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Fear of missing out? Linking workplace changes and presenteeism

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**Fear of missing out?**  
**Linking workplace changes and presenteeism**

**Abstract**

Why do employees continue to work during illness? So-called presenteeism behaviour is a topic of great managerial and societal importance as it is connected to a series of negative individual and organisational outcomes. A growing body of research points to the importance of workplace factors in shaping employee stress and uncertainty and, ultimately, presenteeism behaviour. Curiously though, the impact of workplace changes on presenteeism behaviour has not been examined, even though the potential stress-inducing effects of such change are well-recognised. Building on a data set from the Australian Public Service, we examine how workplace changes are related to presenteeism behaviour. Our findings show that workplace changes generally provoke presenteeism behaviour. Specifically, cutback-related changes appear to cause presenteeism. This finding is relevant in times when many organisations are confronted with major budget cuts.

**Keywords:** organisational change, presenteeism, Australian Public Service

## Introduction

Presenteeism is a clear and accelerating trend followed not only by practitioners and academics but also by popular media and blogs (e.g., Bruce-Lockhart, 2019; Rise, 2020; Simpson, 2019). This has raised broad public awareness of the steep productivity and health costs associated with presenteeism in the workplace. *Presenteeism* is the phenomenon of attending work while ill. In other words, presenteeism describes employees who, despite ill health that should prompt rest and absence from work, still turn up at their jobs (Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005, p. 958). At the organisational level, this behaviour results in employees who are physically present but – to various extents – functionally absent because of illness (Jensen et al., 2019).

Not surprisingly, presenteeism in the workplace is a growing concern for managers and HR professionals because of its potentially damaging effects on both employees and organisations. Presenteeism has been found to be detrimental to employees' (mental) health and well-being as it is related to exhaustion, depersonalisation, burnout, psychological distress, lower self-rated health and aggravated existing medical conditions (Demerouti et al., 2009; Johns, 2010; Skagen & Collins, 2016). At the same time, presenteeism may lead to a lower (perceived) work ability, potentially resulting in a productivity loss (van den Heuvel et al., 2010). In fact, several studies have found that presenteeism accounts for a significantly higher proportion of lost productivity than sickness absence (e.g., Hemp, 2004). In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the construct of presenteeism as a health and safety risk deserves attention as it may become even more central for individuals and organisations than it has been in the past. The wide-reaching implications of presenteeism for both organisations and employees have led many researchers to examine its determinants (e.g., Johns, 2010; Yang et al., 2016). In a similar vein, the current study offers an understanding of the occurrence of presenteeism in the face of workplace changes.

This study contributes to the literature on presenteeism by examining how workplace changes are connected to presenteeism behaviour. Increasingly, studies have shown how a series of workplace factors that relate to employees' sense of (in)security (be it job insecurity, role ambiguity, unclear leadership, etc.) induce stress and facilitate presenteeism behaviour (Caverley et al., 2007; Dhaini et al., 2016; Jensen et al., 2019; Johns, 2010). As employees face increasingly volatile and insecure work environments, they engage in presenteeism behaviour results as one way to cope with increased stress; in so doing, they seek to demonstrate to clients,

colleagues and managers their loyalty, reliability and persistence in insecure times (Cooper & Lu, 2016).

This study focuses on workplace changes as particular instances of uncertainty-inducing work events due to a dismantling of orderly and predictable work routines (Wynen et al., 2019). Workplace factors have been recognised as primary drivers of stress and uncertainty, which in turn drive presenteeism behaviour. Surprisingly, although intense workplace changes have been identified as particularly stress-inducing, the relations between different levels of change intensity across organisations and presenteeism behaviour have not yet been examined.

The theoretical argument for linking workplace changes to presenteeism behaviour through the mechanisms of uncertainty and stress builds on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping (TMSC). TMSC argues that individuals categorise external events according to those events' likelihood of threatening their personal well-being. Such threats provoke emotions of uncertainty and stress and trigger behaviour(s) to cope with stressful events. We examine presenteeism as a particular 'confrontive' coping strategy by which employees cope with uncertain and stressful workplace settings (Raggerty & Griffin, 2006).

The presenteeism literature recognises that employees perform presenteeism behaviour to cope with workplace stress and emotional exhaustion (Gosselin et al., 2013; Miraglia & Johns, 2016). However, little is known about the particular features of workplace events that employees factor into their decision-making process – in particular, which events they categorise as more or less threatening and thus which events provoke certain coping strategies.

In order to study the impact of workplace changes on presenteeism, this paper builds on the Australian Public Service's (APS's) 2014 employee census. The APS, the federal civil service of the Commonwealth of Australia, comprises all departments and agencies wherein staff members are employed under the Public Service Act of 1999. The Australian context provides an interesting setting to study the effect of change on presenteeism because of its constant emphasis on rethinking the configuration of government's administrative arrangements (Machinery of Government changes). In its 2013–2014 State of the Service Report, the Australian Public Service Commission noted that organisational change has become a pervasive characteristic of APS organisations. In 2013, the amendments to the Administrative Arrangements Order resulted in widespread structural and functional change for dozens of

organisations, affecting more than 13,000 employees in the process (APSC, 2014). This makes the APS an interesting case for exploring the effect of workplace changes on employee outcomes.

In the following sections, we first situate presenteeism in the literature and outline its primary drivers, particularly focusing on the role of stress and uncertainty in the workplace. We then discuss change as an increasingly prevalent and stress-inducing feature in the workplace, and discuss how different types of change can provoke presenteeism behaviour. Next, we present our research design and methodological approach, after which we present and discuss the findings.

### **Presenteeism and the workplace**

*Presenteeism* refers to “the phenomenon of people, despite complaints and ill health that should prompt rest and absence from work, still turning up at their jobs” (Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005, p. 958). Presenteeism is a behavioural response to a perceived health problem, and it can be distinguished from a series of related behaviours. Bierla et al. (2013) distinguish ‘presenteeism’ behaviour (attending work when sick) from ‘presence’ behaviour (attending work when well) in the same way that ‘absenteeism’ behaviour (leaving work when healthy) can be distinguished from ‘absence’ behaviour (leaving work when sick).

