

Knowledge Management and Digitalization Potential in Employee Sickness Absence Management Processes

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Abstract: Employee sickness absence generates significant costs for organizations, and its reduction requires a structured management approach. Sickness absence management (SAM) constitutes a function of human resource management (HRM) that remains underdeveloped in organizational practice and insufficiently emphasized in the academic literature. By collecting, disseminating, and effectively utilizing knowledge on sickness absence to enhance managerial efficiency and effectiveness, SAM should also be considered an important component of organizational knowledge management. Accordingly, the first objective of this paper is to identify and systematize the key functions of SAM. The second objective is to assess the potential of digitalization to supplement SAM functions, which are currently reserved mainly for HRM, with additional functions in the area of knowledge management related to sickness absence (KM-SA). This, in turn, may facilitate its broader adoption among organizations that lack sufficient financial and human resources to sustain such management practices. The identification of SAM functions in HRM was conducted using a narrative literature review. The starting point for identifying KM-SA functions was a systematic literature review, the result of which was the identification of a research gap that provided the rationale for conducting empirical research based on a commercial IT platform, widely used in Poland by organizations facing high levels of sickness absence. In addition to systematizing SAM functions in HRM, the study provides examples of benefits resulting from their digitalization and extension to include KM-SA functions. The use of digital tools for absence monitoring enables partial cost reduction through improved workforce planning, earlier identification of adverse trends, and making both more informed staffing decisions and strategic decisions based on knowledge of the phenomenon of sickness absence not only within the organization but also in the labour market. Data derived from commercial platforms, such as sickness absence barometers, make it possible to identify absence patterns, segment problems by departments or employee groups, and link absence to working conditions and organizational policies. In practice, knowledge management of sickness absence (KM-SA) should contribute to increasing the accessibility of such solutions, particularly for organizations with limited resources.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Digitalization, Sickness absence, Personnel management, HR management

1. Introduction

Employee sickness absence represents a specific category of work absence, directly caused by illness or injury, formally certified and resulting in temporary incapacity for work. As such, it constitutes a phenomenon with medical, economic, and organizational dimensions (Čikeš et al., 2018). While absence is broadly defined as any non-attendance during scheduled working time (Cascio, 2001), this study focuses specifically on sickness absence, as recognized within legal and insurance systems and in cost-of-illness analyses (Striker, 2013a).

High levels of sickness absence have both economic and organizational consequences. A review of one hundred key studies indicates that absence is typically associated with reduced operational productivity, declining process quality, and diminished overall organizational performance (Čikeš et al., 2018). Furthermore, panel data from Norwegian firms demonstrate that increases in long-term absence lead to a nonlinear decline in operating revenues and total productivity (Aarstad, Kvitastein, 2023).

Research on sickness absence is inherently interdisciplinary. It is discussed in the literature on medicine and public health (Piha et al., 2010), economics and public finance (Kocakulah et al., 2011), as well as management. In this latter dimension, sickness absence management (SAM) emerges as a distinct function of human resource management (Striker, 2013a). Despite growing awareness of the costs associated with sickness absence, many organizations still lack coherent SAM policies and tools, while its strategic importance remains insufficiently recognized (Striker, 2013b).

Against this background, a clear research gap emerges. Although the literature extensively discusses the definitions, determinants, and consequences of sickness absence, the potential for digitalizing individual SAM functions and the possibilities of standardizing them within IT tools remain insufficiently explored (Striker, 2013a), especially in the context of extending the issue of SAM beyond the area of HRM alone to the area of

knowledge management (KM). The starting point for this study is the authors' proposition that knowledge management of sickness absence fits into the classical understanding of knowledge management as the identification and use of collective organizational knowledge to enhance competitiveness (Alavi, Leidner, 2001).

The identified gap justifies the following objectives of the study: (1) to identify and systematize the detailed functions of SAM from the perspective of HRM and organizational effectiveness; and (2) to examine the digitalization potential of these functions, culminating in a proposal to extend SAM with a knowledge management function focused on sickness absence.

