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**ABSENTEEISM IN THE OPERATIONAL WORKFORCE:
AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF WERNER & MERTZ SERVICE & LOGISTIK GMBH**

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Abstract

Absenteeism disrupts operational flows, leading to monetary losses for organizations. This work project investigates the issue of increased absenteeism at Werner & Mertz Service & Logistik, an intralogistics service provider for a leading German manufacturer of cleaning products. It employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative employee interviews with quantitative absence rate analysis. High workloads, wage discrepancies, poor leadership, and tense work climates were identified as critical drivers of absenteeism. Recommendations include developing a systematic absence management to foster a culture of attendance. This involves implementing fair attendance monitoring, return-to-work interviews, and launching tailored interventions to address identified issues.

Strategic human resource management

Absenteeism

Root cause analysis

Absence management

Intralogistics

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1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction to the Topic and its Relevance

Absence from work is one of the significant issues human resource management is dealing with as it “disrupts the work processes, leads to loss of productivity, and heightens the workload among colleagues” (Ybema, Smulders, and Bongers 2010, 102). The German Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (BAuA) estimated the economic loss of production due to absenteeism to be 89 billion euros in 2021 and the total shortfall in gross value added to be 153 billion. This equates to an annual loss of 2,174 euros in production per employee with a shortfall of gross value added of 3,732 euros per employee (BAuA 2021).

These numbers underline the importance of companies dealing with absenteeism in a systematic way to minimize negative effects. Brandenburg and Nieder (2009) speak of the absence rate as one of the most important early warning indicators for human resource management, which gained particular significance as organizations streamlined their structures under the pressure of national and global competition.

1.2. Internship Objectives and Research Questions

The presented problem of absenteeism also shows at Werner & Mertz Service & Logistik GmbH (S&L). As a 100 % subsidiary of Werner & Mertz GmbH (W&M), S&L exclusively provides logistical support to its parent company, which is established and recognized as a sustainable market leader for cleaning products and laundry detergents (W&M 2023). At S&L, the operational departments are dealing with increased absence rates, resulting in a loss of productivity and failure to achieve certain objectives. Since 2019, their operational absence rate constantly rose from 7.10 % in 2019 to 9.79 % in 2022, peaking at 10.96 % over the first two quarters of 2023 (Appendix 1.1). In response to these developments, the management decided to launch this project to understand better the current situation regarding absenteeism in the operational areas and provide initial recommendations.

This objective can be summarized by the following research questions, which are to be answered in the scope of this work project:

1) What are the underlying causes of increasing absenteeism rates in the operational departments at S&L?

The data obtained in the context of the first research question form the basis for answering the second research question:

2) How can the identified issues be interpreted, and which initial measures can be derived to reduce absenteeism in S&L's operational departments effectively?

2. Company Profile

Werner & Mertz GmbH (W&M) is a family-owned manufacturer of cleaning and care products established in 1867 that is headquartered in Mainz, Germany (Appendix 2.1). It employs around 1,200 people and generated sales of approximately 540 million euros in 2022 (Statista Search Department 2023). The company is family-run in its fifth generation and exhibits a tendency towards long company tenure and strong organizational commitment. Renowned for its iconic red-crowned frog logo (Appendix 2.2) and pioneering sustainability efforts, W&M is committed to eco-friendly practices, setting industry standards, and encouraging other companies to adopt similar practices (W&M 2023).

Werner & Mertz Service & Logistik GmbH (S&L), a 100 % subsidiary of W&M, manages the storage and distribution of its products and supplies primary materials to production units. Its Mainz-based facilities are designed for logistical efficiency through minimized transport distances and include production halls, two fully automated high-bay warehouses, and order-picking and shipping areas. S&L employs about 140 people, with 109 in operational roles, spread across three logistics centers (LC1, LC2, LC4) and a plant logistics department (PL). These centers handle the storage and dispatch of finished goods. LC1, LC2, and PL are at the W&M headquarters, while LC4 is in another part of Mainz (S&L 2023).

3. Literature Review

3.1. Absenteeism

3.1.1. Definitions, Distinctions, and Theoretical Framework

Generally, absenteeism is defined as the failure to report for scheduled work (Johns 2002) and must be distinguished from planned absences. Planned absences, such as annual vacations and maternity leave, are legally mandated and negligible for companies because they are anticipated and inevitable. In contrast, absenteeism is unpredictable and disrupts production cycles (Čikeš, Maskarin Ribaric, and Črnjar 2018). Absence behavior has been the focus of researchers for over fifty years, with the first seminal papers dating back to the 1970s. Steer and Rhodes (1978) are seen as pioneers in the field of absenteeism, deconstructing it into two categories: voluntary absenteeism, which arises from a lack of motivation to attend work, and involuntary absenteeism, which results from an inability to attend, such as due to illness. Their 'Process Model of Employee Attendance' (Appendix 3.1) serves as the theoretical basis for this work project.

3.1.2. Determinants and Organizational Consequences of Absenteeism

This section explores the determinants and organizational consequences of absenteeism, building on Steer and Rhodes' (1978) foundational work with recent meta-analyses, notably Čikeš, Maskarin Ribaric, and Črnjar's (2018) review of over 100 articles from the last 50 years. Appendix 3.2 summarizes the findings of this literature review.

Determinants of Absenteeism

The researchers suggest dividing the causes of absenteeism into six categories: personal, demographic, attitudinal, health-related, organizational, and job determinants.

Regarding Personal factors, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism are cited as the most common influences on absenteeism. Employees high in conscientiousness and agreeableness typically have lower absenteeism, whereas those with neurotic tendencies exhibit higher rates (Störmer and Fahr 2013).

Concerning demographic variables, the results for age are mixed, with some studies indicating that younger employees are more absent than older ones and other studies discovering the contrary. However, positive correlations between absenteeism and individuals with more significant family and personal obligations are identified (Deery et al. 1995). Gender-based research, like Vistnes (1997), shows minor findings, particularly among women with young children, absenteeism seems to be higher compared to men with young children.

Attitudinal factors, especially job satisfaction and organizational commitment, emerge as the most critical determinants of absenteeism (Čikeš, Maskarin Ribaric, and Črnjar 2018). Several previous studies identified both variables as crucial in the context of absenteeism, displaying negative correlations. Furthermore, employees with higher job involvement (Wegge et al. 2007) and pay satisfaction tend to be less absent (Weiner 1980).

Among the health-related factors affecting absenteeism, work-related stress is the most significant. Darr and Johns's (2008) meta-analysis highlights a causal link between work strain and absenteeism, mediated by psychological and physical health issues. Furthermore, they found that acute, rather than chronic stress, is a more frequent trigger for absenteeism.

Research indicates that various organizational and job-related factors influence absenteeism. Building on Steer and Rhodes' (1978) 'Determinants of the Job Situation' (Appendix 3.1), subsequent studies and meta-analyses have identified supervisory style, work atmosphere, and job characteristics such as skill variety, autonomy, and advancement opportunities as relevant factors (Čikeš, Maskarin Ribaric, and Črnjar 2018). While supportive leadership and a positive work climate are negatively correlated with absenteeism, limited skill variety, autonomy, and opportunities for advancement show positive correlations. Furthermore, shift work specifics, including the time and weekday of shifts, also impact absenteeism rates (Nicholson, Jackson, and Howes 1978).

Organizational Consequences of Absenteeism

Unplanned absences disrupt a company's labor supply, affecting several organizational outcomes and increasing managerial focus on absenteeism (Ybema, Smulders, and Bongers 2010). In his meta-analysis, Viswesvaran (2002) found a strong correlation between absenteeism and reduced quality in organizational operations. Čikeš, Maskarin Ribarić, and Črnjar (2018) confirm that absenteeism negatively impacts process quality, output, and operational efficiency, which leads to heightened costs for the company (Brooke 1986). Costs are further driven as absenteeism strongly correlates with employee withdrawal behaviors, such as turnover (Morrow et al. 1999), leading to additional expenses in finding suitable replacements (Blatter, Muehleemann, and Schenker 2012). Absenteeism also lowers overall productivity (Čikeš, Maskarin Ribaric, and Črnjar 2018), with Herrmann and Rockoff (2012) highlighting a significant efficiency decrease when using temporary substitutes instead of regular employees. Finally, the prevalence of absenteeism appears to undermine overall organizational health, leading to decreased employee morale, higher stress levels, poor communication, and strained relationships between management and the workforce (McHugh 2002).

3.2. Absence Management

3.2.1. Definition and Objective

Fürstenberg (2018, 611) defines absence management as "the systematic and sustainable approach of dealing with ill and health-noticeable employees in a company." She argues that this includes tracking absenteeism, analyzing absence data, and deriving appropriate interventions, aligning with the approach proposed by Brandenburg and Nieder (2009). The authors further argue that absence management aims to enhance employee attendance.

3.2.2. Basis for Absence Management

Chapter 1 shows the need to differentiate planned absences from absenteeism. These unplanned absences are accounted for in a company's absenteeism rate, entail uncalculated economic costs

(see section 3.1.2.), and serve as the basis for systematic absence management due to their possibility of being influenced (Fürstenberg 2018).

Brandenburg and Nieder (2009) elaborate further, stating that absenteeism rates can be broken down into medically necessary and motivation-related absences, which occur with approximately equal frequency. Fürstenberg illustrates the blurred borders between these; according to her, an employee's decision to go to work depends on whether they feel ill or healthy. Between the two extremes of sickness and health, "there lies a broad gray area where only the employees themselves can decide if they feel capable of working" (Fürstenberg 2018, 614). The author argues that above-average absenteeism rates indicate a higher tendency among employees to opt against attending work compared to other companies. These perspectives align with Howarth (2005), who argues that absence management should address three potential absenteeism determinants: medical reasons, motivational factors, and stress-related causes.

