

Absenteeism in a Represented Environment

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects of attitudinal and demographic variables on employees' decisions to engage in voluntary absenteeism in a unionized work environment. The 79 unionized participants worked for a national automotive corporation and completed a paper-based survey measuring organizational perceptions and attitudes. Researchers combined these findings with demographic data and archival absence reports and used regression analyses for interpretation purposes. Findings suggested a main effect of job satisfaction on voluntary absenteeism and interactive effects of tenure and organizational trust on voluntary absenteeism (lower-tenured employees with low levels of organizational trust have higher absence rates).

Keywords: Absenteeism, Unions, Job Satisfaction, Tenure, Organizational Trust

1. Introduction

Employee absenteeism is problematic for many corporations, particularly in times of crisis and flux (Wagar, 2001). Robinson (2002) stated, “an unscheduled absence is like a stone dropped into a still pond: The impact ripples outward in ever-increasing waves, affecting the organization at several levels” (p. 7). In fact, absenteeism impacts productivity and bottom-line profits dramatically through direct and indirect pathways, such as wage replacement, missed revenue opportunities and low workgroup morale, to name a few. Absenteeism is also a form of withdrawal behavior that is associated with employee turnover. In two relatively thorough meta-analyses, the relationship between absenteeism and turnover consistently ranged from about 0.29 to 0.36 (Griffeth et al., 2000). However, on the positive side, effective attendance management dangles an organizational carrot of decreased turnover, increased productivity, a competitive edge, and sustained profit (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998; Robinson, 2002). Therefore, reducing absenteeism is an intensely practical issue. Interestingly, most of the research that has demonstrated the practicality of understanding absenteeism in the work force has been done in non-represented or non-unionized work environments. Little research has been conducted to understand whether factors that influence absenteeism are the same for represented (a.k.a., bargained-for or unionized work) environments.

Although comparatively little research has been conducted on absenteeism in unionized environments, this does not mean the need is not present. On the contrary, absenteeism is of particular concern in unionized workforces, as it often runs rampant throughout non-management employees who typically enjoy lucrative benefit policies and relatively high levels of job security (Sagie, 1998). Due to its importance and the paucity of research in this area, the goal of this paper was to further the understanding of absenteeism in the often inaccessible population of bargained-for employees. To this end, the current study attempted to predict how job satisfaction, organizational trust, and tenure affect absenteeism in a unionized work environment. However, when researching absenteeism, it is necessary to understand how the absence literature groups/defines different types of absences – not all absences are equal.

2. Absence Groupings

Employee absenteeism occurs for numerous reasons, such as injury, illness, mental health issues, and family-related constraints (Robinson, 2002). Most researchers dichotomize absences as either voluntary or involuntary, the former encompassing discretionary absence due to organizational withdrawal and the latter referring to unavoidable absences (Sagie, 1998). Voluntary absence can manifest itself in the form of a one-time “mental health” day or as a means to extend weekends or vacations with a convenient illness or emergency.

Sometimes voluntary absences take the form of chronic abuse, and employees use weeks of protected (and unwarranted) Family Medical Leave (FML) time or make fraudulent disability claims. In fact, as stated above, voluntary absence often times can be attributed to withdrawal behavior of an employee that is unsatisfied with their work environment. Conversely, involuntary absence includes any legitimate health or emergency situation that is truly beyond the employee's control, such as an accident, a disease, or an injury to the employee or his/her family. Often only the employee knows the legitimacy of the claim, leaving researchers with the difficult task of teasing apart important theoretically distinctive constructs (Harrison & Martocchio, 1998). Despite the difficulty of grouping absences into either category, we focused on voluntary absence in this study because it is typically considered to be influenced by organizational initiatives intended to reduce absenteeism, whereas involuntary absence is typically considered out of the control of employees and employers (Gaudine & Saks, 2001; Markham et al., 2002).

