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OPINION
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Over-attending isn't a workplace virtue

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
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We all know about the ever-growing external pressures that force us to work longer and longer hours. But we seldom notice one other pressure from within - the curious psychological need for some people to over-attend. This is so widespread that it has earned a formal definition: Presenteeism.

Obviously this can be seen as part of the puritan ethic, celebrating the virtues of hard work per se. At first glance, it looks like simple punctuality taken to an exaggerated level, too much of a good thing.

But our automated hi-tech culture has clashed oddly with puritanism, greatly confusing those who are loyally trying to do their best. First, we have the permanent sense of emergency generated by the email and mobile-phone way of life. Almost without a word of excuse or explanation, a manager can write off our planned evening with a single text-message or one click on 'CC' or 'FWD', indicating something that looks like a crisis. So against our will, we often have to attend more than is sensible or healthy.

On top of this pressurisation, there is a further puritan effect - guilt at going home while our colleagues are still at work. So we may over-attend for that reason.

And then perhaps deeper still is the psychological need to be needed, the dread of feeling redundant - mixed-in with genuine fear for our jobs, and a desperate urge to make gestures of loyalty and high performance. This leads us to generate an artificial sensation of heroic effort. "Do you realise how late I worked last night... Do you realise how early I got in this morning..."

It also leads to the bad habit of attending the workplace while ill. And this is what has turned presenteeism into a political issue, with unions worried about the cumulative effects on an employee's health, and management chiefly alarmed at the potential spread of some infectious disease around the workplace.

But both sides are increasingly coming to accept that attendance while ill is a bad idea altogether. It stands to reason that unwell employees are not going to perform at anywhere near their full efficiency. At the least, this will have a harmful impact on team performance. At the worst, it could lead to some catastrophic error, with knock-on effects

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for the entire corporate output. And that is quite apart from possible long-term effects of a workforce below normal health levels.

Managers are now starting to see the sense of sending employees home if they are struggling to attend while ill - or sometimes, even if they are not ill, but there is simply nothing for them to do. It is worth noting generally that long hours do not always translate into more effective output, and that they may stem from inefficient time management anyway. Managers should also check that they are not setting an example of working over-long hours, which their employees are trying to emulate.

Key points: What constitutes presenteeism

- Many employees have a psychological need to work long hours.
- This is partly exaggerated loyalty and partly fear of redundancy.
- It often leads to attendance while ill, which lowers performance.

- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

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