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Understanding employee absenteeism and its impact on workplace engagement

by

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This work is dedicated to the loving memory of my late father, James Nkumbi. I know you are with me in spirit, and therefore, hope I have been able to make you proud. Love always from your loving daughter.

Abstract

This study examined employee absenteeism and its impact on workplace engagement in the manufacturing sector. Employee absenteeism disrupts operational efficiency, affects team dynamics, and increases costs.

A qualitative, interpretivist approach was used, incorporating semi-structured interviews with frontline managers at a company located in Pietermaritzburg. Thematic analysis revealed patterns of absenteeism, its causes, and its impact on workplace engagement. The study also examined the impact of leadership styles, workplace culture, and financial and non-financial reward systems on absenteeism patterns. Several reasons for absenteeism emerged, such as health issues, disengagement at the workplace, family responsibilities, and substance abuse. Of particular interest were the findings of “silent resignation” by disengaged workers who utilised short-term absences.

The study concluded that absenteeism demotivates workplace participation by burdening present workers with increased workloads and generating distrust within teams. Elevated levels of absenteeism impact the continuity of operations and the organisation’s performance. A recommendation from the study is that the organisation should embrace a holistic approach in managing absenteeism by linking clear guidelines with supportive management and well-being interventions. Flexible work arrangements, mental health interventions, and performance-based reward systems will generate a culture of involvement and decrease absenteeism. Managers must balance disciplinary interventions with positive involvement in shaping the more committed workforce. Investment in employee development and well-being are likely to counteract the determinants of absenteeism.

The study contributes to the existing knowledge on absenteeism by investigating its effect within the context of the South African manufacturing industry. Unlike the economic consequences of absenteeism addressed by the extant literature, this research explores the relational and psychological dimensions of absenteeism and work involvement, leading to practical recommendations for human resources practitioners and managers within the organisation.

Keywords – Employee absenteeism, workplace engagement, employee well-being

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Abbreviations

AWOL	Absent Without Leave
BCEA	Basic Conditions of Employment Act
CARE	Connection, Authenticity, Recognition and Engagement
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
EAP	Employee Assistance Programme
JD-R	Job Demands Resource Theory
HR	Human Resources

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Absenteeism is a significant problem with far-reaching effects on workers and companies. It disturbs regular business operations, influences general productivity, and sometimes results in higher costs and difficult resource allocation. The absence of employees can have a knock-on effect on the company's operations, resulting in project delays, more work for current employees, and a reduction in morale that finally influences the company's bottom line (Tarro et al., 2020). Not only is absenteeism a matter of personal employee behaviour, it also frequently reflects more general organisational problems (Human, 1979). These could be employee discontent, poor management techniques, low employee involvement, and insufficient support for employee well-being (Miraglia & Johns, 2021). Organisations trying to create a healthy and efficient workplace depend on an awareness of the several dimensions of absenteeism. Through investigation of its causes and effects, companies can create plans to reduce absenteeism and improve general performance (Munro, 2007).

One of the complexities of absenteeism is its two characteristics. It can be both voluntary and involuntary. Voluntary absenteeism often signals underlying problems, including job dissatisfaction, workplace conflict, or lack of motivation (Kanwal et al., 2017). On the other hand, involuntary absenteeism is the result of circumstances beyond the control of employees, such as illness or family crises. This difference is significant since it shows that absenteeism is usually a sign of more general organisational difficulties rather than a personal one. While high rates of voluntary absenteeism may highlight gaps in employee support systems, such as inadequate healthcare or lack of flexible work arrangements, high rates of involuntary absenteeism may point to a toxic workplace or ineffective leadership (Grinza & Rycx, 2020). Therefore, a thorough knowledge of absenteeism must go beyond individual employee behaviour and address the systematic elements contributing to company absenteeism patterns.

Investigating the reasons for and effects of absenteeism can help one understand how companies might raise employee general performance, well-being, and involvement. For instance, companies can use focused interventions to build a more positive work environment by knowing the elements that cause voluntary absenteeism, such as lack of engagement or workplace discontent. This could include policies such as better management techniques,

providing chances for professional development, and encouraging a culture of appreciation and support (Nienaber & Martins, 2020). Similarly, knowing the reasons for involuntary absenteeism will enable companies to create policies supporting employees in handling personal and health-related issues, including flexible work schedules, access to healthcare services, and implementing mental health programmes (Côté et al., 2021). Organisations can encourage a more involved and efficient workforce by addressing personal as well as organisational elements causing absenteeism.

This chapter covers the background of the study, problem statement, research objectives, research questions, and relevance. It provides the basis for comprehending the complexity of absenteeism and the necessity of an all-encompassing strategy to handle this problem at the company. The chapter also presents an overview of the remaining chapters, thereby offering a road map for the research.

1.2 Background of the study

A common problem affecting companies all around, employee absenteeism has broad effects on operational effectiveness, production, and employee morale. It is defined as the habitual non-attendance of employees from their work responsibilities, which can result from various causes including health problems, workplace dissatisfaction, personal issues, and external stresses (Grinza & Rycx, 2020). This multifarious problem reflects not only personal employee behaviour but also often reflects more general organisational problems including inadequate working conditions, lack of involvement, and poor management practices. Absence can be both a voluntary and a forced condition. Voluntary absenteeism is the result of employees' purposefully choosing to be absent, usually in response to low morale or job discontent. On the other hand, Kanwal et al. (2017) find that involuntary absenteeism is absence from work brought on by circumstances outside of employees' control, such as illness or family emergencies.

The Basic Conditions of Employment Act No. 75 of 1997 (BCEA) provides for in South Africa different leave entitlements for employees, including family responsibility, annual, and sick leave. Although these clauses in the BCEA are important for safeguarding employee welfare, if improperly controlled, they could unintentionally lead to trends in absenteeism (Muthwa, 2019). For example, misuse or abuse of sick leave could take place in settings where workers

feel disengaged or unhappy, which raises voluntary absenteeism rates. Furthermore, influencing absenteeism patterns are South African socioeconomic circumstances, which include high unemployment rates and income inequality. Employees may thus be under more stress that influences their capacity to attend work regularly. This includes elements such as poor healthcare, transportation problems, and family obligations that might influence both planned and unplanned absences (Sanchez-Gomez et al., 2021).

The cost of absenteeism to companies goes beyond just the direct financial losses, such as paying absent workers. It disrupts project deadlines, undermines team morale, and places additional strain on staff members who are present. As present staff members are sometimes expected to take on extra tasks to cover for absent colleagues, this can result in a cycle of lower productivity and higher stress (Grinza & Rycx, 2020). Absence can have significant consequences for customer satisfaction, product or service quality, and general organisational performance. High absenteeism rates, for instance, can force the hiring of temporary workers, which would raise operational expenses and affect the quality of work because of the lack of experience and familiarity with the corporate operations (Voordt & Jensen, 2023). Long term, regular absenteeism can undermine the organisational culture and cause worker disengagement and the reputation of a company as a preferred employer (Miraglia & Johns, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the dynamics of absence from the workplace. The pandemic brought fresh health hazards and stresses that have resulted in an increase in both planned and unplanned absences with businesses in many different sectors having experienced a previously unheard-of disturbance in their operations (Groenewold, 2020). Apart from raising the physical health hazards related to going to work, the pandemic has drawn attention to mental health issues. Factors including job uncertainty, changes in work schedules, and the necessity of balancing work and family obligations have caused employees to experience increased stress; all of these elements can help to explain higher absenteeism rates (Van Der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020).

Mental health has become increasingly important in determining employee attendance and performance. Mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and burnout, according to De Oliveira et al. (2023), can cause employees to miss more and produce less as they try to handle the extra strain and uncertainty caused by the pandemic. This emphasises the need for companies to adopt a more comprehensive strategy that includes psychological well-being in

addition to physical health to reduce absenteeism. Through programmes including employee assistance programmes (EAP), flexible work schedules, and mental health awareness training, companies are increasingly aware of the need to provide support for mental health challenges (Ngwenya & Utete, 2023). These steps seek to establish a conducive workplace where stressors on employee attendance might be lessened.

Moreover, the pandemic has revealed the shortcomings of conventional approaches of absenteeism control. While rigorous attendance rules and financial incentives might have helped to control absenteeism in pre-pandemic times, they might not be sufficient in the present situation when health and well-being come first (Groenewold, 2020). Especially in sectors where workers are more likely to come into contact with the virus, a more sympathetic and flexible attitude to attendance control is vital. This has caused a change in emphasis towards employee engagement and well-being as key strategies for reducing absenteeism. Engaged workers show consistent attendance and are more likely to be resilient in the face of adversity, and help their company to run successfully (Zondo, 2020). Therefore, in order for companies to negotiate the complexity of the modern business environment, knowledge of the elements causing absenteeism and creation of strategies promoting employee engagement and well-being are essential.

In essence, employee absenteeism is a complex problem that presents major difficulties for companies, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic (Gutsa & Luke, 2021). It is not only a question of personal employee behaviour but also influenced by a complicated interaction of elements including health, workplace environment, socioeconomic level, and organisational policies (Ngwenya & Utete, 2023). These difficulties are especially exacerbated in South Africa by socioeconomic and cultural dynamics affecting absenteeism trends (Ngwenya & Utete, 2023). Examining the causes and effects of absenteeism, the function of employee engagement, and the success of financial incentives in lowering absenteeism rates enables this study to explore and investigate these complexities. By increasing awareness of these elements, this study seeks to offer insights that might guide the formulation of all-encompassing plans to enhance employee well-being, promote involvement, and raise general organisational performance (Zondo, 2020).

1.3 Problem statement

The availability of employment policies, such as sick leave entitlements and wellness programmes, does not always address the underlying causes of absenteeism. Voluntary absenteeism, in particular, signals deeper organisational problems, including inadequate work environments, lack of motivation, and poor management practices (Miraglia & Johns, 2021). This type of absenteeism is problematic as it reduces productivity, lowers team cohesion, and increases turnover rates (Karamehmedović et al., 2021). Companies experiencing high voluntary absenteeism face compounded losses, including diminished morale, an increased workload for the remaining employees, and elevated operational costs (Zondo, 2020). Investigating the factors driving absenteeism and developing targeted interventions to enhance employee engagement is therefore, imperative.

In contemporary competitive work environments, voluntary absenteeism can be symptom of broader employee disengagement. Disengaged employees exhibit withdrawal behaviours, including frequent absences, reduced effort, and minimal discretionary effort (Ruyseveldt, Van Dijke, & Van Dam, 2023). According to the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory, it is understood that sustained job demands and limited resources can lead to burnout and disengagement, weakening the psychological contract of employment and further lowering organisational commitment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2023).

In the manufacturing contexts, absenteeism and presenteeism are influenced by the physical demands of the job, management control, and workplace norms, thus creating a significant impact on productivity and engagement. Understanding the multilevel contextual and individual factors driving attendance behaviours is essential for enhancing employee well-being and organisational performance (Nowak et al., 2023). Consistent attendance is vital for maintaining and meeting production deadlines whereas absenteeism disrupts the workflow continuity which increases pressure on present employees, and jeopardises timely delivery (Van der Walt & Du Plessis, 2020). Indirect consequences such as burnout among overburdened staff and increased workplace conflict further compromise engagement and performance.

Addressing absenteeism requires moving beyond surface-level policy implementation for a deeper understanding of the organisational psychological, and structural factors involved. By recognising how management practices, communication, organisational culture, and employee recognition foster engagement and reduce absenteeism (Ruhle et al., 2020). A holistic, preventative approach is needed to transform workplace cultures that encourage attendance, boost morale, and promote sustained engagement.

1.4 Study site

Hulamin, situated in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, was chosen as the research site. It is the largest manufacturer and supplier of semi-fabricated aluminium goods in Sub-Saharan Africa. Hulamin has 1998 employees of which 23% are women and 77% are men. Hulamin has two primary commercial operations, namely the extruded and the rolled products divisions. This study will concentrate exclusively on the rolled products operation since it comprises about 80% of all commercial products manufactured by Hulamin. Hulamin rolled products manufactures a wide range of products using castings, recycling, and continuous, hot, cold, and foil rolling mills. Through the finishing equipment, they can cut, slit, clean, tension-level and coat aluminium ready for the finishing process of their customers. A dedicated plate plant is equipped with heat treatment equipment, sawing equipment, stretchers, and cutting equipment for cutting plates to length (Hulamin, 2024).

1.5 Research objectives

The aim of this study is to explore the causes of employee absenteeism and understand its impact on the workplace environment. The objectives are to:

- a) Identify the factors contributing to both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism in the workplace and their perceived effects on employee engagement
- b) To explore employee perceptions of how absenteeism affects workplace engagement.
- c) Assess the impact of absenteeism on productivity, employee morale, and operational costs.
- d) Investigate the role of employee engagement in mitigating absenteeism.

1.6 Research questions

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

- a) What are the key factors leading to employee absenteeism in organisations?
- b) How does absenteeism affect organisational productivity and employee morale?
- c) What role does employee engagement play in reducing absenteeism?

1.7 Significance of the study

The study is important because of its thorough approach to understanding employee absenteeism and its wider influence on organisational performance. Particularly in the South African setting, absenteeism poses a difficult problem entwined with socioeconomic circumstances, corporate culture, and legal surroundings. This study offers a comprehensive view by exploring the causes and effects of absenteeism, so helping companies to find the fundamental elements leading to employee absenteeism. Knowing these elements is vital since absenteeism not only causes direct financial losses but also disturbs processes, influences team morale, and increases the workload of those who are present, so causing a domino effect on output (Grinza & Rycx, 2020).

One of the main contributions of this study is the emphasis on employee participation in reducing absenteeism. With engaged workers more likely to show regular attendance, greater productivity, and a stronger commitment to their roles, employee engagement has emerged as a key driver of organisational success (Zondo, 2020). The study contributes to the literature that is currently available by looking at how employee engagement techniques might be used to lower rates of absenteeism. Through an analysis of several aspects of involvement, including job satisfaction, recognition, and chances for development, the study provides understanding of how companies might create a workplace that inspires staff members to maintain regular attendance. By doing this, it emphasises the need for establishing a good organisational culture in which staff members feel appreciated and supported, so fostering continuous development in performance and attendance (Hermawan et al., 2020).

Moreover, the investigation of financial incentives as a means of lowering absenteeism adds a useful dimension to the debate. Although financial incentives including bonuses, pay raises, and performance-based rewards have been shown to favourably affect employee motivation

and attendance (Chebet et al., 2019), their efficacy can vary depending on the organisational setting and the type of workforce. Examining the subtleties of financial incentives, this study assesses how they affect employee behaviour both in the short and over the long term. It also considers how these incentives might be balanced with natural motivators like job satisfaction and a feeling of purpose to develop a whole plan for lower absenteeism. This twin emphasis on extrinsic and intrinsic motivators is especially pertinent in South Africa, where different cultural and economic elements may shape employees' needs and expectations (Kalogiannidis, 2021).

This dissertation presents useful advice for companies trying to reduce absenteeism by offering a thorough study of how financial incentives might be properly included into more general employee engagement plans. While financial incentives can be quick motivators for attendance, they could need to be supplemented with other initiatives, such as employee recognition programmes, career development opportunities, and wellness programmes, to sustain engagement and lower absenteeism over time (Voordt & Jensen, 2023). This multifaceted approach recognises that employee motivation is complicated and that successful interventions have to address psychological as well as financial elements of employment.

Especially in the South African setting, the study is also important in terms of its possible contribution to human resource management strategies. With high unemployment rates, income inequality, and a varied workforce, South Africa's particular socioeconomic scene offers different possibilities and problems for controlling absenteeism (Muthwa, 2019). Through the socioeconomic and cultural lens, this study can guide the creation of policies and procedures specifically for the South African workforce. The study investigates, for instance, how elements including economic stress, family obligations, and cultural attitudes towards work affect absenteeism patterns, so giving businesses the knowledge required to establish more inclusive and encouraging work environments (Sanchez-Gomez et al., 2021).

Moreover, this study affects organisational policymaking. Knowing the underlying causes of absenteeism will help in the creation of targeted strategies for particular problems, such as personal life difficulties, occupational discontent, or health-related absenteeism. As part of a whole strategy to lower absenteeism, the results could imply, for instance, the need of flexible work schedules, better mental health support, or enhanced employee benefits (Ngwenya & Utete, 2023). Such interventions not only help to raise attendance rates but also support general

employee well-being and job satisfaction, so strengthening the resilience and output of the workforce.

This work adds to the larger scholarly debate on absenteeism by offering empirical data and theoretical analysis that might guide future studies. Looking at the qualitative insights in the approach provides a sound grasp of the intricate interaction between absenteeism, employee engagement, and financial incentives. This comprehensive strategy can form the basis for more research on absenteeism in various organisational environments and cultural settings, so advancing the field of organisational behaviour and human resource management.

This study is important for several aspects, such as contributing to and improving the understanding of absenteeism and how it affects employee engagement and productivity in the workplace. Moreover, its emphasis on the South African setting helps to build economically and culturally sensitive strategies for controlling absenteeism, so encouraging a more involved and effective workforce.

1.8 Outline of the chapters

The research is structured into five chapters, as outlined below:

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter introduces the study by exploring the topic of employee absenteeism and its impact on workplace engagement. This section outlines the dissertation structure and sets the context for the research. The background of this study highlights the widespread challenge of employee absenteeism and its impact on productivity, morale, and operational efficiency, especially within the South African manufacturing sector. The problem statement outlines the central issue driving the study: the persistent rate of employee absenteeism at companies and its impact on productivity and operational continuity.

The main aim of this study is to explore and understand the relationship between employee absenteeism and workplace engagement at Hulamin. It aims to uncover underlying factors contributing to absenteeism and to assess strategies that may improve engagement and reduce absenteeism rates. The research objectives are to examine the causes of absenteeism, assess the effectiveness of current interventions, evaluate the role of engagement, and explore possible

recommendations for reducing absenteeism in the workplace. The research questions frame the key issues the study intends to investigate. Questions relate to the drivers of absenteeism, the impact of absenteeism on the organisation, and the potential role of employee engagement in addressing absentee behaviour.

The significance of the study for various stakeholders is discussed. The findings could benefit management in companies by providing insight into absenteeism trends, supporting improved engagement strategies, and contributing to broader academic and practical discussions on workforce management in the manufacturing sector.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Chapter two reviews existing literature on employee absenteeism, workplace engagement, and financial incentives. This dissertation examines how theoretical frameworks such as Human Capital Theory and social exchange theory relate to absenteeism in the workplace.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Chapter three discusses the research methodology. The chapter focuses on the qualitative research design employed in the study, emphasising its suitability for capturing detailed, contextual insights into employee absenteeism. The interpretivist research philosophy underpinning the study prioritises understanding the subjective meanings behind absenteeism. The research approach is inductive: patterns and themes related to absenteeism emerge from the interview data. For the population and sampling method, the purposive sampling technique was used to select participants for interviews. Semi-structured qualitative interviews are used to collect data, which is interpreted by thematic analysis. The process employed to ensure the validity, reliability, and overall trustworthiness of the qualitative interview data is discussed. Chapter three highlights the ethical safeguards implemented, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and protecting participant anonymity throughout the interview process.

Chapter Four: Presentation and analysis of the findings

Chapter four aims to provide a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the primary data collected. Employee engagement strategies and financial incentives are examined as factors contributing to absenteeism.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Chapter five presents the discussion of the study and the context of the existing literature. The research objectives and questions are addressed and are linked to the analysis in chapter four.

Chapter Six: Conclusions

Chapter six provides a conclusion. It outlines the implications for organisational practice and offers recommendations for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the existing literature on employee absenteeism and discusses the theoretical models and main elements influencing this phenomenon. Examining the Human Capital and Social Exchange theories helps one to better grasp how investments in employee well-being and the employer-employee relationship affect absenteeism rates (Deming, 2022; Miraglia & Johns, 2020). The chapter looks at how employee engagement, financial incentives, mental health, leadership, and workplace culture lead to absenteeism, stressing the need for a comprehensive approach to this problem (Tarro et al., 2020; Voordt & Jensen, 2023). Examining these elements helps build the basis for knowing how companies might create plans to lower absenteeism and improve general performance.

2.2 Theoretical framework

In nations where there is a surplus of labour, the concept of human capital takes on higher significance. High birth rates and favourable climatic circumstances often contribute to a naturally larger labour force in these nations (Dhir and Shukla, 2018). The availability of human resources as a tangible source of capital has increased in these nations as a result of the surplus of labour. Uwizeye et al. (2018) contend that by effectively contributing to health, moral values, and educational opportunities in society, this human resource may be transformed into human capital. The development of human capital involves using a variety of inputs to transform individuals into highly effective human resources. According to Schultz (1961), nations with surplus labour can address the scarcity of physical capital by increasing human capital through private and public investments in their health and education sectors.