3. Predictors of absenteeism in the workplace

Muchinsky's (1977) landmark study on factors of workplace absenteeism highlighted correlations between absence and several demographic or individual difference variables such as age, tenure, and gender. Since then, a myriad of research has found other factors related to absenteeism: employees with more tenure are less likely to be absent (Brown, 1996; Ladd, Moss, Fearing, & Stetzer, 2001; Rhodes & Steers, 1990); women are absent more than men (Hui & Lee, 2000; Martocchio, 1989; Rhodes & Steers, 1990; Sagie, 1998; Shaw & Gupta, 2001; but see Iverson & Deery, 2001; Mason & Griffin, 2003; & Griffith et al., 2000 for exceptions); and older workers are absent less than younger ones (Gellatly, 1995; Hardy, Woods, & Wall, 2003; Hui & Lee, 2000; Rentsch & Steel, 1998; Rhodes & Steers, 1990; Sagie, 1998; Shaw & Gupta, 2001; but see Judge, Martocchio, & Thoresen, 1997 for an exception). In terms of race, Roth, Huffcut, and Bobko's (2003) meta-analysis found that blacks were absent more than whites. Other individual differences found to have small effects on employee absence include trait affect (Iverson & Deery, 2001), self-esteem (Duffy, Shaw, & Stark, 2000; Hui & Lee, 2000), alcohol use (Iverson & Deery, 2001), and anxiety and depression (Hardy et al., 2003).

Along with individual differences, the characteristics of the job itself have been found to be significantly predictive of absenteeism. In their meta-analysis of job characteristics, Eby, Freeman, Rush, and Lance (1999) found that skill variety, autonomy, and feedback are significantly predictive of absences. Other research has found small but significant contextual factors as predictors of absence, such as task identity (Rentsch & Steel, 1998), flextime (Baltes et al., 1999), job complexity (Fried, Melamed, & Ben-David, 2002), job demands (Bakker, Demerouti, de Boer, & Schaufeli, 2003), job scope (Rentsch & Steel, 1998), compensation and benefits (Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002; Goldberg & Waldman, 2000), promotions (Lam & Schaubroeck, 2000), and workplace safety (Hemingway & Smith, 1999).

Research has also identified employee attitudes can affect absenteeism. Relatively small but consistent negative effects on absence have been found for organizational commitment (Brown, 1996; De Boer, Bakker, Syroit, & Schaufeli, 2002; Eby et al., 1999; Gellatly, 1995; Harrison & Martocchio, 1998; Johnson & O'Leary-Kelly, 2003; Lam, Schaubroeck, & Aryee, 2002; Sagie, 1998; Sagie, Zaidman, Amichai-Hamburger, Te'eni, & Schwartz, 2002), justice perceptions (Colquitt, Noe, & Jackson, 2002; De Boer et al., 2002; Gellatly, 1995), motivation (Eby et al., 1999), and job satisfaction (Wagar, 2001). Specifically related to job satisfaction, at least two meta-analyses have been conducted to estimate the true correlation absenteeism. Farrell and Stamm (1988) found that contextual variables predicated absence better than job satisfaction did, and Scott and Taylor (1985) found a corrected correlation of only -.15 between job satisfaction and absence. Regardless of the type of predictor (individual difference, job characteristic, or employee attitude), overall consistent or even moderate effects on absence have not been found. While this is potentially problematic for the field, most of the research cited above was conducted in non-union settings. Thus, generalizing these results to a union environment is has its own issues.

4. Important predictors for union environments

Due to the relevance to the specific characteristics of a union environment, this research focused on three predictors that had the potential to clarify potential differences between union and nonunion settings: tenure, job satisfaction, and organizational trust.

4.1 Tenure. The authors focused on tenure as a key variable due to its relationship with seniority. Oftentimes in unionized settings, seniority is king.

Those with more seniority typically have more job security, get the better work assignments, and are first to get time off when available. More tenure equals more seniority. In non-unionized environments, tenure has been linked to job involvement, which has been linked to lowered absenteeism. According to March and Simon's (1958) Model of Organizational Equilibrium, an employee with seniority in a non-unionized environment and little job involvement may choose to leave the employer and seek employment elsewhere. In a non-union environment, the time and experience with the previous employer is often a commodity that can be used to secure a similar position/title with a different employer. The same is not as likely in a unionized setting.