3.2.3. Strategies of Absence Management

Within the field of absence management, the research community widely agrees that a systematic approach to managing absenteeism starts with a thorough investigation into the causes behind increased absence rates (Dunn and Wilkinson 2002). This causal research can be conducted through employee surveys or interviews, with interviews offering a more detailed and in-depth understanding of specific issues, thereby often being the preferred tool (Alamri 2019). Once the causes of absenteeism are understood, most authors recommend fostering an attendance culture rather than discouraging absence through punitive measures like salary cuts or disciplinary actions (MacLean 2008). Although punitive approaches might temporarily reduce absenteeism, they are less effective long-term as they only address symptoms rather than the underlying causes (Evans and Walters 2002). Howarth (2005) suggests that companies should focus on initiatives that positively influence attendance, outlining a methodology with multiple steps. These steps integrate various strategies from existing literature and provide a framework

for implementing a systematic absence management to establish a culture of attendance.

1. **Development of an Absence Policy and Procedure:** This step involves clearly defining expectations regarding employee attendance and outlining the process for managing absences. Horwarth recommends using a fair and objective system for monitoring absences. Along with individual absenteeism rates, the Bradford Factor can be employed as a metric for each employee. This factor is calculated by squaring the total number of separate absence instances for each employee and multiplying it by the total days of absence (Appendix 3.3). Therefore, distinguishing between frequent short-term absences, which are arguably more disruptive to operational flows, and less frequent, more extended absences.
2. **Introduction of an Effective Attendance Monitoring System:** Consistent monitoring of all employee's attendance is crucial, focusing on identifying patterns and areas of concern. According to Howarth (2005), any anomalies should be promptly investigated. Brandenburg and Nieder (2009) emphasize the importance of tracking individual irregularities to prevent absenteeism from developing into a 'contagious disease' within organizations.
3. **Conducting Return-to-Work Interviews for All Absences:** Empirical evidence indicates that this method "contributes to the reduction in absence levels" (Baker-McClearn et al. 2010, 392). These interviews aim to understand the underlying issues behind absences and communicate a sense of support and concern to the employees. This approach demonstrates the company's active absenteeism management and can mitigate factors leading to future absences. Recent research confirms that return-to-work interviews are among the most effective measures for decreasing short-term absenteeism (Dawson 2021). Line managers are critical in this process and must be trained to conduct these interviews effectively (Howarth 2005). Baker-McClearn and colleagues (2010, 320) highlight the significance of this aspect, cautioning that poorly conducted interviews can be perceived by employees as "a 'telling off' rather than a means of receiving support."

4. **Active Review and Revision of Workloads and Duties for Absentees:** This measure primarily signals to absentees that their absence is noticed and informs them about missed activities (Erwin and Iverson 1995). Furthermore, it serves as a reminder to both genuinely ill employees and potential malingerers of the impact of their absence on colleagues, which may prevent future absences based on motivational factors (Howarth 2005).

Besides Howarth's approach of establishing an attendance culture, academic literature offers a variety of additional strategies to manage absenteeism. In their study within a manufacturing company, Erwin and Iverson (1995) proposed several interventions to reduce absences, such as line managers creating absence graphs to encourage a sense of ownership and accountability for absenteeism issues. Brandenburg and Nieder (2009) systematically categorize measures to address absenteeism, distinguishing between preventive and curative approaches. They further divide these into personal and structural interventions, creating a comprehensive catalog of measures aimed at both preventing and mitigating absenteeism (Appendix 3.4).

4. Methodology

4.1. Quantitative Data Analysis

To get an overview of the current absenteeism situation at S&L, the first step was an analysis of SAP master data on employee sickness-related absences from 2018 to the third quarter of 2023. The primary objective of this analysis was to group employees based on similar absenteeism patterns. Management was particularly interested in investigating what they termed 'systematic absences' suspected as unauthorized leave under the guise of medical certificates.

Individual absenteeism statistics were created for each employee. The focus was specifically on the period of elevated absenteeism (2022-2023) and short-term illnesses (less than 42 consecutive days), for which ongoing salary payments must be made. This approach was justified, as long-term absences can be better planned for, not leading to the consequences of absenteeism outlined in section 3.1.2. The analysis included comparing sickness data with vacation leaves,

overlaps with holidays, and frequency of absences on specific weekdays, altogether revealing limited evidence for management's hypothesis of widespread 'systematic absenteeism.'

Subsequently, employees were grouped into three roughly equal segments through statistical analysis of absenteeism rates. Group 1 (n=39) had rates below 4.8%, Group 2 (n=37) between 4.8% and 9.8%, and Group 3 (n=33) above 9.8%. This segmentation structured the qualitative interview phase, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives being captured by interviewing a similar number of individuals from each group.

4.2. Interview Guide

In the next phase, hypotheses about S&L's increased absenteeism were generated through insights from the literature review and discussions with the management and HR. These hypotheses were transformed into questions to structure the interview guide (Appendix 4.1). Partially based on the classification of absenteeism determinants proposed in section 3.1.2, eight different categories were developed, to which these questions were assigned: Attitudinal Factors, Workloads, Organizational Work Structures and Compensation, Working Conditions, Job-Related Factors, Leadership, Group Dynamics, and Personal Circumstances and Behaviors.

Consequently, the interviews followed a deductive approach to confirm or decline the developed hypotheses. Each category began with an open-ended question to minimize bias and encourage independent responses. In addition to the eight sections, the interviews started with open questions about the participant's general perception of the current absenteeism situation, precisely its causes, severity, and patterns. Initiating the interview through these questions limited the interviewer's bias and allowed the exploration of previously unexamined areas. Following a semi-structured approach offered the flexibility to explore specific topics in detail while maintaining a guided framework to ensure relevant information was captured (Adams 2015).

4.3. Qualitative Data Collection

In understanding the causes of absenteeism at S&L and answering the first research question, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted among the pool of 109 operational employees until early September 2023. During this research, the objective was to reach data saturation, indicating that the series of interviews was concluded once the interviewer determined that no additional insights were being gathered. To acquire a thorough collection of perspectives, an initial screening of participants was performed based on the grouping and operational department in which the employee usually works. Subsequently, operational managers finalized this selection to ensure the alignment with ongoing workflows. The interview cohort consisted of representatives from each predefined group. Specifically, four participants from Group 1, five from Group 2, and six from Group 3 led to a total sample of 15 (Appendix 4.2).

4.4. Qualitative Data Analysis

In this work project, the structured content analysis approach by Mayring (2000) was applied to analyze interviews. This methodology focuses on systematic text analysis by processing the material incrementally and theory-guided through a system of categories. The study employed a deductive approach, using predefined categories and hypotheses. Mayring emphasizes that the content analysis methodology remains deductive even when these categories are derived from everyday observations. Accordingly, the developed hypotheses were used as a categorical system (Appendix 4.3), and relevant text segments from individual interviews were allocated to the different categories. An iterative revision of the category system was not required due to the precise allocation of each statement to the developed hypotheses.

Mayring's technique allows for converting qualitative material into quantitative data using ordinal scales. Considering that the interviews were structured to progress from general to specific questions, this approach facilitated the evaluation of responses regarding their cognitive salience, indicating how prominently and readily specific topics emerged in the participants' minds

(APA Dictionary of Psychology 2007). If a hypothesis was mentioned during the initial open-ended question regarding the causes of absenteeism, it was evaluated as having 'high salience.' When participants pointed out a particular hypothesis during the introductory open-ended question in each section, it was considered 'medium salience.' Conversely, if an idea was confirmed only after being presented by the interviewer, it was rated as 'low salience.' The combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis provides a robust basis for managerial decision-making.

5. Interview Results

5.1. General Questions about Absenteeism

Perceptions of absenteeism rates varied widely across departments, with an overall high assessment. While some employees in their respective teams reported low absence levels, there was general agreement that absenteeism was increasing. A common observation was the recurrent absence of specific individuals, leading to heightened workloads for others. This impact was more pronounced in smaller teams, where the effects of each absence were immediately felt. Absences were attributed to both illness and a lack of motivation, as one interviewee highlighted: "I don't feel like it, I'll stay home" (Interview 4).

Patterns in absenteeism were also noted. Elevated rates during certain shifts, such as the morning, and specific periods like vacation times and winter months were mentioned by respondents. The team dynamics, particularly the relationships between colleagues and supervisors, also seemed to play a significant role, as one respondent noted: "When people don't fit well together, it is noticeable [that they are absent more often]" (Interview 7). However, six of the 15 interviewees could not discern any specific patterns in absenteeism.

The following sections present key results from the interviews structured according to the categories of the interview guide (see section 4.2). Comprehensive result tables for each category of hypotheses are included in the Appendix (A5.1 – A5.8).

5.2. Hypotheses Sections

5.2.1. Attitudinal Factors

Respondents generally indicated satisfaction with their work situations, with eight identifying as 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' and seven as 'moderately satisfied,' citing factors like collegial relationships, leadership quality, work environment, and career prospects. However, limited salary and repetitive tasks were noted as drawbacks.

In terms of job involvement, responses were mainly similar. Only one respondent (Interview 6) viewed their job as central to their self-worth, while ten highlighted a clear work-life separation with low job involvement. Organizational commitment responses were heterogeneous. Seven respondents felt little employer loyalty, while five showed strong commitment, influenced by the company's reputation, sustainability focus, and product quality. Others expressed strong team affiliations but lesser attachment to the organization itself, mentioning a dilution of company values, as exemplified by Interviewee 14: "People used to work here because of the frog [company's logo, referring to the values], and now they do it because they need the money."