In the past two decades, presenteeism has become a topic of systematic scholarly research (Johns, 2010). Before this research focus, the spotlight was mainly on the related topic of absenteeism. However, some studies argue that presenteeism might be more prevalent and costly than absenteeism (Gosselin et al., 2013; Dew et al., 2005; Jensen et al., 2019). The potential negative consequences of presenteeism at the individual and organisational level are widely documented. First, scholars have addressed the long-term detrimental health and well-being effects of presenteeism behaviour, pointing to its relation to burn-out (Demerouti et al., 2009), coronary events (Kivimaki et al., 2005), fatigue and depression (Aronsson et al., 2000), low mental well-being (Dhaini et al., 2016) and morbidity (Dew et al., 2005). Second, presenteeism is widely recognised as a threat to organisational performance and work climate. Presenteeism may tap into the “dark side” of generally positively perceived constructs such as public service motivation (PSM). Jensen et al. (2019) observe how presenteeism behaviour is triggered by public service motivation (PSM), and that the two together may have long-term

consequences for the extent to which employees are absent from their jobs due to sickness. Also when ailments associated with presenteeism do not end up forcing employees to stay away from work, they may severely reduce their functioning and morale (Caverley et al., 2007). The resulting productivity loss – believed to be one-third or more of individual productivity – makes presenteeism a costly affair for any organisation (Hemp, 2004).

In recent years, a growing body of research – primarily in management sciences and in the occupational health literature – has addressed the growing need to better understand the determinants of presenteeism. Scholars typically study presenteeism behaviour through a psychosocial lens (Aronsson et al., 2000; Cooper & Lu, 2016). Presenteeism is seen as a behavioural response to perceived sickness, as part of the decision-making process framing the choice whether to go to work (Jensen et al., 2019). Employees *decide* whether to work through illness. In this regard, it is interesting to consider which conditions employees factor into their decision-making process.

A crucial factor that employees integrate in their decision-making is the workplace context (Johns, 2010). Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional model of stress and coping (TMSC) is ideally suited to make sense of the processes by which individuals cognitively appraise external events that threaten their well-being. The presence of such threats creates psychological stress, which sets in motion behaviour(s) meant to cope with stressful events. According to the TMSC (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), individuals decide whether and how to cope with stress by using an evaluative processes that consists of two steps: (a) categorising a situation as stressful (or not) by focusing on the relevance to their personal well-being (primary appraisal) and (b) deciding whether there is anything they can do to cope with external threats (secondary appraisal).

In the context of primary appraisal, there can be little question that employees are experiencing more work-related demands and stress than in the past. Most public organisations have witnessed an almost continuous intensification and change in workplace conditions and demands as a result of private sector management ideas being adopted in the public sector (Politt & Bouckaert, 2017). These evolutions and demands have not just affected the routines and organisation of public organisations; they have also affected civil servants' conceptions of their social identity (i.e., what it means to be a civil servant), thereby adding an identity uncertainty into the other uncertainties generated by workplace changes. Not surprisingly,

studies and reports clearly demonstrate that the proportion of public sector employees perceiving their jobs as stressful has steadily increased (Aronsson et al., 2000; Spicer, 2018).

In the context of secondary appraisal, *coping* refers to the cognitive and behavioural efforts individuals make to manage their internal or external environment and to deal with psychological stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). An important distinction exists between emotion-focused and problem-focused coping (Lazarus, 1993). Emotion-focused coping involves a series of potential behaviours related to changing how the stressful environment is viewed, or related to avoiding the environment altogether. Staying away from work while not ill (absenteeism) or changing jobs altogether (turnover) are examples of such negative coping behaviour. Insights from organisational psychology indicate that employees who are confronted with a lack of control, stress or anxiety are more likely to engage in such coping behaviours (Kouchaki & Desai, 2015; Fugate et al., 2012; Wynen, Verhoest & Kleizen, 2019).

Problem-focused coping involves confrontive coping strategies by which individuals (try to) take control, accept responsibility and reappraise the environment. Presenteeism behaviour, we argue, is an example of such a confrontive coping strategy. The presenteeism literature supports the notion that workplace context and work-related stress are related to presenteeism behaviour. Gosselin et al. (2013, p. 82) found direct evidence that “the level of stress reported by respondents is by far the variable that has the closest link to presenteeism”. Likewise, Miraglia and Johns (2016) found that emotional exhaustion and stress are clearly associated with presenteeism.

This study contributes to existing literature that highlights the role of workplace context in triggering presenteeism behaviour by focusing on an increasingly prevalent aspect of contemporary work: stress and uncertainty brought about by workplace changes. In the next section, we discuss how such changes relate to presenteeism behaviour.

### **Presenteeism behaviour to cope with workplace changes**

This study focuses on the effect of workplace changes on presenteeism in a public sector context. For decades, general perceptions of public organisations concerned their stability and change-averse nature. However, from the 1980s onwards, the public sector has been confronted

with substantial environmental volatility and turbulence, forcing public organisations to continuously adapt in response to evolving circumstances and public demands (Kuipers et al., 2014; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

Workplace changes have consequently become increasingly prevalent for public sector organisations and often challenge the traditional benefits of public sector employment (e.g., job security). In the name of deficit reduction and flexibility, for example, governments increasingly rely on temporary employment contracts, which are more precarious than permanent positions and usually provide fewer benefits (Stecy-Hildebrandt et al., 2019). Cost savings and flexibility have also been the main arguments for downsizing exercises and the outsourcing of ‘non-core’ government activities, again leading to increased job insecurity and chipping away at the career service model (Colley 2001). Furthermore, the need for doing more with less in the public sector has inevitably called for an increase in the pace of, thus resulting in heightened work pressures (Omari & Paull, 2015). Altogether, several workplace changes in the public sector appear to have resulted in increasingly “intense and at times toxic workplaces and a quest for survival [by the employees]” (Omari & Paull, 2015, p. 610).

