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ABSENTEEISM IN SLOVENIAN COMPANIES

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ABSTRACT

The main research question is: How do Slovenian employers assess the level of absenteeism in their companies and what measures do they take to control it? We collected the data for research in 155 Slovenian companies in 2019 by the use of a questionnaire (close- and open-ended questions) that was answered by the people responsible for staffing (human resource managers) or managers in small companies. In addition to questions for demographic data (region, activity, organisation's size, ownership), we also included variables with the following descriptive answers: The range of absenteeism in a company; The reasons for absenteeism in a company; Absenteeism management in a company; Actions for absenteeism management in a company.

Absenteeism is not perceived as critical, but it is more often present among production workers. Various diseases are still the most common reason for absenteeism. The employees are mainly committed to work and do not take advantage of sick leave. The employers should establish systems for managing absenteeism within the companies. In this respect, the system should also consider how committed to work the worker is, how efficient is in using the elements of work and how qualitative is his output. On the basis of these findings, it would be advisable to prepare a research instrument with which we could identify what is happening in the field of absenteeism and which actions should be taken at the national, regional level or at the companies' level, especially in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: employees, employers, causes of absenteeism, diseases, health

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INTRODUCTION

For several decades, the absenteeism from work has been the subject of intensive study by researchers of various scientific disciplines, as its causes and consequences are visible in many areas. Broadly speaking, absenteeism is every failure to report or remain at work as scheduled, regardless of the reason (Cascio 2010). This is usually unplanned, for example, when someone falls ill, but it can also be planned, for example during a strike or wilful absence. The key to this definition is that the person was scheduled to work. This means that absenteeism does not include vacation, personal leave, jury-duty leave, or other reasons. Commonly used synonyms for absenteeism are absence, sickness, skipping, or taking leave. Absenteeism in the workplace is most commonly measured using an absenteeism rate. This rate is the number of absent days divided by the number of available workdays in a given period. The absenteeism rate is the key HR indicator and should also be a very important indicator of public health. For example, excessive absenteeism can indicate problems within the workforce or organisational culture (AIHR 2020) or as far as indicating issues in public health in general such as a possible national health issues. So a definition can only be a starting point since, in practice, national data uses many different definitions (Eurofound 2010).

However, absenteeism from work due to illness is the term used to describe absenteeism in terms of health reasons (Kos 2010). This area of absenteeism is also subject to research that has excited the interest of industrial psychologists, management researches, medical sociologists and health economists (Leigh 1986). This is an urgent problem, to which governments and companies are devoting more and more attention. Sick leave does not only mean economic loss but also loss of knowledge and experience, deterioration of relations between the employees, poorer well-being of employees when returning after a longer sick leave, loss of skills and of other influences. In addition to the above stated definition problems, the Covid-19 has additionally brought tremendous uncertainty to global markets in terms of human health and the economy (McEwan et al. 2020). Once employees start testing positive for the virus, businesses such as processing plants may close temporarily in order to reorganise and allow time for all employees to self-isolate (Olymel 2020).

Absenteeism has been traditionally considered a relevant problem of human resource management (HRM), especially in large sectors and organisations (8 and 9). The generally accepted underlying concept of absenteeism is non-attendance when scheduled to work, so holidays and other planned leaves are excluded (McEwan et al. 2020). The management of absenteeism is one of the main strategic actions in HRM that an organisation may pursue in order to assure company's

performance and success (Cucchiella, Gastaldi, and Ranieri 2014) and it is a relevant and strategic problem in HRM for private and public sectors of many countries. Work has been recognised as a significant source of stress, negatively impacting individual health and well-being. However, there is also evidence demonstrating work's positive influence on employees' physical and mental health (Day, Hartling, and Mackie 2016).

