# WORK AND WELLBEING

Maximising the wellbeing of tomorrow's workforce

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#### Introduction

People spend between 21% and 40% of their waking hours at work, making it an important domain of life to consider when trying to improve wellbeing (Kantak et al., 1992; Thompson, 2016). In addition to its inherent value to workers themselves, wellbeing is key to organisational success (Nielsen et al., 2017), with research showing that happier employees are more productive (Oswald et al., 2015) and less likely to quit (Pelly, 2023). Employee wellbeing is also positively associated with company profitability and stock market performance (De Neve et al., 2023).

Given its value, wellbeing at work is examined across disciplines, including organisational psychology, management, organisational behaviour, behavioural science, and sociology. Although each scientific discipline has a unique take, most definitions see wellbeing at work as a complex, multi-dimensional concept that captures how employees feel and behave at work. Some scholars speak of happiness as a related concept that broadly captures the joy derived from work (Warr, 2007). In this chapter, we take a subjective wellbeing (SWB) approach and consider how people feel about their work (evaluative SWB) and how they feel while working (experiential SWB). We then highlight some of the factors that impact wellbeing at work and discuss existing evidence on wellbeing at work interventions.

The existing literature looks at evaluative aspects of wellbeing – that is how employees feel about their work. Job satisfaction is one of the most studied variables in organisational behaviour and captures how satisfied employees are with their job (van Saane et al., 2003) or how satisfied employees are with different aspects of their job, such as pay, workplace relationships, or task variety (Judge & Church, 2000).

An alternative approach is looking at the experiential aspects of wellbeing – that is how employees feel at work or when they engage in work-related activities.

Unlike evaluative wellbeing, measuring experiential wellbeing at work is more challenging and requires more complex and time-consuming methods, such as naturalistic monitoring approaches that capture how employees feel throughout the day (Taquet et al., 2016).

A closely related concept in the literature on workplace wellbeing is burnout. Burnout is broadly defined as the feeling of being overextended and depleted physiologically, emotionally, and mentally (Maslach & Leiter, 2008); burnout has been linked to cynicism, inefficacy, sickness, and absenteeism (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014; Lin et al., 2019). Notably, burnout is typically conceptualised and measured not as an outcome but as a determinant of evaluative and experiential wellbeing (Maslach et al., 2012).

Interestingly, the evaluative and experiential approaches to wellbeing can co-exist, such as when capturing meaning at work – that is the extent to which employees experience their work to be both significant and purposeful (Steger et al., 2012). From an evaluative perspective, meaning at work is measured as self-reported judgments of overall job meaningfulness (van Saane et al., 2003). From an experiential perspective, meaning at work is measured by asking employees to indicate how meaningful a particular work activity feels (Dolan & White, 2009). Meaning at work has also been studied as both a wellbeing outcome and a driver of relevant organisational outcomes. For example, meaning at work has been associated with greater engagement and lower absenteeism (Soane et al., 2013).

## What is behind wellbeing at work?

The academic literature has produced a wealth of evidence on the positive and negative correlates of wellbeing at work. This research suggests that some of the key factors that determine wellbeing are work—life balance (Hoffmann-Burdzińska & Rutkowska, 2015), working arrangements (Barling et al., 2002), social connection (Inceoglu et al., 2018), and job fit (Lysova et al., 2018). These drivers can be interconnected: for example, more flexible working arrangements can promote or detract from work—life balance (Laine & Rinne, 2015).

Work—life balance is the extent to which people strike a balance between work and non-work responsibilities (Fotiadis et al., 2019). This balance implies space and time for four main areas: self, close ties, distant ties, and career (Hoffmann-Burdzińska & Rutkowska, 2015). Gröpel and Kuhl (2009) show that work—life balance benefits wellbeing because it allows employees to fulfil their personal needs alongside pursuing organisational goals. By contrast, when work—life balance is impaired, employees experience time strain and pressure to multitask (Warren, 2021). A related concept is work—family balance, which captures a specific non-work domain that plays a significant role in work—life balance (Clark, 2000). Employees can experience conflict in both directions: work interfering with family and family interfering with work. Notably, the magnitude and direction of conflict can have unique effects on work-and family-related outcomes (see a meta-analysis by Amstad et al., 2011).

