A Hospitality Industry Case Study: The Impact of Workers Absenteeism at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa Western Cape

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Abstract:  
Absenteeism is the frequent or habitual absence from work and is seen as the biggest cause of lost time and decreased productivity in organisations. However, the Vineyard Hotel and Spa in Cape Town, which employ 300 permanent employees, is experiencing a high rate of absenteeism. The research problem is that if sufficient attention is not paid to the high absenteeism rate, the Vineyard Hotel and Spa will run the risk of losing valuable workers and customers; hence it will threaten the company’s finances. An extensive study of related literature on the topic was undertaken. A multi-disciplinary approach was adopted, whereby literature from areas of strategic management, human resource management, economics and marketing were consulted. The nature of the research dictated both qualitative and quantitative methodologies for a better understanding of the research problem that was identified. Qualitative research involved face-to-face interviews with 8 managers. In addition, a sample size of N=24 was identified to complete the quantitative research questionnaires, choosing participants that manifested certain characteristics in which the researcher was interested. Data analysed revealed the absence of a recognised absenteeism management and monitoring system, lack of accurate recording of absenteeism by managers, as well as a lack of communication between managers and workers. The research conclusively formulated recommendations to the Vineyard Hotel and Spa in order to address the above-mentioned problem.

Keywords: Hotel Industry, Absenteeism policy, Employees, Human resource management, Strategic analysis.

INTRODUCTION

According to Cascio and Boudreau (2010:52) absenteeism can be seen as the failure to report for work as scheduled, regardless of the reason. However, Mathis and Jackson (2007:82) suggest that absenteeism at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa could be influenced by many interrelated factors, some of which could be avoided if managers understood the causes of this problem. The author further states that the advantages of implementing an absenteeism prevention programme in the hospitality industry by using a combination approach of reward and punishment, could substantially alleviate the absenteeism problem. In related studies, which were conducted by Van Dierendonck, Le Blanc and van Breukelen (2002:23), employee absenteeism has been extensively stressed. In addition, absenteeism is a costly phenomenon influencing the overall performance of the company’s productivity, which is a vital factor in the hospitality industry. Therefore, absenteeism is considered as one of the most important challenges in Human Resource Management (HRM).

Location of the study

An extensive study related to workers’ absenteeism was undertaken at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa in Newlands, Cape Town, hence permanent FT and Part-Time (PT) employees were the focal point.

Vineyard Hotel and Spa
The Vineyard Hotel & Spa in Colinton Road, Newlands, is situated on the banks of the Liesbeeck River. The hotel is famous for its warmth and efficient service. More than that, the hotel grounds feature abundant flora and fauna and have been developed into one of the most beautiful landscaped gardens in the Western Cape, with a mix of indigenous Cape Flora including Stinkwood, Yellowwood, Hard Pear, Wild Olive, Coral and Cabbage Trees. Birdwatcher guests will enjoy seeing many species of birds such as Hadeda, Cape Sugarbird and Orange Breasted Sunbird. Moreover, there are vineyards along the river, supplying grapes to their five wine partners, namely Meerlust, Simonsig, Warwick Estate, Waterford Estate and Klein Constantia. The Vineyard Hotel and Spa has a history dating back to the late eighteenth century, as explained in the Fact sheet (2011:8).

Organisational structure of the Vineyard Hotel and Spa

The centralised organisational structure at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa is headed by the Group Operations Director, Lex Petousis, assisted by the Operational Managers, namely the General Manager, Roy Davies and the Financial Director, Hilary Seymour, who are in turn assisted by four Support Managers, namely the HR Manager, the Horticulture Manager, the Maintenance Manager and the Security Manager. Moreover, each department has its own Departmental Manager, namely the Food and Beverage Manager, the Rooms Division Manager and the Group Sales and Marketing Manager, as discussed by McShane (2011:7). In a broad manner, the Group Operations Director has the overall responsibility of the successful running of the hotel, including developing the long-term plans. The General Manager has the function of coaching and facilitating management planning and the alignment of workflow and resources to key strategic priorities. On the other hand, the Financial Director is responsible for setting and implementing marketing and product related strategies, at the same time effectively maintaining and co-ordinating the financial aspects of the Vineyard Hotel and Spa. The Support Managers provide strategic support and develop initiatives through engagement with the departmental staff. The Departmental Managers are responsible for the smooth-running of the daily operations by ensuring the planning, organizing, leading and controlling of their departments. However, the above-mentioned team all work together to ensure the translation of the mission, core values and strategies of the Vineyard Hotel and Spa to all stakeholders, as stated by McShane (2011:22).

