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ATTENDANCE CONTROL TECHNIQUES: UNION VS. NON-UNION DIFFERENCES IN THE SOUTHEAST UNITED STATES

Steven E. Markham
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This research examines both the rate of absenteeism and the attendance control methods found in a sample of 423 union and non-union organizations located in the Southeast United States. These data indicate that absenteeism rates for union and non-union organizations are not significantly different. Methods of controlling absenteeism are reported for both union and non-union facilities. Implications for the control of absenteeism are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Absenteeism is an important and pervasive problem for many organizations. Although the national absenteeism rate of 3% may not sound significant, it means that on any scheduled work day three million employees throughout America fail to show up for work. This figure roughly translates into a \$30 billion annual cost to the national economy. For a single organization with 1,000 employees and a paid absence program, each percentage point of absenteeism costs over \$200,000 annually for obtaining replacements, administrative costs, and lost productivity. In light of this enormous cost, it is little wonder that extensive research (over 800 published articles since 1974) has been undertaken to identify the causes for and possible solutions to this problem.

Given the importance of the labor movement in the American economy, this research examines the ef-

fect of unions on absenteeism and on various attendance control methods in the Southeast United States.

UNION AND NON-UNION DIFFERENCES

Researchers and practitioners alike contend that fundamental differences exist in personnel practices between union and non-union organizations. Unions are typically thought to force management to increase wages and place restrictions on work rules, thereby limiting managerial decision-making (Freeman, 1976; Foulker, 1980). This conception is stated by the *Handbook of Personnel and Industrial Relations*, developed by the American Society of Personnel Administration, as follows:

Non-union organizations are quite different from unionized organizations, in which—despite euphemistic statements to the contrary—the relation-

ship between employees and management may be that of adversaries (1976: 7/55).

In fact, this same publication includes a separate chapter on employee relations in non-union settings. It is implied that the existence of the union contract, formal negotiations, and a grievance procedure contributes to more formal employee/man-

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agement relations in unionized organizations. However, there is very little literature reporting research concerning these differences in personnel practices. There is especially little evidence about the effect of unionization on absenteeism rates and on methods of controlling employee absences.

Based on the May, 1980, Current Population Survey, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that absenteeism is much higher among employees who belong to a union (4.2%) than among their non-union counterparts (2.9%). There are a number of explanations for this difference. For instance, Freeman (1976) suggests that because unions direct attention to work place problems and encourage expression of discontent, unionized employees will be more dissatisfied with their jobs than will non-union employees. To the extent that job satisfaction, or lack of it, is linked to such individual outcomes as absenteeism (see Steers and Porter, 1973) and quit rates, then this might be a viable hypothesis.

Alternatively, Stoikov and Raimon (1968) also highlight the importance of job satisfaction in analyzing individual employee outcomes. They argue that more effective systems of industrial jurisprudence will result in higher employee job satisfaction. While the integrity of the grievance system is dependent upon *bona fide* trade union representation, Stoikov and Raimon (1968) expect job satisfaction to be *higher* among unioned employees. This is contrary to both Freeman's (1976) prediction and to the BLS absenteeism data.

A third alternative is provided by Allen (1981) who explains the differences in absenteeism rates between union and non-union sites in terms of economic theory. He contends that absence from work is the outcome of the employee's labor-

leisure decision, subject to the constraints imposed by the employer.

A worker is absent whenever the benefits of not working on a particular day are greater than the costs. The costs include foregone wages (if no sick pay is provided) as well as a decreased likelihood of receiving a promotion or merit wage increase and a greater probability of being dismissed (1981: 210).

If the union can decrease these costs by negotiating a paid absence program, providing more job security, and basing pay increases on seniority, then one would expect absenteeism to be higher among unionized firms. Allen (1981) did find that higher wages were negatively related to absenteeism. However, he did not find that the presence of a union is a significant factor in the rate of absenteeism. It should be noted that his data were restricted to a single industry and to five companies within that industry.

A fourth and final explanation of the differences in absenteeism between union and non-union plants is offered by Henle (1974). He hypothesizes that absenteeism is higher in unionized and governmental organizations because they are more likely to provide extensive paid-leave arrangements for employees. However, Henle acknowledges that some of the highest absenteeism rates are found in tobacco, apparel, and textile industries, all of which have been traditionally non-union.