Different types of workplace changes exist (cf. Table 1), and each type has a varying impact on work-related stress as a trigger for presenteeism behaviour. For instance, employee cutbacks or relocations to a different city may have a more destabilising impact on organisations and employees than increases in staffing numbers (which may lower the overall workload and decrease incentives for employees to be at work while sick). In the remainder of this section, we formulate two complementary hypotheses: The first hypothesis builds on the expectation that (some exceptions notwithstanding) the overall majority of workplace changes will trigger emotions that enable presenteeism and therefore lead to an average positive effect of change on presenteeism behaviour. The second hypothesis delves into how certain types of workplace changes may be more conducive to presenteeism behaviour than others.

First, we expect workplace changes in general to trigger presenteeism. As mentioned in the previous section, workplace stress is a particularly strong antecedent of presenteeism (Gosselin et al., 2013). Workplace changes, by definition, involve a departure from existing routines and hence bring with them an element of uncertainty that leads to workplace stress. An important outcome of many change events seems to be employee uncertainty, which refers to the psychological state of doubt about what an event signifies (Kleizen et al., 2018; Rafferty &



Griffin, 2006). Workplace changes might provoke an increase in uncertainty and ambiguity that are due to a dismantling of orderly and predictable work routines (Wynen et al., 2019). Because of the resulting insecurity, workplace changes are often accompanied by employees' perceptions of lack of control, anxiety levels and, ultimately, stress (Olsen & Sexton, 2009).

This stress-inducing potential of change holds true for different types of workplace changes. For some changes, the accompanied stress for individual employees requires little explanation. Many contemporary changes result from an agenda to increase employees' responsibilities while holding them individually accountable for poor performance. The threat of facing disciplinary action or of being scapegoated for poor performance increases job insecurity and dissatisfaction (Baker- McClearn et al., 2010; Caverley et al., 2007). In addition, workplace changes often lead to an increase in workload for individual employees as a result of downsizing and/or burn-outs among colleagues (Aronsson et al., 2000).

In addition, even when workplace changes do not seem to have clear negative repercussions for employees, they may generate uncertainty and stress (Daly et al., 2011). A long line of thought in the organisational change literature has pointed to workplace changes as potential drivers of beneficial outcomes (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Kanter, 1984; Kuipers et al., 2014). Even when such beneficial outcomes materialise, organisational psychologists point to the potential harmful effects of organisational changes on the well-being and job satisfaction of employees as a result of the increase in uncertainty that such changes bring about (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006; Staw et al., 1981; Wynen et al., 2017). For instance, an increase in individual responsibilities or in staff levels may benefit employees over time. Nevertheless, the transition period may require intense coordination and include heightened levels of workload and job demands. This increased demand occurs because employees need to learn new skills, adapt to new work circumstances and roll out new procedures while still maintaining the continuity of the organisation's services (Bordia et al., 2004). The investigated changes in the present study occurred in a short and recent timeframe (the 12 months preceding the survey; see the section 'Variables'). These workplace changes are therefore more ambiguous and uncertain and are likely to require significant coordination and adaptation from employees compared to longstanding changes (Wynen et al., 2019). Thus, changes are expected to trigger varying levels of stress and presenteeism behaviours.

We therefore formulated the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Employees who have experienced workplace changes exhibit higher levels of presenteeism behaviour compared to employees who have not experienced workplace changes.

Surprisingly, while workplace factors have been recognised as primary drivers of stress and uncertainty (which, in turn, drive presenteeism behaviour) and although workplace changes have been identified as particularly stress-inducing, the relations between workplace changes across organisations and presenteeism behaviour have not yet been examined. Instead, studies have focused on presenteeism within a setting of single workplace change episodes, such as mergers (Aronsson et al., 2000; Bhatti et al., 2015, Caverley et al., 2007). However, it is yet unclear how presenteeism behaviours vary as a result of variations in experienced change across organisations.

With regard to the first hypothesis, a second interest of this study is to explore how presenteeism may be more likely to occur in particular change contexts. A growing and consistent body of research points at the type of change as an important factor to take into account when considering the relation between workplace changes and a series of individual-level outcomes (Kleizen et al., 2018; Wynen et al., 2017; 2019). There is a large variety in the types of change organisations can experience. The overall definition of organisational change encompasses large-scale, fundamental transformations (e.g., downsizing, mergers) as well as local, small changes (e.g., change in leadership, implementation of new IT system) (Kiefer, 2005). The distinction between types of change matters because workplace changes vary in the uncertainty they generate at the individual employee level.

Several attempts have been made to theorise differences in change types in terms of their likelihood to generate employee uncertainty (Bhatti et al., 2015). First, Kiefer and colleagues (2015) distinguish between cutback-related changes (focused on reducing expenditure) and innovation-related changes (focused on doing something new in the organisation). Compared to innovation-related changes, cutback-related changes typically generate more uncertainty, are often top-down imposed and involve less participation. In addition, cutback-related changes are more likely to generate job insecurity among staff (Bhatti et al., 2015). Second, authors have distinguished between incremental ('first-order') change and transformational ('second-order') change (Dahl, 2010; Levy & Merry, 1986). Compared to incremental changes, transformational changes involve the fundamental processes and structures of an organisation, including

traditional ways of working, values, structure and strategy (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Transformational changes, by their very nature, introduce dramatic shifts in basic aspects of an organisation (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), employees are likely to experience periods of transformational change as highly novel events because they are required to act in new ways and to adopt new values. We therefore developed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Employees who have experienced workplace changes that are cutback-related and/or transformational exhibit higher levels of presenteeism behaviour compared to employees who have not experienced such changes.

