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Managing attendance at work: the role of line managers in the UK grocery retail sector

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of line managers in managing attendance at work in the lean regime of grocery retailing. The increasing competitiveness within the sector, coupled with the sophisticated control systems in place put pressure on managers to keep labour costs low. Attendance, therefore, becomes a critical factor, particularly as staffing levels become leaner. Taking this into account, it is necessary to understand the parameters of the line managers' role in managing attendance, especially within the lean food retail market and the antagonistic terrain of the supermarket shop floor. The paper discusses the impact of lean retailing on line managers' authority and provides a fresh sociological analysis regarding their role in managing attendance, offering insights into managerial practices on the UK supermarket shop floor.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on qualitative research evidence from two case study grocery retail organizations in the UK. It reports on 44 semi-structured interviews and provides a multi-level analysis aiming to understand the different perspectives on the problem examined.

Findings – The paper reveals the existence of a centralized absence management policy and highlights the greater involvement of line managers in this procedure. Line managers though were subjected to forces of bureaucratic control, intensification and degradation of their work. Despite having an active role within the attendance management process and high responsibility for the implementation of rules and procedures handed down by head office, they had limited authority over the process. Line managers perceived the latter as routine and a box-ticking exercise and had developed coping tactics to deal with the control from above.

Originality/value – This paper provides practical and theoretical considerations over the role of line management in the labour process, investigating their role in managing attendance at work within the lean terrain of food retailing. This research contributes to the ongoing academic discussions related to the devolvement of HR responsibilities to the line, highlighting the great involvement of line managers in the absence policy. It also provides a sociological perspective over line managers' authority and discretion in managing attendance, revealing that they were subjected to direct and bureaucratic control within their role in attendance management. However, the research reveals that line managers were not passive in the face of direct control from above and had developed tactics to cope with the monotony and the repetition of this process, attempting to somehow escape the top-down control they were subjected to.

Keywords Line managers, Absence, Attendance at work, Food retail

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The escalating power and domination of supermarkets in the contemporary service economy has been subject to increasing academic attention. The associated low-road employment strategies of low-paid, low-skilled and part-time work have been well-documented in current research (Baret *et al.*, 2000; Lichtenstein, 2006;

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Lichtenstein and Johansson, 2011). Within this context, the strong competitive pressures evidenced in the industry bring the management of labour costs, including absence, to the forefront. This paper explores the role of line managers in managing attendance in the lean regime of grocery retailing. Despite the growing research on employment relationship in this sector, there has been limited research focus on the management of attendance, whereas little is also known of the day-to-day managerial practices on the line regarding this process. This paper highlights the importance of embedding our understanding of the line manager's role in managing attendance within the dynamics of the labour process, especially within leaner working regimes. It provides a fresh sociological analysis on attendance management, discussing the impact of lean retailing on line managers' authority and their responsibility in managing attendance, and offers insights into managerial practices on the UK food retail shop floor.

The reminder of the paper is organized as follows. First, an overview of the literature is presented, discussing the lean regime of food retailing and the necessity to manage attendance. This is followed by a discussion on line managers' role in attendance management. Next, the methodology is outlined, whilst the findings are presented in the third section. Finally the paper discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the research.

Lean regime in food retailing: the issue of attendance management

Managing attendance at work is an area that has received a great deal of attention in the field of organizational research (Edwards and Scullion, 1982). Increasingly, scholars suggest that research should examine the business environment and absence behaviour in different occupational, organizational and industrial lines (Kaiser, 1998; Marcus and Smith, 1985, p. 264).

This research focuses on the lean regime of food retailing, within which strong competitive pressures, and the involvement of organizations in a retail war, make attendance a crucial element to secure competitiveness (Patton and Johns, 2012). Edwards and Whitston (1993) suggest that in times of (price) war, a "moral panic" surrounding absenteeism can emerge, resulting into it becoming something of an obsession for managers. Moreover, Taylor *et al.* (2010) conclude that in highly competitive conditions, in which organizations are pressured to keep labour costs low, attendance becomes critical, particularly as staffing levels become leaner. In addition, they suggest that research is required within a broader sectoral range to gain a better understanding of absence control, with retail being identified as an ideal case to be examined.