It is intangible human capital that serves as a tool to aid in the growth of an organisation (Becker, 1964). This is because if there is human growth, then the qualitative as well as quantitative advancement of the organisation is unavoidable. Human capital refers to the endowment of talents, knowledge, relational and behavioural attributes, including creativity, cognitive capacity, and embodied skills, that people bring to the labour market, enabling them to generate financial benefits through their efforts (Mone and London, 2018).

The fundamental theory according to Beckers' human capital theory grounds the theoretical framework for this work. Human capital theory holds that workers are valuable assets whose knowledge, skills, and abilities help an organisation to flourish (Becker, 1964). According to this view, improving productivity and lowering absenteeism depend critically on investments in employee well-being, health, and development (Deming, 2022). A healthy and well-trained workforce is more likely to contribute successfully to organisational goals, reducing absenteeism (Mone & London, 2018). Studies in favour of this point of view show that a company that makes investments in employee well-being and engagement programmes typically show reduced absenteeism rates and better productivity (Tarro et al., 2020). A company that started wellness initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic provides a clear example, showing a decrease in absenteeism despite the high-stress environment. By seeing employees as investments rather than only resources, organisations can foster an environment where employees feel supported, valued, and motivated to maintain regular attendance.

Human capital theory also emphasises the need for ongoing education and development as a means of keeping staff members and lowering absenteeism. Organisations that provide opportunities for career development, skill enhancement and personal growth will help employees to stay involved and committed to their roles, thereby lowering the tendency for voluntary absenteeism (Budrienė & Diskienė, 2020). This dedication results from the reciprocal relationship between the employee and the company, in which the former feels obliged to return the investment in their development with loyalty and dedication (Hermawan et al., 2020). In this regard, absenteeism is a personal decision and influenced by the company's readiness to make personnel investments. Employees in companies that prioritise training and development are less likely to take unnecessary leave since they see their roles as vital to their personal and professional development (Clack, 2021)

The foundation of the theory of social exchange is the notion that a logical evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of social relationships influences human behaviour. The theory of social comparison by Festinger (1954) suggested that people assess their behaviour and value by contrasting themselves with others in a comparable situation. It established the groundwork for comprehending how fairness and reciprocity are perceived in the workplace. According to Homans (1958), the theory of social exchange suggests that social behaviour is driven by the exchange of tangible and intangible resources, with individuals seeking to maximise benefits while minimising costs. This framework was expanded by Blau (1964), who

stressed the role of power, addiction, and social structure in the relationship of exchange. In the workplace, social exchange theory provides a valuable lens through which to examine employee behaviour, such as absenteeism, which often reflects underlying beliefs in fairness, duty and reciprocity (Gosselin, 2018; Johns, 2008). Gellatly and Luchak (1998) found that perceived corporate standards strongly influence absenteeism, reinforcing the idea that such decisions are socially constructed and not purely personal. Similarly, Gaudin and Saks (2001) have shown that feedback interventions can effectively change attendance patterns, which supports the idea that behaviour is responsive to social cues and expectations. Grant and Parker (2009) have taken this perspective further by emphasising the relational and pro-active nature of modern work design and how peer commitment and social connections influence motivation and engagement. Kaiser (1998) proposes an interdisciplinary interpretation of absenteeism, arguing that it is the result of a complex interaction of economic, social and psychological factors.

Together, these papers underline the continued relevance of the social exchange theory in explaining working behaviour, in particular how employees navigate the social dynamics of attendance, engagement and organisational commitment. Focusing on the reciprocal relationship between employer and employee, social exchange theory presents a complementary view on absenteeism. This theory suggests that when employees believe their company values their contributions and supports their well-being, they are more likely to participate in positive activities, including consistent attendance (Miraglia & Johns, 2021). This supposed organisational support creates a psychological contract between the company and the worker, which drives more dedication and readiness to surpass minimum job criteria (Saks, 2022). On the other hand, employees who feel underappreciated or believe their company lacks support may become detached, which would lead to unfavourable results including voluntary absenteeism and declining performance (Ha & Moon, 2023). This structure emphasises the role of a good workplace where mutual respect and appreciation rule. Employees who receive positive comments, appreciation for their efforts, and support during personal or professional difficulties, for instance, are more likely to respond with loyalty and consistent attendance (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Therefore, one of the most important ways to lower absenteeism is to create a good workplace that supports the relationship between the employer and employees.

Social exchange theory underlines the need for just treatment and fairness inside the company. Workers who perceive organisational procedures such as reward distribution, decision-making,

and policy application as fair, are more likely to develop trust in the company, so reducing the likelihood of absenteeism (Karatepe et al., 2020). Fair treatment supports the idea that the company values its workers and motivates them to return by being present and involved at work (Ngwenya & Utete, 2023). According to this view, employees' perception of their relationship with the company shapes absenteeism not only from personal circumstances but also in response to how others are treated. Employees who feel their contributions are fairly appreciated and rewarded, for example, are less prone to take unnecessary leave since they see their attendance as part of their commitment to a mutually beneficial relationship with their company (Van Waeyenberg, 2024).

2.3 The nexus between employee engagement and its impact on organisational performance

According to Kahn (1990), psychological conditions such as meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability are necessary for engagement. When these conditions are present, employees are more likely to invest themselves fully in their work roles. For an organisation to succeed, its employees must be engaged, which reflects their emotional and psychological investment in their work. Employees who are genuinely engaged demonstrate increased productivity, higher commitment, reduced turnover, and stronger customer satisfaction. In order to achieve these outcomes, organisations need to prioritise engagement as a strategic priority (Harter, Schmidt, & Killham, 2003).

According to Zinger (2014), fostering authentic human relationships through offering meaningful recognition, and promoting individual and organisational alignment are prerequisites for sustainable engagement. Complementing this empirical foundation is the Zinger Model of employee engagement. This model takes a systems-thinking approach and centres on the acronym CARE, which stands for Connection, Authenticity, Recognition, and Engagement (Zinger, 2014). Aon Hewitt (2017) indicates that such behaviours result in enhanced revenue growth, employee advocacy, and customer satisfaction. The behavioural approach not only provides practical insights for performance management and talent retention, it also indicates observable outcomes of engagement.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), although not designed specifically for workplace engagement, also provides valuable insight. According to Maslow (1943) individuals are motivated to fulfil a sequence of needs, beginning with basic physiological and safety needs and progressing toward self-actualisation. In the workplace, organisations that provide job security, foster a sense of belonging, offer recognition, and support personal development are more likely to meet these needs and, as a result, promote engagement. While employee engagement is a psychological construct, it can also be used as a practical tool to improve organisational performance. By applying these frameworks strategically, organisations can create environments that support employee wellbeing and drive measurable success across key business metrics.

Every business wants to obtain a competitive advantage, and employee engagement is perhaps the best tool for doing so. It has long been acknowledged that the most crucial factor in assessing how well a business is performing is employee engagement (Muthike, 2016). Employee engagement is defined by Dhir and Shukla (2018) as enthusiasm and dedication of employees within the context of their role within an organisation. Employee engagement such as job satisfaction and performance is crucial for organisational success. For workers to be productive, they must feel that their work is meaningful, and they must experience psychological safety and comfort (Dhir and Shukla, 2018). People must be assigned to the right jobs and supervised by the right managers for employee engagement to succeed. According to Zondo (2020), employee engagement strongly correlates with labour productivity in the South African automotive assembly sector. As a result of this correlation, employees are more likely to attend work regularly when they feel engaged and connected to their work. Additionally, engaged employees are more committed to their responsibilities and absenteeism is reduced because of a higher sense of purpose and alignment with the organisation's goals.

For Kashimoto (2016), employee engagement is the psychological and rational commitment an individual has to a specific organisation or group. It can be broken down into three behaviours: try, stay, and contribute. According to Moletsane et al. (2019), psychological and rational commitment means employees have a positive view of their companies or organisations. The employee will promote the organisation to colleagues as well as prospective employees, will be enthusiastic, and will also feel a strong sense of commitment to contributing to its success. Even though the organisation has a wide variety of prospects at its disposal, it is the employees' behaviour that will drive performance and contribute to its success.

Employee engagement positively impacts the performance of an organisation, according to Kadiresan et al. (2015), as organisational quality and the impact on performance metrics like customer loyalty, productivity, profitability, and security improve with the number of employees. Similar sentiments were voiced by Othman et al. (2019), who emphasised that businesses could use people as strategic assets. According to Dash and Mohanty (2019), a positive work environment motivates staff to increase productivity, profitability, the calibre of their products and services, and the efficient use of business resources. In order to control their performance levels, drivers should focus more on financial considerations, claims Kazimoto (2016). The link was recognised by Alagaraja and Shuck (2015), who claimed that an organisations capacity to maintain alignment was the only factor affecting the level of engagement. Employee engagement is a multidimensional construct that significantly influences organisational performance. It involves an employee's emotional commitment, motivation, and dedication to their work and organisation (Nienaber & Martins, 2020). Engaged employees exhibit higher levels of productivity, job satisfaction, and retention, all of which contribute positively to the organisation's success. Engaged employees are less likely to be absent because they find their roles fulfilling and meaningful (Tensay & Singh, 2020).

Several studies indicate that employee engagement has a positive correlation with key performance metrics such as profitability, customer satisfaction, and employee retention (Hermawan et al., 2020). Engaged employees are more likely to go the extra mile, resulting in better customer experiences, higher-quality work, and enhanced organisational performance. Conversely, disengagement is often associated with higher absenteeism rates, reduced productivity, and a decline in overall organisational effectiveness (Budrienė & Diskienė, 2020). Negative workplace behaviours, including frequent absences, can disrupt workflow and contribute to a decline in team morale. Disengaged employees often exhibit a lack of enthusiasm, reduced motivation, and a diminished sense of loyalty to the organisation, making them more prone to absenteeism and less likely to contribute positively to the workplace environment (Karamehmedović et al., 2021).

Moreover, employee engagement serves as a protective buffer against workplace stressors, helping to reduce absenteeism. Engaged employees are more resilient to stress, better equipped to handle job demands, and more likely to thrive in dynamic work environments (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021). They tend to have positive attitudes toward their work, which enables them

to cope with challenges and maintain a healthy work-life balance. For example, organisations that foster a culture of engagement through supportive leadership, effective communication, and opportunities for growth can significantly reduce absenteeism and enhance organisational performance (Park et al., 2022). Engaged employees are more likely to have positive relationships with their supervisors and colleagues, contributing to a supportive work environment that encourages regular attendance (King et al., 2020). This sense of belonging and mutual support can act as a buffer against the adverse effects of stressors such as workload pressure, organisational changes, and personal challenges. By prioritising employee engagement, organisations can create an environment where employees are motivated to contribute their best efforts and maintain consistent attendance.

Engagement initiatives also play a crucial role in shaping employees' perceptions of their work environment and their sense of purpose. Employees who feel that their contributions are valued and that they are part of a larger mission are more likely to remain committed and engaged in their roles (Côté et al., 2021). Engaged employees are not only present at work physically but also mentally and emotionally invested in their tasks, leading to improved job performance and reduced absenteeism. Therefore, organisations must prioritise engagement initiatives to cultivate a highly engaged workforce that can mitigate the negative effects of absenteeism and contribute to the organisation's overall success.

2.4 Financial incentives and employee motivation

Employee motivation mostly depends on financial incentives, which are therefore very important for determining performance and attendance. Financial incentives, including bonuses, pay raises, and performance-based rewards, according to Chebet et al. (2019), provide concrete acknowledgement of staff members' contributions and efforts. This recognition can help to improve employee morale and encourage consistent attendance and better performance. Employees who receive bonuses or other kinds of financial incentives, for example, could feel more valued and be motivated to return to work with greater dedication to their roles (Manzoor et al., 2021). This feeling of value promotes a positive workplace, which lowers absenteeism since workers are more likely to be present and help the company to grow. Furthermore, companies who use performance-based incentives can successfully build an excellent culture in which staff members are driven to match their attendance and performance with the corporate objectives (Karatepe et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the degree of success of financial

incentives as a tool to lower absenteeism depends on how fair and transparent the incentive distribution process is perceived to be. Employee motivation to maintain regular attendance is strengthened when they believe rewards are fairly distributed depending on merit (Grinza & Rycx, 2020).

Though financial incentives have a positive effect, the relationship between monetary rewards and absenteeism is complicated. While financial incentives can momentarily inspire staff members, Alhassan and Greene (2020) contend that they might not be able to sustain long-term involvement or consistently lower absenteeism. This is so because financial incentives appeal mostly to extrinsic motivation, which can be reduced once the incentive is seen as an entitlement rather than a reward. Workers who are motivated just by financial gains could lose interest when such incentives seem to be inadequate (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Moreover, studies by Voordt and Jensen (2023) indicate that an excessive focus on financial incentives could eclipse natural motivators including job satisfaction, recognition, and a feeling of purpose. Their research showed that, compared to companies that rely just on financial incentives, healthy workplaces that emphasise intrinsic motivators, such as establishing a supportive work environment and encouraging meaningful work experiences, show higher employee satisfaction and lower absenteeism. This suggests that even if financial incentives can help lower absenteeism, they must be part of a more all-encompassing plan that also attends to employees' basic needs and motivations. Ignoring the balance between extrinsic and intrinsic motivators might result in a workforce that is temporarily driven by financial rewards, while long-term absenteeism remains unaddressed.

Organisations that want a sustainable drop in absenteeism have to take a comprehensive approach combining financial incentives with other techniques meant to inspire inner drive. Kalogiannidis (2021) advises that combining monetary rewards with career development opportunities, employee recognition programmes, and efforts to create a supportive work environment can effectively address both extrinsic and intrinsic motivating factors. Giving staff members opportunities for professional development and advancement, for instance, can help them to feel personally successful and purposeful, so strengthening their involvement in their jobs and reducing their likelihood of absenteeism (Labrague et al., 2020). Furthermore, improving job satisfaction and strengthening a culture of gratitude can be achieved through employee recognition programmes that honour team and individual efforts. Employees who believe their efforts are appreciated and valued outside of financial gains are more likely to

grow to be loyal and committed to the company (Côté et al., 2021). Organisations can develop a more successful plan to support regular attendance and high performance by attending to the holistic needs of employees and combining financial incentives with activities that support job satisfaction, personal development, and a friendly workplace.

2.5 The role of mental health in absenteeism

Mental health is a major determinant of employee absenteeism, with many studies showing the significant impact of mental health problems including stress, anxiety, and depression on employee attendance (de Oliveira et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has further underlined the need for mental health initiatives in the workplace since health issues, job uncertainty, and the demands of remote work setups have caused an unheard-of degrees of stress for employees worldwide. These pressures have not only contributed to the onset of mental health problems but also aggravated already present problems, which has increased absenteeism. Studies reveal that workers who struggle with mental health are more likely to use sick days or personal days as a coping mechanism to control their conditions (Labrague et al., 2020). This trend suggests that rather than only indicating a lack of dedication to work, absenteeism is sometimes a sign of more serious mental health problems. Furthermore, the stigma around mental health in many companies can deter workers from getting help, so causing extended absenteeism as they try to control their diseases alone (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021).

Companies that recognise the link between mental health and absenteeism and take early action to support their staff can significantly reduce this problem. Emphasising the value of offering mental health resources including employee assistance programmes (EAPs), access to counselling services, and mental health days, Ngwenya and Utete (2023) state that tools which help workers to control stress and preserve their mental health can help prevent absenteeism. EAPs in particular provide employees with coping mechanisms and tools to meet their mental health needs, offering them private support for both personal and work-related stresses (Labrague et al., 2020). Furthermore, access to professional counselling can help workers negotiate mental health issues, foster resilience, and help them to remain involved and attentive at work. By using these support systems, companies can create a more inclusive environment in which staff members feel free to ask for assistance, free from guilt or reprisals. Giving mental

health top priority will help companies build a culture of well-being that not only lowers absenteeism but also improves general employee output and involvement.

Reducing absenteeism also depends on creating a motivating workplace that supports honest communication about mental health issues. Chanana and Sangeeta (2021) advocate for a workplace culture that destigmatises mental health concerns, so allowing employees to share their difficulties and get help as needed. Initiatives including mental health awareness campaigns, manager training on identifying and handling mental health issues, and clear policies supporting mental health accommodations will help to accomplish this (Van Der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020). Organisations can, for example, equip managers and supervisors with training to recognise signs of mental health challenges and offer appropriate support to their teams. Open communication channels and an empathetic culture help staff members to express their concerns without fear of discrimination or judgement. Normalising mental health challenges will help companies create an environment where staff members feel safe to address their mental health needs, thereby reducing the possibility of absenteeism caused by unresolved stress or mental health conditions (Ngwenya & Utete, 2023).

In addition to offering direct assistance and creating a conducive environment, companies can implement preventive measures to reduce the effect of poor mental health on absenteeism. Labrague et al. (2020) advise that allowing employees to manage their work-life balance more successfully by including flexible hours and remote work options can lower stress and avoid burnout. Particularly for workers who might be under more stress because of outside events like caring obligations or health issues, flexibility can help to relieve the pressure of juggling job obligations with personal commitments. Organisations can build a workplace that supports general well-being and lowers the possibility of absenteeism by aggressively addressing the elements causing mental health problems (De Oliveira et al., 2023).

2.6 Flexible work arrangements and the link with absenteeism

Flexible work schedules, such as hybrid and flexible working hours, can reduce absenteeism. Employees are given more control over their work schedules, so that they can better manage their personal and professional obligations (Shifrin & Michel, 2022). This adaptability lessens the pressure employees experience juggling competing demands, including attending to family needs or addressing health issues. Giving workers the choice to telecommute helps them to

avoid the time and stress involved in commuting, greatly reducing absenteeism and fatigue. An employee who feels unwell but not too sick to work might decide to work from home, maintaining productivity while avoiding further health deterioration or the risk of spreading illness to colleagues. This adaptability can result in a better work-life balance and, in turn, reduce both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism (Groenewold, 2020).

Flexible work schedules have been found to be quite successful in addressing the underlying causes of absence. Employees who were able to modify their work schedules reported fewer instances of absenteeism and had lower levels of work-related stress according to a 2023 Ngwenya and Utete survey. For workers who have caring obligations such as looking after parents or elderly relatives this is especially important. Flexible work schedules help these people to meet their personal responsibilities without having to take time off from work, lowering the demand for unscheduled absences. By giving staff members the freedom to control their workload in a way that fits their personal needs and energy level, flexible work schedules can also be a preventive step against burnout. Employees can decide, for example, to take breaks when needed or work during their most productive hours, improving mental health and reducing absenteeism (Shifrin & Michel, 2022).

Adoption of flexible work schedules has also been linked to higher employee engagement, a key factor in reducing absenteeism. Employees are more likely to feel empowered and valued by their company when they have control over their work schedules (Van Der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020). Higher degrees of job satisfaction and dedication to the company can follow from this sense of autonomy. Employees who are engaged feel more of a responsibility and connection to their roles and colleagues and are less likely to miss work. Moreover, companies that support flexible schedules show a dedication to employee welfare, which might strengthen loyalty and trust. Employers can build a positive organisational culture that reduces absenteeism and supports consistent attendance by identifying and accommodating the various needs of their workforce (Ngwenya & Utete, 2023).

In addition to helping workers, flexible work schedules help organisations run more effectively. Reducing absenteeism helps companies to keep a constant degree of output and minimise disturbance of processes. Effective managers of work-life balance are more likely to be present, focused, and productive during their working hours (Shifrin & Michel, 2022). Flexible work schedules can also help companies save money by lowering the need for overtime pay or

temporary staffing to cover absent workers. When workers can work remotely or change their schedules, for instance, they are less likely to take leave for minor health problems or personal appointments, so preserving productivity and lowering the financial impact of absenteeism (Lohaus & Habermann, 2021). Furthermore, companies who provide flexible work schedules can improve their employer brand, which will attract more top talent and reduce turnover rates.