### **Control variables related to coping resources**

The TMSC proposes that coping resources, which refer to the resources that individuals draw upon in order to deal with a stressful situation, directly influence their cognitive appraisal of a situation (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). In this sense, the workplace environment can both stress and support individuals; strong social networks and workplace relationships can assist employees in coping with workplace changes (through emotional support, direct aid and services, information and advice, etc.) (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

A number of workplace-related coping resources are included in our study. First, working overtime hours is one of the work factors associated with increased presenteeism (Aronsson et al., 2000; Caverley et al., 2007). Heavy workloads and working under tight deadlines are two of the top reasons for working while ill (Caverley et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2018). Keeping up with these high job demands may require employees to work harder and for longer hours – as well as to attend work when ill (Deery et al., 2014). In particular, overtime related to workplace changes may lead employees to engage in presenteeism behaviour; for example, in the case of downsizing, the remaining staff may struggle to complete the work (Quinlan, 2007). Second, presenteeism is associated with supervisor support (Caverley et al., 2007; Dhaini et al., 2016; Gilbreath & Karimi, 2012; Wang et al., 2018). It is known that supervisors can be a key influence on employees' work experience and their subsequent work behaviour (Gilbreath & Karimi, 2012). Perceptions of a supportive, honest, sincere, just and trustworthy leadership increase the odds of low presenteeism because employees are likely comfortable about staying home while ill (Dhaini et al., 2016; Nyberg et al., 2008). Employees working for a supervisor

who treats them well experience less stress and presumably demonstrate less presenteeism than employees working for supervisors without such qualities (Gilbreath & Karimi, 2012). In addition, high-quality supervisors serve as a role model when it comes to presence and absence in the workplace (Baker-McClearn et al., 2010). Third, we include (fair) pay. Aronsson et al. (2000) found support for a relation between the level of pay and presenteeism, though Hansen and Andersen (2008) did not confirm this relation. In addition, we examined the influence of perceived fairness of pay (relative to others within or outside the organisation) on presenteeism. Johns (2010, p. 535) predicts that “those experiencing more injustice are less likely to act of presenteeism”. Fourth, the type of work is likely to matter. Employees in high-demand jobs (Aronsson et al., 2000; Demerouti et al., 2009), with a low degree of replaceability (Aronsson et al., 2000; Carverley et al., 2007; Deery et al., 2014; Johns, 2010), less control over their work tasks (Aronsson & Gustafsson, 2005; Leineweber et al., 2011) or at higher positions in the organisational hierarchy (Pfeifer, 2010) are more inclined to attend work when ill. Overall, employees aim to maintain high levels of performance in their job, even when ill. Fifth, we include employment type – that is, full-time or part-time work (Aronsson et al., 2000). Lastly, we include employees’ tenure and classification level, which are likely to be related to perceived job security and alternative job possibilities (Yousef, 1998).

In addition, the study also incorporated several individual demographic and personal factors. Concerning demographic factors, gender and age are two of the most frequent correlates of presenteeism. Overall, women have a tendency to show higher presenteeism rates than men (Aronsson et al., 2000; Bellaby, 1999; Leineweber et al., 2011). Younger employees and people of medium working age are generally more likely to demonstrate presenteeism behaviours (Aronsson et al., 2000; Gilbreath & Karimi, 2012; Gosselin et al., 2013; Leineweber et al., 2011; but for contrasting findings, see Bellaby, 1999). We also include education (Aronsson et al., 2000).

Lastly, employees’ personal circumstances, particularly the role of work-family conflict has been found to impact attendance dynamics. Work-family conflict is a type of role conflict in which “participation in the work (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). Employees experiencing such a work-family conflict – for example, because they have young children or take care of another family member – are generally more likely to be absent from work when ill (Chen, 2008; Chapman et al., 1994). In relation to presenteeism, however, both Aronsson, Gustafsson and

Dallner (2000) and Hansen and Andersen (2008) found that, in some instances, work-family conflict can result in employees going to work when ill. Thus, an employee's family life can in fact also serve as a 'negative presence factor', encouraging presenteeism (Kristensen, 1991 in Hansen & Andersen, 2008; McGregor et al., 2016). As such, employees may find it more taxing to stay at home than to go to a stimulating and interesting job (Hochschild, 1997). For example, a large number of children or a sick spouse could make family life more exhausting. At that point, home may become work, and family life may be dissatisfying to the point where it would be likely to prompt presenteeism (Hansen & Andersen, 2008; Hochschild, 1997).

## **Research context and data**

Our study was set within the Australian Public Service (APS). Since its establishment at the beginning of the 20th century, the APS generally experienced incremental change until the mid-1970s. In contrast, the last 45 years have brought rapid and significant change to the APS. The current emphasis on rethinking the role of government (through activities such as the National Commission of Audit (2014) together with the tight fiscal and changing social environments) point to a requirement for ongoing and transformational change across the APS (APSC, 2014). Machinery of Government (MoG) changes are a major driver of organisational change within the APS. MoG changes occur relatively frequently, often triggered by the election of a new government, and they are used by the government to express policy priorities and meet policy challenges. The implemented MoG changes vary greatly in scope and complexity and can involve the following: the abolition or creation of new government entities; the merger or absorption of entities; and small or large transfers of policy, program or service delivery responsibilities to other entities. Throughout such major change processes, entities are also expected to continue to effectively support the Australian government and to seamlessly deliver programs and services (ANAO, 2016). What further characterises the public sector is that reforms are often initiated and closely monitored by external actors (e.g., politicians after elections), thus decreasing organisational control over the content and implementation of these changes and increasing the likelihood of stress and uncertainty among employees as a result of changes being perceived as threats.

Furthermore, the APS has seen policy decisions profoundly affecting the makeup of its workforce in the last decade. The 2013 election led to a reduction in government spending, resulting in a hiring freeze followed by a fixed cap on APS employee numbers, with the APS

now employing fewer public servants per capita than at any other time (Mannheim, 2020). 'There is also a trend of increasing casual and non-ongoing staff on temporary contracts, with lower pay and worse conditions (The Mandarin, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic even caused a peak in the number of non-ongoing employees in 2020, as casual and short-term staff were hired to support economic recovery and ongoing COVID-19 measures (Williams, 2020). In addition, the shift to non-ongoing employment and (non-APS) contractors has raised concerns about contractors' lack of accountability and government's lack of in-house expertise (Mannheim, 2020). Again, such profound changes to the workforce may increase the likelihood of stress and uncertainty among APS employees.