The approach presented in this study also addresses contemporary challenges in knowledge management by incorporating: the critical role of human factors in management processes (Khadir, Durst, 2025), the importance of functional organizational cultures (Kucharska, Bedford, 2023), and issues related to intra- and inter-organizational knowledge transfer (Pedersen et al., 2023).

2. Literature Review

2.1 SEM Functions Within HRM and Barriers to Their Implementation

Typical SEM functions included within HRM are: reducing sick leave through return-to-work interviews, training for managers, and the preparation of reports on absenteeism (MacLean, 2008), analysis of organizational factors such as workplace conflicts (Lakiša et al., 2021), improving working conditions to reduce absenteeism, promoting a culture of attendance and accountability (MacLean et al, 2008), a flexible approach to employees' return to work after illness, and others.

Their implementation faces numerous barriers within organizations, including, among others: a lack of commitment from management or employees (Akerstrom et al., 2024), insufficient managerial competencies, inflexible procedures (Rasmussen et al., 2025), data challenges (Rasmussen et al., 2024), lack of confidentiality, and GDPR and legal restrictions (Klasen et al., 2021), as well as individual psychological barriers and a culture of silence.

2.2 Towards Digitally Supported Knowledge Management of Employee Sickness Absence

There are many similarities between HRM and knowledge management (KM), for example: employees are regarded as a central organizational resource (Nonaka, 1994), an organizational culture based on trust, openness, and learning determines the effectiveness of both KM and HRM (Alavi, Leidner, 2001), learning and development constitute a shared research area (Ferreira et al., 2022), but the development of digitalization processes in the organization makes it possible to incorporate into SEM many KM functions that are typical of it and distinguish it from HRM. Examples of inherent features of KM that distinguish it from HRM include: an emphasis on organizational knowledge as a resource (Nonaka, Takeuchi, 1995) as opposed to people as a resource (Ulrich, 1997), the key role of IT and information systems (Alavi, Leidner, 2001) as opposed to the key role of relationships and human behavior (Huselid, 1995), an emphasis on the team and organizational level of analysis and knowledge bases (Alavi, Leidner, 2001) in contrast to individual, firm-level HR practices (Wright, McMahan, 1992), an emphasis on the continuous spiral of knowledge creation (Nonaka, 1994) rather than on strategies or programs closed within defined time periods (Ulrich, 1997), and responsibility distributed across multiple centers within and outside the organization (Davenport, Prusak, 1998) rather than located mainly within the HR department (Ulrich, 1997).

Due to the nature of KM, it generally demonstrates a significantly greater potential for the use of IT systems and digitalization than HRM. This also applies to SEM. On the one hand, digital HRM streamlines administrative processes, enables the analysis of sickness absence, thereby increasing the objectivity and effectiveness of managerial decision-making (Strohmeier, 2020; Meijerink et al., 2021). The implementation of digital tools in SEM makes it possible to overcome numerous organizational barriers, including difficulties in identifying absence patterns, limited analytical competencies of managers (Graczyk-Kucharska et al., 2023; Dasari, Devi, 2025), and personal biases of supervisors leading to reduced effectiveness of managerial interventions (Colquitt et al., 2022).

On the other hand, digitalization facilitates the extension of SEM to knowledge management of employee sickness absence (KM-SA), providing managers not only with standard information on individual employees or basic analytical cross-sections, but also with the possibility of building behavioral models and analyzing the impact of absence on the achievement of the organization's strategic objectives.

Unfortunately, scientific literature contains almost no studies on the digitalization of sickness absence management processes in the context of KM-SA. The use of the SCOPUS query: (TITLE-ABS-KEY("knowledge management") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("sickness absence")), returned one result. In the publication (Connolly et al, 2010), the authors presented the outcome of cooperation between a university and a healthcare service provider, namely a Management Information System (MIS) for Occupational Health. Although the context of its development was social rather than business-oriented, the essence of the cooperation was knowledge transfer, among other things, in order to reduce the costs of sickness absence in the workplace. The use of the query: (TITLE-ABS-KEY("knowledge management") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY("sick leave")), produced two results, but they were not related to the topic under study. The systematic literature review was conducted on 17 May 2026.