This is the starting point of occupational health psychology in shifting from preventive medicine to psychologically healthy workplaces (Macik-Frey et al. 2009) and to build healthy workplaces (Huczynski and Fitzpatrick 1989). Most absences from work are attributed to illness, and dealing with them can be a challenge in different ways; for the individual, for their employing organisation and for their doctors. It is a major public health concern and a significant financial burden on the economy (Macdonald and Asanati 2016).

To evaluate the extent of absenteeism, we mainly rely on the statistics and studies already performed (Eurofound 2010). The research by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions estimated that absenteeism could cost around 2.5% of GDP in Europe. This would add up to a total cost of absenteeism of \$470 billion in the European Union alone, more than doubling that of the United States (Eurofound 2010). Slovenia is in the middle of the listed countries; within the EU countries. The WHO indicator is "Absenteeism from work due to illness; days per employee per year" and it means: "The average number of lost working days per employee per year due to sickness or injury. Maternity leaves are not included. Data obtained from existing sick leave registration systems" (WHO 2020). In 2018, there were recorded 14,780,930 days in employees regarding their incapacity for work. The share of sickness absence in women is 55% higher as compared to the one in men. The main contributors to temporary absence from work are diseases (70% of days) and injuries (20% of days), namely non-occupational (15%) and occupational injuries (5%). Absence from work continues to increase in 2019. However, the year 2020 will be specially marked by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Temporary absence from work due to legitimate health reasons, also referred to as sickness absence, sick leave or absenteeism, is one of the indicators for working population's health status. The approval of sickness absence is under the responsibility of personal doctors who work within the sickness insurance scheme and appointed doctors at the Health Insurance Institute of Slovenia (ZZZS). These data show an increase in the number of sickness absence after 2014. Furthermore, it is found that the share of absence from work due to health reasons is higher in women than in men. The most common stated reason for

sickness absence in men are injuries, whereas in women, it is diseases of the musculoskeletal system and connective tissue (NIJZ 2020).

METHODS

Setting

The aim of the research was to determine perception of the extent of absenteeism in Slovenia and what is the view of Slovenian employers in this regard. The main research question is: "How do Slovenian employers assess the level of absenteeism in their companies and what measures do they take to control it?"

In the last quarter of 2018 in Slovenia, there were 215,354 registered business entities in total, of which there were 72,922 companies, according to the data of AJPES6 from the business register (ePRG). In the context of the research — "Organisational dynamics for the organisations' excellence and creative management of changes" — we studied the field of absenteeism. The quantitative research was conducted in 2018/19 and was completed on 1 July 2019. The research was carried out in 155 Slovenian organisations. The sample covers 0.21% of all organisations in Slovenia. Given that all companies did not provide answers to all listed questions, in the case of a single question, there is defined the exact number of valid answers in terms of the complete sample. The research comprises the organisations from all regions; mostly from the regions that also have the most organisations (see Appendix 2).

The research also covered organisations from all activities; mostly from trade, manufacturing and civil engineering. Because of the instructions that all sizes of organisations should be included in the research, they are evenly represented and so we have gathered information on regulation of evaluation for all four groups. Since larger companies have a higher number of employees, we also included the data of the majority of Slovenian employees. The ownership data show that we mostly covered private organisations, but we also have the data about public and public-private organisations.

Research Instrument

We collected the data for research by means of a questionnaire with single questions; closed-ended and open-ended questions that were answered by the people responsible for staffing (human resource managers or managers in small companies). In addition to closed-ended questions for demographic data (region, activity, organisation's size, ownership) we gathered opinions on the 1) the range of absenteeism in a company, 2) reasons for absenteeism in a company, 3) absenteeism

⁶ Agency of the Republic of Slovenia for Public Legal Records and Related Services.

management in a company and 4) actions for absenteeism management in a company (see Appendix 2).

RESULTS

To evaluate the perception of the magnitude of absenteeism, we asked companies whether they think that the range of absenteeism is still such that it could be managed by daily adjustments and marshalling of employees. Thus we wanted to find out if the companies are still successful in managing absenteeism. The findings (that include 88% of companies) show that the organisations do not perceive high levels of absenteeism.