If a union employee seeks employment elsewhere, that employee's seniority does not carry over to the new employer. Consequently, a union employee's decision to leave an employer means that employee must start at zero in terms of seniority. Thus, unionized populations are given the incentive to stay via lucrative pay and benefits policies, even when they are dissatisfied or have low levels of organizational trust. Similarly, lower tenured employees may have lower job security and thus be more likely to attend work even if they are dissatisfied. Based on this reasoning and using the alternative withdrawal choice option identified by Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, and Meglino (1979), the present study proposed that tenure would moderate the behavior of unionized employees in such a way that the more tenure one has, the more likely s/he will be to use absence as an alternative withdrawal choice when other attitudinal variables promote such a situation. On the other hand, employees who have little to no tenure will be less likely to use absences as an alternative withdrawal choice due to the lessened job security. As stated in the previous paragraph, tenure was proposed to be a moderating variable as it pertains to absenteeism in a unionized workforce. To test this, two other predictors were selected to identify any potential interactive effects with tenure, job satisfaction and organizational trust.

4.2 Job Satisfaction. While limited, there has been some research on predictors of absenteeism in unionized settings. The predictor that has probably been researched the most in this genre is job satisfaction. In fact, traditionally speaking, there is a stereotype associated with unionization and employee dissatisfaction. This link is reasonable to assume when the impetus to unionize has been linked to mistreatment by management to employees (Bakke, 1946; Form & Dansereau, 1957). It is not difficult to see how poor working conditions and maltreatment could lead to low job satisfaction. This stereotype has also been supported in the research on union members' job satisfaction. Prior research on job satisfaction and union membership has consistently supported that union members report lower levels of job satisfaction compared to nonmembers (Addison & Castro 1987; Getman & Goldberg, 1976; Hersch & Stone, 1990). This finding has been somewhat of a paradox seeing as though union members typically have higher wages, better fringe benefits, more job security, and more opportunities to have their opinions heard compared to nonmembers (Addison, 1987; Hersch & Stone, 1990). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2007, there was a \$200 difference between the median weekly earnings between a union member and a nonmember, \$863 and \$663, respectively. Despite these apparent perks, job satisfaction remains lower amongst union members.

Usually, low job satisfaction is an antecedent to turnover, but this is not the case in union environments. Several explanations have been proffered to explain this paradox. One explanation as to why there is low job satisfaction amongst union members but lower levels of turnover is due to reverse causation; the reasons associated with the initial organization of the union are the cause of low job satisfaction. As stated above, unions were originally formed in reaction to poor working conditions and unfair treatment by management. However, Borjas (1979) tested whether newer union members were higher or lower in job satisfaction than older union members. The results indicated that older union members had lower job satisfaction, seemingly discounting reverse causation as the reason. If reverse causation was the cause, then job satisfaction would be equal amongst newer and older union members, if not higher amongst older union members due to the longer tenure in an improved work environment. While discounting the reverse causation explanation of lower job satisfaction of union members, the results of the Borjas research provided support for two other explanations.

The first explanation attempted to address why high-tenure union members had lower job satisfaction than low-tenure members. This explanation suggested that high-tenure union members have a flatter wage-tenure profile. That is, the wages of newer union members will increase at a faster rate than higher-tenure employees. Thus, the slow down in their wage increases leads to low job satisfaction. Subsequently, this explanation has been rejected by subsequent research. However, the second explanation potentially suggested by Borjas' research has found support.