5.2.2. Workloads

Nearly all respondents linked increasing workloads and related stress levels to the high absenteeism rate. Five mentioned workload increases due to staff shortages as a primary cause of absenteeism when initially asked about possible reasons, signaling its high salience. The majority confirmed this point when prompted by the interviewer. Interviewee 11 illustrated this: "People are unhappy because one person is doing the work of two." At the same time, Interviewee 5 highlighted the demotivating effect: "It's not fair when you're constantly alone everywhere." Only two interviewees offered a nuanced view, suggesting that stress from short-term absences and fluctuating workloads are more critical than a general staff shortage.

Fourteen respondents agreed that high absenteeism adversely affected the remaining staff's motivation and satisfaction due to increased workloads and stress, leading to a vicious cycle. This

sentiment is captured by Interviewee 8: "I basically have to pick up the slack for what they're letting slide [absent colleagues], and I really don't feel like doing that." However, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the new company agreement on the flexible deployment of employees had not significantly impacted perceived workloads or absenteeism.

5.2.3. Organizational Work Structures and Compensation

The most salient hypothesis regarding work organization referred to the differential wage agreements within the Werner and Mertz group, leading to notable dissatisfaction with compensation. Most employees subjected to a logistics rate felt unfairly treated compared to their colleagues in W&M's production sector under a chemical industry rate. This discrepancy, especially given their daily exposure to chemical products, significantly diminished job satisfaction and motivation, with Interviewee 8 stating: "It just feels like we're not properly valued." Many suspected a direct effect on absenteeism, noting that the "felt obligation [to attend work] is reduced" (Interview 2) and that "there are likely some people who call in sick out of spite" (Interview 8). The issue has been exacerbated since the COVID-19 pandemic; in contrast to S&L, other companies, including the parent company W&M, have provided their employees with pandemic-related bonuses and inflation adjustments in 2022. Interviewee 9 highlighted compensation as "the main issue [regarding absenteeism], no inflation money, no pandemic money, nothing," and Interviewee 13 referred to a 'two-class society.' Only two of the fifteen respondents were uncertain about the effects of wage disparities on absenteeism.

While the lack of workplace adaptation to individual needs was only discussed in the context of LC1's commissioning area, due to an unergonomic ribbon machine, occasional cases of health issues related to shift work emerged across all operational departments: "I know of two people who can't cope with it [shift work]" (Interview 2). However, the prevailing view was that those unable to adjust to shifts should consider other employment options, with many also appreciating the higher salaries due to night shift allowances. Ten respondents saw no impact

on absenteeism from temporary contracts, some even suggesting a motivating effect. Lastly, transfers between departments did not appear to add stress, although three respondents noted that they preferred their current area to their previous assignments in LC4.

5.2.4. Working Conditions

Interviewees gave varied responses regarding working conditions. While three reported no problems, the majority (12 out of 15) identified negative aspects. Specifically, eleven respondents cited extreme heat during summer as a detrimental factor causing circulatory issues and negatively impacting productivity. This was aggravated by the warehouse policy requiring doors and windows to remain closed, initially implemented to address a previous problem with pigeons. The lack of air circulation increased the temperature further, as Interviewee 8 stated: "When it's 30 degrees Celsius outside, it's 40 degrees in the warehouse." On a positive note, it was reported that management occasionally provided refreshments on hot days and encouraged self-initiated water breaks. Additionally, employees in plant logistics (PL) uniformly and with high salience reported the poor condition of company premises, particularly road quality, adversely affecting their health with symptoms like back pain.

5.2.5. Job-Related Factors

The overall sentiment suggested that job-related factors had a minimal impact on absenteeism. Most found their job responsibilities appropriately challenging (12 out of 15) and recognized personal growth opportunities (10 out of 15) facilitated by fair prospects for promotion and internal job postings. However, perceptions of autonomy and task variety were heterogeneous. Employees in LC1 and LC4 reported low autonomy, with one noting: "I have very little say in what we do, what the foremen say goes, and even our break times are predetermined" (Interview 9). At the same time, those in other departments experienced more autonomy, sometimes noted to be earned (Interviews 3 and 13). Four of the five employees who found their work

monotonous were from LC1 or LC4. While no direct link to absenteeism was noted, these factors seemed to have a slight negative effect on motivation and job satisfaction.

5.2.6. Leadership

The operational tasks and workflows across departments are broadly similar, but each has its operational manager and foremen. This made the section on leadership-related hypotheses diverse and necessitated an evaluation of responses within specific departments.

LC1: Three out of four respondents cited strained relationships between employees and specific leaders as a primary cause of absenteeism. One interviewee stated that some workers failed to report to work if scheduled with certain leaders. Furthermore, respondents mentioned a lack of appreciation from leaders and the organization, coupled with a sense of being overlooked, exemplified by unimplemented ideas and opinions.

LC2: All four participants viewed their leaders positively, with a motivating influence on attendance: “When you have a good boss, you look forward even more to coming to work.” (Interview 8). Respondents reported feeling recognized and that their opinions were valued.

LC4: Leadership was critically viewed and directly linked to increased absenteeism. Respondents discussed authoritarian foremen who artificially increased workload and pressure; Interviewee 9 stated: “They [the foremen] are constantly competing to see who gets the most done here, even though there's nothing going on.” Former employees of LC4 supported these views (Interviews 13 and 15), noting power dynamics, boosted workloads, and poor treatment of employees. While employee feedback was acknowledged, it was rarely acted upon; interviewees reported that the focus was solely on task completion. Finally, systematic absenteeism was reported when working with certain supervisors: “They [the employees] come, for example, for one or two days and then are sick for the rest of the week” (Interview 9).

PL: Like LC2, respondents in PL uniformly rated their direct leaders positively, noting their empathy, emotional intelligence, and general approachability. Employees received regular recognition and constructive feedback, and their suggestions were taken seriously.

Across all four operational departments, most respondents reported satisfactory support from leaders (13 out of 15), reasonable conflict management (11 out of 15), and fair performance evaluation (9 out of 15). While the absence of a head of operations was generally seen as non-impactful, fourteen respondents attributed adverse effects to the management's cost-saving approach, particularly regarding salaries and benefits. Interviewee 2 stated this topic “accounts for half of the [motivational based] factor, ‘well now I’ll just stay at home then.’” The harmful effects on job satisfaction were amplified when employees compared their situation with other expenditures of the company, which they considered unnecessary: “When you see what is being built and where the money is being spent, and see how they are cutting costs on us, it’s definitely a factor [that could lead to absences]” (Interview 4). Frequent connections were made to the previously discussed rate discrepancies. Only Interviewee 1 viewed this differently: “The company has to operate economically, that ensures all of us to even have a job in the first place.”

5.2.7. Group Dynamics

Consistent with existing literature, the study's findings underscore leadership's significant impact on the work climate (Dulay, Çakmak, and Karadağ 2015). While the work climate in LC2 and the PL was consistently perceived as positive, respondents in LC1 and LC4 spoke of a lack of team cohesion and sometimes with high salience of a negative work atmosphere. At the beginning of 2023, the shift compositions in LC1 were restructured. According to Interviewee 4, this negatively impacted the work climate: “It was much better before, including the general mood.” In LC4, the work environment was frequently characterized as non-collegial (see Interviews 9, 10, 13, 15), lacking open communication and a sense of community.

Conflicts within specific teams contributed to absenteeism across all departments and further harmed the working climate in critical areas. Only three respondents felt no impact from these on absenteeism. Most respondents saw no link between absenteeism and either employee exclusion (8 out of 11) or language barriers (9 out of 10). However, isolated instances were reported: "I think something even ended up in the HR department once" (Interview 7). Team sizes were viewed as appropriate, with Interviewee 6 suggesting that larger teams might increase problems and positively highlighting the smaller groups in LC2: "Fewer people to deal with."

5.2.8. Personal Circumstances and Behaviors

As indicated by nine respondents, family obligations, notably caring for ill children or relatives, were a primary external factor influencing absenteeism. In contrast, all respondents agreed that an employee's residential location did not affect absenteeism. Views diverged on the relationship between tardiness and absenteeism, particularly regarding the accumulation of deficit hours that need to be balanced later. While five interviewees saw no connection, seven confirmed that some employees would rather call in sick than arrive late, "obviously because of the deficit hours" (Interview 9). Additionally, nine respondents acknowledged a potential link between secondary employment, resulting fatigue, and increased absenteeism, again highlighting S&L's low wages as a contributing factor (Interviews 9, 12, 13, 14).

5.3. Summary of Interview Results

In conclusion, respondents fundamentally expressed satisfaction with their work but highlighted increasing workloads, inadequate compensation, and team conflicts as significant factors contributing to high absenteeism. Organizational commitment varied, with some showing loyalty to their teams but not to the company. Workloads across departments were seen as stressful, intensified by staff shortages and high absence rates, creating a vicious cycle. Inconsistent wage agreements within the W&M group and low salaries were believed to lower job

satisfaction and likely decrease attendance motivation. Criticism included the absence of pandemic-related bonuses and inflation adjustments, creating an observed ‘two-class society.’ Managerial demands for constant quality and productivity improvements alongside cost reductions were perceived as incompatible. Furthermore, working conditions, such as extreme heat, impacted health and morale. While most found their roles satisfying and challenging, some experienced low autonomy and monotony in their tasks. Leadership quality differed across departments, with good leadership enhancing motivation and poor management practices in some areas, like LC1 and LC4, linked to increased absenteeism. The work climate is crucial in influencing employee attendance motivation and is particularly strained in conflict-ridden and cohesion-lacking departments (LC1 and LC4). Personal factors and behaviors like family needs and avoiding deficit hours also contributed to unplanned absences.

Overall, the findings indicate that a holistic approach, addressing workloads, leadership quality, work climate, working conditions, and communication of organizational policies and decisions, is crucial for dealing with the prevalent absence culture and improving employee satisfaction.

