



Division of
Occupational Psychology

Applying the science of psychology to work



The
British
Psychological
Society

Working Group on Health and Well-being in the Workplace

White Paper – Psychological well-being at work

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Introduction

This White Paper is intended to provide a succinct and up-to-date perspective on the role of psychological well-being at work, including an indication of the costs/benefits of psychological well-being and guidance on how to improve psychological well-being at work.

Improving the psychological well-being of a workforce brings benefits for both the individual employees and the organisation as a whole. Psychological well-being is a core aspect of overall well-being and is linked to physical health, longer lives and greater happiness for individual employees. For organisations, the business case for investing in psychological well-being is strong and demonstrates improved outcomes for organisations, including lower levels of sickness absence and improved work performance.

Reducing the level of psycho-social risk in workplaces and controlling work-related stress is important but taking a risk reduction approach to psychological well-being does not maximise the benefits to an organisation or its employees. A positive approach to psychological well-being involves the pro-active development of positive well-being, not just controlling risk. It also involves focusing on the whole workforce, not just those already experiencing problems. The core message of this White Paper is that psychological well-being makes a difference – to work, working lives and the success of organisations.

Part 1 – Background

The importance of psychological well-being at work has grown over the last two or three decades as there has been a shift from physical to psychological sources of pressure at work. Nurturing positive psychological well-being is not at odds with challenging, demanding work. In many ways, pressure at work is psychologically healthy. It provides people with an opportunity to experience a sense of challenge and achievement, both of which are important for high levels of psychological well-being. However, when pressures become too difficult or numerous to cope with, psychological well-being is damaged, rather than enhanced. Research evidence on the role of work and psychological well-being has produced several important findings which are summarised in the bullet points below.

- There are relationships between the levels of psychological well-being in a workforce and business outcomes for the organisation, such as productivity and sickness absence (e.g. Harter et al., 2003, Wright, 2009).
- Work is important and beneficial to people: access to, and retention of, work improves the overall health of the population. Good work offers opportunities to promote individual health and well-being (Waddell & Burton, 2006). Work can have a positive impact on health and psychological well-being ('good jobs' in well managed organisations, e.g. Coats & Lehki, 2008).
- Under some circumstances, for example, when it is badly designed or managed, work may have adverse effects on psychological well-being.
- Knowledge of the workplace factors (primarily related to work demands, support, control/autonomy and change) that affect psychological well-being is well developed (HSE, 2005, Foresight, 2009) and in many ways ensuring that these are positive is the key to high levels of psychological well-being.

Recent and ongoing research, particularly in the area of positive psychology provides an increasing evidence base and a pool of material to draw on.

Part 2 – The business case

The current economic situation in the UK means that everyone in the workplace is likely to experience a challenging period. Pressures on psychological well-being may arise because of job insecurity, uncertainties over budgets and financial circumstances, the need to work in a setting with limited resources, shortages of personnel due to financial constraints and many other reasons. With this background the need for resilience and the importance of positive psychological well-being is clear, especially given the established importance of psychological well-being for individual health and organisational success.

Costs of poor psychological well-being

- Ill-health within the working age population costs the UK £100 billion a year, with mental ill health alone costing employers £28 billion (NICE, 2009).
- The average employee absence is 7.4 days per year, costing £692 per employee per year. After musculo-skeletal problems, psychological problems are the primary cause of sickness absence (CIPD, 2009). Those suffering from work-related stress take, on average, 22.6 days off work per year (HSE, 2010).
- Long-term sickness absence is a strong predictor of disability and mortality. Being out of work, through unemployment or ill-health, is linked to lower well-being and the longer someone is absent from the workplace due to ill-health, the less likely they are to return (CIPD, 2009).
- Costs associated with ‘presenteeism’ – when employees attend work when ill – could be greater than those of absence, with mental health presenteeism estimated to cost the economy up to £15 billion per year (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, 2007).
- NICE estimates that effective management of mental health in an organisation with 100 employees could save £250,000 per year (NICE, 2009).

Legal and ethical considerations of workplace psychological well-being

- Employers have a legal responsibility to protect the health of their employees – this includes both physical and mental health. This is set out mainly in health and safety legislation and breach can lead to prosecution or enforcement action.
- Employees whose well-being has suffered for work-related reasons also have redress in the civil courts through legal routes, including personal injury, protection from harassment, equality and employment law cases.
- Many would consider it a moral duty on employers to prevent harm and improve the health of their workforce. It is increasingly being recognised as part of the Corporate Social Responsibility agenda to take action on employee health and well-being.

The Information sheets on health and well-being in the workplace provide further details on legal and ethical issues*.

* www.bps.org.uk/dop/psychologists/dop-structure/working-groups/health-well-being-working-group.cfm.

Part 3 – Taking action

Much can be done to improve and sustain psychological well-being at work and there are many possible approaches that may be taken. Historically, employer action in this domain has focused on supporting individuals to cope better or to return to health/work when they have suffered a health problem. While these interventions are undoubtedly important, they do not change the working environment (create ‘good work’/remove ‘bad work’) and are largely focused at reducing the ill-health of a subgroup within the workforce, rather than improving the psychological well-being of everyone in the organisation. Reviews carried out for the Foresight project, the NICE guidance and other reports have concluded that evidence supports interventions at three main levels: work context; work content and individual development:

Work context	Management style, organisational justice, workplace support, participation, communication
Work content	Key workplace factors such as: Job demands; control/autonomy, flexible working schedules, job stability
Individual	Training in resilience, stress management and psychological flexibility

For employers, one obvious benefit of enhancing well-being in the workplace is that it is likely to lead to enhanced performance and productivity (and perhaps in turn profitability) by having employees who feel psychologically healthy and full of energy at work.

