

The Future of Work is Prioritizing Employee Wellbeing

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Abstract

To set organizations up for success and create thriving and enduring institutions, it's time to change the way managers approach employee wellbeing. Workforce wellbeing must be the first priority. It's a key element to achieve sustainability and business development. In this paper, we are interested in understanding and examining the role of employee wellbeing and why human resources leaders must prioritize and optimize the wellbeing of their workforces. This theoretical review summarizes various studies conducted by different researchers on the importance of the physical, emotional, mental and psychological employee wellbeing. Based on these research findings, we identified the role of well-being in achieving a successful future of work and fostering a sustainable future workplace. The article has two sections. The first section highlights the role and the importance of employee wellbeing for the future of work. And the second section provides recommendations for the improvement and the optimization of employee well-being.

Keywords: Wellbeing, Employee, Future, Work, Sustainability

Introduction

Currently, the business world is facing a deep mutation and many changes and realities, with significant consequences on working conditions and on company's growth and performance. In this destabilizing context, managers are obliged to change their managerial methods in order to accompany the current changes and maintain a good working life quality. Now, more than ever, managers and decision-makers should develop a management style that improves both, the quality of life at work and the company's performance outcomes, for a better future of work. In this paper, we introduce workforce wellbeing as a tool to attain good work environment and to create thriving and enduring institutions. Based on previous research finding, we discuss the importance of wellbeing in the workplace and its impact on the employees and the company, and how low level of wellbeing can conduct to failure and losses. Before diving into the goals of this paper and discussing the importance of employee wellbeing and its impact, it's crucial to first establish a clear understanding of what we mean by the term 'wellbeing'.

Conceptually, wellbeing is a broad and “*difficult construct to define, and even more difficult to*

measure” (Thomas,2009). Wellbeing is not only about the absence of any kind of sickness or pain. Rather, it is a complex amalgam of several different and interrelated components.

The concept of wellbeing is frequently mistaken or confused with other related terms, such as happiness, health, life satisfaction, pleasure, and fulfillment. These notions are commonly used as strict synonyms of wellbeing without understanding their conceptual significations. Obviously, these concepts can be considered as belonging to the lexical field of the word “wellbeing”, but conceptually they are not identical or similar.

Wellbeing is a multifaceted concept and can be studied from several different angles (Juchnowicz and Kinowska,2021). And this explains the significant variation in the interpretations and meanings attached to the notion of wellbeing (Danna and Griffin, 1999).

Numerous definitions have been developed, by a number of researchers, scholars and international organizations, in order to answer the question of “what general wellbeing is?”. Below are some definitions related to notion of wellbeing.

The constitution of the world health organization - which became effective on April 7, 1948 - relates health to wellbeing, and defines health as “*a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity*” (WHO, 1948). Based on the WHO conceptualization, a person cannot be considered truly healthy until he or she has achieved a total wellbeing (C. McDonald,2005). However, the concept of wellbeing in the WHO official definition is not completely defined and remains unclear.

The notion wellbeing in the French language means “*a pleasant state resulting from the satisfaction of the needs of the body and the calm of the mind*” and also refers to “*material comfort allowing a pleasant life*” (Larousse dictionary). Therefore, wellbeing is a combination of three dimensions: the physical, the mental and the material (Perron et al., 2021).

The Cambridge dictionary uses a summarized and simplified description to define the term of wellbeing: “*the state of feeling healthy and happy*” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). According to this conceptualization, an individual who isn't in good health is not necessarily considered “not wellbeing”. Their state of wellbeing can be evaluated according to how they feel about themselves (Simons and Baldwin, 2021) and their own lives. And this is obvious, because what someone considers the perfect state of wellbeing, can be entirely different from someone else's. Szalai and Andres define wellbeing as follow: “*a composite measure of how good an individual feels at the physical, mental and social level*” (Szalai and Andres, 1981).

Waddell and Burton note that wellbeing is a “*subjective state of being healthy, happy, contented, comfortable, and satisfied with one's life*” (Waddell and Burton, 2006).

According to positive psychology, there are two prominent perspectives to conceptualize wellbeing, namely: the hedonic wellbeing and the eudemonic wellbeing (Vallerand and Bragoli-Barzan, 2019). The hedonic approach defines wellbeing as a combination of pleasure achievement, life satisfaction, and pain avoidance (Ryan et al.,2001). According to hedonism, we can attain wellbeing by increasing pleasure and decreasing pain or displeasure. On the other hand, eudaimonism is based on the premise that wellbeing is achieved through personal growth, and self- realization and actualization. These two approaches are complementary and influence each other.