Finally, much of the focus of debate in Australia about staff attendance has been on the issue of absenteeism. According to a 2018 publication of the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC, 2018), fostering an attendance culture was still seen as a key component of ensuring that the APS continues to meet its performance and accountability obligations to government. Whereas the creation of a culture where employees are engaged and committed is undoubtedly important, care must be taken that this does not overshadow or even reinforce the issue of presenteeism. The 2019 What Women Want Survey conducted by the CPSU (Community & Public Sector Union) explicitly assessed presenteeism, with 86% of women in the public sector (72% of participants were employed in the APS) continuing to go to work while sick. Over 52% said they did this because of workload pressures (CPSU, 2020). These numbers again highlight the gravity of the presenteeism issue and the importance of understanding what may trigger it.

Our analyses make use of the 2014 annual census of APS employees.<sup>1</sup> This large-scale survey is used for the State of the Service Report and offers insight into issues such as employee engagement, leadership, health and wellbeing and job satisfaction as well as general impressions of the APS in general. The 2014 census was administered to all APS employees, comprising 151,792 employees. Out of this population, 99,392 employees responded, leading to a response rate of 68%. The methodology used minimised sampling bias and sample error by ensuring that all APS employees had been invited to participate. Non-sampling bias was checked by comparing the survey sample against the overall APS population on gender,

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<sup>1</sup> Newer waves of the survey exist, however they do not all include information regarding changes. Moreover and due to privacy concerns, these versions do not offer the same level of detail as the 2014 wave which is used in this paper.

classification, location and employment category. No significant difference could be detected, supporting the validity and findings of the study.<sup>2</sup>

## Variables

All the included variables and their operationalisations are provided in Table 2. The dependent variable presenteeism is based on how many days in the last fortnight an employee has been going to work while suffering from health problems. Respondents were given the following answer categories: *None*, *One*, *Two*, *Three*, or *More than three*. The measurement of presenteeism behaviour through non-obtrusive methods poses problems: “unlike absenteeism, presenteeism isn’t always apparent: You know when someone doesn’t show up for work, but you often can’t tell when—or how much—illness or a medical condition is hindering someone’s performance” (Hemp, 2004, p. 1). Therefore, presenteeism behaviour is most commonly measured through self-reported employee information (Aronsson et al. 2000; Hemp, 2004; Caverley et al., 2007).

Our main independent variables of interest are related to the workplace changes experienced by the respondent. Firstly, a dummy variable (‘Change’) was created to check if the respondent experienced workplace changes in the past 12 months. Secondly, a categorical variable (‘Type of change’) was constructed to measure the type of change experienced (see Table 1). Given their cutback-related motivation and/or transformational nature, we generally expected the strongest effects on employee stress and uncertainty (and, ultimately, presenteeism) among the first seven types of change.

Control variables concerning demographics, such as age, gender, education and having carer responsibilities (reverse coded), were included. Moreover, other individual-level factors, such as job level (classification level), APS and agency tenure, task, full-time status, pay, working overtime and relationship with direct supervisor (factor score, see Table 3) were accounted for as well.

Please include Table 1, Table 2, Table 3 & Table 4 here

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<sup>2</sup> This part comes from the State of the Service Report 2013-14. Further information on the survey methodology is available at: <https://www.apsc.gov.au/3-survey-methodologies>

The linear correlation analysis among regressors is reported in Table 4. Not surprisingly, the strongest correlation exists between age, APS tenure and agency tenure. When testing for multicollinearity using the variance inflation factor (VIF), it was clear that multicollinearity was not an issue. The mean VIF equalled 1.22, whereby the highest VIFs were found for APS (1.94) and agency (1.74) tenure.

## Findings

To determine the relationship between the independent variables outlined above and the dependent variable, a specific econometric model was required since the dependent variable (how many days did you go to work while sick?) was limited a value of 5 (which reflects the answer category *more than three*). Hence, the dependent was actually censored as we could not see how many more days than three someone was present even when sick. We only observed the maximum value more than three. In this case, a value of 5 (the highest value representing more than three days) can be interpreted as a right-censored variable. Consequently, the observed sample consists of censored and uncensored observations. When the dependent variable is known to be censored in this fashion, OLS is generally not considered to be an appropriate technique (Berk, 1983; Breen, 1996).

We therefore relied on a Tobit approach, which accounts for the censoring and allows for the estimation of a set of independent variables on the basis of the underlying latent uncensored variable (Breen, 1996; Greene, 1997).<sup>3</sup> The coefficients of a Tobit model can, however, be difficult to interpret and should be seen as estimates of the effect of the independent variable on a latent unobserved outcome. Interpreting the Tobit coefficients as direct measures of the effect of the independent variables on the observed outcome of interest is therefore not appropriate (Roncek, 1992). In line with McDonald and Moffitt (1980), we calculated the effects of the independent variables on whether a case had a nonlimit value of the dependent variable. In other words, this shows the effect of the parameter estimates on increasing presenteeism. In line with Roncek (1992) and McDonald and Moffitt (1980), we used the following formula to compute this effect:

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<sup>3</sup> We also conducted a ‘regular’ Ordinary Least Squares regression. Results were roughly similar. As the Tobit coefficients are considered to be more reliable, OLS results have been omitted. They are, however, available upon request from the authors.



$$\frac{\partial Ey^*}{\partial X_i} = \beta_i \times \left[ 1 - \left( z \times \frac{f(z)}{F(z)} \right) - \frac{f(z)^2}{F(z)^2} \right]$$

Here,  $\frac{\partial Ey^*}{\partial X_i}$  indicates the degree to which presenteeism is expected to change because of a particular independent variable.  $\beta_i$  represents a particular parameter estimate.  $Z$  represents a  $z$ -score on a normal distribution, and  $f(z)$  and  $F(z)$  represent the associated normal density and cumulative normal density functions.

