocery-retailing global giants. The intense and international competition, as well as the leaner organization of work is not new in the UK market (Freathy and Sparks, 1995). In contrast, Cyprus is a developing market which has faced dramatic changes in its structure in the past decade when international retailers invested in the country, intensifying the price and market share competition. These new market dynamics, the

aggressive price war in the market and the dramatic increase of the financial cost since the country entered the recession, brought the management of cost to the centre of attention. With the Cyprus market going through a price war in an era of austerity, the need for a leaner regime and the reduction of labour costs was a ‘one-way’ solution. Understandably, the comparison between these two markets, despite the different history in food retailing, relies on the increasing international competition, and the similar lean organization of work, which is based on the lean principles of ‘Wal-Martization’.

Qualitative research data were gathered using semi-structured interviews with a number of respondents in each of the case study organisations. The qualitative research involved 90 interviews across the two countries, and specifically 44 in the UK and 46 in Cyprus. In total, four stores were examined in the UK in the west of Scotland. One large store was examined for UK1, which had more than 600 employees, whereas due to access issues, three stores were explored for UK2. In Cyprus, three stores were examined in total, all located in the North-East of the island. Two stores were examined for Cy1 (the Head-store and store2 which is located in a tourist area), whereas due to access issues, one store was explored for Cy2. Interviews were conducted with HR, senior and line managers, union representatives, and shop-floor employees, aiming to provide a multi-level analysis and to understand the different perspectives on the problem examined. Interviews lasted between 35-90 minutes and focused upon a number of key themes, notably the nature of the work, the job process, the management of absence and the absence policy, and the line managers’ involvement in absence management.

## 4. Coercion and Compliance to regular attendance

### 4.1 The UK experience: Decline in absence levels

In both organizations, managers discussed the significant drop in absence levels. For example, in Store2-UK2, which is a gigantic store, absence levels fluctuated between 2.1% and 2.4%. This was significantly lower than the organizational target (3%). This can be compared to figures in 2010, where absence levels were almost double. Similarly, the HR manager in UK1 discussed the drop in absence levels below the 3% target over the last eighteen months.

The explanation why absence figures in decline is not a simple one, as a blend of reasons caused this drop. These ranged from the view that the current economic climate was the main reason for absence drop, to the more sophisticated control strategies introduced by the organizations, such as the centralized absence policy, the new flexible view on absence

management, and the role of line managers. As this article shows, the recession and the dual absence control system, which is based on coercion and cooperation, have generated compliance to regular attendance.

#### **4.1.1 The recession and attendance**

Participants in both cases associated the drop in absence, and particularly short-term absence, to the recent recession. A senior manager in UK1 suggested that short-term absence dropped when the recession started because many people could not afford to take time off work. Similarly, an HR manager in UK2 described the recession as the main motive for individuals to put a greater effort to attend work because they needed the money.

Managers recognized that employees struggled financially and absence was perceived as a financial cost. Employees' responses in both organizations echoed this view. They expressed their intentions to avoid being absent, arguing that they could not afford to take time off. One employee/UK1 argued:

‘I had times when I felt really sick but I still come in here because I can't afford to be sick’. (E8.UK1)

Evidently, employees discussed feelings of pressure to attend work, even when sick, due to the perception of absence as a financial cost. Participants across the two companies, acknowledged instances of individuals attending work when sick because they could not afford to be absent. An HR manager (UK2) stated: *‘I think they come in because they don't wanna lose the money’*. Similarly, one employee in UK2 commented that it was very common for individuals to attend work with a cold.

Although participants attributed the drop in absence and regular attendance (even sick) with the financial costs accompanying absence, there were several explanations for this behaviour. In fact, more data revealed compliance to attendance due to feelings of fear and insecurity, caused by the formal absence policy as described below.

#### **4.1.2 Attendance (and cost) management: Coercion and accommodation**

##### *The formal policy: Coercion and compliance*

In both cases, Head Office developed a centralized absence policy to manage the behaviour and tackle the high costs associated with managing absence. Absence was indeed a key cost for both companies. The regional HR manager in UK1, as well as one HR manager in UK2, both reported the close monitoring of absence through a formal policy in order to identify

‘what the real [expense of] wages was [and] what was really wasted’. Both organizations had developed a similar formal absence policy and disseminated it across the organization.