6. Discussion

6.1. Recommendations for Establishing a Culture of Attendance at S&L

The interview results revealed patterns and causes of absenteeism at S&L. These insights, combined with the literature review in section 3.2, guided the development of targeted interventions to improve attendance, thus addressing the second research question. Moreover, these strategies are tailored for S&L to fit the organizational culture and operational limits, including budget constraints. In developing an attendance culture at S&L, Howarth's (2005) framework, outlined in section 3.2.3, is recommended as a foundational guide (Appendix 6.1).

6.1.1. Absence Policies and Procedures

Chapter 5 revealed an absence culture at S&L that likely fosters attitudes and norms about acceptable absenteeism levels (Brandenburg and Nieder 2009). In such an environment, some

employees might consider it as usual and tolerated to claim a few weeks of sickness absence per year (Väänänen et al. 2008). To communicate attendance expectations and recalibrate norms, one measure could involve the regular distribution of department-wide absence rates (Erwin and Iverson 1995), including industry benchmarking. Leaders can discuss this data in weekly meetings to foster a more informed and responsible conversation about absenteeism.

6.1.2. Attendance Monitoring System

Implementing the Bradford Factor provides an objective and fair system to monitor individual employee absences, enabling proactive measures against anomalies (Howarth 2005). Subsequent calculations of the Bradford Factor for the operational workforce, followed by correlation analyses with the employee grouping presented in section 4.1, revealed significant relationships (Appendix 6.2). This indicates that the selected groups provided comprehensive insights from both employees with shorter, more frequent absences (higher Bradford Factors) and those with lower Bradford scores. The implementation of this KPI must be monitored actively, and thresholds that are linked to specific actions should be developed in workshops. For instance, employees scoring over 100 could be invited for an informal discussion with HR to address their absences and identify areas of concern early.

6.1.3. Procedures for Returning Absentees

Howarth (2005) recommends that line managers conduct return-to-work interviews after each absence; an exemplary guide for these interviews is available in Appendix 6.3. It is crucial to ensure that supervisors conducting these interviews, such as the operational managers at S&L, are adequately trained and familiarized with the process. Additionally, they should inform absent employees about activities and workloads they missed during their absence to not only update them but also highlight the consequences of their absence on colleagues. This approach could prove particularly effective at S&L, considering the identified vicious cycle where high absence rates intensify workloads for present employees.

6.2. Recommendations for S&L-Specific Issues

Once these initial steps are implemented, establishing a frame for an attendance culture at S&L, the company can address the specific issues identified in the interviews. The prevailing view in academic literature suggests participatory development of measures (Weber, Unterrainer, and Höge 2020) involving different stakeholders and their needs, such as operational employees, the works council, HR, and management. The methodology of using joint workshops or task groups, following a bottom-up approach, has proven to result in effective, comprehensive, and sustainable interventions (Björk, Bolander, and Forsman 2021). Thus, this section intends to provide initial ideas for measures that can serve as guidance for these collaborative workshops, where they can be discussed and further tailored to the specific needs of S&L. Often, the catalog of measures developed by Brandenburger and Nieder (Appendix 3.4) serves as a scientific foundation. An overview of the developed interventions can be found in Appendix 6.4.

6.2.1. Workloads

Elevated workloads are primarily attributed to a general staff shortage and increased absence rates. In addition to hiring more workers or utilizing temporary staff, the implementation of a peer support system can offer significant benefits. Such a platform allows employees to share best practices and voice concerns, fostering a collaborative setting to develop strategies for effectively managing workloads and stress. Insights of Interviewee 15 influenced the development of this measure: “We work exactly according to order numbers [...], this [the work] is actually all a matter of preparation. If you are well prepared and have done good preliminary work, you don't have a stressful day.” This initiative fosters a more supportive work environment, improves morale, and reduces feelings of isolation, ultimately contributing to a more engaged workforce. Furthermore, establishing an open communication channel to express concerns about workloads and stress helps identify critical areas early (Ganapathi 2012).

6.2.2. Organizational Work Structures and Compensation

Different wage agreements within the Werner and Mertz group have led to employee dissatisfaction and demotivation, with a suspected rise in absenteeism. This issue has been particularly pronounced since the COVID-19 pandemic due to the absence of pandemic-related bonuses and inflation adjustments. Besides salary raises, S&L could implement indirect measures to enhance attendance motivation. Initiating open discussions about compensation structures, with reference to industry benchmarks, is essential. Employees must be educated about the reasons behind different wage agreements, facilitating their understanding of the company's perspective and constraints. This initiative is inspired by Interviewee 1, who viewed the topic of compensation differently: “The company has to operate economically, that ensures all of us to even have a job in the first place.” Additionally, enhancing and showcasing opportunities for professional growth and development helps to address the issue. This could involve presentations on career progression pathways featuring best practice examples from within S&L.

6.2.3. Working Conditions

Improving workplace conditions, such as installing advanced climate and ventilation systems or enhancing the infrastructure of the premises, usually incurs significant costs. An alternative approach is to mitigate the effects of inadequate working conditions on employees by launching an awareness campaign about heat-related issues (Trout et al. 2021). Educating the workforce on self-care during high temperatures through informational posters or brief meetings can effectively provide practical advice and strategies. This is aligned with insights from Interviewee 14, who offered a practical tip for coping with heat in summer: “I am already practiced at this and put cold towels on the back of my neck.” Furthermore, S&L could explore the feasibility of allowing lighter and more breathable work clothing during summer to increase employee comfort. Lastly, the management should continue to provide refreshments and encourage regular hydration breaks during extreme temperatures to prevent heat-related health issues.

6.2.4. Leadership

The interviews at S&L align with empirical findings, suggesting that “the extent of sickness-related absenteeism is greatly influenced by the supervisor and their leadership behavior” (Brandenburg and Nieder 2009, 131). The authors argue that leadership encompasses both operational and personnel responsibilities, pointing out that leaders are accountable not only for their area’s productivity but also for their subordinate employee’s job satisfaction. Supervisors often prevail in operational roles but may lack training in people management. Notably, in areas like LC1 and LC4, comprehensive leadership training focusing on emotional intelligence, effective communication, employee recognition, and conflict resolution is recommended.

Furthermore, developing non-monetary recognition programs that acknowledge the efforts of employees who consistently perform well, especially those taking on additional responsibilities during periods of high absences, can increase attendance motivation. This could include initiatives like 'Employee of the Month' awards, an acknowledgment in company communications, or small tokens of appreciation, such as extended lunch breaks, early departures, or additional days off. Interviewee 9's statement on the importance of small gestures initiated the development of this idea: “At least a proper thank you, even if it's only a small thing [would increase employee motivation].” Additionally, increasing management presence in LC4, the branch outside the headquarters, could prove advantageous. Although the absence of a head of operations is perceived to have minimal impact, this measure could reinforce the perception of belonging, consistent leadership, and support.

Finally, for supervisors whose areas of responsibility continue to experience high absenteeism due to their leadership behavior, S&L must be open to considering their replacement. Dunn and Wilkinson (2002) acknowledge that an effective absence management strategy cannot entirely avoid the use of disciplinary actions. However, these should only be taken after transparently communicating the supervisor’s leadership deficits and allowing them to address these issues.

6.2.5. Work Climate

A strained work climate has been observed in specific departments and teams primarily due to individual conflicts and a lack of team cohesion. To address this, regular team-building activities are recommended (Beauchamp, McEwan, and Waldhauser 2017). These activities can range from pre-shift warm-ups and stretching sessions to team lunches, dinners, or other team events outside work hours. Another strategy for strengthening team cohesion could be the introduction of a ‘Gratitude Program.’ In this system, employees can write brief, structured letters of gratitude to their colleagues, for instance, when they assisted in solving specific problems or helped with workloads. An exemplary template for such notes is provided in Appendix 6.5. To encourage participation, a system of rewards should be established. For instance, both the employee who received and the one who wrote the most gratitude letters in each department could be awarded a day off. Other potential rewards for reaching set milestones, such as three notes per year, could include early departure passes, gift cards, or snack vouchers. Interviewee 3 emphasized the need to connect initiatives with tangible rewards: “[I do not want] just empty words; they are indeed also nice, but there is nothing else to it.”

6.2.6. Personal Circumstances and Behaviors

To better manage absences due to personal reasons, S&L could improve support, particularly by offering flexible policies for emergency family leave. This would allow employees to handle urgent family matters without excessive bureaucratic procedures or the need to call in sick. In addressing absenteeism related to tardiness and the avoidance of accumulating deficit hours, S&L may revisit the according policies. Implementing a more flexible grace period that does not immediately affect an employee’s time account could reduce the stress of being late and the fear of collecting deficit hours. Such adaptations aim to create a more supportive work environment, which could positively influence employee satisfaction and attendance. However, monitoring these policy changes closely is crucial to prevent exploitation.

6.3. Conclusion

This work project investigates absenteeism at S&L, an intralogistics service provider for a leading German manufacturer of cleaning and care products, W&M. The aim was to identify root causes of increasing absence rates and develop targeted interventions to address them. A mixed-method approach was employed, combining qualitative insights from employee interviews, selected based on a quantitative analysis of absenteeism records.

The research identified several contributing factors to increased absenteeism, including high workloads, differing wage agreements, a tense work climate, and personal circumstances and behaviors, altogether facilitating an absence culture. Moreover, poor leadership and inadequate working conditions in specific departments intensified the issue. These causes vary in both the extent to which they depend on external conditions and the degree to which S&L's budget constraints can influence them. While addressing topics such as rate differences within the W&M group, personal circumstances, and suboptimal climatic or infrastructural conditions are challenging or involve substantial expenses, internal factors like tense working atmospheres, increased workloads, and poor leadership present more feasible opportunities for intervention.