In the world of work, the notion of wellbeing has diverse senses across organizations and

nations. This variety may be due to the differences in social values, attitudes, or regulatory systems (Kate Field, n.d.). Below are some brief explanations about what is wellbeing at work. According to the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health “*wellbeing at work means that work is safe, healthy, and pleasant*” (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, n.d.).

The International labor organization claims that: “*workplace wellbeing relates to all aspects of working life, from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how workers feel about their work, their working environment, the climate at work and work organization.*” (ILO, n.d.).

The Belgian law defines workplace wellbeing as follows: “*all the factors concerning the conditions under which work is done, namely: safety at work, employee’s health, the psycho-social workload, workplace hygiene*” (Belgian Law, 1996).

The Institute of Occupational Health in Finland suggests another definition “*workplace wellbeing means safe, healthy, and productive work in a well-led organization by competent workers and work communities who find their job meaningful and rewarding and see work as a factor that supports their life management.*” (Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, 2011).

Wellbeing in the workplace is therefore referring to how workforces feel about themselves and their workplace environment. It’s strongly linked to many different factors, that may affect the quality of life at work and the overall health, safety, and pleasure of employees.

The variety of definitions cited above - among many others conceptualizations- highlights the complexity of the concept of wellbeing. However, we can state that, this multidisciplinary and multidimensional construct is a complicated combination of all factors that may impact person's own life.

Investing in wellbeing for a better future of work

Does employee wellbeing matters? Why workplace wellbeing must be a clear priority and a major focus for human resources managers? The future of work is through employee wellbeing? To answer these interrogations, the present section attempts to provide an overview of the existing researches dealing with the importance and the impacts of wellbeing in the workplace.

Several research studies have shown the increasing importance of workplace wellbeing phenomenon, its impact, and its consequences both for workers and organizations. A plethora of scholars and researchers have recognized that employee wellbeing leads to success and various positive outcomes (Turban and Yan, 2016; Bakker et al., 2019) such as performance and productivity (Hewett et al., 2018).

Establishments that invest in the wellbeing of its workforce aim to reduce job pressures, and to build a more comfortable and favorable working environment. Building a workplace focused on wellbeing creates a positive environment and high-performing workers with good attendance and engagement, and low levels of burnout (PADHI,2020) and sickness absence (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2008). Investing in workplace wellbeing doesn’t just reap benefits for workers, but it’s also beneficial for business.

Improving employee’s happiness, that is considered as a facet of psychological wellbeing (Cropanzano, 2001; Padhi,2020), builds a highly optimistic and confident workforce with great

capacities of decision making (Cropanzano, 2001). Furthermore, Sanjukta Padhi's (2020) literature review highlighted other positive outcomes of the psychological wellbeing on employee's health and work, and indicated that workers with high level of wellbeing perform better, and even excel at their job. They have a satisfactory relationship with their colleagues, and they cope better with stress, and job pressures.

On the other hand, the "happy-productive worker" theory (HPWT) emphasizes the crucial importance of the psychological wellbeing, and clarifies the relationship between the happiness and the productivity. The HPWT states that employee wellbeing is a positive key factor to attain great levels of employee and firm productivity (Isham et al., 2021), and assumes that "*happy workers perform better than 'less happy' ones*" (J. Peiró and al., 2019).

In their meta-analysis, Krekel et al. (2019) studied the positive relation between wellbeing, labor productivity and company's performance, and they revealed that higher levels of wellbeing are strongly associated with creativity, effectiveness and task performance. In addition, they showed that wellbeing at the workplace ameliorates business performance outcomes, such as customer loyalty, company's profitability and growth, and turnover rate (Krekel et al., 2019).

Besides, Poor workplace wellbeing affects, in negative ways, workers and organizations. According to health and safety statistics that go back to 2021, 1.7 million employees in Great Britain are experiencing work-related illness, nearly 50% of them are suffering from stress, anxiety and depression, while 28% are suffering from musculoskeletal disorders (HSE, 2021). Lack of support, workload, bullying and violence were supposed to be the principal causes of work-related ill-health (HSE, 2021). Suffering from poor wellbeing generates serious consequences as low quality of decision-making and decreased productivity (Price, & Hooijberg, 1992) and might produce negative long-term health effects.

Low levels of wellbeing at work leads to several damaging effects on employee's health (Salvagioni et al., 2017) such as stress, anxiety or negative emotions. The damage doesn't stop there. Stress – for example - not only affects a person's mood and minds, but can also trigger fatigue, bowel problems, headaches and sleep disorder (Premier Health, 2018) and can increase the risk of cardio-vascular conditions and blood pressure elevation (Eddy et al., 2017).

