



Absenteeism due to COVID-19
Survey Results, January 2022

Executive Summary

Covid-related absenteeism is causing many companies to reduce operations.

A survey conducted by the Malta Employers' Association among its members reveals that the surge in absenteeism caused by Covid related absence is having a significant impact on companies.

32% of the 324 respondents reported an absence rate of higher than 15% which is complicating operations in many workplaces due to manning shortages. 58% of respondents said that they are coping with absenteeism through teleworking wherever this is possible, while 51% said that they have resorted to reducing operations.

The survey covered companies operating in all sectors of the economy. Indeed, the spike in the number of positive Covid cases during three-week period prior to the survey amplified the absenteeism problem not merely in a direct manner with an unusual number of employees who contracted the virus but also due to the fact that several others could also not report for work due to quarantine restrictions triggered from being primary contacts of colleagues or family members who may have also fallen ill to Covid-19.

The collective disruption in business activity, reduced output and lost business (particularly in services) is bound to have a negative impact on GDP and government finances. The latter will be affected by loss of tax revenue and increased expenditure, given that the wage supplement will be extended to, at least, the first quarter of 2022 to many businesses as a result.

In these circumstances, the Association appealed to the Authorities to safeguard public health but to do so without causing unnecessary hardship on economic operators by constantly re-examining the precautionary measures being announced to ensure that they are commensurate with the risk level of the pandemic – e.g., duration of quarantine and other restrictions.

It is also important that issues that have arisen at the work place due to ambiguity in regulations are clarified without further delay to avoid unnecessary absence and industrial unrest which is most detrimental to employers and costly to the economy at large.

Introduction

Background and Chronology

On the 31st December 2021, Malta had 11,441 active cases of COVID-19. This figure was one of the highest number Malta faced during the last two years of being in the pandemic. Higher figures, were in fact experienced at the turn of the year for at least 3 weeks, which has rendered the situation in Malta quite alarming.



Figure 1 showing the cases overview, details provided by the Public Health Response Team within the Ministry for Health¹.

With organisations gradually returning to more normalised work, and with the onset of winter, absence levels were already on the rise from other non-Covid causes. However, this surge in active cases caused a significant impact on absenteeism levels at the workplace. Numerous employers complained to the Association that a large number of their employees were on quarantine and this make it impossible for them to continue with their “business as usual” operations.

At the same period, the booster vaccine roll-out was in full swing, following the one for the second vaccine which occurred roughly 9 months prior (May-July 2022). The MEA was informed by its members, that many workers reported sick following the administration of the vaccination with symptoms ranging from fever, headaches and fatigue, lasting 2-3 days.

To evaluate the situation further, the MEA conducted a survey among employers to obtain the necessary data and insight to support its active participation in social dialogue as well as to provide more meaningful guidance to its members .

¹ <https://deputyprimeminister.gov.mt/en/health-promotion/covid-19/Pages/covid-19-infographics.aspx>

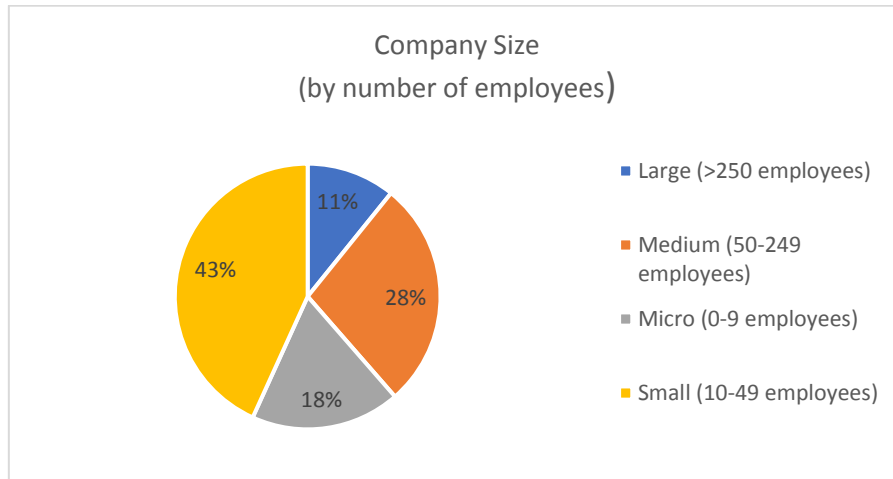
Methodology

The survey was distributed online through Google Forms, to all MEA member companies in all different industry sectors. The survey contained eight (8) questions, seven (7) of which were closed-ended and one open-ended. Through the open-ended question, respondents were given the possibility to explain further their responses, by adding comments to their answers. The questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix I. There were three hundred and twenty-four (324) valid responses to the survey, representing a larger number of companies as a number of respondents represented groups of companies, not individual employers.

