

UITP – BHRM commission

UNDERSTANDING ABSENTEEISM IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT OPERATIONS



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Absenteeism, a persistent challenge for public transport companies

While the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic exacerbated the problem, it is not the only factor. The pandemic highlighted more fundamental drivers such as job satisfaction, the attractiveness of the profession, and evolving attitudes towards work, all of which have played a role in increasing absenteeism.

This issue is now directly affecting the ability of transport networks to meet growing demand. Beyond the immediate operational challenges, absenteeism raises important questions about the long-term sustainability of PT services.

With rising demand for mobility and growing pressure to meet sustainability targets, understanding absenteeism's impact on service continuity is crucial.

This issue reflects broader dynamics that require careful analysis and targeted responses.

UITP REPORT

UNDERSTANDING ABSENTEEISM IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT OPERATIONS

Better understanding and analysis of absenteeism is essential to avoid simplistic answers or quick-fix solutions based on a hasty or even subjective assessment of the situation. Gaining a deeper understanding of the rise in absenteeism is crucial to developing appropriate responses.

This report aims to describe the causes and impact of absenteeism and identify possible courses of action to address the issue, taking into account the action plans put in place by transport companies.

Going beyond these actions and best practices, the report concludes by emphasising the need to involve all stakeholders (executive committee, trade unions, local management, etc.) in preventing or fighting absenteeism in the workplace, as interests must be shared to ensure the sustainability of our solidarity and social protection systems.

This report

- is not a scientific analysis of absenteeism
- is a lever to raise awareness of the diversity of situations contributing to absenteeism and the need to adopt a global vision
- is a toolbox to better understand absenteeism and associate the action plans best suited to your situations

This paper was produced with significant support from Eurogroup Consulting and the BHRM Committee's dedicated working group, composed of representatives from Keolis, Riga Municipality, ATM, Transport for London (TfL), New Jersey Transit, GVB, Alsa, FGC, Eurogroup Consulting, and RATP

- From late 2023 to early 2024, UITP's BHRM (Business and human resource management) commission working group conducted a questionnaire on absenteeism with the members of the working group.
- 20 different public transportation organisations were solicited and responded to the absenteeism questionnaire, representing a total of 13 countries.
- The questionnaire intended to **factualize the different elements of absenteeism** (causes, impacts, rates, best practices etc.), allowing member organisations to position themselves regarding absenteeism.

Topics studied

1. Understanding absenteeism

- Absenteeism calculation + absenteeism rates from 2019 to 2022
- Absenteeism rate of staff (2022) per years of service in the organisation
- Causes and impacts of absenteeism
- Social security framework and compensation for absent workers
- Evolutions in understand absenteeism

2. Absenteeism strategies

- Action plans to fight and prevent absenteeism
- Challenges in preventing and fighting absenteeism and initiatives to address them
- Good practices to reduce absenteeism

3. Well-being & stress management

- Well-being KPIs
- Mental health & physical well-being programmes in place
- Hours / overtime worked by drivers

13 Represented countries

	Austria		Netherlands
	Canada		Portugal
	France		Spain
	Germany		Switzerland
	Italy		UK
	Latvia		USA
	Mexico		



Executive summary

A brief overview of the main findings of the analyses conducted on the questionnaires

Absenteeism in the public transport sector has increased post-Covid and hasn't returned to pre-Covid levels; increasing from **8,4% in 2019 to 10,5% in 2022**

Absenteeism **rates tend to correlate with years of service in an organisation**. Lower rates of absenteeism are seen with those serving less than 5 years. Beyond 5 to 10 years of service, absenteeism tends to rise.