In summary, there is little theoretical explanation for union/non-union differences offered in the available literature. More importantly many of these possible explanations are contradictory, and the empirical data to support them are ambiguous.

In order to investigate the common management presumption that union/non-union differences are im-

portant with respect to absenteeism and its control, four research questions are offered:

Q1: Is the presence of a union associated with a higher absenteeism rate in an organization?

Q2: Are there major differences in the methods used to control absenteeism rates in union vs. non-union settings?

Q3: Do union organizations have more formally developed attendance control policies than non-union organizations?

Q4: Is the presence of a union associated with a paid hourly absence program?

METHOD

Sample questionnaires were mailed to 5,000 personnel managers or chief executive offices (if the organization had no personnel manager). All sites were located in four contiguous southeastern states. The sample was randomly drawn with respect to size, industry, and union representation. The modest return rate (N = 423 or 8.5%) is attributed to sending the instrument to the personnel department rather than to a specific individual.

The Instrument

The questionnaire had four pages. The first page was the cover letter explaining the purpose of the project as an investigation of absenteeism control practices. The next two pages listed 34 methods that an organization might use to control absenteeism. (Listed in Table 2). These methods were assembled from a review of the literature, personal experience of the authors, and two pilot tests on groups of personnel managers. For each method of control, the respondents were asked if their companies or agencies used this method. If they replied affir-

matively, two further pieces of information were requested. First, how many years had the practice been operational? Second, how effective has it been in controlling absenteeism? Respondents had four choices in rating the effectiveness of any of these methods: (1) not effective at all; (2) marginally ineffective, the benefits just below the costs; (3) marginally effective, the benefits barely worth the costs; and (4) definitely effective, successful. The last page of the survey asked for demographic information about the organization itself, including the absenteeism rate. Respondents could also indicate on this sheet if they wished to receive a special summary report. Because the information was considered confidential, only sample averages were used in this summary report. Return envelopes with prepaid postage were provided for respondents.

Because of the nature of this survey technique and because only one respondent from each organization was queried, the possibility of psychometric error was evident. Consequently, careful pretesting of the instrument was done at two management attendance control seminars ($N = 42$ and $N = 31$). In these pretests, the respondents reported that completing the survey was very informative and relatively easy and that they were very interested in the results. Even among the pilot groups there was considerable range in absenteeism rates ($1\frac{1}{2}\%$ to

$9\frac{1}{2}\%$). Furthermore, variation in experience with particular control techniques was high. In these pilot groups respondents took approximately 15 minutes to complete the survey. After each iteration, ambiguous items and unclear wordings were eliminated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1.

In response to the first research question, "Is the presence of a union associated with higher absenteeism rates in an organization?" mean absence rates for union and non-union organizations are presented in Table 1.

Of the 423 respondents, 63% were non-union firms and 36% were union firms. The non-union firms reported an average absenteeism rate of 5.05% (s.d. = 5.01). (Only 200 of the non-union respondents reported their absenteeism rate. Thus about 25% either did not keep records of it or could not report it.) The union firms reported an average absenteeism rate 5.14% (s.d. = 3.32). (Only 23 organizations, or about 15% of these firms, did not report their absenteeism rate.) Given random fluctuations in sampling, there is no statistically significant difference between these two absenteeism rates when an F test is applied. Thus, it appears that the presence of a union is not associated with higher absenteeism rates in this sample.

Research Question 2.

The second research question asked if there are major differences in the methods used to control absenteeism in union vs. non-union settings. Table 2 presents the relevant information to investigate this question.

All 34 absenteeism control methods are ranked in Table 2 by their degree of use in non-union settings. Thus, in the first column of the table, the percentage of non-union sites who use this technique is entered. In the second column, the rated effectiveness of this particular technique is listed. The third and fourth column repeat the same information for unionized settings.

