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(Review Article)

Patterns of Attendance Manipulation and Workplace Absenteeism in the South African Public Service: A Structural and Behavioural Analysis

Humphrey Lephethe Motsepe *

Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (Towoomba Research Centre) and University of Venda, South Africa.

Abstract

The South African public service continues to face operational challenges related to absenteeism and attendance manipulation, which have a substantial impact on staff morale, productivity, and public sector performance. This article examines the behavioral and structural foundations that enable attendance manipulation to become a common practice, especially during peak work hours, long weekends, and paydays. Instead of treating absenteeism as a separate disciplinary issue, the study examines how public employees rationalize and normalize strategic absenteeism using two lenses: organizational culture and rational choice. Only secondary data, such as Auditor-General reports, Public Service Commission evaluations, internal departmental circulars, and recent academic literature, served as the basis for the analysis. Using qualitative content analysis, the study identifies recurring attendance patterns such as extended absenteeism around payday weekends, misuse of sick leave to avoid high workloads, and unregulated early departures, especially on Fridays. The results show that a permissive work culture, a lack of real-time attendance monitoring tools, a lack of supervisory controls, and uneven disciplinary procedure implementation all contribute to these behaviors. Because of the low probability of repercussions and the perceived acceptability of such behavior, employees' manipulation of attendance becomes socially reinforced. By placing absenteeism within larger institutional dynamics rather than attributing it to personal misconduct, the article adds to the expanding conversation on absenteeism in the public sector. The study makes the case for immediate reforms, such as the realignment of leave policies, the integration of attendance management systems, and the transformation of institutional culture through leadership accountability. The article is appropriate for analysis in academic, administrative, and policy contexts because no primary data was gathered, so ethical clearance is not needed. Ultimately, the findings underscore the need to treat absenteeism as a systemic performance issue rooted in both structure and behavior.

Keywords: Absenteeism; Public Service; Attendance Manipulation; Organisational Behaviour; South Africa

1. Introduction

In many areas of the South African public service, workplace absenteeism remains a significant obstacle to institutional performance and service delivery. Frequent unapproved leave, improper use of sick notes, and tardiness are characteristics of absenteeism, which has evolved from a singular instance of misconduct to a structural and behavioural problem. Attendance manipulation has been found to peak during certain times, particularly around paydays, long weekends, and high-pressure administrative cycles (Mabunda & Mathebula, 2021; Naidoo, 2023). Attendance manipulation occurs when employees strategically choose when to attend or avoid work based on personal benefit or minimal risk of consequence. This ingrained behaviour is a reflection of larger problems with inadequate oversight, inadequate handling of consequences, and inefficient application of policies. Because of interpersonal dynamics, bureaucratic obstacles, or conflict aversion, supervisory staff frequently lack the ability or desire to enforce attendance rules (Tshukudu & Makhubela, 2022). The lack of reliable monitoring technologies that could act as deterrents, like

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* Corresponding author: Humphrey Lephethe Motsepe

biometric systems or real-time attendance tracking tools, exacerbates these systemic gaps even more. As a result, many government departments now consider attendance manipulation to be a normal part of organizational life (Mofokeng, 2024).Such behaviours are often tolerated or even indirectly encouraged by the operational culture of many public institutions. Workers frequently use historical trends and unwritten social norms to defend their actions. For example, employees generally agree that if payday is on a Friday, they are unlikely to be present on Monday.

This is frequently explained by post-weekend exhaustion or health issues, and administrative cover is provided by retrospective sick notes (Dlamini & Zondo, 2022). Despite being informal, these practices are rarely questioned and are frequently imitated by new hires as they acclimate to the public service environment (Masilela, 2023). The structural and behavioural aspects of absenteeism that conventional disciplinary measures have not been able to address constitute the research problem this article attempts to address. Previous studies have focused largely on absenteeism as an individual act of non-compliance, neglecting the embedded organisational and cultural contexts that sustain it (Maduna & Govender, 2021). This paper shifts the lens to examine how institutional design, policy enforcement, and workplace culture collectively enable attendance manipulation.

Identifying recurrent patterns of attendance manipulation in the South African public sector, analysing structural enablers like lax disciplinary measures, inefficient monitoring tools, and policy gaps, and investigating how organizational culture and unwritten behavioural norms perpetuate absenteeism over time are the three main goals of the study. The study's theoretical contribution to the literature on public sector management is significant, but so are its practical implications for guiding administrative reforms meant to increase performance and accountability. This study does not directly involve human subjects, so ethical clearance is not required because it only uses secondary data, such as official reports, audits, public records, and recent peer-reviewed publications. Its value lies in synthesising existing evidence to uncover the systemic patterns often overlooked in traditional human resource interventions. This contextualised understanding is essential for policymakers and department heads tasked with improving institutional performance in a sector already under immense pressure to deliver quality public services.

2. Literature Review

In the public sector, absenteeism is a deeply ingrained institutional behaviour that reflects larger problems with motivation, ethics, governance, and control systems. It is not just an administrative annoyance. According to the literature, there are two types of absenteeism: involuntary, which results from legitimate personal or health-related circumstances, and voluntary, which occurs when employees decide not to report to work without good cause (Phala & Mampuru, 2022). Recent research, however, is focusing more on a third, more calculated kind of absenteeism: manipulative absenteeism, in which workers take advantage of social norms and institutional flaws to excuse their absence for convenience (Maduna & Govender, 2021; Mofokeng, 2024).

2.1. Attendance Manipulation and Normalisation

From deliberate absences during payday weekends to the abuse of sick leave and unofficial time-off agreements, attendance manipulation has become a recurring and deeply ingrained problem in the South African public sector. This phenomenon compromises the results of service delivery as well as organizational discipline, especially in departments with inadequate or inconsistent oversight procedures. A thorough nationwide review conducted by the Public Service Commission (PSC, 2023) found that the first two working days after payday Fridays see a sharp increase in the rate of unscheduled absences. This pattern points to a purposeful pattern of leave abuse and highlights a structural weakness in the public service calendar. Despite the formal existence of policies governing leave, absenteeism, and sick notes, expressed through documents like the Public Service Regulations (2022) and departmental SOPs, enforcement of these policies is frequently lax. Even when questionable patterns are apparent, sick notes are rarely examined further than their apparent validity and their legitimacy is rarely questioned (PSC, 2023). Line managers and senior officials' fear of the administrative strain and potential legal repercussions of confronting staff members with medical certifications is one factor contributing to this lack of scrutiny. According to Mkhabela and Dube (2023), the operational culture in public service departments has changed to the point where taking the easiest route is frequently chosen, particularly when medical records are used to ostensibly "justify" absenteeism.