Food retailers are involved in an ongoing price struggle and target the reduction of labour costs in order to achieve the lowest possible price for their customers. Grocers around the globe follow a low-road strategy aiming for lower prices through reduced labour costs. This is a phenomenon that Tilly (2007) calls "Wal-Martization". This trend indicates that Wal-Mart acts today as the archetype food retailer and is becoming the new corporate prototype – after General Motors – operating as a world transforming institution (Lichtenstein, 2005). Lichtenstein (2006) discusses the way in which Wal-Mart has become the template for twenty-first century capitalism, whilst Featherstone (2004) describes "Wal-Martization" as a process happening worldwide, one which impacts in every facet of the organization, including employment.

Wal-Mart, along with other major global retailers, have received major criticism of their employment practices, and the organization of work on the supermarket floor

(see Neumark *et al.*, 2008; Royle, 2010). The growing research on retail employment suggests that food retailers imitate Wal-Mart's labour practices and organize work following Taylorist principles, mainly in an attempt to reduce costs (Lichtenstein and Johansson, 2011). Sophisticated technology, low wages, limited career perspectives, strict supervision, part-time and flexible employment schemes, anti-union practices and high levels of control are endemic in the food retail work organization (Carré *et al.*, 2010).

"Wal-Martization" suggests that Taylorism is not a short-lived phenomenon; rather it suggests that in the lean regime of food retailing a neo-Taylorist approach continues within employment relationships (Carls, 2009). Kristensen (1991) (cited in Johns, 1997, p. 138) argues that "Taylorized" job designs result in higher levels of absenteeism, resulting in increased costs. Similarly, Martocchio (1992) and MacLean (2008) argue that there is a great deal of evidence to show that absenteeism produces significant costs, affecting bottom line results.

Absenteeism is a behaviour that needs to be managed in the lean organization of food retail work. The low-road strategy followed by supermarkets and the "lean retail" principles adopted under the umbrella of "Wal-Martization", bring the management of attendance to the centre of attention for grocers, in order to maintain competitiveness. Although authors suggest that attendance is a crucial feature of the employment relationship that needs to be controlled, there is limited research on the line managers' role within this process. Additionally the pressures on line management, which emerge from the leaner organization of work, are still underdeveloped. This research therefore explores and conceptualizes the role of line managers in managing workplace attendance within the food retail sector.

Managing attendance: conceptualizing the line manager's role

Line managers are defined as the front-level managers who engage in a general management role instead of having special responsibilities in a specific area (Legge, 1995). They are also those who interact directly with employees, but have responsibilities beyond supervision (Renwick, 2009). As Storey (1992, p. 219) suggests, the role of the line manager is moving towards a "mini manager model" and is involved in a broader set of responsibilities and higher authority.

Indeed, since the 1980s the line managers' role has expanded and has become more managerial (Hope-Hailey *et al.*, 1997; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2010), whereas a consistent theme found in the HRM literature is the devolution of HR responsibilities to the line (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). In other words, the line managers' role does not just incorporate technical responsibilities but has been expanded to include people responsibilities (Lowe, 1992). Yet, a review of the historical development of the supervisory role shows that line managers always had some responsibility for people management (Cunningham and Hyman, 1995; McConville, 2006).

Thurley and Hamblin (1963) argue that in different work situations there is significant variation in supervisors' tasks and activities. However, there is limited research in this area, specifically examining the role of the line manager in the food retail sector. According to Child and Partridge (1982, pp. 13-14) "it would be not fruitful to generalize about supervisors, away from the situations in which they work and research should be sensitive to the situation of work and to each supervisor's position". Therefore, it is important to understand whether the lean working regime found in food retailing impacts on line managers' authority and their responsibility in managing attendance.

Hutchinson and Purcell (2003) report that in all the case study organizations in their research, including Tesco supermarket, the most commonly reported activity handled by line managers was absence management. The authors identify that the main responsibilities of line managers in managing absence include contacting absent employees at home, conducting return to work interviews, counseling and disciplinary hearings. Nevertheless, the report does not make clear whether such actions are governed by a formal process or whether it is at the line managers' discretion how they manage their teams.

Evidence suggests that line managers often view absence as a problem that affects them directly. Edwards and Whitston (1993) find that high absence rates reflect badly on managers' abilities, while Bevan *et al.* (2004) suggest that absence management is time consuming and this is a key cost for the organization. Specifically, the latter authors report that managers spent a significant amount of their time in tasks related to absence management, whilst similarly Huczynski and Fitzpatrick (1989) find that absence management introduces extra administrative work for managers and disruptions to their "main" job.