Aside from illness, **working conditions** are a main cause of absenteeism

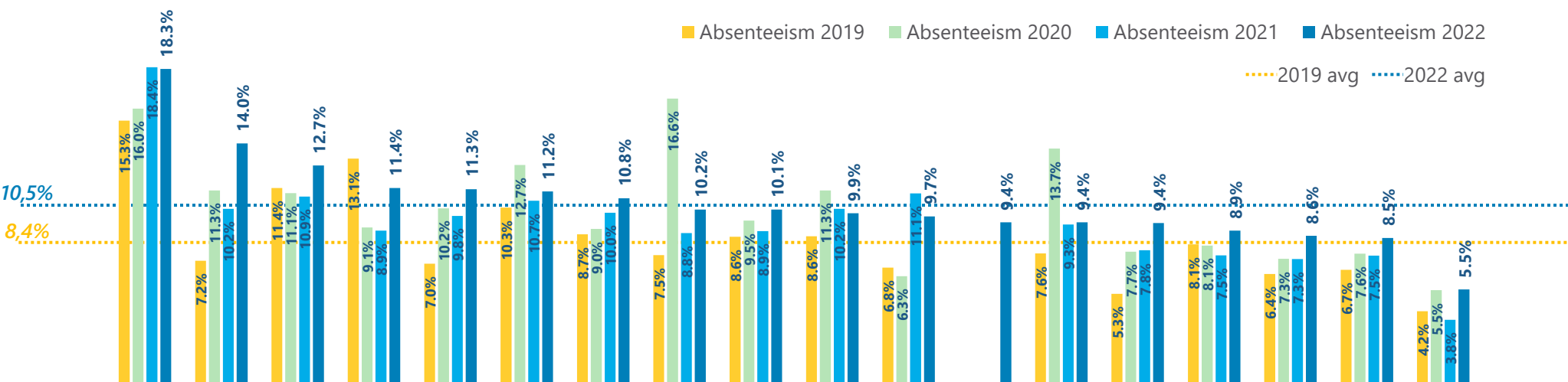
Impacts of **absenteeism** are generally shared across organisations and **affect employers, other employees and customers alike**.

On average, employees work 37,3 hours per week. Only three organisations (Santa Clara VTA, RIGA, STM) show significant overtime hours. **No correlation with absenteeism has been observed**.

Absenteeism is costly for employers but **rarely imposes direct costs on employees themselves**. Across organisations, there are several different compensation models for absenteeism related to illness and accidents

Absenteeism rates have increased from 8,4% in 2019 to 10,5% in 2022

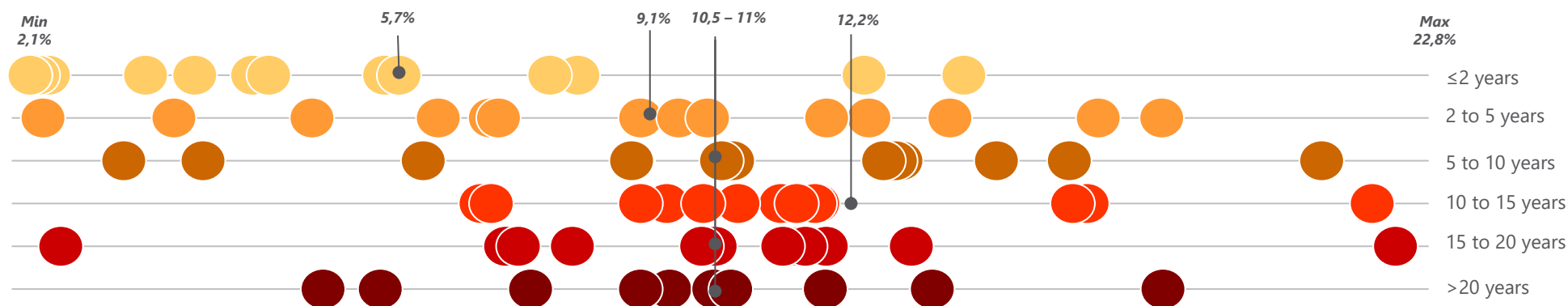
Absenteeism rates across UITP organisations from 2019 to 2022



- The average absenteeism rate across organisations in 2019 was at 8,4%, compared to 10,5% in 2022 – showing an average increase of 2,1% over the last 4 years.
- From 2019 to 2020, the average rate of absenteeism increased from 8,4% to 10,5%, largely explained by the Covid pandemic.