Research problem

Absenteeism in the workplace can generate direct financial costs as well as indirect costs, such as reduced productivity, work done by less experienced and over-worked staff, and the loss of customers. The emotional costs of absenteeism include resentment by other staff members, frustration and anger. The workers’ regularity is a large contributing factor towards the survival of the Vineyard Hotel and Spa. The current absenteeism rate of 6%, is negatively affecting the productivity level required to run a hotel of such a caliber. The current research problem is that if sufficient attention is not paid to the factors behind the high absenteeism rate, it is a foregone conclusion that the Vineyard Hotel and Spa will not yield their desired results.

Research objectives

1) To identify the causes of the high rate of absenteeism at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa.
2) To identify alternate solutions which can alleviate absenteeism at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa.
3) To analyse the losses suffered by the Vineyard Hotel and Spa due to absenteeism.
4) To ascertain the absenteeism at different levels of the organisation’s hierarchy.

Significance of the research

Absenteeism is a drain on the global economy, including hospitality in South Africa. The hospitality sector in SA is important owing to the segment of customers. Indeed, local and international customers should be attended with care in hotels in order to attract more tourists, who will contribute to the country’s economy.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Robbins, Judge, Odendaal and Roodt (2009:512) argue that various research conducted on absenteeism in South Africa converge to the similar negative conclusions including the economic cash loss estimated to be R12 billion per year. In this context, absenteeism is perceived by South African managers as one of the contemporary issues. When employees fail to report to work, the company’s revenue is threatened through insufficient productivity. More than that, absenteeism adds stress on regular and punctual employees, who are then more likely to be absent in the near future. However, Bohlander and Snell (2009:94) state that absenteeism due to sickness, accidents and serious family problems are unavoidable. However, chronic absenteeism should be a signal of possible non-addressed problems either at home or at work. In addition, absenteeism’s corollary is strengthened by extra staff hired casually to counteract the effects of absent employees. Furthermore, casual staff generate higher expenses, lower profits and poor service owing to lack of commitment. A study conducted by Prince (2009:2) about workers absenteeism in SA revealed that South African textile industries have also been affected by high absenteeism rates, which was attributed to workers’ drug addiction. However, currently the highest recording of staff absenteeism in SA is in the mining industry, followed by the medical and hospital industries and then local government, as discussed by Sapa (2010:1). The least effects of absenteeism were recorded in the financial sector. Of the late, mines have severe conditions as well as strict health and safety regulations, whereas the financial sector employed skilled workers. However, hotel workers are differently classified and their absenteeism motivational factors should be different.

History of hotel industry in Cape Town

Jan van Riebeeck arrived at the Cape in 1652 to establish a refreshment station for passing ships, which led to the opening of South Africa’s first hotel, the House of Accommodation, on the 18th May 1656. It consisted of a large sleeping hall with a communal ablution block. Furthermore, in 1801 the Fountain Hotel opened in Cape Town, followed by the George Tavern in 1810. Thereafter, in 1820 the Royal Hotel opened in Paarl (Lubbe, 2003:114). However, for quality service purpose, hotels are graded according to the star system. Indeed, a five star hotel offers the highest standards of service, while a one star hotel offers services of a lower level (Hewitt & Dreyer, 2008:179). Recently, in 2007 World’s Best Awards survey, nine of South Africa’s hotels were listed amongst the top 100 hotels in the world (Hewitt & Dreyer, 2008:179). Furthermore, the tourism industry is one of the fastest growing sectors and generates 7% of jobs in the economy of SA, as stated by Duncan (2008:155). According to Bonehill (2010:252), a hotel worker is a person undertaking any hotel duties under either written or verbal contract of employment. Ferguson (2010:19) states that hotel workers include cleaning staff, chefs, waiters and waitresses, bar tenders, kitchen staff, clerks, bookkeepers, accountants, switchboard operators, receptionists, maintenance and managerial staff. Hence the above mentioned workers’ efforts should be strategically co-ordinated in order for the Vineyard Hotel and Spa to maintain their competitive advantage.

Strategic analysis of the industry

Strategically, it has been recommended to firms operating in the hospitality industry to conduct external and internal factors evaluations before any sensitive decision, as stated by Ehlers and Lazenby (2010:242). However, David (2009:220) further states that strategic analysis implies that alternative courses of action taken should be determined in order for the industry to achieve its mission, vision and objectives. Moore (2008:62), highlights the importance of service excellence by staff in the hospitality industry. According to Sturman, Corgel and Verma (2011:12), excellent service incorporates the workers being friendly, helpful, prompt and anticipatory, so as to ensure that the customers’ expectations are exceeded. Furthermore, Pizam (2008:425) argues that inefficient hotel management could lead to various challenges including a high staff absenteeism rate.
According to Nankervis (2005:340), an organisation can judge their workers’ satisfaction and commitment according to their absenteeism trends. Moreover, absenteeism costs and consequences need to be properly managed and service managers need to address and analyse absenteeism rates by improving employment conditions which will lead to improved customer service, productivity and competitiveness.

