

Personality characteristics that predict absenteeism

“Sickies” disrupt workplaces. Stephen Walton, principal psychologist with Fenchurch Corporate Psychology, offers recruiters advice on how to identify candidates more likely to take leave at short-notice.



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Research that I have conducted into employee absenteeism has shown that a person’s capacity for self-determination and their perception of the control they exert over personal outcomes will have a differential effect on their attendance at work. This study supports the view that the relationship between a person’s “locus of control” and their likely work-related behaviour can be a useful consideration in the selection of new employees.

Locus of Control (LOC) refers to a person’s inclination and perceived capacity to exert control over their lives. People will be classified as having an *internal* LOC if they believe that the decisions they make affect the outcomes in their lives, or an *external* LOC if they believe that outcomes are often out of their control and that their lives are largely influenced by chance, fate, luck or the actions of others.

People with an *external* locus of control are often described as taking things as they come due to a belief that people or events will often intervene to disrupt their plans. They tend to lack persistence and may not exhibit a great deal of initiative. Results from this study suggest that employees with an external locus of control are more likely than others to fall back on sick leave to manage the disruptions in their life that good planning or a more resolute approach to a problem might have solved.

Table 1 displays the sick leave used over a 12 months period by more than eight hundred Australian workers from across several industries. The data reveals that those employees with a very strong *internal* LOC took significantly fewer “sickies” in a year (5.07 Days x 45.3% = 2.29 Days) than their colleagues assessed as having an *external* LOC (8.19 Days x 59.4% = 4.79 Days).

Table 1: Locus of Control and Sick Leave Use

Locus of Control	Average sick leave used over 12 months (Days)	Average proportion of annual sick leave entitlement used (%)	Average proportion of sick leave used for other purposes (i.e. “sickies”) (%)
External	8.19	98.5%	59.4%
Both internal and external	7.35	84.2%	49.0%
Internal	5.69	64.8%	44.1%
Very strong internal	5.07	56.1%	45.3%

These observations clearly demonstrate that assessing a prospective employee’s LOC should have a place in managing workplace absenteeism. While assessing the locus of control can be readily achieved through the use of psychological testing, it is also possible to successfully explore a candidate’s capacity for personal control at interview, although some skill is required.

Employee attitudes that predict absenteeism

Interviewing to Detect the Locus of Control

While some interview questions are offered in this article, understanding the general direction of questioning should allow personnel with recruitment responsibilities to appreciate the type of questions required to assess a candidate's ability to cope with pressures outside of work so that they are less likely to be absent from work.

Interview questions should aim to elicit evidence of the beliefs and behaviours associated with personal control or self-determination. By way of example, a person with strong sense of personal control would tend to agree with the following statements:

"I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough."

"If someone opposes me, I can find a way to get what I want".

"It is easy for me to stick to my plan and accomplish my goals".

"I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events".

"I can remain calm when facing difficulties."

"When I am confronted with a problem I can usually find several solutions".

"If I am in trouble I can usually think of a solution."

"I can usually handle whatever comes my way."

The following are some suggested interview questions that could be used to assess a candidate's locus of control, although it is not an exhaustive list. Interviewers should be prepared to question according to their own style and pursue opportunities to explore the evidence of personal control whenever it emerges throughout the recruitment interview.

- What problems or situations are the easiest for you to manage? What problems or situations are the most difficult for you to deal with, both inside and outside of work? What are the greatest pressures that you face at the moment? Have you been successful in managing such pressures in the past? What have you typically done to get on top of problems? Has it ever been easier to walk away from a problem?
- How do you go about getting what you want, either at work or outside of work? Tell me about a time when people or events were working against you getting your way. How did you respond to that situation? Can you give examples of where you persist until things turn out the way you want?
- Tell me about the last time a problem arose or things changed unexpectedly to affect your plans. How did you respond? What demands on your time and patience are the most challenging for you at the moment? How do you intend to manage these things? How have you been successful managing these things in the past?
- What situations, either at work or outside of work, frustrate you the most or make it hard for you to cope? Are there particular problems or situations that make you lose your cool? Give a recent example of when you were under pressure. How did you respond to the situation?
- Are there particular problems inside or outside of work that you would hope to avoid in the future? How successful have you been at dealing with these things in the past?

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Objectively Assessing the Locus of Control

One of the major limitations of assessing characteristics like locus of control through interviews is the difficulty of determining precisely what equates to an acceptable level of personal control. This is where the use of standardised psychological assessment tools can complement the evidence about candidates obtained from interviews. Fenchurch psychologists are able to provide advice regarding candidates' Locus of Control if absenteeism is a particular concern in your workplace.

Contact us

What assessment or talent management project can we assist you with today? Our assessment specialists are ready to learn more about your business needs so that we can provide the right solution for you.

Call us now on **1300 799 894** or email us at enquiries@fenchurch.com.au. We look forward to hearing from you.