Absenteeism rates have increased from 8,4% in 2019 to 10,5% in 2022

Absenteeism rates across UITP organisations from 2019 to 2022



- A general trend of **lower absenteeism rates** is observed among employees with **less than or equal to 2 years** within the organisation. The average absenteeism rate in this service bracket is at **5,7%**.
- Conversely, **as years of service begin to rise** (and thus, age), **so does the tendency for absenteeism**. The average absenteeism rate for employees with between 2 and 5 years of service raises **+3,4 points**, to **9,1%**. Beyond 5 years of service, absenteeism rates vary and depend on the transport operator.
- **The highest average absenteeism rate** across all organisations is at **12,0%** in the population of employees who have served between 10 and 15 years in their organisation.

Impacts of **absenteeism** are generally shared across organisations and affect employers, other employees and customers alike.

Economic consequences

Absenteeism leads to significant financial strain on transport companies, which must manage increased costs related to staffing and operations.

- Overtime pay
- Increased operating costs
- Recruitment and training costs
- Loss of revenue

Customer-related consequences

Absenteeism significantly affects the quality and reliability of the service provided to passengers, leading to customer dissatisfaction.

- Reduced service quality and frequency
- Unmet customer needs
- Safety concerns

Internal impacts on Public Transport Organizations

Absenteeism has a significant impact on the operations of transport organizations, both externally and internally. It can create a ripple effect that leads to stress and difficulties for remaining employees and managers.

- Operational challenges
- Employee well-being
- Recruitment difficulties and turnover

 Absenteeism is driven by **various factors**, and several organizations have highlighted different causes.

According to responses from organizations:

- 40% of organizations identified **illness** as the main cause of absenteeism.
- 35% attributed absenteeism to **working conditions**, with challenging environments contributing to higher absence rates.
- 25% mentioned leave **regulations and compensation as contributing factors**, reflecting potential dissatisfaction with company policies.
- 15% pointed to **difficult access to healthcare, work accidents, and parental or family leave** as additional contributors.
- 10% of organizations identified **economic factors, social conflicts, and managerial deficits** as reasons behind absenteeism.
- Finally, 5% of organizations linked absenteeism to **leave refusal and disability assistance**.

Development of personas

A **deeper analysis** was conducted to uncover its **root causes** within public transport organizations. Several factors were identified as significant contributors, each affecting **employee retention** and the overall **quality of service**.

To gain further insight into these causes, **personas have been created** to better understand the distinct factors contributing to absenteeism by representing different staff types.

By mapping these **personas**, it becomes easier to **identify specific levers for action**, enabling transport operators to develop more **targeted** and **effective strategies**.

It's important to note that while absenteeism is a concern, **it does not affect all employees equally**. A significant number of workers are never absent throughout the year, and some only take short absences, usually for one or two days, due to **minor illnesses** or **fatigue**.

These brief absences are not the primary drivers of absenteeism within organizations.

Instead, this **analysis focuses** on a **smaller group of employees** whose **longer** or **more frequent** absences have a more substantial impact on **operations** and **service delivery**.

The types of personas and their absenteeism

1

Sick/injured – short term

Non-chronic illness, job-related injury, opportunity to rest

- Can happen to anyone.
- 2 to 3 7-day absences per year, easily managed
- Opportunity to take a day off or to extend a weekend.

2

Sick/injured – long term

Chronic illness, job-related injury, burnout

- More than 90 or 180 days absent per year
- Absences due to serious job injuries, requiring medical treatment and rehabilitation.

3

Elder worker

Health-related, including chronic illness and age-related issues

- Absenteeism due to frequent medical appointments and recovery periods.
- Absences due to exhaustion and sickness.

4

Carers

Family-related, parental leave, and childcare responsibilities

- Absenteeism during childbirth and early childcare phases.
- Frequent short-term absences to care for sick children or attend school events.

5

Extreme shift worker

Safety concerns, work-life balance, and shift fatigue

- Absenteeism due to unsafe working conditions and irregular shifts (unsocial working hours, extreme shifts).

6

Disengaged worker

Work-life balance, job dissatisfaction, job disengagement

- Absenteeism due to work dissatisfaction and poor work-life balance.
- Absences are unpredictable and often linked to job engagement levels.

7

Double job worker

Ad-hoc economic opportunity (spontaneous opportunities to earn extra money); scheduled side job commitments, burnout

- Absenteeism due to ongoing struggle to juggle multiple jobs.