Experiencing low mental or psychological wellbeing impairs creativity (Demerouti et al., 2001; Van Dyne et al., 2002), contributes to productivity loss (Hemp, 2004; Alonso et al., 2011; Bubonya et al., 2017; Isham et al., 2020; Isham et al., 2021), leads to economic losses (Trautmann et al., 2016; Dierendonck et sousa, 2016; Whiteford, 2021) and absenteeism (Shanjabin S. and al., 2021; M.H. Marilyn, 2010), and increases staff turnover (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2021).

Facing low Financial Wellbeing (e.g., low salary, delayed payment, instable income) can also negatively impact staff's mental and physical wellbeing. In clearer form, financial insecurity at workplace can lead to stress, headaches, insomnia and depression (Rath and Harter, 2010) which is susceptible to affect employee's overall wellbeing and productivity. Furthermore, low level of wellbeing is highly costly for the company. Based on the United States experience, work-related stress results in a loss of more than 300\$ billion yearly to industries (American institute of stress, 2019). It causes 120.000 cases of death, and costs US almost 190\$ billion

per year in healthcare expenditures (Goh, J. et al., 2015). An ancient study revealed that job-related ill-health costs the United States of America much more than AIDS or Alzheimer's disease and at least the same as cancer and cardiovascular disease (cf. Coleman, 1997; cited by Karen D. and Al.,1999).

Research also reveals the strong association between low levels of physical wellbeing and decreased productivity (Isham et al., 2020). Poor physical comfort and inadequate conditions in the workplace may lead to dissatisfaction and can limit employee's ability to perform effectively (Herman miller, 2008). Workers who are not physically comfortable with lighting, noise, temperature or any kind of working conditions, are more likely to report that these circumstances impact their work productivity (Leaman, 1995).

Building upon previous arguments, it seems rational to conclude that, employee's wellbeing matters. It's a key factor to create a sustainable high performance / productivity and a better future work place. Thus, companies must adopt this win/win approach and make from wellbeing a powerful lever to ameliorate their business performance outcomes and their workers' satisfaction. Wellbeing, with its ability to generate performance and to improve company's economic results, must become a first priority for human resources managers.

Managers and decisions makers must sustain higher levels of wellbeing at work, in order to avoid the risk of psychological or physical illness, demotivation, and productivity loss, and to guarantee a sustainable long-term work performance and a favorable work climate. Working without satisfaction and high good moods affect, in negative ways, both employee's efficacy and firm's productivity. Therefore, we can say that, a sustainable and a successful company requires a sustainable and a positive wellbeing.

Because "*Company's health is health in the company*" (Chaib, 2016), managers need to develop a strong management style based on wellbeing. When wellbeing is neglected, psychosocial risks arise, happiness and creativity reduce, and performance decreases, which affect company's sustainability. Prioritizing wellbeing practices in the workplace is, therefore, a necessity to ensure company's success and sustainability.

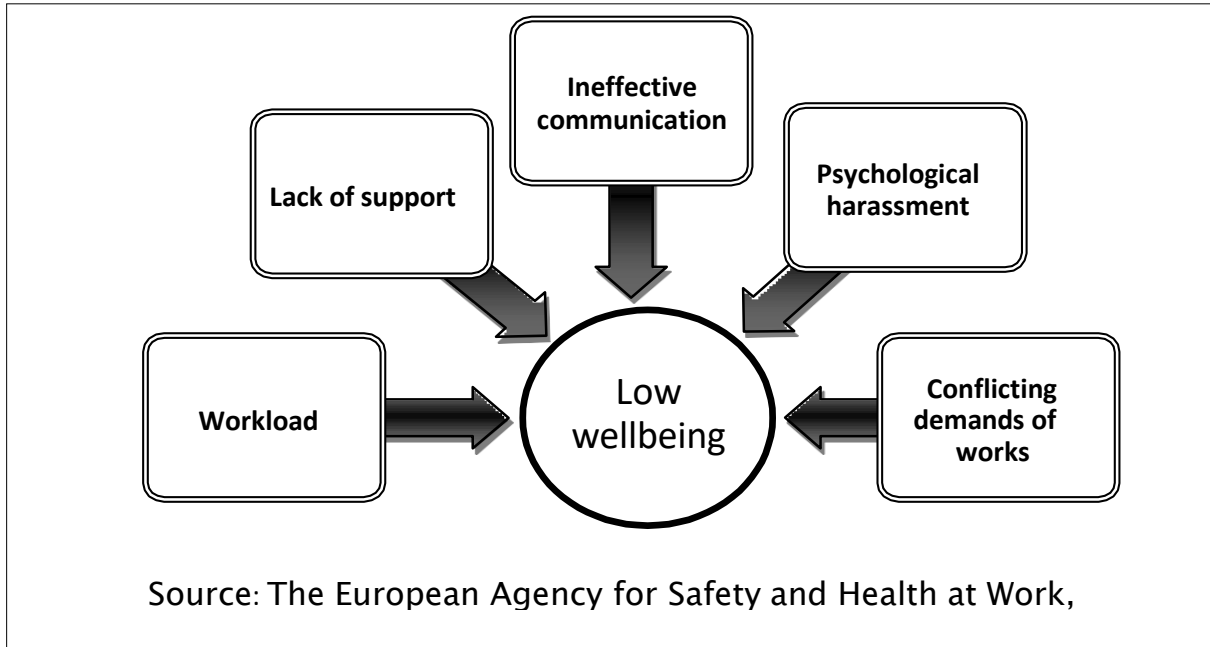
The question that arises now is "what practices to put in place to improve wellbeing at work?". Below, we will expose some suggestions to improve wellbeing and to create a sustainable, comfortable and performing workplace for a better future of work.

