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Gertrude Mleya's Investigation into
the Causes of Increased Absenteeism
at a Meat Processing/Retail Concern in Bulawayo

Report prepared for the Journal by Howard Dean

GERTRUDE MLEYA'S 2010 investigation into THE CAUSES OF INCREASED ABSENTEEISM AT ACEFRUITS ENTERPRISES (PVT) LTD

Introductory comments

This is a survey of the opinions of employees of a private sector organization about the causes of unauthorized absences from work and what could be done to reduce such absenteeism.

After collecting data to check her hypotheses, the researcher reported seven causes of absenteeism in the company and made various recommendations to combat the problem.

It is a meticulous piece of research, exhibiting many strong points of research methodology, described below. Mleya's research thus stands both as a model for other researchers and a source of practical suggestions for HR practitioners.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Mleya stated her Research Question as: "What are the causes of increased absenteeism at Acefruits Enterprises (Pvt) Ltd?"

To widen and deepen her knowledge, Mleya carried out a comprehensive review of published literature both on research methodology and on the subject of absenteeism. Her bibliography lists textbooks, journal articles and internet material.

One observation culled from her reading was that 'any absenteeism rate above 5% tends to indicate dissatisfaction among the workforce'. It would have been useful to develop this point – for example, a rate

could be determined by (a) multiplying the number of employees in an organization (say, 50) by the number of ordinary working days in a year (say, 249, i.e. excluding weekends and public holidays); then (b) counting the number of days of unauthorized absence in the year (say, 75); and then calculating the relationship between the two numbers as a percentage. In the example above, 'b' (75) divided by 'a' (12 450) = 0,6% . However, it is not that simple. It would obviously be necessary for a given organization to clearly define absenteeism and to maintain accurate records of unauthorized absence over time, as well as to make adjustments for staff losses and gains during the period covered by the calculation.

Mleya's wide reading revealed that researchers at various times have found one-fifth of organizations did not know the levels of absenteeism in their organizations; and three-quarters did not know the cost to them of absenteeism. In addition, her review indicated that authors and researchers view absenteeism as a multi-faceted problem, including under the heading of absenteeism such phenomena as failure to report for work, lateness/unpunctuality/poor time-keeping, reduced personal productivity, desertion of post, even allocating work time to personal activities (being physically present but 'psychologically absent'). Finally, the causes of 'culpable absenteeism', i.e. absences that are unauthorized/deemed within the control of employees, are manifold and inter-related, according to the literature on this phenomenon.

Mleya found that there were various definitions of absenteeism in the literature, 'each one specific to the work of the researcher at the time'.

She then presented her own working definition of absenteeism for the purposes of her research as 'the failure of an employee to report to work when scheduled to do so'. She proceeded to formulate eight Hypotheses about the possible causes of absenteeism, developed from her reading and related to her own organization where 'in the year 2009, an average of 26% of employees were absent from work each month'.

Mleya's HYPOTHESES

She began by citing a useful authority from her reading. 'Pons (1992) defines a hypothesis as a basis for reasoning or as starting point for investigation. It is a statement of what one thinks the scenario is. However, the term carries the implication that there is room for doubt regarding this, hence the attempt to establish whether the supposition is correct or not through the testing of the hypothesis.' One tests an hypothesis by collecting facts.

Below are Mleya's 8 hypotheses about the possible causes of absenteeism among non-managerial and factory workers in her organization –

- a) transportation problems to work
- b) lack of job satisfaction arising from routine or boring work
- c) non-existence of rewards or incentives for good attendance
- d) family problems and responsibilities
- e) ill-health
- f) lack of job involvement and organization commitment
- g) no Employee Assistance Program to deal with work and non-work problems
- h) lack of appreciation and recognition of exceptional performance.

These hypothetical causes of absenteeism fall into two categories: external personal problems (transport, ill-health, family demands, no assistance) and internal work-related issues (boring work, lack of commitment, lack of appreciation, no incentive).

DEFINITION OF ABSTRACT TERMS in the Research Question and Hypotheses

Editorial Note on the need to define 'abstract' terms

In research, 'abstract' means the opposite of 'concrete'. When an abstract word or concept is used in a research question, the people from whom you seek information may interpret that word or concept in different ways. This reduces the comparability of their answers to the question, in unknown ways.

Since the purpose of data collection in survey research is to be able to aggregate responses from different people in order to discern a pattern or trend, it is necessary to try and ensure that all who answer your questions have the same understanding of those questions. This is why it is necessary to define abstract terms concretely, observably or measurably.