There is no single approach that should be adopted to improve psychological well-being in an organisation but the following provides an indication of the key aspects involved.

1. It is clear from research and Government-sponsored reports that management and leadership exert a major influence on the psychological well-being of people in an organisation. With this in mind it is clear that the top level leadership of an organisation needs to understand the business case for improved psychological well-being and provide their support and commitment. Managers and supervisors at all levels also need to have the skills and competencies to manage effectively for both well-being and performance – rather than taking an approach that prioritises one or the other.

“Management and leadership exert a major influence”

2. Assessing current levels of psychological well-being across the organisation is a prerequisite, before deciding on specific interventions. There are many ways of gaining a clear picture of levels of psychological well-being across an organisation, including the use of an organisation-wide survey and focus groups. The Foresight project conducted economic analysis and concluded that when organisations used a well-being survey, even without follow-up they obtained some return on the investment (ROI) – when they did take follow-up action the ROI was substantial.

“Assess psychological well-being before deciding on interventions”

3. Before investing in any programme for positive psychological well-being it is useful to be clear about the benefits that are expected (e.g. reduced sickness-absence, better performance). This enables the impact of any interventions to be evaluated. It also provides a clear business case for the activities, ensuring that well-being is not simply seen as an employee benefit, providing no direct pay-off for the organisation. If the intervention is to be properly evaluated it is also important to identify practical and valid measurement metrics for the anticipated benefits, so that baseline and post-intervention assessments can be made.

“Be clear about the benefits expected”

4. Once the current position is clear and goals have been clarified an action plan can be developed. In broad terms the actions that can be taken to enhance psychological well-being may be grouped into three overall categories: primary; secondary and tertiary. Primary level interventions seek to tackle the primary drivers of psychological well-being, for example, poorly designed work, ineffective appraisals and development processes, inadequate internal work flow or unsuitable working schedules. Although primary interventions can be very effective they are often difficult to introduce because they may require changes to core organisational processes.

Secondary and tertiary interventions are progressively further removed from tackling the underlying organisational factors and seek either to reduce the impact of negative workplace factors or to provide support, enabling people to cope more effectively or helping people already affected to recover. Solutions such as counselling services, stress management training, resilience training and background physical health initiatives, such as walking clubs or subsidised gym membership are all examples of secondary/tertiary level interventions. Secondary and tertiary interventions can be extremely effective and are often seen as more practical and realistic, although, of course, they do not necessarily change the primary drivers of psychological well-being for the better.

“Develop an action plan”

5. Throughout any well-being programme it is important to ensure effective and thorough communication, consultation and participation across the organisation. It is also important to ensure that right from the early stages appropriate expertise is available – to assess and understand current levels of psychological well-being and to design and implement suitable interventions. Often the implementation of action plans to enhance well-being involves collaboration across various functional areas of an organisation, for example, occupational health, human resources and health and safety.

Occupational psychologists have particular strengths in the area of psychological well-being and their scientific training coupled with a practical orientation makes them well-suited to supporting organisations wishing to realise the benefits that high levels of psychological well-being can bring. Expertise in occupational psychology may be available within the organisation or it may make sense to bring in external support and expertise in this area.

**“Communicate, consult and enable people
to participate”**

Part 4 – The role of occupational psychologists in improving workplace psychological well-being

Occupational psychologists specialise in bringing their understanding of psychology to bear on issues that relate to the well-being and performance of people in organisations. Thus, occupational psychologists are uniquely positioned to contribute to programmes designed to enhance psychological well-being at work. Some indication of the ways in which occupational psychologists can help to improve psychological well-being in the workplace are given below.

Design and delivery of interventions

- Designing psychologically healthy, productive and rewarding work environments.
- Measuring levels of psychological well-being and assessing the workplace drivers that influence them.
- Advising on issues related to the psychology of managing change in the workplace, so that change can occur effectively.
- Designing and delivering training that helps to build people’s resilience and ability to cope with demanding work.
- Helping organisations achieve a good fit between person and job through effective assessment, selection and development.

Support for management and leadership

- Explaining the business case and helping to develop organisational cultures in which leadership and management recognise the business contribution of health and well-being.
- Helping managers develop management styles that balance the focus on effective performance delivery and psychological well-being to ensure sustainable levels of high performance.
- Providing support and advice to managers and colleagues when an individual has been off work due to ill-health or diagnosed with a disability or health condition and is returning to work.
- Helping managers effectively and sensitively to address issues such as absenteeism and presenteeism and stress-related illness.
- Resolving conflict and supporting people and organisations under pressure, perhaps through team building or management support.

Support for individuals

- Helping people perform at their best.
- Coaching individuals through challenging times, whether the source of the pressure be from work or external to the job
- Providing rehabilitation and return to work advice and support, especially when individuals return to work on a phased basis (e.g. initially part-time or carrying out restricted duties).

Conclusion

Within the broader context of the overall health and well-being of the nation, people's psychological well-being at work is of critical importance. Developing positive psychological well-being at work is an issue for the whole workforce and for all employers. Improving the psychological well-being of people at work will pay dividends for individuals, in terms of longer happier lives, and for employers, in terms of beneficial business outcomes.

The development and maintenance of positive psychological well-being is the responsibility of many people, including specialists in occupational health, human resources and health and safety, the leaders and managers of organisations and individual employees themselves. Occupational psychologists have unique expertise and capability to contribute.

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