Results

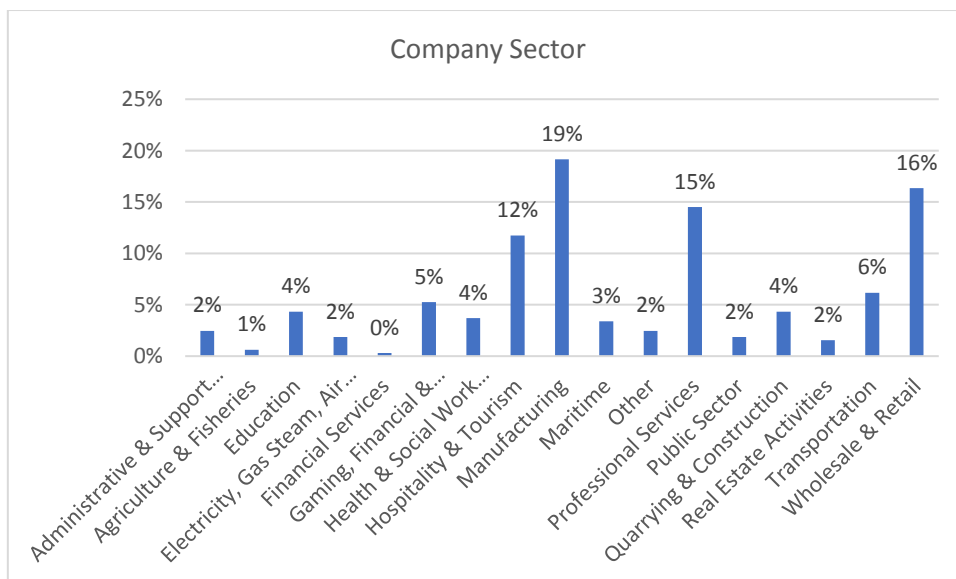
1.1 Company Size

Out of 324 survey respondents, 18% of companies employ less than 10 employees, 43% employ between 10-49 employees, 28% employ between 50-249 employees, and 11% employ between more than 250 employees.



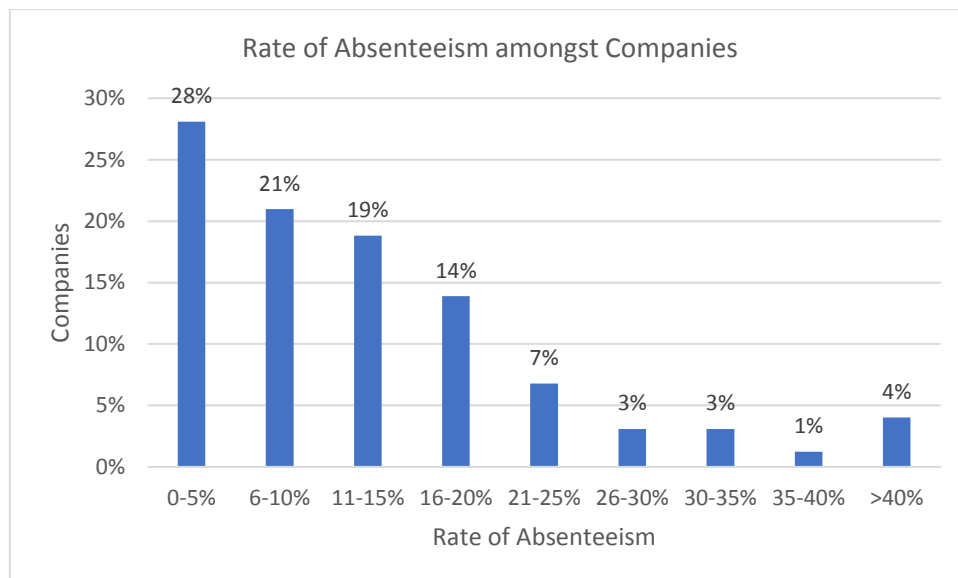
1.2 Company Sector

The data below shows the number of respondents by sector. Out of three hundred and twenty-four (324) respondents, the highest company representations come from Manufacturing (19%), Wholesale & Retail (16%) and the Professional Services (15%).

