



The Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Work Productivity: A Comprehensive Analysis

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ABSTRACT

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Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are increasingly recognized as key determinants of adult health, well-being, and occupational functioning. This study, titled “*The Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Work Productivity: A Comprehensive Analysis*,” explores how childhood adversity affects absenteeism, presenteeism, overall productivity, and activity impairment. A sample of 54 private-sector employees provided self-report data on ACEs, Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCE), Positive Childhood Experiences (PCE), and work productivity indicators. Correlation analyses revealed a modest but significant positive relationship between ACEs and presenteeism, suggesting that individuals with higher ACE scores struggle to perform effectively despite being present at work. In contrast, ACEs showed no significant associations with absenteeism, overall productivity, or activity impairment. BCE and PCE were negatively correlated with ACEs but displayed no direct links to productivity in zero-order correlations. These findings indicate that the primary occupational impact of ACEs is “hidden” productivity loss: employees attend work but underperform due to ongoing stress, reduced resilience, or mental health challenges. The study contributes to the literature by highlighting how childhood trauma manifests in adult workplace outcomes, particularly presenteeism. However, the cross-sectional design and small sample size, especially within certain ACE subgroups, limit generalizability. Future research should examine specific ACE subtypes, assess the moderating or mediating roles of BCE and PCE, and apply longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to clarify causal pathways. For organizations, adopting trauma-informed policies and support systems may help mitigate the long-term workforce impact of childhood adversity.

Keywords: *Absenteeism; Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs); Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCE); Mental Health; Presentism; Positive Childhood Experiences (PCE); Resilience; Work Productivity*

Background

Work serves as a foundational aspect of modern life, deeply interwoven with personal identity, social relationships, and a sense of structure and purpose. It not only offers financial stability but also contributes to self-worth, growth, and social engagement (Drucker, 2012; Pyöriä, 2005). In individualistic cultures, professional autonomy and self-reliance are particularly emphasized. The structured nature of work provides daily routine and a sense of meaning, while also fostering professional relationships that significantly shape personality and behavior (Wiggins, 1973).

Given this centrality of work, increasing scholarly attention has turned to how Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which include abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction experienced before the age of 18, impact adult functioning, particularly work productivity. ACEs are common, with the CDC (2021) reporting that more than half of the population has experienced at least one, and a quarter three or more. These early adversities have been linked to a broad spectrum of negative adult outcomes, including poor physical and mental health, substance misuse, and criminal behavior (Felitti *et al.*, 1998; Anda *et al.*, 2006), all of which can detrimentally affect workplace performance.

This research aims to examine the association between ACEs and work productivity and to identify mediating or moderating factors such as Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs), self-concept, and interpersonal relationships. Studies have already shown that adults with ACE histories tend to experience job-related difficulties such as absenteeism, financial stress, and poor performance (Anda *et al.*, 2004; Rose, Xie & Stineman, 2014). For individuals in high-stress professions such as health and social care, the prevalence and impact of ACEs are especially pronounced (Mercer & Rose, 2023). Interventions that are trauma-informed and resilience-focused are therefore essential to mitigating the adverse effects on employee well-being and productivity (Larkin, Shields & Anda., 2014).

Secondary traumatic stress and workplace stress are notable concerns. For instance, Jobe & Holiday (2021) found that a significant percentage of emergency nurses reported high levels of stress and productivity loss. Similarly, individuals recovering from mild traumatic brain injury reported persistent difficulties in maintaining work output (Silverberg & Hanks, 2017). Such findings emphasize the need for workplace stress management strategies, including structured debriefing and social support systems.

Further, self-concept, a person's overall sense of self, encompassing emotional, social, and physical domains, has been found to significantly influence workplace productivity (Juanamasta, Suryani & Adiputra, 2019; Arif *et al.*, 2020). Employees with a strong professional self-concept tend to demonstrate higher productivity and job satisfaction. Moreover, self-perception, including factors like emotional intelligence and self-esteem, shapes workplace interactions and can mediate job engagement and satisfaction (Brook, 1991).