Although flexible work schedules have advantages, some issues must be resolved if we are to maximise their ability to lower absenteeism. Particularly for workers who work from home, one difficulty is the possible blurring of lines between personal and professional life (Shifrin & Michel, 2022). Without well-defined limits, workers could find it difficult to separate from their jobs, which would raise stress levels and perhaps cause burnout. Organisations must thus give direction and support to help employees create healthy work-life boundaries, including encouraging regular breaks, setting clear expectations for availability, and supporting a culture that values personal time. Furthermore, companies should make sure that flexible work schedules are applied fairly and do not cause employee isolation or inequality (Van Der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020). Regular communication, virtual team-building exercises, and opportunities for teamwork will maintain team cohesion and prevent the negative effects of remote work on employee morale.

The success of flexible work schedules in lowering absenteeism depends on good management techniques. Supporting staff members who use flexible work schedules and making sure these plans fit organisational objectives depends on managers (Ngwenya & Utete, 2023). This calls for a change from conventional management techniques stressing hours worked to a results-oriented approach stressing performance and output. Clear expectations, consistent feedback, and a culture of trust help managers to build an environment in which staff members feel free to take responsibility for their work while preserving regular attendance. Organisations should also provide tools and training to enable managers acquire the abilities to properly run a flexible workforce. Training on managing remote teams, enabling virtual communication, and handling the difficulties associated with flexible work schedules is also required. Organisations that adopt a proactive and encouraging attitude can use flexible work schedules to lower absenteeism, improve employee well-being, and enhance general performance.

2.7 The link between governance and absenteeism

Leadership plays a significant role in shaping the workplace and influencing employee behaviour, including absenteeism. Good work environments created by effective leaders with supportive and transformational leadership styles help to reduce absenteeism and increase employee engagement (Løkke, 2022). Transformational leaders inspire and motivate employees through a sense of purpose and belonging, encouraging them to support the goals of the company and to maintain regular attendance (Park et al., 2022). They accomplish this by clearly expressing a vision, offering tools and support, and honouring staff members' efforts and successes. Transformational leaders, for instance, who give regular feedback and opportunities for professional development can improve employees' job satisfaction and commitment, increasing their likelihood of being present and involved in their work (King et al., 2020). Studies show that employees who view their leaders as supportive are less likely to participate in voluntary absenteeism, demonstrating the link between attendance and leadership.

On the other hand, leaders who show toxic or authoritarian behaviour can create a negative workplace leading to increased absenteeism due to employee discontent and stress (Labrague et al., 2020). Characterised by actions including micromanagement, lack of empathy, and unfair treatment, toxic leadership can erode trust and morale, resulting in disengagement and absenteeism. Employees who feel underappreciated or mistreated by their leaders may turn to absenteeism as a coping strategy or as a means of expressing their discontent (Côté et al., 2021). Employees who experience high degrees of stress and anxiety resulting from unsupportive leadership might take more sick days or personal leave to recover from the negative effects on their mental health. This emphasises the importance of leadership behaviour in forming the work environment and underscores the need for organisations to support good leadership practices that prioritise employee well-being.

Predicting absenteeism largely depends on the quality of the relationship between an employee and their supervisor. Workers who maintain regular attendance and actively engage in their work are more likely to be supported, valued, and understood by their leaders (King et al., 2020). Supportive leaders who open lines of communication, give opportunities for professional growth, and show real concern for the welfare of their staff help to create a positive

workplace that reduces absenteeism. Leaders who support a good work-life balance, schedule flexibility, and stress management tools, for instance, help to reduce the factors that cause absenteeism (Park et al., 2022). Conversely, leaders who neglect to build trust, provide clear communication, or address employee concerns could unintentionally help to create a culture of absenteeism and disengagement. Employees who do not feel heard or valued are less likely to be dedicated to their roles and might turn to absenteeism to express their discontent (Labrague et al., 2020).

Studies show that a management chosen leadership style can directly affect staff attendance and well-being. By means of a shared vision, transformational leaders who are distinguished by their capacity to inspire and motivate employees can foster an environment of trust and respect that lowers absenteeism (Løkke, 2022). Since transformational leaders inspire autonomy, creativity, and personal growth, this leadership approach is linked to greater degrees of employee engagement. Transformational leaders encourage a feeling of purpose and fulfilment by appreciating the efforts of their staff, so inspiring regular attendance and higher commitment. Conversely, authoritarian leadership styles which depend on top-down decision-making and control can cause employee discontent, stress, and finally higher rates of absenteeism (Labrague et al., 2020). This implies that companies trying to lower absenteeism have to take into account how leadership styles affect employee behaviour and endeavour to build a leadership culture supporting confidence, respect, and support.

Dealing with absenteeism in companies depends on the growth of leaders. Programmes for developing strong leadership skills can provide managers with the tools they need to create a positive work environment and minimise absenteeism (Côté et al., 2021). Strong relationships with employees depend on managers' emotional intelligence, communication skills, and conflict resolution techniques all of which can be cultivated through leadership development programmes. Organisations should foster a leadership culture that values empathy, inclusivity, and teamwork to help staff members feel supported and driven to maintain regular attendance (Park et al., 2022). Moreover, initiatives for leadership development can underscore the importance of identifying and fixing the early indicators of disengagement, enabling managers to support staff members who might be prone to absenteeism by intervening early.

Organisations that want to maintain the positive relationship between leadership and absenteeism must create a culture of continuous development and constructive criticism.

Frequent feedback systems, including employee surveys and performance reviews, help leaders to understand employee views and areas of development (Løkke, 2022). Leaders that actively seek and react to employee comments show their dedication to building a friendly workplace and addressing the elements linked to absenteeism. To provide an example for their teams, companies should also inspire leaders to practise healthy habits including stress management and activities that foster personal growth. Leaders who prioritise their well-being and work-life balance send a message to staff members that these elements are valued, helping to lower the stigma around taking time off for self-care and promote a better approach to attendance (King et al., 2020). Organisations can create an environment that lowers absenteeism and improves general employee well-being and productivity by means of a mix of good leadership styles, continuous development, and a culture of support.

2.8 Organisational culture and the link with absenteeism

Employee behaviour, including absenteeism, is influenced by workplace culture, that is, the set of shared values, beliefs, and standards within an organisation. Emphasising employee well-being, recognition, and inclusivity, a positive workplace culture can help to create an environment in which staff members feel valued, supported, and motivated to attend and contribute consistently (Saks, 2022). Employees who believe their contributions are valued and that they belong to a community that supports their personal and professional development are more likely to show loyalty and allegiance to the company (Clack, 2021). This feeling of value motivates staff members to attend work consistently and actively help the company to grow. Organisations that invest in developing a positive culture by supporting values like respect, cooperation, and honest communication can lower absenteeism and raise employee engagement (Côté et al., 2021).

On the other hand, a negative workplace culture marked by great stress, inadequate support, poor communication, and low morale can result in increased absenteeism. Employees who work in such surroundings sometimes suffer from burnout, discontent, and disengagement, which can manifest in regular absences (Miraglia & Johns, 2020). Research indicates that workers who feel overworked, underappreciated, or unsupported are more likely to use unscheduled leave as a coping mechanism (Birioukov, 2020). In companies where a culture of excessive working hours is common and staff members lack sufficient tools or support, the resulting stress and burnout can cause absenteeism as staff members seek time away from the

workplace to recover. Moreover, destructive work environments resulting from toxic corporate cultures that accept or even encourage practices including bullying, discrimination, and favouritism might aggravate absenteeism rates. Workers in such environments could avoid their jobs in order to preserve their mental and emotional health, so affecting the general performance of the company (Labrague et al., 2020).

Workplace culture also shapes the standards and attitudes towards absenteeism inside a company. Absence may be subtly accepted or disregarded in some organisational cultures, which would cause staff members to believe that taking unscheduled leave is a reasonable action (Birioukov, 2020). If absences have no major repercussions, this tolerance can establish a standard in which workers feel less obliged to maintain regular attendance. On the other hand, absenteeism rates are usually lower in societies where attendance is clearly valued and employees are actively appreciated for their commitment and contributions (Ngwenya & Utete, 2023). Employees are more likely to take responsibility for their attendance when companies create a culture that emphasises its importance and highlights the impact of absenteeism on team dynamics and overall performance. Organisations should thus find a balance between honouring employees' legitimate needs for time off and encouraging attendance to make sure that policies do not become unduly strict or punitive, which could cause additional absenteeism and disengagement (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021).

Establishing a good work culture that reduces absenteeism means carrying out projects aiming at meeting employees' holistic needs. Employee recognition programmes, for example, can encourage positive behaviour and reduce absenteeism (Budrienė & Diskienė, 2020). Acknowledging and rewarding staff members for their regular attendance, diligence, and effort will help to raise morale and inspire them to remain loyal to the company. Likewise, wellness programmes aimed at both physical and psychological health can help to create a better workplace and reduce absenteeism. Organisations can help workers control stress and preserve their well-being by offering tools including mental health support, exercise programmes, and flexible work schedules, thereby reducing the levels of absenteeism (Van Der Feltz-Cornelis et al., 2020). Building a culture of trust and openness also depends on open lines of communication, encouraging staff members to express their concerns and offer feedback. Employees who feel heard and valued are more likely to be involved in their work..

Absenteeism can also be significantly influenced by an inclusive work environment that celebrates diversity and advances fairness. Workers who feel included and valued regardless of their background, gender, or identity are more likely to be involved and dedicated to their company (Clack, 2021). Inclusivity creates psychological safety where employees feel free to be themselves and share their ideas without fear of rejection or reprisals. This feeling of safety can help to lower stress and anxiety, enhancing mental health and reducing absenteeism. On the other hand, an organisation devoid of inclusivity that supports prejudice or discrimination can cause employees to feel stressed, isolated, or alienated, so increasing the rates of absenteeism (Miraglia & Johns, 2021). Organisations that actively seek to establish an inclusive culture by means of diversity and inclusion programmes, equal opportunities, and addressing systematic bias will build a more involved workforce with reduced absenteeism rates.

Addressing absenteeism in the workplace calls for a holistic strategy including policies, procedures, and leadership style. Shaping and reinforcing workplace culture depends largely on leaders. Positive behaviour, empathy, and active support of employee well-being by leaders help to build a culture of care and respect that deters absenteeism (Saks, 2022). Leaders who prioritise work-life balance, support open communication, and assist staff members in overcoming personal challenges, for instance, show that the company values the well-being of its employees. This then promotes a culture of mutual respect and trust whereby staff members are driven to help the company and maintain regular attendance. Furthermore, organisational policies supporting a constructive culture such as flexible work schedules, fair leave policies, and clear communication on attendance expectations can reinforce the importance of attendance while so respecting employees' needs for balance and well-being (Ngwenya & Utete, 2023). Organisations can significantly lower absenteeism and encourage a more involved and productive workforce by using a comprehensive strategy covering the many facets of workplace culture.

2.9 Impact of job satisfaction on absenteeism

Absenteeism is also influenced by job satisfaction, which is the degree of fulfilment and contentment employees experience with their work and surroundings. While dissatisfaction can result in higher absenteeism, high degrees of job satisfaction are usually linked with positive workplace behaviours including regular attendance (Labrague et al., 2020). Reduced

absenteeism rates follow from employees who are more likely to be engaged, motivated, and committed to their roles when they are happy with their jobs. Work-life balance, job security, respect, and the nature of the work itself all contribute to satisfaction. Companies that give these top priority and design a workplace that promotes satisfaction should anticipate lower absenteeism and better general performance (Ali & Anwar, 2021).

Studies of job satisfaction have found that there is a strong correlation between an employee's regular attendance at work and their level of job satisfaction. For example, employees whose work is significant and stimulating are seen to be motivated and connected, which lowers absenteeism (Kalogiannidis, 2021). On the other hand, monotonous, stressful, or work that is too demanding can lead to discontent time away from work to manage burnout or stress (Sánchez-Gómez et al., 2021). This behaviour can start a pattern of repeated absenteeism, leading to further disengagement and reducing job performance. Thus, companies have to solve the underlying reasons of job discontent by means of meaningful work, opportunities for professional development, and a conducive work environment fostering employee well-being and satisfaction.

The interaction between workers and their managers is also quite important for job satisfaction. The nature of this relationship can have a significant effect on job satisfaction and hence absenteeism rates. Positive relationships marked by openness, respect, and trust can improve job satisfaction and lower absenteeism (Park et al., 2022). Workers who feel appreciated by their managers are less likely to be absent and more likely to be content with their employment. Conversely, bad managerial practices including unfair treatment, micromanagement, and lack of support might cause job discontent and higher absenteeism rates (Côté et al., 2021). Leadership development initiatives should be viewed as investments by organisations since they equip managers with the tools to establish strong relationships with their teams, provide helpful feedback, and create a workplace environment that enhances job satisfaction.

Another important determinant linking job satisfaction and absenteeism is work-life balance. According to Shifrin and Michel (2022), employees who manage their personal lives and careers are more likely to be content with their jobs and maintain consistent attendance. By allowing workers to manage their personal obligations without neglecting their work duties, flexible work schedules including telecommuting, flexible hours, and compressed workweeks can improve job satisfaction. Organisations can lower the stress and burnout related to strict

work schedules by allowing flexibility, increasing job satisfaction and reducing absenteeism (Ngwenya & Utete, 2023). Still, achieving work-life balance calls for more than just flexible work schedules. Organisations also have to create a culture that values workers' personal time and motivates them to relax and take breaks to guarantee continued job satisfaction and attendance.

The appreciation and rewards that recognise employees' work are also closely related to job satisfaction. Workers who feel appreciated for their efforts are more likely to be satisfied with their work, which may help to lower absenteeism (Manzoor et al., 2021). Recognition can take the form of compliments from managers, medals, bonuses, and opportunities for professional development. Employees who feel their efforts are appreciated are more driven to maintain consistent attendance and continue supporting the company. On the other hand, a lack of appreciation and rewards might lead to employees feeling undervalued and demotivated, so raising the possibility of absenteeism among those who feel less compelled to attend work regularly (Clack, 201). Companies should implement comprehensive recognition initiatives that celebrate staff successes and promote gratitude to increase job satisfaction and reduce absenteeism.

2.10 Understanding quiet quitting and presenteeism

Particularly through actions such as quiet quitting and presenteeism, which challenge conventional ideas of absenteeism, in recent years the workplace has seen a shift in how employee disengagement is expressed. Although historically absenteeism has been defined as the physical absence of employees from the workplace, quiet quitting and presenteeism bring more subtle but equally significant forms of disengagement. While presenteeism refers to employees being physically present at work but not fully productive due of events like stress, illness, or burnout, quiet quitting describes employees doing the bare minimum in their roles, withdrawing from any type of extra effort or emotional commitment (Mone & London, 2018). Though less obvious than absenteeism, these actions can significantly affect organisational performance, reducing productivity, decreasing morale, and increasing operating expenses (Ngwenya & Utete, 2023). Both practices express the deeper problem of employee disengagement, which usually results from lack of work-life balance, poor leadership, or a toxic workplace culture (Nienaber & Martins, 2020). Examining the relationship between these contemporary trends and absenteeism makes it clear that companies have to create more

comprehensive plans to solve the underlying causes of disengagement and raise general employee performance and well-being (Shifrin & Michel, 2022).

Particularly post-pandemic, the term "quiet quitting" has become a hotly debated phenomenon in workplace conversation as workers rethink their connection with their jobs. Quiet quitting differs from conventional quitting as it does not involve a formal job resignation. Employees stay in their roles, but they avoid any activity beyond the minimum standards. Mone and London (2018) claim that employee engagement is a major determinant of organisational performance; therefore, a lack of engagement as seen in quiet quitting represents a silent withdrawal from organisational commitment. Quiet quitting is a more passive kind of disengagement in which workers choose to mentally detach rather than openly criticise their workplace.

Quiet quitting can be connected to elements including burnout, lack of recognition, ineffective management, or employee values that are misaligned with organisational goals. Ngwenya and Utete (2023) emphasise that maintaining a work-life balance is crucial for reducing absenteeism, but it can also help to minimise quiet quitting. Employees who feel overburdened or underappreciated are more likely to withdraw into this lowest level of participation. Quiet quitting is a trend partly in response to growing discontent with the "hustle culture" that values overworking. Workers may still arrive at work, but they emotionally and psychologically disengage, so fostering presenteeism in the workplace.

Recognised as a silent but significant drain on organisational resources is presenteeism, that is, employees physically present at work but not functioning productively due to illness, stress, or disengagement. Presenteeism is more difficult to identify than absenteeism, in which an employee's absence is clear and measurable. Shifrin and Michel (2022) claim that presenteeism significantly affects organisational health since it reduces output while still preserving the appearance of attendance and involvement.

One can ascribe the emergence of presenteeism to several causes. For example, the growing reliance on remote work has blurred the lines between personal life and professional obligations, increasing burnout and presenteeism (Shifrin & Michel, 2022). Workers feel the pressure to be always available, even if they are not physically or mentally fit to participate fully. Presenteeism, where workers show up in body but not in spirit, can be considered as a

counterpart to quiet quitting. Both practices depict what Nienaber and Martins (2020) report as a drop in general organisational effectiveness brought on by disengaged workers.

Although quiet quitting and presenteeism are less obvious forms of absenteeism, absenteeism has always been understood as the physical absence of employees from the workplace. The binary concept of presence and absence is challenged by the practices in which an employee can be physically present but emotionally and psychologically disengaged, so affecting organisational performance in same ways as conventional absence. Though less obvious, quiet quitting and presenteeism remove the employee's whole contribution to their job, so causing absenteeism. Although they might not call in sick, quiet quitters may lack enthusiasm and involvement, which would lower their productivity, much as absenteeism does. Quiet quitting can thus be regarded as a type of passive absenteeism, in which the worker is "absent" in terms of their output and participation in the goal of the company.

Conversely, presenteeism is a more active manifestation of hidden absenteeism. As Park et al. (2022) note, although employees still satisfy the minimum criteria of being physically present, presenteeism is sometimes overlooked. Still, the cost of presenteeism can be just as great if not more than that of regular absenteeism. Illness, stress, or disengagement among employees who are not operating at their full capacity can lead to productivity losses that affect the entire company and result in inefficiencies that are difficult to measure (Mone & London, 2018).

Both presenteeism and quiet quitting produce an illusion of employee attendance devoid of related productivity. For companies that monitor not only employees' physical presence but also their involvement and effectiveness while at work, this kind of absenteeism poses fresh difficulties. As Saks (2022) explains, employee engagement is crucial in making sure workers not only arrive but also perform to their best. Quiet quitting and presenteeism draw attention to companies' need to change their engagement policies and employee well-being programmes to stop these covert types of absenteeism.

Often stemming from organisational culture, leadership, and personal well-being, several elements drive both quiet quitting and presenteeism. One clear factor causing disengagement is inadequate leadership. Nienaber and Martins (2020) stress the importance of leadership in creating an environment either encouraging or discouraging employee involvement. Employees who feel underappreciated in the absence of transformational and supportive

leadership could become disengaged and start quiet quitting. Likewise, leadership that puts physical presence above actual production can aggravate presenteeism.

Workplace culture is also a key factor. An environment ready for quiet quitting can result from a society that supports overworking, presenteeism, and underappreciation of employee efforts. Workers may be driven to be physically present, but they are more likely to mentally withdraw (Mone & London, 2018) without the natural drive to completely engage with their work. Moreover, workers who believe they have to stay at their jobs despite health problems or personal challenges out of concern of job loss or consequences are more likely to practise presenteeism, lowering productivity and workplace morale (Shifrin & Michel, 2022).

Burnout is another significant factor contributing to both phenomena. The boundaries between personal and professional life have grown increasingly blurred, especially as remote work has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Ngwenya and Utete (2023) highlight, many workers find great difficulty in striking work-life balance. Individuals who struggle to keep a good balance are more likely to either quit quietly or engage in presenteeism. Dealing with the underlying reasons of presenteeism and quiet quitting calls for a comprehensive strategy that gives employee involvement, well-being, and supportive leadership first priority. Saks (2022) underlines the need of implementing human resource management strategies that underline employees' individual value. Whether through flexible work schedules, professional development chances, or health and wellness programmes, organisations have to create settings that encourage participation by seeing and meeting the needs of their employees.

Flexible work schedules have been shown to dramatically decrease incidences of presenteeism and absenteeism. According to Shifrin and Michel (2022), granting employees greater autonomy over their work schedules enables them to manage their personal and professional life more effectively. Providing compressed workweeks, flexible hours, or remote work choices can help lower the pressures driving burnout and disengagement. Workers who feel free to balance their personal and professional obligations are more likely to stay involved and avoid the trap of presenteeism or quiet quitting.