Working arrangements capture diversity in employment relationships, work schedules, and work location and are increasingly recognised as an important driver of employee wellbeing (Spreitzer et al., 2017). For example, increased work location flexibility is associated with higher job satisfaction (Possenriede & Plantenga, 2014). Flexible working arrangements positively impact work-life balance, supporting organisations in attracting and retaining talent (Warren, 2021). Although some evidence suggests that work-family conflict can increase when employees work from home (Antino et al., 2022), work location flexibility is becoming a widespread option instead of an exclusive perk (Smite et al., 2022).

Relationship with one's manager can significantly impact employee wellbeing (Gilbreath & Benson, 2004). Employees experience greater wellbeing when they perceive their supervisor as fair and supportive (Sparr & Sonnentag, 2008). By contrast, work-family conflict increases when employees do not align with their manager's normative expectations of work–family boundaries (Hill et al., 2016).

Social relationships can significantly impact both evaluative and experiential wellbeing (Steger et al., 2012). A dominance of negative social connections at work can lead to the development of toxic environments (Rasool et al., 2021), which impedes wellbeing at work. In contrast, feeling included, accepted, and valued at work drives wellbeing (Huong et al., 2016; Pal et al., 2022; Jaiswal & Dyaram, 2019).

Job fit captures the extent to which an individual is suited for the position in terms of alignment between the job requirements and their knowledge, strengths, skills, needs, and preferences (Slemp et al., 2015). Even when there is low job fit, employees can engage in job crafting – that is a self-initiated, proactive approach that employees use to redefine and reimagine their jobs to match their preferences and skills. Both job fit and job crafting have been linked to greater wellbeing at work (Lysova et al., 2018; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

A parallel body of literature examines the relationship between voluntary work and wellbeing. Correlational evidence indicates that volunteering is positively associated with wellbeing, particularly among older populations (Becchetti et al., 2018), although there is some evidence of possible reverse causality (Stuart et al., 2020). Volunteering can support physical and mental health during retirement (Filges et al., 2020), can help buttress wellbeing during periods of unemployment (Griep et al., 2015), and can positively impact wellbeing during crises (Dolan et al., 2021). However, findings on the link between volunteering and wellbeing among young people are more mixed (Tanskanen & Danielsbacka, 2016).

### Delivering wellbeing at work

With an improved understanding of the benefits and drivers of wellbeing at work, scholars and employers are becoming interested in implementing interventions to promote wellbeing.

To date, most wellbeing-at-work interventions aim to equip employees with resources to address competition demands and workload challenges (Lambert

et al., 2022). These interventions typically focus on mindfulness training, work redesign, health behaviour change, or a mix of these approaches (Daniels et al., 2021). Kudesia et al. (2020) found that mindfulness training decreases employees' mental fatigue resulting from multitasking. A randomised control trial spanning 24 weeks found that mindfulness applications can improve wellbeing among law enforcement participants (Fitzhugh et al., 2023). Similarly, a burnout prevention programme consisting of six monthly three-hour sessions used for education and active participation helped reduce burnout among doctors in oncology wards (Le Blanc et al., 2007). Vuori et al. (2011) developed a more comprehensive training model that included a one-week workshop focusing on educating, social modelling, and role-playing to endorse a variety of career and resilience skills. The authors found that this intervention led to a significant decrease in depressive symptoms right after the study and seven months later.

However, other recent research analysing a range of available organisational interventions such as mindfulness training, resilience training, and wellbeing apps found no evidence that these strategies are effective in improving mental health and wellbeing of employees (Fleming, 2023). The 'so-called' workplace wellbeing paradox captures the disconnect between employers' investment in wellbeing at work and experienced wellbeing, highlighting the need for additional research on when, why, and for whom interventions can meaningfully improve wellbeing at work and across organisations (Cunningham, 2023).