The increasingly hostile nature of labour relations in the public sector serves to further solidify this managerial reluctance. According to Madonsela (2024), a lot of senior managers believe that labour disputes are time-consuming, detrimental to their reputation, and frequently ineffective, especially when the results of arbitrations tend to favour the employees. Consequently, this unwillingness to enforce attendance standards creates a lax atmosphere that compromises the integrity of the policy. The social normalization of absenteeism within departments is a more pernicious factor that contributes to attendance manipulation than the formal aspects of policy and enforcement.

According to research by Masilela (2023), especially among junior and mid-level employees, absenteeism is frequently viewed as an informal entitlement rather than a deviant behaviour. This cultural normalisation is facilitated by peer networks and informal workplace socialisation processes. New employees are often introduced to these unwritten norms through 'shadow onboarding' by longer-serving colleagues who model rule-evasive behaviours as acceptable and even desirable.

This behavioural transmission is supported by studies in organisational sociology which describe "behavioural clustering," a process whereby groups of employees adopt and reinforce similar patterns of misconduct (Dlamini & Zondo, 2022). In this context, attendance manipulation becomes a socially learned and reproduced phenomenon, not merely an individual moral failing. Mothapo (2023) found that in departments where no one has been disciplined for leave abuse in the past five years, attendance irregularities tend to become institutionalised. The absence of consequence produces a feedback loop in which manipulation becomes the norm, not the exception.The lack of real-time monitoring systems exacerbates the issue. Time and attendance are still manually recorded in many provincial departments using antiquated digital systems that are susceptible to manipulation or physical registers. In addition to making fraudulent attendance recording easier, the absence of biometric or automated attendance technologies also hides trends that might guide remedial actions (Ramoloko & Seleka, 2024). All things considered, the South African public service's practice of manipulating attendance is both a sign and a root of a lack of administrative discipline. Peer reinforcement, risk-averse management, weak enforcement, and a lack of efficient monitoring tools all contribute to its facilitation. Updating policies won't be enough to address it; cultural shift, improved managerial skills, and the use of technology to promote accountability are also necessary.

2.2. Structural and Systemic Enablers

Individual misbehaviour or managerial indulgence are not the only causes of the ongoing absenteeism problem in South Africa's public sector; structural and systemic flaws that permit and, in certain situations, unintentionally encourage non-compliance are also major contributors. These facilitators are a reflection of larger institutional flaws in the way that administrative capacity, enforcement procedures, policy coherence, and attendance monitoring are set up. The lack of reliable and uniform attendance-tracking systems across government agencies is one of the most noticeable structural flaws. A lot of local and provincial offices continue to use antiquated manual attendance registers, which are very prone to fraud. Naidoo (2023) notes that paper-based registers create loopholes for falsification, peer-signing, and post-dated adjustments, practices that are especially common in departments with limited oversight. A multi-provincial survey conducted by Letsoalo and Nare (2022) revealed that only 36% of departments in Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and the Eastern Cape had deployed operational biometric systems by mid-2022. Even among those departments that had adopted such systems, integration with broader human resource management tools, such as payroll, performance appraisals, and leave management systems, remained limited. Without such integration, attendance data is often underutilised or ignored in managerial decision-making.

Weak disciplinary systems exacerbate the lack of technology infrastructure. Just 14.6% of reported absenteeism cases resulted in formal disciplinary proceedings between 2019 and 2022, according to the Department of Public Service and Administration's (DPSA, 2023) Annual Compliance Review. Because of inadequate documentation, a lack of training, and apprehension about protracted labour disputes, managers in departments with high absenteeism are frequently reluctant to take disciplinary action. According to Tshukudu and Makhubela (2022), supervisors are put in a challenging position because, despite being expected to enforce discipline, they rarely have the institutional support or procedural knowledge necessary to do so successfully. Because of this, inaction becomes the norm, and violations are permitted to continue without repercussion. Another systemic enabler is the continued ambiguity surrounding policy implementation, particularly in relation to leave provisions. Although the Public Service Regulations (2022) have attempted to refine and tighten the criteria for acceptable absenteeism, by, for example, defining patterns of misuse and requiring additional documentation for repeated absences, these revisions have not been uniformly adopted across departments. Moloi (2023) observes that many departments continue to rely on outdated internal policies that have not been aligned with the new regulatory amendments.

This misalignment creates confusion among supervisors and HR personnel, leading to inconsistent application of the rules and weakening enforcement efforts, particularly when it comes to sick leave, the system mainly depends on trust-based mechanisms. Medical certificates are rarely examined, and even chronic absenteeism rarely leads to additional research, according to Mabunda and Mathebula (2021). Even chronic abuse goes unnoticed in departments without analytics or data-driven tools to spot problematic attendance patterns. Compliance monitoring turns into a reactive procedure that relies more on anecdotal reports than on empirical data if data utilization is not done proactively. Therefore, structural enablers of absenteeism are parts of a larger pattern of systemic dysfunction rather than discrete inefficiencies. Coordinated reform at several levels of government is needed to address them. This includes modernizing

technology infrastructure, empowering supervisory personnel, standardizing disciplinary processes, and completely coordinating internal policies with national regulatory frameworks. Without such reforms, even the most well-intentioned strategies for improving attendance are likely to falter.

2.3. Behavioural Dimensions and Rational Choice

While absenteeism flourishes due to structural and systemic flaws, behavioural research illuminates the mental processes and strategic thinking that influence employee choices. Understanding behavioural aspects is essential to comprehending why absenteeism may continue to exist in departments with operational oversight systems. Based on the rational choice theory (RCT), researchers contend that workers weigh the costs and benefits of meeting or exceeding attendance requirements (Phala & Mampuru, 2022; Mofokeng, 2024). Absenteeism is not always illogical or abnormal in this context. Instead, it is a deliberate reaction to institutional incentives, or the absence of them. According to Rational Choice Theory, individuals act in ways that maximise personal utility given the constraints and opportunities of their environment. In the context of the South African public service, the probability of detection, the likelihood of sanction, and the perceived severity of penalties all shape the calculus of whether to be absent without justification. If the risk of disciplinary action is low and the perceived gains, such as rest, informal income-generating activities, or family obligations, are high, absenteeism becomes a rational choice rather than a moral or ethical failure (Phala & Mampuru, 2022). This insight challenges the simplistic view that absenteeism is solely the result of poor work ethic or laziness.

This theoretical perspective is supported by experimental evidence. Mkhabela and Dube (2023) conducted a behavioural experiment involving HR officers, line managers, and administrative staff across four provincial departments. Participants were observed in simulated scenarios that assessed their responses to ambiguous sick leave claims and unreported absences. The study found that absenteeism was most prevalent in environments where it had no consequences for career advancement, performance evaluations, or bonus eligibility. Where attendance records were detached from performance management processes, staff reported little motivation to prioritise punctuality or presence. In contrast, departments that explicitly linked attendance to promotion eligibility, recognition awards, and training opportunities exhibited significantly lower absenteeism rates. These results are consistent with a larger body of research on the behaviour of the public sector in settings with low accountability. Ndlovu and Ramushu (2024) claim that institutional cultures that do not incentivize compliance or penalize non-compliance promote "strategic deviance," which is the deliberate modification of behaviour to take advantage of structural flaws. Absenteeism in these situations is not a sign of personal wrongdoing but rather of institutional gaming. Through informal communication and observation, employees gain knowledge from one another, forming mutual understandings about which rules are important and which can be disregarded with no repercussions.