The regional HR manager in UK1 discussed the need for consistency across the company, arguing that the central function teams developed the policies and procedures, and then through the various networks of regional managers, cascaded them to the individual stores. Therefore, there was one central policy across the organization and ‘*every store would focus on exactly the same thing*’ (LM2.UK1). A similar view was expressed by a line manager in UK2 who stressed the need for consistency across the company stating that:

‘All the stores have to be the same. If everything is painted white, everything is painted white’.

This implies that in every store absence should be managed in the same way. The same manager commented, ‘*Our absence policy is companywide; it's the same in every single store*’. Strikingly, the research showed that the two organizations implemented a similar absence policy, which was divided into three main stages: ‘*green, amber, red*’.

The absence process required employees to ‘phone in’ at least two hours in advance of their shift, to inform the store of their absence. This call was a standard procedure within both organizations and the manager followed a script of questions, aiming to collect some basic information regarding the employee’s absence.

One employee in UK1 discussed a shift in attitude towards absence management. He said that there had always been a common sense approach in terms of employees giving notice of their absence, and that there had always been a process of phoning in advance to inform the duty manager of such an absence. Nevertheless, when this was first introduced as a formal policy, managers became somewhat aggressive towards incidents of absence. He commented:

‘It was a third degree...it was a ten minute phone call and they made you feel really bad to phone in sick’ (E14.UK1).

However, recently this process became more relaxed with managers asking standard questions aimed at collecting the necessary information that the process required. However, in UK2 it was found that the managers were still adopting a more aggressive approach. Employees described the process of phoning in to report their absence as ‘*daunting and uncomfortable*’ and commented that managers made employees feeling guilty for calling in absent. One employee commented:

I think sometimes people feel phoning in sick but...they make you feel like you are inconveniencing them. My manager said, "oh, I've got no-one else"...I suppose it makes you feel guilty (E3.UK2).

The evidence indicates that employees in UK2 were reluctant to phone in absent, and that this depended on the manager's attitude. Although in both organizations absence calls was a daily phenomenon, it was reported that some managers still '*took it personally*' (E1.UK2) and gave individuals who called in absent a hard time, through attempts to foster guilt.

In both companies, it was a requirement for those employees returning at work that they phoned in the day before in order to confirm their attendance. On the employees' first day back, the line manager or the supervisor conducted a one-to-one meeting with the individual. In both cases, this was the 'green' stage, a short five minute meeting. The discussion was essentially around the period, the length, and the reasons for absence, and any actions that needed to be taken by the organization in order avoid any future occurrences. Even though the focus of the green stage was ostensibly the employees' welfare, part of this meeting was also to review the employee's attendance record. The managers had to discuss and inform the employee of the number of days they had been off, the number of absence occasions, and the impact on their personal absence percentage. Further enquiry showed that, in both organizations, when an individual's absence rate was 3% or above within 26 weeks, it triggered the next stage of the absence policy, the 'amber' stage'. This stage required a formal investigation into employee's absence.

The amber stage meeting was conducted with two managers present; the immediate supervisor was not allowed to be involved in this process. These meetings, which lasted between 20-30 minutes, were more in-depth and looked at the bigger picture for absence. Usually the employees progressed to the third stage ('red') when they were off for a third time within the same 26-week period and/or their absence percentage was over 3%. In both cases, two managers would conduct the red stage meeting, which took the form of a disciplinary hearing, with a high chance of verbal/written warnings being issued. This stage was the first to use punitive actions.

Research evidence showed that employees perceived the overall absence policy as a disciplinary process. A significant number of respondents expressed their fear of been disciplined and potentially been dismissed due to personal absence, regardless of what stage they were at. Clearly, the recession alone could not explain the drop in absence rates. This

should be examined in correlation with the absence policy, which inspired fear and job insecurity among employees across the shop floor. The formal policy was a mechanism for coercing attendance and drove decline in absence levels.

### *The flexibility approach and accommodation*

The section above described the identical centralized absence policy in the two organizations and suggested it as a mechanism that contributed to the compliance to regular attendance and thus the reduction of absence levels. However, the policy itself was not the single explanation for the drop in absence percentage. Although it was an important tool to manage absence, research evidence shows that the organizations had also introduced more sophisticated tactics to manage attendance through an accommodative approach.

The findings showed that the management teams also attempted to tackle absence through prevention, rather than through the formal policy. In both organizations, ‘flexibility’ became an important path to manage absence. Within this scheme, managers offered alternative leave options to employees to prevent them from calling in sick and creating a sickness file. As one line manager in UK2 commented:

‘We offer a lot of accommodation that people use instead of being off sick and create an absence and create a sickness file’.