However, more research evidence reveals that while the management of attendance is a crucial problem, line managers often neglect it due to feelings of incompetence (Dunn and Wilkinson, 2002). Renwick (2003) argues that line managers do not perceive themselves as HR experts and are afraid of being criticized for poor performance for not delivering HR effectively and neglecting other parts of their job (Papalexandris and Panayotopoulou, 2005). As a result they are not willing to take on HR responsibilities and often ignore the negative consequences associated with absence. Thus, absence can become a chronic problem, around which no measures are taken by line managers.

The formal devolvement of absence management responsibilities to the line is well evident in contemporary research (Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003; Robson and Mavin, 2011). McGovern *et al.* (1997), try to describe what devolution means in practice and characterize line managers as a "delivery mechanism" for HR practices. This paper argues that this is an unsuitable term to use. To be more specific, in this research the focus is not to just examine whether line managers are mechanically delivering absence policies. The paper argues that characterizing line managers as mechanisms removes their discretion and presents them as passively following specialist directions. In other words, line managers should not be viewed as "unimportant transmitters of orders from the top" (Levertracy, 1987, p. 336). Child and Partridge (1982) suggest that research on line managers should examine their authority and their influence over decisions. Therefore this paper looks beyond the extant research that plainly acknowledges line managers' involvement in administrating absence management policies. It investigates the discretionary elements of line manager's role in managing attendance to work, rather than merely examining whether they are involved in attendance policies. This research is also concerned with the informal accommodations and practices adopted by line managers. Finally, this paper evaluates the social and political dynamics of the managerial job to provide an understanding of line managers' attitudes towards their HR responsibility of managing attendance. It examines the line managers' experience within their own labour process and the wider social structure of the food retail shop floor.

The paper provides a discussion regarding the HR devolution to the line, emphasizing the importance of line managers' role in the effective management of absence and attendance at work. It is argued that this issue has not been explored in-depth empirically, especially in the food retail sector, and much of the existing

research is based on anecdotal evidence. Therefore, a closer examination is necessary to gain a better understanding of the managerial actions in managing attendance. This paper explores the role of line managers in managing attendance at work and identifies the structures and dynamics that impact on their role. It then examines their discretion and autonomy in this process and finally explores the day-to-day managerial practices on the line.

Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative data from two case study organizations. The organizations are two of the bigger global food retailers, they are leaders in the UK market and two of the largest employers in the UK. UK1 is a multinational grocery retailer, with more than 3,000 stores around the UK, employing 300,000 people. UK2 is owned by a multinational company, which expanded its business around the world, including the UK. Approximately, 500 units are located in the country, within which there are more than 200,000 employees. The case studies were selected based on their size and their market share in both the local and global market.

Qualitative research data were secured using semi-structured interviews with 44 participants; 23 from UK1, and 21 from UK2. In total, four stores were examined, all located in the west of Scotland. One large store was examined in UK1, which had more than 600 employees, whereas due to access issues three stores were explored for UK2. In each store, the interviews were conducted with HR, senior and line managers, union representatives and shop floor employees, providing a multi-level analysis and a deeper understanding on the problem examined. Given the resource and access implications, in all cases management selected the participant employees. Interviews lasted between 35 and 90 minutes and focused upon a number of key themes, notably the nature of the work, the job process, the management of absence and the absence policy and finally the line managers' involvement in the management of attendance.

Exploring the lean regime and the cost pressures

The two case study organizations are part of a globalized market that is characterized by high competition and pressures for lower costs. One HR Manager in UK2 commented:

> Everything is predominantly driven by cost and sales (HRM2.UK2).

Both companies had developed strategies to achieve lower costs such as the introduction of state-of-art technology and the control of labour costs through a leaner organization of work. The companies developed an identical work organization, which was based on flexible employment schemes, paying the national minimum wage, whereas the working time schedules were based on algorithms generated by the state-of-art information technology systems. HR managers in both cases discussed the domination of part-time work on the shop floor, whilst evidence revealed that the employment of females and young students on a part-time basis was core to the labour force structure. This relates to the drive for lower costs as the two organizations took advantage of the lower wages and benefits offered to part-time workers to reduce labour costs.

Labour was the key cost for both companies. The regional HR manager in UK1 commented:

> The business works on a cost basis and HR has to be able to understand the cost of it. HR has to influence the wider business around how we do things.