It is recommended that S&L prioritize these more influenceable aspects, developing strategies to create a supportive work environment and motivate employees towards attendance over absence. The basis must be a comprehensive absence management strategy, potentially anchored in Howarth's framework of fostering a culture of attendance. This involves implementing fair attendance monitoring and return-to-work interviews. Subsequent steps should address influenceable causes of absenteeism through targeted interventions, such as establishing peer support systems, conducting leadership training, and implementing a gratitude program. A catalog with initiatives to tackle the identified issues is presented in this work. A collaborative approach is recommended, involving various organizational stakeholders in refining these measures through workshops and developing new strategies to enhance attendance motivation.

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8. Appendix

Chapter 1

A1.1 Development of absenteeism within the operational departments of S&L since 2018

Chapter 2

A2.1 Overview of W&M's headquarters, production locations and sales structure

A2.2 Development of W&M's logo since its founding

Chapter 3

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A4.1 Complete guide of the semi-structured interviews

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Chapter 6

A6.1 Measures to establish a culture of attendance at S&L (Howarth 2005)

A6.2 Correlation between grouping, individual absence rate, and Bradford Factor

A6.3 Exemplary guide for return-to-work interviews

A6.4 List of tailored interventions for S&L based on identified problem areas

A6.5 Sample letters for a 'Gratitude Program'

A1.1 Development of absenteeism within the operational departments of S&L since 2018

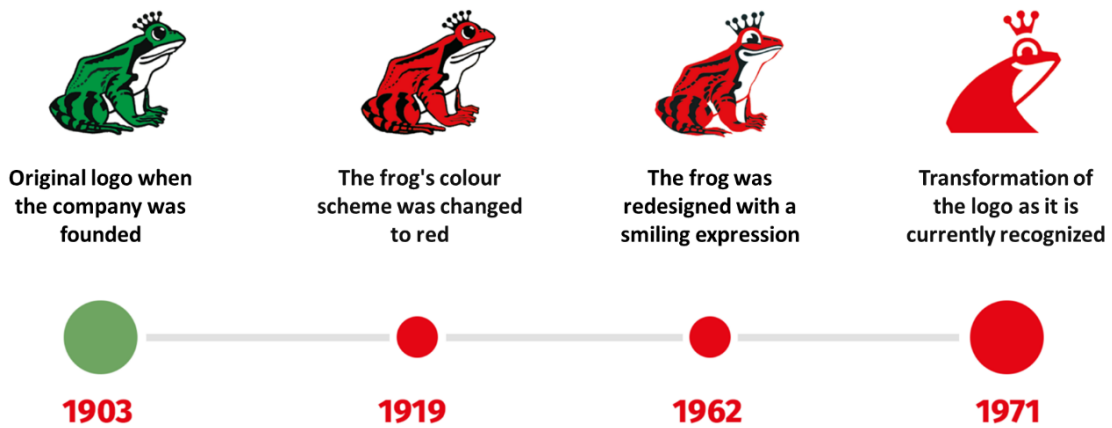
Operational Workforce Health Metrics	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Q1 - Q2 2023
Short-term Absenteeism Rate	6.36 %	6.76 %	6.57 %	6.16 %	8.78 %	9.32 %
Proportion of long-term Absences	26%	5%	17%	24%	10%	15%
Absenteeism Rate	8.60 %	7.10 %	7.91 %	8.06 %	9.79 %	10.96 %
Industry Average*	7.0 %	7.1 %	7.1 %	7.0 %	8.5 %	n.a.

Notes. *Industry average is extracted from the ‘Fehlzeiten-Report,’ an annual publication with detailed absence statistics in Germany of the previous year. The data basis is provided by statutory health insurance providers covering over 10 million employees.

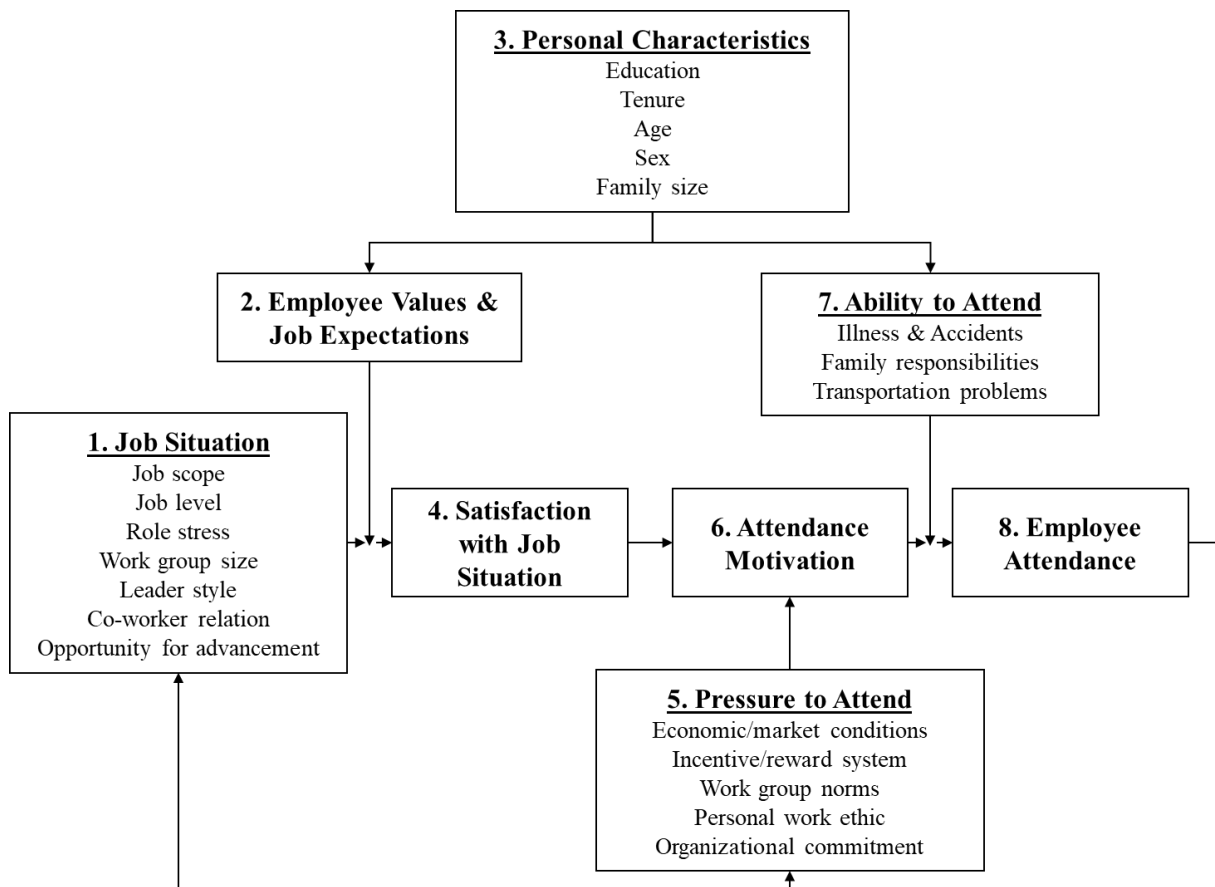
A2.1 Overview of W&M’s headquarters, production locations and sales structure



A2.2 Development of W&M's logo since its founding

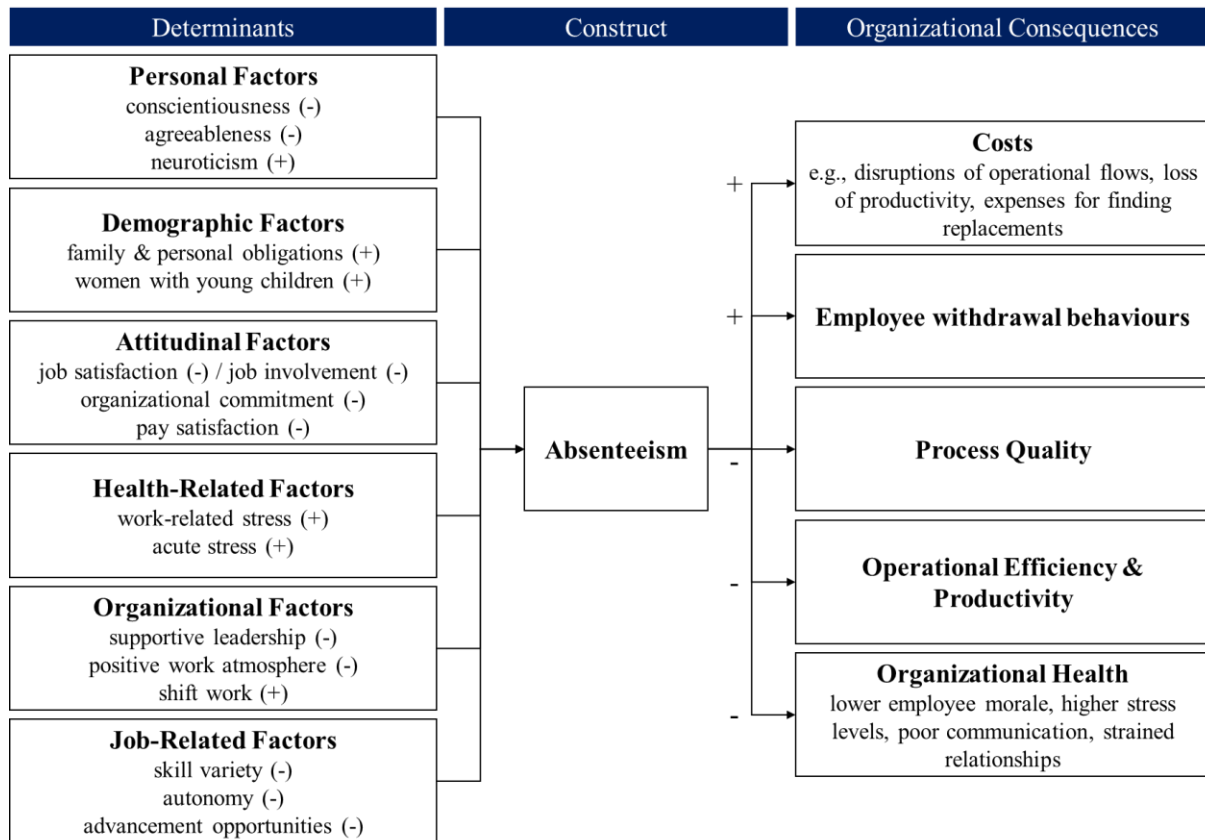


A3.1 A 'Process Model of Employee Attendance' (Steers and Rhodes 1978)



A3.2 Literature Review: Determinants and organizational consequences of absenteeism

(author's illustration)



A3.3 Exemplary calculations of the Bradford Factor

Employee	Instances of absence*	Total days of absence*	Bradford Factor
Employee 1	2	12	$2^2 \times 12 = 48$
Employee 2	2	24	$2^2 \times 24 = 96$
Employee 3	4	12	$4^2 \times 12 = 192$

Notes. * Within a certain time period, for example, the last year.