Interpersonal dynamics also play a vital role. Poor workplace relationships are linked to diminished productivity and increased stress (Fonseca *et al.*, 2022), while positive relationships foster vitality, collaboration, and lower turnover intentions (Carmeli, 2009; Madden, Mathis & Madden, 2015). Similarly, job quality, defined by manageable stress levels, perceived fairness, and support, significantly correlates with enhanced work outcomes.

The role of life satisfaction as both an antecedent and consequence of job satisfaction is also explored in the literature. Research suggests that life satisfaction can serve as a stronger predictor of job performance than job satisfaction alone, particularly when mediated by work engagement (Jones, 2006). Importantly, interventions addressing mental health, such as antidepressant treatments, have demonstrated improvements in both life satisfaction and workplace productivity.

Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) serve as protective factors, buffering the long-term impacts of ACEs. These include supportive caregiving, personal achievements, and nurturing environments, which are associated with positive adult outcomes like civic engagement, social competence, and lower rates of mental health issues (Kosterman *et al.*, 2011; Moran, 2019).

Ultimately, the literature highlights the importance of considering both adverse and positive early life experiences in understanding adult work outcomes. The intersection of ACEs, self-concept, interpersonal relationships, and workplace culture demands holistic, trauma-informed approaches to workplace well-being. This study thus contributes to a growing body of knowledge aimed at building healthier, more resilient, and productive workforces.

Research Objectives

- 1) To investigate the relationship between ACEs and work productivity
- 2) To identify specific types of ACEs that have the most significant impact on work productivity
- 3) To explore mediating factors that influence this relationship

Literature Review

Work plays a central role in shaping individual identity, social relationships, and well-being, offering both structure and purpose (Drucker, 2012; Pyöriä, 2005; Wiggins, 1973). However, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)—including abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction—have been identified as significant predictors of negative adult outcomes that can undermine occupational functioning. Large-scale studies have demonstrated that ACEs are associated with poor health, mental illness, and diminished work capacity (Felitti *et al.*, 1998; Anda *et al.*, 2006). The CDC (2021) further reports that over half of adults have encountered at least one ACE, emphasizing their widespread prevalence.

Research consistently shows links between ACEs and workplace difficulties, including absenteeism, financial strain, and lowered performance (Anda *et al.*, 2004; Rose, Xie & Stineman, 2014). The impact is particularly acute in high-stress sectors such as healthcare and social work (Mercer & Rose, 2023). Trauma-informed and resilience-focused interventions are therefore essential in addressing these long-term effects (Larkin, Shields & Anda, 2014).

Workplace stress and secondary traumatic stress also contribute to productivity loss. Jobe and Holiday (2021) found high stress and presenteeism among emergency nurses, while Silverberg and Hanks (2017) reported ongoing productivity impairments in individuals with mild traumatic brain injuries. These findings highlight the need for organizational strategies such as debriefing and structured support systems.

Individual self-concept has been shown to influence productivity and job satisfaction (Leonard, Beauvais & Scholl, 1999; Juanamasta, Suryani & Adiputra, 2019; Arif *et al.*, 2020). Strong professional self-concept and self-esteem enhance workplace engagement (Brook, 1991), while positive interpersonal relationships foster vitality, collaboration, and retention (Carmeli, 2009; Madden, Mathis & Madden, 2015; Fonseca & Azevedo, 2022).

Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) offer a protective counterbalance to ACEs, promoting resilience and social competence (Kosterman et al., 2011; Moran, 2019). Overall, the literature underscores that both adverse and benevolent early life experiences shape adult occupational outcomes, necessitating trauma-informed organizational cultures to foster productivity and well-being.

Methods

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional design to explore the relationship between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and work productivity. This design was chosen for its suitability in identifying associations between psychological variables at a single point in time (Creswell, 2014).

A total of 54 participants were recruited using convenience sampling from private-sector organizations across IT, healthcare, and education. The sample included project and departmental managers as well as administrative assistants, all engaged in traditional office-based roles using similar digital tools. This occupational homogeneity ensured comparability in work context. Data were collected through an anonymous online survey created using Microsoft Forms. This platform facilitated broad distribution and ensured participant confidentiality, which is essential when collecting sensitive information related to childhood adversity.