Both organizations aggressively pursued lean staffing procedures in an effort to cut costs. This was reflected in the strict budgets for wages and overtime pay, the structure of working schedules and the fact that absence was regarded as an expense, which was something that needed to be controlled. The UK1 regional HR manager reported the close monitoring of absence so each store would know how much it spent on it individually. Similarly, one HR manager in UK2 stressed that absence was very expensive and also commented that it was closely measured to see "what the real [expense of] wages was [and] what was really wasted". Participant employees in both cases recognized that the management of absence was a key issue, because of the impact it had on "business", especially in monetary terms. One employee in UK1 suggested that the organization could not afford to have any people absent arguing: "they want every single penny of every single member of staff".

Both organizations had developed similar controls to manage the cost of absence. These include the formal absence policy and the new approach to flexibility taken by management, as discussed next.

The absence policy

In both cases, head office developed the absence policy and disseminated it across the organization. The regional HR manager of UK1 discussed the need for consistency across the company, arguing that the central function teams developed the policies and procedures, and then through the various networks of regional managers cascaded them to the individual stores. Therefore, there was one central policy across the organization and "every store would focus on exactly the same thing" (LM2.UK1). A similar view was expressed by a line manager in UK2 who stressed the need for consistency across the company stating that: "all the stores have to be the same. If everything is painted white, everything is painted white". This implies that in every store absence should be managed in the same way. As the same manager commented, "Our absence policy is companywide; it's the same in every single store". Strikingly, the data showed that the two organizations implemented a similar absence policy, which was divided into three main stages: "green, amber, red".

The absence process required employees to "phone in" at least two hours in advance of their shift, to inform the store of their absence. In both cases, this call went to the "duty manager" who was the first point of contact and responsible for informing the department managers of any absences. This call was a standard procedure within both organizations and the manager followed a script of questions, aiming to collect some basic information regarding the employee's absence.

One employee in UK1 discussed a shift in attitude towards absence management. He said that there had always been a common sense approach in terms of employees giving notice of their absence, and that there had always been a process of phoning in advance to inform the duty manager of such an absence. Nevertheless, when this was first introduced as a formal policy, managers became somewhat aggressive toward absence occurrences. He commented:

> It was a third degree […] it was a ten minute phone call and they made you feel really bad to phone in sick (E14.UK1).

However, recently, this process became more relaxed with managers asking standard questions aimed at collecting the necessary information that the process required On the other hand, in UK2 it was found that the managers were still adopting a more aggressive approach. Employees described the process of phoning in to report their

absence as "daunting and uncomfortable" and commented that managers made them feel that they were inconveniencing them, and made them feel guilty for calling in absent. One employee commented:

> I think sometimes people feel phoning in sick but […] they make you feel like you are inconveniencing them. My manager said, "oh I've got no-one else" […] I suppose it kind of makes you feel guilty (E3.UK2).

The evidence indicates that employees in UK2 were reluctant to phone in absent and that depended on the manager's attitude. Although in both organizations absence calls were a daily phenomenon, it was reported that some managers still "took it personally" (E1.UK2) and gave individuals who called in absent a hard time, through attempts to foster guilt.

In both companies, it was a requirement for those employees returning to work that they phoned in the day before in order to confirm their attendance. This was to allow managers to control costs because as managers commented, they could not afford to have two individuals "rotaed" [sic] for the same job. On the employees' first day back, the line manager or the supervisor conducted a one-to-one meeting with the individual. In both cases, this was the "green" stage, a short five-minute meeting. The interviewer followed a scripted questionnaire regarding the employee's absence. The discussion was essentially around the period, the length and the reasons for absence and any actions necessary to be taken by the organization in order avoid any future occurrences. Even though the focus of the green stage was ostensibly the employees' welfare, part of this meeting was also to review the employee's attendance record. The managers had to discuss and inform the employee of the number of days they had been off, the number of absence occasions and the impact on their personal absence percentage. Further enquiry showed that, in both organizations, when an individual's absence rate was 3 per cent or above within 26 weeks, it triggered the next stage of the absence policy, the "amber' stage". This stage required an investigation into employee's absence.

The amber stage meeting was conducted with two managers present, whilst the immediate supervisor was not allowed to be involved. These meetings, which lasted between 20 and 30 minutes, were more in-depth and looked at the bigger picture for absence. Usually the employees progressed to the third stage ("red") when they were off for a third time within the same 26-week period and/or their absence percentage was over 3 per cent. In both cases, two managers would conduct the red stage meeting, which took the form of a disciplinary hearing, with a high chance of verbal/written warnings being issued. This stage was the first to use punitive actions. In contrast, however, employees perceived that the overall absence policy was in reality a disciplinary process.