Similarly, a line manager in UK1 stated:

We have lot of people asking for unpaid or swaps, changes in shift and we try to make sure that the guys get it, so it doesn't affect absence. We do everything we can to support them because we don't want to deal enough with absence...so we always offer them everything we can to prevent absence happening...so rather than dealing with absence after fact we try to prevent it...and this really works, we've seen absence drop. (LM1.UK1)

Both organizations encouraged employees to use these alternative leave options rather than to be marked as absent. Employees, in both cases, acknowledged the benefits of these options. They stated that following the ‘flexibility route’ did not impact on their personal absence, allowed them to balance their personal and working life, and ‘sheltered’ them from the risky formal policy and its accompanying disciplinary aspects.

UK2 offered a range of short-term and long-term flexible leaves, such as unpaid leave, called ‘*me-time*’, shift-swaps, late starts, career-breaks, and study-breaks. Employees could use

these as a substitute for sickness absence. Nevertheless, these options were subject to restrictions and limitations. For example, the employees were limited to five occasions of 'me-time' on an annual basis, however, this option needed to be agreed in advance with the line manager.

In UK1, the store HR manager suggested that managing the process alone was not effective in tackling absence, and stressed the need to manage the absence culture on the shop floor through the introduction of the new 'flexibility policy'. She stated:

We don't have an issue with absence in this store. This time two years ago we were a red light...we were doing everything we possibly could in terms of the process, there was nothing else we could do...whereas now we've put something in process, that if you give us 48 hours' notice for the time off you are automatically given a 'Yes'...we saw the benefits...rather having someone to phone in sick on Saturday [you have] someone to tell you on Wednesday "I can't come in on Saturday". You then have got time to cover it and deal with the problem rather than them phoning in sick. So that was the culture change we put in place and it is surely working well for the store. (Store.HRM.UK1)

Indeed, the store reduced its absence percentage within a period of 18 months and this was a result of the introduction of a new flexibility policy, in addition to the formal absence policy. Although the recession combined with the 'draconian'[sic] formal absence policy of the two organizations discouraged employees to go absent, the new flexible approach towards absence management, offering employees alternative options to take time off rather than calling in sick, contributed to the remarkable drop in absence levels and encouraged attendance through accommodation and cooperation. It should be noted though that the new flexible approach did not replace the absence policy, but was used in combination to the latter, introducing a dual approach to absence control in the organizations.

#### **4.2 The Cyprus Experience: The dual explanation of absence drop**

Similarly to the UK, the Cyprus data also revealed the decline in absence. Although there were no numerical evidence to prove the drop in absence levels in any of the two Cyprus case study organizations, evidence in the interviews illustrated this trend. Participants commented that currently absence was a less common phenomenon and this was due to two main reasons; first the recession and secondly, the versatile role of line managers in coercing

attendance and nurturing cooperation to regular attendance through accommodating and being flexible to personal circumstances.

#### 4.2.1 The recession and attendance

Evidence from the two case studies showed that the current recession in the country was the main driver for employees' decision to attend work. The majority of the participants pointed to the recession and the rising unemployment in the country as the main factors in them attending work regularly, reporting feelings of job insecurity, and discussing the financial impact on their monthly salary. The HR manager in Cy2 clearly stated that absence dropped, whilst similarly a checkout manager in the same company stated:

'Before this phenomenon, [absence] was very common. Every day someone would call in sick. Not anymore; they are scared of losing their jobs [and] it is difficult to find a new job nowadays' (LM1.Cy2).

A line manager in Cy1, similarly to the store manager in Cy2, suggested that employees would '*think twice*' before calling in sick. The latter participant argued that before the recession employees were '*playing the [absence] game safely*' because they knew that the organization would be more tolerant of such behaviours due to the limited labour on offer for food retailers in the labour market. This manager suggested that society's view of the supermarket job as being a low status occupation, and low unemployment made the organization tolerant of absence. He commented that before the crisis, the Head Office would not approve any dismissals because it was very difficult to find someone to cover the post. However, as he continued, currently employees were dispensable as plenty of job applicants were available to cover working posts.

