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# Employee Absenteeism and Service Delivery at a Zambian Government Agency

Japhet Mwanamwalye Lishomwa  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Japhet Mwanamwalye Lishomwa

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## Review Committee

Dr. Roger Wells, Committee Chairperson, Management Faculty

Dr. Judith Forbes, Committee Member, Management Faculty

Dr. Barbara Turner, University Reviewer, Management Faculty

Chief Academic Officer  
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2019

Abstract

Employee Absenteeism and Service Delivery at a Zambian Government Agency

by

Japhet Mwanamwalye Lishomwa

MPA, University of Zambia, 2009

BA, University of Zambia, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

August 2019

## Abstract

Employee absenteeism is a global management problem that affects organizational productivity, profits, justice, and employee motivation. A Zambian government agency has little knowledge about absenteeism and the lived experiences of clients regarding staff absenteeism and service delivery. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore employee absenteeism and service delivery through the lens of McGregor's theory X. The research question was about the lived experiences of the agency's clients regarding absenteeism and service delivery. The data were collected through semistructured interviews of 22 purposefully selected clients of the Zambian government agency and were analyzed using the van Kaam method. Findings indicated that health issues of staff and relatives, funerals, alcoholism, demotivation, lack of staff transport, chronic fatigue, staff shortages, poor working conditions and salaries, poor supervision, school runs, laziness and indiscipline, and the transfer of staff affected absenteeism. Absenteeism caused organizational financial losses, inefficiency, reduced productivity, delayed service delivery, damaged the organization's reputation, and created client stress, frustration, and hopelessness. Absenteeism can be significantly reduced by close collaboration between the managers and their subordinates through increased employee engagement, improved incentive rewards programs, and a better understanding of the effects of work-related stress. Positive social change through the reduction of absenteeism in government agencies can enhance the quality of public services in critical public sectors such as education, health, social welfare, labor, and agriculture.

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## Dedication

I wish to appreciate the Almighty God who has given me the passion for education. I dedicate this priceless work to my loving and supportive wife, Sharon, and my children, Inonge, Jeff, Liseli, and Samuel. Your encouragement and mere presence have motored me through this difficult journey. I also dedicate the study to my loving parents and broader family.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Employee absenteeism is a global management problem that affects most conventional organizations. Some of the known problems associated with employee absenteeism are financial losses to organizations (Kocakulah, Kelley, Mitchell, & Ruggieri, 2016), decreased productivity (Dagget, Molla, & Belachew, 2016), and the demotivation of the remaining employees (Cascio, 2006). In Africa, however, relatively few studies have been conducted on employee absenteeism, although absenteeism rates may be higher on this continent (Glewwe & Kremer, 2006). Additionally, researchers on absenteeism in South Africa have only covered a few dimensions like staff absenteeism in South African hospitals regarding long working hours, big workload, staff shortages, the absence of reward systems, hostile managers, illness, unfavorable working environments, and favoritism (Mudaly & Nkosi, 2015).

Although studies have been conducted on employee absenteeism in the developed world, not enough research has been done on the phenomenon at the global level (Ammerman, Mallow, Rizzo, Folger, & Van Gickel, 2016). The research gap exists mostly in the less developed countries where absenteeism is relatively higher than it is in the developed countries (Glewwe & Kremer, 2006). The absenteeism management strategies conceived in the West are useful but may have limitations in less developed countries due to the differences in environment and technology levels. It is, therefore, important for research to be conducted in less developed countries like Africa so that absenteeism interventions are based on appropriate research findings.

Focused on a lack of research on employee absenteeism in Zambia, this qualitative phenomenological study was designed to explore employee absenteeism and service delivery through the experiences of 22 clients of a Zambian government agency. The study may lead to improvements in the quality of the services rendered by the Zambia public service, which include sectors like education, health, social welfare, labor, and agriculture. These sectors of critical social development and economic implications define the future of many in Zambia. The improvement of the quality of the public services may lead to positive social change in the lives of many groups of people.

In this chapter, I start by sharing a background of the study before explaining the problem statement. The purpose of the study and the single overarching research question follow. I also describe the conceptual framework in which the study is grounded. Next will be an explanation of the nature of the study and the definition of the main concepts and constructs of the study. I then focus on the study assumptions, scope, delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study to theory and practice. Before summarizing the chapter and transitioning to the next chapter, I elucidate this study's potential for positive social change.

### **Background of the Study**

Previous researchers on employee absenteeism have concentrated on sickness absenteeism (Bernstom & Kjekshus, 2015), return-to-work (RTW), the financial costs of absenteeism (Rybczynski, 2016), and the causes and effects of absenteeism (Cascio, 2006). Some scholars have focused on strategies to manage absenteeism, whereas others



have explored the leadership styles and absenteeism (Mtimkulu, Naranjee, & Karodia, 2014). There is, however, little research on absenteeism and service delivery.

Absenteeism may be associated with sickness and health conditions that include physical and mental health. Howard and Potter (2014) concluded that obesity was related to higher rates of worker illness absence and that the presence of diabetes positively moderated this relationship. High absenteeism and poor RTW rates may also be linked to depression (Sallis & Birkin, 2014). Specific health problems, like chronic diseases, have been associated with absenteeism and productivity losses (de Vroome et al., 2015). Some researchers have also established that mental disorders (Lau, Victor, & Ruud, 2016) and delayed sleep or stability of circadian rhythm and stress affect the rate of absenteeism in an organization (Rajaratnam, Licamele, & Birznieks, 2015; Zare, Choobineh, & Keshvarzi, 2016). Absenteeism is also related to comorbid health problems and musculoskeletal disorders (Baek, Kim, & Yi, 2015) and rheumatoid arthritis (Verstappen, 2015).

In terms of nonsickness absenteeism research, researchers have established different types of absenteeism and how the external environment can lead to higher absenteeism. Avey, Patera, and Best (2006) suggested two types of absenteeism: voluntary and involuntary absenteeism, which refer to events in and out of an employee's control. In terms of involuntary absenteeism, Enns, Currie, and Wang (2014) concluded that reduced job autonomy and increased job strain were catalysts for higher absenteeism. Azam and Gholam (2014) also established a relationship between the physical

environment and absenteeism; stress factors like inefficiency, duty ambiguity, duty responsibility, and work boundaries were found to be associated with absenteeism.

Other researchers have looked at how leadership style affects absenteeism dynamics. Mtimkulu et al. (2014) found that autocratic leadership led to higher levels of absenteeism in contrast to participative, democratic and laissez-faire leadership. Poor leadership and communication structures, bad employment policies, inappropriate work climate, poor organizational structure, poor employee supervision, and passiveness of organizational leaders are also some administrative factors that negatively affect employee absenteeism (Sheikha & Younis, 2006). Additionally, the quality of leadership might inhibit long-term sick leave to a certain extent in those employees with moderate depressive disorders (Munir, Burr, Hansen, Rugulies, & Nielsen, 2011).

Another dimension of employee absenteeism is the financial cost of absenteeism. The financial cost of absenteeism draws much interest from contemporary managers due to the competitive nature of today's business world (Robbins & Coulter, 2014). Magee et al. (2016) stated that the cost of absenteeism in Australia was at least \$7 billion per year in terms of health care costs and productivity losses. In the United States, sickness-related absenteeism costs an estimated \$153 billion yearly (Rybczynski, 2016). In Canada, it was reported that the annual cost of absenteeism to organizations reached a record \$789 per employee in 2002 and 2.8 million workdays were lost every year to absenteeism (Kocakulah et al., 2016).

To address absenteeism challenges, scholars have researched absenteeism management strategies. Given the seriousness of sickness absenteeism, researchers have

attempted to develop RTW strategies for sickness absent employees. For example, Volker, Vlasveld, Brouwers, van Lomwel, and van der Feltz-Cornelis (2015) established whether RTW self-efficacy was a predictor of time to RTW in long-term sick-listed employees with all-cause sickness absence. Muijzer, Geertzen, de Boer, Groothoff, and Brouwer (2012) also identified some factors for the assessment of RTW efforts in employees on long-term sickness absence. Higher job satisfaction among employees and high-performance work systems may also be effective strategies for handling absenteeism (Abdullah & Lee, 2012; Boon et al., 2014). Finally, communication and monitoring may be necessary procedures for managing and measuring absenteeism (Tanasescu, Florea, & Tanasescu, 2015), and the collective involvement of employers and employees has been identified as the best approach to solve absenteeism problems (Cucchiella, Gastaldi, & Ranieri, 2014).

Despite the research presented in this section, there are few studies conducted on absenteeism and organizational productivity and service delivery at the global level, especially in Africa. In Africa, most absenteeism studies seem to have been conducted in South Africa, but there is little knowledge on absenteeism in Zambia. Mulcahy-Dunn, Herstein, and Sevilla (2003), however, reported that employee absenteeism in the Zambia public service was at 17%. Momba and Kalabula (2007) also reported that over 60% of the recipients of public services in Zambia were not satisfied with the quality of the services. This current study, therefore, addressed a gap in knowledge that can build awareness about absenteeism and absenteeism management strategies and improve public service delivery in Zambia. The current study is focused on a Zambian government

agency with public services that include the issuance of important documents to both citizens and noncitizens of Zambia.

The Zambian government agency is a part of the broader Zambia public service, which consists of 30 specialized line ministries and associated agencies. The 30 line ministries include the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Health, Ministry of General Education, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Gender and Women in Development, Ministry of Labor and Social Security, and the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services. The Zambian government agency explored is one of the biggest agencies of the Zambia public service, sharing the same broad policies, administrative provisions and challenges with the other agencies (Momba & Kalabula, 2007).

### **Problem Statement**

Employee absenteeism disrupts work schedules and affects profits and organizational productivity (Ammerman, Mallow, Rizzo, Folger, & Van Gickel, 2016; Brummelhuis, Johns, Lyons, & Hoeven, 2016). Absenteeism is also associated with poor service delivery (Dagget et al., 2016) and high financial costs to an organization (Kocakulah et al., 2016; Suarez-Bonel et al., 2015). The general problem is that despite awareness of the issue, employee absenteeism has continued to pose a threat to businesses and organizations around the world (Patton & Johns, 2012). Whether viewed from an organizational cultural perspective or ethical standpoint, or in terms of the broader spectrum of employee behaviors, employee absenteeism has a direct impact on organizational performance.

The recurrent reforms of the Zambia public service are partly in response to the dissatisfaction of the public who have previously complained of absenteeism, corruption, and poor customer service by the public officers (Momba & Kalabula, 2007; Mulimbika & Vaal, 2014). The specific management problem is that organizational leaders of the Zambian government agency do not know the lived experiences of their organization's clients regarding staff absenteeism and service delivery (Mulimbika & Vaal, 2014). Compared to the United States, for instance, where absenteeism in the public sector is less than 5% (Rogers & Herting, 1993), absenteeism is high in Zambia, particularly in public service (Mulikita, 2012; Mvula, 2017).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was to explore employee absenteeism and service provision through the lived experiences of 22 clients of the selected two departments of the Zambian government agency in Lusaka, Zambia. The targeted participants were people who regularly seek services from the organization and have had experiences of officers who are supposed to attend to them being absent from work. Through face-to-face, semistructured interviews of the participants, I developed themes and patterns that give insights on absenteeism at the institution. I have offered some understanding of how absenteeism affects service delivery in the institution. This may be critical for strengthening employee management mechanisms and potentially improve service delivery.

### **Research Question**

The study has a single research question, which is adequate to address the identified research problem and purpose. The following is the single overarching research question: What are the lived experiences of the clients of the Zambian government agency regarding staff absenteeism and the delivery of services by the organization?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The purpose of a conceptual framework is to identify and define the concept or phenomenon that grounds the study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). A conceptual framework may also be viewed as a visual representation of the principal foundation of the study, major factors and concepts and their interrelationships, and the processes and populations that interplay with one another (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The main concepts addressed in this study are employee absenteeism and public service. Employee absenteeism can be viewed in terms of an employee's failure to report to work as scheduled (Magee et al., 2016). A public service is any service provided by a government either to the people living within its jurisdiction directly or by financing the provision of the service (Momba & Kalabula, 2007).

The framework of the current study, elaborated in more detail in Chapter 2, is grounded in McGregor's theory x, which suggests that employees have little ambition, dislike work, want to avoid responsibility, and need to be closely controlled to work effectively (Robbins & Coulter, 2014). To contextualize this into the current study, staff absenteeism at the Zambian government agency is influenced by the employees' negative attitude toward work. The framework also includes the concepts of culpable absenteeism

and innocent absenteeism (Avey et al., 2006). Culpable absenteeism means being absent from work without authorization for reasons within a person's control, whereas innocent absenteeism refers to absence for reasons beyond control like sickness and injury.

Culpable absenteeism plays a role in defining the quality of service delivery at the Zambian government agency. Organizational leaders should endeavor to understand the dynamics of employee absences to formulate the relevant interventions and limit the negative effects of the problem on organizational performance.

This framework is open to suggestion that employee absenteeism may not always lead to reduced productivity and customer satisfaction and poor quality of goods and services (Sigursteinsdottir & Rafnsdottir, 2015). Dagget et al. (2016), however, found that absenteeism, especially in terms of health problems, might reduce productivity in an organization by up to 32% and subsequently compromise service delivery and customer satisfaction. Additionally, employee absenteeism in the Zambia public service is relatively high, leading to low productivity and poor service delivery (Momba & Kalabula, 2007; Mulcahy-Dunn et al., 2003).

This conceptual framework is compatible with the descriptive phenomenological approach and the single overarching research question. The descriptive phenomenological approach allowed me to seek the perspectives of the participants regarding the absenteeism of employees and the service delivery at the Zambian government agency. The findings are based on the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon and the interpretation of the investigator (Reiners, 2012). Similarly, this

framework is aligned with the research question, which was focused on the participants' lived experiences of absenteeism and service delivery.

### **Nature of Study**

The approach for the current study was a qualitative descriptive phenomenological study. The focus of descriptive phenomenology is the description of individuals' everyday conscious experiences of a phenomenon, and preconceived opinions are set aside (Reiners, 2012). The basic objective of a phenomenological study is to elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of a person, or a group of people, around a specific phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41).

Although descriptive phenomenology is about articulating experience, a descriptive phenomenologist should reflect on the presented meanings contained in the descriptions to come up with an understanding of the world of the participant (Giorgi, 2012). I selected the descriptive phenomenological approach for the current study because it was appropriate to address the research problem and purpose regarding participants' lived experiences of absenteeism and service delivery at the Zambian government agency.

The key concept that I investigated in this study was employee absenteeism. I asked 22 participants to share their personal experiences of absenteeism and service delivery at the Zambian government agency. Through face-to-face, semistructured interviews of the participants, I was able to develop themes and patterns of absenteeism and service delivery at the institution. I selected the respondents using purposeful sampling, specifically the key informants, key experts, and reputational sampling method,



through which people are selected who have knowledge that can answer the research inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). With the permission of the participants, I audiotaped all the interviews of my 22 respondents to enhance the accuracy of my interview transcripts and limit note taking during the interview.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Absence culture:* Absence culture is a set of shared understandings about absence legitimacy and the established custom and practice of employee absence behavior and its control (Patton & Johns, 2012).

*Absenteeism:* Absenteeism is as an individual's lack of physical presence at a given location and time as socially expected (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara & Sanchez-Medina, 2015).

*Descriptive phenomenology:* Descriptive phenomenology involves disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon from prior experience and professional studies—to be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated (Moustakas, 1994).

*Epoche:* An epoche is a systematic effort to set aside prejudgments of the outer world and focus on the intentional acts within the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994).

*Phenomenology:* Phenomenology is a qualitative approach designed to explicate the meaning and essence of the lived experiences of a person, or a group of people around a specific phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

*Presenteeism:* Presenteeism occurs when employees come to work despite medical or mental illness that should keep them away from work (Halbesleben, Whitman, & Crawford, 2014).

*Service delivery:* Service delivery is the act of performing a task for a business or person that wants or requires it in exchange for acceptable compensation (Momba & Kalabula, 2007).

*Sickness absence:* Sickness absence is defined as absence from work due to work-related and non-work-related injuries or illnesses (Roelen, Bultmann, van Rhenen, van der Klink, & Heymans, 2013).

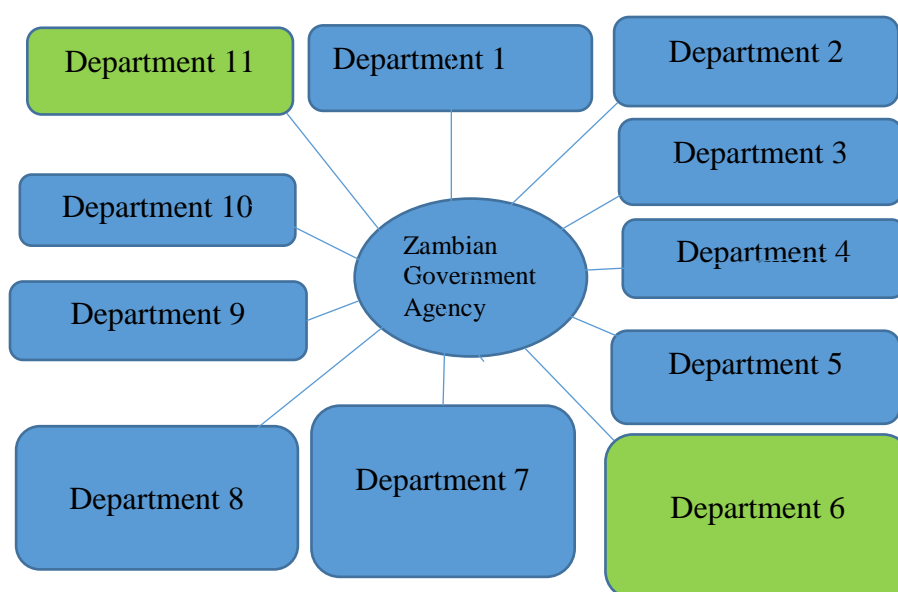
### **Assumptions**

My first assumption in this study was that the selected participants would be honest in their interview answers, as they would want to see an improved service delivery by the Zambian government agency under investigation. My second assumption was that all the targeted participants had some experience of staff absenteeism at the Zambian government agency. I assumed that this would make them good sources of data for my research study. The third assumption was that saturation would occur around 20 participants. In my view, the likelihood of similarity of experiences among the participants was high. I was only convinced that saturation had occurred after interviewing 22 participants.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The focus of this study was the perspectives of the participants on their personal experiences of staff absenteeism and service delivery at the selected two departments

under the Zambian government agency. The study population consisted of the entire clientele of the Zambian government agency that was represented by the sample of 22 purposefully selected participants. The main selection criteria for the participants was based on an individual having had some experience of employees who were supposed to attend to him or her being absent from work. Clients of the other institutions of the Zambia public service were not included. Figure 1 is an illustration of the structure of the study environment, with the two selected departments colored green.



*Figure 1.* Illustration of the research environment.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of the study was that I work for one of the institutions that I explored under the Zambian government agency, Department Number 11 in Figure 1, and as such may have had some influence on how the participants responded. To overcome this threat to data validity, I requested the respondents to give full consent to participate in the study, and I made the conditions for their participation as voluntary and free as

possible in line with the requirements of the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB). I used the consent forms and other IRB guidelines so that the respondents were assured that there would be no consequences for their answers. I also notified the participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage should they decide to do so.

Another limitation of the study relates to the scope, which was focused on the perspectives of the participants regarding absenteeism and service delivery at the selected institution. Considering the limited research on absenteeism in Zambia, the scope of this study excluded many other dimensions of absenteeism like professional autonomy and the work setting, sickness absences, psychological capital, and RTW strategies, which have attracted the attention of many scholars in the field. Although the causes and effects of absenteeism have been covered widely in research elsewhere, the findings in Zambia may be different owing to the different conditions prevailing.

The third limitation is that I could not investigate all the 12 departments of the Zambian government agency as initially planned. I chose two departments because they offer services that are in high public demand, making the task of identifying the ideal participants for this study less difficult. The clientele for the other departments under the Zambian government agency may have been too small and contextually inappropriate for the current study.

Another limitation pertained to the research design and the transferability of the findings. Being a qualitative phenomenological study, the research was focused on the specific perspectives of the selected 22 respondents. The lived experiences the participants may not represent the views and experiences of the rest of the broader

population. To circumvent this threat to transferability, I employed thick description to refer to the process of paying attention to contextual detail in observing and interpreting social meaning when conducting research (see Silverman, 2014). One way I achieved a thick description was offering the detailed accounts of the participants and the research, and the accounts of the participants' perspectives.

### **Significance of the Study**

In Africa, only a few absenteeism studies have been conducted, mainly in South Africa (see Mtinkulu et al., 2014; Mudaly & Nkosi, 2015) and Ethiopia (Dagget et al., 2016). In Zambia, there is a lack of academic knowledge and literature on absenteeism. Thus, my study findings may fill a gap in the current knowledge and literature about employee absenteeism. The study may be critical for professional application and positive social change among groups of people like employers and professional bodies in the Zambia. This study may be helpful to the professional bodies like the Zambia Institute of Human Resource Management, Zambia Federation of Employers, Zambia Consumers Association, and the Zambia Institute of Public Policy Analysis.

Organizational managers, both in the public and private sectors, may also use this study in the formulation of effective absenteeism management strategies as they address absenteeism. The study may lead to the enhancement of efficiency in the operations of the Zambia public service. The donors who support the budget of the Government of Zambia may also find this study to be beneficial. In a broader context, the study may be important to all individuals who benefit from the services rendered by the Zambia public service.

My research has the potential to contribute to positive social change in Zambia and beyond. At the broad national level, the research study may lead to improvements in the quality of the public services in Zambia. The public services include important sectors like education, health, social welfare, labor, and agriculture, which have social development and economic implications. The improvement of the public service delivery may lead to a positive social change in the lives of many people.

### **Summary and Transition**

Both management scholars and practitioners consider employee absenteeism as a problem. Some of the problems associated with absenteeism include financial losses to the organizations (Hilton, Sheridan, Cleary, & Whitehead, 2009; Paula & Luc, 2015) and demotivation and high-stress levels for the remaining employees (Abdullah & Lee, 2012; Enns et al., 2014). Scholars in the United States, Europe, and Australia have conducted studies on absenteeism; however, there are few studies on Africa.

The major dimensions covered in global research on absenteeism include the areas of the causes and effects of absenteeism (Cascio, 2006; Patton & Johns, 2012). Other researchers have focused on psychological matters, substance abuse, and inequality and possible strategies through which to mitigate the effects of absenteeism (Peretz, Levi, & Fried, 2015). Most of the researchers on absenteeism have looked at the dimension related to sickness, whether short-term or long-term (Sigursteinsdottir & Rafnsdottir, 2015; Vanneste, de Loo, Feron, de Vries, & de Goor, 2016; Zare et al., 2016).

Not enough research has been conducted to address the challenges associated with absenteeism (Ammerman et al., 2016; Patton & Johns, 2012). One strand of absenteeism

that has not received enough attention is to do with how the phenomenon affects organizational performance, particularly the quality of service delivery in an organization. This dimension is important for the development of absenteeism management strategies that promote the improvement of the quality of goods and services in any given organization.

The current qualitative phenomenological study was an attempt to extend the knowledge on employee absenteeism, specifically how the phenomenon affects the quality of services rendered by the Zambian government agency. The study involved 22 purposefully selected participants from the clientele of the Zambian government agency. My conceptual framework is based on McGregor's theory x (Robbins & Coulter, 2014). In this chapter, I have introduced the study. The next chapter is a review of the literature on absenteeism, covering major research on absenteeism and indicating that a possible gap exists in the current literature on absenteeism. The literature review is a presentation of the literature relevant to this study, with specific focus on what knowledge exists on absenteeism and what methodological approaches earlier scholars employed to come up with their respective findings.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Evidence that the performance of the Zambia public service has been unsatisfactory exists, necessitating various reforms (Mulikita, 2012). Employee absenteeism is high in Zambia, particularly in public service (Mulikita, 2012; Mvula, 2017). Thus, this study was focused on the lack of knowledge on the lived experiences of clients regarding staff absenteeism and service delivery at a Zambian government agency. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of clients of the Zambian government agency regarding staff absenteeism and service delivery at the institution.

The next segment of this chapter includes the search strategies and databases I employed to review the relevant literature for this study. Following the search strategies is the conceptual framework in which the study is grounded. After that, I share the review of the literature based on thematic dimensions of absenteeism research. The first theme involves absenteeism related to sickness (see Baek et al., 2015; Zare, Choobineh, & Keshvarzi, 2016). Another dimension of absenteeism that I discuss in this review deals with other factors associated with absenteeism (see Abdullah & Lee, 2012; Enns et al., 2014; Kocakulah et al., 2016). Because absenteeism may be a problem for every organization, the third facet of absenteeism I cover in this review is based on the strategies for managing or addressing absenteeism.

I later focus on organizational leadership styles and how they relate to absenteeism. I also discuss the financial costs of absenteeism to the organization (Cascio, 2006; Magee et al., 2016). Few researchers have looked at how absenteeism relates to



organizational productivity and no research was found on how absenteeism affects the quality of service delivery in an organization, particularly in public service. The last two parts of the literature review consist of a review of studies done in Africa on absenteeism, and a discussion of the research gap I have addressed in this study.

### **Literature Search Strategies**

For the review of the literature, I consulted various sources. The main sources I examined for relevant data included the Walden University Library, through which I accessed the following databases: ABI/INFORM Complete, ProQuest Central, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Direct, Thoreau, and Science Direct. I focused on peer-reviewed journals published in the past 5 years, dissertations, government and United Nations reports. I employed the following key search terms in the search for literature: *employee absenteeism*, *employee absence*, *absenteeism*, *absence*, *employee absenteeism in public service*, and *employee absence in public service*. Some of the additional search details I used are *phenomenological study*, *qualitative study*, *service provision*, *effects*, *causes*, *service delivery*, *quality of goods*, *organizational productivity*, *Africa*, and *Zambia*.

Because many resources have been published on absenteeism in recent years, I concentrated on the most recent resources, which reflected the most contemporary debate on the subject. I also considered some older resources to show the chronological growth of the absenteeism discourse. To expand my search, I also examined Google and Google Scholar for relevant resources.

My initial search was generic with foundations of the subject of absenteeism. Later, it became more specific to absenteeism in public service. To review what has been researched on absenteeism in Africa, I limited the search further to Africa and service delivery. From the plethora of resources from the generic search, I realized that the more I limited the search scope, the less the resources came out. When I turned to Zambia, the search did not yield anything appropriate except for Kalusa's (2016) unpublished master's thesis based on teacher absenteeism in Zambia. In total, I reviewed 150 articles, mostly published in the past 4 years, 141 of which are peer-reviewed. I also consulted 25 textbooks, eight dissertations, and five websites. Table 1 is an illustration of the sources of literature for review.