Digitalization for KM-SA creates the potential for continuous improvement of management in the organization, including through:

- identifying absence patterns that are difficult to detect using traditional methods, especially short-term, recurring absences of 1 to 3 days, which generate significant operating costs and disrupt the functioning of the organization (Grimani et al., 2019),
- automation of decision-making processes (Dasari, Devi, 2025),
- deepening knowledge of natural fluctuations in absence and distinguishing them from absence-related behaviors that produce effects contrary to those intended (Sakib et al., 2025).

The literature emphasizes the need to maintain a balance between analytical approaches and the humanistic dimension of human resource management (Carnevale, Hatak, 2020). Digital tools should support dialogue with employees and contribute to building organizational cultures based on trust and fairness.

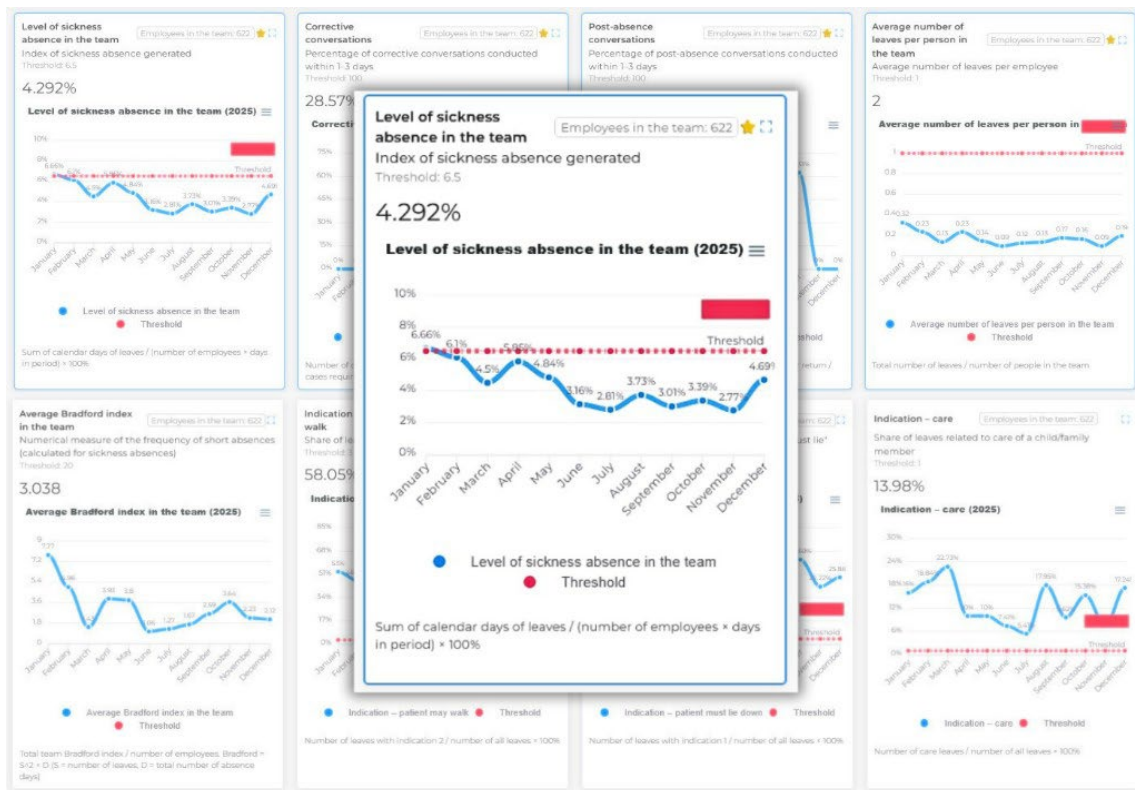
3. Methodology

The subject of the study is the digitalization potential of SAM for the implementation of knowledge management of sickness absence (KM-SA) functions simultaneously across multiple organizations served by a single service provider.