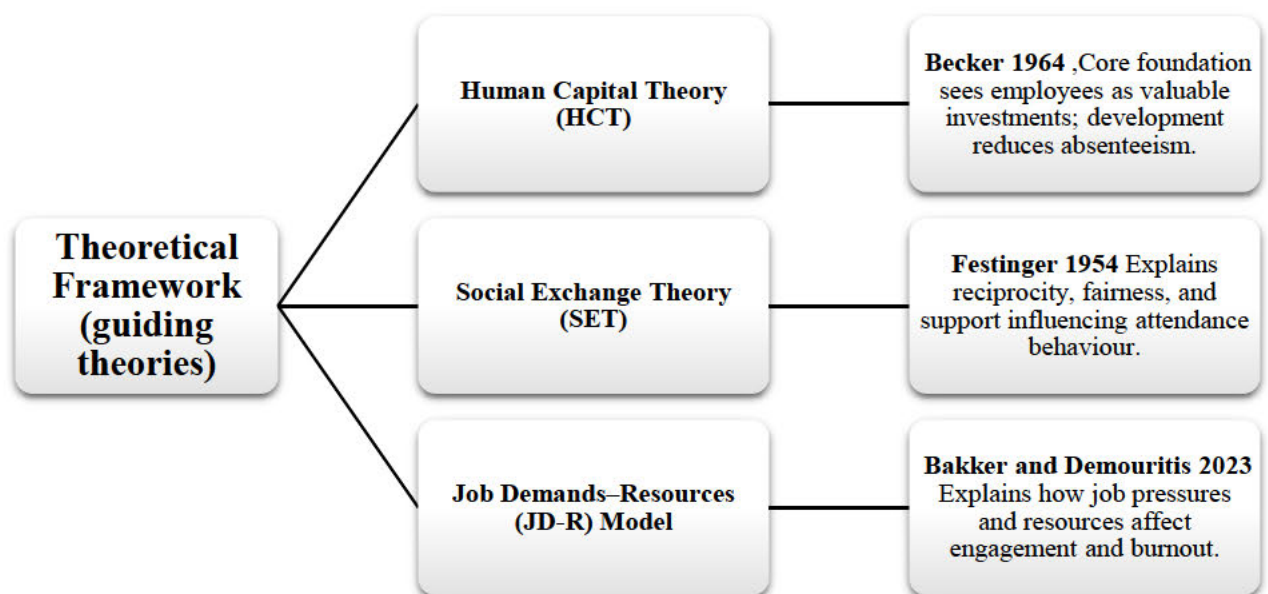
Reducing these problems also depends on good leadership. As Park et al. (2022) observe, transformational leaders improve employee commitment and engagement. Leaders who inspire and motivate their teams, offer clear communication, and acknowledge staff efforts help to create an engaged culture, thereby lowering the possibility of quiet quitting. By motivating

staff members to take care of their health and well-being free from concern for consequences, supportive leadership can similarly lower presenteeism.

Encouraging a culture of appreciation and reward is vital. Employees who feel appreciated for their work are more likely to stay involved and less likely to participate in presenteeism or quiet quitting (Mone & London, 2018). Systems should honour not only physical presence but also contributions and production. Organisations can build a culture that discourages disengagement and promotes complete participation by appreciating the efforts of staff members who surpass expectations.

Figure 2.1: Theoretical Framework Diagram illustrates the guiding theories of this study on employee absenteeism and workplace engagement. It integrates the Human Capital Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Job Demands–Resources Model to explain how employee value, organisational support, and work conditions influence attendance and engagement

Figure 2:1Theoretical Framework diagram



Source: Own

Chapter Three: Research methodology

3.1 Research design

The design of the research follows the Saunders research onion model (Saunders, 2009) for this study on absenteeism, quiet quitting, and presenteeism. From the general research philosophy to the particular data collecting methods, this model directs the methodological decisions and layers of design choices to guarantee a systematic and thorough investigation of the research question. Following the research onion helps the study gently negotiate the philosophical positions, methodological decisions, and approaches suitable for revealing the underlying causes and dynamics of employee disengagement in the workplace.

3.2 Research philosophy

Qualitative research is grounded in interpretivist traditions; Denzin and Lincoln (2008;2011) are recognised as key contributors. They describe qualitative inquiry as an activity that studies phenomena in their natural settings and interprets them through the meanings people assign to their experiences. The research onion outermost layer covers research philosophy. The interpretivist philosophy is chosen for this study since it affords top priority to knowledge of personal subjective experiences and viewpoints (Saunders, 2009). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) emphasise that qualitative inquiry values subjectivity and reflexivity, acknowledging the role of the researcher in interpreting meaning. In this study, the researcher engages as both interpreter and analyst, exploring the lived experiences of managers to uncover the personal and organisational factors driving absenteeism. Reflexivity ensures awareness of positionality and enhances the credibility of the study while the interpretivist paradigm supports an in-depth understanding of how engagement influences attendance behaviour.

Similarly, Guba and Lincoln (1994) advance the constructivist view that reality is co-constructed between researcher and participant. This perspective underpins the current study's design, recognising that managers experiences of absenteeism and engagement vary according to context, role, and perception. Through open-ended interviews, the study captures multiple realities and interpretations, revealing how organisational culture, communication, and support structures shape workplace engagement. The constructivist paradigm thus enables the discovery of diverse viewpoints that quantitative methods may overlook.

Unlike positivist theories' dependence on objective, measurable facts, interpretivism respects the complex, multifarious character of human behaviour, especially in organisational environments. This approach fits the emphasis of the research on absenteeism and disengagement since these events are highly personal and contextual and affected by several individual and organisational elements including leadership, culture, and personal well-being. Interpretivism asks managers and staff members to investigate how they view their experiences with absenteeism, quiet quitting, and presenteeism, so enabling a better knowledge of the social and psychological dynamics leading to these problems.

3.3 Research approach

The study adopts an inductive approach, consistent with its qualitative philosophical foundations, enabling patterns and themes to emerge directly from the data rather than imposing predetermined categories (Thomas, 2006). This data-driven process facilitates the identification of underlying causes and meanings related to absenteeism, ensuring the findings authentically reflect employees' perspectives. Moving from initial codes to categories and broader themes strengthens theoretical understanding of absenteeism and engagement within Hualamin's manufacturing context, grounding the study in the qualitative tradition advocated by Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Guba and Lincoln (1994).

Inductive reasoning, as outlined by Saunders (2009), involves deriving broader theoretical insights from observed data rather than testing pre-existing hypotheses. This approach is particularly suited to exploring complex workplace phenomena such as absenteeism, quiet quitting, and presenteeism, allowing the research to remain open to new interpretations and emerging themes drawn directly from participants' lived experiences.

The research strategy (in this instance a case study) forms the next level. In qualitative research, case studies are sometimes used when the objective is to acquire a thorough, contextualised knowledge of a certain phenomenon within its natural environment (Saunders, 2009). The case study method helps to investigate modern forms of absenteeism, quiet quitting and presenteeism within a particular organisational setting. Examining how these problems manifest in the workplace, how managers view them, and how they affect organisational performance calls for this kind of approach. The case study approach offers the depth and

contextual richness needed to capture the underlying, subtle dynamics of employee disengagement which quantitative techniques might miss.

Within the strategy, the research adopts a mono-method qualitative design, with a focus on semi-structured interviews as the main data collecting method. The qualitative approach is selected since it enables a thorough investigation of participants' lived experiences, offering insights on the psychological, organisational, and personal elements causing absenteeism (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research depends on rich, detailed narratives that expose the subjective meanings and interpretations people attach to their events rather than numerical data. In this situation, semi-structured interviews are especially suitable since they let participants freely communicate their ideas, emotions, and experiences while still directing the discussion towards important themes pertinent to the research goals.

The study has a cross-sectional time horizon; where data was gathered at one point in time (Saunders, 2009). This period from December 02, 2024, to December 19, 2024 was chosen since the study intends to capture, in the chosen organisational environment, a snapshot of the present state of absenteeism, quiet quitting, and presenteeism. Although absenteeism and engagement are events that change with time, a cross-sectional study allows for the examination of the immediate causes and effects, so offering important information that could guide organisational policies for short to medium term resolution of these problems.

The innermost level of the research onion reviews the methods of data collecting and analysis. The main method of data collection for the study is semi-structured interviews. For this study, semi-structured interviews are perfect since they allow participants the freedom to raise fresh subjects and expand on their experiences while balancing guided questions (Kostere & Kostere, 201). Open-ended questions meant to probe important themes including employee engagement, leadership, job satisfaction, workplace culture, and personal challenges all relevant to understanding absenteeism and its contemporary forms are part of the interview guide. Rich, detailed data can be captured using this method, which can then be thematically examined to spot trends, underlying causes of absenteeism, and so forth.

The themes emerged through the analysis of the interview transcripts, which assisted in organising the qualitative information acquired from the interviews. Considering that this study

is inductive, topical analysis is ideally suited for spotting and examining trends in data (Saunders, 2009). Thematic coding of the data allows a better understanding of the elements causing quiet quitting, presenteeism, and absenteeism in the organisational setting. This approach also helps the researcher to remain receptive to fresh ideas that might develop during the data collecting process, so ensuring that the complexity of the events is completely caught.

3.4 Target population

A population is a whole set of individuals or occurrences (Creswell, 2013). According to Bhattacharjee (2012), a target population is any entity having particular qualities that an individual wants to examine, such as a person, a group, an organisation, or an object from which they want to get scientific findings. In scientific jargon, a unit of analysis is another term for a target population. To get appropriate participants, researchers must choose a study population (Kumar, 2018).

The target population was the finishing production departments within the rolled products division of Hulammin. The three core departments targeted were Coil Coating, Coil Processing, and Plate Plant. The target population constituted 38 frontline management employees, and thus, the sample size comprised 18 frontline managers (Area Coordinators, Shift leaders, and Maintenance Coordinators) who are at various levels.

3.5 Sampling method

The eighteen participants for the semi-structured interviews were chosen using a purposive sampling technique. Participant selection was based on the role of front-line managers, length of tenure within the company and tenure in the management role, and the department which constituted the criteria for participant choice. Often used in qualitative research, purposeful sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that identifies participants who may provide rich, relevant data on a given topic (Campbell et al., 2020). This approach was selected since it enables the process to deliberately choose participants depending on particular criteria, so ensuring that those engaged in the study have direct experience with absenteeism, as managers handling absenteeism in their teams. Purposive sampling proved especially helpful in the framework of this study in helping to identify individuals who could offer in-depth analysis of the personal, organisational, and leadership-related elements causing absenteeism.

These criteria were crucial for capturing a variety of viewpoints on absenteeism since different organisational environments would cause absenteeism to show differently. Managers were chosen for their capacity to offer insights on absenteeism from an organisational and leadership standpoint, including how absenteeism is controlled and what policies are in place to minimise its impact. Conversely, they were chosen to share their own experiences, including elements influencing employees to be present for work or take time off. This variety was essential for comprehending absenteeism from several angles since it let the study record the experiences of managers who are directly impacted by the employees' absenteeism as well as their role in managing it (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020).

While statistical generalisability is not the aim of qualitative research but rather, a deep, contextualised knowledge of the research phenomenon, the purposive sampling approach fits this goal (Campbell et al., 2020). The aim of this study was to investigate the several dimensions of absenteeism, which comprise organisational elements (such as leadership practices, workplace culture, and absenteeism policies) and personal elements (such as health, family obligations, and job satisfaction). Choosing participants with direct knowledge in these domains allows the study to concentrate on obtaining comprehensive, complex data that would offer insightful analysis of the elements causing absenteeism inside the company.

3.6 Sampling size

With 18 participants, the sample size was considered suitable for reaching data saturation, a fundamental factor in qualitative research. When no fresh themes or insights arise from extra interviews, data saturation occurs, that is, the data gathered is enough to completely investigate the research topic (Campbell et al., 2020). The choice of 18 participants in this study guaranteed a rich, varied data set and made a reasonable number of in-depth interviews possible. While qualitative research usually has smaller sample sizes than quantitative research, the richness of the data gathered from semi-structured interviews offsets this difference of participants. This is so because qualitative research aims to expose the complex, sometimes hidden elements causing events like absenteeism by concentrating on depth rather than breadth. The selection of participants is based on a specific inclusion criteria, including permanent employment status, a minimum of one year of service, and active involvement in core manufacturing operations. This criterion ensured that only individuals with adequate exposure to organisational processes,

attendance management, and dynamics related to engagement were included in the study. Temporary employees and those with less than one year of service are excluded to maintain the reliability and relevance of the data. The sample consisted of fifteen male and three female participants that reflects the broader gender gap within the company, where male employees traditionally dominate operational and technical roles due to the physically intensive and industrial nature of the work environment. The gender imbalance mirrors the demographic reality of the manufacturing workforce. Through the inclusion of female participants, this has provided a valuable perspective on how engagement practices and absenteeism dynamics may differ across gender lines.

Moreover, the method of purposeful sampling guaranteed that the study included people with a variety of backgrounds and points of view, which was vital for comprehending the several elements affecting absenteeism in the company. ~~For instance, the experiences of a long-serving manager in a leadership capacity are probably different from those of a younger employee who might encounter different difficulties regarding job satisfaction or involvement.~~ The study was able to investigate how absenteeism is seen and experienced throughout the finishing production departments by guaranteeing diversity in job roles and tenure. This diversity also helped to draw attention to any systematic problems including inconsistent leadership practices or inadequate absenteeism policies that might cause absenteeism (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020).

Together with a well-chosen sample of eighteen participants, the purposive sampling technique guaranteed that the study gathered rich, detailed information on the elements causing absenteeism. This strategy was crucial for understanding the complexity of absenteeism in the company and for offering ideas that might guide next actions meant to decrease absenteeism and enhance organisational performance. Together with the use of semi-structured interviews, the choice of participants with direct experience in absenteeism gave the study a strong basis for investigating the complex, multifarious aspect of absenteeism in the workplace.

3.7 Data collection instruments

On 25 November 2024, a pilot study was conducted to ensure the rigour and clarity of the interview process. to the pilot study tested the feasibility and effectiveness of the interview protocol to provide an opportunity to refine data collection tools as needed. According to

Saunders et al. (2012), a pilot study can help researchers identify areas of ambiguity or bias before the main study begins.

A validation of the interview protocol was conducted as part of the pilot study in this case. A sample of two shift leaders was selected based on their similarity to the intended target audience. They were approached verbally and provided with an informed consent form in which they agreed to participate in the study. For reasons of validity, these individuals were not included in the final sample. Participants were informed that the pilot test would not contribute directly to the final dataset. The ethical protocols were observed, including informed consent and the use of pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended, exploratory questions designed to elicit in-depth insights while allowing for clarification and elaboration. As a result of the pilot interviews, it was found that the questions were well understood and relevant. In addition to the topics being appropriate, participants said that the structure allowed for meaningful discussion. Using an open-ended question format allowed the process to explore responses in greater depth, which enhanced the richness of the collected data.

The pilot also allowed for a preliminary assessment of interview timing, flow, and potential response patterns. This early engagement revealed that clarity around specific terms, particularly those relating to generational engagement and mentoring versus coaching, could be sharpened in the literature and the analysis. However, no significant changes to the interview questions were necessary. This outcome reinforced confidence in the reliability of the instruments and their alignment with the objectives of this study.

Additionally, conducting the pilot study gave valuable insights into the perceptions of absenteeism and engagement among different generations. For instance, the shift leaders highlighted absenteeism patterns linked to stress and workload distribution and raised concerns about work-life balance and communication. These observations affirmed the study's relevance and the need to explore the topic. Ultimately, the pilot study contributed meaningfully to refining the research process. It ensured that the interview questions were clear, contextually appropriate, and capable of eliciting the depth of insight needed for this study. It also reinforced the importance of ethical sensitivity, particularly when navigating discussions around employee absenteeism and workplace engagement.

For the interviews with the main study participants, the Microsoft Teams platform was used for data collection. All participants received a call requesting a meeting for the study. The participants received letters asking for their consent. Given the size of the production facility, it was useful to use Microsoft Teams to schedule meetings with participants to collect data. In order to obtain their thoughts and views, participants took part in semi-structured interviews as part of the interview protocol for interviews. The main study interviews were held over three weeks, from December 02, 2024, to December 19, 2024. For a more accurate data analysis, interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams with the consent of the participants. Each participant was given the Informed Consent form stating that their replies would be kept confidential.

A semi-structured interview guide is the main tool used in data collection for this study. An indispensable instrument in qualitative research, semi-structured interviews enable in-depth investigation of participants' experiences and points of view. Their adaptable framework helps to uncover rich, complex data (Taherdoost, 2021). These semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewer to cover important themes across all of the participants while allowing space for free-will, natural conversation. In a research study on absenteeism, where the causes of employee absences can be several and complicated involving personal, organisational, and socio-cultural aspects, this adaptability is especially crucial.

The interview guide was developed with a set of open-ended questions meant to elicit comprehensive answers on many facets of absenteeism. The guide addresses key themes including employee engagement, leadership styles, corporate culture, and personal causes of absenteeism. For instance, "Can you describe how leadership practices in your department influence employee attendance?" asks participants to consider how their contacts with management affect their choice to arrive for work or take time off. "What are the main reasons your subordinates might be absent from work?" another inquiry asks participants to offer insights into both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism, so stressing elements including health, family obligations, job satisfaction, and workplace stress (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). This approach enables the study to explore the underlying causes of absenteeism, moving beyond surface-level explanations to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this phenomenon.

Deeper insights depend on the interviewer asking follow-up questions, thus the semi-structured approach allows for this opportunity. If a participant notes stress as a contributing factor to absenteeism, for example, the interviewer might probe more by asking, "Can you explain what aspects of your work cause you the most stress?" Alternatively, "How do you think the company might help reduce this stress?" This method helps the researcher to investigate unanticipated subjects that surface during the conversation, so ensuring that the data gathered is thorough and fairly representative of the participants' lived experiences. Studies where knowledge of the subjective experiences of individuals is crucial are especially suited to semi-structured interviews since they allow the direction of the conversation to be changed depending on the responses of the participant (Kostere & Kostere, 2021).

The use of semi-structured interviews is also beneficial since they preserve depth while lowering the possibility of interviewer prejudice. Although the open-ended character of the questions lets participants freely express their opinions, the structure of the interview guide guarantees that important themes are always covered. This approach provides a chance to investigate how absenteeism is seen and handled at several levels of the company, so complementing the study objective to comprehend absenteeism from both an employee and managerial standpoint (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020). While still keeping the main goals of the research, the capacity to modify the questioning process in real-time, depending on the responses of the participants guarantees that the data acquired is rich and reflects the complexity of absenteeism.

3.8 Data analysis

The semi-structured interview data were examined using thematic analysis, a commonly used technique in qualitative research, which methodically identifies and investigates trends or themes in the data. The process offers a flexible and thorough method for identifying, evaluating, and presenting the main themes of absenteeism, employee engagement, leadership styles, and workplace culture. The study was able to identify both explicit and implicit themes by means of thematic analysis, thus providing a whole picture of the elements influencing absenteeism in the organisational setting (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). A diagram of the themes is depicted in Figure 3.1, which is a diagrammatic representation of the thematic analysis.

Transcription of the interview recordings started the data analysis process. Particularly in the participants' expressions, tone, and emphasis, every interview was transcribed verbatim to guarantee that no detail was lost. In qualitative research, this first transcription phase is essential since it lets the researcher really engage with the data and begin to notice recurrent concepts or trends (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). To grasp the data fully, the researcher went over the transcripts several times following transcription. In thematic analysis, this phase of familiarisation is especially important, providing the foundation for more exact coding.

The data was then coded, in which case important phrases, ideas, and concepts were found and methodically labelled. Because it divides the data into meaningful chunks that can be arranged under more general themes, coding is a fundamental component of thematic analysis. In this study, initial coding included underlining words or phrases that reflected significant elements of absenteeism, such as leadership support, job satisfaction, health issues, and workplace culture (Verma et al., 2024). Then, codes were arranged according to their relationships and similarities to create more general themes. Under the theme of "leadership influence on absenteeism," codes pertaining to "feeling supported by management" and "trust in leadership," for instance, were categorised as coding was iterative, that is, the researcher kept improving the codes and themes as more interviews were examined.

Once the first codes were found, the researcher identified more general themes capturing the main points of the participants' expression. These issues gave a thorough grasp of how various personal and organisational elements affected absence. Important themes that surfaced were the part leadership plays in determining absenteeism, the impact of workplace culture on attendance, the need for employee engagement, and personal elements, including health and family obligations, influencing absenteeism. One recurring pattern, for example, was that workers who felt their leaders were supportive were more likely to keep regular attendance; those who felt unsupported or micromanaged reported higher absenteeism rates. This result is in line with the body of current research, which emphasises the important influence of leadership styles on employee attendance and behaviour (Løkke, 2022).