Table 1

<i>Literature Review Sources</i>			
Source	2012 Onwards	Before 2012	Total
Peer-reviewed articles	133	8	141
Non peer-reviewed articles	6	3	9
Dissertations	8	0	8
Textbooks	18	7	25
Websites	5	0	5
Total	170	18	188
Percentage of total	90.42%	9.58%	100%

### **Conceptual Framework**

The current study is grounded in McGregor's theory x, which is based on the assumption that employees are inherently lazy and will avoid work if they can (Robbins & Coulter, 2014). To understand the behavior of employees in view of McGregor's theory x, it is important to get the views and lived experiences of the people who interact with the employees, which in this study involved the participants. In the context of the

current study, the absenteeism of employees at the Zambian government agency may be seen in terms of the employees' negative attitude toward work. The result of the absenteeism is poor service delivery due to the disruption of work schedules and overwhelmed remaining employees.

The concepts of culpable absenteeism and innocent absenteeism as propounded by Avey et al. (2006) also form part of the conceptual framework. Culpable absenteeism refers to an employee who is absent from work without authorization for reasons within his or her control, whereas innocent absenteeism means absence for reasons beyond an employee's control like sickness and injury (Avey et al., 2006). The current study aligns with the concept of culpable absenteeism, which is congruent to McGregor's theory x, because in both cases the behavior of the employee is seen in the negative perspective. To contextualize the current study, absenteeism occurs because of employees' bad attitudes toward work.

Another facet of the conceptual framework is rooted in Dagget et al.'s (2016) theory that high absenteeism leads to decreased productivity and difficulty in providing quality services to clients. Levels of productivity and the quality of services are affected because of employee absenteeism (Dagget et al., 2016). The framework is also in line with the argument that employee absenteeism is high in Zambia (Kalusa, 2016; Mulikita, 2012). The study was based on the theory that absenteeism leads to reduced productivity and poor service delivery (Dagget et al., 2016; Harris, 2014). The conceptual framework was open to Sigursteinsdottir and Rafnsdottir's (2015) suggestion that employee

absenteeism may not always lead to reduced productivity and poor quality of goods and services.

### **Employee Absenteeism**

Many researchers of employee absenteeism understand and interpret the term in similar ways. For example, Magee et al. (2016) viewed employee absenteeism as the failure to report to work as scheduled. Patton and Johns (2012) were more specific, defining employee absenteeism in terms of an individual's lack of physical presence at a given location and time as expected. Cascio (2006) offered a more business-inclined perspective, looking at employee absenteeism as any failure of an employee to report for or remain at work as scheduled, regardless of the reason. The emphasis, in this case, is the importance of *scheduled absence*. The term *as scheduled* here automatically excludes vacations, holidays, jury duty, and so on (Cascio, 2006). Anything outside these circumstances entails that an employee missing from duty is considered absent.

Some scholars have also defined absenteeism in terms of the frequency with which an employee fails to report for work. Harris (2014) viewed absenteeism as employees who regularly missed work because of illness or other unforeseen excused or nonexcused reasons. From this standpoint, if an employee is missing work for the first time, then he or she may not be deemed absent. This definition may also exclude time lost to absence after an employee reports for work and decides to check out and do things unrelated to official duty during working hours.

### **Sickness and Absence**

Many studies have been conducted on sickness and absenteeism. Scholars have looked at health conditions to understand their association with absenteeism and how they could be managed to reduce the rates of absenteeism. For example, Howard and Potter (2014) conducted a quantitative study to assess the relationships between overweight, obesity, related chronic health conditions, and worker absenteeism. They concluded that obesity was related to higher rates of worker illness absence and that the presence of diabetes positively moderated this relationship (Howard & Potter, 2014).

Depression has also been linked to absenteeism. Sallis and Birkin (2014) studied the experience of employment with depression as a way of developing an understanding of the mediators that may influence the management of depression-related sickness absence. Through a phenomenological study, they found a need to address depressive symptoms among employees to reduce the observed diminishing ability to work, absenteeism, and poor RTW behavior. Hendriks et al. (2015) went further to argue that depressive moods among employees were strong predictors of long-term absenteeism. Additionally, Munir et al. (2011) suggested the quality of leadership might inhibit long-term sick leave to a certain extent in those employees with moderate depressive disorders. Another fundamental dimension of sickness absence is the aspect of the RTW of employees affected by sickness absence.

### **Return-To-Work**

Some scholars have conducted research to expedite the return of sickness-absent employees to work because of the problem of sickness absence. RTW forms a critical

aspect of absenteeism management and many organizational leaders incorporate it into their strategies and policies (Patton & Johns, 2012). Thus, researchers have investigated factors that affect sickness absence like Volker et al. (2015), who proposed a focus on factors such as self-efficacy illness behavior instead of just symptoms of the sick-listed employee when guiding long-term sick-listed employees. Muijzer et al. (2012) also identified 19 factors for the assessment of RTW efforts in employees on long-term sickness absence, 12 of which were categorized under activities and in the personal and environmental domain and seven under intervention, job accommodation, and measures. Further, Young and Choi (2016) focused on work-related factors useful in estimating timeframes for sickness absent employees. When strategizing for better RTW of sick employees, it is important to concentrate on work-related issues and assist those affected in terms of the tasks they require to complete before they return to work (Young & Choi, 2016).

### **Sickness Absence, Alcohol Consumption, and Smoking**

Sickness absence has also been associated with smoking and the consumption of alcohol. Schou and Moan (2016) evaluated empirical evidence for a possible association of alcohol use with sickness absence and found that alcohol use can be associated with both long and short-term absence. Additionally, Schou, Storvoll, and Moan (2014) used self-reported measures to look at the differences in the rates of alcohol-related sickness absence among young employees and the relationship between drinking patterns and sickness absence. Other scholars have linked sickness absence to smoking.

Smoking is known to lead to several diseases related to cardiovascular, respiratory, and cerebrovascular complications, which causes higher worker absenteeism (Suarez-Bonel et al., 2015). Suarez-Bonel et al. (2015) used a cross-sectional study to analyze differences in the use of healthcare resources, healthcare costs and days of work absenteeism among smokers and nonsmokers. They concluded that more investment in programs for the prevention and treatment of smoking as a health policy could help reduce the health and social costs of smoking and reduce the rate of absenteeism among smokers (Suarez-Bonel et al., 2015). Apart from alcohol and smoking, some specific diseases may be directly associated with absenteeism.

### **Specific Health Conditions and Sickness Absence**

Research on sickness absence has been narrowed to specific diseases to establish their relationships with absence. De Vroome et al. (2015) used a holistic study of chronic diseases and how they contributed to sickness absence, suggesting that chronic diseases led to productivity losses from sickness absence. Azor-Martinez et al. (2014) focused on common infections and how they affected school absenteeism. Common infections in schools were reduced with hygiene programs, especially during flu seasons (Azor-Martinez et al., 2014).

Other researchers have been interested in psychosocial work factors, mental disorders, and delayed sleep disorders and how these relate to sickness absence (Lau et al., 2016; Munir et al., 2011; Rajaratnam et al., 2015). In a quantitative study, Munir et al. (2011) examined the influence of protective work factors on long-term sickness absence among employees reporting different levels of depressive symptoms. Their results

showed that the quality of leadership was associated with reduced sickness absence to a stronger degree for those with moderate depressive symptoms than those without depressive symptoms (Munir et al., 2011).

Additionally, Lau et al. (2016) argued that employees with mental disorders and were fully working had fewer symptoms of disorders and functioned much better than those who were totally on sick leave. Further, Rajaratnam et al. (2015) indicated that delayed sleep phase disorder danger was associated with higher absences and caused disruptions to the operations of organizations, social, and family settings. Zare et al. (2016) also researched the linkages between amplitude and stability of circadian rhythm, sleep quality, and sickness absence and occupational stress, supporting other findings that stress contributed to sickness absence (see also Munir et al., 2011; Sallis & Birkin, 2014) and sleep disorders were associated with sickness absence (see also Baek et al., 2015; Rajaratnam et al., 2015).

Sickness absence has also been associated with childbirth and maternal absence (Narusyte et al., 2016; Nes et al., 2015), comorbid health problems, and musculoskeletal disorders (Baek et al., 2015), and rheumatoid arthritis (Verstappen, 2015). Nes et al. (2015) suggested that a mother with a child suffering from language impairment had a higher risk of not finding employment and if employed, faced the increased risk of taking long-term sick leave when the child attained the age of 5 years. Additionally, Baek et al. (2015) indicated a relationship between musculoskeletal disorders and comorbid health problems, including depression disorder, insomnia or sleep verstadisorder, fatigue, and injury by accident, which affect work productivity.



### **Sickness Presenteeism**

One facet of absenteeism that has been researched is sickness presenteeism, which is when employees turn up to work despite being sick and deserving some rest and absence from work (Skagen & Collins, 2016). The estimated annual loss of productivity due to presenteeism in the United States was estimated at \$255 million (Cascio, 2006). In recent research, presenteeism has been addressed in terms of the economic cost of presenteeism, and the health consequences for employees reporting presenteeism (Russel et al., 2016). Skagen and Collins (2016) also concluded that sickness presenteeism at baseline was a common risk factor.

Their scope was, however, limited and they relied on secondary data (Skagen & Collins, 2016).

### **Other Sickness Absence Issues**

Research has also been focused on sickness absence issues like interventions to prevent absences. Vanneste et al. (2016) evaluated the effectiveness of a Dutch intervention medical advice for sick-reported students through interviews with nine principals and eight special education coordinators at nine different schools. Their findings indicated that the main reasons for schools to address medical absenteeism were their concerns about students' well-being and prospects.

Studying sickness absence in a secondary school setting has implications for understanding sickness absence dynamics so that by the time individuals enter employment some strategies are already formulated to address the phenomenon.

Further research has been focused on sickness absenteeism in other settings in addition to models that can help identify who is likely to have issues with sickness absence. Baydoun, Dumit, and Daouk (2016) researched sickness absenteeism among nurses and found antecedents in nurse sickness absenteeism. Mudaly and Nkosi (2015) also focused on nurse absenteeism and argued that personal and professional issues may lead to nurse absenteeism. Roelen et al. (2013) concluded that the sickness absence model predicted the risk of high sickness absence among office employees but required some more validation. Other organizational factors have also been identified as critical elements of sickness absence.

Bernstom and Kjekshus (2015) studied how long-term sickness absence in hospitals was affected by organizational change. Lahti, Lahelma, and Rahkonen (2012) investigated the effect of variations in leisure-time physical activity on sickness absence. Using the quantitative inquiry, Bernstom and Kjekshus concluded that frequent organizational changes led to increased sickness absenteeism among employees. Lahti et al. concluded that sickness absence may be reduced by increasing vigorous physical activity among the employees. In the Lahti et al. study, data were collected from 40-60-year-old employees from the year 2000 to 2002 and 2007.

The importance of Bernstom and Kjekshus's (2015) research lies in the fact that many contemporary organizations undergo some transformations or changes due to the volatile business environment prevailing (Robbins & Coulter, 2014). As these changes are being made, it is important for managers to incorporate concerns for the potential

higher sickness absence among employees. Sickness absence has also been studied in the education sector.

Carlsen (2012) conducted a qualitative cross-case study of teachers' views about sickness absence. Sumanen, Pietilainen, Lahti, Lahelma, and Rahkonen (2015) looked at how education, occupational class, and income played a part in sickness absence in young employees. Picking three secondary schools, Carlsen established a link between fairness and social support and sickness absence. Carlsen's findings did not align with the assumption that absence-related stigma reduced as the levels of absence increased. After their results indicated that education had the strongest relationship with sickness absence among women and men in both periods of their study, Sumanen et al. propagated for preventive measures to mitigate the risk of sickness absence. The strength of the study by Sumanen et al. is that they spread their research over two periods: 2002-2007 and 2008-2013. This enabled them to compare and consolidate the two sets of results as a means of enhancing data validity.

Carlsen (2012) did well in terms of aligning her study purpose with the chosen methodology of a qualitative cross-case study. The purpose of her study was an exploration of how teachers' absence experiences were related to sickness absence. This sort of purpose could only be effectively addressed through qualitative research which allows a researcher to dig deep into the subject of inquiry by engaging persons with knowledge of the issue being studied (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013). Carlsen focused on an exclusive scope in terms of the study population consisting only of three secondary schools. She did not share the exact problem on which the study was anchored.

Rybczynski (2016) investigated the association of alternative medicine, worker health, with absenteeism in the United States. Rybczynski employed the quantitative method, relying on the 2007 National Health Interview Survey. In conclusion, Rybczynski estimated that some complementary and alternative medicine modalities correlated with lower absenteeism, and many correlated with improved health. Because Rybczynski clearly explained the relationships between various health states and absenteeism, the study has important practical implications for the management of absenteeism related to the health of employees. It is not clear what methodological approach Rybczynski applied in her study, and the practical implications of the study were not shared.

Other researchers have looked at an economic crisis in a country to understand sickness absenteeism. Lopez, Clanchet, Lopez, Bonacho, and Benavides (2016) conducted a cross-sectional analysis of the economic crisis in Spain in 2006 and 2010 and concluded, among other things, that the dawn of the economic crisis had increased sickness absence episodes for women. The focus on the correlation of the economic crisis to absenteeism may have been important for the creation of positive social change. Further, the study was conducted in two separate years, which strengthened the data validity. In terms of data collection, detailed interviews and observations would have assisted the scholars to gather a wealth of valuable and more valid data.

Johns and Miraglia (2015) employed a meta-analysis to look at the reliability, validity, and accuracy of absence self-reports. Their findings indicated that self-reports of absenteeism offer adequate test-retest reliability and they show good rank order

convergence with organizational records. The research results, however, indicated that people have a tendency of underreporting their absenteeism. Self-reports were more accurate when sickness absence rather than any other form of absence was investigated (Johns & Miraglia, 2015).

### **Non-Sickness Absenteeism Factors**

Besides sickness, a number of other factors have been investigated in view of absenteeism. Professional autonomy and the work setting are some of the factors associated with absenteeism (Enns, Currie, & Wang, 2014). Enns et al. (2014) conducted a research among female nurses and concluded that reduced job autonomy and increased job strain were catalysts for higher absenteeism. This is in close agreement with Azam and Gholam (2014) who found a relationship between the physical environment and absenteeism. In addition, all the stress factors comprising inefficiency, duty ambiguity, duty responsibility, and work boundaries were found to be associated with absenteeism (Azam & Gholam, 2014). The stress factors that Azam and Gholam associated with absenteeism are synonymous with the increased job stress that Enns et al. linked to absenteeism.

The studies by Enns et al. (2014) and Azam and Gholam (2014) are both critical for understanding absenteeism. From Enns et al.'s findings, for instance, it is easy for organizational leaders and human resource managers to leverage resources and develop interventions to ensure the minimization of absenteeism among staff. By identifying stress factors that were associated with absenteeism, Azam and Gholam offered managers a practical hunch to improved absenteeism management. The researchers in these two

studies could, however, have strengthened their studies in certain areas. Enns et al. did not justify their choice of a descriptive survey for the methodology. Enns et al. further did not specify their participants in the abstract and did not state the practical implications of the study.

Close to Enns et al. (2014) and Azam and Gholam (2014, Nguyen, Groth and Johnson (2016) acknowledged the connection between absenteeism and emotional labor as they investigated the relationship between surface acting and absenteeism and the moderating role of surface acting self-efficacy. Nguyen et al. argued that when valued resources are threatened or lost because of surface acting, employees tend to strive to prevent further resource loss by withdrawing from work. The study findings indicated direct effects of surface acting on absenteeism, and that higher surface acting self-efficacy reduced the detrimental effects of surface acting on absenteeism (Nguyen et al., 2016). Unlike Azam and Gholam (2014), Avey et al. (2006) analyzed positive psychological capital.

Avey et al. (2006) segregated absenteeism into two types: voluntary and involuntary absenteeism. They concluded that psychological capital was important for the management and control of absenteeism costs (Avey et al., 2006). One of the strengths of this study was a good review of the literature on absenteeism, particularly in the smaller scope of the association of psychological capital with absenteeism. They employed the quantitative approach with a specific methodology involving 105 participants. Through the dichotomy framework, Avey et al. made the important distinction between voluntary and involuntary absenteeism, which is very useful for absenteeism management. This

may enable managers to approach the problem of absenteeism in two different ways, depending on the type of absenteeism in question.

Voluntary absenteeism occurs when an employee can avoid the absence, but still stays away from work. Avey et al. (2006) shared some examples of voluntary absenteeism as vacation or deliberately staying away from work due to potentially unjustifiable personal reasons. This view is contrary to Cascio's (2006) definition of absenteeism where vacation was considered as scheduled absence and not a part of absenteeism. Involuntary absenteeism, on the other hand, was seen as absence from the workplace because of unavoidable circumstances (Avey et al., 2006). Under the normal circumstances, involuntary absenteeism may include physical or psychological illness. The dichotomy developed by Avey et al. is important for mitigating absenteeism.

Once organizational leaders and human resource managers are able to differentiate between voluntary and involuntary absenteeism, it may become easier to address employee absenteeism. Most organizational leaders may be blamed for the failure to strategically address involuntary absenteeism through such proactive efforts like illness reduction, acceleration of RTW of sickness absent employees, and making it less attractive for employees to deliberately miss work (Avey et al., 2006). Avey et al. (2006) may be credited for having described a clear theoretical background, methodology and addressing a unique dimension of absenteeism, which makes absenteeism management easier.

Researchers have also established that the family plays a role in the attitudes and behaviors of employees including absenteeism. Boyar et al. (2016) examined the impact

of the two specific family roles of financing and caregiving on four outcome variables: absenteeism, partial absences, employee performance, and life satisfaction. The results demonstrated the impact of family roles on important outcomes such as absenteeism and life satisfaction (Boyar et al., 2016). For their data collection, Boyar et al. relied on secondary data sources like company records. A theoretical framework did not guide their study and they did not mention the sampling strategy employed.

Some scholars have looked at the relationship between employee engagement and absenteeism. Hoxsey (2010) argued that although a more engaged employee may use less sick time, the differences in use between highly engaged employees and those not engaged were fairly marginal and that correlation was further confounded by other factors. In another study, Liu, Li, Fan, and Nauta (2015) focused on the association between workplace conflict and absenteeism. Their finding was that self-reported interpersonal conflict at work was positively related to absence and lateness while the coworker-reported conflict was not (Liu et al., 2015). Both Hoxsey and Liu et al. looked at sociological aspects of absenteeism and offered some insights that are important to organizational managers.

In terms of methodology, Hoxsey (2010) basically evaluated the 2007 survey conducted among British Columbian civil servants to measure the levels of workplace engagement. Although Hoxsey proceeded empirically, the exclusive use of secondary data collected from the previous survey was less useful than the use of primary data. Further, the author pointed to the fact that the correlations between highly engaged and less engaged employees were confounded by other factors but did not specify these other



factors. In the study by Liu et al. (2015), the sample size appeared to be representative of the population, but it is not clear how the researchers developed the sample size of 204 employee-coworker dyads for the United States and 166 dyads for China. The researchers also did not justify their choice of the United States and China and the use of those figures in the sample, neither was the sampling strategy mentioned.

Absenteeism can also be due to the types of the contract given to the employees. Restrepo and Salgado (2013) analyzed absenteeism in the context of uncertain employment conditions. Among their findings was that women were more likely to be absent from work than men, and that probability increased if the woman got married (Restrepo & Salgado, 2013). People with lower levels of education were found to be less likely to be absent than those with college education, as were individuals working in small rather than large companies (Restrepo & Salgado, 2013). Slightly related to Restrepo and Salgado's study, Vignoli, Gugliemi, Bonfiglioli, and Violante (2016) undertook a quantitative study of how job demands affected absenteeism. Vignoli et al. concluded that subsequent mediation highlighted the role of emotional exhaustion in causing absenteeism.

Restrepo and Salgado (2013) depended on secondary data for their methodology. Restrepo and Salgado also integrated a range of variables that appeared separately in the literature as determinants of absenteeism. Further, they contributed to the development of management theory as they empirically demonstrated the relationship between a type of contract and absenteeism. On the other hand, Vignoli et al. (2016) offered insights to the reduction of costs related to absenteeism and the improvement of productivity by

changing the psychosocial work environment and, consequently, employees' mental health conditions. A different study was based on bullying and absenteeism.

Mundbjerg, Høgh, and Hansen (2016) researched the long-term consequences of bullying at the workplace on sickness absence. Results of this study indicated that bullying at the workplace was not gender-selective (Mundbjerg et al., 2016). Through a quantitative review of an earlier study, Mundbjerg et al. also concluded that workplace bullying was related to negative immediate self-reported health in both men and women. It is not clear from the study abstract who the participants in the Mundbjerg et al. study were and how they were selected. The research problem and question that Mundbjerg et al. attempted to answer in their study is not indicated. Absenteeism has also been studied in school settings.

In a quantitative study of school absenteeism, work, and health, Machado, Milcent, and Huguenin (2013) found a direct effect of the health status of an individual and child labor on school attendance. In a similar research, Dinu (2015) conducted a mixed methods study to substantiate the school attendance initiative in Romanian villages through a sociological understanding of the social processes that were put in motion in communities, schools, and families. The findings suggested that most participants did not have education at both the elementary and higher level and most parents wanted their children to be married as early as possible for economic reasons (Dinu, 2015).

Looking at the aim of Dinu's (2015) study, one would propose the exclusive use of the qualitative approach rather the quantitative method used. The focus of the research sounds more appropriate for in-depth investigations rather than statistical measurements.

One option to consider for this research topic would be the phenomenological or ethnographic research, given the setting and participants in the milieu. Machado et al. (2013) reviewed many resources in their study, but did not state their theoretical framework, purpose, and a clear methodology. Scholars have also linked absenteeism to natural factors.

One of the natural factors that may affect the levels of absenteeism is the type of weather and the amount of daylight. Markussen and Roed (2015) examined the impact of hours of daylight on sick leave and concluded that the overall relationship between absenteeism and daylight hours was negative. This finding is similar to that of Ali, Chua, and Lim (2015) who used case studies to evaluate the effect of the physical environment and levels of comfort on the performance of employees and found that the employees were more sensitive to room temperature than luminance levels. Contrary to luminance, heavy snow gives rise to absenteeism during the winter, while warm weather reduces the incidence of returning to work during the summer (Markussen & Roed, 2015).

Markussen and Roed (2015) did not review enough literature for their study. The review of literature is critical at every stage of an academic research (Patton, 2015). Markussen and Roed also did not collect primary data, opting for the use of the administrative register data.

Ziebarth (2013) evaluated the labor supply effects of cuts in statutory sick pay levels on long-term absenteeism. The methodology used in this study was good because the scholar combined empirical with theoretical measures. Ziebarth concluded that long-term sick employees were unlikely to be very responsive to moderate monetary labor

supply incentives. Cutting sick leave does not significantly reduce the average incidence and duration of sick leave periods longer than six weeks (Ziebarth, 2013). This study is an asset for better absenteeism management. On the other hand, Ziebarth failed to give an explanation pertaining to the practical importance of the findings of the study.

The influence of time and perceptions of social context on absenteeism trajectories has been a subject of research. Russo, Miraglia, Borgogni, and Johns (2013) found that high-tenure employees exhibited flat trajectories of absences over a 4-year period. The more positive the perceptions of top management, the lower the increase in absenteeism and employees with one to three years tenure increased their absences to conform to the dominant norm (Russo et al., 2013). Paula and Luc (2015) preferred to use presenteeism to forecast absenteeism. Paula and Luc also argued that absenteeism, whether sickness-related or not, was not random and the employers had an influence on absenteeism.

Paula and Luc (2015) relied on the literature review and a theoretical analysis for their study methodology. The Paula and Luc study did not include some of the major research elements like a detailed review of the literature, research participants, and data analysis strategies. In the end, the main purpose of the study, prediction of absenteeism using presenteeism, seems not to have been addressed in the findings. In the study by Russo et al. (2013), the predictors of absenteeism were measured cross-sectionally despite absenteeism being measured longitudinally. The sampling strategy used by Russo et al. was not explained. The fact that the Russo et al. study was an offshoot of a broader investigation may raise the concern for originality.

Demyen and Ciurea (2015) concluded that absenteeism lowered productivity and work variation bred new costs in terms of recruiting new staff, training, and retraining. Absenteeism may be seen as a provisional refusal to work, and disruption of the production process and work organization which gives rise to some negative consequences (Demyen & Ciurea, 2015). This argument does not hold in the face of Avey et al.'s (2006) dyadic view of absenteeism - voluntary and involuntary absenteeism. With the distinction between voluntary and involuntary absenteeism, it would be wrong to treat every occurrence of absenteeism as provisional refusal to work because, in involuntary absenteeism, there are compelling circumstances.

Absenteeism has also been associated with anomia. Pablo and Agustin (2015) conducted a quantitative study to test the association of anomia with absence, operationalized as propensity to abusive absence due to illness. Anomia can affect the incidence of absence (Pablo & Agustin, 2015). While the objective of this study was clear, Pablo and Agustin did not employ any conceptual or theoretical framework to support their study. Further, they did not state and justify any sampling method used to come up with the selected 84 employees. Pablo and Agustin also omitted to state any limitations of their research, measures for ensuring data validity and the protection of the study participants.

### **Leadership Style and Absenteeism**

The type of leadership in an organization has been linked to absenteeism levels. Mtimkulu et al. (2014) found that autocratic leadership led to higher levels of absenteeism, while participative, democratic and laissez-faire leadership promoted a

reduction in absence rates. Poor leadership and communication structures, bad employment policies, inappropriate work climate, poor organizational structure, poor employee supervision, and passiveness of organizational leaders are some administrative factors that are known to negatively affect employee absenteeism (Sheikha & Younis, 2006). Munir et al. (2011) argued that the quality of leadership might inhibit long-term sick leave to a certain extent in those employees with moderate depressive disorders.

Mtimkulu et al. (2014) attempted to link absenteeism to a number of factors at four hospitals. Owing to the different prevailing conditions in different sectors, Mtimkulu et al.'s findings may be difficult to generalize beyond the hospital environment. The Sheikha and Younis (2006) study is insightful in terms of leveraging opportunities for the minimization of employee absences. Methodologically, however, Sheikha and Younis did not state how they arrived at their sample. It is important to explain the sampling method to enhance the credibility and validity of study findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

More relationships between absenteeism and the leadership style practiced in an organization exist. Through perceptions of psychological strain and organizational justice, managerial abuse was found to be associated with the incidence of absenteeism (Wood, Niven, & Braeken, 2016). Wood et al. (2016) further argued that the length of absence was not affected by managerial abuse once one was absent, and the absence occurrence was linked to depression and bullying. The frequency of manager absence may be less influential on absenteeism compared to team-level absence (Angus, Podolsky, Biron, & Chan, 2015). In a postmerger mental health facility, it is important to consider transformational leadership because this lowers absenteeism, enhances

employee satisfaction while allowing for better employee sickness management (Elshout, Scherp, & van der Feltz-Cornelis, 2013).