A3.4 Catalog of measures against absenteeism (Brandenburg and Nieder 2009)

Preventive Measures		Curative Measures	
Personal	Structural	Personal	Structural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee Selection • Employee Deployment • Employee Qualification • Employee Appraisals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Dialogue • Health Dialogue • Preventive Dialogue • Selection and Qualification of Supervisors • Leadership Behaviour • Health Care • Special Health Promotion Programs • Letters of Recognition • Transfers • Material Incentives • Individual Personnel Measures • Design of Leisure Behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate Culture • Decentralization of Support • Transfer of Cost Responsibility • Project Groups • Design of the Working Environment • Employee Participation • Creating Transparency • Health Officers • Alternative Workplaces • Better Compatibility of Work and Family 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Notification of Work Incapacity • Addiction Counselling • Support for Special Employee Groups • Health Coaching • Counselling Offers • Rehabilitation/Reintegration • Discussions with Employees <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Return-to-Work Interviews • Absence Dialogue • Information Events for Returnees • Absenteeism Letters • Support for Supervisors • Home Visits • Introduction of compulsory medical certificates • Use of Private Detectives • Legal Measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction of Burdens • Sponsorships • Discussion Groups • Letter to Supervisors • Replacement of Supervisors • Dialogue with External Institutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doctors in private practice • Hospitals • Health Insurance Companies • Involvement of the Medical Service of Health Insurance Companies

A4.1 Complete guide of the semi-structured interviews

General Part

Introduction

Is it okay for us to use first names with each other?

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. As part of my master's thesis, I am investigating absenteeism at S&L. The goal of this conversation is to investigate the reasons for employee absenteeism systematically and to develop measures that positively impact the health and well-being of the workforce. Your insights and experiences are of great value in better understanding the problem. I am the only one who knows which person has given me which answer, and I will anonymize the conversation afterward, so it will no longer be traceable who was asked. Thus, you can answer openly and honestly. The entire interview is, of course, voluntary, and you can stop it at any time or not answer if you feel uncomfortable at any point. For evaluation, I am recording the interview. The audio file will then be deleted after being converted into a text file (transcription); only I can access it.

Do you agree with this?

Open-ended questions about the perception of absenteeism

- How would you currently assess the severity of absenteeism in your area?
- Do you see any specific patterns in absenteeism (e.g., periods)?

Open-ended questions about the cause of absenteeism (high salience)

What causes come to mind when you think about absenteeism here at S&L?

Category	Mention	Keyword of the mention
1. Attitudinal Factors		
2. Workload		
3. Organizational Work Structures and Compensation		
4. Working Conditions		
5. Job-Related Factors		
6. Leadership		
7. Group Dynamics		
8. Personal Circumstances and Behaviours		
<i>Other</i>		

What measures would you like implemented to address these issues and reduce absenteeism?

Specific Part

1. Attitudinal Factors

- How satisfied are you with your current work situation, and what exactly contributes to this?
- How important is it to you to be a part of the company Werner & Mertz, Service & Logistics, and why?
- Do you feel involved in your job regarding your tasks and responsibilities (identification, connection, work as part of life)?

2. Hypotheses Section: Workload

Open-ended question (medium salience)

How do you assess the workloads/demands on you and your team, and what are the possible reasons for these?

Hypothesis	Mention	Keyword of mention
1. Flexible working hours		
2. High absenteeism (vicious circle)		
3. Staff shortages		
<i>Other</i>		

Hypotheses (lower salience)

1. Do you notice any effects on yourself [or your colleagues] resulting from the required deployment flexibility due to the new company agreement?
 - *Backup Question: How does the required flexibility regarding your working hours burden you [or your colleagues]?*
2. Do you believe that the high absenteeism rates in the company negatively impact the workload of the present employees?
 - *Backup Question: How high is the time pressure in your area?*
3. Do you feel that there is a general staff shortage at S&L, leading to increased workloads and an overload of present employees?
 - *Backup Question: Where is this staff shortage evident in your work?*

3. Hypotheses Section: Organizational Work Structures and Compensation

Open-ended question (medium salience)

Are there any aspects of the organizational work structure and compensation approach that positively or negatively impact employees?

Hypothesis	Mention	Keyword of mention
1. Employment contracts		
2. Different Collective Agreements in the Group		
3. Dissatisfaction with Pay		
4. Lack of Adaptation to Individual Needs		
5. Shift Work		
6. Workplace Mobility		
<i>Other</i>		

Hypotheses (lower salience)

1. Can you imagine that some employees feel additional stress due to insecure employment conditions or fixed-term contracts?
 - *Backup Question: How do you notice this, and how does this stress manifest itself?*
2. Can you imagine that perceived injustice over the different collective agreements within the Werner & Mertz group leads to higher absenteeism?
 - *Backup Question: How do employees react to this issue?*
3. Do you think your pay is adequate compared to colleagues with similar experience and responsibilities?
 - *Backup Question: Do you think it's likely that your pay and the type of benefits impact employee absenteeism?*
4. Do you observe in yourself [or your colleagues] a lack of adaptation of the workplace to individual needs (e.g., health limitations)?
 - *Backup Question: Can you give me any example?*
5. Have you noticed that irregular working hours and switching between day and night shifts cause stress and health problems for some colleagues?
 - *Backup Question: How does this stress manifest?*
6. Do you notice in yourself [or your colleagues] that regularly changing between locations leads to additional burdens?
 - *Backup Question: How often do you [do they] have to switch between areas?*

4. Hypotheses Section: Working Conditions

Open-ended question (medium salience)

How would you rate the immediate working conditions (the environment in which you carry out your work)?

Hypothesis	Mention	Keyword of mention
Poor Working Conditions		
<i>Other</i>		

Hypotheses (lower salience)

Do you think it is likely that climatic conditions, such as heat in summer and cold in winter, [smells or loud noises] affect employees' health and lead to absenteeism?

5. Hypotheses Section: Job-Related Factors

Open-ended question (medium salience)

Which aspects of your job and tasks motivate you the most and the least?

Hypothesis	Mention	Keyword of mention
1. Challenging Tasks		
2. Autonomy & Leeway		
3. Task Variety		
4. Personal Development		
<i>Other</i>		

Hypotheses (lower salience)

1. Do you feel sufficiently challenged and motivated by (the breadth and depth of) your tasks and responsibilities?
2. How do you assess the perceived leeway in your work?
3. Do you find your work tasks to be varied?
4. Do you feel that your job gives you the opportunity to develop your skills further?

Hypotheses Section: Leadership

Open-ended question (medium salience)

How do you rate the decisions and behaviors of your supervisors and the management?

Hypothesis	Mention	Keyword of mention
1. Conflict Management		
2. Feedback and Appreciation		
3. Inclusion of Opinions and Ideas		
4. Irreconcilable Demands (Management)		
5. Lack of a Head of Operations		
6. Lack of Recognition for High Performers		
7. Supportive Leadership		
8. Leadership Style		
<i>Other</i>		

Hypotheses (lower salience)

1. How do your supervisors deal with conflicts and disagreements?
2. Do you receive regular feedback/appreciation from your supervisors regarding your performance?
3. Do your supervisors take your opinions and ideas seriously?
4. Do you think the management approach of cutting costs negatively affects employees' motivation and attendance behavior?
 - *Backup Question: How does the 'cost-saving approach' reflect in your work?*
5. Have you observed a change in employee absenteeism behaviors since the position of head of operations at S&L has been vacant?
 - *Backup Question: What has changed in the (operational) workflow since this position became vacant?*
6. Can your manager recognize the good and poor performance of employees accordingly?
7. How does your manager react when you have difficulties at work or need support?
8. How do you generally assess your supervisors' leadership behavior and style?
 - *Backup Question: Do you notice any correlations with absenteeism?*

6. Hypotheses Section: Group Dynamics

Open-ended question (medium salience)

When you think about your team and the composition of the work groups, do you notice anything that could lead to absenteeism?

Hypothesis	Mention	Keyword of mention
1. Conflicts within Departments / Teams		
2. Migration and Language Barriers		
3. Social Integration at the Workplace		
4. Team Size		
5. Work Climate		
<i>Other</i>		

Hypotheses (lower salience)

1. Are there tensions or conflicts between departments/teams that affect the work atmosphere?
2. Do you feel that language barriers and cultural adaptations play a significant role in your team?
 - *Backup Question: How do these affect the team dynamics and work atmosphere?*
3. Have you noticed that certain employees are not as well integrated into the team, which could have a negative impact on their job satisfaction?
 - *Backup Question: Do you feel supported and respected by your team?*
4. Do you believe that the current size of your team negatively influences team cohesion and the sense of community?
5. How would you describe the general working climate in your team?