The third explanation of the finding that high-tenure union members had the lowest levels of job satisfaction suggests that this relationship is due to a prolonged exposure to the political aspects of union membership. This explanation is supported by Hirschman's (1970) "exit-voice" theory, which suggests that in order for unions to be effective, they have to voice their dissatisfaction. The political nature between unions and management oftentimes leads to unions being more declarative about their dissatisfaction than they actually are in order to gain bargaining strength. Thus, the "dissatisfaction" that long-time union members have may simply be an artifact of being "unionized." Hersch and Stone (1990) tested this explanation by surveying 18 different unionized firms. Their results found a significant negative relationship between tenure and job satisfaction, which was stronger in union members than non members despite objectively similar working environments. This result provided support for the "exit-voice" theory in that despite objectively similarly working conditions, union members reported lower levels of job satisfaction. Another finding of this research was the significant negative relationship between job satisfaction and intention to quit for both union and non-union members.

This finding was consistent with the mainstream research on job satisfaction. Interestingly, there was a significant negative relationship between tenure and intention to quit for union members but not non-union members, despite similar relationships between job satisfaction and intention to quit. This suggests that when tenure increases and job satisfaction decreases, non-union members were more intent to quit while union member were not more intent to quit in the same circumstances. This would also seemingly support the "exit-voice" theory. That is, highly tenured union members do not quit because they are not "really" dissatisfied. However, the present researchers suggest that there is possibly another explanation behind the results of the Hersch and Stone study. These researchers suggest that there is a difference in the value of tenure between non-union and union environments, which may shed more light on the effect of tenure on job satisfaction.

As stated in the introduction, these researchers suggest that it is possible the high tenure employees will be dissatisfied, but instead of leaving, they will manifest this behavior by alternative means. Unionized employees may be more likely to stay in a position even if their job satisfaction is low due to the cost of losing seniority with a job change. While low job satisfaction is less likely to result in a change of employment, it may manifest itself in other behavior, such as absenteeism. This relationship has been found in other settings, but the present authors proposed it would be particularly strong in a unionized environment for the reasons expressed above. With similar logic, lower-tenured members have more to lose. These members don't have seniority yet, so they will be less likely to engage in "balancing" behavior to even out their dissatisfaction. Thus, they will not engage in alternative work behaviors despite low levels of job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 1: Consistent with prior research on absenteeism, employees with lower job satisfaction will be absent voluntarily more than employees with higher levels of job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: Tenure will moderate the relationship between job satisfaction and voluntary absence such that high satisfaction conditions will lead to low levels of voluntary absence. When satisfaction is low, voluntary absence will be low in conditions of low tenure but higher in situations of high tenure.

4.3 Organizational Trust. While there is considerable research on the relationship between absenteeism and job satisfaction and some of the other predictors listed above, there has been very little research of trust on absenteeism. Trust is typically characterized as a job characteristic, typically grouped as a dimension in organizational culture. Similarly to trust as an independent predictor of absenteeism, there has been a paucity of research on organizational culture and absenteeism (Carmeli, 2005). Organizational culture can include several variables ranging from autonomy to job scope. In fact, the research that has been done has found that employee absenteeism and turnover are lower when organizational culture characteristics such as autonomy, job responsibility, job scope, and task variety are high (Mobley et al., 1979; Mowday & Spencer, 1981).

In his research with the Israeli health care system, Carmeli used the organizational culture index developed by Zeitz et al. (1997), which identified five dimensions: job challenge (the diversity and complexity in the job); communication (the communication between and amongst employees and management); innovation (the facilitation of creativity and problem-solving on the job); social cohesion (the substance of social relationships and sense of solidarity amongst the members of the organization); and trust (the trust between and amongst employees and management). In his research, Carmeli found that while they were distinct variables, trust was correlated with the other organizational culture variables. However, only job challenge was significantly correlated with and predictive of absenteeism. It is intriguing that trust was not significantly related to absenteeism or other withdrawal intentions.

These findings on trust are important, but there is an important distinction in this study that should be pointed out. The dimension of trust tested in Carmeli's work was a measure of interpersonal trust, which is distinctly different from organizational trust. Interestingly, most of the research on the relationship between trust and absenteeism is based on this interpersonal nature; these researchers could find little research on organizational trust as it relates to absenteeism. Similarly, there was even less research on organizational trust in unionized environments. This was surprising considering the potential importance of trust and the fundamental qualities of a unionized environment.