Non-peer-reviewed, practitioner research can offer additional insights into well-being interventions that work. For example, research into the performance and wellbeing of the National Health Service Trusts in England found that practices that support workers, such as opportunities for development and regular encouragement, led to higher staff job satisfaction (Ogbonnaya & Daniels, 2017). Job-related training was found to improve the wellbeing of workers by an equivalent of a 1% hourly wage increase in some areas of the UK (What Works Wellbeing, 2017b). There is also some evidence that team activities, such as workshops and social events, could improve the social aspects of work that are understood to feed into greater wellbeing (What Works Wellbeing, 2017a).

Although the existing literature provides valuable insights on the effectiveness of some wellbeing interventions, it is still in its infancy. Most existing knowledge base on wellbeing at work is intra-organisational and seldomly evaluated with rigorous experimental methods. Companies conduct internal reviews and roll-out interventions, usually led by HR teams or external consultants, with results rarely shared with the broader community. For example, the for-profit company 2DaysMood helps organisations gather experiential workplace wellbeing data through 15-second surveys that employees receive on their mobile phones (Fehrmann, 2022). However, the data behind these partnerships and intra-organisational interventions are not available to third parties due to anonymity and safety requirements.

Yet another problem is that many organisational policies related to wellbeing are rolled out based on management intuition and with limited empirical evidence

of their effectiveness. This prevents any assessment of the successes and failures of these interventions, which could improve our understanding of what promotes or undermines wellbeing at work. Further research and collaboration between organisations and academia (e.g. Fitzhugh et al., 2023) will help develop a stronger knowledge base for creating healthy and inclusive workplaces.

An important success factor for any intervention to achieve the intended improved wellbeing outcome is the continuation of the wellbeing efforts from the organisation post-intervention. Clear governance, strong delivery structures, and continuous learning to supplement interventions such as coaching or workshops can support the intervention implementation but are not themselves sufficient to improve wellbeing (Daniels et al., 2021).

Additionally, many sources of heterogeneity could impact the effectiveness of wellbeing interventions, including gender, age, carer status, socio-economic background, and personality characteristics, yet the evidence is lacking. Further research on the impact of interventions across different types of employees and circumstances is needed to better understand how to create tailored wellbeing interventions that work for all

#### Conclusion

Wellbeing at work is a key driver of societal welfare and performance. It is also an important goal in and of itself and should be part of both public and organisational policy. Although there is a substantial body of evidence pointing to the drivers of evaluative aspects of wellbeing at work (e.g. job satisfaction), more research is needed to understand the experiential aspects of wellbeing at work, in terms of both negative (e.g. stress and burnout) and positive experiences (e.g. meaning and happiness). Future research should differentiate between the drivers of wellbeing at work and wellbeing outcomes and use robust, experimental, and longitudinal designs to test interventions that can yield long-lasting and scalable improvements in wellbeing at work.

#### **Actionable points**

Some of our recommendations around best practices for wellbeing interventions in organisations include the following:

- · Collect evaluative and experiential wellbeing data, as well as objective indicators of wellbeing (e.g. turnover rates, sick days, vacation days), regularly (weekly or at least quarterly) and from everyone in the organisation (employees, leaders, CEOs, etc.). Such a systematic and robust approach can help capture wellbeing trends and discover potential areas for improvement.
- Develop and rigorously test policies that support work-life balance (e.g. limit work-related communication after work hours), flexible working arrangements

- (e.g. shift from inputs-based metrics, such as the number of hours worked, to outputs-based metrics, such as quality of work), social connection (e.g. provide employees with time to connect with others within work hours), and job fit (e.g. empower employees to craft different aspects of their job along their strengths).
- Collaborate with academics to develop research-backed interventions and to rigorously measure their impact on employee wellbeing and beyond.
- Share insights on ongoing organisational initiatives and surveys to consolidate the growing knowledge around wellbeing at work.

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