Wood et al. (2016) did not indicate any practical implications for their study despite starting with a justifiable research problem. The scholars also did not include the limitations and study framework of their study. Elshout et al. (2013) failed to explain the premise of their quantitative study. While the methodology was appropriate and representative of the population, Elshout et al. did not explain the theoretical framework that grounded their investigation. Angus et al. (2015) did considerable literature review but did not share any measures to ensure the validity and reliability of their data. Further, congruence between the study purpose, methodology, and research question was apparently lacking in the Angus et al. study.

### **The Financial Cost of Absenteeism**

One of the reasons why employee absenteeism attracts so much interest among organizational leaders and multidimensional scholars is the financial cost associated with the phenomenon. Researchers have established evidence of financial costs to businesses because of absenteeism. Kocakulah et al. (2016) reported that the annual cost of absenteeism to organizations in Canada reached a record \$789 per employee in 2002 and 2.8 million workdays were lost every year to absenteeism. In 2008, absenteeism in Canada translated into losses of over \$16 billion in salary expenses. An estimated 15 to 20% of direct and indirect payroll costs in Canada were linked to absenteeism (Kocakulah et al., 2016). These absenteeism levels may raise interest from many organizational leaders because of the implication for the profitability of a business.

Kocakulah et al. (2016) digested absenteeism in a very illuminating approach, weaving together various sources to discuss the causes and effects of absenteeism and proposing some solutions to the problem. By identifying personal illness and family issues as some of the major causes of absenteeism, Kocakulah et al. offered good tools to employers for the formulation of interventions for managing absenteeism. The researchers opted for the exclusive review and analysis of literature as their methodology, ignoring more empirical data collection methods like interviews, which offer more validity and reliability to the data. Unlike Kocakulah et al., Ivanova et al. (2009) embarked on a similar study with more empiricism in their approach.

Ivanova et al. (2009) looked at absenteeism and disability costs among employees with multiple sclerosis. Ivanova et al. used a quantitative retrogressive analysis of a database for disability data from 17 companies as the main data collection method. The conclusion was that multiple sclerosis created huge costs for organizations in terms of absenteeism and disability (Ivanova et al., 2009). Unlike Kocakulah et al. (2016) who researched a topic that had previously been addressed by many other scholars, Ivanova et al.'s choice of a research topic was better, owing to its uniqueness. The more scientifically unknown a research topic is, the more the contribution of knowledge to the given field (Silverman, 2014). Other researchers have focused on health care costs.

Suarez-Bonel et al., (2015) investigated the health care costs and absenteeism among smokers and concluded that the costs were higher than those recorded among non-smokers. A cross-sectional study was employed in this study, with a sample size of five hundred patients. Suarez-Bonel et al. were more solid in their study methodology than



Ivanova et al. (2009) who reviewed a database for their data collection. From the ethical perspective, however, Suarez-Bonel et al. did not have any special measures in their methodology to ensure the protection of the participants who were patients. Both Suarez-Bonel et al. and Ivanova et al. did not state any strategies for enhancing the validity of their data.

In the United States, sickness-related absenteeism cost an estimated \$153 billion yearly (Rybczynski, 2016). Rybczynski (2016) observed that these costs were related to complementary and alternative medicine for chronic conditions that were the major cause of absenteeism. In terms of unscheduled absences, the annual cost of absences in the United States was around \$800 per employee (Cascio, 2006). Cascio (2006) put the cost of presenteeism to employers in the United States at \$255 million per year. It is not every employer, however, who considers absenteeism as a problem and some employers ignore absenteeism, as long as their employees are able to reach targets and deliver the expected results (Cascio, 2006). Research indications are that the rates and cost of absenteeism could be increasing with time.

A comparative analysis of the Cascio (2006) and Rybczynski (2016) figures indicated an exponential growth of the cost of absenteeism in the United States over the decade. Rybczynski (2016) may be credited for a strong literature review, a clear methodology and a good analysis and interpretation of results. On the other hand, Rybczynski omitted to state her study's practical implications. Cascio's research was a good synthesis of various perspectives, with the methodology of an exclusive desk study. Most research studies on absenteeism costs have yielded considerable figures.

Magee et al. (2016) stated that the cost of absenteeism in Australia was at least \$7 billion per year in terms of health care costs and productivity losses only. The costs of absenteeism in Europe and the United States is quite considerable as well (Magee et al., 2016). Magee et al. did well to investigate absenteeism trajectories in Australia over a five-year period because of the lack of evidence of any earlier study that followed that methodology. The big sample size of 2,481 was also representative of the study population, enhancing the generalizability of results. The quantitative approach was appropriate for this study, given the purpose. Magee et al. (2016), however, did not include the study problem, implications for practice, and the measures for ensuring data validity and participant protection. Another area of absenteeism that has been researched widely is absenteeism management.

### **Employee Absenteeism Management**

In response to the various problems emanating from employee absenteeism, researchers have conducted studies to come up with strategies for managing the phenomenon. Boon et al. (2014) evaluated the effect of certain management practices on absenteeism and time allocation at work. Leaning on the theory of withdrawal, Boon et al. proposed higher job satisfaction among employees and high-performance work systems as effective strategies for handling absenteeism. Abdullah and Lee (2012) also recommended job satisfaction for absenteeism mitigation. Boon et al. conducted an extensive review of the literature and appropriately employed the quantitative approach for the study. The weak side of the Boon et al. study was the abstract which did not have

a statement of the results and the implications of the research for practice. Abdullah and Lee composed a better abstract with all the basic components.

Abdullah and Lee (2012) found lower absenteeism levels among the respondents who had attended wellness programs than the respondents who had not attended wellness programs. While the composition of the Abdullah and Lee study was good, their literature review was too brief compared to the wealth of resources analyzed by Boon et al. (2014). Abdullah and Lee were clear about their methodology, stating clearly their sample size and sampling strategy. On the other hand, Abdullah and Lee did not state their research problem, outline a comprehensive research framework, and study limitations. Communication and monitoring have also been recommended as tools for absenteeism management.

Tanasescu, Florea, and Tanasescu (2015) discussed communication and monitoring as necessary procedures for managing and measuring absenteeism. Effective communication between the managers and employees and good monitoring of the employees are very efficacious strategies for managing and reducing employee absenteeism (Tanasescu et al., 2015). Considering that the methodology adopted by Tanasescu et al. was a theoretical review, their findings may have limited validity in terms of the dynamic research environment. The collection of primary data, in this case, would have enhanced the data validity and research credibility. The Tanasescu et al. study was not supported by any theoretical or conceptual framework and it is difficult to ascertain which study design was followed. Cucchiella et al. (2014) looked elsewhere for strategies for managing absenteeism.

Cucchiella et al. (2014) suggested the collective involvement of employers and employees as the best approach to solve absenteeism problems. Unilateral decisions and actions by the managers to handle absenteeism may exacerbate the problem (Cucchiella et al., 2014). Agreeing with Tanasescu et al. (2015), Cucchiella et al. proposed communication between the managers and subordinates within the broader framework of collaboration between the two sides as an effective way of managing absenteeism. Other measures for absenteeism reduction as suggested by Cucchiella et al. included the health protection policies and initiatives for the motivation of employees. Largely, the propositions by Cucchiella et al. are synonymous with the employee wellness programs postulated by Abdullah and Lee. Some key components like the methodology, analysis of the results, limitations, and ethical measures were missing from the study by Cucchiella et al. Other scholars have considered the possibility of zero-absenteeism.

Unlike most researchers whose focus was on the employees who were often absent from work, Schreuder, Roelen, van der Klink, and Groothoff (2013) had a unique mixed-methods qualitative study as they concentrated on those employees who recorded zero absenteeism. Schreuder et al. concluded that personal attitudes played a key role in absenteeism and zero-absentees managed to have such record due to personal motivation rather than pressure from their superiors. In other words, innate personal and behavioral attributes and not organizational mechanisms influence one's absenteeism pattern. When viewed against the dichotomy of voluntary and involuntary absenteeism proposed by Avey et al. (2006), Schreuder et al.'s attribution of zero-absenteeism to personal motivation may not hold because people can miss work for inevitable reasons like

sickness, which have nothing to do with one's attributes. Schreuder et al. did not offer justification for the choice of the mixed-method qualitative method.

Allen, Robinson, Aucoin, and Leeming (2014) recommended administrative support and the collaboration between managers and union leaders as effective strategies for reducing absenteeism. It may also be helpful to build the capacity for supervisors in terms of how to handle attendance matters (Allen et al., 2014). The position of Allen et al. aligns closely with the arguments of Tanasescu et al. (2015) and Cucchiella et al. (2014) that absenteeism management requires the engagement of supervisors and their subordinates. Schreuder et al. (2013) did not recognize the importance of the collaboration of superiors with their juniors as the best way to find mechanisms for managing absenteeism. Allen et al. specifically proposed that the trade unions should engage organizational leaders on behalf of the employees and reach some mutual agreements that incorporate the interests of both sides in respect of absenteeism.

While Allen et al. (2014) agreed with Tanasescu et al. (2015) and Cucchiella et al. (2014), Allen et al.'s methodological approach may have been less appropriate. A substandard build-up and methodology in research may compromise the acceptability and validity of findings (Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 2007). Before suggesting some strategies for mitigating absenteeism, Allen et al. did not share any research problem, purpose, literature review, or methodology. They simply conducted a desk study as they discussed absenteeism issues among the nurses at the New Hampshire Hospital. In another study, Hadjisolomou (2015) explored the role of managers in handling work attendance. Hadjisolomou used a qualitative methodology involving two case studies of

grocery retail outlets. From a multi-level analysis of 44 semi-structured interviews, Hadjisolomou found that attendance management was highly centralized. Unilateral and centralized attendance management may be ineffective.

The finding by Hadjisolomou (2015), that the attendance management policy was centralized, is incongruent with the recommendations by Allen et al. (2014), Tanasescu et al. (2015) and Cucchiella et al. (2014) for superiors to engage their subordinates to improve work attendance. For effective absenteeism management, supervisors must engage their subordinates in a transparent and honest way. The authority given to managers to superintend over their juniors (Hadjisolomou, 2015) may actually lead to the lack of cooperation from the employees and ultimately exacerbate absenteeism (Cucchiella et al., 2014). The engagement of subordinates in absenteeism management policies and strategies gives them a sense of ownership of such programs and enhances success. Collectively formulated strategies may be more effective for the sake of subordinate compliance compared to some ideas autocratically imposed by managers.

An appropriate reward system can be used to address the problem of employee absenteeism. Allisey, Rodwell, and Noblet (2016) identified three reward systems to mitigate absenteeism among police officers. Their study findings indicated that social rewards like recognition and social support to the officers helped to reduce absenteeism. This may be viewed as an extension of the argument advanced Cucchiella et al. (2014), with the prioritization of the recognition of employees in absenteeism management whether by accommodating their voice or showing appreciation for exemplary attendance

behavior. This approach may be better than punitive and dictatorial one-sided policies which subordinates are likely to confront with disobedient resentment.

Kocakulah et al. (2016) proposed a number of measures for absenteeism management at the workplace. One of the strategies for absence management is the use of disciplinary action for absent for employees (Kocakulah et al., 2016). Most employers have employment policies that are clearly explained to new employees through, for instance, contracts of employment. These agreements ideally contain clauses pertaining to disciplinary procedures that should cover absenteeism. When an employee is guilty of absenteeism, supervisors have a duty to institute disciplinary procedures as stipulated in employment agreements. While this approach may be effective, the collective and collaborative approach advocated by Allisey et al. (2016), Allen et al. (2014), Tanasescu et al. (2015) and Cucchiella et al. (2014) could be a better proposition.

Kocakulah et al. (2016) further suggested some employee assistantship programs, the creation of positive company culture, and childcare and flexible scheduling as strategies for managing absenteeism. Similar to the reward system advanced by Allisey et al. (2016), Kocakulah et al. proposed an incentive system called the *carrot system* rather than the *stick system* in reducing absenteeism. In this regard, the holistic framework of proposals for absenteeism by Kocakulah et al. is a useful tool. It may be important for organizational leaders to decide when to employ which strategy. This may require the in-depth understanding of the form of every case of absenteeism and then select the most appropriate strategy. For instance, voluntary absenteeism cases may be dealt with through

disciplinary action while involuntary incidents may be addressed using more lenient strategies like superior-subordinate collaboration.

Scoppa and Vuri (2014) digested absenteeism through the lens of unemployment rates and found a negative relationship between the rate of absenteeism and unemployment. Public sector employees are not affected by unemployment and tend to be more prone to absenteeism than employees in the private sector, especially those with little job security (Scoppa & Vuri, 2014). In this regard, unemployment may be seen as a disciplinary device for the minimization of absenteeism once individuals are employed. Critically analyzing this argument by Scoppa and Vuri, the weight of unemployment may be a catalyst for better attendance patterns; but some other factors could be contributing to the low absenteeism. It would be more helpful to research the problem holistically to clearly identify distinct tools for absenteeism management and specify to what extent each of them is effective in the scenario.

Like Hadjisolomou (2015), Camden, Price, and Ludwig (2011) proposed some absenteeism management strategies for the grocery retail sector. The Camden et al. recommendations were, however, the opposite of what Hadjisolomou suggested. Hadjisolomou proposed a one-sided approach where managers dictate decisions for absence management. Camden et al. did not support a unilateral and assertive method, opting for a credit reward system as an effective strategy for reducing absenteeism. Camden et al.'s argument was supported by Allisey et al.'s (2016) proposed reward system and Cucchiella et al.'s (2014) proposition for the recognition of employees in absenteeism management.



In the Camden et al. (2011) study, it may have been better to use the qualitative rather than quantitative approach. Because the focus was on understanding strategies for reducing absenteeism, one would propose to use the case study, phenomenology or narrative research for this research environment to have the ability to dig deep into absenteeism. Data from the participants, preferably the employees affected or fond of poor work attendance, would be insightful enough to assist managers to have a multidimensional understanding of absenteeism and formulate appropriate strategies for managing it. The quantitative approach used by Camden et al. (2011) did not allow the researchers to have enough in-depth interactions with the participants.

Woolmer (2013) used a quantitative survey to comprehensively research the strategies used by employers to reduce the sickness absence of employees. The absenteeism management strategies included some programs involving RTW interviews, training programs for sickness absence line managers, the provision of occupational health services, and coming up with stretched absenteeism targets (Woolmer, 2013). Although, to some extent, Woolmer's suggested strategies are similar to those advanced by Abdullah and Lee (2012) and Allen et al. (2014), it is not clear what methodology Woolmer used to arrive at the findings. Overall, it appears Woolmer was advocating for certain action to be taken against absentees rather than conducting a conventional research study. Absenteeism rates may also be linked to diversity programs.

Peretz et al. (2015) argued that if diversity programs in an organization are not in tune with the practices and policies that guide the behavior of employees, the employees are likely to psychologically and behaviorally withdraw from the organization. This

withdrawal may breed negative effects on general organizational performance including absenteeism (Peretz et al., 2015). This implies that any strategy that aligns diversity programs with the practices that guide employee behaviors may be a tool for absenteeism management. Peretz et al. had a good research plan comprising a strong theoretical background based on the review of the literature and a detailed quantitative methodology. Peretz et al., on the other hand, did not share measures to enhance the trustworthiness of their study, including the protection of their participants drawn from 22 countries. They also did not state any limitations of the study.

Close monitoring and diminishing employee privacy may lead to psychological resistance and withdrawal. In a quantitative study, Workman (2009) found that reduced privacy for employees because of enhanced security measures in an organization might trigger rebellious behaviors from employees. The psychological withdrawal raised by Workman is close to the conclusion by Peretz et al. (2015). The psychological withdrawal of employees is detrimental to organizational success through several effects including absenteeism (Peretz et al., 2015). In this regard, it would be helpful for organizational leaders to formulate strategies that foster the nonpsychological withdrawal of employees as a policy for managing absenteeism. The reward systems advocated by Allisey et al. (2016) and Kocakulah et al. (2016) may be examples of such policies.

Workman's (2009) study findings were based on a well-organized research plan that included a theoretical framework, extensive literature review, a well-illustrated methodology, and clearly explained results. Workman, however, did not explain the problem that necessitated the study and the implications of the study findings for practice.

Further, Workman did not state any study limitations. Other scholars have attempted to formulate strategies for the prevention and minimization of absences.

Some researchers have focused on totally getting rid of absenteeism. Similar to Schreuder et al. (2013) who looked at zero absenteeism, Ritter (2000) analyzed some practical strategies for the prevention and minimization of absenteeism and arguably recommended more strategies than any other scholar on the subject. A total absence management program should include the following interventions: RTW programs; disease management; productive utilization of sickness absent employees; safety and accident prevention, and; health and wellness programs (Ritter, 2000). Other measures included the documentation of leave policy and communication, and training of employees. Other researchers supported most of the strategies illuminated by Ritter.

In terms of the RTW programs, which Ritter (2000) viewed as the foundation of a successful absenteeism management strategy, she agreed with the proposal by Volker et al. (2015). Abdullah and Lee (2012) echoed Ritter's argument for communication and training of employees as an effective tool for managing absenteeism. Like Peretz et al. (2015) and Kocakulah et al. (2016), Ritter posited that wellness programs were important for the management of absences. The research by Ritter may have been methodologically different from the other studies.

Methodological variances exist in how Ritter (2000) and the other researchers arrived at those uniform proposals. Most of the other researchers explained the methodologies they employed to conclude with their respective recommendations for mitigating absenteeism. For instance, Kocakulah et al. (2016) used a quantitative inquiry.

Ritter's methodological approach was not clear, as there was neither literature review nor empirical data collection. Other researchers have suggested the use of some legal instruments in absenteeism management.

Rooks (2016) argued that employers in the United States could use the Employee Absences and the Americans with Disabilities Act to ensure that employees do not violate their attendance obligations. The first managerial instrument for ensuring that employees do not miss work may mainly be the legal documents defining the terms of employment, whether an individual contract of employment or the broader national employment law. While these legal instruments may be useful, they may not be the panacea to the problem of absenteeism. Absenteeism persists even in workplaces with strict and harsh absenteeism conditions (Boon et al., 2014). An effective absence management strategy should inevitably incorporate the voice of the employees as promulgated by Allisey et al. (2016) and Kocakulah et al. (2016).

Russel et al. (2016) shared a critically reflective account of the experience of the actual value of undertaking qualitative research alongside a pilot cluster randomized controlled trial of a guided e-learning intervention for managers in a Mental Health Trust to improve employee wellbeing and reduce sickness absence. The study was qualitative, involving 36 in-depth interviews with key informants, managers, and employees. Their finding was that there were two key overarching roles played by the qualitative research: problematizing and contextualizing. In the context of qualitative inquiry, the methodology used in this study was very appropriate because the researchers targeted

informants who had the information required to answer the research questions and share more insights pertaining to the research problem.

Russel et al. (2016) did not state any framework that guided their research process. The scholars also did not give any justification for the sample size of 36 key informants chosen and the sampling strategy that they used. It was possible to efficaciously conduct this type of qualitative research using a sample size of 25 to 30 participants as recommended in this type of inquiry (see Patton, 2015). It also appears that the researchers attempted, in their discussion, to compare the qualitative research to mixed methods inquiry. This debate is endless, according to the extant literature. Similar to Russel et al., Vanneste et al. (2016) proposed some strategies for addressing sickness absenteeism among students. The next segment of this literature review is focused on absenteeism and organizational productivity.

### **Absenteeism and Organizational Productivity**

Organizational leaders and business owners are concerned about absenteeism because it affects organizational productivity and profitability. Although relatively few studies on absenteeism and organizational productivity have been conducted, the effect of absenteeism on organizational productivity has been well documented in research. Demyen and Ciurea (2015) found that absenteeism negated productivity as the production process is slowed down. Absenteeism also resulted in absent employees being paid wages during their absences, costs for the replacement of staff, and the risk of penalties for late deliveries (Demyen & Ciurea, 2015). These factors may not only result

in productivity loss but also reduced profits. This makes it critical for employers to put in place deliberate strategies for managing absences.

The Demyen and Ciurea (2015) quantitative study had very good implications for practice, although the authors did not acknowledge it. By identifying the subtle channels through which absenteeism reduced organizational productivity, Demyen and Ciurea offered some potential tools to organizational leaders to manage absenteeism. In terms of the wages paid to absent employees, for instance, human resource managers may come up with appropriate reward systems that prevent productivity losses. Demyen and Ciurea appear to have overlooked the critical review of the literature on their topic. Apart from omitting to state a clear methodology, Demyen and Ciurea also did not link their study to any problem.

Harris (2014) concluded that employers were willing to increase the job satisfaction of healthy employees who covered the work for sickness absent employees. Because sickness affected productivity negatively, employers were eager to implement some interventions to respond to health-related absence (Harris, 2014). This conclusion by Harris is in agreement with the position of Demyen and Ciurea (2015). In terms of the research plan, however, Harris had a better-structured study. Harris shared a background of the problem, problem and purpose statements, clear research questions, conceptual framework, and results. The choice of a conceptual framework for a qualitative inquiry was appropriate (see Maxwell, 2013) and the congruence of the research elements was evident.

Most of the absenteeism resources reviewed so far are grounded in studies conducted in the United States, Europe, Australia, and Asia. While absenteeism could be higher in Africa (Abudu, 1986; Glewwe & Kremer, 2006), relatively little research has been done on absenteeism on the continent. The few studies done so far have been focused on very lean scopes of absenteeism in South Africa (Coetzee & Venter, 2016; Mudaly & Nkosi, 2015; Mtimkulu et al., 2014), Ethiopia (Dagget et al., 2016), and Zambia (Kalusa, 2016). The next section of this review is a focus on some of the few absenteeism studies done in Africa.

### **Absenteeism Studies in Africa**

Most of the absenteeism studies in Africa have been conducted in South Africa. Mudaly and Nkosi (2015) investigated the reasons for nurse absenteeism and found several factors that could lead to the problem. Aspects including personal, professional and organizational issues could lead to professional nurse absenteeism (Mudaly & Nkosi, 2015). Specific factors included attendance demotivation, family issues, illness, long working hours, big workload, staff shortages, the absence of reward systems, hostile managers, unfavorable working environments, unfair promotion mechanisms, and favoritism (Mudaly & Nkosi, 2015).

The factors identified by Mudaly and Nkosi (2015) as the causes of nurse absenteeism were critical for addressing absenteeism in the sector. These are factors which have also been identified by other researchers: illness (Cascio, 2006; Hendriks et al., 2015; Howard & Potter, 2014; Muijzer et al., 2012; Sallis & Birkin, 2014), family issues (Boyar et al., 2016; Cascio, 2006; Kocakulah et al., 2016) and poor leadership

style (Mtimkulu et al., 2014; Munir et al., 2011; Sheikha & Younis, 2006). The Mudaly and Nkosi study was well executed, with a clear research problem, methodology and well-analyzed results and conclusions. Mudaly and Nkosi also explained their ethical measures including obtaining consent from the participants before interviewing them and further devised some measures for enhancing the reliability and validity of data.

Mudaly and Nkosi (2015) opted for a conceptual framework for a quantitative research instead of a theoretical framework. Maxwell (2013) elucidated that a conceptual framework in research was appropriate for the qualitative inquiry while a theoretical framework was suitable for quantitative research. Another issue with the Mudaly and Nkosi research was the selection of the nursing profession for investigation. This sector had already been heavily researched, making this choice less appropriate. Venturing into more unexplored phenomena in research is critical for the creation of new knowledge (Charmaz, 2014). A similar study was conducted at some Ethiopian hospitals.

Dagget et al. (2016) investigated absenteeism from a perspective of stress among nurses. They found high-stress levels among the nurses and concluded that this led to absenteeism and reduced productivity (Dagget et al., 2016). In this regard, it is important for organizational leaders to come up with strategies for managing stress as a deliberate mechanism for mitigating absenteeism. This aligns with the recommendations for health and wellness programs propagated by Ritter (2000) and the stress and sickness management measures suggested by Peretz et al. (2015) and Kocakulah et al. (2016). Dagget et al. used other people as research assistants for the collection of data and may not have had control over ethical considerations in the process. There is also no record



indicating that Dagget et al. obtained the consent of their participants, which possibly violated research ethics (see Janesick, 2016).

Like Mudaly and Nkosi (2015), Mtimkulu et al. (2014) were interested in absenteeism in South African hospitals. Mtimkulu et al. conducted a quantitative study based on a descriptive survey design, with a structured questionnaire as the main data collection instrument. The study findings showed that autocratic, participative, and democratic and laissez-faire leadership styles were prevalent in the four hospitals under investigation (Mtimkulu et al., 2014). Autocratic leadership led to higher levels of absenteeism while participative, democratic and laissez-faire leadership promoted a reduction in absence rates (Mtimkulu et al., 2014).

Some ethical and validity omissions are apparent in the Mtimkulu et al. (2014) study. Mtimkulu et al. did not explain their measures for protecting their participants as ethically required in research (see Miles et al., 2014). It is not clear how Mtimkulu et al. enhanced the validity of their data. Mtimkulu et al. did not include any limitations of their study and omitted to state the study population, which makes it difficult to determine the sample sufficiency. Because this was a quantitative study, the researchers could have explained the theoretical framework in which their research was rooted. On the other hand, the Mtimkulu et al. did well in terms of the review of the literature, as they were able to establish a firm foundation for their study. They could have, however, extended their build-up by specifically showing that a gap existed in the knowledge on the subject.

Coetzee and Venter (2016) took the legal avenue to research absenteeism at public schools in South Africa. Coetzee and Venter found that South African law and the

broad national policy on learner absenteeism reinforced the management of learner absenteeism while the specific regulations about attendance did not. The Coetzee and Venter study methodology was grounded in literature review on the subject, mainly legal instruments, without collecting primary data. The research problem and study limitations were not stated. Apart from South Africa and Ethiopia, another absenteeism study was done in Zambia.

Kalusa (2016) researched the effects of teacher absenteeism on the quality of education in three primary schools in Ndola District, Zambia. Using the qualitative inquiry, Kalusa found that teacher absenteeism mainly resulted from illnesses, nursing sick relatives, unfavorable working conditions and poor salaries, bad work culture, work overload, lack of motivation, and the lack of teaching and learning materials. Teacher absenteeism resulted in poor performance and poor pass rates as the pupils mostly failed to go beyond the grades eight and ten examinations (Kalusa, 2016). Kalusa's findings are generally consistent with other researchers on absenteeism. For instance, in terms of the causes of absenteeism, illness (Baek et al., 2015; Cascio, 2006; Nes et al., 2015; Munir et al., 2011; Verstappen, 2015) and heavy workload (Dagget et al., 2016; Kocakulah et al., 2016) have been suggested by other scholars.