The question "Which work profiles are most frequently absent?" brought the answer that the employees who work on the ground (53%) and young mothers (17%) are the most subject to absenteeism; whereas the reasons of the latter are personal absence or childcare. Besides, the companies notice higher levels of absence in: employees who smoke; workers who are less physically active – i.e. they take less care of their health; people who qualify for disability retirement; and shift workers. The employees with negative personal traits and with a greater predisposition to depression have more absences as well. The respondents highlighted absences as a big problem.

The question "Are there emerging any particular absence patterns?" gave a joint reply that certain patterns do exist (37%). The additional question "Which are those patterns?" provided answers in favour of sick leave in the case of family member care or seasonal diseases (for example influenza). However, some employees take advantage of sick leave in order to avoid work. In addition, the respondents also admit taking sick leave due to occupational injuries and diseases. There are more cases of burnout and depression as well.

In terms of the next set of questions, we tried to identify the reasons for absenteeism. The answers to the question "What are the primary reasons for absence?" can be summarised as follows: the most common reason is a disease (72%), then stress (10%), injuries (9%), and family member care (7%). All this demonstrates that also the employers themselves can take some action to reduce sickness absence through the establishment of better working conditions.

More positive were the answers to the question "How much are the employees committed to work?", where we found out that the majority of employees (67%) is very committed to work. Such commitment to work is reflected through willingness to help others and to work for a longer time in case of troubles in the production process.

With the answers to the question "Do the employees take every opportunity (e.g. every cold) to be absent?" we can conclude that employees (76%) do not seize every opportunity to go absent. The

responses to this question support the answers to preliminary questions, i.e. that the overall situation is satisfactory.

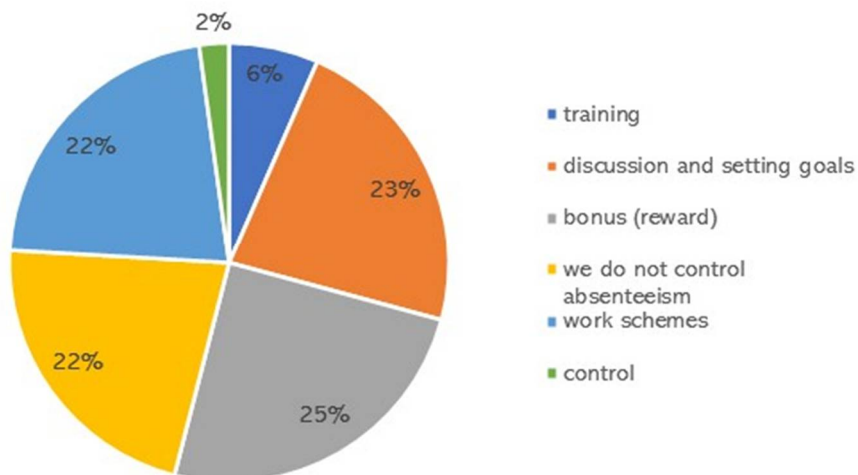
The aim of the next set of questions was to identify how to manage absenteeism. The answers to the questions "What actions should be taken in order to manage absenteeism?" provide suggestions that greater care of employees is required and that is necessary to deal with them every day (35%). What is more, the motivation of employees can be stimulated in an appropriate manner (31% of the respondents believe that the rewards would be useful in this case). The respondents also admit to still have considerable reserves in relation to working conditions (20%).

The question "What do your employees prefer: material or non-material reward systems?" gives the answer (61%) that employees still prefer material reward systems, followed by combined reward systems (26%) and non-material reward systems (13%).

However, the question "Do you think there would be less absenteeism if the employees received bonus for longer presence at work?" does not offer a clear answer, i.e. if the introduction of bonuses brought a considerable decrease in absences. 50% of respondents say that such action would have only a short-term effect, but on the other hand 43% strongly oppose such point of view and believe that we should be looking for solutions through improving working conditions and work with employees.