For this reason, it is necessary for a researcher to rigorously identify every abstract term in the research question and in the hypotheses – and then to 'concretise' each term in observable form. The way to do this is to find a concrete example for each abstract term. Take each word or phrase in the research question and hypotheses and methodically ask yourself in regard to each, "How will I see if it is... increased? boring? non-existent? etc". For example, 'non-existent incentives to attend work' could refer to deducting pay for unauthorized absences: i.e. 'no work, no pay'.

Being this specific early in the research process can later help the researcher to frame clearer questions for the interview schedule or questionnaire.

Some of the abstract terms that appeared in Mleya's Research Question and Hypotheses were: causes – increased – absenteeism – transportation problems – job satisfaction – routine – boring – non-existence of rewards – incentives – good attendance – family problems – family responsibilities – ill-health – job involvement – organization commitment – employee

assistance program – work-related problems – non-work-related problems – appreciation – recognition – exceptional performance.

She began this section with the following insightful and useful statement – 'Definitions are crucial in studies of this nature as they help to avoid ambiguity as to what the researcher is referring to, particularly where the same word may have other meanings in everyday language or in other disciplines. Unfamiliar technical jargon is explained to ensure that prospective readers will not miss the point the researcher is trying to communicate.'

She then defined six of the above abstract terms –

- absenteeism ('failure to report/remain at work as scheduled; unscheduled leave')
- job satisfaction ('general attitude to job; difference between rewards received and what they believe they should receive')
- job involvement (extent to which one identifies with a job, actively participates in it, considers performance important to self-worth')
- organization commitment ('degree to which one identifies with organization/goals, wishes to maintain membership')
- employee assistance program ('counselling, advice and assistance provided/funded by the employer, to help employees/families with problems')
- exceptional employee contributions ('exceeds set targets').

While these are fairly detailed, some of the definitions could still be considered to use 'technical jargon', explanation of which to factory workers (included in Mleya's population) might have benefited from being defined by means of concrete, observable, measurable indicators. (For example, 'organization commitment' might be rendered into more specific, concrete form as "boasting to one's friends about working for Acefruits, telling them, for example, 'It is a good place to work'.")

When we turn to her questionnaire, two of her questions did provide respondents with more concrete examples, enabling them to see more precisely what she meant by the abstract terms used – e.g. 'family responsibilities such as looking after sick members of the family or attending funerals of loved ones' and 'recognize and appreciate your outstanding performance (a job well done)'.

Incorporating such specific, concrete examples in all her definitions would have usefully improved this section of her report – and later improved the questions themselves. It might also have helped her to avoid the ambiguity apparent in question 2(ii) which asked if people would 'miss work' if they were not

satisfied with their job. This might be interpreted as either “I miss my job; I wish I was at work” or “I think I’ll miss work today; I’ll absent myself”.

POPULATION of interest – and the SAMPLE selected from that population for research

In research terms, a ‘population’ consists of all those about whom the researcher wishes to obtain information.

In this case, Mleya was interested in the opinions of the 142 full-time employees of Acefruit Enterprises, consisting of those in Factory/Processing (79 employees), Production (15), Sales/Marketing (15), Procurement/Services (9), HR (9) and Accounts (15).

She decided to choose a random sample and described the sampling process in considerable detail. This involved placing 79 cards, each containing the employee number for a factory worker, in an opaque box, shaking the box each time and withdrawing a number of cards one at a time until the sample number had been selected. The Main Register of Employees was then used to identify the names of those chosen for the sample. This was done in the presence of senior managers.

This description of the sampling process provides useful guidelines for other researchers. However, her report on the figures involved is not completely clear, with references to 79 cards (the number of employees in Factory/Processing), 30 random draws, but 93 employees being included in the sample. One may deduce that 30 factory workers out of 79 were randomly selected and these were then added to the other 63 (presumably non-managerial) employees working in the other departments in the company.

One point is worth making. With a small population of interest, it is not always necessary to select a sample. For example, rather than choose 30 out of 79 factory workers, Mleya could have included all 79 and proceeded to survey all 142 employees comprising her population of interest. However, since this research was undertaken as a learning exercise comprising part of a qualification, her sampling provided an opportunity to demonstrate some facility with sampling techniques, in preparation for future situations where sampling might be unavoidable.

INSTRUMENT used to collect data

There are a number of ‘instruments’ a researcher can use in a survey. One of these is the self-administered questionnaire where the people in the sample write down their answers to questions in their own time and then return the questionnaire to the researcher by a specified deadline. Another is the interview schedule where the people in the sample answer questions put

to them verbally by the researcher, who notes their answers on a separate printed schedule for each person interviewed.