The strength of the Kalusa (2016) study lies in the apparent absence of a record of any other study on absenteeism in Zambia thus far. This means that the study may be key on the subject of absenteeism in Zambia and offers a critical contribution to the knowledge on the subject of absenteeism. The study was also well structured, encompassing all the conventional components of a study including a problem statement,

research objectives and questions, literature review, methodology and a discussion of the findings. A few shortcomings may, however, be detected in this study.

From the methodological perspective, Kalusa (2016) demonstrated some inconsistencies and weaknesses. First, Kalusa claimed to have employed the qualitative approach and yet the sampling strategy that he used was the stratified random sampling, which is ideally a quantitative strategy (see Patton, 2015). Kalusa also had a sample size of 50 respondents comprising 44 teachers and some head teachers and their deputies. These high figures are more consistent with the quantitative approach, where statistical value matters, rather than the in-depth knowledge focus of the qualitative research. The researcher did better in terms of data collection because, as required in qualitative inquiry, he was the main data collection instrument.

Another problem with the study by Kalusa (2016) was the apparent absence of measures for enhancing the validity of the data and the observance of ethical considerations. For example, it is not stated how the participants were protected in terms of the possible risks involved in the study. Critically, Kalusa did not establish the requisite linkages between the research problem, methodology, and other components of the study. The three research questions were not segregated into the main and sub-questions and were not crafted in the best way to provide the appropriate answers to the identified research problem. From a methodological and organizational standpoint, the study components stood in isolation.

In another related research, Stekelenburg, Kyanamina, and Wolffers (2003) concluded that there was poor service delivery in the health sector of Zambia. They

attributed the poor service to irregular and unreliable supply of drugs and the selection of the wrong people to be trained as community health workers. Stekelenburg et al. did not address the issue of absenteeism in their study. Tordoff and Young (1994) reviewed the program of decentralization in Zambia involving the deconcentration of administrative functions to the country's nine provinces and the devolution of additional responsibilities to the urban and rural local authorities.

### **Gaps Addressed in the Study**

From the review of the extant literature, it is evident that the research on employee absenteeism has mostly been conducted in the United States, Europe, Asia, and Australia. In Africa, only a few research studies have been conducted in South Africa. In Zambia, very little evidence of academic research on absenteeism exists (Kalusa, 2016). In this regard, the current study may address a big gap in terms of the knowledge and literature on absenteeism in Zambia. Apparently one of the first ones on absenteeism in the country, the current study may also raise awareness on the phenomenon, especially in terms of organizational service delivery.

At the global level, most researchers on absenteeism have looked at sickness absenteeism (Volker et al., 2015; Young & Choi, 2016), alcoholism and smoking (Schou & Moan, 2016; Suarez-Bonel et al., 2015), specific health conditions like chronic diseases (de Vroome et al., 2015), and common diseases (Azor-Martinez et al., 2014). Other scholars have focused on the relationship of absenteeism with mental disorders, psychological factors, and sleep disorders (Lau et al., 2016; Munir et al., 2011;

Rajaratnam et al., 2015). Another strand of sickness absence covered well by researchers is presenteeism (Skagen & Collins, 2016).

Nonsickness absenteeism research includes Avey et al.'s (2006) distinction between voluntary and involuntary absenteeism. Other major absenteeism dimensions addressed are the leadership style of an organization and absenteeism (Mtimkulu et al., 2014; Sheikha & Younis, 2006). Investigators have also explored the financial cost of absenteeism (Kocakulah et al., 2016; Magee et al., 2016; Rybczynski, 2016). The causes and effects of absenteeism have also drawn the interest of some researchers (Cascio, 2006; Kalusa, 2016).

Another angle of absenteeism covered broadly by research is absenteeism management, with such strategies as RTW (Volker et al., 2015; Woolmer, 2013), communication and monitoring (Tanasescu et al., 2015), employee engagement (Cucchiella et al., 2014), a collaboration between organizational leaders and union leaders (Allen et al., 2014), and good reward systems (Allisey et al., 2016) suggested. Kocakulah et al. (2016) proposed interventions like the use of disciplinary action, employee assistantship programs, positive company culture, and childcare initiatives. Other proposals for absenteeism management are training programs for line managers, occupational health services, and RTW interviews.

From the current literature, I could only find very little research conducted on absenteeism and service delivery in organizations. Few researchers have concluded that absenteeism leads to reduced organizational productivity and poor service provision (Dagget et al., 2016; Demyen & Ciurea, 2015) without necessarily focusing on

absenteeism and service delivery as the main subject of their studies. This study may bridge this current gap in the knowledge and literature on absenteeism because the focus of the study is fundamentally on absenteeism and service delivery at the Zambian government agency.

The current study may also be helpful in the development of the appropriate absenteeism interventions in the Zambian environment. The absenteeism management strategies in the current literature were mainly developed based on studies conducted in the Western World where environments are different from Africa, particularly Zambia. Using the qualitative phenomenological approach, the study may lead to the generation of a wealth of absenteeism information that may assist organizational leaders in addressing the problem.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The first theme extracted from the review of the literature is sickness absence. It is clear from the review that most researchers on absenteeism have focused on sickness absence. Sickness absence has been researched from the perspective of RTW mechanisms for sickness absent employees (Muijzer et al., 2012; Volker et al., 2015; Young & Choi, 2016), alcoholism and smoking (Schou & Moan, 2016; Schou et al., 2014; Suarez-Bonel et al., 2015), and in terms of specific health conditions like chronic diseases (de Vroome et al., 2015) and common diseases (Azor-Martinez et al., 2014). Other researchers focused on the relationship of absenteeism with mental disorders, psychological factors, and sleep disorders (Lau et al., 2016; Munir et al., 2011;

Rajaratnam et al., 2015). Other scholars have covered the facet of presenteeism (Skagen & Collins, 2016).

For non-sickness factors associated with absenteeism, professional autonomy and the work setting were identified by Enns et al. (2014) and Azam and Gholam (2014). Avey et al. (2006) made the critical distinction between voluntary and involuntary absenteeism and argued for the separation of the two in terms of absenteeism management. Family roles and workplace conflicts are other factors that have been found to be closely associated with the incidence of absenteeism at the workplace (Boyar et al., 2016).

Another theme that emerged from the literature review is the relationship between the leadership style in an organization and absenteeism. Democratic and laissez-faire leadership may lead to reduced absenteeism rates (Mtimkulu et al., 2014) while poor leadership and communication in an organization are likely to increase absenteeism (Sheikha & Younis, 2006). The quality of leadership may inhibit long-term sick leave to a certain extent in those employees with moderate depressive disorders (Munir et al., 2011).

Scholars have also found that the annual cost of absenteeism ranges in billions annually in Canada (Kocakulah et al., 2016), United States (Rybczynski, 2016), and Australia (Magee et al., 2016). The cost of absenteeism is generally very high everywhere and this should draw the attention of organizational leaders and other concerned stakeholders (Magee et al., 2016; Suarez-Bonel et al., 2015). As a result, a lot of research has been conducted on the management of absenteeism.

Investigators have proposed several absenteeism management strategies. These include communication and monitoring (Tanasescu et al., 2015), employee engagement (Cucchiella et al., 2014), a collaboration between organizational leaders and union leaders (Allen et al., 2014), and good reward systems (Allisey et al., 2016; Kalusa, 2016). Kocakulah et al. (2016) suggested interventions that include the use of disciplinary action, employee assistantship programs, positive company culture, and childcare initiatives. Other suggested measures are training programs for line managers, occupational health services, and RTW interviews (Woolmer, 2013). Researchers have also concluded that absenteeism leads to reduced organizational productivity (Demyen & Ciurea, 2015; Harris, 2014).

In Africa, relatively few studies have been conducted on absenteeism mainly in South Africa. Mudaly and Nkosi (2015) looked at the causes of absenteeism among nurses. Mtimkulu et al. (2014) researched the association of leadership style with absenteeism while Coetzee and Venter (2016) focused on absenteeism in public schools. In Ethiopia, Dagget et al. (2016) studied absenteeism from the perspective of stress among nurses. The only evident study in Zambia was based on the effect of teacher absenteeism on the quality of education (Kalusa, 2016). From all the reviewed studies, none focused specifically on how employee absenteeism affects service delivery in the public sector. I could not find evidence of any other qualitative phenomenological study of absenteeism in the public service. The current study may be instrumental in filling this apparent gap in research and knowledge on absenteeism.



In the next chapter, I focus on a detailed explanation of the research methodology for the current study. The chapter includes an account of the research design and a justification for the chosen study approach and issues to do with specific steps I adopted in the selection of research participants. I also address the data collection methods, data analysis steps, and the various issues to do with aspects of trustworthiness.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I discuss the qualitative methodology with the research design for exploring the experiences of clients of the Zambian government agency in Lusaka, Zambia regarding employee absenteeism and service delivery. The purpose of the study was to explore employee absenteeism and service delivery through the lived experiences of clients of two departments under the Zambian government agency in Lusaka, Zambia, which provide a range of services to the Zambian public. Through face-to-face, semistructured interviews with 22 participants, I was able to develop themes and patterns about absenteeism and service delivery at the institution. The respondents were selected using purposeful sampling through the key informants, key experts, and reputational sampling method that allows researchers to identify people with knowledge and/or influence who provide valuable information (Moustakas, 1994).

This chapter is made up of an explanation of the central phenomenon of the study, which is employee absenteeism and service delivery. I share details of the research genealogy and a justification for the choice of the research tradition. This is followed by a discussion of the role I played as the researcher in the study, which includes the measures I took to address personal and professional conflicts with participants and power differentials. I then give a detailed account of the selected methodology, the steps and criterion for the selection of participants, and the instrumentation I used for the study. This is followed by the detailed procedures for the recruitment, participation, and data collection before I present the data analysis plan. Finally, I provide an analysis of the

issues of trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical procedures) before providing a chapter summary.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This qualitative phenomenological study was based on one research question: What are the lived experiences of the clients of the Zambian government agency about employee absenteeism and service delivery at the organization? The central phenomenon of the study is employee absenteeism and how it may affect the delivery of services at the Zambian government agency.

Scholars have advanced several interrelated definitions of *employee absenteeism*. For this study, employee absenteeism may be viewed as an individual's lack of physical presence at a given location and time when expected (Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara & Sanchez-Medina, 2015). Additionally, public service delivery referred to the mechanism through which public services are delivered to the public by local, municipal, or federal governments (Mulikita, 2012).

The research was qualitative with a descriptive phenomenological exploration of employee absenteeism and service delivery through the experiences of 22 clients of the Zambian government agency. Given that the purpose of the study was to explore the lived experiences of selected clients, I chose a qualitative rather than a quantitative study. I did not select a quantitative method because it is more appropriate for objective measurements and the statistical, mathematical, or numerical analysis of data gathered with questionnaires, polls, and surveys, or by manipulating preexisting statistical data using computational techniques (see Punch, 2013). On the other hand, a qualitative study

was appropriate because it allows a researcher to dig deeply into the participants' experiences using a diversity of data collection and analysis methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2016) instead of looking at mere statistical values.

From the various qualitative approaches, I determined that the descriptive phenomenological approach was the most suitable for this research. I did not choose a case study because it is used to focus on the factors that explain the complex behavioral patterns of a unit and the place of the unit in its surrounding social milieu (see Silverman, 2011; Yin, 2014). This focus was inconsistent with the purpose of this study, which was an exploration of people's lived experiences of absenteeism and service delivery.

Ethnography was also less appropriate compared to phenomenology because the key principle is that a researcher should immerse himself or herself in a setting and become part of the group under study to understand the meanings and significances that people give to their behavior and that of others (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2013).

Narrative research would also be a misplaced choice of approach for this study. Narrative research is a case-centered type of research where the investigator preserves and interrogates particular instances, sequences, sequences of action, the way participants negotiate language and narrative genres in conversations, and other unique aspects of a case, which could be an individual, family, community, group, organization, or other unit of social life (Miles et al., 2014).

Grounded theory was the final qualitative approach considered but not chosen. Grounded theory may be similar to phenomenology; however, in a grounded theory approach, the researcher attempts to offer accounts of what happens, how it ensues, and

may aim to account for why it happened (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theorists emphasize the use of theories to address *why* questions about observed actions (Patton, 2015), which often raises existential issues such as those of meaning and moral value (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory involves careful analysis of the data, examination of field notes, study of the transcribed interviews sentence-by-sentence, coding of each sentence or phrase, sorting the codes, making comparisons among the categories— to construct a theory (Moustakas, 1994). I did not select the grounded theory approach because the focus of my study was to understand the lived experiences of the participants and not to use theories to answer questions.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In phenomenological inquiry, the researcher is the main research instrument (Moustakas, 1994). In the current study, I was responsible for the identification and selection of the 22 participants. My criteria for the selection of the participants was based on an individual having had some experience of employees who are supposed to attend to them at the Zambian government agency being absent from work at a time or times, which meant they had knowledge about the absenteeism of staff at the institution. From one of the selected two departments, I focused on consultants who are official agents who represent various clients requiring different services from that organization. The consultants visit the offices of the department frequently to pursue their clients' cases. I adopted a similar strategy for the other department.

For the collection of data, I was the only one who collected the data as the sole researcher. My main data collection method was face-to-face, semistructured interviews

of the selected participants. As permitted by the partner organizations, I also collected data from institutional records and documents, particularly those with employee attendance and absence details. I also generated more data from field notes and a reflexive journal. For the analysis of the collected data, I worked through the data using the van Kaam method of analysis for the qualitative phenomenological inquiry as explained by Moustakas (1994).

As a senior and long-serving officer at one of the two departments under the Zambian government agency, I had a good idea of the clients who may fit the selection criteria for this organization. To circumvent the possible risk of participants under the department that I work for being influenced by the fact that I am a top management staff at the organization, I assured them of my objectivity and that the study would be conducted under the regulation of Walden University. Additionally, to address potential bias and enhance transparency, I explained the full rights of the participant and voluntary conditions for participation before a consent form was signed and the interview conducted. I also explained that there would not be any negative impact on the participants' relationship with me or their access to the services provided by the Zambian government agency. I also felt that the participants could be reluctant to share feedback of negative nature for fear of possible reprisals from the officers who attended to them. To address this potential problem, I assured the participants of the confidentiality of the data I would obtain from them for this study.

Using the consent process and other IRB guidelines, I assured the participants of the confidentiality with which their responses would be treated. I reinforced the assurance

by telling them that their identity details would not be revealed to anyone at any time during or after the study.

In terms of addressing researcher bias, I ensured that the voices of the participants were reflected as accurately as possible. From a phenomenological standpoint, the experiences and perspectives of the participants are most important, and the researcher should not take any assumptions for granted (Reiners, 2012). Epistemologically, phenomenology is grounded in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity where the emphasis is on the importance of personal perspective and interpretation (Giorgi, 2012). As such, I shared my perceptions and feelings and separated them from the research findings based on the feedback from the participants. To enhance the research validity, I verified the research findings with the participants for validation. I also used triangulation to interrogate my research findings.

### **Methodology**

The method I employed for this study is descriptive phenomenology. In the phenomenological inquiry, the interest of the researcher is to examine, through interviews, observations, or stories the qualities or essence of the participants' experiences of the chosen phenomena (Bjorbaekmo, Robinson, & Engebretsen, 2017). Descriptive phenomenology is about gathering participants' descriptions through open-ended questions and dialogue, and the researcher describes the structures of the experience based on reflective analysis and interpretation of the participants' responses (Moustakas, 1994). I used descriptive phenomenology to study employee absenteeism and service delivery at a Zambian government agency. Descriptive phenomenologists

focus on describing the conscious experiences of participants while ignoring any preconceived opinions (Reiners, 2012). From this standpoint, my aim was to reflect the perspectives of the respondents based on their lived experiences of absenteeism and service delivery at the selected organization.

I used 22 respondents, which was consistent with previous research on phenomenological methodology (see Giorgi, 2012). Once there were no new data emerging from the participants, I discontinued the data collection process. I used the key informants, key experts, and reputational sampling strategy, where people with knowledge are chosen to provide information on a research inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). I selected my participants based on them having experienced incidents where the employees who were supposed to attend to them at the Zambian government agency were absent from work. My focus was individuals who frequented two departments of the Zambian government agency to seek various services. My participants shared various useful insights regarding the absenteeism of the staff and the delivery of service at those institutions.

My main data collection method was semistructured interviews based on an interview protocol (see the Appendix). Beyond the interview protocol, I used follow-up questions to collect as much data from the respondents as possible. Follow-up questions are important in the qualitative interview process, as they enable the researcher to gather useful data from the respondents (Silverman, 2014). I also gathered some data from institutional documents, particularly those with employee attendance and absenteeism records. I examined the attendance registers and disciplinary cases related to the



absenteeism of employees. From the face-to-face interviews, I enlisted an expert to transcribe the data. My other sources of data included field notes, a reflexive journal, and audio-recordings from the face-to-face interviews, all of which were critical for the analysis phase of my research.

For the analysis of the data, I manually classified, sorted, arranged, and analyzed my data from the interview transcripts, field notes, reflexive journal, and the audio-recordings from the face-to-face interviews using the van Kaam method as prescribed by Moustakas (1994). I proceeded through the seven stages of the van Kaam method: preliminary grouping or horizontalization, reduction and reduction, clustering and thematizing, final identification, individual textural description, individual structural description, and textural-structural description. I subjected each of my 22 interview transcripts to all the seven stages of the van Kaam and ended up with a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experiences of all the participants.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The target population in this study were individuals who had experienced situations where the employees of the Zambian government agency who were supposed to attend to them were absent from work. In qualitative inquiry, researchers employ purposeful sampling to focus on information-rich participants that address the research inquiry (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling because their interest is in selecting information-rich cases whose examination will illuminate the questions under study (Silverman, 2014).

In the current study, I used the purposeful sampling strategy called key informants, key experts, and reputational sampling, which allowed me to identify individuals who had experiences with employee absenteeism at the Zambian government agency. I focused on some consultants who visit the offices of the selected two departments of the Zambian government agency almost daily, and I chose participants who knew about the absence dynamics and the delivery of services at the two departments. My interest was to access as much relevant detailed information of the phenomenon as possible.

Following my IRB approval and the identification of the potential participants, I contacted each one of them through recruitment letters. The recruitment letter had details pertaining to the face-to-face interviews. I also used a consent form, which the potential participants were requested to sign once they agreed to participate in the study. Once a potential participant had consented to take part in the study, I included the person on my official list of participants and exchanged contact details to open communication. If the response from a potential participant was negative, I proceeded to seek the participation of the next eligible person. In both scenarios, I thanked them for their time and attention. I repeated this routine until I had reached my proposed sample size of 20 participants for the study. I added the extra two because I was still getting new data after the first 20 participants, meaning I had not reached saturation (see Patton, 2015; Ritchie & Lewis, 2013).

No rules exist in determining the number of participants in nonprobability inquiry, making the issue of sampling ambiguous. Sample size is, however, dependent on what

needs to be learned, what will be helpful, what will have credibility, and what can be done within the resources available (Symon & Cassel, 2013). Many qualitative researchers leave the issue of the sample size to the emergence of saturation in the data (Blaikie, 2017). The final sample size of 22 was, therefore, determined based on reaching data saturation.

### **Field Test**

It is important for researchers to undertake field tests to examine the alignment of the selected segments of their studies, mainly the research method and design with the research problem and purpose statement. Field tests are employed to strengthen the link between the research question and the research method and design, as well as support the alignment of interview questions with the research question (Charmaz, 2014). Field tests may also be useful in sharpening the interview questions to ensure optimum efficacy (Rubin & Babbie, 2014). I conducted a field test to seek expert guidance on the alignment of my research question and interview questions.

As part of the field study, I attended the Center for Quality Research Office Advice Hours where the advisor looked at my research problem, research purpose, and research question and felt that they were generally okay. The advisor further indicated that she would need more time, than the one-hour advisory session, to understand my research proposal, effectively advise on the alignment of my research question, and interview questions. I also extended invitations to five qualitative experts within the College of Management and Technology to assist with advice on the alignment of my research question and interview questions, but none offered the required assistance.

## **Instrumentation**

In the phenomenological inquiry, the researcher is the primary research instrument. The preferred method of collecting data in a phenomenological investigation is the in-depth interview of carefully selected respondents (Leedy & Ormond, 2010; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process of open-ended questions and comments designed to extract as much data as possible from the lived experiences of the participants (Reiners, 2012). The researcher's aim is to focus on the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon and attempt to analyze those personal reflections to obtain the understanding and clarity of the human experience.

In the current study, I employed semistructured interviews as the key data collection tool. The semistructured interview enabled me to construct questions that attracted answers to address the main research problem of organizational leaders of the Zambian government agency not knowing their clients' lived experiences of staff absenteeism and service delivery. I developed the interview protocol questions, aligned with the overarching research question of the study: What are the lived experiences of the clients of the Zambian government agency regarding staff absenteeism and the delivery of services by the organization? Leaning on de May and Smit (2013), once the participants had agreed to participate, I created an atmosphere in which a participant felt comfortable to participate.

My semistructured interviews commenced with preset open-ended questions supplemented by follow-up questions meant to dig deep into the lived experiences of the

participants. The preset questions helped to keep my focus on the phenomenon under investigation and eliminate the possibility of researcher bias (see Rubin & Babbie, 2014). Semistructured interviews also have the benefit of allowing a researcher to interrogate the participants further using prompts such as *share more details*, *elaborate further*, or *give examples* (Maxwell, 2013). Another advantage of the face-to-face interview is the opportunity to observe the respondent's body language and verbal tone to discern more meaning and validate responses (Janesick, 2016). Similar to law enforcement interviews, the tone of responses and the body or facial language of the respondent in phenomenological interviews are as important as the actual responses.

With permission of the participants, I audiotaped all the interviews of all my 22 respondents to enhance the accuracy of my interview transcripts and limit note taking during the interview. Carefully listening and understanding every word the participant utters during the interview is important (Miles et al., 2014). I verified and validated the data with the participants before I proceeded to the analysis stage. I also ensured that each participant signed the Informed Consent form declaring that he or she would participate in the study voluntarily and freely. I designed the consent form in line with the requirements of the Walden University. I also informed the participants of their right to discontinue their participation in the research at any time they may have felt so.

I used a field test to improve the alignment of the research method and design with the research problem and purpose statement. The flexibility of semistructured interviewing techniques may make it unnecessary to always conduct a full pilot study (Charmaz, 2014). It is only inevitable to use a pilot survey when the research involves a

more structured questionnaire in quantitative or mixed method studies because it is important for the participants to uniformly understand and interpret the questions. To generate extra information on preliminary responses, I turned to the qualitative interview technique called probing (see Patton, 2015).

Probing is a qualitative interview technique used to clarify things and seek additional information on relevant points. Patton (2015) referred to three types of probes in semistructured interviews: detail-oriented probes; elaboration probes, and; clarification probes. Detail-oriented probes are used when the interviewer wants to extract more detailed information from the participant. Elaboration probes are used for additional information while clarification probes are necessary when the respondent has to clarify or explain further a particular answer.

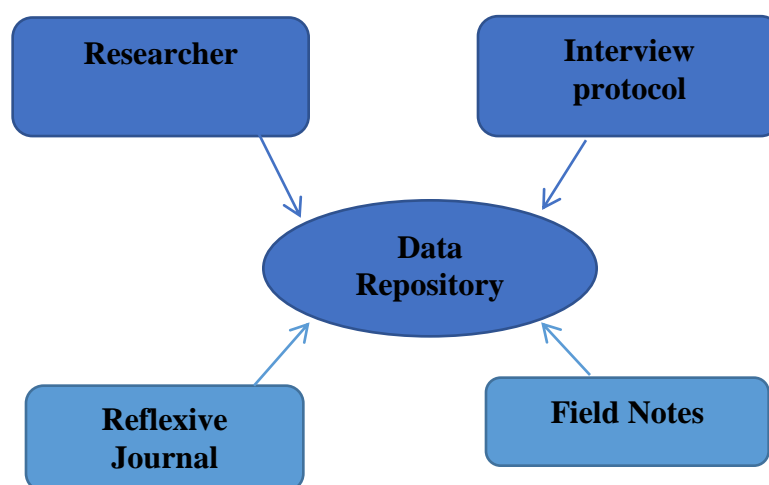
Another instrument that I used in this study is the reflexive journal. Journaling is a method that is used in literature and research as an active tool meant to enhance reflective learning (Blake, 2005). Reflective learning means a self-examination by the inquirer that involves looking back over what happened in practice in an effort to improve or encourage professional growth (Blake, 2005). Researchers are urged to talk about themselves, their presuppositions, choices, experiences, and actions during the research process (Symon & Cassel, 2013). Such reflective practices illuminate to the reader the constructed nature of research outcomes, a construction that originates in the various choices and decisions researchers undertake during the process of research.

Journal writing enables the researcher to refine the meaning and interpretation of his or her role in the research (Janesick, 2016). I used the journal writing to try to

understand more fully the responses of the participants. The journal acts as an interactive tool of communication between the researcher and the participants in a study. Journal writing is also a conduit to connoisseurship by which qualitative researchers reflect and become specialists of their own thinking patterns and they understand their role as research instruments (Patton, 2015). I attempted to use this instrument as a mirror of my role in the study so that I was able to generate more understanding.

I also used field notes, which are long established as a method of data collection in ethnographic research, and particularly in observation form the primary data (see Miles et al., 2014). In phenomenological studies, field notes provide an opportunity to record what the investigators see and hear outside the immediate context of the interview, their thoughts about the dynamic of the encounter, ideas for inclusion in later field work and issues that may be relevant at the analytical stage (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013). Field notes may simply take the form of rough jottings, though generally some stimulation of the issues for consideration. The inquirer's interest may include the tone of the participant's answers and the body and facial expressions.

As the sole researcher in the current study, I was be the main research instrument. I was responsible for everything from identifying the participants, developing other research instruments like the interview protocol, collecting and analyzing the research data. I also established the trustworthiness of my study, including the issues of ethical concerns. By getting into the inner lived experiences of the participants and discovering some themes and patterns, I was effectively the main instrument in the study. Figure 2 is a summary of data collection instruments.



*Figure 2.* Data collection instruments.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

A qualitative researcher focuses on participants selected based on their knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation in order to get the insights of their inner experience (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). My criterion for the selection of participants was based on one having had some experience of staff absenteeism at the chosen two departments of Zambian government agency. Under the two departments, I gave the priority to consultants who frequently pursue cases on behalf of their clients at the offices of the two institutions. These individuals were potentially a good source of primary data given their lived experiences and understanding of employee absenteeism dynamics at the departments.

Once I had identified the potential participants, I formally sent invitation letters for them to participate in the study. In case someone declined to participate, I sent out



more invitations to other potential participants until I had the initial sample size of 20, which grew to 22 after saturation.