8

Absence strategist/opportunist

Opportunity to take advantage of company policies

- Absenteeism is frequent as the employee takes advantage of the leave system, knowing they can do so without affecting their salary.
- Employee knows the rules and exploits opportunities.

Action plans



Health, safety, well-being and prevention

Address mental health issues, improve access to healthcare, and enhance workplace safety

- **Develop health and wellbeing plans**
- **Foster a safety culture**
- **Conduct regular safety training**
- **Implement safety inspections and audits**



Work organization (scheduling, flexibility, double shifts, etc.)

Optimize work schedules to improve work-life balance and job satisfaction

- **Improve shift management**
- **Introduce flexible shift policies**



Management and engagement

Foster a supportive management culture to reduce absenteeism

- **Reinforce management & provide manager training**
- **Develop employee engagement**



Control / fight against absenteeism fraud

Minimize fraudulent absenteeism through strict controls and clear policies

- **Verify and control absences**



Adapting HR policies

Improve employee retention and attract talent with improved HR strategies

- **Enhance employer brand**
- **Develop and deploy improved recruitment strategies**
- **Define policy for double jobs**
- **Adapt salary based on work presence**



Understand/measure/steer absenteeism and support initiatives

Better understand absenteeism patterns and implement measures to address them

- **Monitor KPIs and attendance patterns**
- **Deploy employee centered initiatives**
- **Conduct absenteeism data analysis**
- **Govern absenteeism**

Health, safety, well-being and prevention



Address mental health issues, improve access to healthcare, and enhance workplace safety



Key actions

1. Develop health and wellbeing plans

- Focus on preventative measures by implementing regular health assessments and screenings for common health concerns such as blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and diabetes risk
- Promote physical wellbeing by encouraging fitness challenges, offering gym memberships, or fitness classes and providing nutritional education or workshops to promote healthy eating habits
- Support mental health by establishing a mental health support hotline or online platform where employees can access resources, counselling, or referrals to mental health professionals
- Promote employee access to doctors by implementing appropriate plans

2. Foster a safety culture

- Recognize and reward safe behaviors, encourage open communication about safety issues
- Establish priorities, embed practices and rituals, the must have and the must do are put in the long-term incentive plan

3. Conduct regular safety training

- Train newcomers for safety and conduct reminder safety training for all employees

4. Implement safety inspections and audits

- Establish a safety reporting system address safety concerns and near-miss incidents



Illustrations

- Keolis has several plans related to nutritional education and activates them according to the situation
- EMT polls employees to identify psychosocial risks
- EMT implements and offers voluntary medical check-ups for company staff, and in-house physiotherapy office, in-house nursing service at each work center
- BVG and TfL offer fitness classes, mental health support and reintegration programs after illness
- TfL has implemented a self-declaring system that is similar to what is done in Hong Kong and Singapore.
- RATP has its own center of doctors, which is different from occupational doctors. Keolis has implemented tours in India for employees. TfL offered flu injections to their employees this year.
- TfL offers an Employee Assistance Programme, TriM (Trauma Risk Management) practitioners, a trauma support group, a Supporting Colleagues Network, Health and Wellbeing champions challenges and requires online learning in mental health awareness at work
- STM offers "Securibus training" for new bus drivers and sends a survey to their absent workers and managers to identify risk factors
- RATP conducts regular safety training and has developed a new training program for employees on preventing conflicts with clients. RIGA has set up training courses on safe driving and conflict management
- TPG has created break, relaxation, catering and coworking areas in the network and Keolis Rennes installed a breakroom on their Prébott site

Work organization (scheduling, flexibility, double shifts, etc.)