The last set of questions was about the measures that organisations have already adopted. From the responses to the question "List concrete actions with which you manage absenteeism", we can deduce (Chart 1: Discussion and setting goals for dealing with absenteeism in organisation) that organisations take care of staff since only 21% of respondents cannot handle absenteeism. They also: adopt training measures (6.5%), talk with co-workers about goals (22.5%), give them extra rewards (24.6%) and have work schemes (21.7%). A specific control over employees is exercised in only 2.2% of participating companies.

Chart 1: Discussion and setting goals for dealing with absenteeism in organisation



The answers to the question "Do you want to add any thought on absenteeism" expressed the view that absenteeism would be reduced if sick leave were lower-paid and if people were more conscious and took better care of their health, were more physically active and ate healthy." The respondents also believe that it would be good to introduce some kind of tax allowance for the employer in the case of longer absence. Besides, the reward systems are in itself rigid and not simulative in relation to more committed workers.

It was highlighted that "precarious workers (self-employed) must always be present at work as business performance depends on the amount of their work, so they cannot afford to become ill. General measures can have a negative impact, so it is necessary to find concrete actions, which are well-suited to a single group of workers. In doing so, the school system would in itself more encourage social responsibility".

In addition, the respondents take the view that "the doctors who are uninformed about legislation, represent a big problem because they write sickness absences retroactively, and they approve sick leave for alleged stress at work etc. Moreover, it happens that the co-worker, who is waiting on meniscus surgery, is on sick leave for 9 months, otherwise he or she could not be added to a surgery list. These are system anomalies, not people." "People just take advantage of the flawed system. More precisely, Slovenian health system is terribly misguided if a 40-year-old has been waiting at home for three years on heart surgery," concluded the respondents. What is more, the waiting times for certain surgeries continue to increase and consequently, sick absences will continue to rise as well.