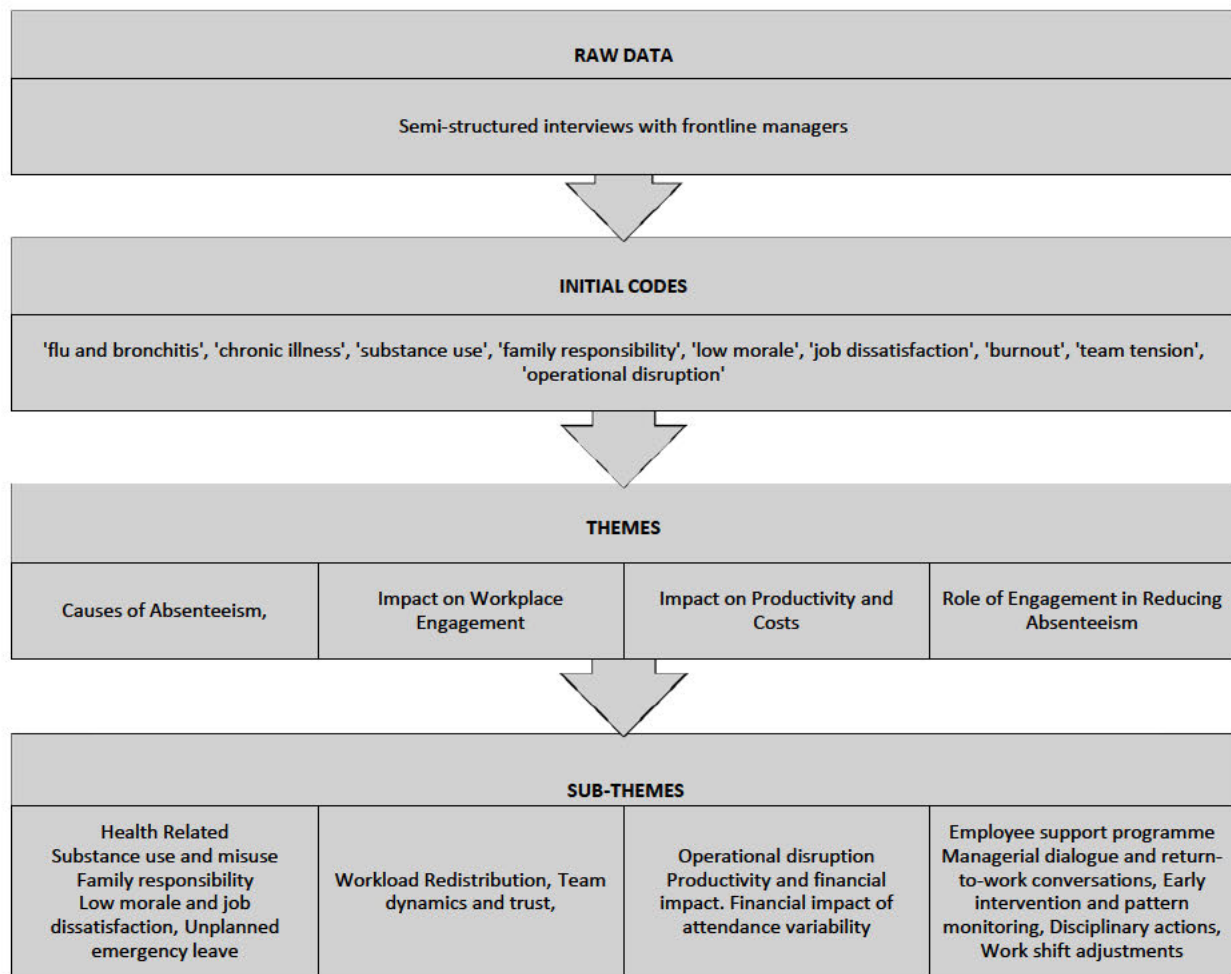
The influence of workplace culture on absenteeism became yet another crucial theme that surfaced. Participants often talked about how their choice to visit or avoid their place of employment was affected by the positive or negative surroundings. Those who said their workplace was inclusive and supportive, for instance, reported lower absenteeism; those who

mentioned high levels of stress, poor communication, or inadequate recognition were more likely to take time off. This theme underlined the need of creating a good work environment that supports employee well-being and lowers the demand for absenteeism by means of which Pandey & Pandey, 2021 .The thematic study made it possible to investigate in great depth how organisational policies and personal experiences interact to affect absenteeism, so offering insightful information on how companies might handle these problems holistically.

This study is focused especially on the subtle ways in which participants expressed their experiences to make sure the themes caught the whole range of absenteeism in the workplace. The iterative coding and theme development ensured that the results were thorough and quite faithfully reflecting the viewpoints of the participants. Combining the voices of managers allowed the thematic study to present a comprehensive picture of absenteeism, stressing the part played by both systematic elements and individual agency in forming attendance trends.

Figure 3:1 provides a visual representation of the thematic analysis conducted in this study on employee absenteeism and its impact on workplace engagement. This diagram illustrates the key themes and subthemes that emerged from the data, showing how the causes, effects, and organisational responses to absenteeism interact to influence overall employee engagement and productivity.

Figure 3:2 Diagrammatical representation of the thematic analysis



Source: Own

3.9 Validity, reliability and trustworthiness

The validity and reliability of the research method must be guaranteed for any qualitative study to be considered credible. In qualitative research, validity relates to the accuracy and veracity of the findings, whereas reliability reflects the consistency and reproducibility of the research methods (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Maintaining high standards of validity and reliability is crucial for guaranteeing that the results are reliable and can be boldly applied in pertinent settings even if qualitative research does not aim for generalisability in the same way as quantitative research does.

Carefully developed based on a comprehensive literature review on absenteeism, employee engagement, leadership practices and work culture, this semi-structured interview guide helped to enhance the validity of the study. This guaranteed that the questions posed during the

interviews addressed the main concerns found in the body of current knowledge. Grounding the interview questions in existing research helped the study to make sure the data gathered matched the main themes of absenteeism and associated causes (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). Moreover, the open-ended character of the questions let participants express their own experiences in their own words, so strengthening the authenticity of the data and raising the possibility that the results would fairly represent the participants' actual experiences and viewpoints.

Another tactic meant to improve the validity of the research was member checking. Participants could review their transcripts to verify that their answers had been faithfully recorded once the interviews were transcribed. This procedure let participants fix any errors or clarify their remarks so that the data represented their intended meaning. In qualitative research, member checking is a commonly used method used to guarantee that the results fairly capture the opinions of the participants (Kirtley, 2022). Including participants in the verification process helped the research to guarantee the validity of the data and so strengthen the validity of the conclusions.

In qualitative research, reliability is the consistency of the research techniques and the stability of the conclusions across time. Maintaining a consistent method of data collection and analysis ensures dependability in this work. Every interview followed the same interview guide, and the interviews were carried out similarly to guarantee that every participant had an equal chance to relate their stories. Following a methodical approach, the researcher made sure that the same themes were covered in every interview while leaving space to investigate personal events in great detail (Taherdoost, 2021). This consistency in data collection helped to guarantee that the conclusions were dependable and that the themes found in the analysis derived from a solid and consistent data set.

Apart from consistent data collecting, the process of thematic analysis was meticulously recorded to improve dependability. Every stage of the study was noted in detail, and every transcript underwent methodically applied coding. To guarantee that the analysis was consistent over the whole data set, the researcher identified, classified, and grouped codes into themes using a transparent and repeatable method. If necessary, the study offered a clear narrative of how the results were obtained by recording the actions taken in the coding and analysis process, so enabling other researchers to replicate the process (Verma et al., 2024). This meticulous

approach to the data analysis process guaranteed that the conclusions were based on a thorough and methodical study of the data and so affirmed the dependability of the study.

Inter-coder reliability checks carried out during the coding process help to improve dependability even more. This included several researchers coding and reviewing a subset of the interview transcripts to guarantee that the themes found matched several coders. In qualitative research, inter-coder reliability checks are a crucial stage to guarantee that the coding process is not unduly swayed by the interpretation of one researcher (Kostere & Kostere, 2021). Involving several coders in the analysis process guaranteed that the themes found were regularly applied over the data set and were not biased by individual perspectives.

According to Saunders et al. (2012), in order to ensure trustworthiness, specific questions must be carefully designed in semi-structured interviews. In this study, the need for the interview protocol was thoroughly explained to all participants. Research reliability can often be compromised by observation bias. Therefore, triangulation was used following the semi-structured interviews and literature review. In the interviews, personal identifiers were removed to maintain anonymity. A coded name was given to each Participant.

The interviewer was aware of participant bias, as described by Saunders et al. (2012). It has been reported by the authors that interviewees may say what they think they are supposed to say by their organisation and the interviewer. In order to prevent this, the interviewer established a rapport with the interviewees before the interviews to better understand their roles and responsibilities. The participants also understood that the interviewer was bound by confidentiality. The same interview protocol guide was used throughout the process to ensure consistency and reduce the participants' responses from being of one view. The anonymity was kept throughout the process.

3.10 Ethical considerations and confidentiality

Any research must take ethical issues into account, especially when addressing delicate subjects like absenteeism, which might call for personal and confidential data. Several steps were taken in this study to guarantee that the research was carried out in accordance with accepted rules for qualitative research (Kirtley, 2022). Prior to the interviews, each participant provided their informed consent and received an explanation of the study's objectives, their

position within it, and their rights, such as the ability to leave the study at any time without incurring any consequences (Taherdoost, 2021). With every participant signing off on the consent forms, it guaranteed that they agreed to be interviewed and completely understood the nature of their participation.

Strictly maintained throughout the research process were anonymity and confidentiality. To protect participants' identities, names and any identifying data were deleted from the transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms. Access to the securely kept interview data is limited to the researcher (Pullen & Rhodes, 2021). Furthermore, all participants were guaranteed that their answers would be recorded to prevent their identification, thus preserving their anonymity.

At last, the research followed the beneficence principle, making sure the results would help to improve knowledge and control of absenteeism in companies. The results of the study were presented in a way that highlighted areas for improvement without assigning responsibility to any one person or manager. Focussing on structural and organisational elements, the study sought to offer suggestions that might result in favourable changes in the workplace, so benefiting workers and the company at last (Pullen & Rhodes, 2021).

The APA 7th edition referencing and citation guidelines were followed in this study. Those references listed in the reference list are all appropriately cited in the text and consistent with APA standards.

Chapter Four: Presentation and analysis of results

4.1 Introduction

The detailed findings, as obtained from semi-structured interviews with frontline managers in the finishing production departments in Hulamin, are contained in this chapter. It projects absenteeism from the perspective of employees as well as how it relates to workplace engagement. After a general discussion of the data collection strategy, the chapter describes the research instrument in detail, followed by a description of the procedures and process of the interviews. These points (4.2, 4.3, and 4.4) within the chapter provide a methodological base that prepares for the thematic analysis and discussion of results.

4.2 Description of data collection

The data-gathering methodology used in this study aims to capture the multi-faceted nature of employee absenteeism and its effect on workplace engagement in a South African manufacturing context. Data collection was largely qualitative, with semi-structured interviews used to gain rich, contextually grounded information from key informants. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify and select 18 frontline managers from Hulamin's finishing production departments within the rolled products division. The frontline managers included Area Coordinators, Shift Leaders, and Maintenance Coordinators, all directly concerned with managing and monitoring employee attendance and have first-hand experience in absenteeism concerns.

This section presents the demographic profile of the participants. The demographic profile of the participants is depicted in Table 4.1. A summary of the demographic profile follows: 83% are males and only 17% are females. Of the 44% of the participants who are within the age group 41 to 51 years, 28 % are above 51 years, and 28% are within the age group of 30 to 40 years. About 52% of the participants have more than 16 years of service experience, whilst 37% have 5 to 15 years of experience and only 11% of the participants have less than 5 years of service.

Table 4.1 Demographic profile of participants

Demographic Profile	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	3	17%
	Male	15	83%
Age	30-40 years	5	28%
	41-50 years	8	44%
	51+ years	5	28%
Years of service	1-5 years	2	11%
	6-15 years	7	37%
	16+ years	9	52%
Job level	Area Coordinator	2	11%
	Maintenance Coordinator	3	17%
	Shift Leader	13	72%

Source: Own

Interviews were held at Hulamin's production environment in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, a setting that presented itself as a natural context for discussing the operational difficulties facing employees and the organisational culture that influences their behaviour. The interviews were held on the Microsoft Teams platform in the quiet, private meeting rooms, in the factory, creating an atmosphere that facilitated open and frank discussions. Participants could also reflect on specific incidents or practices in their work context, thereby enriching the quality of the data collected.

Before commencing with interviews, relevant information sheets were distributed to potential participants, including the purpose of the study, how confidentiality was assured, and the nature of voluntary participation. Each participant provided informed consent in writing, so they were fully apprised of their rights and the ethical considerations guiding the research. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to in the study, where confidentiality of all the data collected was ensured. In this way, the first stage of the data collection was viewed as crucial in creating trust and helping the participants to voice both experiences with absenteeism and some positive experiences.

Interviews were scheduled over several weeks so as not to disrupt the busy schedules of frontline managers. Such flexibility in scheduling was advantageous for in-depth talks without compromising operational requirements. Each interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes, ensuring sufficient time for discussions into the range of issues on absenteeism, from causes and their effects on employee engagement to organisational policy and leadership practice implications. With consent, the interview discussions were recorded on audio tape to capture all subtle points and details. Immediately after each interview, field notes on non-verbal cues, contextual factors, and first impressions that could assist in the analysis were made.

Transcription of recorded interviews was done verbatim to conserve the data integrity. The transcribed documents were subsequently checked for accuracy and clarity by the researcher, followed by substituting pseudonyms for any identifying details regarding the participants. The researcher also kept a reflective journal, documenting emerging themes and potential biases during the data collection. This elaborate and multi-faceted data-gathering procedure expanded the understanding of the organisational dynamics. It ensured that the outcome would be resistant, credible, and truly reflect the complex realities in the working world.

4.3 Research instrument

The principal data collection method used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide that was developed based on an extensive literature review relevant to the study and the proposed research questions. This guide accommodates multiple perspectives on employee absenteeism alongside the possible impacts of absenteeism on workplace engagement by using theoretical constructs such as human capital theory and social exchange theory. The interview protocol guide included several open-ended questions to stimulate lengthy discussions on personal experiences, organisational practices, and managerial styles and their effects on employee behaviour.

The interview questionnaire was divided into various thematic sections. The first section of the questionnaire dealt with contextualising absenteeism, asking research participants to discuss their experiences with employee absences and the effects of these absences on team dynamics and productivity. Specific questions in this section targeted the frequency of absenteeism, common reasons for employee absences (voluntary and involuntary), and perceived effects on operational efficiency.

The second part dealt with leadership and managerial practices. Participants were encouraged to reflect upon how attendance patterns are affected by leadership styles: transformational, supportive, or authoritarian. They were also asked to think about visible managerial interventions, feedback systems, and support structures to control absenteeism. This portion of the interview was intended to capture the relational dimension of engagement and the role of managerial empathy and recognition.

An important component of the instrument addressed workplace culture and organisational policies. Questions in this area asked how the organisational environment fosters or hinders absenteeism, including job satisfaction, employee recognition, and flexible work arrangements. Interviewees were asked for instances of policies that have either helped curtail absenteeism or inadvertently contributed to its rise.

In addition, the guide included questions concerning the impact of financial or non-financial incentives. This section sought to establish the relative effectiveness of financial incentives or other acknowledgement forms in controlling for regular attendance and enhancing morale.

This semi-structured nature of the interview guide increased flexibility in allowing the interviewer to follow interesting points raised by the participants while, at the same time, ensuring key themes were covered as required. This process facilitated a rich, nuanced interchange that balanced structured inquiry with the opportunity for participants to elaborate on their own experiences and insights. This research instrument comprehensively gathered data that reflected the complexities and interwoven factors affecting absenteeism and workplace engagement.

4.4 Interview process and procedure

This interview process was well planned and meticulously executed so that the data collected were rich in detail and methodologically sound. Then, preparatory steps were undertaken in the early stages before the interviews to ensure clarity, ethical compliance, and comfort for the prospective research participants. These communications were followed up with written informed consent from each participant, declaring their willingness to participate and acknowledging that they understood how the research process would unfold.

The timings of the interviews were arranged jointly at the participants' and the interviewer's convenience, at times when disruptions would least likely affect the daily operations at

Hulamin. These interviews were held in private meeting rooms and offices on the production site, where, in some cases, they were held on Microsoft Team's platform for this purpose; this was done because of the need for an environment that is as quiet and sheltered as possible, resulting in an open platform for discussion. Each session was planned to span between 20 and 30 minutes, a timeframe that would give good enough depth without overburdening the busy schedules of the frontline managers.

During the interval of interviews, semi-structured interviews were used with a very flexible framework for the different sessions. While the application ensures that all important issues are raised, such as the reasons and results of absenteeism, the role of leadership, and the impact of the organisational culture, it allows the participants to provide detailed narrative-type responses. While conversing with those managers, the interviewer would swing back and forth between effectively listening and following up with probing questions on interesting points to ensure that highly rich, in-depth data was retrieved. The natural conversational style of the interviews facilitated open discussion with participants, providing frank perspectives on sensitive workplace issues and management practices.

4.5 Presentation of the results

This section presents results from the qualitative data provided through the interview process with managers. The presentation links the data to the emerging themes from the analysis process. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: causes of absenteeism, impact of workplace engagement, impact on productivity and costs, and the role of engagement in reducing absenteeism, which in turn provided the various sub-themes for each category of themes. Table 4.2 presents the thematic analysis of qualitative data. The aim is to align the emerging themes with the objectives of the study and research questions, presenting a coherent analysis that demonstrates the multifaceted nature of absenteeism, its causes, impacts, and mitigation strategies and supported by the literature review.

Table 4. 2 Alignment of themes with research objectives, questions and literature

Theme	Research objectives	Research question
Theme 1: Causes of Absenteeism Sub-Theme: Health Related Substance use and misuse Family responsibility Low morale and job dissatisfaction, Unplanned emergency leave	Objective 1: Identify the factors contributing to both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism in the workplace and their perceived effects on employee engagement	Question 1: What are the key factors leading to employee absenteeism in organisations?
Theme 2: Impact on Workplace Engagement Sub-Theme: Workload Redistribution, Team dynamics and trust,	Objective 2: Explore employee perception of how absenteeism affects workplace engagement.	Question 2: How does absenteeism affect organisational productivity and employee morale?
Theme 3: Impact on Productivity & Costs Sub-Theme: Operational disruption Productivity and financial impact. Financial impact of attendance variability	Objective 3: Assess the impact of absenteeism on productivity, employee morale, and operational costs.	Question 2: How does absenteeism affect organisational productivity and employee morale?
Theme 4: Role of Engagement in Reducing Absenteeism Sub-Theme: Employee support programme Managerial dialogue and return-to-work conversations, Early intervention and pattern monitoring, Disciplinary actions, Work shift adjustments	Objective 4: Investigate the role of employee engagement in mitigating absenteeism.	Question 3: What role does employee engagement play in reducing absenteeism?

Source: Own

4.5.1 Theme 1: Causes of absenteeism

Absenteeism is driven by a wide range of justifiable and behavioural factors at Hulamin. The causes of absenteeism constitute significant branches or core themes, and the following presents an elaborate discussion of these core themes and relevant sub-themes according to the interview results. Each sub-theme begins with an outline of the theme, continues with representative direct quotations from participants, and concludes with an analytical discussion. Table 4.3 presents the findings linked to the research objective and the main theme (causes of absenteeism) by identifying the factors contributing to both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism in the workplace and their perceived effects on employee engagement. The sub-themes that emerged are health-related, substance use and misuse, family responsibility, employee motivation, job dissatisfaction, and unplanned family emergency.

Table 4 3 Identified factors contributing to both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism in the workplace and their perceived effects on employee engagement.

Research Objective 1: Identify the factors contributing to both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism in the workplace and their perceived effects on employee engagement	
Sub-theme	Frequency of responses
Health Related	14
Substance Use and Misuse	13
Family Responsibility	11
Employee Motivation and Job Dissatisfaction	10
Unplanned Emergency Leave	6

Source: Own

Health-related absenteeism

Health-related absenteeism is a sub-theme of voluntary and involuntary absenteeism, which is a contributing factor to employee absenteeism. Several managers are aware that health-related problems, from minor illnesses such as colds to more serious long-term ones, are frequently responsible for absenteeism in the workplace. The pattern of absenteeism also follows the season, with increases occurring in the colder months. In some cases, employees would have undergone a formal procedure (for example, hospitalisation) without disclosing details results.