Flexibility: the new approach to attendance management

Following on from the discussion of the formal absence policy, a closer look at the data revealed that in both organizations there was evidence of a shift in the day-to-day management of absence. Findings showed that the management teams in both organizations attempted to tackle absence through prevention, rather than through the formal policy. In both organizations, "flexibility" became the central path to manage absence. Within this scheme, managers were offering alternative leave options to employees, such as shift-swaps, late starts, holidays or unpaid leave to prevent

employees calling in sick and creating a sickness file. As one line manager in UK2 commented:

> We offer a lot of accommodation that people use instead of being off sick and create an absence and create a sickness file.

Similarly, a line manager in UK1 stated:

> We have lot of people asking for unpaid or swaps, changes in shift and we try to make sure that the guys get it, so it doesn't affect absence. We do everything we can to support them because we don't want to deal enough with absence […] so we always offer them everything we can to prevent absence happening […] so rather than dealing with absence after fact we try to prevent it […] and this really works, we've seen absence drop (LM1.UK1).

Both organizations encouraged employees to use these alternative leave options rather than to be marked as absent. Employees, in both cases, acknowledged the benefits of these options. They stated that following the "flexibility route" did not impact on their personal absence, allowed them to balance their personal and working life, and sheltered them from the risky formal policy with its accompanying disciplinary aspects. Additionally, employees and managers in all cases recognized that these options reduced absence occurrences.

UK2 offered a range of short-term and long-term flexible leaves such as unpaid leave called "me-time", shift-swaps, career-breaks and study-breaks. Employees could use these as a substitute for sickness absence. Nevertheless, these options were subject to restrictions and limitations. For example, regarding "me-time", the employees were limited to five occasions of unpaid leave on an annual basis, whereas this option needed to be agreed with the line manager.

In UK1, the store HR manager suggested that managing the process alone was not effective in tackling absence, and stressed the need to manage the absence culture on the shop floor through the introduction of the new informal "flexibility policy". As she stated:

> We don't have an issue with absence in this store. This time two years ago we were a red light […] we were doing everything we possibly could in terms of the process, there was nothing else we could do […] whereas now we put something in process that if you give us 48 hours' notice for the time off you are automatically given a "Yes" […] we saw the benefits […] rather having someone to phone in sick on Saturday [you have] someone to tell you on Wednesday "I can't come in on Saturday". You then have got time to cover it and deal with the problem rather than them phoning in sick. So that was the culture change we put in place and it is surely working well for the store (Store.HRM.UK1).

Indeed, the store reduced its absence percentage within a period of 18 months and this was a result of the new flexibility policy. Line managers stressed that this new process was an effective tactic in managing absence.

It is important to recognize the essential role of line managers within both the formal process, as well as their vital role in the implementation of the flexibility approach. Next, the paper focuses on line managers' role in managing attendance, stressing the significance of their involvement in the two processes. It also discusses the direct control of the former group of by the HR specialists, who aim for consistency within the absence management process, it illustrates the impact on their role and finally describes the day-to-day practices of managing attendance.

Line managers' role in absence policy: the key players

Line managers were key players within the formal absence policy in these two organizations and one of their main HR responsibilities was the management of short-term absence. The formal absence policy specified that the line manager was the first point of contact for employees to request time off and the organizational actor who drove the implementation of the policy. This went beyond just monitoring absence targets and incorporated numerous responsibilities within the formal policy. Line managers, in both cases, were found to hold identical responsibilities and delivered the day-to-day tasks of the policy, such as contacting absent employees at home, covering shifts, changing the rotas and conducting the meetings specified by the formal policy. They also played a vital role within the flexibility approach as the first contact for employees seeking time off with the power to approve or decline requests. As the regional HR manager (UK1) commented: "we would always encourage the first point of contact to be the [line] managers".

Line managers argued that the management of absence was their responsibility because it was a behaviour that affected them directly, as it impacted on the department's performance and, respectively, on their personal performance:

> It can be difficult if it's a short notice which is understandable. Sometimes in the morning a kid is not well or something, and that affects, we have schedules for queue and things, it can affect us […] (LM1.UK2).

Participants discussed the impact of absence on the departmental targets, budgets and sales. They commented that absence affected their department's performance and potentially exposed them as incompetent to the rest of the management team.