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Delineation of the research

This research is related to the workers’ absenteeism at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa, which is located in Cape Town, where the field study was conducted. The study excluded conflict management resulting from absenteeism and did not recommend any labour court proceedings to the Vineyard Hotel and Spa. The current study recommendations should be reconciled with future research in the hospitality industry to recommend appropriate absenteeism conflict-based management in hotels operating in Cape Town.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Brynard and Hanekom (2006:36), maintain that research methodology focuses on the process of research and the decisions that the researcher has to make in order to execute the research project. The authors further state that there are two basic research methods, namely qualitative and quantitative research, which was used in this study. Qualitative research involves considering human actions from an “emic” perspective, as stated by Babbie and Mouton (2001: 217). The authors further state that the advantage of the qualitative method is that it allows one to gain an in-depth understanding of the research problem that was identified, as discussed by Babbie et al. (2001:306), while interviews were utilised as a research technique which enabled the researcher to discover new ideas.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted amongst low, middle and top management of the Vineyard Hotel and Spa. Brynard et al (2006:40) argued that the meeting of two minds in a face-to-face conversation might allow the interviewee to open up and add valuable information to the research, which could extract vital information that would otherwise not be covered in the questionnaire.
A quantitative research design was utilised, as the intention was to investigate from an outsider’s perspective and obtain a detached objective view of the facts, as stated by Welman, Kruger and Mitchell (2005:9). The quantitative approach requires that the data should be expressed in numbers, as stated by Struwig and Stead (2001:7), which is suitable for large amounts of data collected from a large target group.

**Sampling**

According to Struwig and Stead (2001:122), purposeful sampling is concerned with choosing participants that manifest certain characteristics that the researcher is interested in. For this research a sample size of N=24 was selected. Sampling is known for avoiding bias, even though it is time consuming.

**Questionnaire design**

Struwig et al. (2001:90) provide guidelines with regards to the content, phrasing and structuring of questions. The main advantage of this method was its familiarity to users and the fact that it allowed users to complete the questionnaire at their own convenience, while thinking about the answers. The author further states the disadvantages to be a low response rate and the fact that filling out a questionnaire could be time consuming.

**Research design**

Both quantitative and qualitative research needs to follow an orderly and systematical plan and format; hence the research design enables the researcher to achieve this purpose, as stated by Taylor (2005:17). More than that, without a well developed research design, the researcher has no systematic plan for scientifically carrying out the research. The purpose of research design is to avoid the evidence collected not addressing the initial research questions. In addition, it is an overall plan that guides the researcher through data collection and analysis phases of the research project. More than that, it is a logical model of proof that allows the researcher to make assumptions concerning relations among the research variables; namely absenteeism, the Vineyard Hotel and Spa, motivation and personal circumstances. Finally, the research design acts as a framework, which details the type of information to be collected, the data sources and the data collection methodology, as stated by Mendes (2011:25).

**Research variables**

A variable is a characteristic of individuals, groups, organisations, human products or events, or the conditions to which they are exposed, as stated by Welman et al. (2008:17). In addition, variables can be either dependent or independent. The dependent variable is the factor which the researcher observes and measures to establish how it is influenced by the independent variable. Furthermore, dependent variables can change depending on the independent variable. For the purpose of this research, absenteeism rate and the Vineyard Hotel and Spa were dependent variables. However, Johnson and Christensen (2011:40) stated that independent variables are factors that cause the change in other variables. The researcher was interested in the relationship between the dependent and independent variables, and to establish a relationship between the two. In this study, independent variables included motivation and personal circumstances, allowing the researcher to evaluate the relationship between the research variables by using the chosen random sample. The figure 3.3 below illustrates research variables which were utilised.
Motivational factors at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa

According to Borkowski (2010:105), motivation can be defined as an inner desire to satisfy an unsatisfied need. The process of motivation plays a key role in improving workers’ performance, which makes the organisations, including the Vineyard Hotel and Spa, more productive. In general, workers will be motivated to achieve the goals of the organisation if they believe that their best interests are closely linked to the interests of the organisation they work for. The most satisfying work environment for employees is one that combines their best interests with the best interests of the organisation. Maslow’s theory of motivation was based on the assumptions that people always want more than they have and that peoples’ needs hierarchy arise in order from the least to the most important, as stated by Muthu (2009:46). Managers can motivate workers by providing for their physiological and security needs, they can include employees in groups to satisfy their social needs, as well as create working environments where their self-esteem and self-actualisation needs are met, as stated by Smit, Cronje, Brevis and Vrba (2007:340). As can be seen from Maslow’s Theory of Motivation, involving workers plays a large role in motivating them. The two areas which managers can use to involve employees are participation and empowerment, as this changes the way in which workers perform their job. Participation is when workers have a say in how they do their own work, whereas empowerment allows workers to set their own work goals, as well as be involved in decision-making and problem-solving. Through participation and empowerment workers will increase their job satisfaction, and therefore work harder, especially when they see encouraging results. Their need for achievement, recognition and responsibility will be realised, which in turn will lead to improved self-esteem, thus ensuring they have a higher level of commitment, as stated by Moorhead (2010:125). No hospitality organisation can succeed unless they have a reasonably high level of commitment from their workers, so hotel managers and supervisors must have an understanding of motivation to enable them to maintain and motivate the workers. However, workers cannot be motivated by their managers as motivation comes from within. In the hospitality industry, workers need to work in an environment in which they can self-motivate. It is of utmost importance in the hospitality industry that the workers have a strong motivational commitment as it is a service industry dealing with customers, as discussed by Sommerville (2007:312).

Significance of the research

Absenteeism is a drain on the economy of SA, as explained in “The Cost of Absenteeism” (2009:12). More than that, it has negative effects on the Vineyard Hotel and Spa due to lost productivity and other related costs. The hospitality sector is particularly of importance as they provide services to local and international customers. The industry represents a country’s mirror and visitors’ shopping window, which could influence SA’s perception beyond borders.

Data analysis and interpretation

This is a detailed data analysis and interpretation based on workers’ absenteeism at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa. Qualitative research involved face-to-face interviews which were supplemented by quantitative research. The interviews were conducted amongst 8 managerial staff who provided the researcher with more insights. Furthermore, a self-administered questionnaire divided into 2 sections was administered. Indeed, data regarding demographic characteristics was used
to profile respondents, whereby content-based data enabled the researcher to address the research problem that was identified. The problem was that if sufficient attention is not paid to the high absenteeism rate, the Vineyard Hotel and Spa would run the risk of losing valuable staff and customers, which will result in a loss of profits.

Dependents

The rationale of this data was to establish a relationship between workers’ social problems at home and their professional obligations.

![Figure 1: Respondents grouped by number of dependents](image1)

Respondents’ views

**Level of education**
The rationale of this data was to establish a relationship between employees’ tasks and their intellectual capacities.

![Figure 2: Respondents grouped by level of education](image2)

Respondents’ views

**Respondents’ positions held at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa**
The rationale of this data was to establish relationships between workers’ categories and motivating factors related to work attendance.
Respondents’ views

Figure 3: Respondents grouped by positions

Perception of co-workers attendance at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa
The rationale of this data was to monitor workers’ regularity at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa.

Respondents’ views

Figure 4: Respondents’ perception of co-workers attendance

Perception of workers own attendance at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa
However, self attendance evaluation revealed that 88% of workers perceived their own attendance as excellent, with the remaining 12% perceiving their own attendance as average.
Attitudes and morale at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa

The Table 1 shows that the average of 65.5% of respondents (16% strongly agree plus 49.5% agree) argued that absenteeism affects attitudes and morale of workers. However, 34.5% (25% disagree and 9.5% strongly disagree) of them did not admit that absenteeism has a negative effect on attitudes and morale of workers at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa.

Table 1: Attitude and morale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude and Morale at work</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Financial impact of absenteeism

Data analysed in Table 2 revealed that an average of 70% of respondents (30% strongly agree plus 40% agree) argued that absenteeism has a financial impact on the company’s financial statements. However, 24% of them (21% disagree plus 3% strongly disagree) do not correlate absenteeism and financial statements.

Table 2: Financial impact of absenteeism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial effects of absenteeism on the Vineyard Hotel and Spa</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effects of absenteeism on customer care at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa

Table 3 reveals that 60.5% of respondents (16.5% strongly agree plus 35% agree) argued that absenteeism affects customer care at the hotel. However, 30.5% of them (20% disagree plus 10.5% strongly disagree) thought that absenteeism does not negatively affect the customer care service of the hotel.