Two validated instruments were used. The ACE Questionnaire assessed participants' exposure to childhood abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction (Felitti *et al.*, 1998). The Work Productivity and Activity Impairment Questionnaire (WPAIQ) measured absenteeism, presentism, and the impact of health on work productivity. Both instruments were selected for their psychometric robustness and relevance to the research objectives. Survey items included both nominal and Likert-scale questions across six dimensions informed by existing literature. A two-week window was provided for completion, with reminder prompts to ensure an adequate response rate.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic and key study variables. Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of associations among ACE, BCE, PCE scores and productivity outcomes. This statistical method was appropriate for identifying linear relationships among continuous variables. Significance was determined at $p < .05$. This methodological approach enabled a focused examination of how childhood experiences influence adult work functioning, using validated tools within a controlled sampling frame.

Results & Discussion

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), Positive Childhood Experiences (PCE), Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCE), and various dimensions of work productivity, including absenteeism, presentism, overall productivity, and activity impairment.

The results indicated a significant positive correlation between ACE scores and presentism ($r = 0.274$, $p = 0.045$), suggesting that individuals with higher ACEs are more likely to experience reduced productivity while physically present at work. However, ACE was not significantly correlated with absenteeism ($r = 0.173$, $p = 0.210$), overall productivity ($r = 0.195$, $p = 0.157$), or activity impairment ($r = 0.190$, $p = 0.168$). These findings imply that the impact of ACEs on work productivity may be more internalized and less visible through external measures such as attendance or total output.

A strong positive correlation was observed between absenteeism and overall productivity ($r = 0.773$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that increased absence is associated with lower productivity. Presentism also correlated

positively with both overall productivity ($r = 0.423$, $p = 0.001$) and activity impairment ($r = 0.904$, $p < 0.001$), reflecting that presentism and impairment often co-occur and jointly contribute to diminished workplace functioning.

Table 1: Key Significant Correlations between Childhood Experiences and Work Productivity Indicators

Variable Pair	Pearson r	p-value	Significance Level
ACE_ Presentism	0.274	0.045	0.01
BCE_ ACE	-0.615	0	0.05
PCE_ ACE	-0.663	0	0.05
BCE_ PCE	0.569	0	0.05
Presentism _Overall Productivity	0.423	0.001	0.05
Presentism _Impairment	0.904	0	0.05
Absentism _Overall Productivity	0.773	0	0.05

The analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) and presentism ($r = 0.274$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that individuals with higher ACE scores are more likely to struggle with productivity while at work. However, ACE was not significantly associated with absenteeism, overall productivity, or activity impairment.

Both Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCE) and Positive Childhood Experiences (PCE) showed strong negative correlations with ACE ($r = -0.615$ and -0.663 , respectively; $p < 0.01$), but neither was directly related to productivity outcomes.

Among productivity indicators, absenteeism and overall productivity were strongly correlated ($r = 0.773$, $p < 0.01$), and presentism and activity impairment demonstrated a very strong relationship ($r = 0.904$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that these variables may reflect similar underlying workplace challenges, such as reduced concentration and performance.

This study explored how Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and positive early life experiences relate to adult work productivity. The findings provide nuanced insight into how early adversity influences current workplace functioning, particularly through “hidden” productivity losses such as presentism. Each research question is discussed in light of both statistical findings and existing literature.

The results revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between ACEs and presentism ($r = 0.274$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that individuals with higher ACE scores are more likely to experience reduced productivity while physically present at work. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that ACEs are linked to psychological strain, which may impair focus, emotional regulation, and engagement in the workplace (Anda *et al.*, 2004; Rose, Xie & Stineman, 2014). In line with this supports the concept of “silent productivity loss,” where mental presence does not equate to optimal performance.

By contrast, ACEs did not significantly correlate with absenteeism, overall productivity, or activity impairment. This suggests that individuals with a high adversity load may still attend work and maintain average productivity levels, but experience internal struggles that affect quality and engagement, an observation echoed in Mercer & Rose. (2023), who note that ACEs manifest in psychological distress more than in overt dysfunction. The study examined total ACE scores without disaggregating by subtype. Consequently, specific ACE domains such as emotional neglect or household dysfunction could not be

independently assessed. Prior studies (e.g., Larkin, Shields & Anda., 2014) suggest that emotional abuse may impact self-concept, while household dysfunction may relate more directly to absenteeism or chronic health conditions. The absence of subtype analysis in the current dataset is a limitation; however, the results indicate that the cumulative burden of ACEs affects workplace performance, primarily through internal mechanisms like emotional dysregulation and concentration challenges.

Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCE) and Positive Childhood Experiences (PCE) were strongly and negatively correlated with ACEs ($r = -0.615$ and -0.663 , respectively), reinforcing the idea that adversity and protection often exist on opposite ends of the developmental spectrum. Despite this, neither BCE nor PCE showed a direct, statistically significant relationship with productivity measures at the zero-order level.

This does not negate their potential role as moderators or mediators. Prior research has highlighted the buffering effects of PCEs on mental health (Kosterman *et al.*, 2011; Moran, 2019). These experiences may enhance resilience, coping skills, and social functioning, which in turn affect how individuals manage stressors in adult life. While our study did not employ mediation models, the protective role of early positive experiences remains conceptually valid and warrants further investigation using regression or SEM techniques.

Among productivity variables, absenteeism was strongly correlated with overall productivity ($r = 0.773$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that work absence impacts output. Presentism was also strongly associated with activity impairment ($r = 0.904$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting both metrics reflect the same underlying struggle: reduced effectiveness despite physical presence. These results align with findings from Silverberg & Hanks. (2017), where participants post-injury or trauma experienced high levels of presentism despite attending work.

Although not directly measured in the study, constructs such as self-concept (Leonard, Beauvais & Scholl, 1999; Juanamasta, Suryani & Adiputra, 2019) and workplace support systems (Carmeli, 2009; Madden, Mathis & Madden, 2015) are likely mediators. Arif *et al.* (2020) emphasize that a strong professional self-concept enhances engagement and productivity, while Jobe & Holiday (2021) note that psychological vulnerability following trauma increases susceptibility to stress. The significant relationship between ACEs and presentism underscores the need for trauma-informed workplace practices. Organizations should consider screening tools for ACEs during wellness check-ins, along with interventions such as resilience training, mental health support, and flexible work arrangements (Larkin, Shields & Anda., 2014; Mercer & Rose, 2023). Positive early environments, even if not statistically significant here, may lay the groundwork for later coping strategies that mitigate workplace dysfunction.

Additionally, literature highlights the value of strong interpersonal relationships and perceived organizational support in reducing turnover and improving productivity (Fonseca & Azevedo, 2022; Pouw, 2018). Though not measured directly in this study, BCE and PCE may shape adults' capacity to form such relationships, contributing indirectly to workplace success.

Conclusion

This study reinforces that Adverse Childhood Experiences are significantly linked to presentism, a subtle but impactful form of productivity loss. While absenteeism and overall output may remain stable, internal struggles persist in those with high ACE scores. This study is limited by its cross-sectional design, small sample size ($N = 54$), and reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce reporting bias and restrict generalizability. The use of an aggregated ACE score, while suitable for initial analysis, prevents examination of how specific adversities (e.g., abuse, neglect, household dysfunction) uniquely affect work

productivity. Future research should employ larger, more diverse samples and disaggregate ACE data to identify the distinct impacts of different childhood adversities. Advanced statistical techniques, such as mediation and moderation analyses, could clarify how Benevolent and Positive Childhood Experiences interact with adversity. Incorporating objective productivity measures and longitudinal designs would provide stronger causal insights into the long-term occupational effects of early life experiences. Although BCE and PCE did not directly affect productivity outcomes, their inverse relationship with ACEs and role in fostering resilience underscore their theoretical importance. Ultimately, early interventions, organizational support, and trauma-informed strategies are essential to unlocking long-term workforce potential.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: The study strictly followed ethical standards, ensuring participant rights and confidentiality. Objectives, data scope, and risks were explained before obtaining informed consent. Identifiers were removed or encrypted, with data stored securely and accessed only by authorized team members. Findings were reported in aggregate, protecting identities. All presented information is original, maintaining privacy and ethical integrity.

Conflicts of Interest: Not applicable.

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