According to a study by Themba and Khosa (2024), absenteeism decreased when line managers made clear expectations regarding attendance and took visible action on attendance data. However, compliance was low in cases where rules were applied inconsistently or were seen as symbolic rather than substantive. This implies that employees' perceptions of the legitimacy of enforcement influence rational behaviour, which is not just the result of formal regulations. Essentially, the Rational Choice Theory offers a convincing behavioural framework for comprehending the enduring prevalence of absenteeism in public service environments. Reforms should take into account changing the incentive structures that influence employee decisions rather than concentrating only on punitive measures. Incorporating attendance into career development, rewards, and performance assessments may not only deter absenteeism but also reshape employee perceptions about what the system truly values.

2.4. Absenteeism as a Barrier to Service Delivery

Absenteeism in the public service is not a contained human resource issue; it has direct and compounding consequences for the delivery of essential services. Its cumulative impact disrupts workflow, undermines the continuity of programmes, erodes institutional efficiency, and contributes to public distrust in government institutions. In South Africa, where public service delivery already faces challenges related to resource constraints, skills shortages, and bureaucratic delays, the effect of chronic absenteeism is particularly damaging.

Poor attendance undermines operational continuity and administrative routines, according to Twala and Maseko (2021). Absent workers cause tasks to be postponed or unequally divided among current employees, which slows down turnaround times and raises error rates. As a result, departments become less productive overall and create administrative backlogs that could take weeks or even months to resolve. The absence of even one employee can cause several processes to stall, especially in departments that need close interdependence between functions, like finance, supply chain management, or project coordination. Absenteeism has detrimental effects on organizational culture and employee morale. When expected to make up for absent coworkers, regularly present employees frequently feel

overworked, underappreciated, and demotivated. These dynamic fosters workplace resentment, deteriorates teamwork, and contributes to burnout and secondary absenteeism. Madiba and Ndaba (2024) highlight that morale-related attrition is a growing trend in provincial departments, where overextended personnel eventually seek alternative employment or reduce their own compliance with attendance expectations as a form of protest or self-preservation.

In frontline service sectors like health, education, and agriculture, where prompt and consistent staff presence is crucial, the repercussions are even more dire. Absenteeism has a direct negative impact on service quality in industries that rely on face-to-face communication, knowledge sharing, or quick reaction. For instance, in the medical field, absenteeism by nurses or doctors can lead to long lines, shortened clinic hours, and subpar patient care (Ramathuba et al., 2022). According to Maphosa and Lekena (2023), students in under-resourced schools who receive little support outside of the classroom are disproportionately affected by teacher absenteeism, which disrupts the learning process. In agriculture, absenteeism among field staff has particularly high stakes, as shown in Zulu and Dlamini's (2023) multi-departmental review of agricultural extension officers in Limpopo and North West provinces. The study revealed that irregular attendance among technical personnel delayed planting and harvesting schedules, led to the late distribution of critical inputs like seeds and fertilisers, and disrupted community-based training sessions. As a result, subsistence farmers were left without essential advisory support, contributing to reduced crop yields and heightened food insecurity in vulnerable communities. The authors caution that unless attendance management becomes an operational priority, the long-term sustainability of rural development and food production initiatives will be compromised.

Absenteeism also reduces public participation in government agencies. Communities lose faith in public institutions when they frequently encounter delays, postponed appointments, or unavailable services. Protests over service delivery, a drop in civic engagement, and an increase in the perception of the state's incompetence or indifference are all possible outcomes of this. According to Mnguni and Setlaba (2024), frequent exposure to service interruptions caused by absenteeism erodes the legitimacy of the public service, especially in historically marginalized areas where the state already has a minimal presence. In the end, absenteeism hinders the public sector's larger developmental mission in addition to internal departmental performance. Effective attendance management, supported by both structural reforms and behavioural interventions, is critical for sustaining service delivery, protecting institutional credibility, and fostering equitable access to state services across the country.

2.5. Gaps in the Literature

The academic literature on the complex and systemic aspects of manipulative absenteeism is still lacking, despite the fact that public service absenteeism in South Africa is receiving more attention. The majority of current research takes a generalist approach, classifying absenteeism as a single or consistent phenomenon without making a distinction between forms that are structural, intentional, and legitimate. Because of this, a large portion of the research does not examine the behavioural logics and institutional conditions that permit persistent misuse of attendance systems in the public sector. The dominant approach within the literature conceptualises absenteeism primarily as a human resource management (HRM) challenge, often linked to employee dissatisfaction, workplace stress, or weak managerial oversight (Govender & Khumalo, 2021; Baloyi & Mahlangu, 2022). While these factors are undoubtedly relevant, the HRM framing tends to localise the problem within individual departments or managerial inefficiencies, thereby obscuring broader questions about policy design, enforcement mechanisms, and incentive structures. This framing also limits the scope for multi-level analysis that links micro-level behaviours to macro-institutional weaknesses.

Few academics have specifically linked these structural gaps to behavioural economics-informed employee decision-making models, despite the fact that some have examined the structural barriers that lead to absenteeism, such as inadequate administrative systems or subpar attendance-monitoring technologies (Letsoalo & Nare, 2022; Naidoo, 2203). To analyse how employees strategically navigate institutional weaknesses to maximize personal benefits with minimal risk, for example, the Rational Choice Theory lens is still underutilized (Phala & Mampuru, 2022; Mofokeng, 2024). Additionally, little research has been done on how organizational culture, informal norms, and peer behaviour perpetuate and justify absenteeism over time. Importantly, the literature fails to distinguish between manipulative absenteeism, the wilful abuse of institutional weaknesses, such as fabricated sick notes, unapproved time off, and pre-signed registers, and unintentional absenteeism brought on by systemic barrier (such as transportation delays, health problems, or unfavourable working conditions). The creation of focused policy interventions is hampered by this lack of differentiation. For instance, assuming that all absenteeism is a sign of stress or burnout could result in wellness programs that don't really address intentional absenteeism, which is encouraged by lax oversight.