One HR manager in UK2 argued that he would hold line managers accountable when absence increased in their particular area, whilst data illustrated that in both cases absence levels were appraised by the HR teams. As the regional HR manager in UK1 stated:

> Attendance is audited by the HR team, they would know exactly, so if they [line managers] are complying with the whole process then I think they will be a bit more worried about their performance.

Overall, a high departmental absence rate created negative reflection on managers' abilities and their personal performance, with line managers feeling pressured to comply with the formal policy.

Direct control by HR specialists

Despite the vital role of line managers within absence management, in both cases, they were closely monitored by the personnel department on how they managed absence, the decisions they took and whether they followed the organizational policy. The HR manager in UK1 commented:

> The most difficult thing in managing attendance in a supermarket is to maintain that broad consistency.

The latter manager argued that line managers held various degrees of competence and experience, which inevitably led to inconsistency regarding the management of absence and therefore necessitated the monitoring of line managers' actions by the HR team. Similarly, all the HR managers in UK2 suggested that monitoring line managers'

actions within the absence policy was part of their role, aiming to ensure the consistent implementation of the procedure. One HR manager in UK2 commented:

> Just be closer to it and be consistent […] I go back and make sure and chase up any of the managers that maybe haven't done the return to work process on the first shift back cause that is when it should happen, and make sure that that's happened (HRM3.UK2).

Line managers in both cases suggested that absence only became a priority when it impacted on the departmental targets. For example, a line manager in UK1 to the question whether absence is a priority replied:

> Personally, I don't see it as such. If you got a problem with it, so say if I have someone sick then I'll be managing that […] if absence becomes a problem then probably I switch about (LM3.UK1).

Similarly, the store HR manager in UK1 commented: "Because they are so busy they may not see it as a priority for them", whilst one HR manager in UK2 commented:

> Not all of them [see absence as a priority] […] not everybody is gonna think that everything got the same level of priority. Some people would say is a priority and other people probably would say is down in the list of priorities. It depends maybe on their history. So if they got history with absence then it probably puts it further up their agenda, whereas if absence isn't really a big priority for them then it's not probably high up on their agenda (HRM3.UK2).

However, HR managers in both cases suggested that absence should be a daily priority for line managers as it was part of their role:

> [Absence] is part of their role, how important it is within an individual can change on day to day basis (HR3.UK2).

Thus, HR attempted to control the different levels of priority through the close surveillance and monitoring of line managers' actions. HR specialists often intervened in line managers' decisions, resulting in limited authority over attendance for the latter. All the HR managers who participated in this research commented that at some point they overruled line managers, intervened, and changed their decisions. One HR manager (UK2) commented on her interventions in line managers' decisions:

> Yeah, we have to do that sometimes. Managers sometimes will do things that they think is right but sometimes you have to explain to them that that's not the case […] sometimes you have to say to them "no we have to follow the policy so you can't jump disciplinary or whatever", you have to ring them in sometimes […] taking the manager through so they understand the process (HRM1.UK2).

Two HR managers, one in each case, suggested that the need for their intervention emerged through the lack of competencies and skill gaps of line managers. These participants described line managers as unconfident or unwilling to follow the procedures, and/or to take the appropriate decisions. The UK1's store HR manager accounted for the latter as a personal perception of line managers towards absence, stating that "[they] like to be liked and they won't be liked if they deal with absence". She added that young managers or managers who did not deal with absence often, such as the stock control managers, lacked confidence and they often asked for her support and guidance. Conversely, she referred to the checkout managers who dealt with absence frequently and stressed that less intervention was needed by HR in this case. Therefore, checkout managers had slightly higher authority to manage absence, as less intervention by HR specialists was evident. Nevertheless, this is not to suggest

that they escaped the formal absence policy or the direct surveillance by specialists. This still occurred, albeit to a lesser degree. Similarly, one HR manager in UK2 discussed skill gaps for line managers in conducting investigations and disciplinary meetings. He argued that because most of the managers progressed from the shop floor they held shop floor knowledge but "fell down" in their HR role. However, he also stated that managers who were involved in absence management frequently were more confident, whilst others would try to shy away from it, and at that point the HR manager had to intervene.

Absence in the day-to-day reality: what do line managers really do?

So far, the role of line managers in managing absence in both the formal policy and the flexible approach was discussed, as well as the dynamics that affect their authority and discretion within these processes. However, it is important to understand the attitude of line managers in absence management within the daily reality of the food retail shop floor.