I was responsible for interviewing all the 22 participants using an interview protocol (Appendix). In unstructured interviews, it is always important to make the participants feel comfortable and let them take control of the dialogue with the interviewer ensuring that every experience is discussed and recorded in detail (de May & Smit, 2013). The interviews lasted for an average of about 26 minutes per session, with the longest going up to 60 minutes and the shortest 15 minutes. Prior to every interview, I reminded the participants of their right to withdraw their participation at any time of the interview if they so decided.

With the permission of the participants, I audio-recorded all the interviews to make transcription easier. This eliminated the extra workload of note taking while conducting the interview. In case a respondent refused to be recorded, I had planned to take notes of the answers to my questions as accurately as possible. All my participants agreed to the audio recording.

For the transcription of data, I engaged a professional transcriptionist with whom I entered a confidentiality agreement. I arranged the interview location and setting in respect of 12 participants. On their preference, I interviewed the other 10 participants from their offices under conducive environments on my request. At the end of each interview, I requested for a follow-up interview if need arose for clarifications or more information on the initial interviews. With the permission of the participants, I would audio-record all follow-up interviews.

I collected more primary data through note taking of nonverbal observations of the participants' behavior during the interviews. This applied to all my participants because they consented to the audio recording of their interviews. With the permission to record the interviews, I had enough time to discern meanings of the body and facial language of my respondents. I scrutinized the voice tones of the respondents to strengthen my field notes.

Apart from the primary data from the interview process, I was granted permission to access secondary data sources from the two departments of the Zambian government agency. The secondary data sources included staff work attendance registers and records related to disciplinary cases of absenteeism at the two departments. Secondary data are important for triangulation purposes.

Triangulation is a strategy that qualitative researchers use to reduce the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to a specific method, and allows a better assessment of the generality of the explanations that one develops (Maxwell, 2013). I weaved the primary and secondary data at the analysis stage to come up with some themes and patterns. I collected all data within 1 month.

In terms of participant debriefing, I thanked every participant at the end of the interview for his or her time and participation. I further explained the next segments of the study, including that I would accord the participants the opportunity to verify their data before I concluded the study. I also sought permission to get in touch with the participants for follow-up face-to-face interviews regarding more information or clarifications about the initial interview.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Qualitative data analysis involves a lot of hard work, hence, the need for mastering the requisite methods and techniques for effective analysis. In phenomenological studies, researchers focus on two main issues in the analysis of data collected: understanding the perspectives of the participants regarding their lived experiences of the phenomenon while suspending the researcher's own predetermined views and notions about the phenomenon, and interpreting the perspectives of the participants to establish the essence of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2012). The researcher uses the methods and procedures of phenomenological analysis to study the material from the transcribed interviews (Moustakas, 1994). One qualitative data analysis strategy is data coding.

In the current study, I employed the modified van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data as espoused by Moustakas (1994, pp. 120-121). This method starts with horizontalization, the listing of every expression relevant to the lived experience. The second step, reduction and elimination, involves the determination of the invariant constituents by testing each expression for two requirements: Does it contain a moment of the experience that it is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it; and, is it possible to abstract and label it? If yes, it is a horizon of the experience. All the expressions falling short of the above requirements should be eliminated. Other expressions recommended for elimination include those that are repetitive, overlapping, and vague. The horizons that remain are invariant constituents of the experience.

The third step of Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam method of analysis involves clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents. The researcher clusters the invariant constituents of the experience into a thematic label. The clustered and labeled constituents are the core themes of the experience. The fourth stage of the method is the final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application. Also called validation, the process is about checking the invariant constituents and their accompanying theme against the complete record of the research participant.

The next level of the van Kaam method is the construction of an Individual Textural Description of the experience for each core-researcher using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes. It is important to include verbatim examples at this stage. The sixth step is to construct for each co-researcher an Individual Structural Description of the experience based on the Individual Textural Description and Imaginative Variation. The final step is the construction for each research participant a Textural-Structural Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes. Using the explained steps, I constructed the meanings and essences of the employee absenteeism and service delivery at the Zambian government agency.

## Issues of Trustworthiness

### Credibility

Although the importance of credibility in qualitative research is a subject of debate among scholars (Silverman, 2014), it is always important for qualitative investigators to ensure the credibility of their work (Patton, 2015). Unlike quantitative research, which is based on formulas and strict rules, qualitative research relies on the insights, conceptual capabilities, and the integrity of the analyst. In this vein, it is pertinent to explain strategies that support the credibility of a given study. In phenomenology, the research findings are made up of the researcher's interpretation of the participant's shared experiences. To prove credibility, certain elements are inevitable in a qualitative study (Blaikie, 2017).

To enhance the credibility of my study, I adopted the framework suggested by Patton (2015) which is anchored on four distinct but related inquiry elements. My first consideration was to ensure that my fieldwork was in-depth, systematic, and yielded high-quality data. Part of this procedure was the follow-up interviews to verify data with the participants and extract as much relevant detail as possible. Second, I followed a systematic and conscientious analysis of data with good attention to the issues of credibility. This included triangulation, a research technique that involves gathering and analyzing multiple perspectives using diverse sources of data, and during analysis, using alternative frameworks (see Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

The fourth element of Patton's (2015) framework hinges on the credibility of the researcher in terms of training, experience, record of accomplishment, status, and

presentation of self. In terms of this element, I implemented the research knowledge and skills I have gained through formal education, especially the coursework at Walden University, and the extensive review of the literature. The final element had to do with my research readers' and users' philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry. This points to the readers' fundamental appreciation of naturalistic inquiry, qualitative methods, inductive analysis, purposeful sampling, and holistic thinking (Patton, 2015).

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which the research findings are transferable to the wider population beyond the sample (Punch, 2013). Also referred to as external validity, transferability in qualitative research may not be as fundamental as it is in quantitative research because the research findings in the former are not strictly transferrable beyond the sample of respondents due to the small sample size and the purposeful sampling methods used. It is important, however, that the results of a qualitative study are transferable and have broader significance and implications for understanding the phenomenon under scrutiny (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). From that premise, I considered a number of elements to establish transferability of my study.

One strategy I considered to enhance the transferability of my research findings was thick description. Thick description is a term used in qualitative research to refer to the process of paying attention to contextual detail in observing and interpreting social meaning when conducting research (Silverman, 2014). A description may be rich if it provides abundant, interconnected details, and possibly cultural complexity; but, it becomes thick description if it offers a direct connection to cultural theory and scientific

knowledge (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013). One way to offer a thick description is to provide the detailed accounts of the participants and the research and the accounts of the participants' perspectives. I have explained the diversity of the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon of absenteeism so that my readers are able to do their own analysis and come up with conclusions.

### **Dependability**

Dependability may be seen as the equivalent of reliability in the quantitative inquiry. Dependability can be understood in terms of the replicability of research findings and whether or not they would be repeated if another study, using the same or similar methods, was undertaken (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013). The extent to which a qualitative study can be replicated has been a source of controversy (Corbin & Strauss, 2014); but, it remains very important to ensure high dependability in qualitative research (Patton, 2015). To build dependability in the current study, I used two strategies: audit trail, and triangulation.

An audit trail in qualitative research involves the explanation of the whole study process from the beginning to the conclusion. Maxwell (2013) explained an audit trail in terms of a transparent description of the research project to the development and reporting of findings. This involves a record of everything that was done in the study, including sources of raw data like field notes. An audit trail may also include data reduction and analysis products like summaries of field notes (Silverman, 2014). Data reconstruction and synthesis materials such as themes, definitions, and relationships are

part of an audit trail. An audit trail also includes methodological notes, trustworthiness notes, the inquiry proposal, personal or reflexive notes.

My second strategy of triangulation involved the interrogation of my study by comparison with other research findings. Triangulation may be done through the data source, method, theory, and data type. Triangulation is similar to the techniques used by detectives, mechanics, and primary care physicians who use different kinds of measurements that provide repeated verification. In the current study, I focused on the methodology and research findings of my study.

### **Confirmability**

The equivalent of objectivity in quantitative research, confirmability refers to the level of confidence that the research findings emanate from the words and narratives of the research participants as opposed to the opinion or bias of the researcher (Miles et al., 2014). Confirmability is especially important in the current study because phenomenology is fundamentally based on the perspectives of the participants and not the notions and feelings of the researcher. Confirmability strategies include reflexivity.

I used reflexivity to build the confirmability of my study. Reflexivity is a research tool or attitude that the researcher must adopt, when collecting and analyzing data, to reflect on his or her own background and position to see how these influence the research process (Charmaz, 2014). Patton (2015) looked at reflexivity as a reminder to the researcher to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and economic origins of one's perspective and voice, as well as the perspective and voices of those one interviews and those to whom one reports.



Reflexivity was particularly important to my study because I am a top management official at one of the departments under the Zambian government agency. This entailed that I had some preconceived ideas and feelings about the phenomenon of employee absenteeism and the service delivery, the subject of my study. I used reflexivity to draw a distinction between my possible bias based on the preconceived position about the study and the narratives of the participants regarding their personal lived experiences. Reflexivity is also important because of the fact that I personally knew the research participants.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Unlike journalists and spies, academic researchers have an obligation that hinges on both personal morality and professional ethics. Ethical procedures are so important to qualitative researchers that all experts pay a lot of attention to the subject. Qualitative researchers must not only focus on the quality of knowledge they are producing, but also on their actions in relation to the people whose lives they are studying (Miles et al., 2014).

Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, and Silverman (2004) pointed to codes and consent, confidentiality, and trust as the three main elements that define ethical conduct in qualitative research. Codes and consent mean that the research subjects have the right to know that they are being researched, the right to be informed about the nature of the research, and the right to withdraw at any time. In this regard, I did not enlist any participant using deceptive measures but the truth about my study.

In terms of the right of the participants to know, I took measures at every stage of the study to ensure that ethical standards were adhered to. For example, I sought authorization from the Walden University IRB before interviewing any of the participants for this study. This approval was one of the requirements to conduct research under the Walden University. The Walden University IRB plays the critical role of ensuring ethical conduct in research, including the protection of the rights of the research participants. I also ensured that every participant signed the consent form before I proceeded to conduct the interviews. This process included a clear explanation of any potential harm and risks, costs, benefits, remedies for any discomfort, the procedures in the study, and a clear statement of confidentiality.

Confidentiality is another standard ethical issue that deals with the obligation to protect the participants' identity and the information they disclose during the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Confidentiality is closely related to privacy and anonymity of the research participants (Miles et al., 2014). In order for my participants to divulge as much information as possible, I ensured that their identities were masked. I put in place a plan to optimize the honesty of my participants in their responses to interview questions. Prior to engaging the participants, I attempted to explain my role as the investigator and their roles as respondents so that no misunderstandings arose in terms of the data collection.

In the current study, it was my duty to ensure that all data collected were treated as confidential. In this regard, I secured the data files on my computer, and created reliable back up on the external drive and flash discs. Data storage back up is an

important consideration in any research project (Silverman, 2014). To ensure compliance, I used a confidentiality agreement for the person I hired to transcribe the data. No confidential data were disseminated to any unauthorized person at any time of my study. Part of my data came from the audio recordings of the interviews. I used good audio recording equipment to have the best sound. I then duplicated the audio recording of each interview session at the end of the interview to minimize problems in case of the loss of data.

The third element of ethical practice identified by Seale et al. (2004) and echoed by Patton (2015) relates to the issue of trust. Trust refers to the relationship between the researcher and the participants, and to the researcher's responsibility not to spoil the field for others in the sense that research participants become reluctant to participate in the future. It is cardinal to learn the participants' perceptions and understanding of both the researcher and the research in order to develop useful and ethically appropriate relationships with them (Maxwell, 2013). In the current study, I made sure that I was very honest with the participants with what I intended to research.

Punch (2013) condensed the plethora of ethical considerations in a research to a few major elements. Issues that arise early in the process include the worthiness of the project, competence boundaries, informed consent, and the benefits, costs, and reciprocity for the parties involved in the study. The research must be worth doing in terms of knowledge contribution and other considerations. The researcher must have the requisite skills and knowledge to undertake the research. Ethical issues that arise during the course of the research include the potential harm and risk to the people involved and

honest and trust between the research parties. Other ethical dimensions are intervention and advocacy; research integrity and quality; ownership of data and conclusions, and; the use of and misuse of results. I incorporated all these considerations into my study in line with the Walden University requirements.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I have given a full description of the qualitative phenomenological study I conducted. I have further shown that I was the main research instrument in terms of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data. I have also offered a full justification of the choice of my research methodology. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive phenomenological study was to explore employee absenteeism and service delivery in the Zambian government agency through the lived experiences of the selected 22 participants.

After restating the single research question of the study, I used Moustakas's (1994) purposeful sampling strategy called key informants, key experts, and reputational sampling. Using this sampling strategy, I focused on individuals who had experienced situations where the employees of the two departments under the Zambian government agency who were supposed to attend to them were absent from work. In terms of instrumentation, I was the main research instrument. My other tools included the institutional documents, semistructured interviews, a reflexive journal, field notes, audio recording equipment, a consent form, and the confidentiality form for the transcription of data. I used Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam method of analysis to analyze my data.

Participants for this study were selected primarily on the criterion of having experienced staff absenteeism at the selected departments of the Zambian government agency. I have also indicated that I conducted all the interviews and collected all the data for this research. I informed the participants of their rights to participate in the study, and obtained consent prior to any interview. After the data collection, I employed Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam method of analysis to analyze and interpret data.

The last part of this chapter related to the issues of trustworthiness that included credibility and transferability. The other elements of trustworthiness that I have discussed in this section are dependability, confirmability, and ethical procedures. I have shared the strategies I employed to ensure that my results are credible or believable. I have indicated cause for the transferability of my study. To build dependability in the current study, I used an audit trail and triangulation. I used reflexivity to build the confirmability of my study. Finally, I have described in detail how I used consent, confidentiality, and trust to ensure ethical compliance as required by the Walden University.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to explore employee absenteeism and service delivery through the lived experiences of the 22 clients of a Zambian government agency. Through purposeful sampling, I selected 22 individuals who had experiences where the employees who were supposed to attend to them at this Zambian government agency were absent from work. I used semistructured, in-depth interviews with the 22 participants as the main data collection method.

The following was the single overarching research question to address the problem and purpose of the study: What are the lived experiences of the clients of the Zambian government agency regarding staff absenteeism and the delivery of services by the organization?

This chapter includes a detailed description of the research setting, personal or organizational conditions that influenced the participants or their experience at the time of the study. This is followed by the participant demographics and characteristics relevant to the study. After the participant demographics, I discuss the details of my data collection. The discussion includes the number of participants, the data collection methods, types of data, duration of data collection, and how the data were recorded.

In the rest of the chapter, I provide the process of my data analysis. I also address the evidence of trustworthiness of study in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This is followed by the presentation of the study

results. The final section of the chapter is a summary, comprising answers to the research question and a transition to the next chapter.

### **Research Setting**

The study was conducted at three institutions in Lusaka, Zambia. As permitted by the IRB, for my primary data, I recruited most of my participants from a professional body of consultants who act as agents for people who require services from the Zambian government agency. I wrote a letter to the executive committee of the professional body, seeking authority to interview some of their members for my study. The response I got was positive, and some of the members of the professional body volunteered to participate in the study. The professional body shared the details of their members who were ready to take part in my research study.

Once I had the full list and contact details of the willing participants, I engaged them individually to seek their consent to participate in the study. Each of the individuals in the list provided by the professional body consented to participate. I then arranged with each of the identified participants for individual interview sessions. For the rest of the participants, I obtained permission through their employers, and they all consented to be interviewed. These were mainly human resource managers and legal practitioners from various companies.

Out of the 22 participants, I interviewed 12 at a centrally located office in the city of Lusaka that the participants agreed to, and I met their cost of transport. The place was quiet and perfect for the interviews. I interviewed the other 10 participants from their respective offices in Lusaka. In each case, I requested that the offices be secured from

any form of disturbances during the interviews, and the participants facilitated accordingly. All the participants allowed me to record the interviews.

For the secondary data, with the written permission of the controlling officer of the Zambian government agency, I looked at documents at the selected two departments under the organization. These were documents with some relevance to the phenomenon of absenteeism of employees at the departments. They included institutional documents used for enforcing disciplinary actions on employees, attendance registers, and records of employees punished for absenteeism.

### **Demographics**

My selection of participants for the study was guided by the criterion of an individual having good knowledge of the employee absenteeism dynamics at the Zambian government agency, including experience with situations where the employees who were supposed to attend to them at the institution were absent from work. I was interested in their experiences in terms of absenteeism and service delivery.

From the 22 participants, 15 were male and seven were female. All the participants demonstrated some general good knowledge of the institution and met my inclusion criterion based on their experiences. Their experiences in dealing with the institution ranged from 3 to 20 years, with a combined total of 204 years of experience. The participants reported making some frequent visits to the Zambian government agency ranging from eight times a day to twice a month. I have illustrated the participant demographics in Figures 3, 4, and 5.



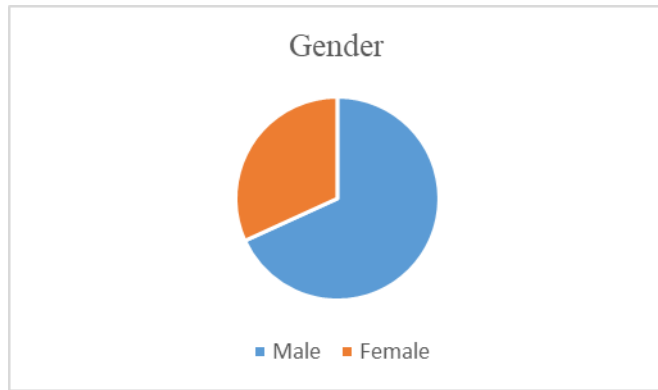


Figure 3. Gender of participants.

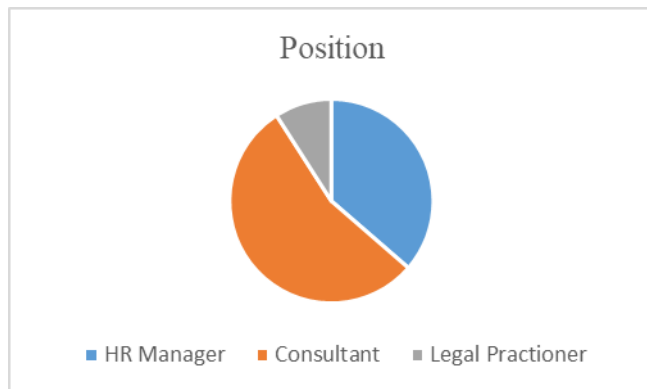
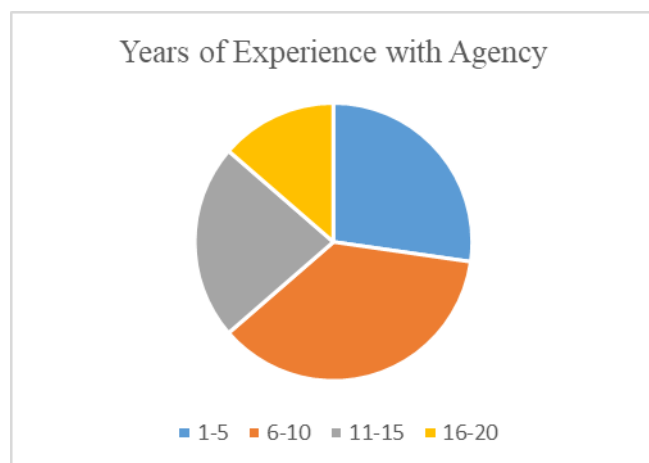


Figure 4. Positions held by participants.



*Figure 5.* Participants' years of experience with agency.

### **Data Collection**

My data collection process only deviated slightly from the original plan. I had initially planned to interview 20 participants, but I ended up with 22 respondents due to saturation. My study consisted of primary data, with little secondary data from the institutional documents. My main data collection tool was semistructured, face-to-face interviews of the 22 participants, which provided my primary data.

The semistructured interviews enabled me to gain answers to address the main research problem of organizational leaders of the Zambian government agency not knowing the lived experiences of their clients regarding staff absenteeism and the delivery of services by the organization. I developed the interview protocol questions to align with the overarching research question of the study.

Once I had the IRB approval and the consent of a participant, I set up an appointment for the interview of that individual. I conducted all the 22 interviews in Lusaka, Zambia. I arranged an office in one of the central districts of Lusaka for the interviews. Out of the 22 interviews, I conducted 12 interviews from this centrally located place in Lusaka. I met the cost of transport for the 12 participants who agreed to be interviewed from that location. I interviewed the other 10 participants from their offices. I requested for no interruptions or disturbances during the interviews at the participants' offices. All the 10 interviews progressed disturbance free.

My semistructured interviews commenced with preset, open-ended questions supplemented by follow-up questions to explore the lived experiences of the participants.

The preset questions helped me keep my focus on the subject. The semistructured interviews also gave me the benefit of interrogating the participants further using prompts such as share more details, elaborate further, or give examples (see Maxwell, 2013). I applied the probing technique to clarify things and seek additional information on relevant points.

Before commencing every interview, I reviewed the purpose of my study to the participant. I also reminded the participants of their rights, including the fact that they were free to discontinue their participation in the study at any time if they decided so. I also reviewed the consent form and invited any clarifications or questions from the participants. All the 22 participants agreed to participate and signed the consent form. I also requested permission to contact the participants for any follow-up interviews if the need arose. They all indicated their willingness to participate in any follow up interviews. At the end of each interview, I thanked each participant for his or her time and participation in the study.

Once I had the IRB approval, I commenced the interview process that lasted from January 14, 2019 to January 24, 2019. My longest interview lasted for 1 hour, with the shortest going for 15 minutes. The average interview duration was about 26 minutes per participant. My combined interview duration for the 22 participants was 539 minutes, more than 8 hours.

With the permission of each participant, I used two smart phones to audio record the interviews. I saved the 22 recordings of the interviews in my password-secured smart phones. I later transferred the audio recordings to the main database for my study on my

password-secured laptop. I also backed up the data using a password-protected flash drive. All my equipment for the research study is kept in my private office at home, with the office keys hidden a password-secured safe in the house.

Because all the participants gave me permission to audio record the interviews, I had the time to take field notes during the interviews. I was able to observe the respondents' body language and verbal tone to discern more meaning and validate the verbal responses. The tone of responses and the body or facial language of the respondent in phenomenological interviews are as important as the actual responses (Janesick, 2016). Besides the field notes, I also developed a small reflexive journal as a record of my learning experiences during the interview process. I recorded a few observations and experiences, including the difficulty I encountered in extracting data from some participants who opted to be brief in their interview responses. In a few interviews, I had to probe further for realistic data from the respondents. I also noted how broad the responses to the main research question were compared to my limited presuppositions.

When I finished interviewing the participants, I shared my audio recordings with my professional data transcriptionist on January 24, 2019 after we signed the confidentiality agreement. Once the work was in the hands of the transcriptionist, I had to wait until February 13, 2019 when the transcriptionist sent me the 22 interview transcriptions. I secured the transcribed data in the main database for my study in my password-protected laptop. I also kept a backup on a password-secured flash drive.

I collected secondary data from the January 25 to 30, 2019. I collected the data from two departments under the Zambian government agency under investigation. I

looked at administrative documents like attendance registers, policy documents used to regulate the conduct of employees, and records pertaining to the discipline of employees related to absenteeism.

### **Data Analysis**

I started the data analysis after my transcriptionist gave me the interview transcripts on February 13, 2019. I conducted the data analysis using Moustakas's (1994) van Kaam method of data analysis for qualitative phenomenological inquiry. I concluded the data analysis process on March 23, 2019, making the whole process 39 days long.

Moustakas's van Kaam method of analysis consists of seven stages that start with listing and preliminary grouping. Under this stage, also called horizontalization, I listed every expression relevant to participants' experiences of absenteeism and service delivery at the Zambian government agency as recorded in the 22 interview transcripts. I proceeded from the first interview transcript to the last one, selecting all the relevant expressions from the participants and separating the irrelevant text. At the end of it, I had a summarized version of my interview transcripts.

The second stage of the van Kaam method of analysis is called reduction and elimination. The stage involves the further compression of the interview transcripts by testing every expression listed in the preliminary grouping for two requirements:

- Does the expression contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?
- Is it possible to abstract and label the expression? (Moustakas, 1994)

If an expression satisfied this criteria, I recorded it as a horizon of the experience of absenteeism and service delivery at the Zambian government agency. Through this process I eliminated many expressions from the first stage list and remained with fewer ones that I considered the invariant constituents of the experience or horizons. I scrutinized all the expressions from the first stage listing in respect of all the 22 participants.

In the third stage of my analysis process, clustering and thematizing, I clustered related invariant constituents of the experience into thematic labels. After the scrutiny of the invariant constituents, I developed eight themes aligned with the preset interview questions and tailored to generate answers to the overarching research question. The eight themes included general impression of absenteeism, factors affecting absenteeism, customer relations/care, delayed services due to absenteeism, absenteeism and remaining employees, standard of service delivery, how absenteeism affects service delivery, and absenteeism management strategies.

The final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application constituted the fourth stage of the analysis process. At this stage, the researcher is supposed to check the invariant constituents and their accompanying theme against the complete record of the research participant (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher checks whether the invariant constituents are expressed explicitly in the complete transcription and if they are compatible if not explicitly expressed. All my invariant constituents passed this test.

My next stage of the analysis was the Individual textural description of the experience of absenteeism by the participants. This stage involved returning to each interview script and using the validated invariant constituents and themes to construct for each of my 22 participants an individual textural description. This process is about sharing the participants' version of the story mostly verbatim. I often used the actual words of the participants to form the individual textural description.

The sixth stage of Moustakas's (1994) van Kaam method of analysis is called *individual structural description*. At this stage, I used the individual textural description for each participant to construct an individual structural description. The stage involves the researcher paraphrasing the participant's version with little quotation of the actual words used by the participant. I used the individual structural description to shape the structure of each participant's experience of absenteeism and service delivery at the Zambian government agency.

The final stage of my analysis involved the textural-structural descriptions of the experiences of each of coresearcher. I used the meanings and essences derived from the experience of each participant, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes. Using the textural-structural descriptions, I developed a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience for the 22 participants combined. The composite description represents my main findings for the study and the answers to my research question. In all, I went through my scripts a combined 154 times for analysis.



## **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility**

Although the importance of credibility in qualitative research is a subject of debate among prominent scholars (Silverman, 2014), it is always important for qualitative investigators to ensure the credibility of their work (Patton, 2015). Unlike quantitative research, which is grounded in formulas and strict rules, qualitative research relies on the insights, conceptual capabilities, and the integrity of the analyst. In this vein, it is pertinent to explain strategies that support the credibility of a given study. In phenomenological inquiry, the research findings are made up of the researcher's interpretation of the participant's shared experiences. To prove credibility, certain elements are inevitable in a qualitative study (Blaikie, 2017).