Participant 1:

"We seem to get a surge of absences during winter. A lot of them bring doctor's notes saying they have got flu or bronchitis."

Participant 3:

"We have a high absenteeism rate during winter months because many employees suffer from flu, and it spreads quickly in our environment."

Participant 4:

"We have staff who are genuinely dealing with chronic illnesses; they hand in extended sick notes and might be off for weeks. It definitely disrupts production scheduling."

Participant 8:

"Some employees actually do the right thing: they call me the night before, say they are down with a fever, and come back with a legit sick note. But we still scramble to find cover."

It seems, therefore, that health-related absences are primarily justifiable. As indicated by Participant 1, supervisors they do not challenge the authenticity of absences certified by doctors. However, some staff tend to suspect that frequent and extended sick days might be a sign of something more profound, untreated illness or poor working conditions that might contribute to burnout. The fact that such absences are regarded as legitimate from an organisational point of view only brings further complication to the management of the processes, particularly operationally, as workflow grinds to a halt or slows when employees are regularly off-site for treatment or extended recovery from illness.

Substance use and misuse

Another recurring theme has been substance use and misuse, alcohol-related absenteeism, and, to a lesser extent, drug-related issues. As described by several shift leaders, employees would get to work late or make sick calls instead of taking a breathalyser test that they knew would probably fail at the start of the shift. This outcome seems to have increased attention on attendance for weekend and payday shifts, which show sharp rises in tardiness or last-minute sick calls.

Participant 2:

"We see a pattern around payday some guys have cash in hand and then don't pitch on a Friday or phone in at six in the morning saying they are sick. It's no coincidence."

Participant 5:

"Alcohol is big. We have caught employees blowing positive in the morning. Rather than be sent away at the gate, a few simply do not come at all and text last-minute that they are 'ill'."

Participant 7:

"We notice that some employees who have been drinking over the weekend often take unplanned leave on Mondays."

Participant 11:

"We had to refer one person to rehab. He was an excellent operator but started missing work on Monday mornings. It turned out he was binge-drinking on his off days."

From these responses, a somewhat convoluted nexus is evident between absence and substance disorder: as referred to by Participant 5, a few employees choose to stay home purposely so that they will escape gatehouse testing (using a breathalyser), while a few others arrive late or are absent without notification. Managers claimed that such behaviours occur during weekends, holidays, and paydays, which increases the operational overheads for last-minute leave, especially that by skilled personnel who are difficult to backfill.

Family responsibility

A third major sub-theme which emerged is family responsibility which results from a sudden childcare crisis and care for elderly relatives. Often, employees discover conflicts at the last moment, such as a child getting sick unexpectedly and thus have to miss work without adequate notice. Such emergencies generally escalate absences.

Participant 3:

"We are on a continental shift, so weekends mean family events. Some employees have to attend funerals or handle urgent family duties on short notice, which results in calling in absent."

Participant 6:

"We get last-minute calls about a mother who is ill or a babysitter not showing up. Suddenly, I am left to reassign tasks or find someone else on overtime."

Participant 9:

"I had a guy who overslept because his kid was in hospital all night. He only phoned me at half past six. We were already one short, so it was chaos on that line."

Participant 10:

"Many employees call in last minute saying they have to take care of a child or family member."

Low morale and job dissatisfaction

Another recurring concern is low morale and job dissatisfaction, which leads to increased absenteeism. Managers have noted that workers appeared disengaged from their occupations, possibly due to burnout, lack of purpose, or frustration with working conditions. Such individuals tend to take time off from work, whether paid or unpaid, for several reasons, including illness, and they tend to have frequent brief absences.

Participant 7:

"You can tell they are unhappy at work always complaining, checking the clock. Then, they start using every sick day or skipping the shift right after payday. It's a pattern."

Participant 12:

"Sometimes it is burnout. A guy who has been on the same machine for ten years might feel stuck. You see them pulling away, using more leave, calling in for 'stress headaches.'"

Participant 14:

"We had a pocket of employees with low morale; some left and others showed up but seemed mentally absent. Absenteeism is like a symptom of deeper job dissatisfaction."

The transcripts indicate that supervisors notice these signals: recurrence of habitual leave usage, short-notice call-ins or cyclical absenteeism is usually repackaged in the context of employees expressing complaints or being stressed. While health or family obligations may be a cause, these repetitive patterns may reflect deeper than surface burnout or work-related frustration. Managers also acknowledge that solving morale issues or developing engagement can reduce levels of absenteeism.

Unplanned emergency leave

Finally, numerous interviews indicated the pattern of leave that mainly consisted of spontaneous or unplanned one-day absences at very short notice for reasons not solely health- or family-related. They include things they might want to do on their off time, even personal tasks, spontaneous events, or something employees thought they could deem an emergency. Regularly taking one day's leave causes disproportionate chaos since managers cannot adequately plan coverage.

Participant 10:

"They will ask for 'emergency leave' the morning of, usually for something like a burst pipe or a last-minute appointment. Not always easy to confirm if it is truly urgent."

Participant 13:

"I see frequent single-day absences cropping up around midweek or bridging a weekend. These are the hardest to manage because they are short notice, and staff treat them as entitlements."

Participant 15:

"Employees sometimes treat annual leave or emergency leave interchangeably. They will say, 'I need the day off tomorrow, sorry boss.' Moreover, there is no real-time to find a replacement."

4.5.2 Theme 2: Impact on workplace engagement

Absence significantly impacts employee engagement, as it disrupts team dynamics, erodes trust and creates an uneven distribution of workload. If employees are often absent, the additional responsibilities can overwhelm the team members, leading to frustration and burnout. Table 4.4 presents the findings linked to the research objective, to explore employee perceptions of how absenteeism affects workplace engagement. The responses from the interviews conducted provided the sub-themes: workload distribution, team dynamics and trust.

Table 4 4 Employee perceptions of how absenteeism affects workplace engagement.

Research Objective 2: To explore employee' perceptions of how absenteeism affects workplace engagement	
Sub-theme	Frequency of responses
Workload distribution	15
Team dynamics and trust	9

Source: Own

Workload redistribution

As part of workload distribution, some employees often take on extra duties and tasks when others are absent. Short-term workload redistribution entails one person covering a shift or people looking at splitting one shift into two parts. However, when the long-term absence of

some individuals in the same position becomes routine, this sometimes takes a toll on others. Managers have reasons enough to worry about overwork, flagging morale, and the accumulation of excess burden against those who are there every day.

Participant3:

"When someone calls in sick, I will ask two or three others to handle the absent person's tasks. That means they do double the usual job. It is not sustainable week after week."

Participant7:

"I see the same guys volunteering every time, but they eventually burn out. Meanwhile, the absentee might not even realise the stress he is causing."

Participant 9:

"Compensatory overtime helps them feel compensated, but there is a limit. Overtime pay does not fix exhaustion if the same employees keep filling those gaps."

Tolerance of absentees exacerbates developing workload shifts, which imposes obligations on the stamina and morale of the other workers. Overtime pay favours another set of workers who think longer days and being overburdened with their duties might push them to their physical or psychological exhaustion. This pattern is an erosion of loyalty and breeds resentment of absenteeism when employees feel absenteeism is unfair because grace is given to some of their colleagues at short-notice.

Team dynamics and trust

A recurring theme is that absenteeism affects tangible outputs and shapes team relationships. Frequent absenteeism may breed distrust or resentment among staff who must compensate. Over time, damaging morale can seep into daily interactions, weakening communication and collective motivation.

Participant 2:

"When the same person misses Monday shifts, others ask, 'Why are we always covering for him?' They get upset feels like they are being taken advantage of."

Participant 11:

"Sometimes colleagues believe the absentee is faking. That suspicion erodes trust. They start blaming each other when something goes wrong on the line."

Participant 15:

"A big frustration is seeing one or two employees have perfect attendance while someone else seems to vanish every payday. Naturally, that stirs negativity and them-versus-us vibes."

Participant 16:

"Frequent absenteeism affects teamwork. Some employees feel overburdened, leading to frustration."

The examples cited indicate the transformation of a basic human resource problem into an interpersonal squabble; when coworkers give and take on extra responsibilities routinely without acknowledgement, the lack of promotion might lead to frustration or bitterness.

4.5.3 Theme 3: The impact on productivity and cost

Absenteeism significantly disrupts productivity and inflates operational costs in the manufacturing environment at Hulamin. Absenteeism consequences cascade across departments, resulting in missed production targets, equipment idling, overtime dependencies, and financial underperformance. The findings linked to the research objective 3: assess the impact of absenteeism on productivity, employee morale and operational costs are depicted in Table 4.5. The responses provided the sub-themes on operational disruption, resource strain and overtime costs, productivity and financial impact, and financial impact of attendance variability.

Table 4.5: The impact of absenteeism on productivity, employee morale, and operational costs.

Research Objective 3: Assess the impact of absenteeism on productivity, employee morale, and operational costs.	
Sub-theme	Frequency of responses
Operational disruption	13
Productivity and financial impact	8
Financial impact of attendance variability	11

Source: Own

Operational disruption

Operation disruption is a sub-theme that is depicted below in the participants' responses, which is linked to the theme of the impact of absenteeism on production and cost

Participant 2: "Some guys, when they stay away, they do not understand the repercussions of not being at work. It affects the entire plant; it is not just one department."

Participant 5: "Guys are strategic. A guy may work two or three weeks, then take one or two days before his weekend to make it longer. We are left trying to fill the gap."

Participant 8: "If we are not notified early, we cannot get cover, and that affects the proper running of production. It disrupts everything because we scramble."

Participant 13: "Even a 5% absenteeism rate adds up because it is not just about the day lost; it is about slowing the whole system."

Participant 14: "It affects our production if somebody is not at their station. That station could stand, causing a loss of production, causing a loss of sales."

Participant 16: "It affects the performance of the production lines if they are not here. We rely on planning, and when people are absent, you are forced to reshuffle."

Productivity and financial impact

Productivity and financial impact are a sub-theme identified in the responses provided by the participants.

Participant 1:

"When one operator is absent, we might lose several hours on a critical machine. It translates to thousands in lost output each shift."

Participant 4:

"Financially, it adds up. Overtime costs surge; we are paying double time to someone who came in at the last minute. Meanwhile, we are not recouping that expense in productivity."

Participant 10:

"Our manager demands an explanation every month for the shortfall in production. It is usually linked to inconsistent attendance no matter how well we juggle the schedule."

Financial impact of attendance variability

Financial impact of attendance variability is a sub-theme that is depicted below from the participants' responses, linked to the theme of the impact of absenteeism on production and cost.

Participant 1: "If you are not coming to work, we need to cover. That is either overtime or pulling from another team. Either way, the cost adds up."

Participant 4: "Sometimes we use people who are not trained for specific roles, and it slows everything down."

Participant 10: "The absenteeism rate in my department was as high as 75–80%, significantly undermining operational predictability."

4.5.4 Theme 4: Role of engagement in reducing absenteeism

The findings showed that engagement emerged as a decisive factor in managing absenteeism. Managers consistently found that supportive relationships, open communication, and trust-based leadership reduced absenteeism. In contrast, disengaged employees tended to misuse sick leave or avoid work altogether. Engagement strategies like counselling, personalised check-ins, and human resources referrals were key in promoting attendance. Table 4.6 presents the findings linked to the research objective, to investigate the role of employee engagement in mitigating absenteeism. The Participant's responses from the interviews conducted provided the sub-themes: employee support programmes, managerial dialogue and return-to-work interviews, work shift adjustments, early intervention and pattern monitoring, and disciplinary actions.

Table 4. 6 The role of employee engagement in mitigating absenteeism

Research Objective 4: Investigate the role of employee engagement in mitigating absenteeism.	
Sub-theme	Frequency of responses
Employee support programme	17
Managerial dialogue and return-to-work conversations	18
Early Intervention and Pattern Monitoring	14
Disciplinary Actions	18
Work Shift Adjustments	5

Source: Own

Employee support programme

Employee support programme is a sub-theme that is depicted below from the participants responses, linked to the theme of the role of engagement in reducing absenteeism.

Participant 2: "I helped a lady with a gambling issue. She asked for money, but instead, referred her to the programme the company had. It changed her life. She has bought a house now. Her work ethic is back. She is engaged again."

Participant 4:

"If it is more than just a pattern of absenteeism and they say, 'I am drinking a lot' or 'I am depressed,' we refer them to our EAP or the on-site counsellor. Sometimes, that is the turning point."

Participant 6: "We refer them to support if we feel it is beyond us. Sometimes, it is no longer excuses they are genuinely struggling."

Participant 8:

"We have had about three guys who were sent to rehab for alcohol or drug issues. The company footed the bill to help them recover. Two came back with better attendance, and one relapsed."

Participant 13:

"Our role is to figure out if the absenteeism is personal, mental health, or addiction. Once we know that, we can channel them to the relevant programme. Counselling has helped some employees keep their jobs."

Participant 18: "Sometimes people open up they will say, 'I have a drinking problem' or 'I am in debt.' That is when you would involve human resources or refer them for rehab. Engagement makes the difference."

Many of the participants hint at a more full-circle viewpoint, while absenteeism can be a red flag for existing or unaddressed wellness, mental health, or personal issues, many supervisors felt that a solution that addresses the root of the problem must be found first. The inclusion of professional counsellors and employee assistance programme (EAPs), primarily to combat stress among the workforce, alcoholism, and abuse, is a sympathetic gesture exercised by committed employers. Not only does this strategy lessen repeated absenteeism for employees, but it also alleviates issues such as higher turnover in case of an injured employee to energise them to fulfil their job responsibilities naturally.

Managerial dialogue and return-to-work conversations

Managerial dialogue and return to work conversations are a sub-theme that is depicted below from the participants' responses, which is linked to the theme of the role of engagement in reducing absenteeism. Management has a dialogue through a process called return-to-work interviews. These interviews provide regular check-ins and return-to-work interviews, which foster trust and uncover deeper issues affecting attendance.

Participant 1:

"Employees are supposed to call two hours ahead if they are not coming in. Some do; others message me 15 minutes before the shift, which complicates everything."

Participant 2: "You talk to them, and you can see something is bothering them sometimes, not even work-related, but it affects their attendance."

Participant 4: "We have one-on-one sessions to understand what is happening. If things do not change, we escalate but it starts with listening."

Participant 5: "We talk to the guys before it becomes a problem. I think that is why absenteeism is under control in my team."

Participant 6:

"We have a policy, if you are sick, get a doctor's certificate if it is more than two days. But we have had debates about one-day sick notes; employees argue they do not always see a need for it."

Participant 11:

"After every absence, we conduct a return-to-work interview. That is the policy. The employee must sit with the shift leader to discuss the reason for being away and whether they are fit to work."

Participant 12:

"These interviews allow us to identify patterns and determine whether additional support is needed for employees."

A common thread in these quotations is that although notification protocols exist, compliance varies considerably. While some employees readily update a supervisor about their absence, others contact their supervisors just before or after a scheduled shift, allowing little time to change schedules. Last-minute notices further burden the manager as he or she tries to rearrange work schedules or find a replacement. Participants show that return-to-work interviews are the most important policy instruments for holding workers accountable. With these, they must explain an absence, include appropriate documentation, and declare being fit to return to work.

Early intervention and pattern monitoring

Managers who track attendance proactively and engage employees at early warning signs tend to prevent chronic absenteeism. Managers repeatedly underscored the importance of precise timekeeping and absenteeism tracking tools to achieve transparency and effective scheduling. Occasions for monitoring attendance patterns and finding trends that show potential root causes behind problems, such as incessant tardiness or erratic sick days, emanate from Kronos systems, manual calendars, or unique logs utilised by supervisors.

Participant 3:

"We rely on Kronos to confirm clock-in times and see if someone's consistently late or leaving early. That data helps us spot absentee patterns quickly."

Participant 8: "Normally, with the younger guys, there is no sense of responsibility. However, when you sit with someone one-on-one, they need counselling or support."

Participant 10:

"Without proper logs or daily calendars, you miss the bigger picture. You might not realise someone has been off three Mondays unless you track it systematically."

Participant 13: "We know who complies and who does not. Those who value their work are consistent. Engagement builds that value."

Participant 15:

"We do an end-of-month analysis. Anyone over a certain threshold of absent hours gets flagged for a check-in interview or further investigation."

Participant 17: "We track patterns and follow up. That is how we catch problems early."

The role of engagement in reducing absenteeism positions workplace engagement as both a preventive and corrective mechanism. Participants detailed how open communication, personal counselling, and empathetic supervision directly influenced attendance behaviour. Engaged employees demonstrated a stronger sense of accountability and commitment to their roles. Managerial practices such as return-to-work interviews and pattern tracking were essential in identifying early warning signs and intervening constructively. Engaging employees strengthens morale and helps develop a sense of belonging and mutual purpose that helps reduce absenteeism.

According to managers, tracking processes foster accountability, although without open dialogues and a supportive environment, data will not do anything alone. If further attention or additional conversation were needed, like seeing a rapid pattern increase or sudden leave, managers could meet with the employee to better comprehend underlying issues. So, in some way, the monitoring system serves as an early flag in a broader discussion about attendance rather than as a cornerstone practically constituting the system.

Disciplinary actions

Supervisors have realised that disciplinary actions form an integral part of managing absenteeism. According to them, depending on the seriousness or frequency with which an employee abstains from work, verbal warnings, counselling, written warnings, and final notices are imposed through different levels of discipline. Managers and frontline staff perceive these formal procedures as curbing the attendance issue and re-emphasising the organisation's policies. However, they recognised that constant pressures or overly severe enforcement could undermine morale.

Participant 2:

"If someone has a bad attendance record, we start with counselling or a verbal warning. If it persists, then we move to written warnings. Once you are on a final written warning, any repeat might lead to dismissal."

Participant 5:

"We try progressive discipline. A single slip does not mean we dismiss you. We do a session to see if the employee needs help. However, after repeated absences, we will escalate to a hearing."

Participant 9:

"Discipline is tricky. We have employees who are absent for valid reasons, but they fail to follow the notification procedures. So we issue them a verbal or written warning, not for being sick but for not complying with policy."

Participant 18:

"We start with verbal warnings, followed by written warnings, and finally dismissal for repeat offenders."

These statements show that many of the participants opt for a progressive discipline method to curb repeated or policy-defying instances of absence. The participants were reported to have followed a well-structured process in order to help employees overcome past miss-point and policy breaches. This series began with informal discussions or mild verbal warnings, in which they mentioned the expectations and clarified the consequences associated with attendance. If the absenteeism persists or the policy breaches increase, a situation of "writeups," and eventually dismissal, appears. This layering demonstrates a primary goal of discipline: to give the employee as much leeway as possible to correct the problem while minimising the impact on the working relationship.

Work shift adjustments

Some participants argued that the adoption of more flexible work arrangements, for example, flexible work timing, compressed workweeks, and 4-day weekend work cycles typical of

"continental shifts", could reduce absenteeism, as employees would have more time for rest and their obligations would be catered for in this regard.

Participant 7:

"We changed from the old 5-day, 12-hour system to a 4-day on/4-day off pattern. Absenteeism dropped because staff had more downtime to sort out personal stuff."

Participant 12:

"Flexible scheduling helps some employees. They can swap shifts with a colleague if they have appointments or family duties, so they do not end up AWOL."

Participant 16:

"We see that the continental shift is a double-edged sword. They get four full days off, but some employees party too hard before the night shift and skip Monday's shift entirely."

Based on the participants' responses, a 4-day break helps employees accomplish personal chores, arrange doctor appointments, or act on more significant events without necessitating a short-notice absence. In some teams, it began to show improvement in various attendance metrics at once due to the favoured rotation. More so, informal shift swaps can further cement the spirit of cooperation and flexibility in the team.

Flexible work schedules are much-needed morale boosters and peacebuilders in balancing private lives, yet noncompliance with attendance is never a sure thing. These responses called for more excellent managerial supervision and the strict application of articulated policy in a potentially sobering climate of semi-self-regenerative absenteeism or lateness.

4.6 Analysis of results

The evidence from these subthemes collectively demonstrates that absenteeism is a multifaceted issue. Health concerns and domestic obligations are the primary genuine causes, with substance abuse and dissatisfaction also emerging as more plausible explanations behind unavoidable habitual absences. Moreover, emergency absences almost always create a vicious circle of operational continuity as managers struggle to fill last-minute shifts.