Another gap is the limited sector-specific analysis. While health and education sectors receive some attention due to their direct public interface, other critical service areas such as agriculture, rural development, and municipal

operations remain understudied. Yet, as studies like Zulu and Dlamini (2023) illustrate, absenteeism in these sectors has tangible consequences for food security, rural livelihoods, and local economic development, dimensions that are seldom explored in existing national analyses. To provide a more unique and theoretically based analysis, this article seeks to close these gaps. It specifically synthesizes the body of research on absenteeism while firmly establishing the analysis in behavioural economics and structural-institutional theory. Through the use of this dual theoretical lens, it is possible to gain a better understanding of how patterns of manipulative absenteeism are maintained by the interaction of informal behavioural logics (such as peer normalization and rational actor calculations) with formal institutional weaknesses (such as inadequate enforcement and outdated technologies). By doing this, the paper advances a more thorough and useful understanding of absenteeism as a result of institutional design flaws and ingrained behavioural norms rather than just being an HR issue.

3. Theoretical Framework

Two complementary theoretical frameworks, Organizational Culture Theory and Rational Choice Theory, support the examination of absenteeism and attendance manipulation in the South African public sector. When taken as a whole, these frameworks provide behavioural as well as institutional explanations for why formal policies, codes of conduct, and performance systems do not eliminate absenteeism.

3.1. Organisational Culture Theory

Edgar Schein (2017) developed the Organizational Culture Theory, which holds that shared values, norms, and underlying assumptions that change over time greatly influence the behaviors displayed by members of an institution. In this situation, absenteeism turns into an adaptive behavior ingrained in the institution's culture rather than just a rule violation. Departments foster an informal culture that normalizes non-attendance when they overlook it, fail to enforce discipline, or treat it as a low priority issue. Empirical results from South African studies lend credence to this theoretical viewpoint. According to Dlamini and Zondo (2022), absenteeism is not an isolated incident but rather a culturally reinforced behaviour in certain departments where informal norms actively counteract formal regulations. As such, employees learn from observation and peer behaviour rather than policy manuals. Organisational Culture Theory helps explain why new entrants into the public service often adopt these practices early in their careers, they are socialised into an environment where attendance manipulation is normalised (Masilela, 2023).

3.2. Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory sheds light on why employees decide to manipulate their attendance, while culture explains how absenteeism becomes accepted. According to this theory, people make well-considered decisions that maximize their own gains while lowering expenses or risks (Scott, 2000). Employees in the public sector may choose to skip work if they believe that they won't be disciplined for it and that their medical records will protect them from scrutiny. According to Phala and Mampuru (2022), workers who have access to healthcare providers or are aware of legal loopholes are more likely to strategically take advantage of sick leave regulations. Likewise, Mkhabela and Dube (2023) show that absenteeism spikes during periods of high workload or audits, suggesting deliberate avoidance rather than unplanned absence. Rational Choice Theory thus helps to unpack the decision-making logic that underpins manipulative absenteeism.

3.3. Synthesis of Theories

A multifaceted understanding of attendance manipulation is made possible by the combination of these theories. Rational Choice Theory explains the individual incentive logic behind the behaviour, while Organizational Culture Theory explains the institutional permissiveness and shared beliefs that allow for rule-bending. This dual-theoretical framework is essential for changing the emphasis from a purely punitive approach to absenteeism to systemic reforms that change the institutional culture and address the perceived cost-benefit imbalances that influence attendance decisions. The application of these theories provides the foundation for the article's analytical model, enabling a deeper interpretation of the findings and helping to guide the formulation of policy and managerial recommendations later in the article.

4. Methodology

The qualitative research design used in this study is based on thematic content analysis of secondary data sources and documentary analysis. Without using human subjects, the objective is to identify trends in attendance manipulation and the institutional dynamics that support them, avoiding the need for ethical approval.

4.1. Research Design

A qualitative, interpretive approach was selected because of the emphasis on systemic behaviours and structural elements in the public sector. This design is suitable for examining institutional reports, policy documents, and textual records to uncover organizational behaviour and meaning patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Understanding the formal and informal systems that influence employee attendance behaviour was the goal of the analysis.

4.2. Data Sources

The study only uses secondary data that is accessible to the public, such as the Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA) Reports (2019–2023); Reports and circulars from the Public Service Commission (PSC); policy documents from the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA); Current scholarly journal articles released between 2021 and 2024; Annual reports from a few national and provincial departments (such as the Department of Agriculture, Department of Health, and Department of Education). These records were chosen because they were pertinent to time and attendance systems, human resource management, absenteeism, and institutional performance.

4.3. Sampling Criteria

Reports and documents that (a) address workforce attendance or leave management, (b) include empirical data or evaluations of staff discipline and performance, and (c) come from departments or oversight institutions with broad jurisdictional scope were specifically chosen using criterion-based sampling. This made it possible for the study to obtain data that was indicative of national trends without requiring access to private information or internal personnel records.

4.4. Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to examine the texts that were gathered. Inductive coding was used to identify key terms, phrases, and trends pertaining to absenteeism and attendance manipulation. Thematic clusters were formed from the categories, including:

- Absenteeism related to paydays;
- Misuse of sick leave;
- Inadequate supervisory enforcement;
- Tools for monitoring attendance;
- Organizational tolerance and cultural norms

To increase rigor and reproducibility, textual data was coded and clustered using NVivo software.

4.5. Limitations

The study has limitations even though it stays clear of ethical issues by using secondary data. The quality and content of the available documents limit the analysis and may not capture undocumented practices or real-time behaviours. Furthermore, the study omits viewpoints from specific managers or employees, which would have enhanced the behavioural aspect of the analysis. However, the variety of departmental reports and the depth of the documents offered enough information to meet the goals of the study.

5. Results

The analysis of publicly available reports and policy documents yielded three dominant patterns of attendance manipulation in the South African public service. These patterns were consistent across departments and provinces, revealing not only behavioural tendencies but also structural weaknesses in enforcement and oversight. The findings are categorised into (1) payday absenteeism, (2) strategic sick leave during peak workloads, and (3) unregulated early departures.

5.1. Payday Absenteeism

Payday absenteeism is a persistent behavioural trend in the South African public sector, especially when the monthly salary date falls on a Friday. Provincial departments, especially those in Agriculture, Education, and Health, have noted a steady drop in attendance on the Monday after payday weekends. Instead of being sporadic individual behaviour, this phenomenon has become a systemic pattern. Internal departmental audits have revealed that sick leave submissions typically increase dramatically on the Monday following paydays, especially when pay dates fall just before weekends, according to the Auditor-General of South Africa (AGSA, 2023). In some cases, over 40% of sick leave certificates are

backdated and submitted for approval post facto, raising concerns about the authenticity and timing of these medical excuses. This behaviour suggests that employees may be exploiting lax attendance monitoring systems to extend their weekends under the guise of medical incapacity. This observation is further supported by the Public Service Commission (PSC, 2022). The PSC discovered that in some departments, including frontline services like clinics and district offices, absenteeism on Mondays after payday Fridays surpassed 35% in its consolidated report on employee time and attendance across five provinces.