To build the credibility of my study, I followed the framework suggested by Patton (2015) which is anchored on four distinct but related inquiry elements. My first step was to ensure that my fieldwork is in-depth, systematic, and yielded high-quality data. In this regard, I spent a combined 539 minutes interviewing my 22 participants in a period of 11 days. My longest interview lasted 1 hour with the shortest going for 15 minutes. My average interview time was about 26 minutes. In some cases, I had to dig deep to excavate the required insights from my participants. I spent a further 6 days gathering secondary data from the research site, making a total of 17 days of data collection. My data analysis lasted for 39 days.

Part of my credibility plan was to have follow-up interviews to clearly verify data with the participants and extract as much relevant detail as possible. All my 22

participants gave me permission to have follow-up interviews if the need arose. I only had follow-up interviews with two participants whom I felt had to make some certain clarifications. The rest of the interview transcripts were clear and adequate for the analysis stage.

Besides the in-depth interviews, I followed a detailed systematic and conscientious analysis of data with good attention to the issues of credibility. Moustakas's (1994) van Kaam method of data analysis is a good strategy for phenomenological data analysis. The van Kaam method consists of seven stages that are elaborate enough for the researcher to sift through data and develop the appropriate themes, patterns, meanings, and essences of the participants' experiences. I also used triangulation in my study, especially for the data analysis and research findings and discovered similarities with earlier investigators on absenteeism.

The fourth element of Patton's (2015) framework hinges on the credibility of the researcher in terms of training, experience, record of accomplishment, status, and presentation of self. In terms of this element, I employed my broad research knowledge and skills gained through many years of formal education, especially the doctoral coursework at Walden University, and the extensive review of the literature.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which the research findings are transferable to the wider population beyond the sample (Punch, 2013). Also referred to as external validity, transferability in qualitative research may not be as important as it is in quantitative research because the research findings in the former are not strictly

transferrable beyond the sample of respondents due to the small sample size and the purposeful sampling methods used. It is imperative, however, that the results of a qualitative study are transferable and have broader significance and implications for understanding the phenomenon under scrutiny (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). My transferability plan worked well.

The strategy I used to enhance the transferability of my research findings was thick description. Thick description is a term used in qualitative research to refer to the process of paying attention to contextual detail in observing and interpreting social meaning when conducting research (Silverman, 2014). A description may be rich if it provides abundant, interconnected details, and possibly cultural complexity; but it becomes thick description if it offers a direct connection to cultural theory and scientific knowledge (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013).

In the context of my study, I applied thick description to provide the detailed accounts of the participants and the research and the accounts of the participants' perspectives. The detailed accounts of participants' feelings and experiences are part of my detailed data analysis, specifically the horizontalization, individual textural description, and the individual structural descriptions of the participants' experiences. These analysis stages included the verbatim versions of each participant's lived experiences of absenteeism and service delivery at the Zambian government agency. My thick description may assist to explain the diversity of the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon of absenteeism so that my readers are able to do their own analysis and come up with conclusions.

## **Dependability**

Dependability in qualitative inquiry may be considered the equivalent of reliability in the quantitative inquiry. Dependability may be understood in terms of the replicability of research findings and whether or not they would be repeated if another study, using the same or similar methods, was undertaken (Ritchie & Lewis, 2013). The extent to which a qualitative study can be replicated has been a source of controversy (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), but it remains very important to ensure high dependability in qualitative research (Patton, 2015). As explained in Chapter 3, I used two strategies to build dependability in the current study: audit trail and triangulation.

An audit trail in qualitative research involves the explanation of the whole study process from the beginning to the conclusion. Maxwell (2013) explained an audit trail in terms of a transparent description of the research project to the development and reporting of findings. From the first chapter, I explained what I have done in this study. I have shared the research plan, my detailed review of the literature relevant to the phenomenon of absenteeism, and the research design and methodology.

My data collection methods were the face-to-face, semistructured interviews of 22 purposefully selected participants, field notes, and a reflexive journal for primary data. I explained my sample inclusion criteria. I gathered my secondary data from the institutional documents with relevance to employee absenteeism. I also explained my data storage and analysis details, leading to the research findings. The details about trustworthiness are part of my audit trail. I have used an audit trail to illuminate everything I did to arrive at my findings.

For my second dependability strategy of triangulation, I interrogated my study by comparison with other research findings. I used triangulation in terms of my data sources, method, theory, and data type. Triangulation is similar to the techniques used by detectives, mechanics, and primary care physicians who use different kinds of measurements that provide repeated verification. In the current study, I focused on the literature review, methodology, and research findings of my study to verify my research work.

### **Confirmability**

The equivalent of objectivity in quantitative research, confirmability refers to the level of confidence that the research findings emanate from the words and narratives of the research participants as opposed to the opinion or bias of the researcher (Miles et al., 2014). Confirmability is especially critical in the current study because the perspectives, feelings, experiences, and words of the participants and not the notions and feelings of the investigator ground the phenomenological inquiry.

As planned in Chapter 3, I applied the technique of reflexivity to build the confirmability of my study. I used reflexivity to set a boundary between my feelings and assumptions and the reported experiences of my participants. To confirm my reflexivity in the study, I have reflected the actual words and expressions of the participants as they shared their lived experiences of absenteeism and service delivery at the partner organization. This provides evidence of the source of my study findings and leaves no room for researcher bias.

Reflexivity was particularly important to my study because I am a top management official at one of the departments under the Zambian government agency under investigation. This entails that I have some preconceived ideas and feelings about the phenomenon of employee absenteeism and the service delivery at the institution, the focus of my study. I used the reflexivity technique to draw a distinction between my possible bias based on the preconceived position about the study and the narratives of the participants regarding their personal lived experiences.

### **Results**

Following my in-depth data collection and detailed systematic and conscientious analysis of data, I present my study results in this section. The results are thematically organized. There are eight themes, with the last theme in the section divided into subthemes. I have presented the expressions of all the 22 participants verbatim on each of the eight themes. At the end of the section, there is a summary of the combined results for all the participants in the form of a composite description of their lived experiences.

#### **General Impression of Absenteeism**

In the first part of the interview, my interest was to obtain the participant's general overview of their perspective about absenteeism at the Zambian government agency. The verbatim responses of the participants follow.

Participant 1 (P1): "Total absenteeism, it's not really much. Partial absenteeism is the one that is common, where one decides to report yet they are just there in numbers and not providing the necessary service which is required of them."

P2: "It's very rare that I have seen employees being absent from work . . . I think they don't have a big issue on absenteeism because most of the times they are there"

P3: "It is on the higher side."

P4: "Absenteeism is there but it's not very bad. It is not something that happens perpetually or on an everyday basis."

P5: "It's 50-50 because they are not very bad."

P6: "Yes, it's there but it's not that much. You find someone may report for work but has gone in the field or has gone to other duties."

P7: "It's sporadic."

P8: "It's not all that bad but sometimes you find that, may be, somebody is sick or somebody is on leave and then work becomes slow in following up."

P9: "Absenteeism has adversely affected the institution in that some people have failed to acquire the required services."

P10: "I would describe the levels of absenteeism as frustrating, quite frustrating."

P11: "It's not all that very bad . . . it's not so much."

P12: "I think I haven't really seen this problem. Except that, maybe, when an officer goes for a training somewhere, you find there could be a vacuum. But for mere absenteeism, I have not noticed that one."

P13: "I think from my experience, I wouldn't want to spot, indeed, that I have discovered there is absenteeism going on. I think there have just been times where you find that there is quite a queue where people are actually waiting and then the officer at that respective place is not there."

P14: "I have not experienced any incident where the officer I wanted to see was absent . . . one to 10, maybe in a department of 10, maybe there can only be one person who is absent."

P15: "Well, like my experience with the officers at this institution, really, I have not found any problem with them regarding absenteeism. It's rare that they are absent."

P16: "I would say that . . . well, maybe, 30 percent. I think a lot has to be done, you know. We don't have to be inconvenienced as customers just because other people are not coming, you know, because it also affects our work."

P17: "It's actually very touching. In general, the level of absenteeism is very low . . . not so bad."

P18: "Most of the time you find that an officer has been transferred but someone else hasn't come to replace that person. Then there is kind of standstill of work."

P19: "In my honest opinion, from the time that I have been going the institution, the absenteeism is not much . . . these people when they are absent, they don't announce. When you there, they don't announce whether they will be absent."

P20: "My personal impression would be that the officers are always available . . . I cannot recall a situation or an incidence where I went to the institution, the employee who was supposed to attend to me is not there and there was nobody else to attend to me."

P21: "I would say it's 50-50 in the sense that on certain days you might be attended to well or, maybe, faster than other days and other days you will probably spend even the whole day. Absenteeism, okay, for me, on my part, I haven't really experienced



that much employee absenteeism because I think most of the times that I go there, I would be told to see a certain person and in most cases I have seen the person that I'm told to see."

P22: "I think it's occasionally because I don't have a lot of problems with absenteeism. Usually when I have a case and I go to the institution, I get attended by the officers there."

### **Factors Affecting Absenteeism**

P1: "These are individuals who probably have their own interests. May be they are pushing their own works which are not related to official work. Somehow, it is laziness . . . some of them are just lazy and they do not have the passion for the work." "Having dealt with these people, these are the people that have been saying that . . . me I have worked in the service for a long time and yet promotions are not there . . . and then they become demotivated."

P2: "There are times when I have gone to the institution, you find that the officer may be has got a funeral, the child is sick, and some, may be unexplainable circumstances . . . someone is sick, someone may be took a bit too much beer the previous day, or child is sick." "Most of these people are very lazy and they don't care about their jobs."

P3: "Personal errands, school things which may be can be done by somebody who can . . . even a guardian could go there." "Sometimes the absent officers just go to buy something like a present for somebody and thus create a vacuum now in their section."

P4: “For example, sickness or bereavement – those are things beyond our control . . . their children or their spouses are sick or they have lost a loved one . . . death within the family.”

P5: “May be someone has a family problem, transport problem . . . there are a lot of things. Sometimes it has to do with the sickness of a child or spouse, or attending a funeral . . . the child is sick, may be the husband, the wife, funeral . . . those are the things that can make someone to be absent from work.” “Sometimes, maybe he was drunk the other day, hangover.”

P6: “When I asked they said he was not there because he has gone for other duties somewhere. And like the other day again, it happened the same way. Like the third day I went there, it was that he had a family problem. . . . Immorality means playing . . . playing means childish. It means may be he likes life—entertainment too much. On that one to be clear may be, as I said at first, maybe he has friends outside marriage . . . girlfriends and so on. He is frustrated because he is not given according to what he is supposed to be given or he is not motivated.”

P7: “A person has an illness which has them confined to bed like malaria, high fever, diarrhea, cholera . . . things that keep somebody out. Some people have chronic patients, whom they tend throughout, to take to the hospital and have to look after. Employees have dual functions . . . to move paperwork, so, meaning that a specific officer has to do the physical motion of the paperwork themselves. They will say either the person is off work or the person has stepped out or either for a meeting or a private

matter or the person hasn't come in that day because he is sick or it might be that the person is on leave.”

P8: “The causes range from funerals, when somebody is having a funeral, when somebody is sick or may be attending to a sick relative . . . and then when somebody has gone for studies.”

P9: “I think, first of all, from my experience and from the reasons that I have gotten from many other people I have asked . . . is that the officers are too busy and they are overloaded with work. But generally, what I think is that the officers are interested in their personal endeavors than what they were contracted to do by the state.” “Some of the officers have given me a reason which totally does not make sense at all.”

P10: “From my own understanding, I think their working conditions are not so good . . . It's too congested, number one. The place is small and there is also too much work there but minimal employees . . . The salaries of the workers . . . if they can be improved, you will find that even the employees will put more effort. But because the salaries are not so good in their position, they are tempted to go out and do businesses outside so that they can have at least enough money to support their families, to support themselves as well because the economy right now is a bit on the higher side.”

P11: “In the government system, although now it has improved but transport is a major challenge for the officers to report on time for work. The other one could be lack of discipline on the part of the members of staff.”

P12: “What I notice, what could have brought about this absenteeism is maybe the lack of manpower . . . I think there is need to . . . to employ more members of staff to fill

these positions in case one has a bereavement or one has gone for studies or so . . . If I am to put it in a general term, the cause of absenteeism is lack of management administrative skills in order to . . . supervise the officers.”

P13: “Whatever it is they do, it’s a service and they are paid to do that. So, they should be able to know that when they are present, it’s worth it because the government needs to collect as much revenue as possible.”

P14: “Sickness and understaffed . . . and employees are fatigued and they just feel like taking a day off and without giving a reason, they stay off work.”

P15: “From my personal view, I think this absenteeism . . . you find these members of staff, maybe, the officers have got personal problems, family problems or bereavements in the family . . . a relative is not well, the child is sick or, maybe, they have to sort out school issues for their children . . . you find they will not be in the office. They are demotivated, of course, they will not feel happy to go for work, you see. You may find these employees are getting low salaries compared to what is prevailing in the economy. Because like the cost of living now in Zambia is quite high. So, you may find their salaries are quite low, so they would prefer to abscond and do other activities that, maybe, would give them financial gain.”

P16: “Somebody is sick; maybe, they have personal problems, family problems and all that.”

P17: “Natural incidents that the employee doesn’t have control of, like sickness, accident, a child falls sick . . . If she forces herself to go to work, then she won’t have a stable mind at the place of work. . . Habit is something that comes into a person; it’s got

nothing to do with natural occurrences. It's just a habit . . . he goes drinking or partying, he comes late in the night and he knows he is working. He wakes up late in the morning and says no, I am not feeling well. Those are habits and those are the most common occurrences in the institution, so to say, in Africa in particular because of our set-up. We come to work with a lot of burdens . . . You want to work, you have got a habit of drinking, alcoholism; you have a habit of just tiredness; sometimes the work that you do, you do it so much that when you get home the following day you are worn out.” “The work environment sometimes becomes hostile for the employee and this leads to absenteeism . . . the environment where you work is not conducive for you. And so, one day in a week, when you think of that man or that place or that person you work with, just that picture in your mind puts you off from work . . . you stay away from work... We call them miscellaneous activities, where officers borrow so much money from people. Then, you decide to stay away from work, hoping that maybe tomorrow when I find money, I will go and pay, that's when I will go for work.... In Africa, we in Zambia in particular, we work long hours, from 08 00hours to 17 00hours. Elsewhere, people work short-term work periods. I will give an example of the people in Europe, maybe in the UK where an employee will go to a place of work, maybe, at a warehouse or coffee shop from 10 00hours and by 15 00 hours he or she knocks off... Sexual relationships at the workplace result in conflicts that are a source of absenteeism.”

P18: “Most of the time, you find that an officer has been transferred but someone else hasn't come to replace that person.”

P19: “In most cases, they are obviously personal matters; someone is sick or if it is a lady, maybe, the child is sick or the next of kin is sick . . . taken a day off or two for a study or to attend a bereavement as you are aware that here in Africa if you don’t attend a funeral for friend or any neighbor or anyone close to you, you are seen to be a bad person. It is either someone is sick, a child, a husband or whoever or funerals and usually funerals are the ones that are rampant and mainly cause absenteeism.”

P20 reported no experience of absenteeism at the institution.

P21: “The overwhelming work leads to absenteeism in the sense that probably you will be working probably longer hours than you are supposed to work. Eventually, after a long time, you can get sick and then you will not be able to perform well or you will not be able to report for work the following day. In fact, chronic fatigue is a disease.”

P22: “Funerals and a child being sick . . . and operations.”

### **Customer Relations/Care**

This theme was not one of those emanating from the responses to the preset interview questions. It came from the unsolicited insights of some participants. It passionately came from the participants as an issue that affects the delivery of services.

P1: “I have come to realize (that) . . . type of service that these people are supposed to provide is not there because the way that someone is supposed to respond, you will know that someone is welcoming you. The first touch will give you a signal whether to go for it or not to approach the officer. That is my view. Customer relations.”

P2: “They will give us good service . . . apart from a few who may be will be rude to you.”

P6: “Apart from absenteeism, sometimes it’s the way they approach you. The approach sometimes is not good, you know . . . I explained to them that the status of this person in the country is expiring today, but they said I should come back tomorrow. I asked them: What if you catch this person on the street? They responded, ‘It’s his fault.’ These offices are similar to a hospital where people go for assistance. Even at the hospital, we all go to get attended to. They are supposed to attend to me . . . instead of just saying come tomorrow. Even when you go to the hospital, they cannot just say you go and die. We have been answered like that, roughly, very rough!”

P10: “I am not saying all, but most of them are very rude and they intimidate people the way they talk. They like creating that fear in people. To me, I feel they are in that position to help, to serve the people, not to intimidate the people. People are scared of them. Most of the clients I have had to deal with, when they come to my office, you find when you ask them the real reason why they find it so difficult to go to those offices, it’s because they are intimidated. When someone comes to talk to you, you put up a smile because that is your job. You are serving the people. I have had an instance, myself, personally where when I went there, I was told to wear a wrapper. I was given something to cover myself because they felt that I wasn’t dressed properly. But to my understanding, I was decently dressed, it was just a sleeveless top I was wearing but they made it sound as if I can’t enter the offices like that. I thought that was very rude and arrogant.”

P12: “At times, maybe, certain officers, the attitude of certain officers might not be so good and they would rather choose who to attend to from the clients. It is worse when it comes to obtaining information from the employees, where you are just told that

no; the document is in the process, something like that. So those processes have not been explained . . . I think, maybe, for me as a consultant, the officers tend to choose who to serve and it's like the officers have not been comfortable with . . . consultants, for some reason. I think the attitude has not been good because they have been very selective in terms of how they have been attending to consultants or specifically to me, the way I look at it.”

P 16: “Attitude! With some officers, you know, some of them are actually very rude. It is like they are doing you a favor, you know. They are unapproachable. You know, approaching them is like you are wasting your time, you know. Others are rude and that is not fair. It could be they have some personal issues, maybe they are not motivated, or maybe they hate the job they are doing.”

P21: “Customer relations skills, I don't think they have . . . not too good. When a customer walks into an office as a customer, you are supposed to greet them, not a customer greeting you. They do greet but in most cases, you greet them. I really want to be greeted when I go to someone else's office because that's not my office.”



**Delayed Services Due to Absenteeism**

P1: “Every time there are people by the table, this person will just stand up, leave the phone on the table and go behind or maybe the registry. We will stay there even for one or two hours and people start going back.”

P3: “In a certain incident I experienced, I spent almost three days going to the same section and there was nobody there. I had to finally go to seek the help of the supervisor to reassign somebody else because the other remaining staff refused to sign on behalf of the absent officer because the case did not fall under their sections.”

P4: “When a specific person is not there, there are times when I have to be referred to the supervisor or the manager to accept that application and that will take a bit of time because the manager or the supervisor also has her own work to do. So, you find that to be a bit inconveniencing.”

P5: “When the officer who was supposed to attend to me was absent, I faced a lot of difficulties again to find someone else to help me because that officer who was absent is the only person who knows my problem. I feel . . . my work becomes so difficult because that person is not there.”

P6: “I was delayed for almost three days or so.”

P7: “The officer wasn’t there at the desk. I had to stay at the supervisor’s desk for over, I think over 30 minutes just trying to submit and eventually he did attend to me.”

P8: “I remember a case for one of our clients. It couldn’t be processed because I think the officer was out and then it delayed. It took, maybe, four weeks.”

P9: “For about two months, each time I went there he was unavailable.” “In another case, from 9 am to 12 hours, the person would be absent . . . and you know this would be very inconveniencing on my part. Not only on my part, including the client’s part as well.”

P11: “It was last Friday when I wanted to see one officer. He was not there. Then I waited, I waited, he was not there up to 16: 00 hours. So, I gave up and went back home.”

P13: “I was told to see one officer on some table, I went there and I actually did not find that particular officer. And for some reason, I did not ask where that officer had gone. But then I had to leave, meaning that I came two weeks later because I was held up as I am also a busy man wherever I am.”

P16: “I have a particular case that has been pending for, I think from last year August. Every time I go there, I am told this person is not there, you know, and there is nothing anybody can do, you know. When you go to the next person, they will tell you, you know, come back tomorrow and, you know, it is a lot of pressure from my employers as well, you know. Because they are like, okay, isn’t there another person that could attend to you? I was there today, nothing has been done because the person who was supposed to attend to me today was also not available. I have to go back tomorrow again and check. So, I keep going back and forth. I am not getting feedback, I don’t know, you know, when my cases will be worked on, you know, you are just left hanging just like that without the outcome.”

P19: “Unfortunately, we had to wait for another week to come for it to be worked on and it was embarrassing on my part. Equally, I did not just walk away. I was almost losing business because these people they buy tickets in advance and changing a ticket is quite expensive and they do plan their travel and everything. We had to extend for another extra 5 days and everything was now in reverse gear and it was put on hold because of this same officer who was absent. If the officer was there, definitely it was going to be efficiently worked on and it was going to be successful and we wouldn’t have had any problem.”

P20: “This time we were made to wait, if I am not mistaken, we were there in the afternoon, I think by . . . okay, the client was there by, I think 10 to 11 00 hours, and then I was notified by, I think by lunch time. So, I was there about 13 00 hours.”

### **Absenteeism and Remaining Employees**

P1: “Let me just give an example. This one officer in a day probably is supposed to work on 20 files . . . and stays away from work. He is absent. For the sake of service delivery, probably the superiors will add more responsibility on another person who has reported, hence putting much pressure on one individual as well as the pace at which the other files could have been worked on.”

P2: “Actually, they will be affected because there will be workload . . . backload now on the work. Others now will start doing other people’s work. So the efficiency won’t be there.”

P3: “I had to finally go to seek the help of the supervisor to re-assign to me somebody because the other remaining officers refused to sign on behalf of the absent

because the case did not fall under their sections . . . absent staff are putting pressure on fellow officers who are remaining there.”

P4: “When one officer is not in the office, it means there is an overwhelming load of work that has to rest on the others . . . to cover up for the work that a particular officer had to do.”

P5: “The remaining staff are affected because they will receive a lot of customers from that person who is absent. Like one time when I went there, I had a case which was supposed to be worked on. So, that case was still on the same person who was absent. So, for the remaining officer to get that work from the absent officer’s desk it was difficult for her to start looking for that work in order to work on it.”

P6: “Actually, what happens is that they may be consulting first what somebody else was doing or their workmate was doing . . . they start afresh. They ask, ‘What is the issue? Where do we start from? So, it delays the cases.’”

P7: “I think those who are present experience an increased workload because they have to cover what that missing person would have assisted in covering. It also causes congestion because . . . what happens is that a lot of people are now waiting for one particular person to deal with them.”

P8: “I think the other employees are overworked.”

P9: “And it causes stress to the others.”

P10: “The remaining employees are affected in such a way that they are overloaded with work.”

P11: “The officers that are present in the offices are being affected because instead of concentrating on one responsibility, they will be attending to this customer, then they jump to another desk to go and attend to that other queue which is there and so forth.”

P12: “The remaining employee will be overloaded with more job, which is supposed to be done by, maybe, more than one officer . . . because every officer has got his own or her own duties and so forth. Absenteeism creates an overload for the remaining employees.”

P13: “To me I have actually found it a privilege because I’m familiar with the way around, which I think each and every one probably are . . . you can still be assisted by the other officers. I think to me . . . It’s not really an issue to me indeed because if the officer is not there, I normally go to another table and I have gotten assistance.”

P14: “They are understaffed and there is a lot of work for them which they are not supposed to actually be doing but they go ahead and do that . . . and in the process also customers get affected by waiting longer in the queues.”

P15: “Well, those that are present, I think that the way they work, I think they are well coordinated. For me, I think that they are not really affected as per se because it’s like they are always ready to take up the challenges . . . somebody will automatically have to sit in.”

P16: “They may work on the work meant for their workmates but it’s just a by-the-way thing. So, I think they get affected as well, it could be an overload for them as

well. It becomes poor because any person that's overloaded, overburdened, you know, the output is usually not up to par, you know. They try but it's not 100 percent."

P17: "The most obvious one is that they do extra work because they cannot send the client away, saying you go back because that one is not there. When a remaining employee takes up a case for absent colleague, it will take time for him or her to try to scabble; try to understand the situation before I am given results."

P18: "They have to carry the burden of the other officers who are not there because of the demand of work . . . because they have a lot of us who go there, doing the same thing, pushing cases. So, obviously, they work under pressure because of trying to cover up for those officers who are not there on that particular day."

P19: "They are affected in the way that they are overloaded with a lot of work because they have to now cushion the work of the other person as they have to double up the effort to deliver efficiently."

P20: "If, perhaps, a particular officer is absent, another one definitely will have taken their place and every time that I have gone, I have been attended to."

P21: "They are affected in the sense that the work that the colleague was supposed to do is going to be transferred to them. It means you are going to have double work, your work will be doubled."

P22: "The remaining staff get a bit more pressurized because now what happens is; they can't turn away the clients, the public when they come to ask for services."

### **Standard of Service Delivery**

P1: "From my experience, the standard is generally improving day by day . . . the department has invested heavily in going the online way."

P2: "I would say the standard of service delivery is okay. When we go to those offices, we ask questions, we take applications there. They give us a good service except for a few rude ones."

P3: "Well, it's not the way it is supposed to be projected. It is supposed to be very efficient."

P4: "I think it's okay, apart from the few instances where the cases are delayed because of the same absenteeism."

P9: "From my experience, especially in the recent past, I would describe the service delivery as professional. I am quite impressed in the past two years how the officers in the department's good . . . but I also think that it's work in progress. I think the department still has to do a lot more to improve the service delivery."

P5: "The standard of service is okay, though sometimes we face a lot of difficulties with the officers."

P6: "The services at least are good . . . though they are not 100 percent."

P7: "People are getting a poor service. It also reflects badly upon the institution, that they are not able to attend to people."

P8: "It's quite not good how they have conducted themselves."

P10: "To me who gives services to my clients, I find the service delivery a bit frustrating because when I give them dates to say come on this date, I will have

information for you, when I go back to the offices, I don't have any information to give back to my clients."

P11: "As a client, I rate the standard of service at the Department as excellent, it's excellent."

P12: "Well I think on this one, I would say not very good because of documents and files missing."

P13: "You find that there is a queue where people are, actually, waiting and then, maybe, the officer at that respective place is not there or she is not there."

P14: ". "For the service delivery, I think there is loss of revenue in the Department and may be some customers get frustrated because of the poor service."

P15: "For me, I think . . . average . . . it's okay."

P16: "They try but it's not 100 percent."

P17: "It is now very good, that one I will be honest and straight to the point."

P18: "It's generally okay but not up there, where we would have been very happy . . . where I would say wow! It's okay."

P19: "I would rate it I think eight out of ten, if I had to rate it. I think the standard, it is not bad, it's good. It has improved. It's very good."