Employees sometimes follow procedures: sick notes are provided, and calls are made at least two hours before the shift starts. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect on supervisors leads to heavy administrative and operational burdens as they try to rearrange duties or procure casual labour. Disciplinary policies and employee support programmes like the EAP or rehabilitation referral initiatives try to address the causes. However, as noted in the interviews, more profound issues are often systemic or related to employee morale. To reduce absenteeism and mitigate its impact, clear and consistently enforced policies are needed in conjunction with a palpable and responsive environment addressing the causes ranging from health emergencies to demotivation. The responses suggest that absenteeism can best be managed through compassion in leadership with policy enforcement and flexible scheduling. By crafting solutions that address the reasons for employee absences, managers can prevent some negative consequences from impacting company harmony and employee welfare.

Thus, five areas of focus: attendance policies, disciplinary actions, employee support programmes, timekeeping/tracking, and shift adjustments, are all part of a multilateral approach to dealing with absenteeism. Policies establish expectations concerning reporting and returning from leave, while disciplinary actions are taken for severe, sustained violations. Furthermore, broader support programmes offer resources and assistance to employees whose attendance at work might be hindered for personal, mental health, or substance abuse reasons. Tracking tools such as Kronos are crucial for detecting attendance patterns and making corrections before they escalate. Lastly, shift design is a proactive method to make work schedules tolerable to employees. These can, however, inadvertently pose problems due to increased demands in day-off options, unless this is carefully managed.

The interviewees perceived these strategies not as individual tools but as components that must work together to preserve a stable workforce. Attendance policies and disciplinary steps should be applied in collaboration with empathetic actions and a trustworthy tracking system. Flexible shifts, whatever freedom they offer, also raise the possibility of increased absenteeism. At the interface of structured management and flexibility, resolving this issue requires strategic policy execution, data-driven monitoring, and adaptability to change.

4.7 Conclusion

The results indicate how recurring or unscheduled absenteeism, prompts significant responses across various industries, particularly in relation to employee engagement. Managers are primarily responsible for managing the operational and budgetary impacts of absenteeism, often incurring overtime costs to keep productivity rates from dipping. Those employees who are present are risking burnout and may begin to harbour resentment in cases where they have to cover the workload of absent colleagues. Trust is easily severed if staff suspect that their colleagues' absences were unjustified. Strong moral and social ties are needed, as unbroken workflow iterations and unfulfilled shifts may halt operations. These converge to one conclusion: a battle against absenteeism cannot be fought only with strict attendance policies and consistent disciplinary action. It requires supportive programmes and a scheduling system that focuses on employee well-being and synchronisation of team members.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

Chapter five begins by providing a broad and in-depth review of absenteeism, its causes and its effects on workplace engagement through empirical findings. Reflecting on the main findings of this study, the chapter examines the literature on absenteeism, emphasising its root causes, effects on employee engagement, and management techniques. The reasons for absenteeism in the workplace vary, including personal factors, organisational factors, and noncompliance with workplace policies. It was found that frequent or unpredictable absences adversely affect team morale, disrupt workflow, and weaken the sense of unity required for strong employee engagement. According to the study, disciplinary measures alone are not sufficient. Instead, a comprehensive strategy should include organisational culture, employee well-being, and management support. Management interventions have been shown to lower absenteeism in addition to offering early assistance, planning return-to-work conversations, and setting up flexible shifts. The findings underscore the importance of empathetic and consistent leadership in creating a work environment that promotes accountability, fosters commitment, and enhances overall attendance.

5.2 Discussion of findings

The findings of the research objectives are discussed below, aligning empirical observations with the theoretical insights from the literature review. Absenteeism is a multifaceted matter, shaped by numerous organisational, personal, and societal antecedents. The human capital theory illustrates the value of employee skill improvement, well-being, and career development to decrease voluntary absenteeism and introduces the notion of high-value human resources (Deming, 2022; Mone & London, 2020).

5.2.1 Objective 1

The first objective was to identify the factors contributing to both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism in the workplace and their perceived effects on employee engagement. This gives rise to Research Question 1: What are the key factors leading to employee absenteeism in organisations?

Many causes for absenteeism came through from the data, and it is consistent with the arguments of authors like Budrienė and Diskienė (2020) and Miraglia and Johns (2021). While there were health-care-related causes for absenteeism, including flu, chronic disease, or stress-related incidents, substance-related (mainly alcohol) absenteeism was also prominent. The responses from the participants depict a typical reason for sick leave within the workplace: seasonal health-related conditions, especially influenza. However, most employees informed their supervisors reasonably timeously by sending in the appropriate documentation. On the other hand, participants indicate that such persistent or repeated sick leave destabilises the shift's work plan, leading to the accumulating burden of operational pressure. Chronic conditions such as asthma and other longterm illnesses become even more difficult to manage because of the employees' repeated or extended absences, which disrupt scheduling and lead to unplanned overtime demands. This supports the view of Labrague et al. (2020), who assert that chronic health issues, exacerbated by stress and seasonal illnesses, contribute substantially to absenteeism when not supported by adequate workplace flexibility.

This behaviour underscores Chebet et al.'s (2019) findings that employees would seek and justify external entities (social drinking; personal crises springing up at the last minute), often coinciding with paydays or weekends. Shifrin and Michel (2022) also show that employees sometimes stay out of work due to family responsibilities, heralding a higher proportion of unplanned leaves. Moreover, family obligations such as childcare, eldercare, or sudden domestic crises appeared as valid contributing factors. This behaviour further indicates that absenteeism emanates from the employees' real-life constraints (Ngwenya & Utete, 2023). Interviews stressed that employees missed work by calling in at short notice, as few childcare options were available or a family crisis had just emerged, which would have a ripple effect on their labour. Such events are frequently unavoidable. However, they strained the production process and took a toll on employees who were on duty. This strain demonstrates the need for the organisation's policies to remain inherently responsive to employees' conduct (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2021).

Another notable concern raised in the interviews was low employee morale and job dissatisfaction (Karamehmedović et al., 2021), which was marked as a strong predictor of absenteeism. Absenteeism was high among employees who lacked intrinsic motivation and who felt undervalued. This perspective resonates with Mone and London's (2018) argument on

the concept of “silent resignation.” According to the participants, staff randomly used many short leave days as a sign of dissatisfaction over conditions at work. Their experience corroborates the findings from Alhassan and Greene (2020): extrinsic incentives alone were not enough to drive attendance, provided the operational culture remained inadequate.

Unplanned emergency leave absence, claimed for sudden events, was identified as a significant subcategory of leave. Much like Birioukov (2020), who finds some tolerance for such unplanned absence, the managers in this study attested to how employees sometimes misused these short-notice leave requests to avoid normal channels of operation or annual leave procedures. In such cases, abrupt rescheduling of work plans would result in operational inefficiencies and frustration among colleagues. The findings conclusively confirm the wide range of causes of absenteeism, among which personal health, family obligations, substance abuse, job dissatisfaction, and unplanned emergencies can be identified to varying degrees.

The findings reveal a complex mix of justifiable and behavioural drivers behind absenteeism at Hulamin, many extending beyond the standard narrative of health and family-related causes. Seasonal patterns emerged as a significant operational consideration, with spiking health-related absences during colder months. During the winter season, many supervisors observe similar increases in cases of flu and bronchitis being reported, which are often supported by medical certificates. As much as these absences are legitimate based on the supporting documentation required for the absence, they still strain operations, indicating the need for seasonal workforce planning strategies (de Oliveira et al., 2023).

Substance misuse, particularly related to alcohol, emerged as another critical yet under-discussed factor. Employees were reported to deliberately avoid shifts following heavy drinking episodes, particularly around weekends and paydays. Some avoid attendance altogether to evade workplace breathalyser testing. The data also show that the organisation has mechanisms to address substance abuse and make provisions for employee assistance programmes and rehabilitation referrals. Despite all these efforts, however, managers are still worried that substance-related absenteeism may be indicative of underlying psychosocial stressors. This view is consistent with findings by Voordt and Jensen (2023), who argue that absenteeism can reflect deep-seated psychological disengagement if underlying causes remain unaddressed.

Another important involuntary driver of absence was family obligations, especially those requiring last-minute caregiving demands. Because there is little time to reschedule or replace roles, managers have voiced displeasure with these short-notice absences. These situations show how family-friendly measures, such as flexible scheduling options or emergency help for carers, may be necessary to address frequent unplanned absences. Interviewees frequently emphasised the disruptive nature of these so-called "legitimate" family obligations, particularly when employees fail to communicate promptly to allow the shift leader to line up a substitute. This view aligns with suggestions by Groenewold (2020), who emphasises the impact of uncoordinated personal leave on operational capacity.

Unplanned one-day absences by employees, which are frequently disguised as "emergencies," make it more challenging to track leave and interfere with shift continuity. Managers have often observed that these situations are difficult to verify as genuine and are commonly used as informal replacements for annual leave. In some instances, the irregular application and misuse of emergency leave regulations show a lack of control and procedural clarity. Improved workforce reliability may require reviewing attendance regulations and implementing systems to differentiate between real and non-essential. The view is reinforced by the work of Lohaus and Habermann (2021), who identify ineffective leave regulation as contributing to productivity loss and a decline in employee morale.

Absenteeism is merely the symptom of disengagement: the employee who is less motivated or does not feel valued is likely to take any excuse rather than attend. Some employees who are "visible" in their roles or have growth opportunities demonstrate higher job satisfaction and fewer unplanned absences. This argument is consistent with the broader notion: the absence of intrinsic motivators such as career growth, recognition, and supportive leadership increases the likelihood that personnel will resort to absence as a coping mechanism or form of protest (; Dhir & Shukla; 2018 Zinger, 2014). Addressing job dissatisfaction is, therefore, a strategic approach to reducing absenteeism.

Through the study, the objective was met. The study successfully identified voluntary and involuntary causes of absenteeism: health issues, substance use, family responsibilities, low morale, and unplanned emergencies, confirming the multifaceted nature of absenteeism. This comprehensive identification reflects the complex interplay between the personal, organisational, and situational factors that influence attendance behaviour patterns in the

workplace. The participants' accounts provided nuanced insights into how these causes are not isolated but often interlinked with family stressors, which can exacerbate health problems or, at times, contribute to decreased motivation at work. This view highlights the importance of having a holistic approach to addressing absenteeism, with solutions that consider the overlapping dimensions rather than treating causes in isolation. Additionally, the operational context at Hulamin revealed unique stressors and emergency scenarios, enriching the understanding of absenteeism in manufacturing environments.

The findings align with the literature. Participant views broadly supported the theoretical foundation presented in Chapter 2. The social exchange theory (Saks, 2022) and various scholars (e.g., Chebet et al., 2019; Miraglia & Johns, 2021) described similar motivations and behaviours related to reciprocity, fairness, and personal obligation. The alignment demonstrates the theory's robustness in explaining drivers of absenteeism across different settings. The findings also extend the literature by emphasising the operational burden caused by absenteeism, such as workflow disruption and emergency staffing challenges, which are less prominent in many models.

No divergence was observed, though the study emphasised the operational burden more clearly than prior models. While the causes of absenteeism remain consistent, their practical implications can vary by industry, necessitating context-sensitive interventions

5.2.2 Objective 2: Explore employee perception of how absenteeism affects workplace engagement.

Research Question 2: How does absenteeism affect organisational productivity and employee morale?

The second objective was to explore employee perception of how absenteeism affects workplace engagement. This is represented in Research Question 2: How does absenteeism affect organisational productivity and employee morale?

Numerous interviews indicated that absenteeism erodes productivity, workload distribution, team bonding, and continuous operation. Employees who were present often had to bear higher workloads or work overtime because of the absence of staff. Zondo (2020) reasoned that if employees find themselves overworked or extending themselves to compensate for other

employees who are perceived as "freeloaders," it hurts morale, creates hostility, and saps the workers' enthusiasm. The study's participants agreed that chronic absenteeism can confuse even the most dedicated staff agreeing with Grinza and Rycx (2020) as they highlighted firms' productivity hit by generic sickness spells. Their research found that the cost of repeated sickness-related absenteeism disrupts operational consistency and, over time, reduces engagement across the board. It is evident in the sentiments of those employees who described fatigue and loss of motivation due to always having to cover for others.

This view aligns with the theory from Miraglia and Johns (2021), which asserts that engagement acts as a buffer against the negative impact of absenteeism, but this resilience erodes over time when imbalance persists. Employees working double shifts or constantly being asked to "step in" eventually exhibit signs of burnout and cynicism, which indicates that engagement cannot be maintained through effort alone; equitable workloads, and visible managerial support must be nurtured.

In addition, frequent short-notice absenteeism eroded trust among teams. The participants mentioned instances when co-workers had doubts about the genuineness of the so-called emergency leaves, thus encouraging suspicion and conflict. The eroded trust correlates with Côté et al. (2021), who argued that, through social exchange theory, strong social ties reinforce attendance, but perceptions of unfairness or exploitation reduce willingness to cooperate and erode psychological safety.

This perceived injustice multiplies from one party to the other, with a belief becoming a reality that someone is perpetually avoiding work, exploiting medicals or faking emergencies. Smaller teams can inadvertently create conditions that reinforce workplace gossip. Such trust is hidden when it concerns suspicion of "evasion." Without trust, collaboration becomes problematic; where once an employee must have been proud of themselves for filling in for somebody "missing," cynicism develops, stifling communal success. The accused employee is viewed as a "freeloader," who skips work with no repercussions or negligible ones. This tension is directly tied to Blau's (1964) interpretation of social exchange theory, which describes a breakdown in reciprocity the moment one party perceives an imbalance, and commitment and trust unravel.

Leaders try to solve such mistrust by being transparent. Real reasons are shared, and the effort to maintain fairness exists to mitigate against resentment. Therefore, consistent standards for

recognition are set to create more trust for the team, which fosters a positive atmosphere. When these ties weaken, employees would be disinclined to extend themselves and cooperate, thereby generating potential clashes within a group. The interactions start with the assertion that absenteeism affects not only the actual work, it has implications for aspects such as psychological safety, solidarity, and group identity. The latter two are reported by Clack (2021), who highlights how unresolved workload imbalances often affect morale and break down commitment in a team.

Managerial insistence on doing away with all the workforce tasks acts as a measure to levelling the blame and shows that distribution is a deluxe effort rather than just in response to a need. More concerning is that supervisors note a variety of specialist skills as a reason for their hindered blooming, for they are zoned in on operations as highly skilled operators at the expense of a handful of other operators who are the only outcome of many technicalities. Such a working environment makes burnout even more likely, leading to high staff turnover, or, ironically, more absentees. This cycle supports findings by Dash and Mohanty (2019), who noted that disengaged employees become less resilient, more reactive, and more susceptible to voluntary absenteeism.

Interview data shows that absenteeism affects more than just operational flow; it profoundly impacts interpersonal dynamics and the psychological contract among employees. A recurring sentiment among present employees is a feeling of being exploited, particularly when they must repeatedly cover for colleagues who are absent without sufficient notice. Employee disengagement happens over time due to emotional exhaustion and decreased willingness to give their all to the team.

One important factor that was weakened by the absence was trust. The legitimacy of frequent absences, particularly those that fall on weekends or paydays, was questioned by team members. This mistrust causes conflict, erodes team unity, and polarises the workplace, where staff members take on a "them versus us" mentality. A high-performing team depends on cooperation, creativity, and open communication, which are hindered when trust erodes

Furthermore, the emotional and psychological burden placed on employees who repeatedly fill in for absent co-workers exacerbates resentment and fatigue. Even though some people might offer to help initially, frequent exposure to unfair and unequal workload distribution makes

them less tolerant. They are in turn more likely to become disengaged or eventually miss work. This cyclical nature of stress and disengagement indicates that absenteeism can quickly evolve from an individual issue into a systemic organisational challenge (King et al., 2020).

There were also reports of "silent withdrawal," where employees display minimal effort or reduced enthusiasm before transitioning to frequent absenteeism. Early warning indicators that managers noticed included clock-watching, lack of involvement, and emotional detachment. These results emphasise the necessity of training line managers to identify subtle signs of disengagement and take prompt action before attendance declines. Engagement, as defined by Kahn (1990), requires psychological safety, meaningfulness, and availability, which are three conditions that absenteeism directly undermines.

Through the study, the second objective was met, as the study effectively captured how absenteeism negatively affects workplace engagement through increased workload distribution, diminished trust, and lowered morale among remaining staff. This cascade effect reduces psychological safety and weakens team cohesion, which is crucial for a healthy workplace culture. Participants described how absenteeism leads to resentment among colleagues who must compensate, fostering a climate of suspicion and interpersonal strain. This dynamic undermines the sense of belonging and emotional investment in work, crucial drivers of engagement. Notably, the study highlighted that the impact is not only immediate but accumulates over time, affecting long-term team stability and employee well-being. Such findings underscore the need for organisations to monitor absenteeism closely, not just as a staffing issue but as a key determinant of organisational culture and engagement levels.

The findings align with the literature where participants' accounts strongly support the works of Zondo (2020), Grinza and Rycx (2020), and Côté et al. (2021), who describe how absenteeism erodes trust and causes fatigue that compromises engagement. The additional focus by participants on interpersonal resentment and suspicion adds richer, context-specific depth, illustrating how patterns of absence disrupt the social fabric within teams. This insight offers practical implications for team management and leadership in fostering resilience and maintaining engagement despite attendance challenges. There is no significant divergence, though the participants' detailed focus on emotional responses within teams enhances the existing theoretical framework, suggesting that future research could further explore absenteeism's emotional and relational consequences.

5.2.3 Objective 3: Assess the impact of absenteeism on productivity, employee morale and operational costs.

Research Question 2: How does absenteeism affect organisational productivity and employee morale?

As evidenced in the literature concerning enforceability and supportive leadership (Mone & London, 2018; Ngwenya & Utete, 2023), in today's organisations, formal policies, disciplinary action, and supportive programmes appear as the primary management strategies employed to regulate absenteeism. The findings revealed one of the established procedures requiring the employees to report their absence before a specific number of hours has passed before the designated commencement of the shift. This process would also trigger a return-to-work meeting when the employee returns. This procedure resonates with Miraglia and Johns (2021), who argue that consistent policy environments also discourage unjustified breaks.

Conversely, numerous managers mentioned challenges to be faced. Among these was the minimal lead time given by absentees to notify the company (sometimes just 15 minutes before the start of work), which was indeed causing problems in line with that described by Shifrin and Michel (2022). Verbal and written warnings of progressive discipline were some of the actions followed regularly. However, several participating managers said they had always walked a fine line between enforcing compliance and keeping the goodwill of employees. Violating the spirit of social exchange theory (Saks, 2022) by being extremely punitive affects employees' confidence. Such impaired trust is particularly undesirable when the absenteeism is involuntary or tied to much deeper mental health or addiction concerns.

Absenteeism often delays production lines and causes last-minute rescheduling, resulting in inefficient workflow execution. Contrary to popular belief, absenteeism does have an important impact on the company's bottom line. It is an unintended industrial action against the company because absenteeism is one of the causes of production falling below the target levels which are monitored during monthly performance reviews. Overtime pay, which is necessary to some extent to cover absent employees, also leads to a considerable escalation in operating costs. At times the associated costs exceed the benefits derived from maintaining short-term throughput.

These disruptions reflect the concept of operational fragility. Deming (2022) states that a well-structured production system should account for a reasonable level of employee absence through predictive forecasting and skill redundancy. However, as several frontline managers in this study indicated, productivity targets were frequently missed, not because of poor employee performance but due to absenteeism-induced gaps in shift coverage that created downstream delays, quality variations, and mechanical downtime.

Managers face a difficult dilemma: whether to absorb short-term losses through costly overtime or to operate with fewer shift, compromising service quality and risking some service-led agreements with clients. Participants mentioned that excessive overtime and temporary reassignments are costly and demoralising for the remaining staff. The view aligns with Grinza and Rycx (2020), who observed that the compounding effects of unscheduled leave negatively impact overall firm performance, especially in labour-intensive industries.

Attendance variability, a frequently mentioned sub-theme, was particularly disruptive in operations requiring consistent workflow, such as manufacturing lines with just-in-time processing. Several managers noted that absences in peak periods (e.g., Mondays, month-end, or the winter flu season) led to higher-than-usual volatility in output and financial reporting. Such findings mirror the concerns raised by Voordt and Jensen (2023), who found that companies with reactive rather than preventive attendance strategies experienced sharp spikes in operating inefficiencies and employee dissatisfaction.