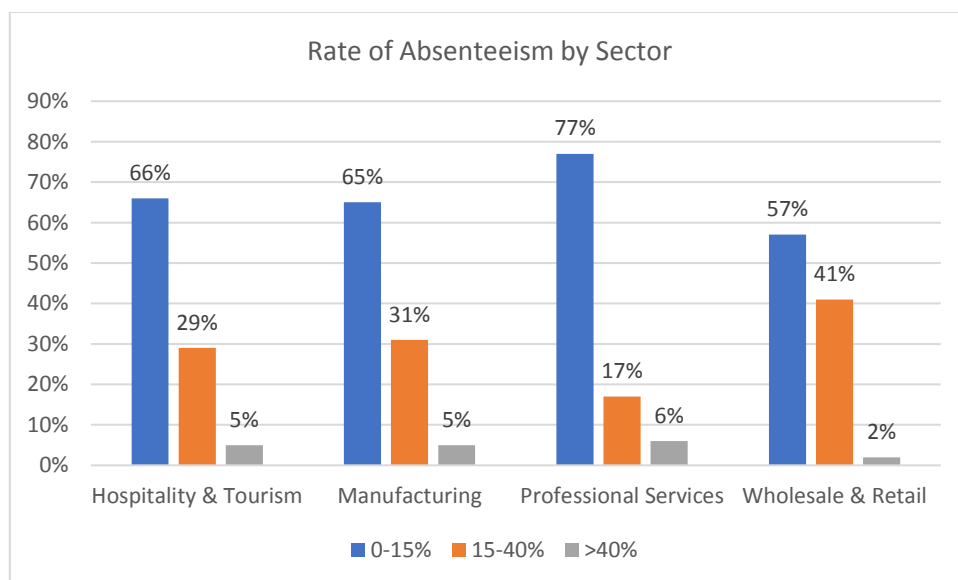


1.3 Rate of Absenteeism

32% of the 324 respondents reported having an absence rate of higher than 15% which made coping with the shortage of workers a problem in many workplaces.

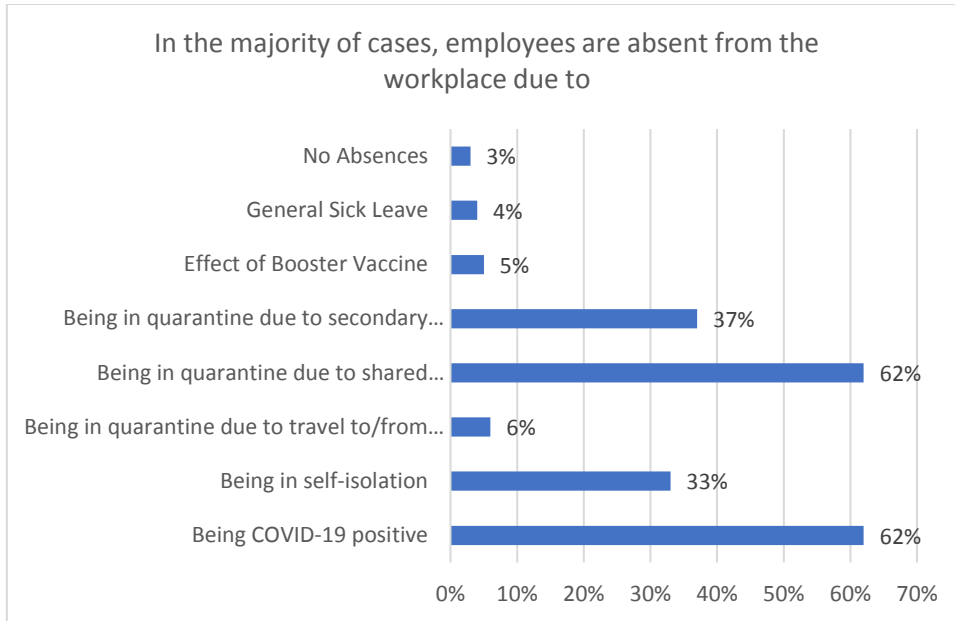


Some sectors like Wholesale & Retail experienced higher absenteeism rates of between 15-40%.



