

Q4 2021

The future of workplace wellbeing

Exploring Happiness Research

Author: Elliot Jones, Editor

IG: @weareexploringhappiness

Twitter: @WeAre_EH

Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many parts of our lives, but it is perhaps our working lives where there have been the biggest changes. Large swathes of office workers flocked to their homes in March 2020, and many continue to work there most of the time. In some cases, this has become a permanent move as business look to cut the costs associated with managing an office space. It is without doubt that these changes will have had a material impact on the wellbeing of those in work. For some these changes bring greater flexibility and lead to an improved work-life balance. While for others these changes have led to increased social anxiety and loneliness. Organisations of all sizes are currently considering what policies to put in place to adapt to this changing working environment. Those organisations that take the wellbeing of their workers into account when doing so are more likely to be successful.

One upside to the pandemic has been that workplace wellbeing has come to the fore. The nature of the changes we have been observing are well summarised by Kelly Greenwood and Julia Anas in a recent [Harvard Business Review article](#): *"Until recently, the conversation has primarily centred on pre-existing mental health conditions and the related stigma. Increasingly, the focus is on work's effect on everyone's mental health."*

This is of course great progress; however, many organisations remain unsure how to best implement new workplace wellbeing strategies. This research article looks to put together recommendations for how to do exactly this. Before that, we review the empirical evidence related to workplace wellbeing. We use this evidence, alongside the broader wellbeing literature, to develop a range of principles for workplace wellbeing. These principles then form the basis of our recommendations in the final section of this paper.

Evidence on workplace wellbeing

Empirical evidence suggests that good working relationships, having interesting work and a good work-life balance are three of the most important factors for workplace wellbeing ([Krekel et al, 2018](#)). Pay is also important and shouldn't be ignored by businesses when considering their wellbeing approach, however for the purposes of this analysis, we assume firms are already paying their workers as much as they are able to afford to. The three factors outlined above are hardly surprising. The challenge comes when management begin to consider how to generate these outcomes for their employees, whilst balancing against the priorities of the business. However, these two factors don't have to be conflicting. It is in businesses best interests to have a happy workforce, as the evidence suggests that happier workers are more productive ([De Neve, 2019](#)). Higher wellbeing at work is also associated with lower staff turnover and higher profitability ([Krekel et al, 2019](#)).

Workplace wellbeing interventions aimed at promoting both the health and wellbeing of staff have been shown to have positive results ([Ammendolia et al, 2019](#)). For example, researchers partnered with a large financial services company to test a health and wellbeing program to reduce presenteeism – which refers to the loss of productivity among workers who are present at work but limited in some aspect of job performance by a health problem. The most common health problem was mental health, with depression and stress the first and second highest cause of productivity loss, respectively. A multi-pronged program with detailed action steps was developed and directed at key stakeholders and health conditions. For mental health, regular sharing focus groups, social networking, monthly personal stories from leadership using webinars and multi-media communications, expert-led workshops, lunch and learn sessions and manager and employee training were all part of a comprehensive program.

Specific strategies were developed and aimed at encouraging healthy behaviours that impact presenteeism such as regular exercise, proper nutrition, adequate sleep, smoking cessation, socialisation, and work-life balance. One of the main limitations of this intervention program was that it included high resource and time requirements.

Although these programs were shown to have positive outcomes in other settings these interventions may not produce the equivalent results. This is because context matters. As businesses look to consider what interventions are appropriate, it is vital to tailor these interventions to the needs of the workforce ([Biron, 2014](#)). Workplace wellbeing surveys are a good starting point for understanding these needs. A key outcome from the literature is that continuity of effort and adaptation of workplace wellbeing policies is critical to their success ([Herrera-Sanchez et al, 2017](#)). In achieving this, businesses with learning structures and good governance are best placed to facilitate these adaptations ([Daniels et al, 2021](#)). In addition, the position that senior managers take in responding to wellbeing interventions put in place is key to how junior staff perceive the intervention ([Passey et al, 2018](#)).

Principles for workplace wellbeing strategies

From this evidence we identify three key principles that should form the building blocks of any workplace wellbeing strategy:

- **Preferences matter:** There are no silver bullets when it comes to workplace wellbeing interventions. Different groups of people have different preferences, and these will also change over time either through staff turnover or as existing staff move through their lives. An ideal wellbeing intervention for a new graduate is likely to be very different to a senior manager. Different industries will also likely have different preferences too.

- As noted above, the best way to capture these is through asking staff directly – either face-to-face or through written surveys. These surveys should be quick and simple to ensure you capture as much of the workforce as possible. Their focus should be towards capturing the differences across the workforce to best understand how to tailor interventions for this group.
- **Optionality matters:** For a young workforce of professionals, it may be that their preferences for a wellbeing intervention centre around more time for socialising with other colleagues. This could mean finishing earlier on Fridays to go play mini golf. Alternatively, for a group of workers with young children, their preferences might be more focussed towards greater flexibility of when they spend their hours working. This could mean leaving the office early to pick up the kids from school. Both interventions will likely lead to significant wellbeing benefits for large groups of these respective workforces. However, even if a group has a broad preference set that would be different to another group, this doesn't mean that everyone in that workforce has the same preferences. This is why optionality with these policies matters a lot. For the group of young professionals, it should be made clear to staff that not everyone in the workforce should feel obliged to attend the Friday social gathering, nor will it impact how they are perceived at work. This is a good illustration of how a wellbeing intervention can create further workplace issues despite carrying several benefits for the broader workforce.
- **Adaptation:** Given that wellbeing interventions can lead to unintended negative outcomes for some staff it is important for employers to continually reassess the impact of an intervention and the level overall staff wellbeing. It is unlikely that employers will get it perfectly right first time and even if they do, since preferences can change, they still might need to make changes in the future. Putting in place good structures to allow for genuine reflections on how interventions are going is paramount to capture accurate information about employee wellbeing. This relates to a broader topic of developing the right culture within a business.

Recommendations

- **Staff surveys:** Wellbeing interventions cannot be put together effectively without understanding the issues and pressures that they are looking to alleviate. These surveys can be structured in many ways but at the very least they should be looking to capture both the level of wellbeing across the workforce and employee's preferences towards certain interventions. This doesn't necessarily mean asking employees directly "would you like X or Y policy to be put in place?". But instead asking questions like "what impact would more of X have on your wellbeing?". This structure is more beneficial when looking to get to the crux of the issues.
- **Leading by example:** The culture of a business is an important leading indicator for whether a business will be able to successfully implement wellbeing interventions. Culture is generated from good leadership, and this means making sure that managers and leaders within a business are supportive of wellbeing interventions. In addition, leaders that share personal stories related to their wellbeing with employees are more likely to create a culture where employee wellbeing thrives. This is because by leading by example means that other staff are then more likely to feel empowered to share their own wellbeing stories, helping to solve issues such as presenteeism quicker.
- **Education:** Providing sessions that allow employees to learn about how best to manage their wellbeing can have significant benefits. This provides employees with information to solve issues earlier and quicker than otherwise. It can also help to develop a healthy culture within the business.
- **Safety nets:** Regardless of preferences, industries, or the overall level of wellbeing within a workforce, all businesses need to put in place safety nets to support their staff. Wellbeing policies can only do so much and there will undoubtedly remain a portion of the

-
- workforce that need additional support. Providing employees with access to professional mental health support will again allow for issues to be solved quicker and earlier than otherwise. Knowing this support is available will lead to lower staff turnover as fewer staff would be burnt out and they would have greater loyalty to the business since the employer shows that it cares about their employees.