P20: "Speaking for myself, I think on the whole, the standard of service delivery is satisfactory to a large extent, speaking for myself, at least the experiences that I have had, whether in my own case or my family's case or members of my family or, indeed, customers who pay me to do this kind of work."



P21: “They are a bit slow in doing certain things because there are certain problems that you would have that you would want to sort out but the procedure that is there is just too long.”

P22: “Sometimes, the standard of service is very fast and quick and timely and good. Sometimes, it is a bit slow but then again when it’s slow it somehow damages the standard of delivery because what we know is that the delivery is supposed to be offered in a certain specified period.”

### **How Absenteeism Affects Service Delivery**

All the participants shared some insights regarding the theme.

P1: “When one officer scores, it means the name of the institution scores. When one officer is absent, the institution suffers because generally if, for instance, I make an application today and then I am told this application takes five working days for it to be processed . . . the timeframe of five days will be pushed further. It won’t be five days because the days for the application to be processed will be more.”

P2: “Meaning that when one is absent, work doesn’t move. So, we need the institution to be effective on the absenteeism because the work of the institution will go backwards. There is no efficiency in the delivery of services.”

P3: “There are times whereby, may be, you have got a pressing issue. Then you find that you are made to wait and inconvenience the client who is waiting for you. May be, they have other pressing things to do. They say to us. . . it’s your fault, you are not doing your job and yet it’s the fault of that particular officer who has not been there at that particular time.”

P4: “When one officer is not in the office, it means there is an overwhelming load of work that has to rest on the others . . . to cover up for the work that a particular officer had to do . . . So, it means that I am inconvenienced with my time and the client is inconvenienced. So, I think that does not augur well on my part as a consultant because it could mean to a client that I am not doing my job well.”

P5: “When the officer who was supposed to attend to me was absent, I faced a lot of difficulties again to find someone else to help me because that officer who was absent is the only person who knows my problem. I feel . . . my work becomes so difficult because that person is not there.” “It was so difficult for me to explain to that officer who took over . . . to understand what I am talking about because that person who was supposed to help me is absent. So, for me to start explaining to that new one again, it’s very difficult for that person to understand what I am talking about.”

P6: “In general, when somebody is absent, it means he is not productive . . . I went there, yes, that day was a Thursday when I went there. Then the officer was not there and I was told that he has not reported for work. So, it affected me very much because I had the customer himself with me. So, he was very annoyed that . . . how come the officer is not there.”

P7: “People are getting a poor service. It also reflects badly upon the institution, that they are not able to attend to people. What I have observed is . . . you only get a response in four weeks for a service that is supposed to take only two weeks.”

P8: “Most of the time the delays are because of absenteeism. But when the officers are there, cases normally go on normally. When the officers are absent, the

delivery of services is slowed down. When they are not there, work becomes slow. The quality of service becomes compromised because, you know, when you expect something to be done fast, it becomes very slow.”

P9: “What I think is that, first of all, it will negate the ability of the department to work efficiently because where one officer is overloaded with, first of all, his or her work and his or her superior’s work, it becomes way too much . . . And it causes stress to the others.”

P10: “There is an incident where I had gone to a particular office because my client needed to go through an interview. They gave us a date but when we went there, we found that particular officer had gone into the field. To us, that was time wasting and the client was a bit disappointed. It affected me in such a way that my client thought maybe I am not serious with my work because they expected me to reconfirm again before we went back. The remaining employees are affected in such a way that they are overloaded with work . . . I find the service delivery a bit frustrating because when I give them dates to say come on this date, I will have information for you, when I go back to the offices, I don’t have any information to give back to my clients. When you bounce, it’s frustrating because it eats your time. It gets into your time, meaning you have to keep on going back and forth to the offices.”

P11: “This impedes the rating of the head of the institution and his . . . management team. It affects them very much. For the clients, instead of getting what they want, to be served, to be cleared, it affects them that they take a lot of time . . . maybe two, three, four months not being cleared.”

P12: “We are not able to get the truth of what’s happening to the application because the remaining officer is busy. So, he doesn’t want to tell you that there is nothing happening. We will only be cheated that the document is in the process, even when it is not there, because the officer is unable to cope up with the extra job. Well, my clients have not been happy because of the delays. You find I am pushed. So, when I’m pushed like that, it will look like I am also not doing my job . . . but when it takes about more than a month or so, in fact, we tend to lose, we lose clients because of that.”

P13: “I was told to see one officer on some table, I went there and I actually did not find that particular officer. And for some reason, I did not ask where that officer had gone. But then I had to leave, meaning that I came 2 weeks later because I was held up as I am also a busy man wherever I am.”

P14: “For the service delivery, I think there is loss of revenue in the Department and may be some customers get frustrated because of the poor service . . . our company is affected because we suffer loss of revenue and maybe cringes in the work we deliver to our clients.”

P15: “The absenteeism of staff affects the delivery of services in a way that you find the processing of cases is delayed . . . like I said, the other officer who might sit in might not be conversant with what the other officer does. So, that process might delay the service delivery.”

P16: “I have a particular case that has been pending for, I think from last year August (2018). Every time I go there, I am told this person is not there, you know, and there is nothing anybody can do, you know. When you go to the next person, they will

tell you, you know, come back tomorrow and, you know, it is a lot of pressure from my employers as well, you know. Because they are like, okay, isn't there another person that could attend to you? I was there today, nothing has been done because the person who was supposed to attend to me today was also not available. I have to go back tomorrow again and check. So, I keep going back and forth. I am not getting feedback, I don't know, you know, when my cases will be worked on, you know, you are just left hanging just like that without the outcome.”

P17: “So, when I went there, I was told the officer hasn't come for some reason or the other. So, I couldn't get the service. The person who was supposed to come was a businessman who wanted to come and invest in the company. He was coming from Europe if I remember. So, we stayed, we couldn't get the service. When I got back to the office, I told the director and when they informed the applicant, he cancelled the trip. He said, ‘well, my schedule is tight; I expected to be in Zambia in the evening so that the other two days I fly back to South Africa and then back home.’ So, just because of that, the applicant never came and we lost out because of that incident of an officer being absent from duty.”

P18: “I can say absenteeism really affects a lot of people, including myself, because as at now, even as we are speaking, I think not all, not everyone is there who is supposed to fill the places or the sections. The quality of the service, I think that one comes a bit slower because it never moves at the same pace like where all officers are there, they are able to attend to their stations.”

P19: “It affected my work, it affected my business because I had promised the client that the case would be worked on and it needed to go for approval, of which I could tell or read between the lines that it was going to be approved. Unfortunately, we had to wait for another week to come for it to be worked on and it was embarrassing on my part. Equally, I did not just walk away. I was almost losing business because these people they buy tickets in advance and changing a ticket is quite expensive and they do plan their travel and everything.”

P20: Reported no experience of absenteeism at the institution.

P21: “It affects the delivery of services in the sense that your work will be delayed. What you were supposed to do on a particular day will not be done on that day. The remaining employee will have a lot of work, they will be overwhelmed and then, at the end of the day, he will probably end up attending to a few people only.”

P22: “When an officer is absent from his duties, it definitely affects the service because what happens is; unfortunately, it is like what will happen is like because this is not there, the file is on that officer’s desk and it has to wait for the officer to come back and sort it out. The time of service delivery gets prolonged. It affects our business in the fact that sometimes the clients don’t understand and lose confidence in what we are doing.”

### **Employee Absenteeism Management Strategies**

P1: “Those who probably have served long enough . . . those are the people that somehow the management should consider when it comes to providing them with promotions. Those are the things that will make someone really look forward to going for

work because some of them see that those people who have joined the institution recently . . . they are up already. Immediately one is out of the table, management should . . . the supervisors should look for a replacement immediately to fill in the table which is vacant. It takes the individual employees . . . the officers, they really need the heart to which they agreed to serve the public . . . they need to be self-motivated. One other issue that I will bring to your attention is . . . the reshuffles or may be transfers because certain officers when they overstay at a station, they feel like now they have grown. They feel like . . . no . . . they cannot be moved. So management should consider also having certain timeframe to which one can serve at a certain station. This will certainly improve the service delivery and the absenteeism and the attendance.”

P2: “I feel they should come up with a system that they tell their staff to say that with absenteeism our institution will go backwards. People should be serious in whatever they are doing in their work so that at least there is efficiency. What the employees can do is just change the mindset. What I would suggest is that if the institution can put up a suggestion box where if us clients are going to those offices, we can at least put in suggestions to the department to say what we have seen in this employee is this . . . eeh service is not well, and all that. If a suggestion box is there, I think it will be the best way to go.”

P3: “There must be a weekly target. May be in a week, a person should clear so many files or should attend to so many cases. If you leave them like that, it will be work as usual. Presents, awards . . . anything. For example, if somebody does work efficiently and may be the number of files or the target she has reached has gone over, it’s

something to motivate them. It's like the example of I am giving may be the football team, national team. If you give them incentives you know that they will play well, if you don't, they know anybody can play that game. One example, rotation of people who might go on leave or rotation of people who might get permission to do something. This must be systematically done because sometimes you find that I go to one section (and I am told). No, they said officer has gone somewhere. And by the way, I would even ask for a suggestion box because that suggestion box helps people to understand that this is their weakness, their shortcomings.”

P4: “It is not a manual register where they have to write their names but it is I think electronic . . . where they have to key in their fingerprint. This makes it easy to monitor who has come in today and then when a person has not keyed in, that person is considered to be absent. And also, those who are not absent are also recognized in a way. And then they should be commended for that . . . at an award giving of some kind . . . like at the end of, may be, 6 months, you should come up with the most hard-working staff, the person who was good, he didn't miss work in a certain period of time.”

P5: “They should just increase manpower.” “The Department should sometimes provide transport for the workers. It's not everyone who has a vehicle. They should provide transport for the workers.”

P6: “They need to empower them like giving them allowances, transport, good accommodation . . . so that things can go well on that one. Good administration . . . at least you get their views when you make a meeting. You understand what they need and you will be able to tackle their requirements. The management has to ensure that they



keep monitoring the employees. If you leave them, it's like when you are at a funeral (and) you put on a fire. That fire goes down, isn't it? So, the top management should be pushing that fire so that it keeps burning. It's the same. . . these employees. So, you need a system of rotation of the officers . . . sometimes when someone is always at the same place or has been long at the same place, he becomes loose to other issues . . . so that, maybe, a rotation is needed."

P7: "To have two service people who take care of a particular service . . . now there has always been only one person. Introduce, may be porters, office orderlies for documentation purposes so that the service person actually just allocates by saying that this is needed, this is needed . . . so and so, please, can you take it, so that the person doesn't have to physically leave the station and have to go to another office. Incentives, let's say, if you don't leave your station, if you are not absent for a particular period, they can have, maybe, an incentive or like a prize. Like, let's say, employee of the month or employee of the week so that people can have that competitive run that, okay, even I wouldn't want to be absent so that I can get that prize. And then you can have penalties where you charge a person for absenteeism. You have a minimum acceptable level for absenteeism . . . let's say, three days absent, three times absent or for the level of complaints against the person not being at the station."

P8: "In case somebody is absent, then somebody else should be assigned to take over their duties than waiting for that absent one. I think they can just make sure that on each and every case where there is no one, somebody should be assigned to take over."

P9: "I propose that the management builds a spirit of teamwork. The team leaders should motivate their teams. The other solution is enforcement of discipline or disciplinary measures. Some things, maybe, should be taught to the officers or inculcated in their minds from the time they start their training . . . and they may be reminded of those principles."

P10: "Number one is if their conditions of service can be improved. Then as well as if they can be having more training frequently."

P11: "I think the management should see to it that they have got close supervision of the employees, generally. There is no suggestion box . . . you find that a lot of institutions have introduced suggestion boxes in which the clients can be slotting in what they think can improve the service delivery. The management can introduce car loans or transport loans, where the employees can be getting loans and buy themselves transport, in this case, these days, it's motor vehicles."

P12: "Somebody else will be picked to cover up that particular officer who is absent but what I am saying . . . if they were many then people would not be able to notice that."

P14: "Start engaging employees, maybe, in these fun activities at work so that they look forward to reporting for work almost on daily basis . . . let's say you come up with smaller, smaller prizes for each and every employee that they need to look forward to . . . at least win something as they are participating in those fun activities. Like you charge them so that they know that whatever they are doing affects the organization and it also affects the customers that they are supposed to attend to. They can introduce

questionnaires where people can just sign in for you to know if they are satisfied with the services or not . . . even review meetings.”

P15: “Succession planning in the Department . . . such that everyone or at least one or two people should be able to sit in . . . to know what the other does so that if one is not there, the other one can readily sit in there and cope with the work without any challenges. The recruitment should be ongoing. If you have got more staff, at least you will be able to allocate them positions that are vacant at that particular time. There should be a deliberate policy that the management should come up with where those staff who have problems are given time off to go and attend to those problems and then come back for work.”

P16: “If the other employees are not there, if there could be other people to sit in, you know. If there could be shifts, you know, other people are called in so that there isn’t that gap and vacancy, you know, so that we are not affected by them not coming because if a person is not there, then it means everything stalls.”

P17: “Make the officers feel that they are important . . . encourage the officers to interact with each other on social, even prayers or anything else so that they share their problems . . . they relieve their fears to others. When one officer goes off, the other one is there. Staffing has to be increased. The management can consider the motivation of employees through some incentives like allowances for good work attendance. He knows if I miss work today, I will miss my allowance so I have to go today. Incentives also are very, very important in terms of money. These are actually three basic things that I think if the department works on, they will be reducing on absenteeism. Make them feel that

they also one time or the other will be where you are. That calls for character assassination, not in terms of what you call denting somebody's name, no. There has to be a change in the employees. They have to be told that absenteeism is a disease, it's a cancer, it's a problem in an institution."

P18: "If manpower was enough, I think things would have been moving at a right speed or right direction. I am saying that what I have noticed, manpower is not really up to the point."

P19: "If they are remunerated in a way that they are supposed to be remunerated and according to work, the input that they put in, I think the challenges of absenteeism would reduce. They should introduce different awards and different aspects of awards: the most committed officer award; the most hardworking officer award; the customer care award, you know, all such things."

P20: "In the public sector, I think there is so much permissiveness. People can be absent and no action is taken. In the private sector, we will not tolerate a situation where an employee is absent without cause. They would have to employ more people, but I think part of the congestion that obtains at this office is because the space is a little bit restricted."

P21: "One person in a certain department handling certain cases, I think the best is to employ two, just in case the other person is absent from work. They should have shifts like from 08 00 hours to 13 00hours and then they knock off since they will be tired. There should be an office where you can complain to or, maybe, a suggestion box

where if what you have experienced there really affects you in negative way, you can write something and throw it in the suggestion box.”

P22: “I think if the Department can have training, constant training, it will help.”  
“The recruitment of more staff means less pressure on everyone that is there because you have enough people.”

### **Composite Description of the Study Results**

Under this section, I present a summarized version of my study results based the final stage of Moustakas’s (1994) van Kaam method of analysis.

#### **General Impression of Absenteeism at the Institution**

All the research participants acknowledged the existence of employee absenteeism at the Zambian government agency. Except for one, all participants reported having personally experienced the absenteeism of a member of staff who was supposed to serve them at the institution. The general level of absenteeism at the institution is quite bad and can be unpredictable or sporadic. A few participants described the occurrence of absenteeism as “50-50.”

Whenever an employee is absent from work, the clients suffer the consequences. Some coresearchers described the feeling of experiencing absenteeism as frustrating and distressing. The feeling can be very bad, one of difficulties, anxiety, tension, and hopelessness.

#### **Factors Affecting Absenteeism**

Based on their experiences, the research participants attributed the absenteeism of employees at this institution to a range of factors. Most of the participants reported the

biggest factors behind the absenteeism of staff at the institution as sickness and bereavements within the families. One participant emphasized that funerals accounted for most absences because funerals in Africa are cultural, customary and respected, and if one does not attend, he or she is looked at in a bad way.

Many participants reported the sickness of a child or relative, school runs, excessive consumption of alcohol, and employee demotivation at work as the other factors affecting absenteeism at this organization. The participants explained the demotivation of employees in terms of poor working conditions, particularly low salaries that force the employees into venturing into other income generating activities at the expense of their official work. The extra income is inevitable to augment the employees' poor salaries. Some participants elaborated the demotivation in the dimension of lack of promotion for long serving employees.

Few participants pointed to factors related to the lack of transport for the employees, laziness and lack of a passion for the job, chronic fatigue due to overworking, extra marital affairs, and the transfer of employees to other stations without replacements. Few other participants reported issues of sheer indiscipline on the part of the employees, the employees' pursuit of personal interests, and the extra duties of physically moving paperwork between offices. Another factor reported was the inadequacy of the management of the institution in terms of administrative skills to handle employee absenteeism.

**Customer Relations/Care**

While deeply reflecting on the type of service delivered by this organization, a few respondents passionately reported the general poor customer relations and bad attitude the employees have towards their clients. The employees do not know how to welcome their clients and make them feel comfortable. The few participants used the example of greeting a client; most of the employees do not extend greetings to their clients. In most cases, the clients have to greet the employees first, and this makes some of the clients very uncomfortable.

Few participants reported that the employees are very rude and intimidate their clients in the way they talk. The employees' approach or lack of customer care skills creates some fear in the clients. The staff effectively make it very difficult for the clients to face them and seek the services and information required. The participants described the employees as unapproachable. The employees are selective in the way they attend to the clients. Sometimes their choice of the client to serve is based on inducements from the clients. For those clients without the capacity to offer inducements, they may be served last.

**Delayed Services Due to Absenteeism**

All participants but one shared some personal experiences of how absenteeism led to lengthy delays in accessing the various services. The participants described inordinate delays in getting services, contrary to the periods prescribed in the institution's service charter. They explained that in most cases, individual cases are assigned to specific employees. When the specific employee is absent, that particular case will pend until the

responsible staff is back. Some participants explained that they were assisted by other employees when the specific employees they had wanted to see were absent from work.

The reported delays involved various services and ranged from days, to weeks, to months of the client waiting for a specific person to get back for work. At the time of interviews, one participant described a scenario where the case she was pursuing was delayed for almost a year and was yet to be resolved because the staff handling the case was always absent from the station. In some instances, it took the intervention of supervisory staff to save the clients the long delays.

The participants shared that in some cases the employees may not be at their workstation because they have gone for a meeting or personal matter. Many times, the remaining staff ask clients to make follow-ups some other times when the responsible employees may be present. Regardless of the circumstances, the participants described feelings of anguish, desperation, inconvenience, stress, helplessness each time the member of staff they intended to see was absent from the workstation. Emotions of hopelessness, disillusionment, and being left in suspense displace the participants' hope when employees are absent. The resultant delays create friction between the participants and their clients, who are mostly in a hurry to have their documents.

### **Absenteeism and the Remaining Employees**

All the research participants reported that absenteeism at the institution caused serious problems for the remaining employees. The remaining staff either attend to the clients whose handling staff are absent or send them away. When they opt to attend to these clients, the implication is that the remaining staff perform double duties to cover



their absent colleagues. This results in reduced efficiency as the remaining staff is overwhelmed. They end up with backlogs of work, with growing queues of clients waiting to be attended to. From their lived experiences, many participants described situations where the remaining employees work under excessive pressure to try to satisfy all the clients.

When a remaining employee takes up a case for an absent workmate, one of the first problems is that he or she has to take some time to study and understand the case. This contributes to inefficiency in the way the services are delivered. Second, the absenteeism slows down the workflow due to the increased workload for fewer individuals. The participants explained that the offices get congested, sometimes chaotic, because of some employees being absent.

Instead of attending to a reasonable number of clients, a remaining employee is confronted with a huge number of individuals wanting to be served. In the end, the remaining employees are stressed. The stress from being overworked makes the remaining employees more susceptible to absenteeism, further compounding the problem for the institution. Sometimes, the remaining staff lose focus because they are faced with too many issues. Some of the participants reported that the stress contributes to the bad attitude and rudeness of the employees towards their clientele.

### **Standard of Service Delivery**

The majority of the participants reported that they were not satisfied with the standard of service delivery at the institution, though there was room for improvement. A few participants described the standard of service as professional, good, average, or

simply okay. A few others found the service delivery as very poor because of the delays created by the absenteeism of the employees or missing files and documents.

A few other participants felt the service delivered by the institution was poor and frustrating because the employees fail to meet the deadlines outlined in their organizational service charter. Because of this inefficiency, the few participants explained their resentment of visiting the organization, knowing that almost every time they would have to spend too much time there.

### **How Absenteeism Affects Service Delivery**

All the research participants reported that the absenteeism of employees at this institution affected the delivery of services negatively. Most of the participants felt that absenteeism reduced the productivity of the institution, as the remaining employees get overwhelmed with the extra workload that creates inefficiency and ineffectiveness in the delivery of services. They reported delays in accessing the various services and products because some employees are absent at any given time. Because of the delays, they reported feelings of inconvenience and frustration.

From the practical experience of the participants, whenever an employee is absent, the remaining staff may either attend to the client whose case is supposed to be handled by the absent staff or ask the client to come back another time when the handling employee is likely to be back. When the remaining employees choose to serve the client, the process takes longer because the remaining staff has to start by studying the matter from the beginning.

If the client is requested to come another time, the process takes much longer as time is lost and there is no assurance of the consummation of the case the next time. A few participants reported that when the remaining staff attend to the clients whose handling staff is absent, it is a “by-the-way” nonpriority issue, meaning a client may be served last. In other words, the client is at the total mercy of the remaining employee.

Because of the work overload, the remaining employees struggle to cope with the pressure of work. This results in long queues of clients anxiously jostling to be attended to by a depleted workforce. The participants spoke of chronic fatigue permeating the remaining employees, heightening their vulnerability to absenteeism. This increases the overall organizational susceptibility to absenteeism. In the meantime, some participants reported that some employees are overwhelmed with stress and become very rude to the clients. The employees’ professionalism succumbs to bad attitude, giving rise to complaints from the clientele.

Some participants reported that absenteeism affects the delivery of services adversely. Because of absenteeism, the public is subjected to a poor service. The poor service reflects badly on both the management team, the institution, and the country, considering the broad clientele of the institution. Other participants explained that the absenteeism makes the institution fail to fulfil the commitments in the organizational service charter because the services take much longer than the periods stipulated in the service charter.

One of the key issues reported by the participants in view of the absenteeism of staff is the financial loss to the institution. As the productivity goes down because of

absenteeism, so do the revenues collected by the institution. Many of the participants complained of inconvenience each time they experience absenteeism of staff at the institution. They described the inconvenience in terms of time and the problems they encounter with their clients because of the delays in accessing the services because of staff absenteeism. The participants spoke of feelings of frustration and resignation. They further reported that absenteeism makes it very difficult for them to obtain accurate information about the statuses of their cases. They felt that the remaining staff sometimes gives false updates about cases because they just want to get rid of the clients, because they are overwhelmed.

A few participants reported that absenteeism at the institution frustrates potential foreign investors due to the lengthy periods for obtaining the relevant documents. Some examples of specific cases were shared, including a potential “big” European investor who had to cancel his trip to Zambia because his application was delayed due to an absent employee. Other potential overseas investors gave in to frustration and changed their travel plans after their air tickets were rebooked for a number of times but their entry documents were still not ready.

A number of participants reported problems with their clients because of the delayed cases. They described situations where their clients lose hope in them and sometimes sever the business ties due to frustration and anxiety from the absenteeism related delays in accessing services.

## **Employee Absenteeism Management Strategies**

Based on their various experiences of absenteeism at the institution, the research participants proposed a number of absenteeism management strategies as explained below:

**Replacement of absent staff.** Most of the participants suggested that the managements of the two departments of the *Zambian government agency* should ensure that they find immediate replacements for staff who are absent from the workstations at any given time. In line with this was the proposal for the institution to recruit more employees to create a reservoir for replacing absent staff even at short notice. Each workstation should have a minimum of two employees stationed there to ensure there is no vacuum in the delivery of services.

**Client feedback.** A number of the participants reported the absence of a client feedback system at this institution. This plagues a barrier between the clients and the management and makes it impossible to know the challenges faced by clients on the ground. In this regard, a number of participants proposed that management should introduce suggestion boxes or questionnaires for the clients to share their views about the kind of service they receive, particularly problems related to staff absenteeism at the institution. Once the organizational leaders are aware of such feedback, they can implement corrective measures.

**Employee engagement.** The organizational leaders should have routine meetings with the employees to educate them against the dangers of absenteeism. At the same

time, this engagement may allow the managers to appreciate the problems that lead to employee absenteeism and devise some corrective action.

**Incentives for good work attendance.** The organizational leaders can introduce incentives for good work performance. In this context, employees with good work attendance may be given incentives as a way of encouraging good attendance by all staff. The incentives may be extended to those employees who meet their output targets. This strategy can stimulate improved performance from all the employees and help reduce absenteeism at the institution.

**Improvement of the conditions of service.** A number of participants reported that the conditions of service for the employees at this institution were poor. The reason why some employees miss work is that they are forced to venture into other income generating activities to augment their poor salaries. Poor salaries demotivate and push staff towards absenteeism. To address the problem, the participants proposed the improvement of the conditions of service, especially the salaries.

**Stress management policies.** Almost all the participants reported that the employees of this institution are overworked and, therefore, stressed and chronically fatigued. From that premise, the participants proposed that the organizational managers should come up strategies to manage the stress of the employees. There were suggestions of refreshments to enable the employees take out their stress and refresh their brains so that they do not break down and miss work.

**Fun activities.** Related to stress management, the organizational leaders can also use fun activities to stimulate better work attendance from the employees. The fun

activities may be spiced with little prizes to make them more appealing to staff. This strategy may make absenteeism less attractive and improve the employees' work attendance.

**Staff rotation.** A few participants suggested that the employees at this institution stay at one station for too long and become too complacent, familiar, and comfortable. This may breed habits of absenteeism. To resolve this problem, the participants proposed that the managers should periodically rotate the employees around different stations to keep them committed to their work and reduce the incidence of absenteeism. Routine staff transfers may be a solution to absenteeism.

**Performance targets.** Some of the participants suggested the use of performance targets as an absenteeism management strategy. When targets are introduced, may be weekly or monthly, it becomes difficult for the employees to miss work anyhow as they will fail to meet their set targets. There should also be repercussions for those who fail to meet their targets.

**Electronic attendance register.** Because the organization still uses a manual attendance register, the participants observed that the monitoring of employee absenteeism is flawed and ineffective. They proposed the introduction of an electronic system using biometric features like finger scanning each time an employee checks in or out of the workstation. This system makes it difficult for staff to be absent from their workstations without justifiable reasons.

**Disciplinary action.** Generally, there is too much permissiveness towards absenteeism in the public sector compared to the private sector. One of the main

strategies the participants proposed to correct the situation is the use of punitive measures against employees who are absent from work without justification. There should be some penalties stipulated for various types of absenteeism. The management should also introduce a minimum absence level. The punishment of erring employees may serve as deterrent to potential offenders.