The cost of managing this unpredictability is not only financial. Participants emphasised that morale declines significantly when present employees are asked to "stretch" beyond their capacity. This view echoes the position of Chanana and Sangeeta (2021), who argue that persistent overextension of employees to cover absenteeism leads to fatigue, disengagement, and eventually more absenteeism. In this context, absenteeism can perpetuate itself, leading to a cyclical decline in employee commitment and well-being that becomes costly to reverse.

From a governance standpoint, participants expressed that while return-to-work interviews and performance counselling were instituted as standard practice, they were insufficient to resolve repeat occurrences. The burden of monitoring, documenting, and managing attendance cases particularly for persistent short-term absences often diverted management's time from developmental work to reactive administration. This inefficiency aligns with findings by

Lohaus and Habermann (2021), who suggest that large amounts of time spent managing attendance matters correlates with higher indirect costs to the business due to lost leadership productivity. The data supports that absenteeism has a dual cost implication: it creates visible operational disruptions (missed production targets, overtime, bottlenecks) and invisible cultural strain (reduced engagement, increased tension, and leadership fatigue). As the literature proposes, a holistic response requires strategic alignment of health policies, flexible scheduling, early detection, and capacity forecasting, all under-leveraged components in the current case.

The third objective was met as the study confirmed that absenteeism significantly contributes to production inefficiencies, financial loss, and elevated overtime costs at Hulamin. Participants provided vivid examples of how absenteeism disrupts planned production schedules, delays delivery times, and necessitates costly last-minute staffing adjustments. Beyond direct financial costs, the study revealed less obvious but critical indirect costs, such as the time managers spend on crisis management and reallocating resources, and the adverse effect on employee morale that can reduce overall productivity. This broad cost perspective is essential for organisations to understand the full impact of absenteeism, extending beyond payroll and temporary staffing expenses to include opportunity costs and long-term workforce disengagement. The findings call for integrated absenteeism management strategies encompassing financial, operational, and human resource perspectives.

The findings align with the literature, and the participants perspectives were consistent with Deming (2022), Shifrin and Michel (2022), and Voordt and Jensen (2023), who identify absenteeism as a significant risk to organisational performance and financial stability. However, this study extends the understanding by highlighting underexplored indirect costs, particularly those related to managerial workload and workforce morale, which can cumulatively exacerbate productivity losses. Such findings support the development of a more comprehensive model for researching and calculating the costs of absenteeism. There is no divergence, though this study's detailed operational insights add practical value to the literature by showing how absenteeism impacts multiple levels of organisational function beyond immediate production line effects.

5.2.4 Objective 4: Investigate the role of employee engagement in mitigating absenteeism

Research Question 4: What role does employee engagement play in reducing absenteeism

The results of this study confirmed that employee engagement is a strong determinant in reducing absenteeism. Managers highlighted various mechanisms and interventions at Hulam, including employee assistance programmes, return-to-work conversations, early warning systems, and informal check-ins. These measures reflect a broader understanding that reducing absenteeism requires discipline, proactive engagement, and support. This view aligns with Saks (2022), who underscores the principles of social exchange theory: that employees reciprocate perceived support with increased commitment and attendance.

The study found that employee support programmes effectively built a sense of care and psychological safety. Line managers acknowledged that employees with access to counselling, mental health resources, and structured referral systems were more likely to return from absence with renewed motivation. These findings align with Chanana and Sangeeta (2021), who argue that holistic well-being frameworks addressing physical and psychological health can reduce stress-related absenteeism and enhance resilience. Similarly, De Oliveira et al. (2023) advocate for preventative health interventions as a strategic tool to reduce future time off.

Furthermore, managerial dialogue, especially return-to-work conversations, emerged as a critical sub-theme. Managers shared that these engagements offered a procedural opportunity to understand the cause of absence and a relational opportunity to express concern and reset expectations. It resonates with the findings of Park et al. (2022), who highlight the role of transformational leadership in reducing disengagement by fostering trust and communication. Participants noted that employees given time to explain their situations often felt less judged and more accountable moving forward.

Early intervention and pattern monitoring were also frequently employed to detect emerging absentee trends. Managers referenced attendance dashboards and scheduling reviews that helped identify repeat patterns or vulnerable employees. When discussed proactively, these conversations allowed for flexible support measures (e.g., change in shift times or task reallocation), which helped to re-engage employees before their absence became habitual. It

aligns with the strategic HR recommendations of Mone and London (2020), who argue that absenteeism should be treated as a lead indicator of disengagement rather than a lagging disciplinary issue.

The findings also emphasised the role of disciplinary actions still applied when absence patterns showed signs of abuse or inconsistency. However, the tone across interviews suggested that managers preferred this as a last resort, indicating a preference for supportive mechanisms over punitive ones. It reflects social exchange theory's caution against imbalance: employees disengage further if they feel overly monitored or penalised without care (Saks, 2022).

A further sub-theme, often underemphasised in absenteeism research, was using work shift adjustments as a strategic form of engagement. For example, flexible shifts, staggered starts, and rotational coverage systems were highlighted as measures to accommodate family demands or personal health needs. Managers noted that such adjustments helped retain attendance among skilled staff who might otherwise take frequent emergency leave. This notion is supported by the recommendations by Voordt and Jensen (2023), who suggest that physical flexibility, when embedded in operations, leads to lower levels of absenteeism and better employee retention.

Overall, the findings suggest that employee engagement when expressed through managerial empathy, workplace flexibility, meaningful conversation, and timely support significantly mitigates absenteeism. These findings do not diverge from existing literature but rather reinforce the idea that a multi-pronged and relational approach to engagement is essential in sustaining employee presence, particularly in high-pressure environments like manufacturing. The strategic implication is that absenteeism should not merely be tracked as a compliance issue but understood as a metric of employee connection, wellness, and morale.

The study objective was met as the study participants confirmed that employee engagement, the support programmes, workplace flexibility, open dialogue, and monitoring of patterns of absence effectively reduce absenteeism. These strategies foster a culture of mutual respect and understanding, empowering employees to manage personal challenges without resorting to unscheduled absences. The study illustrated how engagement is a preventative mechanism by addressing root causes, improving job satisfaction, and enhancing psychological safety. Participants emphasised the importance of leadership commitment and structured

communication channels as enablers of successful engagement initiatives. Furthermore, integrating monitoring tools allows for early identification of trends in absenteeism, enabling timely interventions before issues escalate. This holistic approach shows how engagement is not merely a reactionary tool but a proactive organisational asset that supports sustainable attendance.

The findings align with the literature. These views reflect the positions of Saks (2022), Park et al. (2022), and Chanana and Sangeeta (2021), who describe engagement as a critical protective factor against absenteeism, combining psychological and structural elements. The study reinforces the literature's argument that engagement requires compelling leadership vision, organisational structure, and empathetic practices. The findings also expand existing knowledge by demonstrating how monitoring technologies and data analytics can enhance engagement efforts through timely feedback and targeted support.

No divergence was observed; the study strengthens the theoretical proposition that engagement is a multi-dimensional, holistic solution requiring coordinated action at multiple organisational levels to reduce absenteeism effectively.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

Chapter Six concludes the study investigating employee absenteeism and its multifaceted impact on workplace engagement in the manufacturing sector, specifically focusing on Hulamini. The chapter consolidates key insights from all previous chapters, particularly the findings presented in Chapter 4 and the thematic analysis discussed in Chapter 5. It highlights how the aim and objectives of the study were achieved and how the core research questions were answered. The chapter also discusses the significance of the results in the larger framework of organisational behaviour and human resource management, particularly in developing nations like South Africa.

The study emphasised absenteeism's complex and multifaceted nature. Rather than treating absenteeism as an individual issue, this study adopted an organisational lens to explore how leadership, organisational culture, job satisfaction, mental health, and employee engagement interact to shape attendance behaviours. In addition, the research uncovered contemporary workplace trends such as quiet quitting and presenteeism, which blur the lines between physical presence and psychological engagement. The integration of human capital theory provides a solid conceptual basis for interpreting the results, suggesting that absenteeism can be both a warning sign of weakened psychological contracts within organisations as well as a consequence thereof.

The chapter confirms the studies' practical relevance for organisational leaders and human resources practitioners which outlines the recommendations for reducing absenteeism through increased well-being and involvement of managers. It concludes by reflecting on the limitations of the study and the directions for future research, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of the research contribution.

6.2 Aim of the study

The study aimed to explore the causes of employee absenteeism and examine its impact on workplace engagement in a South African manufacturing context. This aim was achieved through a qualitative, interpretive research design using semi-structured interviews with frontline managers at Hulamin. The choice of methodology allowed for a rich and nuanced understanding of absenteeism that moves beyond surface level metrics to explore the subjective experiences and organisational dynamics contributing to absenteeism at an organisation.

The study identified the primary drivers of absenteeism through thematic data analysis, including mental and physical health challenges, disengagement, family obligations, workplace conflict, ineffective leadership, and organisational culture. These causes aligned with both voluntary and involuntary dimensions of absenteeism. The results indicate a growing trend known as "quiet quitting," in which workers stay physically present but emotionally and psychologically disconnected, resulting in intentional and temporary absenteeism in the workplace.

The findings also show how absence damages trust, increases the workload of those employees in attendance and simultaneously lowers morale, all of which negatively impact workplace engagement. The study indicates how absenteeism can worsen an organisations performance culture when it becomes pervasive. The results, interpreted through relevant theoretical frameworks, validate the emphasis of human capital theory on the importance of investing in employees' well-being. Thus, the intended goal of the study was effectively achieved.

6.3 Fulfilment of research questions and research objectives

The research was structured around four core objectives, each addressed through a methodologically sound and theoretically informed process.

Research Question 1: What are the key factors leading to employee absenteeism in organisations?

The study identified various individual, organisational, and environmental factors contributing to absenteeism in the workplace. These included health issues (both mental and physical), burnout, substance abuse, family responsibility, lack of flexibility, toxic leadership, and workplace disengagement. A growing trend was the strategic use of short-term leave by

employees practicing 'silent resignation' or quiet quitting. This trend was most common when employees felt undervalued, overworked, or unsupported.

Objective 1: To identify the factors contributing to both voluntary and involuntary absenteeism and their perceived effect on engagement.

This objective was thoroughly explored through questions related to the perceived causes of absenteeism. Health issues, family responsibilities, job dissatisfaction, and lack of recognition were the most commonly cited reasons. Voluntary absenteeism was frequently associated with disengagement and low morale, whereas involuntary absenteeism was often linked to genuine medical circumstances or a family crisis. The concept of quiet quitting bridged both types, illustrating how employees tactically use short-term absences to disengage from toxic or unsatisfying work environments.

Research Question 2: How does absenteeism affect organisational productivity and employee morale?

Absenteeism adversely affects performance, particularly in settings like Hulamin that focus on production. Managers noticed that absence demotivated current workers, slowed production, and interfered with team functioning. The continued employee absence also connected to the increased overtime expenses, which impacts on profitability of the organisation. Morale was also significantly affected, with present employees often expressing dissatisfaction about carrying the additional workload.

Objective 2: To explore employee perceptions of how absenteeism affects workplace engagement

These responses were in alignment with the literature. Through thematic analysis of the participants' discussion, this goal was achieved. The interview discussion with the participants it confirmed the consistent reports of absenteeism that has a detrimental impact on team and individual involvement. Team members who are required to cover for absent coworkers expressed weariness and anger. This burden-sharing weakened team cohesion by fostering resentment and lowering motivation. In this way, absenteeism was found to erode both emotional and functional engagement across the organisation.

Objective 3: To assess the impact of absenteeism on productivity, employee morale and operational costs

Participants pointed out that absenteeism causes inefficiencies and additional expenses by interfering with operational continuity and frequently requiring job reallocation. According to managers, absence lowered morale in general, delayed projects, and created stress for current workers. Insufficient staffing caused some departments to produce lower quality work, worsening performance problems. Increased overtime compensation and the expense of deploying temporary substitutes were among the financial ramifications experienced by the managers that have to account for the high production costs.

Research Question 3: What role does employee engagement play in reducing absenteeism?

The findings of the study indicate that high levels of employee engagement can reduce absenteeism to which engagement strategies that promote recognition, fairness, communication, and work-life balance help employees feel valued and included. It is also demonstrated through managers who are invested in team-building activities, transparent feedback mechanisms, and wellness initiatives having reported higher attendance and stronger team cohesion. This practice by managers confirms that organisational investment in engagement yields emotional and operational returns.

Objective 4: To investigate the role of employee engagement in mitigating absenteeism

The interview responses described the value of proactive engagement strategies in reducing absenteeism. Managers who implemented regular check-ins, team recognition, and wellness initiatives reported less absenteeism. Employees who felt recognised, supported, and empowered to grow were likelier to maintain regular attendance. These findings reinforce the reciprocal nature of the employer-employee relationship in support of the human capital theory. Through the engagement practices that have been fostered, a sense of psychological safety and loyalty emerges, discouraging absenteeism.

6.4 Recommendations

1. Refine attendance policies: Simplify notification requirements to ensure clarity and consistency (e.g., a set timeframe for calling in) while including guidelines for emergency absences. Clearer attendance policies help reduce confusion among employees and managers, enabling fair and consistent enforcement. Including defined steps for planned and unplanned absences fosters accountability and operational stability.
2. Strengthen supportive leadership: Provide leadership development programmes focusing on empathy, conflict resolution, and motivational skills to foster a culture of trust. Training leaders to understand and support their teams enhances communication, reduces workplace tension, and encourages employee engagement. Supportive leadership also improves retention and minimises absenteeism through proactive problem-solving.
3. Enhance well-being programmes, expand mental health resources, EAPs, and wellness initiatives to address stress, burnout, and substance misuse proactively. Integrate this into attendance policies and create an employee awareness drive that will allow employees to take up the initiatives addressing the challenges they face early, rather than at a later stage when the issues of absenteeism have escalated to the level that impacts their jobs.
4. Encourage flexible scheduling: Where operationally feasible, implement or refine flexible/remote work options to accommodate family responsibilities and reduce short-notice leave. Flexibility empowers employees to better manage personal obligations without compromising productivity. It enhances morale, reduces stress-related absenteeism, and demonstrates organisational commitment to employee well-being and work-life balance.
5. Improve data monitoring: Integrate kronos (or equivalent) logs with real-time alerts so managers can promptly identify absentee trends and offer early interventions. Enhanced monitoring enables proactive management of attendance issues, helps detect patterns such as habitual lateness or absenteeism, and supports timely, targeted responses to prevent further disruption and improve accountability.
6. Recognition initiatives: The organisation could institute a consistent recognition programme for good attendance and productivity, bridging the gap between extrinsic rewards and intrinsic motivators

6.5 Limitations

The sample was limited in size because of the constraints of this research; the resulting number of participants might not be enough to encapsulate the broad spectrum of experiences in absenteeism for the organisation. It would have been rewarding to involve different focus groups or members from different organisations with various disciplinary systems.

This generality might be a limitation of the study, especially seen through the lenses of front-line management.

The problems and findings can only be gauged from predominantly operational rather than strategic views, providing feedback that is not sufficiently nuanced or useful from the perspectives of non-managerial personnel. Future research might involve staff members from various professional backgrounds and organisations.

Another limitation was the data collection method based on participant self-reporting and the retrospective stance. Because managers recalled absentees and disciplinary actions, their interpretations and memories could be susceptible to recall, dialogue bias, and personal biases.

6.6 Future studies

Future research might facilitate comparison across different industries, cultural contexts, and workforce demographics regarding the success of the intervention strategies proposed, after which ways interventions should be differentially applied can be explored further. . Presented with longitudinal depth, this study could come across as a systematic representation of other possibilities concerning workplace changes, such as hybrid work, AI scheduling, and shifting social norms that might alter absenteeism. Further, quantitative data could be gathered, with demonstrated measured outcomes before and after applying holistic anti-absenteeism strategies to confirm their efficacy in this context.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Letter



11 November 2024

Pinky Precious Hillman (214552217)
School of Man Info Tech & Gov
Westville Campus

Dear PP Hillman,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00007762/2024

Project title: Understanding employee absenteeism and its impact on workplace engagement

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 26 September 2024 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 11 November 2025.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)
/nng

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X57001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

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Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix B: Gatekeeper letter



CONSENT FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This letter confirms and, as a result of this, grants Pinky Hillman, student number 214552217, permission to conduct her research at Hulanini.

Study title – Understanding employee absenteeism and its impact on workplace engagement.

The student should note HULAMIN Safety and Human Resources policies and procedures before conducting her studies and ensure that a HULAMIN representative accompanies them throughout the process.

Yours Sincerely

Group Executive: Human Capital
24 June 2024

[illegible]

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL For research with human participants

INFORMED CONSENT RESOURCE TEMPLATE

Note to researchers: Notwithstanding the need for scientific and legal accuracy, every effort should be made to produce a consent document that is as linguistically clear and simple as possible, without omitting important details as outlined below. Certified translated versions will be required once the original version is approved.

There are specific circumstances where witnessed verbal consent might be acceptable, and circumstances where individual informed consent may be waived by HSSREC.

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: 12 November 2024

Dear Participant”,

My name is Pinky Hillman Masters of Commerce student 214552217 from the University of Kwazulu Natal.

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research on **Understanding employee absenteeism and its impact on workplace engagement**. To determine the effect that Absenteeism has in the workplace environment and how it impacts workplace engagement.

The supervisor for the research study is Prof Isabel Martins : martinsm@ukzn.z.ac.za

The study is expected to enrol (10-15 participants in total over 3 departments). It will involve the following procedures, an interview process with a questionnaire. The duration of your participation, if you choose to enroll and remain in the study, is expected to be 20-30 minutes .

I hope that the study will create the benefits of a deeper understanding of absenteeism's impact in the workplace and the effect it has on employee engagement. There will be no risk associated with the study

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number HSSREC/00007762/2024).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher Supervisor Prof Isabel Martins martinsm@ukzn.ac.za or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in the research is voluntary and participants may withdraw from the research at anytime. In the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation the participants will not incur penalty or loss of treatment or other benefit to which they are normally entitled. Researcher terminate the participant from the study should they not be available for the study due to personal reasons or illness.

There will be no costs incurred by participants as a result of participation in the study. All information provided will be kept confidential and will not be made available to any other persons without the consent of the participant. All information gathered will be stored in an access password file only known to the researcher.

CONSENT

I (Name) have been informed about the study entitled (**Understanding employee absenteeism and its impact on workplace engagement**) by Ms Pinky hillman.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study which relates to her academic study.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I am usually entitled to.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher Supervisor Prof Isabel Martins martinsm@ukzn.ac.za .

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Witness
(Where applicable)

Date

Signature of Translator
(Where applicable)

Date

Appendix D: Research instrument interview protocol

Interview questions for management

Research Interview Guide: Understanding employee absenteeism and its impact on workplace engagement

Introduction

1. Purpose of the Interview:

Explain that this interview aims to gain insights into the reasons behind employee absenteeism and its impact on workplace engagement.

- Assure confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honest and open responses.

2. Consent:

- Obtain verbal or written consent to participate in the study.
- Inform participants that they can withdraw at any time without any consequences.

Questions

1. Absenteeism Understanding and Policy

1. How would you define absenteeism based on your understanding?
2. What do you believe is the primary cause of employee absenteeism in your department?

2. Absenteeism Rates and Types

1. How would you describe the absenteeism rate in your department?
2. What types of absenteeism (e.g., short-term, long-term, frequent, sporadic) are most common in your experience?

3. Impact on Engagement

1. Can you describe the ways in which absenteeism has impacted engagement at work?
2. How does absenteeism within the team influence individual roles and overall engagement?

4. Workplace Environment

1. How would you describe the level of employee engagement in your workplace?
2. How do you manage and respond to both positive and negative performance among your employees?

Conclusion

Summary and Additional Comments:

Do you have any additional comments or suggestions regarding absenteeism and workplace engagement?

Thank the participant for their time and valuable insights.

Appendix F Language Editor Certificate



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Certificate of editing

18 July 2025

Name: Pinky Hillman

Title: Understanding employee absenteeism and its impact on workplace engagement

This serves to confirm that the above document was edited substantively by members of the KZN Language Institute's professional English language editing team. The document was returned to the author with tracked changes and comments intended to correct errors and to clarify meaning. It was the author's responsibility to attend to these changes.



J. Kerchhoff

Director of the KwaZulu-Natal Language Institute

KZN Language Institute – Transforming Words