Absenteeism was highest in remote service points in the provinces of the Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga, where time management is done by hand and oversight is frequently inadequate. Concerns regarding lost productivity and compromised service delivery during crucial times were raised by the study's clear pattern of "calendarized absenteeism," in which workers schedule absences around regular pay cycles. Furthermore, Letsoalo and Nare (2022) contend that the majority of public offices' inadequate integration of digital time-tracking systems contributes to this behaviour. Absenteeism has gone unchecked due to a lack of automated leave monitoring tools and biometric systems, leaving little data available to identify or look into repeat offenders. Because they lack institutional guidance on handling attendance abuse or out of fear of workplace conflict, supervisors frequently approve sick leave requests without giving them careful consideration (Tshukudu & Makhubela, 2022). What makes payday absenteeism particularly concerning is not only its predictability but its silent acceptance within organisational culture. As noted by Mkhabela and Dube (2023), some departments have internalised this behaviour as a "normal rhythm of operations," with attendance metrics rarely questioned unless they severely disrupt workflows. This normalisation embeds absenteeism as an informal workplace norm, undermining both accountability and the credibility of HR systems.

5.2. Strategic Sick Leave During High Workloads

The misuse of sick leave during periods of heightened workload is a salient pattern identified across multiple government departments. This form of absenteeism reflects a strategic decision by employees to avoid demanding tasks or critical reporting deadlines by taking unplanned or opportunistic leave. Rather than being a spontaneous health-related absence, these sick leaves are often tactically timed to coincide with internal audits, financial year-end processes, and other periods characterised by increased pressure and accountability demands. In its annual performance reports, the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA, 2022) noted this trend, pointing out that periods of high operational stress corresponded with spikes in sick leave utilization. For instance, compared to non-critical periods, a number of provincial departments reported up to a 25% increase in sick leave days taken during the fiscal year-end of 2021–2022. This was particularly noticeable in departments like Agriculture and Health, where seasonal activities like planting or vaccination campaigns increase operational demands (DPSA, 2022). Empirical research further supports these findings. Masilela (2023) conducted a qualitative study within Gauteng provincial offices, revealing that employees deliberately timed sick leave to avoid audit periods and complex project deadlines. Participants acknowledged a tacit understanding among colleagues that "sick leave during crunch time" was socially permissible and rarely questioned by supervisors. This finding aligns with Mothapo's (2023) observation that supervisory staff often feel ill-equipped or reluctant to challenge sick leave during high workload periods, due to concerns over workplace morale and fear of escalating grievances.

Moloi (2023) adds to this dynamic by pointing out policy ambiguities that unintentionally encourage this behaviour. The Public Service Regulations give employers a lot of latitude in granting sick leave, frequently depending on employee-submitted medical certifications that aren't routinely checked. This makes it possible to "game the system," especially when there aren't strong absence management procedures in place. Additionally, Mofokeng (2024) notes that the issue is made worse by technological limitations, as manual attendance tracking systems are unable to identify patterns of recurring absences during crucial times. Strategic sick leave abuse has a variety of repercussions. In addition to the immediate operational disruptions, persistent absences during periods of high workload put a strain on the remaining employees, cause delays in service delivery, and erode public trust in government agencies (Zulu & Dlamini, 2023). As workloads intensify, the disparity between present and absent staff exacerbates tensions, leading to diminished team cohesion and reduced organisational effectiveness (Twala & Maseko, 2021). Overall, the strategic use of sick leave reflects both individual coping mechanisms and institutional vulnerabilities. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive reforms, including clearer leave policies, improved supervisory training, and deployment of real-time attendance monitoring technologies.

5.3. Unregulated Early Departures

The frequency of uncontrolled early departures, especially on Fridays, is another noteworthy attendance-related behaviour that the analysis revealed. These early knockoffs contribute to shortened operating hours and worse service delivery even though they don't always show up as official absenteeism. In departments with already low staffing levels, like agricultural offices and rural clinics, where every hour of service is crucial, this practice is particularly troublesome.

A large percentage of employees frequently left work before official closing times without obtaining formal approval or documenting it as leave, according to a 2023 departmental audit conducted in the North West province (Mkhabela & Dube, 2023). Supervisors frequently accepted unofficial agreements that permitted workers to leave early, particularly after long workweeks or in the days before public holidays. These informal arrangements were rarely documented in official attendance registers, complicating efforts to hold staff accountable or accurately measure workforce availability.

Letsoalo and Nare (2022) attribute this trend to a wider cultural acceptance of flexible work schedules, which can be abused in settings with little supervision even though they are advantageous in other situations. The problem is made worse by the dependence on self-reporting and the lack of real-time attendance monitoring. Furthermore, Tshukudu and Makhubela (2022) point out that supervisors' hesitation to impose rigorous timekeeping is a result of their worries about worker morale and the possibility of labour disputes, especially in unionized settings. Uncontrolled early departures put extra strain on coworkers who stay on duty and cause gaps in service delivery schedules from an operational perspective. According to Twala and Maseko (2021), this conduct frequently precedes more severe types of absenteeism and adds to a cumulative drop in productivity. Furthermore, the normalization of early departures signals weak organisational discipline and undermines the perceived value of formal work hours. This pattern reflects the complex interplay between institutional culture and individual behaviour, where employees negotiate informal norms to balance work demands and personal needs. Unless addressed through clear policies, effective monitoring, and supportive leadership, unregulated early departures will continue to compromise public service efficiency and accountability.

5.4. Structural Enablers/Findings

The patterns of absenteeism and attendance manipulation described above are deeply rooted in systemic and structural weaknesses within South African public service institutions. Several key enablers/findings have been identified across departmental reports and scholarly analyses, which collectively undermine effective attendance management.

5.4.1. Lack of Real-Time Monitoring Systems

The widespread lack or underutilization of real-time attendance monitoring technologies is one of the most important structural flaws that allow attendance manipulation in the South African public sector. Many departments still rely on antiquated manual or paper-based attendance registers, even though biometric and digital clocking systems are readily available and have been shown to be effective. According to Letsoalo and Nare (2022), over 60% of government departments in the provinces of Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and the Eastern Cape; three that are distinguished by both rural and semi-urban public service offices; continue to use these antiquated techniques as their main method of keeping track of attendance. In addition to compromising data accuracy, this reliance on manual procedures makes manipulation easier. Manual attendance registers are highly vulnerable to falsification. Common malpractices include "buddy punching," where an employee clocks in or out on behalf of a colleague who is absent, and retrospective signing, which allows employees to backdate attendance records (Naidoo, 2023; Mofokeng, 2024). These practices significantly weaken the integrity of attendance data, making it difficult for management to distinguish between genuine and fraudulent absences. Furthermore, paper-based systems lack transparency, as they do not generate automated reports or flags for irregular attendance patterns, limiting supervisors' ability to identify repeat offenders or anomalous behaviours (Tshukudu & Makhubela, 2022).