Table 5, which comprises five distinct models, reports the estimates of the regression model. In model 1, the effect of experiencing one or more changes on presenteeism is examined. In model 2, the effect of experiencing a specific type of change (cutback-related, transformational, other) on presenteeism is explored. Note that the number of observations dropped significantly (from 77,065 to 27,766). This drop can be explained by the fact that we only took observations into account that experienced no change or those that experienced precisely one change. The reason for doing so is that experiencing more than one change would make it impossible to distinguish the precise effect of each single change on presenteeism. We have therefore dropped these observations from our regression. In models 3–5, more detail is provided regarding the precise effect of changes per category (cutback, transformational, other).

Please Include Table 5 here

In Table 5, we see that employees who experienced at least one workplace change are more likely to go to work while ill (Model 1). Hence, presenteeism appears to be strongly connected to workplace change. This finding is in line with Hypothesis 1. Model 2 shows only significant effects for those employees who experienced cutback-related changes or other types of changes. Transformational changes appear to have had no impact on presenteeism. When comparing the marginal effects, the impact of the cutback related changes was significantly larger compared to the impact of other changes (diff. = 0.226 with a  $p$ -value of 0.033). Hypothesis 2 is therefore only partially confirmed. When examining the specific changes per category, we observe that a decrease in staffing numbers significantly increased presenteeism. Within the category of transformational changes (model 4), none of the changes were significant. Transformational changes do not appear to increase presenteeism. When examining model 5, we notice that other changes (the changes that were not predefined in the survey) appear to positively affect presenteeism.

A number of control variables were found to contribute to presenteeism: gender (females are more likely to be present while sick compared to men), age (younger employees are more likely to be present while sick compared to older employees), tenure (employees with a longer tenure are more likely to be present while sick compared to employees with a shorter tenure), education (employees with a higher education are more likely to be present while sick compared to other employees), being a carer (people with carer responsibilities are more likely to be present while sick compared to other employees), working overtime (employees who work overtime are more likely to be present while sick), satisfaction with pay (when employees are satisfied with their pay, they are less likely to be present while sick) and the supervisor relationship (having a good relationship reduces the likelihood of presenteeism).

## **Conclusion and discussion**

This article examined whether and how workplace changes are related to presenteeism behaviour in the public sector. Our study took a novel perspective to studying presenteeism, building a theoretical argument based on the TMSC (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), by analysing not only the occurrence of workplace change but also variances in the types of change. The APS, a frontrunner in a variety of reform waves that have come with varied forms of workplace changes (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), offered a relevant setting to study the potentially negative consequences of such change trajectories on presenteeism.

Consistent with our argument (H1), the analyses show evidence of a positive relation between workplace changes and presenteeism. Employees who experience workplace changes are more likely to go to work sick. Next, regarding the impact of specific types of changes (H2), we observed that decreased staffing (cutback-related change) was the main driver of presenteeism behaviour. This finding is in line with previous studies that point to the stress- and uncertainty-increasing impact of cutback-related changes (Bhatti et al., 2015; Kiefer et al., 2015). Somewhat surprisingly, in light of extant theorisation on the impact of transformational changes (Dahl, 2010; Levy & Merry, 1986), no effect was found for any of the specific changes that were considered to have a more far-reaching impact on employees (e.g., relocations, structural changes, etc.). Another explanation for the absence of these effects might be that the likely impact that individuals attribute to workplace changes is a highly personal act (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Changes that are perceived as threatening for certain employees might be

considered harmless for others, regardless of the broader organisational impact such changes might have (McCarthy & Kearns, 1998). For instance, Bhatti et al. (2015) show how a single change type (mergers) have a different impact on individual health-related outcomes depending on the organisational context and related job insecurity. Our operationalisation focused on the objective occurrence of changes (asking respondents whether changes occurred, not how they perceived these changes more subjectively). This approach had two benefits: it made it possible to compare similar change events across organisational contexts, and it mitigated the risk of common source bias (which is particularly problematic when dealing with perceptual measures). The drawback of this method, however, is that it offers no direct insight into the stress- and uncertainty-increasing effects of specific changes, an interesting avenue of research for future studies.

Although not the focus of our study, several of the control variables showed significant effects. Presenteeism was higher among employees working harder and longer hours – that is, performing overtime, likely for the purpose of meeting high job demands. Fairness of pay reduced the likelihood of presenteeism. Perhaps employees who feel they are fairly remunerated experience less stress and, hence, demonstrate less presenteeism. Similarly, employees with carer responsibilities showed higher levels of presenteeism. Contrary to previous findings by both Aronsson et al. (2000) and Hansen and Andersen (2008), our results show a typical case of work-family conflict, where the care for young children or another family member leads to a higher likelihood of being present when ill (Chapman et al., 1994; Chen, 2008).

Our findings have clear practical implications, not least for the APS. Australia, and the APS in particular, has been a frontrunner in many global reform doctrines. Urged on by shortly successive (and sometimes contradictory) MoG changes, many APS workplaces have been characterised by multiple, intense changes. Change is typically considered a necessary part of organisational life, needed for organisations to adapt to their evolving environment. Altogether, our study contributes to a more nuanced view of workplace changes. Although workplace changes can potentially lead to increased efficiency or effectiveness, these benefits should be weighed against potential harmful effects, such as presenteeism. The observation that cutback-related changes are particularly likely to push employees to work while ill is important information for the APS. There was a hiring freeze in place and a decrease in the workforce at the moment of data collection (2014). Both of these factors, which are more strongly related to presenteeism behaviour, should prompt senior officials to consider more carefully the negative

side-effects of such far-reaching and uncertainty-increasing changes. On a more positive note, transformational changes (e.g., relocations, structural changes, etc.) did not seem to be related to presenteeism. This might suggest that the APS is reaping the benefits of the extensive support provided by the central agencies in implementing MoG changes and by the detailed guide “Implementing Machinery of Government Changes: A Good Practice Guide”. To be clear, more appropriate methods should be used to directly measure the mechanisms between change types and presenteeism. Nonetheless, the findings above tentatively suggest that while change itself is unavoidable and even necessary for organisations adapting to external demands, the potentially negative effects of change may be mitigated by appropriate change management and structures.