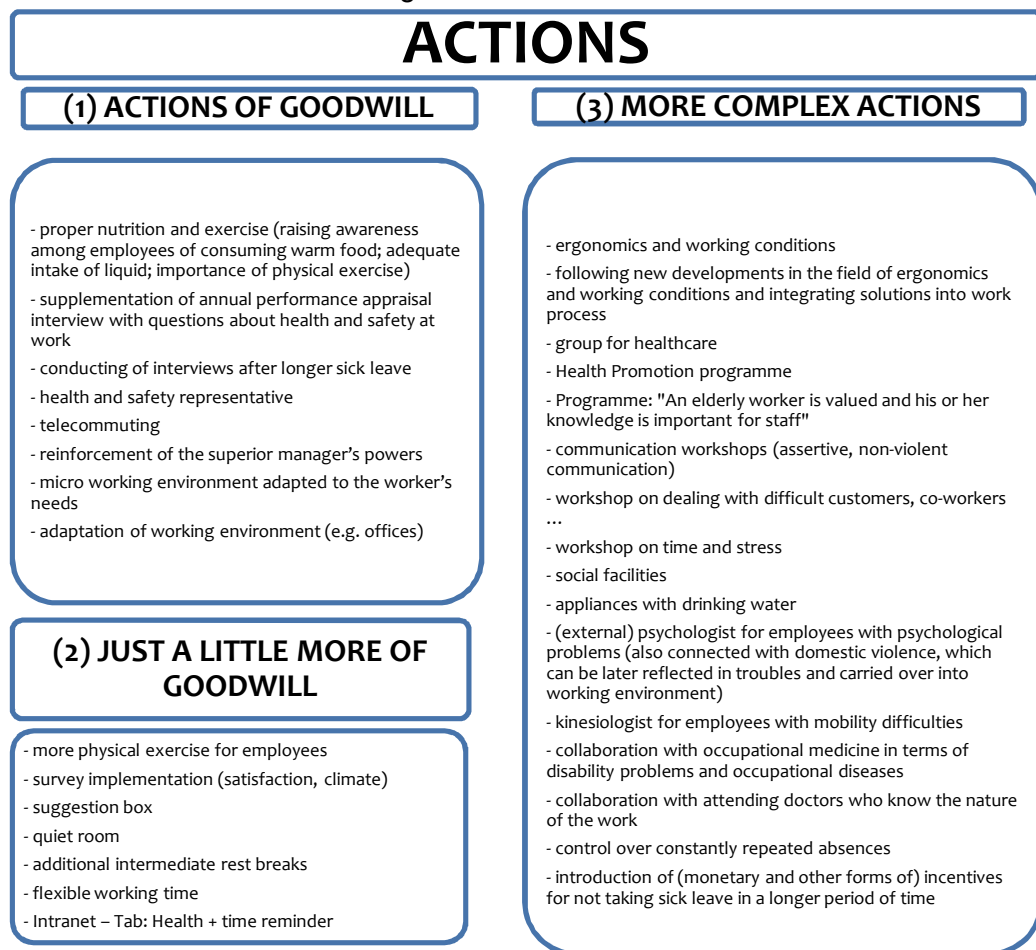
DISCUSSION

4.1 General improvements

The working conditions significantly improved in the last century but it is not only on the employer to create a safe working environment. The workers who follow safety practices are less prone to errors and injuries and are more productive. If the employees are healthy (e.g. alert, energetic), then they will probably work more safely and efficiently. These programmes — health insurance, medical benefits, worksite safety, and health promotion — are synergistic; they all contribute to employee health (Sparling 2010)

The measures and the resources required for their realisation, are summarised and illustrated in the scheme 1.

Scheme 1: Actions for reducing health absenteeism



(Tajnšek and Raspor 2015; Tajnšek 2020; Own research)

4.2 Actions to establish control

It is necessary to establish control over the employees suspected of taking advantage of sick leave. In this case, it is firstly necessary to talk with an employee. The next step is the cooperation with occupational medicine and attending doctors. They have to become acquainted with the nature of the work and with peculiarities so that they will be able to treat the employees in the right way. The employers note that doctors sometimes approve unnecessary sick leave. The establishment of stimulation systems for the employees who do not take sick leave in a longer period of time (material and non-material methods of rewarding). In these terms, it is certainly necessary to be careful about potential contradictions with labour legislation.

4.2 Actions for improving organisation of work

The employees' working time is precisely defined. Perhaps it would be worth considering the action of telecommuting and work according to the system of 4–3 (for day work and 3 day off) or 36-hour long working week. However, in some workplaces (trade, production, etc.) such action certainly would not be possible. In terms of commuting, the workers would carry out work independently of time and would take a break when they felt the need. Besides, it would also be easier for them to coordinate job and personal responsibilities. The workers would also save on the costs of child protection and of buying business clothing, they would eat healthier and would also avoid rush hours and the nervousness related to being late due to traffic jam would disappear. However, we should keep in mind that telecommuting requires a lot of self-discipline and good organisation.

The reinforcement of the superior manager's powers for freer adaptation of work plan is an important action, for which a strong support of senior management would be required. This is even more important for production when it must adapt to orders. On the basis of a specific authorisation, the leaders would have the possibility to change the work plan according to a current situation; quickly and without unnecessary bureaucracy. The action would be of a temporary nature. The manager should also have certain powers i.e. to send a worker with flu home.