A number of observations can be made by comparing the non-union data and the union data in this table. First, there is a high degree of similarity between the percentage of non-union firms that use each method and the percentage of union firms that use the same method. For example, termination based on excessive absenteeism is used by 96% of the non-union respondents and by 96% of the union respondents. This is the most frequently used method for both groups. Throughout the entire list, only four methods of the 34 differ by more than 11%. Most are much closer, if not identical in their proportion of use, for non-union and union users. The four programs which are more than 11% apart are (1) requiring a written doctor's excuse for illness and accidents (74% of the non-union firms require this whereas 88% of the union firms require it); (2) the inclusion of absenteeism rate on job performance evaluation (74% of the non-union sites use this method; only 48% of union sites use this); (3) formal work safety programs (60% of the non-union respondents use this while 79% of the union firms report

TABLE 1
SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Type of Organization	Total Number of Firms	No. of Firms Reporting Absence Rate	Mean Absence Rate
Non-union Organizations	268 (63%)	200	5.05%
Union Organizations	155 (36%)	132	5.14%

this method being used); and (4) substance abuse programs for drugs, alcohol, etc. (12% of non-union firms offered vs. 29% of union firms).

It is also interesting to note that non-union firms do not appear to be innovators in terms of new absence control methods. In other words, both the union and non-union sites reported the highest levels of usage for traditional, disciplinary forms of control: terminations, employee call-ins, progressive discipline schedules, etc. Newer methods that have been discussed in a positive light in the personnel literature are used very infrequently: operation of a day care center (1/2% non-union/1% union); and a paid absence bank to be cashed in at a later date or added to next year's vacation time (7% non-union/4% union).

One final observation can be made with respect to Item 34 in Table 2. This item asks if the absenteeism control policy has been negotiated in the union contract. This question only applies to unionized sites, and only 38% of them reported that absenteeism control was subject to negotiation. As increasing pressure for higher productivity becomes more a national economic concern, this item could be of much greater importance in future labor contracts during this decade.

Finally, the similarity between union and non-union respondents in the perceived level of effectiveness of each of these methods should be noted. For most methods, there is little difference between the rated effectiveness in the non-union setting and the union setting. On the whole, it would be very difficult to argue, based on these data, that there are major differences in the methods that union sites use to control absenteeism when compared to non-union sites.

TABLE 2
ABSENCE CONTROL METHODS AND THEIR FREQUENCY OF USE
IN NON-UNION VS. UNION ORGANIZATIONS*

METHOD OF CONTROL	NON-UNION		UNION	
	% Use	Rated Effectiveness	% Use	Rated Effectiveness
1. Termination based on excessive absenteeism	96%	3.37	96%	3.29
2. Employee call-in	91%	3.15	92%	3.23
3. Progressive discipline for excessive absenteeism	90%	3.32	95%	3.46
4. Identification and discipline of employees abusing attendance policies	81%	3.35	90%	3.26
5. Require written doctor's excuse for illness/accidents	74%	3.01	88%	3.06
6. Inclusion of absenteeism rate on job performance evaluation	74%	3.10	48%	2.95
7. A clearly written attendance policy	74%	3.24	79%	3.19
8. A consistently applied attendance policy	71%	3.48	78%	3.31
9. Daily attendance records maintained by supervisors	69%	3.29	68%	3.22
10. A component on attendance in formal employee orientation programs for new hires	69%	3.08	75%	2.86
11. Screen recruits' past attendance records before making a selection decision	69%	3.24	72%	2.97
12. Improvements of safety on the job	66%	3.15	75%	3.08
13. Formal work safety program	60%	3.15	79%	3.20
14. Analysis of daily attendance information at least monthly	54%	3.37	65%	3.34
15. Employee interviewed after an absence	53%	3.29	52%	3.01
16. Daily attendance records maintained by Personnel Department	50%	3.35	57%	3.22
17. Wiping clean a problem employee's record by subsequent good attendance	42%	3.12	55%	3.09
18. Peer pressure encouraged by requiring peers to fill in for absent employee	37%	2.52	47%	2.40
19. Supervisory training in attendance control	36%	3.08	46%	3.13
20. Public recognition of employee good attendance (i.e. in-house bulletin boards or newsletter, etc.)	26%	3.07	23%	2.83
21. Inclusion of work unit absenteeism on supervisory performance evaluation	23%	3.03	24%	3.05
22. Visitation (or phone call) to check-up at employee residence by doctor/nurse/detective/other employee	22%	3.02	28%	3.00

continued

TABLE 2 (CONTINUED)