Muleya originally planned to use the self-administered questionnaire. In the end, however, she had to vary this procedure due to English-language difficulties experienced by 19 respondents. She took the respondents in groups of 4 (to minimize work disruptions) and went through the questionnaire explaining each question while the respondents ticked their chosen answers. In some instances, the questions were translated into Shona or Ndebele. This approximated a group interview, with the difference being that it was the respondents themselves who completed the ‘interview schedule’.

Her questionnaire consisted of two parts –

Part A: Biographical data (gender, age, marital status, number of dependants, length of service, qualifications and job category).

Part B: Causes of absenteeism (as postulated in her hypotheses).

The questionnaire was accompanied by an excellent covering letter to respondents – and ended with the appreciative statement ‘*Thank you for your valued and thoughtful feedback!*’

Editorial Note on explaining in detail the reasons for research

Conventionally, a questionnaire is accompanied by a brief covering letter. This should explain, among other things, why the particular recipient was singled out to receive the questionnaire. If the researcher does not explain that selection was random, for example, and there is no special significance in the selection, the recipient may modify his responses, perhaps thinking he is being scrutinized – for punishment, say, or for advancement. This could obviously impact on the truthfulness of his replies. So it is important to address this.

In Mleya’s covering letter, all these points were ably-covered, with one significant exception. The letter did not explain why the particular recipients had been chosen to receive the questionnaire.

One innovation she introduced was to state, “Participation in this study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any stage if you do not feel like continuing.” In the event, 7 respondents did not return the questionnaires, so presumably took her at her word.

THE PRE TEST and PILOT STUDY

Wherever possible, it is a good idea to pre-test the questionnaire in a pilot study, to check how understandable the questions are, before going to the expense of producing the required number of final copies. In a pilot study, a pre-test is done by administering the draft questionnaire to a small

number of persons from the population (randomly selected, if possible), often in a face-to-face situation where the researcher observes respondents completing the questionnaire, preferably does not speak during the pre-test, merely noting any apparent difficulties in comprehension for *subsequent* discussion as much as possible. The idea is to simulate as far as possible the circumstances in which those in the sample will subsequently be expected to complete the questionnaire, i.e. where there will be no researcher to answer questions about what a question ‘means’.

Mleya’s pre-test involved distributing the draft questionnaire for completion by 9 employees (who had not been selected for the sample). In an interesting innovation she asked these employees, in addition to completing the questionnaire, to rate eight aspects of the instrument on a 6-point scale from Excellent (1) to Poor (6). The eight aspects were: clarity of the covering letter; overall appearance; page layout, clarity of instructions; legibility; realistic completion time; assurance of anonymity; and relevance of items to causes of absenteeism.

As a result of the pre-test, the clarity of some questions was improved – which is one of the purposes of pre-testing. It would have been useful to give the reader some details of how questions were made clearer, following the pre-test.

COLLECTION OF DATA: the main study

After the pre-test and after amending her instrument, Mleya then proceeded with the main study. Her report on this is informative and likely to be helpful to other researchers.

This is the procedure she followed. She held a meeting with heads of the various departments to inform them about the nature and importance of the survey and discussed the questionnaire and data collection process with them. She distributed the questionnaire/covering letter/pre-addressed envelope (to those selected for the sample) with monthly pay-slips. Recipients were furnished with the researcher’s contact details and were invited to contact the researcher for any necessary clarification. They were given 3 weeks to complete the questionnaires, to seal them in the pre-addressed envelopes supplied and to put them in any one of five locked ‘suggestion boxes’ placed around the premises of the business.

Anonymity was promised, to encourage honest responses (i.e. valid data). One question that arises is whether any of the 19 respondents who completed the questionnaire in the group interviews might have suspected she would be able to identify their questionnaires, which would compromise anonymity. In turn this might impact on the validity of their

responses. She does not cover this aspect in her report – but one can assume that having completed the questionnaires in her presence the 19 were left to put their documents in one of the five locked boxes, rather than hand them directly to her.

RESPONSE RATE to the questionnaire

83 employees out of the 93 comprising the sample returned the completed questionnaire, a very high response rate of 89%. Five did not answer the questionnaire fully so Mleya regarded them as spoilt and disregarded them, resulting in 85% usable responses.

Some employees in her sample were unavailable. One died and two were on leave. Due to time constraints, she decided not to carry out the procedure known as ‘sampling with replacement’, where further employees would be randomly chosen from the balance of the population.

Seven employees in the original sample did not return the questionnaire.