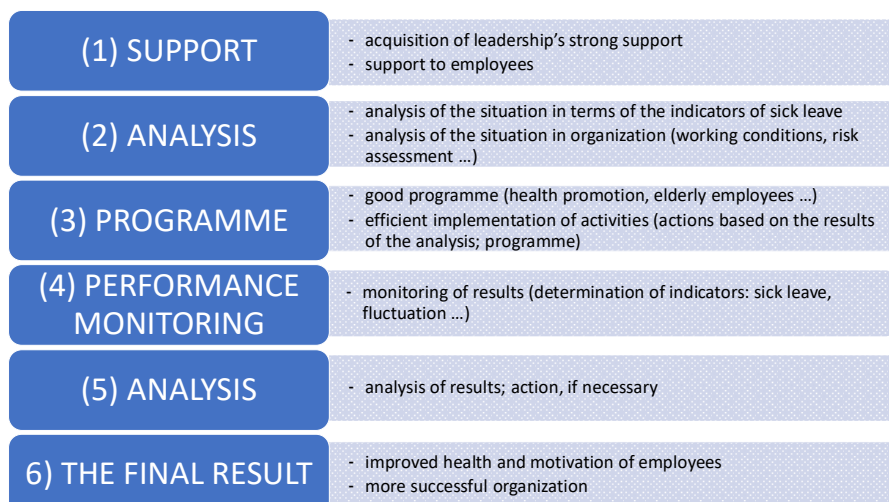
4.3. Individual actions

In any event, care for every individual in order to improve and maintain mental health, is in the first place. In terms of fulfilling work assignments, most employees are faced with deadlines, which can be related to production, formalities (e.g. deadlines for issuing decisions, for lodging complaints) or to the date set by their superior (e.g. deadlines for the preparation of various reports, responses, tenders). Work under

pressure is not necessarily a bad thing and being under pressure does not mean that you are really under stress. If the employer can ensure legal aid (also) with experts of his or her own kind, then the role of a psychologist has to be explicitly independent. In the case of severe stressful situations, the employer is the one who should refer the worker to an interview and the latter should respond the invitation.

To conclude, let us illustrate the course of managing absenteeism with image representation of stages that should be considered, if we want to reach success in the field of reducing health absenteeism (Scheme 1: Stages of development in managing health absenteeism) as proposed by the author (Tajňšek 2020).

Scheme 1: Stages of development in managing health absenteeism in a company



(Tajňšek 2020)

In our previous studies, we have already explored the possibilities on how to adopt the measures that can contribute to a better well-being and better health of employees (Tajňšek and Raspor 2015). However, if such measures are carried out, we can also contribute to health absenteeism management. The "health promotion in the workplace is an integrated approach to the workplace (Tajňšek and Raspor 2015); it is a combination of overall health promotion and well-being with a more traditional approach to maintaining health and safety in the workplace." The authors (ibid) have repeatedly pointed out the fact that – despite the word "health", this area is still neglected in terms of conceptual sense – health promotion should be oriented towards maintaining and improving health and not towards the employer's panic fear of: (1) getting a fine if he or she does not carry out the promotion of health in the first place,

(2) diseases, sickness absences and other costs related to social and healthcare rights of a worker.

CONCLUSION

Slovenian organisations are not immune to absenteeism but according to the results, they are still able to manage it. Comparatively speaking, we are also not among the worst countries in the EU; for example, it is an interesting fact that Germany as the strongest European economy has one of the highest levels of absenteeism. Further on, presence is not the only criterion in terms of productivity. What matters is how committed to work the worker is when he or she works, how efficient is in using the elements of work and how qualitative is his output. The Covid-19 outbreak has an increasing impact on the Slovenian industry. The study for 2010 reports that absence costs represent 1.4% of labour costs (Eurofound 2010). According to the fact that the range of absenteeism is increasing every year, those costs are probably higher now (NIJZ 2020). What consequences will Covid-19 have for Slovenian economy, will only be known at the end of 2021 when it is expected that the situation will return to normal.

However, it would be recommended to carry out in-depth researches and to prepare a strategy to manage the problem of absenteeism, which would have clear goals and the operators for specific areas. In order to manage the problem, the representatives of employees (especially works council) and occupational medicine should also participate. Strategic human resource management focuses on human resources programmes with a long-term objective. The primary goal of strategic human resources is to increase employee productivity by focusing on the business obstacles that can limit company's performance (Cucchiella, Gastaldi, and Ranieri 2014).