Our study is not without limitations. The first and perhaps foremost limitation of this study is the fact only entities from the Australian government were examined, leading to a strong homogeneity across organisations. As a result, it is not possible to generalise findings across different contexts. For instance, it is not unthinkable that the presenteeism-change relationship is also strongly dependent on contextual factors, such as national culture. Hence, to understand the precise effect of workplace changes on presenteeism, studies focusing on organisations across multiple countries are needed. A wider knowledge base, across different sectors and countries, would in turn allow for general predictions regarding the effect of organisational change on presenteeism.

Second, it is notable that our data did not present an opportunity to study the intermediate mechanisms explaining why presenteeism occurs, causing our statements to remain theoretical. Why do employees fear to miss out on work in a setting of multiple change? Is it because of personal motivations (e.g., to demonstrate consistency to managers as an asset), because of more altruistic motivations (e.g., out of commitment to the organisation of clients), or because of a combination of both? Follow-up studies should thus employ approaches that allow for a more comprehensive study of the link between changes, the multiplicity of change and presenteeism. Such studies will be able to assess whether mediating or moderating variables not discussed here are also important.

Third, our analysis is based on cross-sectional data. It is not unlikely that some of our examined relationships, such as that of presenteeism and working overtime, is affected by these kinds of underlying psychological mechanisms (e.g., conscientiousness). Ideally, one would track

individuals over time to identify these mechanisms and to correct for these possible confounders. Moreover, such longitudinal data would allow for more advanced econometric models that would make it possible to more easily correct for endogeneity.

Lastly, future research may look at the interplay between change, presenteeism and its ‘twin concept’ absenteeism. Because the majority of scholarly and practitioner attention has been devoted to absenteeism, this study opted to introduce presenteeism and its relation to organisational change. Both absenteeism and presenteeism can be seen as coping strategies in response to workplace stress, either by staying at home while not really sick (absenteeism) or by going to work while actually ill (presenteeism). Furthermore, both strategies may be temporally related and contingent on employee motivation. Jensen et al. (2019) found that presenteeism mediates the relation between PSM and absenteeism: “PSM increases presenteeism, which then over time increases absenteeism, thus counteracting or even overriding the theoretically expected lower level of absenteeism among employees with high PSM” (2019, p. 493). While PSM itself was not included in our analyses as such, it might shed light on some of the findings from the control variables. For example, the observation that tenure with the APS is positively related to presenteeism behaviour may reflect the mechanism that more tenured employees have developed a higher PSM, which makes them more likely to cope with change-related stress and uncertainty through presenteeism. Similarly, future research may consider the precise nature of the relationship between these concepts and organisational change: Under which conditions do workplace changes urge employees to demonstrate presenteeism or absenteeism? What is the impact of organisational, managerial and individual factors? And what are the longitudinal dynamics between change, presenteeism and absenteeism?

## Tables & Graphs

*Table 1: Operationalizing Change impact*

Included workplace changes	Cutback-related	Transformational
Machinery of government change	(X)*	X
Decrease in staffing numbers	X	
Change in physical workplace (e.g. moved to a new building, existing workplace renovated)		X
Relocated to a new city		X
Structural change (change in division or branch structure)		X
Functional change (e.g. change in responsibilities)		X
Change in work priorities		
Increase in staffing numbers		

Change in SES leadership (e.g. change of branch head)		
Change in supervisor		

\*Machinery of government changes mostly (though not always) have a cost-saving component (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017)

*Table 2: Descriptive statistics*

Variable	Description	Mean	Sd.
Presenteeism	How many days in the last fortnight have you gone to work while suffering from health problems? (1: None/ 2: One/ 3: Two/ 4: Three/ 5: More than three)	2.13	1.41
Change	In the last past 12 months has your work group been directly affected by workplace changes?	1.74	0.44
Type of change	Which of the following changes impacted your work group in the last 12 months?		
change1	Change in physical workplace (0: no/ 1: yes)	0.23	0.42
change2	Machinery og government change (0: no/ 1: yes)	0.22	0.41
change3	Relocated to a new city (0: no/ 1: yes)	0.01	0.10
change4	Structural change (0: no/ 1: yes)	0.42	0.49
change5	Functional change (0: no/ 1: yes)	0.31	0.46
change6	Change in work priorities (0: no/ 1: yes)	0.34	0.47
change7	Decrease in staffing numbers (0: no/ 1: yes)	0.50	0.50
change8	Increase in staffing numbers (0: no/ 1: yes)	0.07	0.26
change9	Change in SES leadership (0: no/ 1: yes)	0.26	0.44
change10	Change in supervisor (0: no/ 1: yes)	0.34	0.47
change11	Other (0: no/ 1: yes)	0.07	0.25
Gender	1: Male/ 2: Female	1.57	0.49
Age	1: < 30 years/ 2: 30-44 years/ 3: 45-59 years/ 4: 60 years or older	2.37	0.78
Classification level	1: Trainee,Grad,APS1-6,Other / 2: el	1.29	0.45
APS tenure	2: <5 years/ 3: >=5 years	2.78	0.42
Agency tenure	1: <1 year/ 2: 1 -5 years/ 3: >5 years	2.57	0.62
Education	1: year 12 or lower/2: vocational qualification/ 3: tertiary qualification	2.37	0.88
Carer responsibilities	1: yes/ 2: No	1.72	0.45
Task	Which one of the following best describes the kind of work you do?		
Task1	Accounting and finance (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.06	0.23
Task2	Administration (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.12	0.32
Task3	Communications and marketing (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.03	0.16
Task4	Compliance and regulation (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.12	0.33
Task5	Engineering and technical (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.04	0.19
Task6	Information and communications technology (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.10	0.30
Task7	Information and knowledge management (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.02	0.13
Task8	Intelligence (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.03	0.16
Task9	Legal and parliamentary (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.03	0.17
Task10	Monitoring and audit (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.02	0.13
Task11	Organisational leadership (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.02	0.12
Task12	People (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.05	0.22
Task13	Science and health (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.03	0.16
Task14	Service delivery (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.20	0.40
Task15	Strategic policy & research (0: No/ 1: Yes)	0.16	0.37
Overtime	1: would not normally do this/ 2: Not this fornights/ 3: Once or twice/ 4: Most days/ 5: Every day	3.03	1.03
Supervisor	Factor score	0.01	0.99
Pay	I am fairly renumerated (1: stronlgy disagree/ 2: disagree/ 3: Neither disagree nor agree/ 4: agree/ 5: strongly agree)	3.64	1.00
Employment	1: fulltime/ 2: part-time	1.14	0.34