The object of the study is the IT system "Absence Dashboard," designed to support KM-SA, developed and implemented by the Polish consulting company Conperio, which specializes in providing services supporting clients in the field of SAM. As of March 31, 2026, the system was used by over 300 organizations, primarily manufacturing companies. Collectively, these organizations employ approximately 250,000 employees (ranging from 300 to 40,000 employees per organization). These entities adopt the tool in response to rising sickness absence costs, the lack of effective analytical tools, and difficulties in managing the issue at the operational level. The choice of a single system is justified by the limited number of analogous systems available on the market and the scarcity of scientific studies in which such systems would constitute either the object or the subject of research, and to which the present study could therefore refer.

The "Absence Dashboard" constitutes the central component of the SAM platform. The tool was designed as a response to the limitations of traditional absence management methods within individual organizations. It enables the transformation of raw data into actionable knowledge regarding employee sickness absence (Figure 1).

The research method applied is a case study, justified by the specific nature of the phenomenon under investigation and its strong embedding in an institutional and legal context. As a result, the market for such services in Poland remains limited, and Conperio—as the only specialized provider (as of March 2026)—has a unique capacity to collect and process sickness absence data into organizational knowledge. The case study approach allows for an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon in its real-life context and facilitates the identification of mechanisms that are not accessible through quantitative research methods.



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the "Absence Dashboard" system (Conperio)

Figure 1: Illustrative Screenshot of the "Absence Dashboard" application – level of sickness absence in the team

The initial premises for undertaking the study, derived from Conperio's empirical experience gained through SAM implementations for business clients, include the following:

- a low level of managerial preparedness for analyzing absence data and limited ability to interpret its significance,
- entrenched interpersonal relationships leading to a lack of objectivity in employee evaluation,
- the influence of supervisors' personal sympathies or antipathies on decisions regarding employee-related actions, resulting in perceived organizational injustice and reduced effectiveness of managerial interventions,
- a tendency among organizations to overestimate the scope and quality of available information on employee absence behavior, while in reality such data are incomplete, fragmented, or insufficiently processed for decision-making purposes,
- the fact that sickness absence behavior in Poland is not solely determined by health conditions; sick leave is often treated as an opportunity to obtain paid time off work,
- according to Conperio statistics, approximately one-third of a sample of 33,000 controlled sick leaves were used improperly (Zajac et al., 2025).

These premises are consistent with factors identified in the existing literature. In light of these findings, a key value proposition for business clients is the possibility of accessing codified knowledge on employee sickness absence without the need to invest in proprietary IT solutions, collect and analyze data independently, identify relationships and dependencies, manage analytical tools, define decision points and action triggers, or search for appropriate benchmarking entities.

The analysis of the digitalization potential of SAM was conducted in three interrelated research stages. In the first stage, key managerial problems related to sickness absence were identified and mapped to corresponding SAM functions. In the second stage, the digitalization potential of these functions was assessed by referencing them to the functionalities of the "Absence Dashboard" system, with particular emphasis on process automation, data integration, and aggregation capabilities. In the third stage, the scope of knowledge

management of sickness absence (KM-SA) functions was defined, emerging as a result of the digitalization of SAM functions and the use of aggregated data derived from multiple organizations.

4. Research Findings

This section presents the findings concerning the digitalization potential of sickness absence management (SAM) functions, along with the identification of knowledge management of sickness absence (KM-SA) functions emerging as a result of this digitalization.

Stage 1: Identification of Key Managerial Problems and Corresponding SAM Functions

Due to the diversity and complexity of managerial challenges, the analysis focused exclusively on key problems, as presented in Table 1. Each identified problem was linked to a corresponding management function, the implementation of which enables its resolution.