Based on the fundamental elements of a unionized environment, there are two "sides" – the union and the management. Oftentimes, these two sides are in conflict and are forced to battle between each other for middle ground on issues such as salary, pension, and benefit packages. This quality of unionized environments creates a "duality" within the union member between the union and the employer – where does the allegiance lie? In one of the few studies investigating this duality, Conlon and Gallagher (1987) found that there are differences between employees, even within the same company, when some employees are union members and others are not. Even though all the employees in the research received the benefits of being represented by a union, union members had significantly higher commitment to the union than nonmembers and current employees who were former union members (leavers). Interestingly, members and nonmembers had relatively equivalent commitment to the employer, whereas leavers had the lowest level of commitment to the employer. This suggests that the relationship between union members and the employer is not easily conceptualized - trust may be an integral part in understanding this relationship.

It is not uncommon to see organizational trust issues amongst bargained-for employees, particularly in times of contract negotiations. Similar to the justifications for job satisfaction, the present researchers propose that trust will have a similar relationship with absenteeism. That is, under normal circumstances, there will be a negative relationship between organizational trust and voluntary absences. However, when tenure is included in the model, high-tenure unionized employees will be more likely to stay in their position even if organizational trust is low due to the cost of losing seniority with a job change. Due to the importance of tenure in a unionized setting, a union employee's decision making will be affected when it comes to absenteeism. Because of the benefits inherent in tenure, highly tenured employees that have low organization trust will be less likely to leave the company. However, according to the proposed model based on March and Simon's (1958) Model of Organizational Equilibrium and Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, and Meglino's (1979) proposed existence of alternative withdrawal choices, high-tenure employees will act out with alternative behavior, namely voluntary absence. For union members with low tenure, the options available to them are fewer. Similar to the situation with job satisfaction and tenure, lower-tenured members have more to lose because they are lower on the totem pole, so they will be less likely to engage in "balancing" behavior to even out their low organizational trust.

Hypothesis 3: Employees with lower levels of organizational trust will exhibit more instances of voluntary absence as compared to employees with higher levels of organizational trust.

Hypothesis 4: Tenure will moderate the relationship between organizational trust and voluntary absence, such that high trust conditions will lead to relatively low levels of voluntary absence regardless of tenure. When trust is low, voluntary absence will be low in conditions of low tenure but higher in situations of high tenure

5. Method

5.1 Participants. Participants were 79 non-management employees from a large automotive corporation located in Columbus, Ohio. These employees worked in a unionized population, 74% were male, and ranged between 21–63 years of age, with an average age of 43. Nucleus Solutions, a consulting firm contracted by the automotive corporation to improve attendance, granted access to employee groups' data.

5.2 Procedure. The collection of the data was a part of the initial stage of an absence management program designed by Nucleus Solutions. In order to determine appropriate interventions to improve attendance, Nucleus Solutions administered paper surveys consisting of 75 questions and 13 categories to a random sampling of 733 non-management employees in the automotive plant. Employee participation was voluntary. Of the 100 randomly distributed surveys, 79 were collected by the plant's human resources department and sent to Nucleus via postal service, where they were scanned electronically. Survey responses were then linked to demographic data and absence data through the plant's tracking systems.

5.3 Independent Variable Measurement, Tenure data were collected the same way the absence data were collected, through access provided by Nucleus Solutions. The average number of years of tenure for this population was 15.53, with a standard deviation of 10.50.

The minimum number of years was 2.44, and the maximum was 31.89. Not surprising, most employees were highly tenured (49% of respondents held 21 or more years of service). Perceptions of job satisfaction and organizational trust were measured by employee responses to the voluntary survey distributed to the random sample of employees. The items used in this survey were developed by Nucleus Solutions and were based on data collected from a compilation of their previous clients. Although the persisting psychometric properties of this scale were not available, these researchers were told that its creation was based on rigorous discriminant validity testing. All responses used a five-point scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

5.3.1 Job Satisfaction. Perceptions of job satisfaction were measured by the following five items: “My work is valuable to [company’s name] operations;” “My work is satisfying;” “I’m doing something worthwhile in my job;” “My job is often dull and monotonous;” and “My work gives me a sense of accomplishment.” The fourth item was reverse coded. The internal consistency alpha based on the data collected for this study was moderately strong ($\alpha = .77$).