Indeed, interviews with employees in both cases confirmed the drop in absence. Participants commented that there was a general feeling of job insecurity across the shop floor, which was a major factor that prevented workers from calling in sick and complied with regular attendance, even sickness. They discussed the increasing unemployment in the country and the high difficulties of finding a new job, in comparison to previous years, as having a significant impact on attendance. A store manager commented:

[Being absent] today is like playing with fire...Before people would be absent often, now these phenomena have been eliminated...they are scared now that they'll lose their job. We've got a pile of job applications waiting in the [HR] office. If I can't trust them then surely I might get someone who I can trust and

they won't let me down. People need their job though so they are more careful now (Store Manager.Cy2).

Additionally, interviews in both cases showed that employees were also sceptical of being absent due to the financial cost associated with this behaviour, and often attended when sick. For example, one employee in the food-section/shelves in Cy1 recalled an incidence when her colleague attended work with a sore leg because 'she needed the money'. A line manager in Cy2 described a similar case with an employee who attended work while sick on a Sunday shift so as not to lose the overtime pay. Therefore, it is understandable that employees attended work when sick or not fit to carry out their job, because they could not afford to lose a day's payment. What is important to highlight is not only the reduction of non-genuine absence but also a general reduction in the number of 'sickness calls'. Employees tended to attend work when sick because of the fear of losing their job, with the current recession and the increasing unemployment in the country being major contributory factors in an employee's regular attendance at work, even while being sick.

#### **4.2.2 The absence of a formal attendance policy and the line managers' role**

The majority of participants recognized the recession as the source for regular attendance. Yet, more data revealed a more complex explanation for this behaviour, which was related to the line managers' flexible role in managing absence.

The review of secondary data and the policy guides of the two case studies revealed the absence of a formal attendance policy in both organizations. This is not to say, however, that they did not manage attendance. In fact, the line managers were those who managed attendance by either coercing employees to attend work, even when sick, or through accommodating workplace attendance, encouraging in this way cooperation within the absence control system. The research revealed that the line managers' versatile role in attendance management was a catalyst to the employees' decision to attend at work.

#### ***Absence management and Coercion***

Although the absence of a formal policy in both cases was evident, the available data seems to suggest that a similar practice was adopted by both organizations to manage absence. In both cases, the employees had to call their line manager before the start of their shift to report their absence, and as the research evidence has revealed, line managers often forced and coerced employees to attend at work, even when sick. The evidence did however illustrate different tactics within the two companies. Line managers in Cy1 were less tolerant of

absence and pressured employees to attend at work while sick, whereas in Cy2 there was no data to suggest such behaviour by line managers. Although some participants in Cy2 suggested that one particular line manager pressured employees to attend by making them feel guilty for their absence, she would not force them to attend while sick.

Research in Cy1 showed that it was common for managers, especially in Store2/Cy1, not to accept sickness as a reason for absence and required employees to attend work while sick. A young part-time employee in this store stated:

‘What’s the chance to call in sick? Three days ago, Kathrine had a swollen eye and they forced her to come in to show that she did have a swollen eye...they force you to come in the store to ensure that you are genuinely sick. But even if they don’t force you in [work], you’ll have a third degree via phone: “Did you go to the doctor, when did you go, what did he say, when are you going again”. All those questions to catch you in case you are lying’ (E9.Cy1).

This data clearly showed that coercion for regular attendance was a behaviour that was bred by the line managers’ intolerance of absence, whether that was genuine or not.

The managers in this store described their actions as legitimate and necessary in order to carry out the tasks and provide a good service to the customers. For example, a checkout manager in Store2/Cy1 admitted that she might ask someone who is sick to attend work:

‘The fact that she has some fever doesn’t mean that she shouldn’t be in work. Take some Panadol [painkillers] and come [in]. When you can’t cover the shift there is nothing else you can do’ (LM1.Cy1).

Managers preferred to have enough bodies on the checkouts, even if employees could not carry out their work to the best of their ability. They suggested that absence generated longer queues and delays in customer service, stressing the necessity of full attendance, even when employees attended while sick.

Although this seemed an extreme practice, one that was mainly found in store2/Cy1, research showed that managers in Head-store/Cy1 and Cy2 also encouraged sickness presence through similar actions but with a less aggressive attitude. For example, LM3 in the Head-store/Cy1 commented that she might ask an employee to attend sick for a couple of hours in order to cover part of her shift. Therefore, despite managers arguing that they did not force employees to attend work when sick, evidence suggest that line managers negotiated sickness attendance with employees, to avoid the impact of absence on customer service.

