

John Hill and Eric Trist

Temporary Withdrawal from Work Under Full Employment

The Formation of an Absence Culture*

Introduction

In the decades of full employment following World War II, industry in several western countries became concerned over the high levels of labor turnover and absence. Sample surveys and exit interviews threw little light on how these high levels came about.

A firm in the steel industry, the Park Gate Iron and Steel Company in Sheffield, asked the Institute to find a new way that would help them to reduce their problem with labor turnover and absence. Our response was to try out a process approach—to follow through a cohort of entrants over a four-year period. The company kept meticulous records so that the fact-gathering part of the inquiry did not present much difficulty. The results, however, showed that there were systematic problems to which there were no easy solutions (Hill and Trist, 1953).

The quantitative aspects of the results generated widespread interest and quite a large academic literature, especially in Scandinavia. The qualitative aspects, however, which involved a number of key psychoanalytic concepts, were totally disregarded. They need attention today as much as then.

Following through entrants from the time of joining to the time of leaving yielded what we called “survival curves”—the proportion at any given time who had not left. Though the slope of these curves varied greatly between different firms, they had a general shape. Over the first few weeks or months there was an explosion of leaving which we called the *induction crisis*. The slope of the curve was very steep. Over the next six months to two years the slope became more gentle; this was called the period of *differential transit* when there was an increase in absenteeism. After this the rate of leaving

*A shortened and rewritten version of the original—*Human Relations*, 8:121–52, 1955.

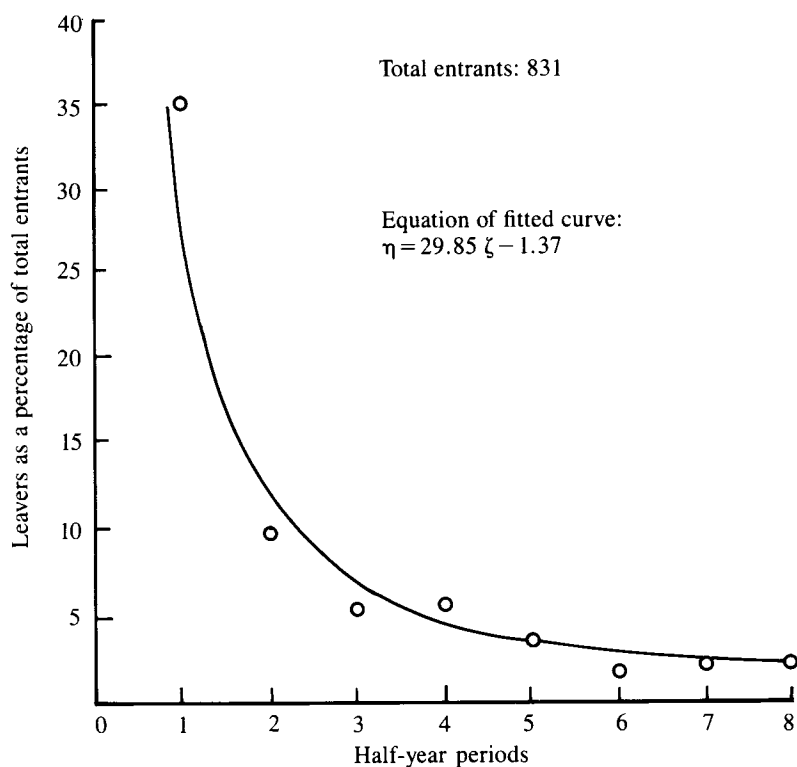


Figure 1. Survival curve (Park Gate)

leveled off in what we called the period of *settled connection* when sickness increased. The survival curve for Park Gate is given in Figure 1.

As contrasted with labor turnover, absences are a "stayer" phenomenon. One of the uses of absence is to provide a means of temporary withdrawal from the stress of continuing in, as distinct from breaking, a work relationship.

The group examined were all subject to the same broad socio-economic conditions during the four years' service studied. Detailed records made it possible to examine the forms of absence for each of the 289 individuals in the stayer group. These forms were classified as absences due to accidents; certified sickness; uncertified sickness; other reasonable explanation; and no reasonable explanation. The data showed the familiar pattern of monthly fluctuations not significantly different from random, superimposed upon seasonal variations which could be allowed for.