*Table 3: Factor score*

Survey Item	Factor Loading
Supervisor	
My supervisor provides me with regular and constructive feedback	0.86
My supervisor appropriately deals with employees that perform poorly	0.8
My supervisor works effectively with people from diverse backgrounds	0.86
My supervisor treats people with respect	0.87
Eigenvalue	2.88
Proportion	0.72
N	92,583



*Table 4: Correlation matrix*

Variable		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
Presenteeism	(1)	1.0000													
Change	(2)	0.0955	1.0000												
Gender	(3)	0.0654	0.0470	1.0000											
Age	(4)	0.0112	0.0085	-0.0727	1.0000										
Classification level	(5)	-0.0297	0.0182	-0.1294	0.1509	1.0000									
APS tenure	(6)	0.0653	0.0439	0.0188	0.4057	0.1859	1.0000								
Agency tenure	(7)	0.0440	0.0025	-0.0058	0.3196	0.0684	0.6433	1.0000							
Education	(8)	-0.0681	0.0028	-0.1200	-0.0970	0.2696	-0.1075	-0.1123	1.0000						
Carer responsibilities	(9)	-0.0805	-0.0412	-0.1188	-0.0640	-0.0597	-0.1279	-0.0963	-0.0192	1.0000					
Task	(10)	0.0323	0.0288	0.0696	-0.0524	0.0583	0.0220	0.0124	0.0481	-0.0243	1.0000				
Overtime	(11)	0.0858	0.0825	-0.0461	0.0030	0.2315	0.0293	-0.0004	0.1070	0.0079	0.0302	1.0000			
Supervisor	(12)	-0.1415	-0.0436	0.0053	-0.0631	0.0152	-0.0773	-0.0655	0.0109	0.0231	0.0168	0.0095	1.0000		
Pay	(13)	0.1366	0.0422	-0.1195	0.0048	-0.1308	-0.0237	0.0162	0.0049	-0.0156	-0.0482	0.0570	-0.2399	1.0000	
Employment	(14)	0.0156	-0.0002	0.2374	-0.0186	-0.0578	0.0954	0.0865	-0.0516	-0.2241	0.0800	-0.1170	0.0056	-0.0522	1.0000

Table 5: Results

Variables	Presenteeism				
	$\frac{\partial E y^*}{\partial X_i}$ (SE)				
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Change	0.631*** (0.0300)				
Type of change					
Cutback-related		0.395*** (0.0753)			
Transformational		-0.0354 (0.0775)			
Other		0.169* (0.0842)			
Cutback-related					
Decrease in staffing number			0.382*** (0.0743)		
Transformational					
Change in physical workplace				-0.212 (0.160)	
Machinery of government				-0.184 (0.149)	
Relocation to new city				0.573 (0.645)	
Structural change				-0.125 (0.120)	
Functional change				0.234 (0.190)	
Other					
Change in work priorities					0.384 (0.196)
Increase in staffing numbers					0.0179 (0.198)
Change in SES leadership					-0.409 (0.298)
Change in supervisor					-0.0968 (0.158)
Other					0.341* (0.139)
Gender	0.416*** (0.0283)	0.461*** (0.0505)	0.464*** (0.0504)	0.470*** (0.0505)	0.469*** (0.0505)
Age	-0.142*** (0.0184)	-0.236*** (0.0323)	-0.235*** (0.0323)	-0.231*** (0.0323)	-0.234*** (0.0323)
Classification	-0.0575 (0.0331)	-0.00962 (0.0606)	-0.0134 (0.0606)	-0.0195 (0.0607)	-0.0148 (0.0607)
Tenure APS	0.439*** (0.0428)	0.403*** (0.0785)	0.400*** (0.0784)	0.407*** (0.0787)	0.398*** (0.0785)
Tenure agency	-0.0289 (0.0271)	0.0693 (0.0521)	0.0705 (0.0520)	0.0648 (0.0524)	0.0734 (0.0521)
Education	-0.194*** (0.0159)	-0.248*** (0.0280)	-0.249*** (0.0280)	-0.249*** (0.0280)	-0.247*** (0.0280)
Carer	-0.542*** (0.0293)	-0.531*** (0.0532)	-0.532*** (0.0532)	-0.535*** (0.0532)	-0.535*** (0.0532)
Overtime	0.315*** (0.0130)	0.317*** (0.0230)	0.317*** (0.0230)	0.322*** (0.0230)	0.321*** (0.0230)
Supervisor	-0.382*** (0.0132)	-0.408*** (0.0243)	-0.409*** (0.0243)	-0.407*** (0.0243)	-0.408*** (0.0243)
Pay	-0.391*** (0.0135)	-0.365*** (0.0247)	-0.365*** (0.0247)	-0.372*** (0.0247)	-0.372*** (0.0247)
Employment	-0.0893* (0.0393)	0.00508 (0.0684)	0.00683 (0.0684)	0.00637 (0.0684)	0.00358 (0.0684)
Task dummies	Included	Included	Included	Included	Included
N	77,065	27,766	27,766	27,766	27,766
Cragg-Uhler R <sup>2</sup>	0.069	0.061	0.061	0.06	0.06
Cox-Snell R <sup>2</sup>	0.065	0.057	0.056	0.056	0.056

Mean standard errors in parentheses , \*\*\* p&lt;0.001, \*\* p&lt;0.01, \* p&lt;0.05

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