**Promotion of deserving employees.** Some employees have been working for the organization for long periods without promotion. This has led to their frustration and demotivation, with absenteeism consequently setting in. The participants reported that some employees who have served for shorter periods have been promoted at the expense of the ones who have served longer. To solve this problem and address potential absenteeism, the long serving employees should be promoted.

**Provision of staff transport.** A good number of the participants recommended the provision of staff transport to reduce absenteeism. This is because a number of absences occur due to the lack of transport for the absent employees.

**Staff monitoring.** Currently, there is a gap in terms of monitoring the work attendance of the employees. This gap perpetuates absenteeism. To counter the problem, the participants proposed that the organizational leaders monitor and supervise the employees more closely to enhance better work attendance.

**Employee needs satisfaction.** A few participants who felt that the managers were not doing enough to understand the problems that led to employee absenteeism suggested this strategy. The participants proposed that the managers should not distance themselves from their subordinates because that makes them alien to the circumstances around



absenteeism. Instead, the participants proposed that the managers should embrace their subordinates so that they appreciate their needs and address them. The employees with pressing problems should be allowed to go and sort out their problems so that they return to work with free and fresh minds.

**Introduction of shiftwork.** Some participants reported that the employees of this institution are overworked and stressed. They have long working hours that lead to stress, chronic fatigue, and absenteeism. They proposed the introduction of shifts with shorter working hours to mitigate against stress and the resultant absenteeism.

**Employee empowerment.** Some of the participants proposed that the employees be empowered through special loans and allowances to resolve their persistent financial problems that keep them away from work. The loans can enable the employees to make their living conditions more comfortable and overcome absenteeism.

**Recruitment of support staff.** A few participants suggested the recruitment of support staff like office orderlies to specifically be moving paperwork from one office to another. This will resolve the issue of the dual duties current staff have of serving clients and having to move around the offices delivering various physical documents.

**Digitization of records.** The digitization of records may make it easy for the remaining staff to take up cases of their absent workmates without spending much time. The current paperwork makes it difficult for the remaining staff to efficiently attend to the clients who should have been served by absent employees. Digitization may also be the answer to the absence of office orderlies to move paperwork from one office to another. The employees can do this more efficiently using a digital system.

**Promotion of peer interaction.** One participant proposed the promotion of peer interaction as a way of finding the solutions to employee absenteeism. He argued that subordinates are not free enough to share all their issues with their superiors. From that angle, lateral interaction should be encouraged so that peers share their problems and find the appropriate solutions.

**Staff training.** Many participants recommended the constant training of employees as a strategy for mitigating absenteeism. Training keeps the staff constantly reminded of their organizational values, professionalism, and other work virtues. The strategy may be very useful in managing absenteeism.

**Motivational talks.** Motivational talks may be very helpful to keep the employees motivated to have good attendance records. At least one participant suggested daily motivational talks to keep the staff away from absenteeism.

**Introduction of work teams.** The organizational managers may consider building work teams. Each work team should have a leader charged with the responsibility of motivating the team members against absenteeism.

**Early notification system.** One participant suggested that the employees of the institution should be informing their superiors about their imminent absence from work so that the superiors can put measures to find replacements. Abrupt absenteeism makes it difficult for the managers to find staff to replace the absentees at short notice.

**Planning for employee absenteeism.** Very few participants proposed a deliberate plan to counter absenteeism and its consequences on the organization. This is a plan that

cuts across functions and departments to address absenteeism in a broad perspective.

Table 3 is a summary of the key findings of the study.

Table 2

*Summary of Key Results*

Participant	Factors Affecting Absenteeism	How Absenteeism Affects Service Delivery	Absenteeism Management Strategies
1.	Sickness	Loss of productivity	Employee Engagement
2.	Funerals	Inefficiency	Client feedback
3.	Sickness of relatives	Staff stress/fatigue	Fun activities
4.	Alcoholism	Delayed services	Incentives for presences
5.	School runs	Client inconvenience	Performance targets
6.	Demotivation	Poor service delivery	Motivation of staff
7.	Lack of transport	Financial losses	Staff transport
8.	Chronic fatigue	Poor customer care	Stress management
9.	Poor salaries	Poor communication	Better salaries
10.	Staff transfers	Bad staff attitude	Replacement of absentees
11.	Poor supervision		Disciplinary action
12.	Extra marital affairs		Staff rotation
13.	Staff shortage		Increase staffing
14.			Staff monitoring
15.			Shiftwork
16.			Employee empowerment
17.			Digitization of records
18.			Employ support staff
19.			Electronic registers
20.			Peer interaction
21.			Staff training
22.			Motivational talks

### Summary

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to explore employee absenteeism and service delivery through the lived experiences of the 22 clients of a Zambian government agency. The study had a single research question, which was adequate to address the identified research problem and purpose. The following was the single overarching research question: What are the lived experiences of the clients of the Zambian government agency regarding staff absenteeism and the delivery of services by the organization?

Except for one, all the participants acknowledged the existence of employee absenteeism at the Zambian government agency. They described various experiences of absenteeism at the institution. From their lived experiences, most of the participants considered absenteeism at the institution as a big problem. They attributed absenteeism at the institution to the sickness of staff, sickness of relatives, funerals, alcoholism, and demotivation. The other factors included the lack of staff transport, chronic fatigue for the employees, poor salaries, poor supervision, school runs, and the transfer of staff without replacements.

The participants shared specific instances where they were delayed in obtaining services from the institution because of the absenteeism of the staff that were supposed to serve them. The delays ranged from some days to close to a year. Another theme that emerged from the participants' experiences was to do with how absenteeism affected service delivery. They described a poor service delivery with some chaotic scenes of queues of clients jostling for services from fewer staff because some employees were

absent from work. They also shared that absenteeism caused financial losses to the institution. They explained feelings of frustration, anguish, hopelessness, and disillusionment resulting from the absenteeism of staff.

Based on their lived experiences, they described the poor customer relations exhibited by employees of the institution. The participants proposed a number of absenteeism management strategies for the institution. These included the immediate replacement of absent staff, client feedback systems, shiftwork, improved salaries, employee engagement, stress management programs, and fun activities. Other suggested interventions were incentives for good work attendance, staff rotation, performance targets, electronic attendance registers, and disciplinary action.

In Chapter 4, I have provided details of my research setting, demographics, and my data collection processes. I have also explained my data analysis procedures based on Moustakas's (1994) van Kaam method. Later, I looked at how I addressed issues of trustworthiness, particularly credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I then gave a detailed account of my study results based on the words of the participants and a summary in the composite description.

In Chapter 5, I present a discussion about the findings, present my conclusions, and make some recommendations. I interpret my study findings in terms of how they confirm, disconfirm or extend knowledge in the field. I also share the limitations of my study and implications for social change. Conclusions comprise the last section of the chapter.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to explore employee absenteeism and service delivery through the lived experiences of 22 purposely selected clients of a Zambian government agency. Through face-to-face, semistructured interviews, I investigated participants' experiences and feelings about absenteeism and service delivery by the institution. My findings may strengthen the organizational managers' absenteeism management mechanisms and improve service delivery. Given my broad findings, the study may also be important for awareness creation and the sensitization of managers about absenteeism in Zambia, as the study is one of the first explorations on the phenomenon in the country.

One of the key findings of my study is that employee absenteeism exists at the Zambian government agency, and most of the participants stated that the levels were high. Whenever an employee was absent, there were significant consequences to service delivery and clients. The participants described several scenarios where their matters were delayed from a few days to close to 1 year. They stated that absenteeism caused financial losses, inefficiency, and ineffectiveness in the service delivery. Absenteeism also reduced organizational productivity and caused chronic fatigue to the overwhelmed remaining employees.

From their lived experiences, the participants further reported poor service delivery, poor customer care, and poor communication from the overburdened remaining employees. They also spoke of experiencing frustrations, embarrassments before their

clients, hopelessness, and disillusionment when they found that the employees who were supposed to serve them were absent.

From experiences with absenteeism, participants proposed some strategies for the management of absenteeism at the institution. The proposed strategies include employee engagement, client feedback mechanisms, improved salaries, incentives for good work attendance, stress management for the employees, and fun activities. The other measures included performance targets, electronic attendance registers, disciplinary action, the immediate replacement of absent employees, staff rotation, staff motivation, and the provision of staff transport.

### **Interpretations of Findings**

From the lived experiences of my participants, I found that the absenteeism of employees at the Zambian government agency was in two forms: avoidable and unavoidable absenteeism. The avoidable absenteeism involved situations where the employees miss work for reasons within their control such as personal errands. The unavoidable circumstances pertained to things beyond the employee's control, like sickness or an accident. This finding is supported by the literature such as Avey et al. (2006), who analyzed positive psychological capital and segregated absenteeism into two types: voluntary and involuntary absenteeism. They concluded that psychological capital was important for the management and control of absenteeism costs (Avey et al., 2006).

One of the key findings of my study from participant responses is that sickness, family issues like the sickness of a child or relative, poor salaries, poor supervision, long working hours, work overload for the remaining employees, absence of incentives, and



an unfavorable working environment affect absenteeism at the *Zambian government agency*. This finding is supported by Mudaly and Nkosi (2015), who investigated the absenteeism of nurses in South Africa and reported various causes of absenteeism including attendance demotivation, family issues, illness, long working hours, big workload, staff shortages, absence of reward systems, hostile managers, unfavorable working environments, unfair promotion mechanisms, and favoritism. These factors were further confirmed by other researchers in terms of illness (Cascio, 2006; Hendriks et al., 2015; Howard & Potter, 2014; Muijzer et al., 2012; Sallis & Birkin, 2014), family issues (Boyar et al., 2016; Cascio, 2006; Kocakulah et al., 2016), and poor leadership style (Mtimkulu et al., 2014; Munir et al., 2011; Sheikha & Younis, 2006).

Other reported factors affecting absenteeism at the *Zambian government agency* included excessive consumption of alcohol by employees and various infections, which affect employees' ability to make it to work. To support this finding, Schou and Moan (2016) evaluated the strength of empirical evidence for a possible association of alcohol use with sickness absence and found that alcohol use can be associated with both long and short-term absence.

My participants also reported the problem of various infections as a common cause of absenteeism among staff. Confirming this finding, Azor-Martinez et al. (2014) studied common infections and how they affected school absenteeism and concluded that common infections in schools were reduced in scenarios where hand hygiene programs employing sanitizing gels were in place, especially during the flu seasons.

My participants also reported issues of congestion and lack of office space at the institution as a factor linked to the absenteeism of staff. Other researchers have explored this dimension of absenteeism. For instance, Enns, Currie, and Wang (2014) suggested that professional autonomy and the work setting are some of the factors associated with absenteeism, concluding that reduced job autonomy, poor work environment, and increased job strain were catalysts for higher absenteeism with female nurses. Other research has also supported a relationship between the physical environment and absenteeism (see Azam & Gholam, 2014).

In addition to the factors affecting absenteeism, my findings indicated that absenteeism reduces the productivity of an organization. Other researchers have suggested that chronic diseases lead to productivity losses as a direct result of sickness absence (de Vroome et al., 2015). Additionally, Demyen and Ciurea (2015) found that absenteeism reduced productivity as the production process is slowed down. Absenteeism has also resulted in absent employees being paid wages during their absences, costs for the replacement of staff, and the risk of penalties for late deliveries (Demyen & Ciurea, 2015). Similarly, Harris (2014) found that absence sickness affected productivity negatively and employers were eager to implement some interventions to respond to health-related absence.

I also found that the absenteeism of employees at the organization led to stress and chronic fatigue for the remaining staff as work overwhelmed them. My participants reported work stress and chronic fatigue as common among the employees due to long working hours, which is supported by the literature as a link to absenteeism (see Mudaly

& Nkosi, 2015). In terms of the stress, all the stress factors comprising inefficiency, duty ambiguity, duty responsibility, and work boundaries were found to be associated with absenteeism (Azam & Gholam, 2014; Enns et al., 2014).

The financial cost of absenteeism is one of my major study findings. Many participants reported that the Zambian government agency suffered revenue losses and bad reputation owing to the absenteeism of staff. There is collaboration of this finding in current literature. Kocakulah et al. (2016) reported that the annual cost of absenteeism to organizations in Canada reached a record \$789 per employee in 2002, and 2.8 million workdays were lost every year to absenteeism. In 2008, absenteeism in Canada translated into losses of over \$16 billion in salary expenses. Further, an estimated 15 to 20% of direct and indirect payroll costs in Canada were linked to absenteeism (Kocakulah et al., 2016).

In the United States, sickness-related absenteeism cost an estimated \$153 billion yearly, which were related to complementary and alternative medicine for chronic conditions that were the major cause of absenteeism (Rybczynski, 2016). In terms of unscheduled absences, the annual cost of absences in the United States has been around \$800 per employee with a total cost of \$255 million per year (Cascio, 2006). In addition, Magee et al. (2016) stated that the cost of absenteeism in Australia was at least \$7 billion per year in terms of health care costs and productivity losses. The costs of absenteeism in Europe and the United States are enormous as well (Magee et al., 2016).

Almost all the strategies proposed by my participants for managing the absenteeism of employees are supported by evidence from the literature. One of the main

strategies is communication and monitoring of the employees. Tanasescu et al. (2015) discussed communication and monitoring as necessary procedures for managing and measuring absenteeism. Effective communication between the managers and employees and good monitoring of the employees are efficacious strategies for managing and reducing employee absenteeism (Ritter, 2000; Tanasescu et al., 2015).

Contrary to my finding on communication and monitoring to improve absenteeism, research has indicated that close monitoring and diminishing employee privacy may enhance psychological resistance and withdrawal (Workman, 2009). In a quantitative study, Workman (2009) found that reduced privacy for employees because of enhanced security measures in an organization might trigger rebellious behaviors like absenteeism from employees. Peretz et al. (2015) also suggested that the psychological withdrawal of employees is detrimental to organizational success through several effects including absenteeism. In this regard, it would be helpful for organizational leaders to formulate strategies that foster the nonpsychological withdrawal of employees as a policy for managing absenteeism.

Close to the strategy of communication is my finding that close collaboration between the managers and their subordinates is important for absenteeism management. Cucchiella et al. (2014) suggested the collective involvement of employers and employees as the best approach to solve absenteeism problems. Unilateral decisions and actions by the managers to handle absenteeism may worsen the problem (Cucchiella et al., 2014). Communication between the managers and subordinates within the broader

framework of collaboration between the two sides is an effective way of managing absenteeism (Cucchiella et al., 2014; Tanasescu et al., 2015).

In addition to communication and collaboration, most of my participants suggested a reward or incentive system to stimulate better work attendance by employees. In previous research, Allisey et al. (2016) identified that social rewards like recognition and social support mitigated absenteeism among police officers. Similarly, Kocakulah et al. (2016) proposed an incentive system called the *carrot system* rather the *stick system* in reducing absenteeism. My finding on rewards and incentives may be viewed as an extension of the argument advanced by Cucchiella et al. (2014), with the prioritization of the recognition of employees in absenteeism management whether by accommodating their voice or showing appreciation for exemplary attendance behavior. This approach may be better than punitive and dictatorial one-sided policies that subordinates are likely to resist (Kocakulah et al., 2016).

To support the importance of management in reducing absenteeism, some of my participants attributed absenteeism to poor leadership or management. To confirm this finding, scholars have provided evidence of the relationship between leadership style and absenteeism. Mtimkulu et al. (2014) found that autocratic leadership led to higher levels of absenteeism, whereas participative, democratic and laissez-faire leadership promoted a reduction in absence rates.

Poor leadership and communication structures, bad employment policies, inappropriate work climate, poor organizational structure, poor employee supervision, and passiveness of organizational leaders are some administrative factors that negatively

affect employee absenteeism (Sheikha & Younis, 2006). Munir et al. (2011) also argued that the quality of leadership might inhibit long-term sick leave to a certain extent for employees with moderate depressive disorders. Further, Boon et al. (2014) evaluated the effect of certain management practices on absenteeism and time allocation at work, suggesting that higher job satisfaction among employees and high-performance work systems were effective strategies for handling absenteeism.

Another fundamental finding of my study is that disciplinary action is important for managing employment. For instance, Kocakulah et al. (2016) proposed measures for absenteeism management at the workplace like disciplinary action for absent for employees. Most employers explain their employment policies to new employees through contracts of employment and codes of conduct. These policies include disciplinary conduct that the employees should follow or managers will take specified punitive actions.

I also found that training employees is critical for absenteeism management. Current literature in the field confirms this finding such as Woolmer (2013), who found that absenteeism management strategies included some programs involving RTW interviews, training programs for sickness-absence line managers, the provision of occupational health services, and coming up with stretched absenteeism targets.

Ritter (2000) also suggested that a total absence management program should include the following interventions: RTW programs, disease management, productive utilization of sickness absent employees, safety and accident prevention, and health and

wellness programs. Other measures included the documentation of leave policy and communication and training of employees.

Another finding of my study that is supported by current literature is the use of fun activities to mitigate absenteeism. My participants suggested fun activities in the form of physical activities for the employees to take out their stress and rejuvenate themselves. Lahti et al. (2012) also concluded that sickness absence might be reduced by increasing vigorous physical activity among the employees.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One of the limitations of this study is that I work for one of the departments under the Zambian government agency that I investigated. This could have blurred my analysis of the data based on biased presumptions and prior knowledge on the subject. Based on the philosophical foundation of phenomenology, reflexive journaling, and the analysis method I used, I attempted to base all my findings on the words, feelings, and lived experiences of my 22 participants.

Another limitation of the study relates to the methodology and scope, which are based on the perspectives of the participants regarding absenteeism and service delivery at the Zambian government agency. Considering that very little may academically be known on the subject of absenteeism in Zambia, the scope of this study excludes many other dimensions of absenteeism like the financial costs and RTW strategies for sickness absent employees. Scholars in other places have extensively covered those areas of the field.

The third limitation is that I could not investigate all the departments of the Zambian government agency as initially envisaged. This was not possible because of time and resource limitations. In the end, I settled for only two departments that I felt offered services that were in high public demand. This means my study excludes the perspectives of the clients of the other departments under the Zambian government agency. Given that the departments are different in structure and services offered, the lived experiences of the clients of the excluded departments may be different from my findings.

Another limitation pertains to the research design and the transferability of the findings. Being a qualitative phenomenological study, my findings are based on the specific perspectives of my 22 respondents. I purposefully selected the participants based on the belief that they had knowledge and the lived experience of the phenomenon. This approach was limited to my decision making. There could have been potential participants with more knowledge of the phenomenon whom I omitted unknowingly.

The majority of my participants were agents who represented other people seeking services from the Zambian government agency. The chances are that the agents experienced the same things, limiting the findings of my study. Other types of clients may have different lived experiences of the phenomenon.

I knew all my participants prior to the study, and they knew that I worked for the Zambian government agency I was investigating. From my reflexive journaling, I could tell that a few participants responded to my interview questions in a way conscious to my perceived feelings as a management member of the institution.



## **Recommendations**

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to explore and illuminate employee absenteeism and service delivery through the lived experiences of the 22 purposely selected clients of a Zambian government agency. My findings have revealed a broad spectrum of issues related to absenteeism. I believe that my study may be helpful in terms of raising awareness on the subject in Zambia, assist managers in managing absenteeism, and improve public service delivery. Going forward, I recommend that other scholars look at more specific areas of my findings like the cost of absenteeism. Scholars in the United States, Europe, and Australia have established the annual costs of absenteeism that are very critical to both the public and private sectors.

My exploration was specific to one sector of the Zambian economy. Although I attempted to strengthen the transferability of my findings, I recommend that other researchers focus on the phenomenon of absenteeism in other sectors like health, agriculture, and education in Zambia. Those sectors have a lot of bearing on the livelihoods of people in the country. The creation of knowledge in the areas may be critical for the creation of positive social change, especially for the rural populations of the country.

From my study, it is clear that the managers of the Zambian government agency I investigated were not doing anything in terms of programs of RTW of sickness absent staff. I recommend that other investigators explore ways of assisting sickness absent employees in the Zambia public service. These may be employee engagement programs

or wellness programs to ensure that employees are not absent from work for long spells because of sickness.

Another recommendation for future researchers on the subject is to consider looking at the effects of stress on the employees of the Zambian government agency. The employees at the institution are stressed and chronically fatigued because of overworking and being understaffed. I recommend that future scholars on the subject look at the effects of that chronic fatigue and stress so that the managers are assisted in finding some solutions.

My study indicated that employee absenteeism reduces the productivity of an organization. To extend knowledge in that area, other researchers may explore the area of how much productivity is lost due to absenteeism. Organizations, especially in the private sector, are driven by higher productivity and profits. It is imperative that scholars establish how absenteeism affects productivity so that organizational leaders in Zambia are able to address the problem.

I conducted my study in a public institution in Zambia. Since the public sector is very different from the private sector in terms of focus and organization, I recommend that other researchers on absenteeism in Zambia turn to the private sector. The findings in the public sector may have limitations in terms of transferability to the private sector.

### **Implications**

Employee absenteeism is a problem for most organizations both public and private (Kocakulah et al., 2016). This makes it important for scholars to conduct research

to create knowledge in the field and provide solutions to the associated problems. My study has implications for positive social change at different levels.

Roffey (2012) stated that relationship building is fundamental to human and community development, and to national and international peace. At the individual level, I have established a wide range of absenteeism challenges facing individuals who seek the services of the Zambian government agency. I have also used the lived experiences of my participants to propose measures to address those challenges. The challenges are related to the absenteeism of staff and hinder the access of the public to the important services. By suggesting some solutions to the challenges, I have potentially unlocked opportunities for many individuals to experience a positive social change in their lives.

The classes of people who may individually benefit from the findings of my study in terms of positive social change include the participants themselves, the majority of whom are full time consultants. They earn their living by engaging the Zambian government agency on behalf of their clients. Some of the participants reported poor personal relationships with the employees of the organization. A positive social change may only occur if the employees improve their customer care skills and accommodate the needs of their clients as I have recommended in this study.

At the organizational level, I have shared critical knowledge in terms of the phenomenon of absenteeism. First, there is little knowledge on absenteeism in Zambia as my study is one of the first ones on the subject. My findings in terms of the factors affecting absenteeism, how absenteeism affects service delivery, and the absenteeism management strategies are very important to organizational leaders in the country. The

identified factors may enable the managers to develop the relevant interventions to ensure that absenteeism does not impede service delivery. I have shared some proposals for managing absenteeism so that managers at the *Zambian government agency* and other public and private organizations may consider implementing them.

The organizations may use my findings to improve organizational performance and profitability. In line with that, the organizations may be able to engage in social corporate responsibility activities to enhance their corporate images, as well as create positive social change in the broader context.

At societal level, my study has the potential to contribute to positive social change. The study may lead to improvements in the quality of public services in *Zambia*. The public services include very important sectors like education, health, social welfare, labor, and agriculture. Certain sectors of critical social development and economic implications define the future of many people in *Zambia* and beyond. The improvement of the public service delivery may lead to a positive social change in the lives of many groups of people.

In terms of the methodological implications, and based on evidence from extant literature, my study may be one of the first to follow the qualitative phenomenological approach in *Zambia*. As such, the study is important for the *Zambian academia*. I have created a learning opportunity for other scholars in the country to explore the foundations of the phenomenological genealogy.

For practice, my study may be helpful to the professional bodies like the *Zambia Institute of Human Resource Management*, *Zambia Federation of Employers*, *Zambia*

Consumers Association, and the Zambia Institute of Public Policy Analysis.

Organizational managers, both in the public and private sectors, may use this study in the formulation of effective absenteeism management strategies as they grapple with the problem of absenteeism. The study may lead to the enhancement of efficiency in the operations of the Zambia public service.

The donors who support the budget of the government of Zambia may also find this study to be beneficial. In a broader context, the study may potentially be important to every individual who benefits from the various services rendered by the Zambia public service.

### **Conclusions**

I embarked on this qualitative phenomenological study to explore employee absenteeism and service delivery at a Zambian government agency because absenteeism has been associated with many problems in other parts of the world while there was very little evidence of research and knowledge on the subject in Zambia. Through the phenomenological tradition, I interviewed 22 individuals and used the van Kaam method of analysis as espoused by Moustakas (1994).

I found sickness of staff and their relatives, funerals, alcohol, school runs, demotivation, chronic fatigue, and the lack of staff transport as the factors affecting absenteeism. Other factors were staff transfers, poor supervision, extra marital affairs, staff shortages, and a poor work environment. Absenteeism reduced organizational productivity, delayed the delivery of services, created stress for the remaining employees, and led to financial losses to the organization. Absenteeism also led to poor service

delivery. My findings also indicate that the employees at the Zambian government agency had poor customer relations, worked long hours, and suffered from stress and chronic fatigue.

From my study, the proposed absenteeism management strategies include employee engagement, client feedback, staff motivation, fun activities, improved salaries, and incentives for good work attendance. Other strategies are stress management, provision of staff transport, immediate replacement of absent employees, disciplinary action, staff rotation, and increased staffing. Earlier scholars in the field support most of my findings. My study has the potential to create positive social change at the individual, organizational, and societal levels.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol and Guide

Participant Code/Identification: .....

**Section 1: Background Information**

1. Kindly explain what business you do at the Zambian Government Agency.
2. For how long have you been doing this business at this institution?
3. Briefly explain how often you visit the institution to seek the services.
4. Will you share some specific examples of the services you get from this institution?

**Section 2: Employee Absenteeism at the Zambian Government Agency**

5. Explain what you understand by employee absenteeism.
6. From the time you started accessing services from the Zambian Government Agency, give me a general account of your experience of employee absenteeism by the members of staff who attend to you.
7. Could you narrate some specific incidents where you remember that the member(s) of staff you had wanted to see at this organization were absent from work?
8. How would you describe the levels of employee absenteeism at this institution?
9. What do you think causes the absenteeism of staff at this organization?
10. How are the remaining employees of the Department affected by the absence of others?

**Section 3: Employee Absenteeism and Service Delivery at the Zambian Government Agency**

11. How would you describe the standard of service delivery by this institution?
12. From your experience, tell me how the absenteeism of officers at this institution affects the delivery of services by the institution.
13. Personally, how does employment absenteeism in this institution affect your work?
14. What other factors, other than staff absenteeism, do you believe affect the delivery of services by this institution?

**Section 4: Employee Absenteeism Management Strategies**

15. Based on your experience of employee absenteeism at the Department, what measures would you propose to manage the absenteeism of staff?
16. What can the management of this institution specifically do to improve the work attendance of their employees?
17. From your experience, what do you think the employees can do to reduce their absenteeism from work?

You may share any other ideas or thoughts about employee absenteeism and the delivery of services at this institution. My Walden University approval number is 01-10-19-0546742 valid up to January 9, 2020.