

Unfairness at work increases risk of long-term sick leave

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Credit: University of East Anglia

Staff who feel they are treated unfairly at work are at increased risk of being off sick more frequently and for longer, according to new research by the University of East Anglia and Stockholm University.

Sickness absence is a major health concern for organisations and important contributing factors are found in the work environment. For example, low job control and decision-making opportunities have

previously been shown to increase the likelihood of sick leave.

A relatively new determinant of employee health is their perception of fairness in the work place, known as organisational [justice](#). The new study, published today in *BMC Public Health*, focused on one element of this, called interactional justice, which relates to the treatment of employees by managers.

Interactional justice itself can encompass informational justice - defined as receiving truthful and candid information with adequate justifications - and interpersonal justice, concerning respectful and dignified treatment by the manager.

Using data from more than 19,000 employees in Sweden the researchers, from UEA's Norwich Business School, the Stress Research Institute and Department of Psychology at Stockholm University, investigated the relationship between interpersonal and informational justice and long and frequent [sickness](#) absence. They also explored whether times of high uncertainty at work, for example perceived [job insecurity](#), had an effect on [sick leave](#).

The team found that lower levels of justice at work relate both to an increase in shorter, but more frequent sickness absence periods, and to an increased risk of longer sickness absence episodes, irrespective of job insecurity and demographic variables of age, gender, socio-economic position and marital status. Also, higher levels of job insecurity turned out to be an important predictor of long and frequent sickness absence.

Co-author Dr Constanze Eib, a lecturer in organisational behaviour at Norwich Business School, said: "While shorter, but more frequent periods of sickness absence might be a chance for the individual to get relief from high levels of strain or stress, long-term sickness absence might be a sign of more serious health problems.

"Our results underline the need for fair and just treatment of employees irrespective of perceived job insecurity in order to keep the workforce healthy and to minimise lost work days due to [sickness absence](#)."

The study analysed data from participants in a long-term biennial survey - the Swedish Longitudinal Occupational Survey of Health (SLOSH) - that focuses on the association between work organisation, work environment and health. It used data from the 2010, 2012, and 2014 waves of the survey, with the final sample consisting of 58,479 observations from 19,493 employees.

Lead author Dr Constanze Leineweber, from the Stress Research Institute, said: "Perceived fairness at [work](#) is a modifiable aspect of the [work environment](#), as is job insecurity. Organisations have significant control over both and our results suggest that they may gain by investing or improving their policies and rules for fair treatment of their workforce and by improving job security.

"Organisations might also gain from the selection of managers for their qualities associated with fair practices, training them in justice principles, and implementing performance management practices for them that consider their use of organisational justice. Indeed, training in justice principles has been shown to be successful in different organisational contexts."

More information: Constanze Leineweber et al. Interactional justice at work is related to sickness absence: a study using repeated measures in the Swedish working population, *BMC Public Health* (2017). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-017-4899-y](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-4899-y)

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