Line managers in both organizations considered the implementation of the absence policy as an extra task to their duties, which distracted them from their overall role. Even though they acknowledged that the management of absence was part of their job, they also stressed that they were extremely busy and they often had to multitask to complete their daily tasks:

> I think sometimes the biggest thing is that you have so many things going on at the same time and there are a new things launching, such as absence, and it's quite difficult to keep with all, so you have times you feel that everything launches at once […]. You constantly have things to do. Like lists you know and you've got lots of stuff to do, you are very very busy (LM3.UK1).

Line managers in both cases felt that absence management consumed a significant amount of their time. A line manager in UK2 discussed the time taken to contact absent employees and also commented on the time spent to find someone to cover that shift and edit the working schedules, stating: "it takes a lot of time out of your day". Similarly one line manager in UK1 commented:

> I do feel that it takes a lot time of the day. Sometimes you can spend like an hour, some investigations are time consuming (LM3.UK1).

Data showed that line managers in both organizations spent time on monitoring particular cases, revising work schedules, counselling workers, monitoring the process of covering shifts, conducting one-to-one meetings with the individuals and the HR managers, and arranging shift-swaps as the new flexibility approach specified. Managers in both cases felt distracted from their other responsibilities and neglected other tasks, whilst absence forcibly became a priority.

It is interesting though to note that in both cases, the management of absence was a routine for line managers, or as the regional HR manager (UK1) put it, "some line managers just tick a box". She suggested, for example, that checkout line managers were process orientated, whilst on the other hand night managers focused more on the operational part of their job and regarded the absence process as a distraction and annoyance. Similarly, an HR manager in UK2 argued that night managers were those who did not devote enough time on the process, and perceived it as just an extra task. She argued that they would still follow the process but they would try to finish it as early as possible to just tick this box. The majority of line managers

perceived absence management and the process *per se*, as a ticking exercise. One employee in UK2 commented:

> It always seems to me that the managers are not really that bothered to be doing it, it's just something they have to do, it's just bureaucracy. Is not something that they do because they feel that they should, they do it because is a process set up by UK2 […] they were just like "this is what we need to do, Done! Go back to your shift" […]. Just ticking a box (E1.UK2).

Another employee in UK2 described the attitude of line managers in the attendance meetings as routinized, especially, in the green stage meeting. She suggested that managers just sat there with their list of questions on hand and asked the same questions every time; It is "fairly a routine" she stated. This showed that the first stage of the process was regarded as a standard exercise that the managers had to complete because they had to follow the process. Identical findings emerged in UK1. Line managers described this first stage as a ticking exercise, whereas employees in UK1 also suggested that this meeting was a scripted procedure that the managers had to go through. Yet, data provided convincing evidence that line managers had developed two major strategies to cope with the time consuming exercise of the absence process. The first strategy was their attitude through the meetings and particularly the first stage of the policy. In both organizations, managers were found to rush through this meeting, whereas some participants also commented that managers did not make eye contact and showed limited interest for their personal circumstances. These practices saved time for the managers and assisted them to overcome the repetition of the scripted process. The union representative commented:

> There's a couple of managers, one of them is racing through the procedure, he just reads off the sheet and hardly lets the person get a word. I had to say him before "Barry we cannae conduct this like this, you need to slow down, look at the person that you are speaking to. Ok you've done it a thousand times, you've not done it a thousand times with this guy, and this is the first time or somebody's first time" (Union.rep.UK1).

Finally, indeed line managers in both cases considered the first stage of the absence policy as a routine exercise, which consumed valuable time out of their busy work schedules. Therefore, they often delegated this task to the supervisors. This was a practice that was common between the two organizations. Section/team leaders, in both organizations, who directly reported to managers, carried out tasks such as calling back absent employees and conducting the "green" meetings. Moreover, data showed that managers in both cases gave a small amount of authority to supervisors regarding the administrative work of absence management, such as changing the rotas and updating absent employees for any changes during their absence.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper examined the role of line managers in managing attendance at work within the lean regime of grocery retailing. The analysis clearly showed that in both organizations the management of absence was a priority due to the costs accompanied with this behaviour. Indeed, the pressure for lower costs, as the result of the price war in the market, suggested absence as a costly behaviour for the organizations, hence a problem that needed to be managed. This supports Taylor *et al.*'s (2010) argument, discussing lean regimes and attendance as two interconnected aspects within the employment relationship.

Data revealed a similar two-tier approach in managing attendance in the two organizations. First, both organizations implemented a three-stage absence policy, which suggested the penalization of absence. This confirms authors argument that the management approach to attendance is "one of stick rather than carrot" (Edwards and Whitston, 1993, p. 7).