Attendance tracking tools and payroll or performance management systems are frequently not integrated, even in departments with biometric systems in place. According to Mofokeng (2024), absenteeism data would remain isolated and underutilized in the absence of this integration, failing to prompt interventions or remedial measures. The efficacy of biometric data as a performance accountability tool is limited because, for example, it can verify attendance at work but is not connected to output metrics or leave records. Because of this, managers and human resources staff still depend on unofficial observations or employee reports, which are biased and subjective. Limited technical capability and inadequate training on the use and upkeep of attendance technologies worsen this disconnect (Masilela, 2023). Budget constraints and infrastructure challenges, especially in rural areas, further hinder the widespread rollout and optimisation of digital attendance systems. Consequently, the absence of robust real-time monitoring tools significantly compromises the ability of public service departments to enforce attendance discipline and to develop data-driven human resource strategies.

Comparative studies have emphasized the significance of real-time attendance monitoring as a deterrent to absenteeism. For instance, when fully implemented and connected to leave management, biometric systems can lower absenteeism rates by as much as 30%, according to research conducted in other African public sectors by Phala and Mampuru (2022). This demonstrates the possible benefits that South African departments could obtain if they gave priority to technology investments and completely integrated them into administrative procedures. To conclude, a

significant structural weakness that permits attendance manipulation is the absence of efficient real-time attendance monitoring systems. In addition to purchasing digital or biometric tools, closing this gap calls for developing supervisory skills and integrating these systems with more general HR management tasks.

5.5. Weak Disciplinary Enforcement

Despite the existence of formal attendance policies within the South African public service, enforcement mechanisms remain inconsistent and frequently ineffective, significantly undermining efforts to curb absenteeism. The Department of Public Service and Administration's (DPSA, 2023) Human Resource Oversight Report reveals a stark reality: only about 13% of reported absenteeism cases progress to formal disciplinary action. This low rate of enforcement reflects both procedural challenges and deeper institutional reluctance to impose sanctions. This enforcement gap is largely caused by procedural delays. Because of bureaucratic red tape, intricate grievance procedures, and lengthy appeals processes that impede case resolution, disciplinary procedures in the public sector are frequently drawn out (Moloi, 2023). Because cases may drag on for months or even years without clear results, these delays may deter supervisors from taking formal action. Additionally, many departments' backlog of disciplinary cases strains administrative capacity, making it challenging to promptly handle new incidents (Naidoo, 2023). In addition to procedural inefficiencies, supervisory hesitancy is a significant factor. According to Tshukudu and Makhubela (2022), a lot of line managers believe they are not prepared to deal with absenteeism-related disciplinary actions.

This is frequently brought on by a lack of human resource management training, a poor comprehension of the laws governing employee relations, and a fear of retaliation or confrontation in unionized workplaces. Strong public service unions are widely present, which adds complexity because managers expect formal challenges to disciplinary decisions. This can result in drawn-out arguments and additional administrative work (Masilela, 2023). Moreover, this supervisory reluctance is compounded by a lack of institutional support. Supervisors frequently report inadequate backing from higher management and human resources departments, leaving them isolated in managing attendance infractions (Tshukudu & Makhubela, 2022). Without clear guidance, resources, and consistent enforcement policies, managers often default to informal resolutions or tolerate absenteeism to maintain workplace harmony. In addition to failing to prevent attendance manipulation, this lax enforcement environment may unintentionally encourage it by sending a message that there is little chance of repercussions. Effective disciplinary systems are essential for lowering rationally motivated absenteeism, according to Phala and Mampuru (2022), and the ensuing erosion of accountability perpetuates absenteeism and has a negative impact on overall organizational performance.

5.6. Policy Ambiguity and Administrative Loopholes

Policy ambiguity surrounding leave entitlements and sick leave verification remains a significant challenge in managing absenteeism within the South African public service. Despite efforts to strengthen regulations; most notably the 2022 amendments to the Public Service Regulations aimed at tightening sick leave controls; there is a persistent disconnect between national policy frameworks and their implementation at departmental levels (Moloi, 2023). This gap contributes to inconsistent application of leave policies, creating opportunities for exploitation and undermining overall attendance management. According to Moloi (2023), a lot of departments have been sluggish or inefficient in updating their internal policies to conform to the new rules. In certain instances, leave management is still governed by antiquated or conflicting policies, which causes misunderstandings for both managers and staff. Employees can submit medical certificates with little scrutiny in an environment where there are unclear, inconsistent procedures regarding sick leave certification, duration restrictions, and verification procedures. These certificates, which are occasionally acquired through dubious or informal means, turn into a means of evading work-related responsibilities in the absence of thorough verification. Further complicating the situation is the inadequate training provided to supervisory and human resource staff on the new regulatory provisions. Moloi (2023) observes that many managers remain unaware of the full scope of policy changes or lack the practical skills to enforce them effectively. This training deficit undermines consistent decision-making and contributes to the discretionary application of leave rules, where some employees receive preferential treatment while others face stricter scrutiny.

This is supported by research by Mothapo (2023), which highlights how employees have taken advantage of administrative ambiguities and policy gaps to justify absenteeism. This issue is made worse by the absence of centralized leave monitoring systems, which make it challenging to monitor leave trends and identify abuse. Because manual record-keeping departments find it difficult to spot frequent or recurring absenteeism, exploitative behaviour goes unnoticed. Furthermore, these policy flaws lower employee morale among hardworking employees who believe the system is unjust and vulnerable to manipulation (Zulu & Dlamini, 2023). Similar absenteeism behaviours may be indirectly encouraged by the perception of unfairness, which also contributes to disengagement. A thorough policy overhaul that guarantees the lucidity, uniformity, and enforceability of leave entitlements is necessary to address these issues. This includes standardizing leave procedures across departments, enhancing verification mechanisms, and

investing in training programs to build supervisory capacity for effective leave management (Moloi, 2023; Mothapo, 2023). Additionally, integrating leave management with digital attendance systems would support better oversight and reduce opportunities for policy exploitation.

5.7. Organisational Culture and Supervisory Neglect

A deeply ingrained organizational culture that implicitly accepts absenteeism as a normal part of the public service work environment lies beneath the procedural and technical flaws that allow attendance manipulation. According to Masilela (2023) and Mkhabela and Dube (2023), supervisory neglect; where supervisors frequently decide not to confront or discipline absenteeism in order to maintain workplace harmony, avoid interpersonal conflict, or avoid drawn-out disciplinary procedures; is largely responsible for maintaining this permissive culture. This reluctance to enforce attendance rules stems from multiple pressures faced by supervisors, including resource constraints, lack of training, and fears of damaging team cohesion or inciting grievances, especially in unionised settings (Tshukudu & Makhubela, 2022). Consequently, supervisors may adopt a hands-off approach, allowing absenteeism to persist unchecked. This behaviour, in turn, reinforces a cultural tolerance that normalises attendance manipulation and erodes formal accountability mechanisms.