Optimize work schedules to improve work-life balance and job satisfaction



Key actions

1. Improve shift management

- Involve employees in the scheduling process by seeking their input and preferences, where possible and by personalizing work schedules
- Anticipate the construction of schedules and commit as much as possible not to modify them
- Utilize predictive scheduling software to allocate shifts according to demand, minimizing the need for unexpected double shifts and optimizing resource allocation
- Use rotating shift schedules where possible to ensure employees have an equal opportunity to work preferred hours
- Balance shift lengths to avoid excessively long work hours
- Encourage and protect mandatory rest periods between shifts, especially after double shifts
- Consider installing proper welfare facilities for employees to utilize between their shifts
- Invest in technology, solutions, software, and tools to better manage the shifts
- Encourage employees to use new technologies related to shift management
- Improve transparency and relationships with employees in the scheduling process

2. Introduce flexible shift policies

- Implement policies that allow employees to adjust their work schedules when necessary, providing flexibility to manage personal commitments such as childcare or medical appointments
- Implement new measures for elder workers to adapt their schedules and ensure a better work-life balance to avoid exhaustion or sickness



Illustrations

- ATM allows flexible working hours and assigns particular shifts to guarantee work-life balance
- TPG implements job rotation and part-time work options to reduce monotony and accommodate personal needs
- Metro de Lisboa created the MyPLAGO platform, allowing the consultation and management of planned activities of operation workers; facilitating the reconciliation of professional, personal and family life
- TfL has difficulties getting its people to use electronic devices. TfL has made the use of 41 cameras compulsory, but it remains a challenge as there are concerns about how TfL will use the information contained in the camera.
- RATP has developed a mobile application for its drivers to facilitate the communication with HR.
- The Netherlands has introduced a type of compulsory where drivers indicate their preferences at the beginning of the month, if they do not, they can't complain afterwards
- RATP is beginning to think about guaranteed days off for its employees and the creation of a marketplace for vacations.
- RATP has 2 marketplaces where drivers can swap their shifts with each other, which must be accepted by HR.

Management and engagement



Foster a supportive management culture to reduce absenteeism



Key actions

1. Reinforce management & provide manager training:

- Offer training programs for managers to enhance their leadership, communication, and employee engagement skills
- Involve managers actively in preventing absenteeism, especially focusing on helping long-term absent employees return to work
- Assure that managers provide enough time with employees to increase the relationship and the engagement
- Optimize the time dedicated to interviews between managers and employees.
- Improve managers training for interviews with employees

2. Develop employee engagement:

- **Measure employee engagement** by implementing regular employee engagement surveys and use feedback to drive improvements and address concerns
- **Reinforce communication with employees** through regular communication (newsletters, emails, etc.)
- **Recognition for performance and presence** (paid bonuses for productivity, incentives based on absenteeism KPIs, experimental "present" bonus for 6 months)



Illustrations

- TPG has implemented training courses for their operations managers to identify and meet their needs
- AT FGC, HR has trained managers how to interview the employees with repetitive sickness to better understand the employee's situation.
- RATP has developed a training program for manager to help them better manage employee interviews.
- RATP mobilizes and engages management on preventing absenteeism and encouraging employees absent longer than 30 days to return to work
- RATP uses an in-link digital tool for better communication between HR departments and bus drivers
- ATM has implemented mentorship programs
- TfL managers are conducting an interview with an employee every time after an absence, regardless of the length of the absence
- RATP managers are conducting a mandatory interview after 60 days of absence, they are not doing it for micro absenteeism, but they are thinking about a mandatory interview regardless of the length of the absence.
- TfL has developed a leadership framework setting out what we expect leaders to do.
- Keolis noticed that managers fear to ask the right question, because of the law, and are not properly prepared for the interview.

Control / fight against absenteeism fraud



Minimize fraudulent absenteeism through strict controls and clear policies



Key actions

1. Verify and control absences

- Strengthen absence verification processes to ensure legitimate sick leaves
- Conduct regular check-ins with employees on extended sick leave to verify their condition and provide for support for their return to work
- Use tools, KPI and data analytics to monitor and predict potential fraud.



Illustrations

- RATP inspects suspected leave fraud and double activity
- RATP has systematic management interviews for employees on leave for more than 30 days and training on social security rules and laws
- In Italy, doctors can check employees' state of health. ATM can initiate disciplinary procedures if the employee has lied.
- In France, it's the social security system that can check employees' conditions, and RATP has not introduced any penalties for lying about health conditions.
- In New Jersey, NJT has created a list of employees it considers fraudulent. Investigations are conducted on these employees, checking social media to verify their status, but this is costly.