5.3.2 Organizational Trust. Participants’ perceptions of organizational trust were measured by the following five items: “Management creates a positive work environment at [company’s name];” “[Company’s name] instills a value system to all of its employees;” “I can trust local management to follow through on promises;” “[Company’s name] management is really interested in the welfare of employees;” and “There is quite a bit of mistrust between management and non-management employees at [company’s name].” The last item was reverse coded. The internal consistency alpha based on the data collected for this study was moderately strong as well ($\alpha = .75$).

5.4 Dependent Variable Measurement. These researchers were primarily interested in voluntary absence as a dependent variable. However, we also reviewed involuntary absence and total absence for comparison and contrasting purposes. Voluntary absence included absence categories of disability, FMLA, illness, unexcused, unknown, and unspecified absence. Involuntary absence included the categories of employment ended (layoff) and excused absences due to vacation, official union business, death in the family, or jury duty. Total absence included all missed days regardless of reason, which includes both voluntary and involuntary absences. These authors recognize that voluntary absence may include some involuntary days and visa versa, but we feel this relationship is unavoidable given the ambiguity of absence reasons.

6. Results

Based on the data from the 79 participants, the number of Voluntary Absences ranged from 3-51 ($M = 18.70$, $SD = 10.00$), Involuntary Absences ranged from 0-32 ($M = 10.70$, $SD = 6.80$), and Total Absences ranged from 6-62 ($M = 29.40$, $SD = 12.00$). Preliminary statistics were calculated to ensure that the absence data was normally distributed. This was done, specifically, to test the normality of the absence data because other research has found that absence data has a tendency to be right skewed. The dependent variable of primary interest, voluntary absence, had a skewness statistic of .793 that, when divided by the standard error of .272, was 1.10, which fell into the +2 or -2 range rule of thumb test for a normally distributed data set. Similarly, the mean statistic (18.54), when divided by the standard statistic (9.86) was 1.88, which also fell within the rule of thumb test. Total absence data also proved to be normally distributed. Involuntary absence data was not normally distributed, and attempts to transform the data were unsuccessful. However, the focus of the present study was on voluntary absence, so the statistics on involuntary absence were kept in the paper simply to provide scope and comparisons to the other data.

Table 1 displays the means, the standard deviations, and the correlation of the dependent and independent variables used in the analyses. As can be seen, only four of the correlations are significant. As would be expected, the total number of absences is significantly correlated with voluntary absences $p < .01$ ($r = .82$). Consistent with research regarding job satisfaction, a significant negative correlation existed between job satisfaction and total number of absences ($r = -.27$, $p < .05$). A significant negative correlation was also identified between job satisfaction and voluntary absences ($r = -.25$, $p < .05$). The information from the correlations is consistent with hypotheses one and three, increased levels of job satisfaction and organizational trust will be related to lower incidents of absences. Although the correlation between organizational trust and voluntary absenteeism was not significant, it was in the direction expected. Table 2 presents the results of the regression analyses testing Hypothesis 1, the main effect of job satisfaction on absences, and Hypothesis 2, the interaction of job satisfaction and tenure on absences. Although the focus of this study was on the subset of voluntary absences, analyses included the remaining subset of involuntary absences and the overall category of total absences.

Results demonstrate support for Hypothesis 1. Specifically, there was a significant main effect for job satisfaction on voluntary absences ($p = .022$). More so, the weighted coefficient of job satisfaction ($b = -3.434$) indicates that as job satisfaction increases, the number of absences decreases. The same significant main effect exists for job satisfaction on total absences ($b = -4.21, p = .019$). There was no main effect of job satisfaction on involuntary turnover. Although the results garnered support for Hypothesis 1, the same was not true for Hypothesis 2. The regression model that included tenure, job satisfaction, and tenure x job satisfaction was not significant.