Basic recommendations to improve employee wellbeing

As mentioned above, employee wellbeing is the cornerstone of company's global success, growth and sustainability. And to attain these performance outcomes, employee wellbeing must be the company's primary concern.

Ill-being at work can lead to many serious risks, affecting both the employees and the overall business. That is why, human resources managers must focus their efforts on improving their policy and practices of wellbeing.

Before deciding on a wellbeing policy, managers must identify the sources of ill-being at work. The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work presents a variety of factors strongly linked to psychosocial risks and low levels of wellbeing at work. Below is a diagram summarizing some factors.



Title: The factors linked low levels of wellbeing at work

Understanding the source of the ill-being is crucial to decide on the appropriate practices to adopt. If decision-makers succeed in identifying the causes, it will be easier to find solutions and to put an end to this state of ill-being at work.

Once the causes are recognized, then suitable measures should be quickly taken to avoid major losses. In the following lines, we will present some basic practices to maintain a good levels of wellbeing in the workplace.

- ✓ For healthy and happy staff, the work environment must be clean, comfortable and suitably equipped. A modern colorful workspace with adequate lighting and temperature could boost employee's job satisfaction and overall wellbeing, thereby increasing productivity. Such investment in the workplace will creates favorable conditions with beneficial outcomes for both workers and company.
- ✓ Employees spend approximately one third of their time at work (Blok et al., 2015), so ensuring that work stations are adequately set up and equipment (e.g., desk, chair, keyboard, computer) is comfortable and conform to health and safety norms, can maintain physical wellbeing and minimize the risk of musculoskeletal disorders such as back and neck pain.
- ✓ Organizing monthly team meetings to identify employee's needs is essential to enhance support and to reinforce interpersonal relationships between the employer and employees.
- ✓ Creating relaxation and rest areas are considered very effective for taking breaks in the

middle of the workday, and to relax and reduce fatigue and stress, so keeping them comfortable is a highly important.

- ✓ Organizing team-building activities and learning workshops is a source of recognition and motivation. It can enhance social relationships and cooperation between teams, reduce isolation and professional conflicts, boost knowledge, and develop skills.
- ✓ Having an occupational health specialist in the workplace is essential to follow-up employee's psychological, mental and physical health and to prevent accidents and work-related risks.
- ✓ Organizing coaching and personal development sessions for employees is a great solution to improve wellbeing at work. This type of non-monetary recognition can improve self-confidence, manage stress and bad moods, and overcome work pressures. These recommended practices are only a few examples among many others. Each organization must adopt practices adapted to its situation, and to the risks faced, in order to maintain employee's wellbeing, and to ensure the company's sustainability for a better future of work.

Conclusion

Through this theoretical research, we explored the complexity of the notion of "well-being", its importance and its impact on both employees and organizations, to come to a conclusion that, company's sustainability and success is strongly linked to employee wellbeing. Investing in wellbeing is highly beneficial for an organization and its employees. On the employee's side, wellbeing is a lever of satisfaction, efficiency, motivation and productivity. And on the company's side, wellbeing is a way to improve the overall performance and to avoid losses. Prioritizing wellbeing is a must, to reduce job pressures and maintain a positive work climate for a sustainable growth and a better future of work.

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