The research highlighted great involvement of line managers in the absence policy. Contrary to Edwards (2005, p. 393) argument that, despite the cost pressures and the development of lean organizations absenteeism has not been a prominent issue for the daily agenda of line managers, this research revealed a different insight, highlighting the key role that line managers play in the management of absence. Similarly to other research (see Cunningham and James, 2000; Hutchinson and Purcell, 2003) this paper has found that, in both cases, line managers carried out the daily tasks of the absence policy, and were responsible for the implementation of the three stages. Clearly, the Wal-Martization trend, as the main driver for lower costs, brings the management of absence into sharp focus and drives the involvement of line managers within the formal absence policy. Evidently, line managers have a primary responsibility to manage the absence policy (Dunn and Wilkinson, 2002) and keep labour cost low.

As Freathy and Sparks (1995) report, food retailers have turned the individual stores into cost centres, within which the store managers are responsible to manage budgets and meet targets set by the head office. Yet this research has shown that through the centralization of decisions and the devolvement of targets to the line, the store management teams and HR attempted to control the absence cost through line managers' involvement in the process. The tight targets set by the head office were devolved to the line and the latter group was held accountable for high absence in their department.

Second, data showed that the two grocery retailers adopted a flexible approach towards the management of attendance, aiming for the prevention of absence rather the management of finite absence occasions. In both cases, managers offered employees alternative options going off work rather than calling in sick. This resulted in the significant reduction of absence levels within all the stores examined. Line managers in both cases had a great involvement in the flexible approach, as they were the actors who managed any requests for flexible leaves. Evidence showed that they encouraged employees to take alternative leave options, even in cases when the employees called in sick. Recognizing the positive impact of the flexible approach on the departmental targets, line managers were offering these options to secure low absence levels in their department. This is also related to the unwillingness of line managers to get involved in the absence process, either because they do not perceive themselves as HR experts (Renwick, 2003), and/or because they were afraid to be criticized for poor performance (Papalexandris and Panayotopoulou, 2005).

Predictably, line managers had a significant role to play within the two conflicting approaches. However, they enjoyed a higher level of authority within the flexibility approach, as the intervention of HR specialists was more common in the formal policy. HR managers stressed the lack of competencies and managerial skills by line managers to legitimize their intervention. Similarly to Nichols and Beynon (1977), this research reveals that line managers were subject to bureaucratic and direct control. They were expected to be bureaucrats with high responsibilities in managing attendance, but they were still monitored by the HR and store managers. Hence, the degradation of line managers' work was evidenced as they became solely responsible for the implementation of rules and procedures handed down by the head office (Rose *et al.*, 1987). Despite the

evidence for higher discretion within the flexibility policy, data showed that managers' decisions were still formulated under the rules and regulations of the senior management. Therefore, although line managers had a significant role within the management of absence, this role has been diminished as the demands for control from above escalated (Carter *et al.*, 2014, p. 328).

Similarly to Grugulis *et al.* (2011b), this research suggests that forms of bureaucratic and direct control are still strong on the supermarket shop floor, generating increasing limitations and constrains over line managers' discretion in managing attendance. Indeed, the HR teams in both cases attempted to control absence and to monitor line managers' actions. Therefore, this suggests that absence forcibly became a priority (Bevan *et al.*, 2004), whereas line managers were caught within a regime of hierarchical control, regarding their role in managing attendance.

Nevertheless, and to conclude this paper, line managers were not passive in the face of direct control from the top management. They had developed tactics to cope with the monotony and the repetition of this process, such as devolving part of it to the supervisors (team/section leaders). Additionally, tactics to attain some element of control in the absence management process were evidenced, such as rushing through the meetings, revealing low identification to employees' personal problems and showing limited empathy regarding the reason for absence and employees' personal circumstances. Therefore, the assumption that line managers will implement policies the way that those are designed by the HR is indeed false as other authors have also suggested (Townsend, 2013, p. 424). In this research, the fact that the line managers were solely responsible to conduct these meetings enabled them to escape (to an extent) the control by the HR specialists who were not present at the meeting and therefore gained some degree of autonomy in the management of absence. Hence, this research shows that line managers within the two cases examined, did not act as "trained gorillas" (Nichols, 1980) rather they opened a window of opportunity to somehow cope with the process and escape the top-down control they were subjected to.

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