Table 1: Relationship between managerial problems and sickness absence management functions in HRM

Problem ID	Managerial problem in a single organization	Function ID	SAM Function in HRM
P1	What is the appropriate level of sickness absence?	F1	Defining the appropriate level of sickness absence
P2	Identification of atypical behaviors	F2	Identifying employees requiring intervention
P3	Measuring process effectiveness	F3	Evaluating implemented actions at all management levels
P4	Calculation of the Bradford factor	F4	Monitoring and identifying frequent short-term absences
P5	Non-actionable absence	F5	Objective reporting of actual sickness absence levels
P6	Return-to-work interviews	F6	Supporting managers in conducting return-to-work interviews
P7	Enterprise-level KPIs	F7	Benchmarking absence-related indicators against other organizations

Stage 2: Digitalization Potential of SAM Functions and Stage 3: KM-SA Functions

Digitalization of SAM Function F1: Defining the Appropriate Level of Sickness Absence

A key challenge in managing sickness absence is determining an appropriate reference level that allows organizations to assess whether observed absence rates fall within the range typical for comparable entities.

The digitalization of this function involves:

- automating the collection of employee sickness absence data across supported organizations,
- storing and aggregating absence data within the system,
- developing benchmarks based on comparable organizations and establishing a representative point of reference (RPR).

KM-SA Function F1: Benchmark-Based Determination of Absence Levels

The collection and codification of sickness absence knowledge from multiple organizations enable benchmarking processes, supporting the identification and monitoring of the representative point of reference (RPR). This, in turn, allows organizations to compare their absence rates with typical values observed in similar entities.

Digitalization of SAM Function F2: Identifying Employees Requiring Intervention

Organizations seeking to actively manage sickness absence typically rely on overall absence rates expressed as a percentage of the workforce. However, such aggregated indicators are insufficient for planning targeted actions, as they require deeper analysis, often at the level of individual case studies. Moreover, effective management requires adopting a behavioral model indicating which employee patterns should trigger managerial responses.

KM-SA Function F2: Identification of Absence Behavior Patterns

The processing and analysis of employee absence data enable the systematic identification of absence behavior patterns. Based on these patterns, deviations can be detected, allowing for the objective selection of employees who require intervention.

Digitalization of SAM Function F3: Evaluation of Actions Across Management Levels

Effective sickness absence management should involve managers at all organizational levels, supported by HR departments acting in an advisory and control capacity. A common challenge is the lack of clearly defined roles and decision-making criteria across management levels.

KM-SA Function F3: KPI Definition and Performance Management

Digitalization enables the establishment of KPIs for managers at all levels, as well as ongoing monitoring and evaluation of their achievement. These KPIs may range from operational targets, such as conducting return-to-work interviews, to strategic objectives, including maintaining acceptable absence levels at team or organizational levels.

Digitalization of SAM Function F4: Monitoring and Identifying Frequent Short-Term Absences

Employee absence constitutes a significant organizational challenge affecting overall performance. Employers incur not only direct costs related to sick pay but also substantially higher indirect costs resulting from unperformed work. Short-term absences (typically 1–2 days) are particularly disruptive in this regard.

KM-SA Function F4: Identification of Patterns in Short-Term Absence Behavior

The automated monitoring and analysis of the frequency of short-term absences, through continuous calculation of the Bradford factor, enable the rapid identification of potentially problematic absence patterns and support managerial decision-making.

Digitalization of SAM Function F5: Objective Reporting of Actual Sickness Absence Levels

Despite legal permissibility, certain types of sickness absence should not be subject to managerial intervention for ethical reasons (as reflected in Conperio's policy). Two such categories arise directly from the nature of sick leave: absences related to hospitalization and maternity-related leave ("type B"). Another category includes employees with chronic illnesses, who are also excluded from monitoring. Due to personal data protection regulations, employers do not have access to information regarding the nature of an employee's medical condition; therefore, active absence management is not pursued in such cases.