Adapting HR policies



Improve employee retention and attract talent with improved HR strategies



Key actions

1. Enhance employer brand

- Develop internal and external campaigns to highlight the organization's commitment to main work life balance
- Make information about absenteeism support programs readily available on the company's website, career pages, and job advertisements
- Regularly update and share resources related to employee wellbeing and absenteeism management on social media platforms and company newsletters

2. Develop and deploy improved recruitment strategies

- Identify critical roles and tailor recruitment messages that emphasize the benefits of the organization's absenteeism management programs
- Leverage partnerships with educational institutions, community organizations, and professional networks to reach a diverse and broad talent pool
- Offer employee referral programs with incentives, particularly for roles with high absenteeism rates, to attract candidates who value support in managing absenteeism
- Improve recruitment processes to measure and assess the level of risk, to select better quality candidates and avoid turnover

3. Define policy for double jobs

- Clearly define in policy whether employees can hold double jobs, and implement penalties for infractions of the policy

4. Adapt salary based on work presence

- Some organizations may opt for policies that penalize absent employees with reduced salary



Illustrations

- Wiener Linien deploys intensive recruiting campaigns
- Mobility ADO has recruitment policies that include flexible work arrangements
- At FGC, HR has trained managers how to interview the employees with repetitive sickness to better understand the employee's situation
- Keolis has implemented psychometrics tests to assess the candidate's behavior.
- TfL has not faced a problem retaining train drivers and outsources the recruitment of bus drivers.
- RATP is willing to open the debate on double employment, but questions arise as to the responsibilities of companies.
- In Portugal, a law has been implemented to regulate the transport sector, and HR have a system for tracking the hours worked by an employee.
- RIGA has introduced a bonus system based on employee productivity

Understand/measure/steer absenteeism and support initiatives



Better understand absenteeism patterns and implement measures to address them



Key actions

1. Monitor KPIs and attendance patterns

- Develop and track key performance indicators (KPIs) specifically related to absenteeism. Use KPIs to monitor progress and the effectiveness of absenteeism reduction strategies.
- Define alert KPIs to trigger immediate action when absenteeism rates exceed habitual levels. Ensure that managers are notified promptly to address issues proactively.
- Conduct systematic and periodic audits of attendance records to identify patterns of absenteeism and potentially fraudulent absence and schedule quarterly reviews of attendance logs to detect irregularities.
- Use data analytics to detect unusual absenteeism patterns and intervene early (NJT)
- Improve HR's understanding of definitions and data

2. Deploy employee centered initiatives

- Use questionnaires and surveys to gather employee feedback on absenteeism-related policies and workplace conditions.
- Develop personalized absenteeism monitoring and action plans for employees with higher absenteeism rates. Work closely with these employees to understand their specific challenges and provide tailored support.

3. Conduct absenteeism data analysis

- Collect and analyze absenteeism data to identify patterns, trends, and root causes. Implement a system for monthly reporting and monitoring of absenteeism across the organization. Use surveys and interviews to gather qualitative data from employees about factors contributing to absenteeism.

4. Govern absenteeism

- Develop comprehensive absenteeism policies that clearly outline acceptable reasons for absences, reporting procedures, and consequences for excessive absenteeism. Ensure these policies are easily accessible and communicated to all employees.



Illustrations

- RATP regularly monitors absenteeism data and has a database to follow absenteeism KPIs. High-level executive committee meetings are held regularly to discuss absenteeism topics
- Keolis Rennes performs individual monitoring of absenteeism and implements KPI monitoring to set up corrective actions
- ALSA publishes a monthly report and monitoring of companies, work centres and cases
- ATM has defined alert KPIs
- Santa Clara VTA has created incentives based on absenteeism KPIs
- RATP has an experimental "present" bonus for 6 months
- TfL uses a tool to check that best practices are being followed, the tool sets out what it expects to happen

Conclusion

Absenteeism presents significant **challenges** for PT organisations, impacting financial performance, service quality, and employee well-being.

Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive **understanding of its root causes**, coupled with **targeted strategies** that focus on improving work conditions, supporting employee health, and enhancing management practices.

By **shifting from reactive solutions to proactive approaches**, organisations can build more resilient operations, better engage their workforce, and ultimately improve service quality for their customers.