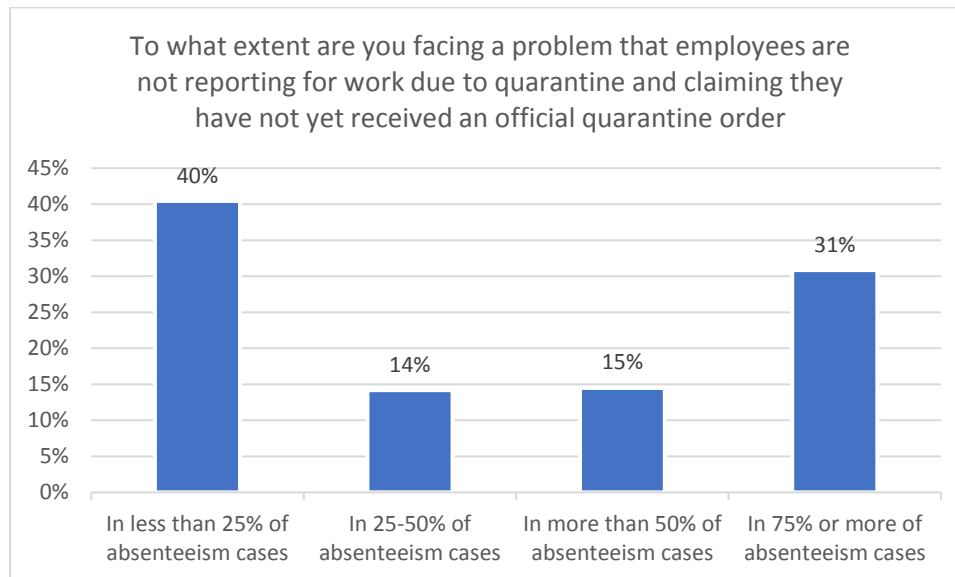
1.4 Reasons for Absence

In the majority of cases, employees were absent from the workplace because they were COVID-19 positive (63%) and/or were quarantined due to shared households (62%).



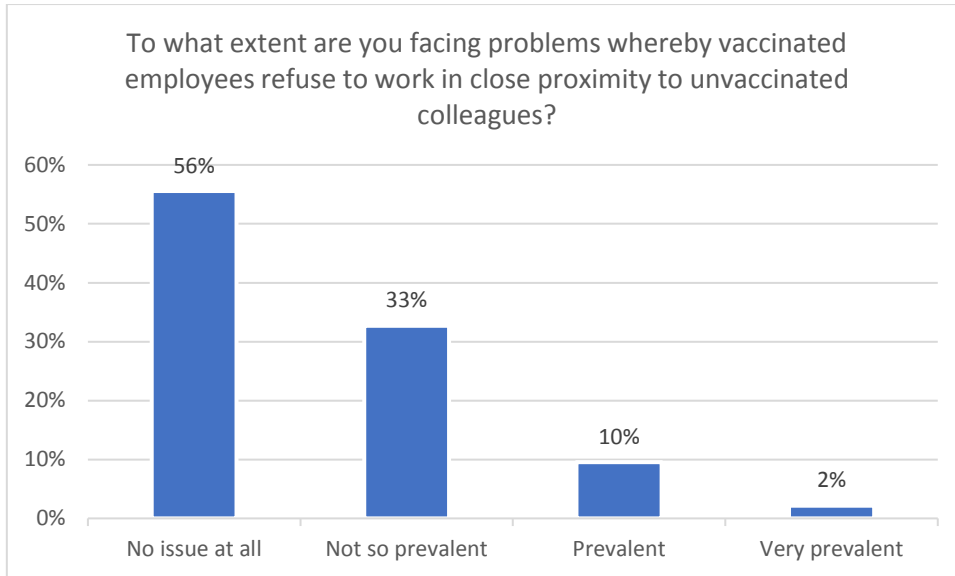
1.5 Quarantine Official Letter

48% of respondents stated that in more than 50% of absenteeism cases, their employees did not report for work due to quarantine though they had not received an official quarantine order.