The research limitations consist of the fact that only 0.21% of all organisations in Slovenia participated in the survey. Nonetheless, we manage the limitations in a way that we established contact with companies (according to their size, activity, region, ownership) and consequently we got at least a little clear perspective. The second limitation was that we conducted the research through structured interviews. We had to unite the findings. On the basis of those findings it is possible to prepare a research instrument, with which we could periodically (every 5 years) identify what is happening in the field of absenteeism and which actions should be taken at the national, regional level or at the level of activity and company despite the fact that the approach will never be unambiguous.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST: The authors declare that no conflicts of interest exist.

FUNDING: The study was not financed.

ETHICAL APPROVAL: As the study was retrospective, fully anonymous and consisted exclusively of data collection and analysis, we consider ethical aspect of the study unquestionable.

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Appendix 1: Demographics

	Freq.	Valid Percent
(I)Region		
Pomurska (Mura region)	9	6.3
Podravska (Drava region)	23	16.0
Koroška (Carinthia region)	2	1.4
Savinjska (Savinja region)	13	9.0
Zasavska (Central Sava region)	1	0.7
Posavska (Lower Sava region)	2	1.4
JV Slovenija (Southeast Slovenia region)	9	6.3
Osrednjeslovenska (Central Slovenia region)	68	47.2
Gorenjska (Upper Carniola region)	8	5.6
Goriška (Gorizia region)	3	2.1
Obalno-kraška (Coastal-Karst region)	6	4.2
Total	144	100.0
(II)Activity in terms of NACE standard ⁷ for classification of companies (or SKD ⁸ 2008)		
Agriculture, hunting, forestry, fishery	3	2.1
Manufacturing	17	11.8
Electricity, gas and steam supply	1	0.7
Water supply; treatment of sewage and waste; rehabilitation of the environment	2	1.4
Civil engineering	9	6.3
Trade; maintenance and repair of motor vehicles	22	15.3
Transportation and storage	9	6.3
Hospitality	10	6.9
Information and communication activities	14	9.7
Financial and insurance activities	8	5.6
Professional, scientific and technical activities	7	4.9
Other diverse business activities	15	10.4
Activity of public administration and defence; activity of compulsory social security	4	2.8
Education	8	5.6
Health care and social assistance	2	1.4
Cultural, pastime and recreational activities	2	1.4
Other activities	11	7.6
Total	144	100.0

⁷ Statistical Classification of Economic Activities within the European Communities.

⁸ Standard Classification of Activities in Slovenia.

(III)Classification in terms of Companies Act		
Micro companies (up to 10 employees)	31	21.7
Small companies (up to 50 employees)	51	35.7
Middle companies (up to 250 employees)	36	25.2
Large companies (above 250 employees)	25	17.5
Total	143	100.0
(IV)Company's ownership		
Private	108	75.0
State-owned	17	11.8
Mixed	19	13.2
Total	144	100.0

Appendix 2. Absenteeism questionnaire

The range of absenteeism in a company

- Do you think that the range of absenteeism is still such that it could be managed by daily adjustments and marshalling of employees?
- Which work profiles are most frequently absent?
- Are there emerging any particular absence patterns?
- Reasons for absenteeism in a company
- What are the primary reasons for absence?
- How much are the employees committed to work?
- Do the employees take every opportunity (e.g. every cold) to be absent?
- Absenteeism management in a company
- What actions should be taken in order to manage absenteeism?
- What do your employees prefer: material or non-material reward system?
- Do you think there would be less absenteeism if the employees received bonus for longer presence at work?
- Actions for absenteeism management in a company
- List concrete actions with which you manage absenteeism.
- Do you want to add any thought on absenteeism?
- Demographics