### *Accommodation and flexibility to tackle absence*

Although previous data showed that in both organizations, managers attempted to control absence through coercion, evidence supports the notion that managers within the two organizations also adopted a humanitarian and accommodative approach towards attendance. As a line manager in Cy1 stated:

‘Above all with are humans, we empathize with our workers. My role is to manage peoples’ personal issues, as long as they do their job right’ (LM4.Cy1).

Employees in both cases similarly argued that line managers often accommodated peoples’ needs and adjusted the rotas to accommodate their circumstances outside of work, where this was possible, resulting in less absence calls.

The research revealed that managers utilized flexible practices, such as shift swaps; notice to line managers; early leave; late starts; unpaid leave and a one/two-hour break, to accommodate employees’ circumstances outside work, encouraging attendance through accommodation and cooperation. These practices however were not formal policies in either Cy1 or Cy2; rather it was a discretionary approach that was developed by managers on the shop floor.

This was a new approach in both organizations, with flexibility becoming vital to attendance management. For example, a line manager in Cy1 commented that when she was first promoted to manager she was not as flexible as she is today. Nevertheless, as she discussed, she realized that higher flexibility and empathy with workers personal needs outside of work were the mechanisms to manage attendance and eliminate non-genuine absence. Indeed, she commented that by accommodating employees’ personal circumstances, she observed a significant drop in absence. Line managers in both cases perceived flexibility as a form of preventing absence, whilst employees similarly discussed the scheme of ‘paying a favour back’. In other words, line managers expected employees to return the favour for supporting their personal circumstances outside work, and accommodating their requests for time off. For example, a checkout manager in Cy2 stated that she was deliberately empathetic to her subordinates in order to gain space to request a favour in return, such as regular attendance, as well as overtime work.

The ‘favour back’ approach taken by the line managers in both cases generated an absence culture that was based on reciprocity, generating feelings of obligation for employees to attend work, even when sick. Indeed, evidence in both cases revealed incidences of

employees attending work with high fever, sore arm, or sore back, and generally unable to carry out their duties. Although the economic crisis and the authoritarian approach by some managers towards absence could explain the compliance to regular attendance due to feelings of job insecurity, these participants stated that they attended sick due to the cooperative relationship with their manager and the support they received from them, 'paying the favour back'. Overall, it was becoming the norm for the majority of line managers, across the two cases, to adopt an accommodative approach to workplace attendance, which explains how line managers secured attendance through this 'give and take relationship'.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This article has explored the management of attendance in the UK and Cyprus food retail sector, responding to Taylor et al's (2010) call for further research on this matter. The research revealed a dual approach in managing attendance across the two countries. The first approach indicated the penalization of absence, whilst the second focused more on the prevention of absence through flexibility and accommodation. Despite commonalities on the dualism across cases, significant differences were identified between the two countries regarding the formality of these approach. The evidence revealed that the recession, accompanied with the hybrid coercive and accommodative absence control mechanisms, resulted the decline in absence rates and the increase in sickness presence levels in both countries.

The recession and the market discipline were the primary drivers for the decline in absence across the two countries. Participants, in all cases, discussed the recession, the rising unemployment and therefore feelings of job insecurity, as factors that generated greater compliance to workplace attendance confirming Quazi's (2013) argument. Participants, in all organizations, acknowledged instances of individuals attending at work when sick, and discussed the drop in non-genuine absence and 'sickness calls'. In other words, employees attended work while being sick with the fear of losing their jobs (Patton, 2011; Taylor et al., 2010), substituting sickness absence with sickness presence (MacGregor et al., 2008).

Yet, the decline in absence and compliance with attendance systems were not merely an outcome of the recession but also of the managerial discipline and the coercive approach to manage absence. As the data in this study indicated, the approach to manage attendance was in part, 'one of stick rather than carrot' (Edwards and Whitston, 1993, p.7), generating

feelings of job insecurity and fear of sanction ensuring regularity of attendance, as Taylor et al. (2010, p.283) similarly conclude.

To turn to the comparative dimension of this study, in the UK, both organizations implemented a centralized three-stage absence policy, which suggested the punishment of absence. This research, similarly to Hopkins (2014), showed that employees in both case studies expressed fear of being disciplined and potentially being dismissed due to personal absence. Evidently, discipline and coercive intentions lay at the heart of absence management in the UK, driven by the lean regime, the cost pressures, and the intense competition in the market.