Table 3 presents the results of the analyses that tested Hypothesis 3, the main effect of organizational trust on absences, and Hypothesis 4, the interaction of organizational trust and tenure on absences. The results did not support the predicted main effect of organization trust on voluntary absences; however, the results did demonstrate a main effect of organizational trust on total absences ($b = -3.526, p = .039$). Although these findings did not support Hypothesis 3, the predicted interaction between organizational trust and tenure on voluntary absences was supported. Because the interaction term of organizational trust x tenure was significant ($b = .392, p = .006$), we continued with probing analyses to identify whether the interaction followed what was predicted in Hypothesis 4.

Figure 1 displays the plotted significant interaction between organizational trust and tenure on voluntary absences. The figure depicts the influence of organizational trust for different levels of tenure on voluntary absenteeism. Because there is no standard in determining different levels of tenure in the literature, these authors used the guideline suggested by Cohen and Cohen (1983) to use three levels, the mean and one standard deviation above and below the mean. The regression line for one standard deviation below the mean was not significant ($b < 1.9, p = ns$). This result suggests that for employees that have been with the company for a long time, their absence rate is not affected by their perception of organizational trust. The regression lines for the tenure mean and one standard deviation below the mean were significant at $p < .05$ ($b = -3.54, b = -8.7$, respectively). This result indicates that the newer an employee, the relationship between trust and absenteeism becomes stronger. Opposite to the prediction in Hypothesis 4, the new employees that have low organizational trust miss significantly more days than new employees that have high organizational trust.

7. Discussions

The results of this study were mixed. Hypothesis 1 was supported by the results. This finding supported research in non-represented workforces, and it is not surprising that as job satisfaction increases, voluntary absenteeism decreases in a represented environment as well. Contrary to the expectation of the authors, support for Hypothesis 3 was not demonstrated. There was no main effect of organizational trust on voluntary absenteeism on this data set. Although the results were not significant, they did point toward the prediction of Hypothesis 3. In fact, the exploratory inclusion of regressing total absences on organization trust was significant. No support was collected for Hypothesis 2. That is, an interaction between tenure and job satisfaction on voluntary absenteeism was not detected in this data set. However, support for Hypothesis 4 was collected; a significant interaction between tenure and organizational trust on voluntary absenteeism was detected.

Follow-up analyses suggest that highly tenured employees took voluntary absence days regardless of their trust in the organization. However, lower tenure employees were highly influenced by organizational trust such that voluntary absence was quite low in situations of high trust but extremely high in situations of low trust. Although Hypothesis 4 predicted a significant interaction, it suggested that low tenure would result in low voluntary absenteeism regardless of the level of organizational trust due to the lack of security that comes with tenure. That is, the authors proposed that employees new to a company would not jeopardize their job by being absent, regardless of the level of organizational trust. However, the results of the follow-up analyses indicate that voluntary absenteeism of employees with high tenure is unaffected based on the level of organizational trust.

Instead, it appears that new employees will voluntarily decide to be absent more if there is low organizational trust. It is unclear why different levels of tenure moderate the effect of organizational trust on voluntary absenteeism. Future research should attempt to identify if this effect can be duplicated and, if it can, what underlies this relationship. On a positive note, this research may suggest the importance of developing a strong relationship with employees early in their admittance into a represented environment. If employees begin their employment with trust and confidence in the organization, they may be less apt to abuse the system later. Future research should corroborate these findings and compare them with the relationship between tenure and trust on absenteeism in a non-represented environment.