METHOD OF CONTROL	NON-UNION		UNION	
	% Use	Rated Effectiveness	% Use	Rated Effectiveness
23. Employee bonus (momentary) for perfect attendance	17%	3.16	17%	3.08
24. Job enrichment/enlargement/or rotation to reduce absenteeism	13%	2.78	8%	2.69
25. Substance abuse program (drugs, alcohol, etc.)	12%	3.88	29%	3.00
26. Flexible work schedules	10%	2.96	6%	3.10
27. Perfect/good attendance banquet and award ceremony	10%	3.10	5%	3.13
28. Education programs in health/diet/home safety	9%	2.96	14%	2.62
29. Allow employees to build a paid "absence bank" to be cashed in at a % at a later date, or added to next year's vacation time	7%	2.90	4%	3.17
30. Letter to spouse indicating lost earnings of employee due to absenteeism	2%	2.40	1%	2.00
31. Attendance lottery or poker system (random reward)	1%	2.67	2%	2.67
32. Chart biorhythms for accident prone days	1%	2.50	2%	2.33
33. Operation of day care for employees' dependents	½%	4.00	1%	2.00
34. The absenteeism control policy has been negotiated in the union contract (Applies only to unions)	NA	NA	38%	2.98

* N = 268 non-organizations
N = 155 union organizations

TABLE 3
THE EFFECT OF UNION PRESENCE
ON A PAID ABSENCE PROGRAM

UNION PRESENCE	DO NOT HAVE PAID ABSENCE PROGRAM			HAVE PAID ABSENCE PROGRAM			TOTALS	
	Freq.	%	Mean Absence Rate	Freq.	%	Mean Absence Rate	Freq.	%
Non-Union	130	66.0	5.1%	67	34.0	5.1%	197	100.0
Union	102	77.8	5.1%	29	22.2	5.1%	131	100.0
Totals	232	70.7	5.1%	96	29.3	5.1%	328	100.0

Research Question 3.

Given Allen's (1981) argument concerning the union as a moderator of individual costs associated through its more formalized procedures, one might wonder if union sites do in fact have more formally developed attendance control policies than non-union organizations. In order to investigate this possibility, each of the 34 methods listed in Table 2 was considered as an example of a formal attendance control method. For each firm, a composite score was computed by adding the number of affirmative responses to the 34 questions of whether or not a specific method was used. Thus, if a firm indicated that no methods were used, its score would be zero. If a firm used every method in Table 2, then its score would be 34. The average combination score for non-union sites was 14.6 (s.d. = 3.96). The average combination score for union sites was 15.9 (s.d. = 3.84). These scores are not identical; there is a statistically significant difference between them. (An F Test [df = 1,421] with an adjustment for unequal cell sizes resulted in an F ratio = 12.37 [p < .001], R² = 2.9%.) Thus, the non-union firms reported that they employed on the average about 14½ methods (the range was 3 to 24). Union firms used on the average 16 methods with a range of 3 to 27. Therefore, the third research question can be answered affirmatively.

Research Question 4.

The last research question asked if the presence of a union is associated with a paid-hourly absence program. The data for this question are shown in Table 3.

Of the 197 non-union firms who responded to this question and who reported their absenteeism rate, 34%

did have a paid absence program for hourly workers. Of the 131 union firms who responded to this question and who reported their absenteeism rate, 22% of the firms had a paid absence program for hourly workers. Thus, it does not appear that the presence of a union is associated with an increased probability of having a paid-absence program; in fact the very opposite seems to be true. Furthermore, the absenteeism rates for each of the four cells represented in Table 3 are all approximately 5.1%. It would be difficult to argue that the presence of a paid-absence program had an appreciable difference on the absenteeism rates reported for the firms in this sample.

CONCLUSION

Of the four research questions posed at the outset of the article, three were answered negatively. First, the absenteeism rate in union firms did not appear higher than in non-union firms. Second, there were not major differences in the profiles of absenteeism control method usage in union and non-union firms. Third, union firms apparently *did* have a greater number of formal control methods. Finally, the presence of a union was not associated with a higher probability of having a paid-absence program. Quite simply, the management assumptions, cited at the beginning of this report, that there are large differences between union and non-union firms were not supported.

There are a number of possible explanations for these findings. It is possible that the number of unions was understated due to the sampling method that was used or that regional data collection influenced our findings. It is entirely possible that there are major differences in the characteristics and operations of unions in different regions of the

country. If this is the case, especially if the unions in the Southeast are more "cooperative" than those of the Northeast, these findings may be more a reflection of regional differences between union and non-union sites.

In either case, it appears that the common management assumptions about unions and absenteeism control methods are not supported. Therefore, absenteeism and unions may not be as closely linked as one might first think.

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