7. Hypotheses Section: Personal Circumstances and Behaviours

Open-ended question (medium salience)

Can you think of any personal behaviors or circumstances that could contribute to the absenteeism rate at S&L?

Hypothesis	Mention	Keyword of mention
1. Fear of Being Late		
2. Marital Status		
3. Residence		
4. Strains from Second Jobs		
<i>Other</i>		

Hypotheses (lower salience)

1. Can you imagine colleagues would rather call in sick than be late?
 - *Backup Question: What are the fears/suspected consequences?*
2. Can you imagine that employees are frequently absent because of family reasons (such as sickness of children or caregiving for relatives)?
 - *Backup Question: How do your supervisors handle this?*
3. Can you imagine that colleagues with a longer work commute are more frequently absent?
 - *Backup Question: How long does it typically take you to get to work?*
4. Can you imagine some colleagues are additionally burdened because they have another job besides their job at S&L?
 - *Backup Question: What do these burdens look like, and do they affect absenteeism at S&L?*

A4.2 Interview sample

Interviewee	Role	Department	Org. tenure	Grouping*
Interviewee 1	Operational Foreman	LC1	>10 years	1
Interviewee 2	Operational Employee	LC1	6-10 years	2
Interviewee 3	Operational Employee	LC1	>10 years	3
Interviewee 4	Operational Employee	LC1	1-5 years	3
Interviewee 5	Operational Employee	LC2	>10 years	1
Interviewee 6	Operational Foreman	LC2	1-5 years	2
Interviewee 7	Operational Employee	LC2	6-10 years	2
Interviewee 8	Operational Employee	LC2	1-5 years	3
Interviewee 9	Operational Employee	LC4	6-10 years	1
Interviewee 10	Operational Employee	LC4	>10 years	2
Interviewee 11	Operational Foreman	LC4	6-10 years	3
Interviewee 12	Operational Foreman	PL	>10 years	1
Interviewee 13	Operational Foreman	PL	1-5 years	2
Interviewee 14	Operational Employee	PL	6-10 years	3
Interviewee 15	Operational Employee	PL	1-5 years	3

Notes. * Grouping according to the individual absence statistics (see section 4.1), with Group 1 having absence rates below 4.8%, Group 2 between 4.8% and 9.8%, and Group 3 above 9.8%.

A4.3 Categorical system for the evaluation of the interviews (deductive approach)

Category	Interview 1	Interview ...	Interview 15
Perception of Absenteeism Severity			
Absenteeism Patterns			
Job Satisfaction			
Organizational Commitment			
Job Involvement			
Flexible working hours			
High absenteeism (vicious circle)			
Staff shortages			
Employment contracts			
Different Collective Agreements in the Group			
Dissatisfaction with Pay			
Lack of Adaptation to Individual Needs			
Shift Work			
Workplace Mobility			
Poor Working Conditions			
Challenging Tasks			
Autonomy & Leeway			
Task Variety			
Personal Development			
Conflict Management			
Feedback and Appreciation			
Inclusion of Opinions and Ideas			
Irreconcilable Demands (Management)			
Lack of a Head of Operations			
Lack of Recognition for High Performers			
Supportive Leadership			
Leadership Style			
Conflicts within Departments / Teams			
Migration and Language Barriers			
Social Integration at the Workplace			
Team Size			
Work Climate			
Fear of Being Late			
Marital Status			
Residence			
Strains from Second Jobs			

A5.1 Result Table 1: Attitudinal factors

Construct	Finding	Evaluation			n.a.
		High	Mid	Low	
Job Satisfaction	All respondents are at least moderately satisfied with their job despite recognizing issues like low salaries.	8	7	0	-
Organizational Commitment	Responses vary; some express strong loyalty to their employer, while others feel less attached, often due to perceived changes in company values.	5	3	7	-
Job Involvement	Most respondents do not seem involved with their job and maintain a clear distinction between work and personal life.	1	0	10	4

A5.2 Result Table 2: Workloads

Hypothesis	Finding	Saliency			No effect	Not sure
		High	Mid	Low		
Flexible Working Hours	The newly implemented company agreement demanding flexible working hours does not appear to significantly impact stress or absenteeism levels.	0	0	3	9	1
High Absenteeism (Vicious Circle)	High absenteeism in the company places additional stress on present employees, negatively affecting their job satisfaction and contributing to higher absenteeism.	5	4	5	0	1
Staff Shortages	A general staff shortage at S&L exacerbates the workload, correlating with an uptick in absenteeism.	5	1	7	2	0

A5.3 Result Table 3: Organizational work structures and compensation

Hypothesis	Finding	Saliency			No effect	Not sure
		High	Mid	Low		
Employment Contracts	Temporary contracts or insecure job situations do not increase stress or absenteeism.	0	0	2	10	2
Different Collective Agreements in the Group	Perceived injustices over different collective agreements within the Werner & Mertz group are likely to result in lower attendance motivation.	5	0	8	1	0
Dissatisfaction with Pay	Inadequate pay compared to colleagues with similar jobs and responsibilities negatively affects attendance motivation.	4	0	7	1	1
Lack of Adaptation to Individual Needs	A lack of workplace adaptation to individual needs at LC1 (ribbon machine) contributes to health problems, which might lead to increased absenteeism.	1	0	3	8	2
Shift Work	For certain individuals, irregular working hours and the switching between day and night shifts contribute to increased stress and health problems, leading to higher absenteeism.	2	1	8	1	3
Workplace Mobility	There appears to be no noticeable correlation between frequent workplace transitions and absenteeism.	0	0	4	8	1

A5.4 Result Table 4: Working conditions

Hypothesis	Finding	Salience			No effect	Not sure
		High	Mid	Low		
Poor Working Conditions	Suboptimal working conditions (climatic factors and road infrastructure) have been identified as a key factor contributing to health-related issues and lowering morale, particularly among employees of the PL.	6	5	1	3	0

A5.5 Result Table 5: Job-related factors

Hypothesis	Finding	Salience			No effect	Not sure
		High	Mid	Low		
Challenging Tasks	The complexity and depth of designated tasks seem sufficiently challenging, exhibiting no consequential impact on absenteeism.	0	0	3	12	0
Autonomy & Leeway	Within LC1 and LC4, perceived constraints in job autonomy most adversely affect job satisfaction and motivation.	0	0	7	7	1
Task Variety	Within LC1 and LC4, the absence of varied work tasks leads to decreased job satisfaction and motivation.	0	0	5	10	0
Personal Development	Employees feel that their current job role offers ample opportunities for personal and professional skill development without a noticeable impact on absenteeism.	0	0	4	10	0

A5.6 Result Table 6: Leadership

Hypothesis	Finding	Saliency			No effect	Not sure
		High	Mid	Low		
Conflict Management	The management of conflicts and disagreements by supervisors likely has no significant impact on absenteeism rates.	0	0	1	11	1
Feedback and Appreciation	The lack of regular feedback and appreciation from some supervisors at LC1 and LC4 negatively impacts some employees' attendance motivation.	1	3	2	9	0
Inclusion of Opinions and Ideas	Within LC1 and LC4, some supervisors fail to value employees or take their opinions seriously, negatively affecting their job satisfaction and motivation.	0	0	6	5	0
Irreconcilable Demands (Management)	The management's cost-saving approach (e.g., in-house cleaning work and other saving measures) adversely affects employee motivation, though its direct impact on absenteeism is not specified.	2	2	10	1	0
Lack of a Head of Operations	The absence of a head of operations does not affect absenteeism within the operational workforce.	0	0	1	13	0
Lack of Recognition for High Performers	Supervisors are generally able to recognize both good and poor performance accordingly.	0	0	2	9	2
Supportive Leadership	Supervisors seem responsive and supportive when employees face difficulties.	0	0	0	13	1
Leadership Style	Negative behaviors of some supervisors at LC1 and LC4 reduce job satisfaction and motivation, contributing to increased absenteeism.	3	2	0	9	0

A5.7 Result Table 7: Group dynamics

Hypothesis	Finding	Saliency			No effect	Not sure
		High	Mid	Low		
Conflicts within Departments / Teams	Team tensions and conflicts significantly impact the work atmosphere and reduce job satisfaction, potentially leading to lower attendance motivation.	1	2	4	3	2
Migration and Language Barriers	There is no correlation between immigration background or language barriers and absenteeism.	0	0	1	9	0
Social Integration at the Workplace	It is unlikely that absenteeism is increased because of poorly integrated employees.	0	1	2	8	0
Team Size	At LC1, large team sizes might negatively affect team cohesion and reduce job satisfaction.	1	0	4	8	0
Work Climate	At LC1 and LC4, a strained work climate is closely associated with increased absenteeism.	3	2	2	8	0

A5.8 Result Table 8: Personal circumstances and behaviors

Hypothesis	Finding	Saliency			No effect	Not sure
		High	Mid	Low		
Fear of Being Late	The fear of being late for work and accumulating deficit hours motivates some employees to opt for absenteeism.	0	0	7	5	3
Marital Status	Absence due to family-related issues, such as caring for relatives or children's illnesses, contributes to the overall absenteeism rate.	4	4	1	1	2
Residence	An employee's place of residence has no impact on his or her absenteeism behavior.	0	0	0	12	0
Strains from Second Jobs	Having a second job in addition to employment at S&L contributes to increased stress levels, though its direct effect on absenteeism is not clear.	1	0	8	3	1

A6.1 Measures to establish a culture of attendance at S&L (Howarth 2005)

Measure	Description
1. Revise Absence Policies and Procedures	S&L should begin by reviewing and communicating their absence management policies. The aim is to establish and convey the expected norms regarding attendance, addressing any cultural attitudes that may deem a certain level of absenteeism acceptable. Regularly sharing department-wide absence rates and industry benchmarks can help recalibrate norms and encourage responsible conversations about absenteeism.
2. Implementation of the Bradford Factor (Attendance Monitoring System)	Introducing the Bradford Factor offers an objective method to monitor individual employee absences and identify patterns that may disrupt operational flows. This metric, calculated by squaring the number of absence instances and multiplying by the total days absent, enables the company to differentiate between frequent short-term and less frequent long-term absences. Setting score thresholds can prompt early discussions between HR and employees to address and resolve underlying issues.
3. Procedures for Returning Absentees	<p>Return-to-work interviews: Implementing return-to-work interviews following each absence, conducted by adequately trained line managers, is recommended to reduce future absenteeism. These interviews should be constructive and allow employees to discuss any issues they may be facing rather than feeling punitive.</p> <p>Inform absent employees about missed activities and workloads: Leaders should inform absent employees of the activities and workloads they missed during their absence to emphasize the impact of their absence on the team. This practice not only updates the absentee but also highlights the consequences their absence has on their colleagues, thus potentially mitigating future absences.</p>

A6.2 Correlation between grouping, individual absence rate, and Bradford Factor

	<i>Grouping*</i>	<i>Indiv. absence rate</i>	<i>Bradford-Factor</i>
Grouping*	-		
Indiv. absence rate	.79**	-	
Bradford-Factor	.38**	.79**	-

Notes. N = 109. * Grouping according to the individual absence statistics (section 4.1) with ascending average absence rates. ** p < .001.