Editorial Note on satisfactory response rates to questionnaires

Where there is no external compulsion to respond (e.g. ‘return this form to me by next week’), one could assume as a working model that there are three equally likely possibilities regarding response – **voluntary response** (“I want to fill this in”); **voluntary non-response** (“I can’t be bothered to fill this in”); and **involuntary non-response** (the person is away from the workplace on leave etc, so did not receive the questionnaire). *Assuming* all things to be equal, one might then expect a voluntary one-in-three (33%) response rate. The voluntary aspect of completion might be considered to encourage truthful replies.

A response rate above 33% may increase as a result of extrinsic factors beyond the control of the researcher. For example, if the research addresses issues of great personal interest to certain elements of the sample they may be more likely to respond.

The response rate may also be increased by various intrinsic factors, i.e. factors within the control of the researcher – a well-designed and easy-to-complete questionnaire; a promise (and guarantee) of confidentiality or anonymity as appropriate; an appealing topic; the hope that completing the questionnaire might lead to some good personal outcome, a convenient method of return – each increasing motivation to return the questionnaire.

Unusually high response rates are rarely reported in the literature. Mleya reports two examples of response rates of 57%, although she doesn’t provide further details.

LIMITATIONS of the research

Researchers are encouraged to recognize the limitations of their research and to draw these to readers’ attention, so that they do not read more into the findings than is warranted by the methodology followed.

Mleya identified four factors as her limitations ('the research findings will probably not reflect conclusive results due to...'). She thought the following might have impacted on the validity of responses to her questionnaire and the extent to which the findings could be confidently generalized.

1. The organization was not randomly selected. However, since her goal was in effect to carry out a case study of one organization, this need not really be considered a limitation.
2. There was a global recession. This interesting point would have benefited from further explanation as to how she saw this as a limitation.
3. 'Responses to the questionnaire might have been prejudiced due to employee doubts on the purpose of the study. Respondents who are often absent from work might have been reluctant to *participate* in this investigation because they might have felt that the questionnaire was designed to examine their behaviour.'

This is a good point. For example, if the 7 non-respondents included regular absentees, their absence from this survey might have skewed the results in unknown ways. However, since the impact cannot be ascertained, the researcher did well by acknowledging this possibility and alerting readers to it.

4. The comparability of responses to the questions might have been reduced to an unknown extent because while 64 of her 83 respondents responded to an English-language questionnaire, the remaining 19 (approximately 1 in 4) were not proficient in English and consequently 'were assisted to understand the questionnaire by means of translating the questions into Shona or Ndebele... distortions may have occurred given that some English words do not have single vernacular word equivalents or are difficult to interpret'.

This reinforces the point made earlier about defining abstract terms by means of concrete examples, which would tend to be easier to translate (e.g. 'boasting to your friends about working for Acefruits' rather than 'organizational commitment').

The fact that the translations were done in group interview-type situations introduces the possibility of another factor that might affect the comparability of responses – 'interviewer bias' which Mleya drew attention to in her review of research methodology. This could have resulted from the fact that the 64 and the 19 respondents were responding to different stimuli, with the researcher giving more explanations to the 19.

However, the researcher meets her obligations in this regard by drawing readers' attention to these possibilities.

RELIABILITY and VALIDITY of the data

Editorial Note on reliability and validity in research

Reliability and validity are related but separate issues in research. Reliability means consistency, i.e. if a respondent were to be asked a particular question a second time (either later in the questionnaire, perhaps in a slightly different form; or after the passage of time), would he or she give the same answer? If he does, we can conclude that his response is reliable. The dilemma is that he may be untruthful both times, i.e. he may consistently misrepresent his views, or even lie.

This brings us to the issue of validity.

Validity means truthfulness, i.e. is each respondent giving accurate information – or, where he is stating an opinion, is he saying what he truly believes?

Concerns about reliability and validity arise in all social research. Researchers cannot guarantee that the information they gather is reliable and valid. What they must do is explicitly acknowledge the problems and seek to minimize them.

In regard to reliability/likely consistency of responses, Mleya offered the opinion that this was ensured by making use of a representative sample. However, random sampling related to the extent to which survey results could be confidently generalized to her wider population of interest. It does not address the core question: were she or another researcher to replicate her investigation, would they obtain similar results?

In fact, Mleya incorporated an excellent check on reliability into her questionnaire. After asking 11 specific questions relating to her 8 hypotheses, her 12th question asked respondents to rank the 8 factors in order of importance. Allowing for differences in the number of respondents to each question, there is considerable consistency apparent in responses to the 12th question and the other 11.