In Cyprus the research showed the absence of a formal attendance policy in both case studies. This could be expected for Cy1 because of the small size of the organization and the 'family-owned' culture in the company. As Papalexandris and Stavrou-Costea (2004, p.227) report, the 'HR practices of small organisations, which is the vast majority of organisations in Cyprus, are not systematically organised and they are more likely to depend on the owner/manager's will' and note that a small percentage of Cyprus organizations involve HR in the corporate strategy. Although it is suggested that small steps of improvement are evident since 1997, it remains true that, in contrast to the UK (Legge, 1995; Storey, 1995), HR is a new and still a developing function within the Cypriot organization. This could explain the lack of development of formal and centralized absence control systems in Cy1. Additionally, European data suggest that it is the norm that employers in Cyprus have traditionally not regarded absence as a major cause for concern (EurWORK, 2010). This could also explain the lack of formal measures to reduce absence, as well as the absence of any formal attendance policies in Cy1.

Yet, the lack of formality in this process was more of a surprise in Cy2. It was expected that this company would follow the absence policy of the international parent company, or at least have some regulations introduced from abroad. Papalexandris and Stavrou-Costea (2004) comment that multinationals in Cyprus operate differently from local organisations, emphasising the professionalism of HRM practices. This was not the case in Cy2. Although the latter authors discuss a more active role of HR for MNCs in Cyprus, they report that 'HR practices need time to be developed and to be employed so that they will have the desired results' (p.227). The lack of a formal policy in Cy2 could be explained, suggesting that HR, even this multinational company, is also managing attendance informally rather than fully

aligning workplace attendance with corporate strategy, following the norm in the Cyprus market.

This is not to argue that the Cyprus organizations did not somehow manage absence. The management in both cases similarly adopted a punitive approach and minimum tolerance to absence which, unlike the UK, was not centralized or formalized, but still nurtured similar feelings of fear and job insecurity. However, the evidence suggests that in Cyprus the managerial discipline was less strategically intended, as was the case in the UK, but was more an emergence operationalized by line managers.

Despite the differences in formality and the drivers of coercion, the data shows that employees across all four cases were indeed 'scared to go sick' (Taylor et al., 2010). Overall, the management across the four case study organisations attempted, as Taylor et al. (2010, p.283) conclude, 'to solve the problem of the indeterminacy of labour's *attendance* [emphasis original] through coercion rather than consensus'.

However, the evidence also allows for a challenge to part of Taylor et al's (2010) conclusion, suggesting that attendance across the case study organizations was also managed through cooperation and accommodation. This research has demonstrated that all the organizations also adopted a flexible approach in managing attendance, emphasizing the prevention of absence rather than just the management of finite absence occasions. A plausible explanation to this is that management are aware of the need to combine punitive measures with practices that can sustain possible cooperation within the workplace. As Thompson (1989) notes capital cannot rely wholly on control and coercion, but, as Cressey and MacInnes (1980) put it, the two-fold nature of capital-labour relation is important to be recognized, emphasising the cooperation within the employment relationship. In this research, management in both countries has developed a dual approach in absence management, progressing from a wholly punitive to a hybrid absence management regime, which balances coercion and cooperation. Johns and Nicholson (1982) similarly discussed the normative control of absence which requires 'control via [both] rewards and punishments to adjust some desired equilibrium' (in Goodman and Atkin, 1984, p. 13). Whatever the intent of management in the case organizations, the dual approach through formal and informal flexibility resulted in the significant reduction of absence levels in all case studies. This suggests the generation of a particular attendance culture within the organizations, one that is not merely a culture of fear, as Taylor et al (2010) suggest, but rather a culture that includes accommodation and cooperation.

Interestingly, the study also reveals the formalization of the accommodative-based approach within the UK case study organizations. In contrast to Edwards and Whitston's (1993) discussion of the informal workplace rules, UK food retailers have formalized cooperation for workplace attendance through the introduction of formal and centralized flexible policies. This formalization could be a reflection of the emphasis for consistency across stores by the top management in the UK organizations. A similar flexible approach was found in Cyprus, which though was not regulated by any formal written policies. In these two organizations, the offer of alternative leave options was more an informal practice of reciprocity that was developed over the years, as managers identified the positive impact on absence behaviour through a culture of 'give and take' (Edwards and Whitston, 1993).

In conclusion, attendance was not simply the outcome of coercion, as Taylor et al suggest, but also the product of the 'give and take' culture and the cooperation within the employment relationship. In this research employees might have indeed complied with the market pressures and the organisational directions for attendance due to feelings of fear and job insecurity, but at the same time the accommodative and flexible approach was the platform to develop an absence culture and an attendance management regime that balances coercion and cooperation.

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