Table 3: Effects of absenteeism on customer care at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effects of absenteeism on customer care at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Efficient handling of workers’ absenteeism by management

Table 4 shows that 72% of respondents (20% strongly agree plus 52% agree) argue that conflict-related absenteeism is efficiently managed. However, 12% of them (10% disagree plus 2% strongly disagree) believe that the management team is inefficient in terms of managing conflict-related absenteeism at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa.

Table 4: Efficient handling of workers’ absenteeism by management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers’ absenteeism is handled efficiently by management</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of face-to-face interviews which were held with managers

The second section of the study was covered by face-to-face interviews with 8 managers of various sections of the Vineyard Hotel and Spa. The interviews were held in the managers’ offices, where the same 5 questions were asked to each manager. Only managers displaying characteristics that could interest the researcher were selected by the Human Resource (HR) manager for the purpose of the interviews. However, respondents were encouraged to enlighten wherever possible, which enabled the researcher to address the problem that was identified.

How do you feel when a worker is absent?

Of the managers interviewed, there was a general feeling of frustration, irritation, annoyance and discouragement when workers were absent. The majority of them admitted that it causes additional pressure on the normal operations.

How does absenteeism affect operations at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa?

From this concern, the 8 respondents conclusively argued that absenteeism does affect the hotel’s operations. Moreover, absenteeism is very challenging when the hotel is fully booked and customers are desperately waiting for better service delivery.

What is the financial estimated cash loss due to absenteeism?

When posed this question, the majority of the managers interviewed had no current data. Broadly, some argued that it was never calculated, whereas others believed that it was beyond their power.

Do you have policies that regulate absenteeism?

The majority of managers interviewed were of the general opinion that there were policies in place at the HR department. In addition, each department is responsible for submitting their own absenteeism statistics. It was stated by one of the managers that they have a busy schedule and do not always get the time to do all the administration jobs.

How do you handle workers who abuse absenteeism?

The general answers to the above-mentioned question were that if the managers felt that absenteeism was being abused, some would address the issue with counseling, while others would give either a written or verbal warning.
General conclusion and recommendations

Findings revealed that the absenteeism rate at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa was relatively higher than the average; hence it is recommended to management to introduce effective absenteeism monitoring and management measures. However, relying on a purely disciplinary approach to manage absenteeism is likely to be met with little success. Furthermore, the real value of absence measuring can only be realised if the information recorded is efficiently interpreted and acted upon. More than that, once patterns of absenteeism can be determined, it creates a powerful tool at the employer’s disposal in analysing, understanding, and managing absenteeism. The advantages of absence monitoring and recordkeeping will assist in keeping track of absence on an individual level, analyse group trends, and to be aware of changes over time. Indeed, motivation of workers will be greater if there is a proper match between the employee and the job they are doing, job enrichment, rewards for good performance and clear attendance standards. Once an attendance policy has been developed, it should be communicated to all staff at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa and consistently applied. From the data analysed, the following general recommendations were formulated:

- The Vineyard Hotel and Spa should make use of an automated tracking system, which will allow absenteeism figures to be accurately and effectively monitored.
- There should be a well-defined absenteeism policy, which has clear guidelines for dealing with various situations.
- Managers should undergo specialized training through the HR department where they are trained to record absences and keep accurate records of their department as a whole, as well as of individual workers.
- Constant assessment of absenteeism should be conducted.

- Manager’s performance levels should also be determined according to their staff’s absenteeism rates.

CONCLUSION

This research was based on a strategic analysis of workers’ absenteeism within selected hotels in Cape Town: case of the Vineyard Hotel and Spa, which is situated in Newlands. The investigation into the high absenteeism rate was the main research objective. In addition, the research dependent variables were the Vineyard Hotel and Spa as well as the absenteeism rate, with the independent variables being employees’ motivation and personal circumstances. An extensive literature review revealed that absenteeism is a disruptive event which causes extensive loss of productivity to an organisation. However, workers who engage in an employment relationship are expected to act in the best interests of the organisation. Therefore a competent HR department is required to deal with the problem of absenteeism effectively, efficiently and competently. Qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were utilised. Qualitative research data was collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 8 managers of various departments, while quantitative research data involved the completion of questionnaires by a sample group of N=24. Microsoft Excel was utilised to analyse and interpret the data collected, which clearly indicated that managers were overworked and that absenteeism was not being effectively dealt with. Managers are continually searching for better ways in which to handle the absenteeism of their workers. However, certain workers have a sense of entitlement and think it is their right to be absent from work. The findings of this research revealed that the two most important factors regarding the improvement of attendance rates at the Vineyard Hotel and Spa are the introduction of an absence management and monitoring system, as well as improving communication between managers and workers.
REFERENCES