This culture is further solidified by the lack of explicit, dependable penalties for absenteeism. Employees are more likely to act manipulatively when they believe that their noncompliance will not result in significant consequences (Phala & Mampuru, 2022). A feedback loop is created as a result: loose enforcement fosters permissive norms, which in turn promote more absenteeism and gradually erode organizational discipline. Additionally, this cultural acceptance encompasses attitudes within the organization as a whole, not just supervisors. Unofficial "work rhythms" that allow for erratic attendance are frequently developed in departments with high absenteeism rates, subtly conveying that absenteeism is a normal and accepted aspect of day-to-day operations (Masilela, 2023). Employees may perceive enforcement actions as unfriendly or unjust in such settings, which discourage reporting and impede attempts to impose stronger controls. Due to a lack of accountability and enforcement, these structural and cultural factors work together to create an environment that not only makes attendance manipulation possible but also frequently rewards it indirectly. Therefore, effective absenteeism management necessitates comprehensive reforms that include institutional redesign, improved enforcement mechanisms, and intentional cultural transformation in addition to focusing on individual behaviours (Zulu & Dlamini, 2023). These reforms ought to include transparent consequence management, accountability-focused leadership development, and the promotion of a mutually respectful and responsible culture in public service organizations.

5.8. Normalisation of Absenteeism

The analysis also emphasizes how widespread absenteeism has become as a norm, which is a major contributing factor to attendance manipulation in the South African public sector. Payroll absenteeism, strategic sick leave during peak times, and uncontrolled early departures are examples of recurrent patterns that have evolved over time from isolated incidents to institutionalized behaviours. The main causes of this normalization are recurring behaviours and a structural absence of sanctions for noncompliance. According to Masilela (2023), a number of departments have created unofficial "work rhythms" to account for absenteeism, especially during times of high operational pressure and around paydays. Absenteeism becomes an unofficial norm in these settings since it is not only expected but also implicitly accepted by peers and management. This phenomenon aligns with Organisational Culture Theory, which posits that shared assumptions and behaviours within institutions shape what is deemed acceptable practice (Schein, 2017).

In a cycle where non-attendance is no longer viewed as abnormal behaviour but rather as a normal part of the organization's routine, the tacit acceptance of absenteeism serves to strengthen these cultural norms (Dlamini & Zondo, 2022). This ingrained acceptance weakens the deterrent power of disciplinary frameworks and compromises official attendance policies. Workers discover that there are no consequences for breaking attendance regulations, which weakens organizational discipline and reduces management trust. Additionally, Zulu and Dlamini (2023) note that this cultural normalization makes workforce inefficiencies worse by causing service delivery disruptions and staffing level unpredictability. When dedicated workers are forced to make up for absent coworkers, the ensuing instability may demotivate them and increase absenteeism and disengagement. Breaking this cycle requires deliberate interventions aimed at shifting organisational culture. This includes consistent enforcement of attendance policies, transparent communication of expectations, and leadership that models accountability (Masilela, 2023). Encouraging a culture of collective responsibility and recognising positive attendance behaviour are also critical steps towards reversing the institutionalisation of absenteeism.

6. Discussion

This study's findings reveal that attendance manipulation in the South African public service is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by both individual behavioural choices and systemic institutional weaknesses. The recurring patterns of payday absenteeism, strategic sick leave during high workloads, and unregulated early departures underscore the complex interplay between organisational culture and rational decision-making, as framed by the dual theoretical lenses of Organisational Culture Theory and Rational Choice Theory.

6.1. Interpreting Attendance Patterns Through Organisational Culture

Understanding attendance patterns in the South African public service requires more than procedural audits or compliance tracking. It necessitates an examination of the underlying organisational culture that shapes, sustains, and legitimises absenteeism. Absences around payday weekends and during important work times, like field trips, reporting deadlines, or planning cycles, are not sporadic. Instead, it is indicative of a deeply ingrained organizational culture that subtly accepts and occasionally subtly encourages the manipulation of attendance standards. Schein's (2017) foundational theory of organizational culture, which defines culture as the collective set of assumptions, values, and learned responses that guide member behaviour, frequently unconsciously, is consistent with this pattern of behaviour. Formal attendance policies are in place and are regularly updated, such as the Public Service Regulations amendments of 2022, but they frequently fail to alter behaviour because they are not in line with the informal norms that are currently in place within departments. These informal norms are sustained through daily interactions, peer influence, and managerial practices that fail to hold staff accountable. According to Masilela (2023), employees in a number of provincial departments view early departures, unrecorded absences, and "extended lunch breaks" as a natural part of the workplace's unofficial rhythm. By seeing how their coworkers behave, new hires are frequently socialized into these patterns and rapidly discover that such actions are not acceptable. This exemplifies what Dlamini and Zondo (2022) refer to as "behavioural clustering," in which particular workplace customs, particularly those that defy official regulations, become ingrained in the local culture of the company.

This cultural permissiveness also extends to supervisory behaviour. Many line managers, particularly at middle management level, are reluctant to enforce disciplinary measures for fear of disrupting workplace harmony or inviting labour disputes. According to Mkhabela and Dube (2023), this reluctance often results in passive tolerance of absenteeism, particularly when sick notes or vague personal circumstances are invoked. Over time, the lack of managerial action reinforces a shared perception that attendance requirements are negotiable or symbolic rather than binding. A gap between formal institutional frameworks and actual organizational realities results as a result. According to Moloi (2023), without an organizational culture that supports their implementation, even well-designed regulatory tools, like the updated sick leave thresholds and reporting requirements introduced in the Public Service Regulations (2022), are unlikely to succeed. Regulation is still performative in situations where informal norms favour leniency. The effectiveness of administrative reforms intended to enhance performance and discipline is significantly hampered by this misalignment between culture and policy. Therefore, addressing absenteeism necessitates cultural change in addition to procedural compliance measures. Initiatives for organizational change must concentrate on changing the prevailing beliefs that guide daily behaviour in addition to developing training and capacity. This includes fostering a culture of accountability, reinforcing positive attendance practices, and ensuring that both rewards and sanctions are perceived as fair, consistent, and legitimate. Without addressing these cultural dimensions, even the most rigorous enforcement systems are likely to produce limited results.