Return-To-Work Interview Form

To be completed by interviewer (operational manager)

Employees Name:																			
Reason for absence:	First notification: (date, time, to whom)																		
Dates of absence: From: To:																			
Is a sickness certificate available? YES / NO (if yes, provide details)	Is there an ongoing health problem? YES / NO (if yes, provide details)																		
Can the company assist? YES / NO (if yes, provide details)	Is there an external problem? YES / NO (if yes, provide details)																		
<p>What is the employee's absenteeism record for the last 6 months?</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th><i>No. of occasions</i></th> <th><i>Date</i></th> <th><i>Reasons</i></th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td> </td> <td> </td> <td> </td> </tr> <tr> <td> </td> <td> </td> <td> </td> </tr> <tr> <td> </td> <td> </td> <td> </td> </tr> <tr> <td> </td> <td> </td> <td> </td> </tr> <tr> <td> </td> <td> </td> <td> </td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Bradford-Score:</p> <p>Is there an obvious pattern to the absenteeism record? YES / NO</p>		<i>No. of occasions</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Reasons</i>															
<i>No. of occasions</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Reasons</i>																	

Return-To-Work Interview Form



<p>Was the employee’s loss to the department discussed? YES / NO (if yes, provide details of comment made)</p>	
<p>Is it recommended that the employee is referred to the company doctor? YES / NO (if yes, for what reason)</p>	
<p>Is the employee to receive a caution in relation to absenteeism? YES / NO (if yes, provide details)</p>	
<p><i>Further Comments:</i></p>	
<p>Employee’s signature:</p> <p>Print Name:</p> <p>Date:</p>	<p>Interviewers signature:</p> <p>Print Name:</p> <p>Date:</p>

A6.4 List of tailored interventions for S&L based on identified problem areas

	Initiative	Description
Workloads	Hiring Additional Employees or Utilizing Temporary Staff	Staff shortages can be addressed by hiring more permanent or temporary staff. The aim is to reduce elevated workloads and related absenteeism by evenly distributing tasks decreasing stress among current employees. This can lead to fewer absences due to work-related stress.
	Implementation of a Peer Support System	This measure involves creating a platform where employees can openly share concerns and collaboratively develop solutions to manage workload and stress. Fostering a supportive work environment aims to improve morale, reduce feelings of isolation, and increase employee engagement. The peer support system can serve as an informal channel for employees to voice their challenges and receive support from colleagues, enhancing the overall workplace atmosphere.
	Establishing Open Communication Channels	This initiative focuses on setting up clear and accessible channels for employees to express concerns about their workloads and stress levels. By ensuring that employees have a way to communicate their struggles, management can identify critical areas early and take proactive steps to address them. This approach not only helps in managing immediate workload challenges but also contributes to creating a culture of openness and trust within the organization.
Organizational Work Structures and Compensation	Salary Raises and Bonuses	This intervention directly targets the financial aspect of employee motivation and satisfaction. By raising salaries and offering bonuses, S&L addresses a primary motivator for many employees: financial security and reward for their efforts. The goals are to boost morale, attract and retain talent, and reduce absenteeism.
	Initiating Open Discussions on Compensation	This measure involves starting open dialogues about compensation structures within the company, referencing industry benchmarks for transparency. The goal is to educate employees about the reasons behind their wages and the process by which collective agreements are negotiated, thereby facilitating a better understanding of the company's perspective and constraints. This approach can help reduce employee dissatisfaction and demotivation, which IS linked to increased absenteeism.
	Enhancing and Showcasing Opportunities for Professional Growth	This strategy highlights and improves employee professional growth and development opportunities. By organizing presentations on career progression pathways and showcasing best practice examples from within the company, employees can see a clear path for their career advancement. This measure aims to boost motivation and make employees feel more invested in their careers at S&L.

	Initiative	Description
Leadership	Comprehensive Leadership Training Programs	This measure involves providing extensive training for supervisors, particularly in areas like LC1 and LC4, focusing on emotional intelligence, effective communication, employee recognition, and conflict resolution. As leaders play a crucial role in influencing job satisfaction and commitment, enhancing their people management skills can increase attendance motivation.
	Non-Monetary Employee Recognition Programs	The development of programs to acknowledge employees who perform well, especially those taking on additional responsibilities during high absence periods, is recommended. Examples include 'Employee of the Month' awards, public acknowledgment in company communications, or small tokens of appreciation like extended lunch breaks, early departures, or additional days off. Such initiatives can boost motivation and a sense of appreciation among employees.
	Increasing (Management) Presence in Branch LC4	Enhancing management presence in the branch outside headquarters (LC4) is suggested to foster a sense of belonging, consistent leadership, and support. Even if the absence of a head of operations is perceived as having minimal impact, this increased presence could positively influence the work environment and reduce absenteeism. Gestures that could further strengthen the sense of belonging among LC4 employees include, for example, the occasional delivery of lunch from the canteen at headquarters to LC4.
	Transparent Handling and Replacement of Ineffective Supervisors	For supervisors whose areas continue to experience high absenteeism due to their leadership behavior, there should be transparency in communicating their leadership deficits and providing opportunities to address these issues. If no improvement is observed, S&L must be open to considering their replacement. This approach underscores the importance of effective leadership in managing absenteeism and maintaining a healthy work environment.
Work Climate	Regular Team-Building Activities	The introduction of regular team-building activities is recommended to improve the work climate and address individual conflicts and lack of team cohesion. These activities could range from pre-shift warm-up and stretching sessions to team lunches, dinners, or other events outside work hours. The aim is to foster a sense of unity and team spirit among employees, which can improve the overall work atmosphere and increase attendance motivation.
	Implementation of a Gratitude Program	This strategy involves introducing a 'Gratitude Program' where employees can express appreciation to their colleagues through structured letters of gratitude, exemplary for help with specific problems or workload sharing. A rewards system should be established to encourage participation, such as granting a day off to the employee who receives or writes the most gratitude letters in each department. Additional incentives might include early departure passes, gift cards, or snack vouchers. Collaborative workshops between HR and operational staff are suggested to refine the layout and enhance the program's effectiveness.

	Initiative	Description
Working Conditions	Improving Working Conditions	This cost-intensive intervention prioritizes the physical aspects of the work environment, enhancing ventilation, climate control, and infrastructure to address health, safety, and comfort, which are critical components of job satisfaction. Such investments demonstrate a strong commitment to employee well-being.
	Launching an Awareness Campaign about Heat-related Issues	This measure involves initiating an awareness campaign about heat-related issues at the workplace. By educating employees on self-care during high temperatures through informational posters or brief meetings, the company can provide practical advice and strategies to cope with heat. This approach aims to mitigate the impact of strained working conditions, particularly in summer, thereby enhancing employee well-being.
	Allowing Lighter and More Breathable Work Clothing	S&L can explore the option of allowing employees to wear lighter and more breathable clothing during the summer months. This change in dress code aims to increase employee comfort in high temperatures, improving their overall work experience and potentially reducing heat-related absenteeism.
	Continue the Provision of Refreshments and Hydration Breaks	The management's ongoing effort to provide refreshments and encourage regular hydration breaks during extreme temperatures is a well-perceived measure. This initiative helps prevent heat-related health issues among employees, contributing to a healthier work environment and reducing the likelihood of heat-related problems.
Personal Circumstances and Behaviors	Flexible Emergency Family Leave Policies	S&L can enhance employee support by offering more flexible policies for emergency family leave. This change would allow employees to manage urgent family matters without going through excessive bureaucratic procedures or feeling compelled to call in sick. By providing this flexibility, the company acknowledges and supports the personal needs of its employees, which can reduce absenteeism related to personal emergencies.
	Implementing a more Flexible Grace Period	S&L may consider its approach to managing employee tardiness and accumulating deficit hours. A grace period that allows employees to be late by a certain margin without affecting their time accounts could be introduced. This more forgiving policy aims to decrease the pressure employees feel from lateness and concerns over deficit hours.
	Close Monitoring of Policy Changes	If S&L decides to change its policies, close monitoring of the effects is needed to prevent potential exploitation. This involves regularly reviewing the impact of the new policies on attendance patterns and employee satisfaction, ensuring that the changes are creating positive results and are not being misused.

A6.5 Sample letters for a 'Gratitude Program'



[Name of giver here]

[Date here]

THANK YOU

[Name of receiver here]

[Text here]



[Name of giver here]

[Date here]



[Name of receiver here]

[Text here]