

# In certain jobs supervisor support can reduce absenteeism

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A supportive supervisor can keep employees in certain hazardous jobs from being absent even when co-workers think it's all right to miss work, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

Researchers explored factors that can influence employee absenteeism and found that a job's level of risk and [peer pressure](#) were both negligible compared to the influence of the employee's supervisor. Having peers who think it's OK to miss a lot of [work](#) days influenced employees to miss more work only when the employees felt their supervisors were not supportive, the study found. An employee's perception of danger on the job did not itself play a role in determining absenteeism, according to the study published online in APA's [Journal of Applied Psychology](#).

"The findings provide useful guidance for companies and organizations that are dealing with a counterproductive employee subculture that condones missing work," said lead author Michal Biron, PhD, of Israel's University of Haifa and the Netherlands' Tilburg University. "Leadership will do well to provide frontline supervisors with training and resources so that they can be supportive of their employees who deal with tough [work environments](#)."

The study involved 508 workers with the transportation authority of a large U.S. municipality that closely monitors employee attendance and enforces a strict absence policy. The sample was 69 percent men and 31

percent women with an average age of 46. Forty-three percent of the workers were employed in the authority's bus division, 48 percent in the station division and 9 percent in the subway division.

Researchers determined the participants' rate of absenteeism from their personnel records over 24 months. To determine perceived job hazards, they randomly selected 34 of the participants to respond to a series of questionnaires about hazards on the job such as electrocution, [dangerous chemicals](#) or contaminants, continuous loud noise, [extreme temperatures](#) or humidity, and verbal or physical assaults by customers or co-workers.

The entire sample was asked to respond to questions asking how they felt about their co-workers and the degree to which their co-workers viewed 20 possible reasons for absence as "justifiable." Reasons ranged from the individual's own illness symptoms to personal situations such as parental illness or an important event at a child's school.

The participants were also asked to rate their supervisor's supportiveness. Researchers asked the employees to indicate how often during the past month their immediate supervisor assisted them in various ways, such as "talked you through work-related problems, helping you come up with solutions," and "provided you with encouragement about your work." The participants responded using a 5-point scale ranging from 0 for "never" to 4 for "several times a day."

"An employee culture that approves of missing work might result in higher employee absenteeism when coupled with aversive work conditions if a supervisor is considered unsupportive, but it seems to have no effect at all when employees feel their supervisor is supportive," said co-author Peter Bamberger, PhD, of Tel Aviv University and the Smithers Institute of Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. "This may be because [employees](#) want to reciprocate positive treatment and avoid causing any problems due to their absenteeism that

could negatively impact their supervisors."

Demographic and individual differences such as gender, age, tenure, ethnicity and average hours worked per week were included in the analysis to ensure accurate statistical representation.

**More information:** "Aversive Workplace Conditions and Absenteeism: Taking Referent Group Norms and Supervisor Support Into Account," Michal Biron, PhD, University of Haifa and Tilburg University; Peter Bamberger, PhD, Tel Aviv University and the Smithers Institute of Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations; Journal of Applied Psychology, online, March 2012.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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