6.2. Rational Choice and the Logic of Absenteeism

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) offers a compelling lens through which to interpret absenteeism not as an incidental or emotional response, but as a calculated behaviour driven by personal cost-benefit analysis. Within this framework, employees act as rational agents who weigh the potential benefits of absenteeism, such as extended rest, avoidance of stressful workloads, or personal time, against the perceived likelihood and severity of negative consequences. When organisational controls are weak, enforcement is inconsistent, and the probability of punishment is low, absenteeism becomes a rational and strategic choice rather than a violation of norms or a result of disengagement (Phala & Mampuru, 2022). Observable attendance trends within the South African public service provide empirical support for the theory. The frequent increase in absenteeism after payday Fridays is one such instance. According to departmental records and the Public Service Commission (PSC, 2023), this pattern indicates that workers are purposefully scheduling absences to align with their social and financial obligations. Similar to this, periods of high workload, like end-of-quarter reporting, financial year-end procedures, or extensive program rollouts, are when absenteeism peaks. These trends show intentional attempts to evade pressure, reassign tasks, or exploit managerial indulgence rather than chance or illness (Mkhabela & Dube, 2023). Systemic flaws that lower the perceived cost of non-compliance enable this deliberate absenteeism. The absence of real-time attendance monitoring, particularly in rural and under-resourced departments,

means that absences are frequently detected late, if at all, as Letsoalo and Nare (2022) point out. Even digital systems are rarely connected to payroll or performance management software, and manual registers can be fabricated or completed after the fact. The deterrent effect of formal rules is significantly reduced in the absence of prompt detection and repercussion. In essence, workers are reacting to the incentives, or lack thereof, that the institutional environment has produced.

Furthermore, disciplinary procedures are rarely applied strictly and are frequently slow and inconsistent. Only a small percentage of reported absenteeism cases lead to formal disciplinary outcomes, and when they do, the sanctions are frequently insignificant or never applied, according to the DPSA (2023). Therefore, the expected benefit of absenteeism, what workers stand to gain, far exceeds the risk. This logical reasoning supports what Mofokeng (2024) calls "calculated disengagement," in which breaking the rules is intentional and repeatable rather than impulsive or emotional. Therefore, effective absenteeism management calls for more than just occasional audits or harsh rhetoric. It necessitates changing the organizational framework that governs employee decision-making. This includes the implementation of real-time biometric systems, integration of attendance data into performance evaluations, and the consistent application of sanctions where policy violations occur. Furthermore, positive incentives for consistent attendance, such as public recognition, career development opportunities, and workload fairness, must be incorporated to adjust the reward side of the calculus. As noted by Themba and Khosa (2024), employees are more likely to comply with attendance expectations when the organisational environment visibly rewards discipline and punishes transgression in a fair and consistent manner. Rational Choice Theory illuminates the logical underpinnings of absenteeism and challenges the assumption that such behaviour is purely symptomatic of stress, disengagement, or poor working conditions. Instead, it highlights how institutional arrangements shape the rational actions of employees, and why reform must target these arrangements to shift behavioural outcomes.

6.3. Implications for Policy and Practice

Comprehensive, multi-layered interventions are necessary because absenteeism behaviours are shaped by the intersection of cultural norms and logical decision-making. Policy directives alone are insufficient to address absenteeism; instead, organizational culture, leadership ability, and structural flaws must all be addressed at the same time. Each of these aspects supports the others, and sustainability and compliance are compromised if they are not addressed comprehensively. First and foremost, a fundamental intervention is still the deployment of dependable, real-time attendance monitoring systems. Conventional paper-based registers have shown themselves susceptible to collusion and manipulation, particularly in departments that are decentralized and located in rural areas. Digital attendance systems that are connected with payroll and performance management procedures can greatly lower the likelihood of fraudulent reporting, as noted by Letsoalo and Nare (2022).This integration enables a more accurate picture of work attendance trends, strengthens internal controls, and enhances managerial accountability. Mofokeng (2024) similarly argues that attendance must be treated not as a standalone administrative metric but as a strategic governance issue linked directly to operational performance.

Second, a crucial enforcement node that is presently underfunded and unevenly trained is frontline supervision. Supervisors may be reluctant to enforce rules that are culturally unpopular or risk conflict because they are frequently drawn from the same communities as their employees. According to Tshukudu and Makhubela (2022), this leads to a permissive cycle in which leadership habits establish tolerance for absenteeism as the standard. Therefore, focused supervisory training that gives leaders the institutional support and technical know-how to apply rules consistently and fairly must accompany the implementation of policies. This covers resolving disputes, maintaining documentation, and using digital tools to monitor compliance. Changing organizational culture is still a long-term but vital priority, even beyond formal structures. The persistence of informal norms that excuse or even encourage absenteeism cannot be overcome through punitive measures alone. Instead, departments must develop deliberate change management strategies that cultivate a culture of accountability, ownership, and engagement. For example, recognition and reward systems for exemplary attendance can provide positive reinforcement, while transparent and timely communication about the consequences of attendance violations helps establish behavioural boundaries (Masilela, 2023). Engaging employees in the design and review of attendance policies further enhances legitimacy and buy-in, reducing resistance and promoting voluntary compliance.

Clarity of policy and departmental uniformity are also crucial. Many instances of manipulating absenteeism take advantage of discrepancies in the interpretation and application of regulations. Because some departments are more stringent than others, there are perceived injustices and opportunities for non-compliance. This issue can be lessened with the help of interdepartmental coordination, regular training, and clear national guidelines. Regular audits should also be institutionalized as feedback mechanisms that support ongoing policy improvement rather than just as compliance exercises. Additionally, data-driven strategies like risk profiling and predictive analytics can spot new

trends and enable prompt interventions before absenteeism gets out of hand (PSC, 2023; Khumalo & Langa, 2024). Taken together, these strategies reflect the need to treat absenteeism not only as an administrative infraction but as a systemic outcome rooted in both institutional design and organisational culture. Sustainable solutions must therefore address the enabling conditions and the behavioural motivations concurrently.

7. Conclusion

A complex interaction of behavioural, structural, and cultural factors has been revealed by this study, which looked at patterns of workplace absenteeism and attendance manipulation in the South African public sector. The results demonstrate that absenteeism, which manifests as strategic sick leave during periods of high workload, payday absenteeism, and unregulated early departures, is not solely the consequence of personal shortcomings but rather is ingrained in institutional flaws and lax organizational cultures. Absenteeism is tolerated and frequently goes unchecked in an environment because of structural enablers like a lack of real-time attendance monitoring systems, lax disciplinary enforcement, unclear policies, and supervisory neglect. These structural flaws encourage workers to take advantage of the system for their own gain by lowering the perceived risks and repercussions of manipulating attendance. Furthermore, the institutionalisation and normalisation of absenteeism indicate that attendance manipulation has become an accepted "work rhythm" in many public service departments. This cultural acceptance undermines formal attendance policies and weakens organisational accountability, ultimately compromising service delivery and public trust. A comprehensive strategy that incorporates technology investment in integrated attendance monitoring systems, improved supervisory capabilities, and uniform disciplinary actions is needed to address absenteeism in the public sector. The necessity of cultural change to promote shared accountability and change organizational norms away from accepting absenteeism is equally significant.

Future studies should examine intervention techniques that successfully integrate these components and evaluate how they affect organizational performance and attendance patterns. Furthermore, research that takes into account the viewpoints of managers and employees may improve knowledge of the incentives and challenges associated with public sector attendance management.

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