KM-SA Function F5: Incorporation of Equality and Privacy Considerations

These categories have a significant impact on overall absence rates. The "Absence Dashboard" enables their identification and quantification within total absence levels. Factors such as gender and age naturally increase the proportion of non-actionable absence. Their identification allows for more precise estimation of absence indicators and ensures objective reporting of results.

Digitalization of SAM Function F6: Supporting Managers in Conducting Return-to-Work Interviews

A key tool for direct supervisors in managing sickness absence is the conduct of return-to-work and corrective interviews. Digitalization facilitates the selection of employees requiring such interviews and enables the digitization of interview records, reporting based on their content, and the generation of advanced statistics derived from these data.

KM-SA Function F6: Knowledge Management of Return-to-Work Interviews

The collection of digitized interview records enables the codification of knowledge derived from these interactions, the parameterization of conclusions, and the development of statistical analyses supporting the improvement of interview processes and their outcomes.

Digitalization of SAM Function F7: Benchmarking Absence Indicators Across Organizations

Ensuring the comparability of absence-related KPIs both within organizational units and across different companies facilitates a reliable assessment of managerial effectiveness. Digitalization enhances the ability to identify areas requiring intervention and to recognize best practices.

KM-SA Function F7: Monitoring Typical Absence Characteristics in the Labor Market

The “Absence Dashboard,” combined with aggregated data from multiple organizations, enables the calculation of typical (e.g., average) parameters of sickness absence, such as average absence duration, the proportion of short-term absences, hospitalization rates, and the number of employees on sick leave on a daily basis.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Sickness absence represents a significant cost-related challenge for organizations. At the same time, it is a highly complex phenomenon, exhibiting different characteristics across countries.

The case study of the “Absence Dashboard” illustrates a tool that supports organizations in managing knowledge related to employee sickness absence, enabling early identification of excessive and unjustified absence patterns that generate organizational losses.

The study applied a structured research process to identify the digitalization potential of SAM functions and to support the implementation of KM-SA functions. The research was conducted in three stages: (1) identification of key managerial problems and corresponding SAM functions, (2) assessment of the digitalization potential of these functions, and (3) identification of KM-SA functions emerging from this digitalization.

In the first stage, SAM functions with high digitalization potential were identified. The literature review indicates that functions related to absence monitoring (F1, F3, F5, F7), supporting return-to-work processes (F6), and early detection of long-term absence risk (F2, F4) are particularly significant (Alonso, 2022).

In the second stage, the identified functions were mapped onto IT solutions. In sickness absence management, reporting and data analytics systems play a critical role by enabling data collection, integration, and visualization. The analyzed tool demonstrates the feasibility of digitalizing multiple SAM functions, which is consistent with existing literature emphasizing the importance of accessible and easily interpretable data for line managers engaged in decision-making processes (Rasmussen et al., 2024).

The digitalization of sickness absence management is enabled by several factors. First, absence-related processes are repetitive and data-driven, which facilitates their standardization and automation. Second, advances in digital technologies enable real-time monitoring and analysis of absence (Lawpoolsri et al., 2014). Third, the use of digital health tools, such as applications and e-health systems, enhances the effectiveness of absence management and supports return-to-work processes (Alonso, 2022).

The third stage focused on defining the scope of KM-SA functions, whose implementation is made possible through the codification of knowledge provided by digital systems operated by service providers. The development of these functions, resulting from the digitalization of selected management processes, enables real-time absence monitoring, rapid response, and the implementation of preventive measures (Lawpoolsri et al., 2014).

The conducted research achieved the stated objectives and contributed to reducing the identified research gap. The study was subject to certain limitations, including reliance on a single IT system, restriction to the Polish context, and the focus on selected SAM functions within the case study. Future research should address these limitations. An important direction for further research is the development of procedures for evaluating the effectiveness of KM-SA implementation, in order to accurately assess the relationship between cost savings achieved and the costs associated with accessing such knowledge-based services.

Ethics Declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for the research, as the study did not involve human participants but focused solely on the functions of a system containing anonymized data. These anonymized data were also not the object of the study.

AI Declaration: No AI tools were used for this paper.

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