The tendency to go absent, by whatever means, produced a positively skewed distribution whose mode and tail indicated the majority who conformed to a social norm and the minority who deviated from it. We then asked: does the tendency to go absent more often than is the custom constitute an unalterable pattern or do certain changes occur as length of service increases? Are there any signs of a capacity on the part of individuals to learn to maintain themselves with less frequent recourse to temporary withdrawal, i.e., to improve their relationship with their employing institution?

With the overall annual absence level varying no more than between 5.5 percent and 6.5 percent of shifts for a working population of over 3,500, there was a sufficient approximation to a broad constancy. The fluctuation in the component forms was no more than might be expected in a complex social situation under real life conditions. Our entrant group comprised roughly a tenth of the working population at any one time.

Absences Other Than Accidents

We shall now examine changes in our stayers group in the level and form of their withdrawal from work during these first four years of service, divided into eight half-yearly periods. Table 1 shows that absences rise from 637 in the first to 775 in the second, from which they fall to 626 in the fifth and then stay at that level for the remaining three.

The survival distribution of entrants to the steel works conforms to the characteristic J-shaped curve. In comparison with other published cases it combines a fairly sharp induction crisis with a comparatively short period of differential transit—the curve tends to flatten out after a period of about two-and-a-half years.

Joining and leaving a firm is a publicly and legally institutionalized process regulated by contract. Knowledge of how to join a firm must exist outside the firm itself otherwise it would normally get no entrants. In going through the process of joining it the entrant acquires knowledge and experience of the means of leaving it. A desire to break the contract can be put into effect simply, and the terms of the contract provide the amount of notice (a week in most cases) that must be given. No barrier of any strength exists, therefore, to prevent painful feelings arising during the entrant's first encounter with the firm from being acted out immediately—by leaving. The characteristically high starting point of the survival curve in the present case bears witness to the extent to which this occurs.

Very different is the picture of temporary withdrawal from work. Absences are not publicly institutionalized acts. They tend to be regulated by internal cultural characteristics of individual firms—by what may be called an *absence*

TABLE I Total Numbers of Absences Sustained per Half-Yearly Period of Service

<i>Half-yearly period of service</i>	<i>1st</i>	<i>2nd</i>	<i>3rd</i>	<i>4th</i>	<i>5th</i>	<i>6th</i>	<i>7th</i>	<i>8th</i>	<i>Total</i>
Number of absences	637	775	719	667	626	630	618	630	5,302

culture. This in the majority of cases is expressed in the pattern of *taking a day off* which accounts for 75 percent of industrial absences. The possibilities of withdrawal by absence are not known by the entrant; they are cultural mechanisms ignorance of which marks out the newcomer. Absorption of these cultural mechanisms is a process taking some time.

Involved is learning to remain a member of an organization while being away from it. One of the reasons for the high rate of leaving in the early period of service is the comparative lack of other means of withdrawal at the entrant's disposal through which to express the intense conflicts that may be experienced (during the induction crisis)—without leading to a breach of the relationship.

MEETING THE STRESSES OF "STAYING"

Concern is with the resort to absences by stayers, who, having survived their induction crisis, are prepared to endure—in ways tolerable both to themselves and to the firm—the tensions consequent on continuing with, rather than breaking, their work relationship. One result appears to be the considerably increased level of absence which characterizes the stayers' group during their second and third half years of service. Such stayers have had time to learn the prevailing absence culture to the point where they can operate it more freely. Their need to do so is also greater; for it is just when the role of stayer is fully taken and the person begins genuinely to identify him- or herself with being an employee that the role of leaver becomes less available as a means of alleviating stress. A person starts, therefore, to make more use of the role of absentee which, correspondingly, has become more available. He or she increases the rate of temporary withdrawal—but within limits which are not likely to lead to termination of employment. The firm and the employee have become more valuable to each other. There is a greater investment on both sides in containing stress arising between them within the on-going relationship that has become established.

One would not, however, expect the employee to increase the rate of absence beyond a point. As the relationship between the individual and the employing organization goes on, it needs to "work through" to a position of