In regard to the crucial issue of validity, Mleya considered two aspects –

- The first was to assess the 'face validity' of her questionnaire – i.e. 'on the face of it' or on first appearance, would the instrument measure what it was intended to measure? Here she first sought the opinion of her research supervisor and then the opinions of the 9 pre-test employees on the relevance of her questions to the causes of absenteeism. She stated that 'they judged the items to be relevant in terms of reasons for absenteeism.' It would have been useful to have included in her report a summary of how the 9 rated these on her 6-point scale.
- The second aspect was to assess the 'truthfulness' of respondents' replies – i.e. did they give their honest opinions about the causes of absenteeism? Here Mleya ably recognizes the various factors that might be involved. For example, see the third point in her section above on Limitations of

the Study. She commented, ‘To ensure that respondents gave their honest answers without fear of reprisal from seniors or peers they were specifically assured that anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained.’ This assurance was given in the covering letter – and to back this up, the questionnaire did not require respondents to provide their names.

The FINDINGS of the research

Mleya clearly summarizes the responses to her 19 questions from the 78 respondents in her sample, using tables, pie charts and bar charts.

The first part of her questionnaire consisted of questions about gender, marital status, length of service, age, number of dependents, education and job category. Responses provided a profile of the sample and, by extension, a profile of the workforce.

It would have been useful to go further and differentiate responses in terms of these various profiling factors to see whether there were significant differences in views on causes of absenteeism by, say, gender, number of dependents, length of service and so on. However, since Mleya’s hypotheses did not suggest there would be any significant differences according to these factors, there was no real need to so differentiate.

What she did do with the bio-data was to offer some comments and speculations, derived from her review of the literature on absenteeism and her knowledge of the local food industry. For example, ‘the food industry is characterized by a female-dominated workforce’ (64% of her respondents were female); ‘the nature of business and job tasks require young energetic people’ (the average age of her respondents was 32); ‘absence levels tend to be higher where length of service is shorter’ (73% of her respondents had been with the company for 3 years or less); and so on. Some of her postulations could form the basis for further research.

The second part of Mleya’s questionnaire consisted of 12 closed questions seeking respondents’ views about the causes of absenteeism at Acefruits (plus a final open-ended question seeking their views about how to reduce or prevent absenteeism).

Then she used the data to check her original 8 hypotheses. She concluded that all but one – ‘absenteeism was caused by lack of job involvement and organization commitment’ – were supported by the data she collected.

She was thereafter in a position to draw from the hypotheses to answer her Research Question about the causes of absenteeism at Acefruits Enterprises as

being: family problems/responsibilities; no incentives for good attendance (elsewhere in her report although not in the questionnaire itself she clarified this in concrete terms to mean the company was promoting absenteeism by not deducting pay for unauthorized absences from work); transportation problems; lack of appreciation and recognition for good work; routine or boring work; no Employee Assistance Program; and ill-health.

USEFULNESS of the findings to HR practitioners

Mleya concluded with a number of thoughtful recommendations about how to reduce absenteeism, some derived from her research findings and others from her wide reading on the subject of absenteeism.

These include: developing an attendance policy; carrying out return-to-work interviews when an absentee comes back to work; feedback on attendance (possibly with rewards for good attendance; and also pay deductions for unauthorized absence as provided in section 12(6)(a) of the *Labour Act*); flexi-time to help with transport bottlenecks; positive work feedback; job enrichment and so on.

Anyone interested in coping with absenteeism would find her detailed recommendations worthy of careful study. They are set out in Chapter 7 of her research report which can be studied at the IPMZ National Office.

CONTEXT & EDITORIAL POLICY of the HR RESEARCH JOURNAL

The first three Quarterly Research Papers in the series comprising Volume 8 of the HR Research Journal were sent to you as an IPMZ membership service in September and December 2012 and in February 2013. This is the fourth paper, completing Volume 8. The four papers constituting Volume 8 resurrect the HR Research Journal after a 10-year gap in production.

The Editorial Policy of the Journal is to report on Research Dissertations prepared by those studying for higher qualifications, such as the IPMZ Higher Diploma. These quarterly reports will –

- Describe the research methodology used – i.e. Research Question - Hypotheses - Abstract terms - Population and Sample - Instrument used to collect information - Pre-test/Pilot Study - Response Rate - Limitations of the research - Reliability and Validity of information – Collection of data.
- Offer observations/suggestions on methodology for the guidance of future HR researchers.
- Summarize any Research Findings of possible use to HR practitioners.

You may find it useful to print out each quarterly paper and file it, for ease of future reference.