While the findings of this paper are promising, there are limitations to this research that should be noted. First, only voluntary absence was used as a potential alternative balancing behavior. It is likely, and supported in research, that other counter-productive work behavior may manifest itself, thus making voluntary absences just one of the options available to employees. However, particular to union settings, voluntary absences are typically very much protected. Thus, while other counter-productive work behavior may be an option, such as stealing from the company, cyber loafing, tardiness, etc., these alternatives will not be as “safe” as voluntary behavior. Another limitation to this study comes in the measurement of the dependent variable. This research used absence data from the company’s attendance tracking systems, which include disability and FML absences. While these researchers did not have the capability of excluding these forms of absences in the data, it is important to state the issues that come about from their presence in the data. Absence due to disability has generally been ignored in organizational absence research (Cunningham and James 2000). Disability absences, however, represent the least voluntary of the forms of unscheduled employee absence that were included in this research. They may be due to injuries received on the job or to chronic health-related problems, and thus often prevent employees from attending work whether or not they wish to attend. Thus the inclusion of disability absences in the voluntary category may inadvertently affect the results.

However, a stronger case can be made for the inclusion of FML absences. There are two arguments that can be made to justify the inclusion of FML absences in voluntary absences. First, what constitutes FML absences—and the reporting of the reasons for those absences—is not entirely clear under the FMLA; employees may intentionally or unintentionally claim absences as FMLA that are not legitimate family leave. Second, because the act specifically states that employers may not “interfere with, restrain, or deny the exercise of, the attempt to exercise any right” (U.S. Department of Labor, 1993, Section 105a1) under the FMLA, supervisors may be reluctant to question the validity of an employee’s claim of FMLA absence. Because of this ambiguity associated with classifying absences under FMLA, any organizational attempt to reduce voluntary absence may simply result in a shift in the reasons for absence from voluntary absence to FMLA absence. That is, an employee who may have previously attributed a day off to voluntary absence may attribute it to FMLA absence in order to avoid the negative repercussions associated with casual absence. Thus, FML absences can fall into the “middle ground” between voluntary and involuntary absences.

Unfortunately, classifying absences is an issue that surfaces in absence studies, whether dealing with FML or not. In fact, some researchers have suggested that absences should not be considered in the dichotomous framework of voluntary v. involuntary. Instead, absences should be considered based on a continuum of casualness (those being most casual would normally be considered strictly voluntary and those being least casual would traditionally be considered strictly involuntary). With this conceptualization, it may be easier to classify and absence due to an employee that was sick and stayed home, but that same employee could have probably went to work had s/he been so motivated.) However, collecting that type of data provides issues as well (is it categorized as such by the employer or does it need to be collected in a self-report format from the employee).

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Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
1. Tenure	15.6	10.5					
2. Job Satisfaction	3.8	0.8	.18				
3. Organizational Trust	2.7	0.8	.05	.23			
4. Voluntary Absences	18.7	10.0	.04	-.25*	-.06		
5. Involuntary Absences	10.7	6.8	-.06	-.10	-.20	-.02	
6. Total Absences	29.4	12.0	.00	-.27*	-.16	.82**	.55**

* Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Job Satisfaction and Organizational Trust were measured on 5-point scales.

Table 2: Regression Weights for Tests for Hypothesis 1 and 3

<i>Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>
Voluntary Absences		
(Constant)	23.811	
Tenure	-.171	ns
Job Satisfaction	-3.434	.022
Tenure x Job Satisfaction	.172	ns
Involuntary Absences		
(Constant)	11.823	
Tenure	-.074	ns
Job Satisfaction	-.776	ns
Tenure x Job Satisfaction	.031	ns
Total Absences		
(Constant)	33.633	
Tenure	-.245	ns
Job Satisfaction	-4.210	.019
Tenure x Job Satisfaction	.203	ns

Table 3: Regression Weights for Tests for Hypothesis 2 and 4

	<i>Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>
Voluntary Absences	(Constant)	18.956	
	Tenure	.045	ns
	Organizational Trust	-1.579	ns
	Tenure x Organizational Trust	.392	.006
Involuntary Absences	(Constant)	10.794	
	Tenure	-.042	ns
	Organizational Trust	-1.947	ns
	Tenure x Organizational Trust	.098	ns
Total Absences	(Constant)	29.749	
	Tenure	.003	ns
	Organizational Trust	-3.526	.039
	Tenure x Organizational Trust	.490	.004

Figure 1. Interaction of Voluntary Absences on Tenure and Organizational Trust