1.6 Vaccinated vs. Unvaccinated Employees

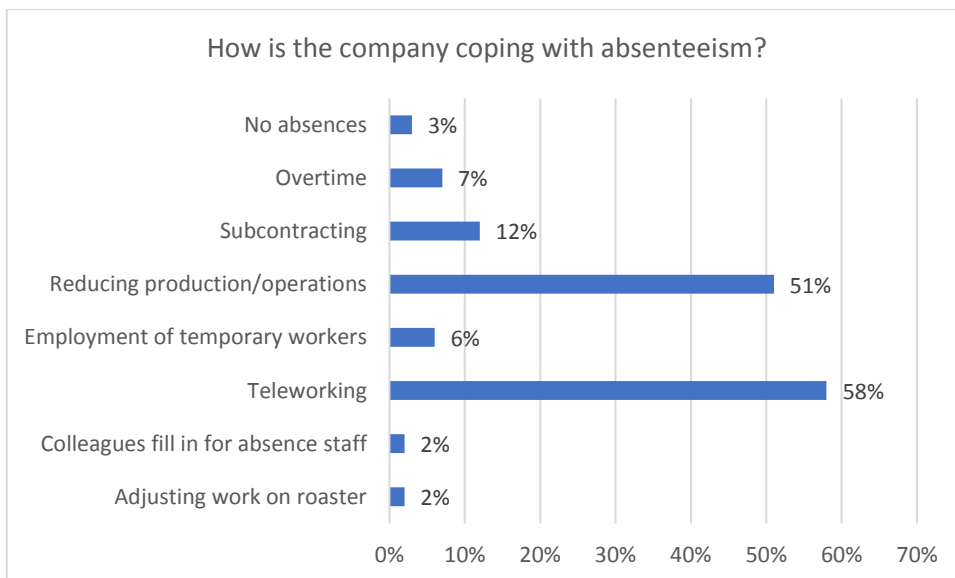
Most companies that participated in this survey did not face issues with vaccinated employees who refused to work in close proximity to their unvaccinated colleagues. Twelve per cent (12%) of the sample stated that the situation was 'Prevalent' and 'Very Prevalent'.



1.7 Companies coping with Absenteeism

58% of respondents said that they were coping with absenteeism through teleworking wherever this was possible, while 51% said that they had no option but to reduce operations.

25% of companies resorted to other measures which further increased operation costs. These measures included the employment of temporary workers (6%), subcontracting (12%), and increased overtime (7%) for their employees.



1.8 General Comments

A number of companies highlighted the below observations:

- Appointments of PCR tests were taking too long (in some cases even up to 15 days). Some companies resorted to private services at additional cost (to the employer);
- Teleworking arrangements were not always possible, especially in certain sectors like manufacturing and client-facing roles in all other sectors;
- A large number of employees reporting sick for 2-3 days after taking the booster dose. This needs to be analysed if the booster is going to become a regular occurrence going forward;
- There is room for abuse if employees do not receive the quarantine letter. Late receipt of the letters also impacted negatively payroll procedures;
- Given that quarantine leave is not treated as sick leave, the amount of benefit given to compensate for quarantine was significantly low compared to the expense the employer is incurring;
- Reducing the number of quarantine days should be considered as it may help alleviate the situation; and
- Ongoing dialogue with stakeholders, especially the unions is critical.

Annex I: Questions

1. Number of Employees
 - Micro (0 – 9 employees)
 - Small (10 – 49 employees)
 - Medium (50 – 249 employees)
 - Large (>250 employees)

2. Company Sector
 - Agriculture & Fisheries
 - Hospitality & Tourism
 - Quarrying & Construction
 - Professional Services
 - Manufacturing
 - Public Sector
 - Wholesale & Retail
 - Electricity, Gas Steam, Air Conditioning & Water Supply
 - Transportation
 - Education
 - Gaming, Financial & Insurance Activities
 - Real Estate Activities
 - Administrative & Support Services, Info & Communication
 - Health & Social Work Activities
 - Maritime
 - Other

3. What percentage of absenteeism are you currently experiencing among your staff?
 - 0-5%
 - 6-10%
 - 11-15%
 - 16-20%
 - 21-25%
 - 26-30%
 - 30 – 35%
 - 35-40%
 - >40%

4. In the majority of cases, employees are absent from the workplace due to (tick where applicable):
 - Being COVID-19 positive
 - Being in self-isolation
 - Being in quarantine due to travel to/from dark red zones
 - Being in quarantine due to sharing households
 - Being in quarantine due to secondary contacts

Other, please specify:

5. To what extent are you facing a problem that employees are not reporting for work due to quarantine and claiming they have not yet received an official quarantine order?

- In 75% or more of absenteeism cases
- In more than 50% of absenteeism cases
- In 25%-50% of absenteeism cases
- In less than 25% of absenteeism cases

6. To what extent are you facing problems whereby vaccinated employees refuse to work in close proximity to unvaccinated colleagues?

- Very prevalent
- Prevalent
- Not so prevalent
- No issue at all

7. How is the company coping with absenteeism?

- Employees are teleworking when on quarantine, unless they are COVID-19 positive
- Employment of temporary workers
- Sub-contracting
- Reducing production/operations
- Other, please specify:

8. General Comments
