

What is psychological well-being and how it changes throughout the employment cycle?

“If you have health, you probably will be happy, and if you have health and happiness, you have all the wealth you need, even if it is not all you want.” (Elbert Hubbard)

Psychological well-being at work

Nowadays, there is much evidence about the importance of psychological well-being in the workplace. Research has demonstrated consistently that employee’s well-being is positively associated with physical health and is a strong predictor of high individual work performance as well as of some outcomes at organisational level (e.g. customer satisfaction, productivity, profitability and employee turnover). Overall, it is known that employees with high levels of psychological well-being perform better at work than those with lower levels of psychological well-being. However, researchers do not always agree on what exactly well-being means and how it can be measured.

There are at least two broad approaches, which originate from positive psychology, to measuring the impact of well-being. The first one (also known as “hedonic”) is mostly about being happy or “feeling good”, i.e. explains well-being in terms of experiencing positive feelings (affects and emotions). A typical example of this interpretation is the exploration of job satisfaction and affects at work. The second approach (also referred to as “eudaimonic”) emphasises the importance of having a purpose in well-being. In other words, it assumes that people cannot truly enjoy their life (and work), unless they are able to achieve important life/work goals. For instance, a person would probably not be pleased with a job which (s)he finds pointless.

Based on these two approaches, the most recent definition of psychological well-being at work incorporate both the degree to which employees experience positive emotions and the extent to which they experience meaning and purpose in their work. Thus, psychological well-being can have various aspects, some of which framed specifically within a work context (e.g. positive feelings at work, job satisfaction, experience of vitality and sense of development at work) and others, having a much broader meaning (e.g. overall personal growth, positive relations with others, self-acceptance, autonomy).

Age-related changes in psychological well-being

Individuals' emotions and overall experiences of psychological well-being tend to change with age and over the employment cycle. For instance, a large-scale study by Birdi, Warr and Oswald (1995) with employees aged between 18 and 64 years in 9 countries revealed that employees' overall job satisfaction was higher for both younger (up to the age of about 26 years) and older (aged 50-55 years and over) workers, compared with middle-aged workers. In addition, the group of middle-aged workers reported more negative feelings, associated with job stress, than the groups of younger and older workers.

There could be a number of factors, accountable for these results. In general, it is possible that younger (compared with middle-aged and older) workers have lower expectations and standards of comparison in terms of how they view their jobs and thus, report more positive feelings. Also, it is possible that with increasing age and experience (e.g. after the age of about 50 years or at the stage of late career) many employees become more influential, move into more desirable jobs and, therefore express more positive feelings. The lower levels of job satisfaction, coupled with higher levels of job stress for the middle-aged group of workers, could be partly explained with the increased job and overall life pressures (e.g. the necessity to juggle between complex work responsibilities and family commitments).

However, it was assumed that beyond the effects of the contextual/external factors, the observed group differences in job satisfaction were highly attributed to age-related changes in workers' motivation. More specifically, along with systematic age-related changes in individuals' physical state, cognitive capacity (i.e. fluid intelligence), personality, knowledge and experience (i.e. crystallised intelligence), there is an age-related shift in employees' motivation. The value of extrinsic factors, such as promotion and financial rewards, seems to be (on average) higher for workers at the earlier career stages than for late career workers, while the value of intrinsic factors (e.g. interesting and meaningful jobs, opportunities to develop good work relationships and to contribute to the societal good) increases with age and may become particularly important in late career. Consequently, these changes in employees' motivation lead to changes in their experiences of job satisfaction. Thus, for example late career workers would be likely to experience high job satisfaction even if they don't get promoted, but find their job interesting and meaningful, while this may not be the case for workers at earlier career stages.

Carol Ryff and her colleagues (1995) argued that to be well psychologically well is more than just to be free of distress and mental problems and proposed a complex 6-dimensional model of psychological well-being. The first component, *autonomy*, is the ability to resist social pressures and to make and pursue one's own decisions. *Purpose in life* (the second dimension) is the belief that one's life is purposeful and meaningful. The third element of well-being is *positive relationships* and is about the ability to have warm, satisfying and trusting relationships with others. *Personal growth* (dimension four) refers to the individual's sense of continued growth and development as a person as well as openness to new experiences. The fifth component, *environmental mastery*, is associated with the capacity to effectively manage one's life and the surrounding world, while the sixth element, *self-acceptance*, is about being able to have a positive evaluation of oneself and one's past life.

People with overall high scores on these 6 components are considered as having high psychological well-being. Moreover, a person may have higher scores on some (compared with others) dimensions of psychological well-being.

The six dimensions of well-being have been explored internationally in a number of studies and have been found to vary with age, gender and national culture. For instance, two independent studies with young, middle-aged and old-aged adults in the USA revealed significant age-differences in well-being profiles. *Environmental mastery* and *autonomy* were reported as increasing with age, particularly from young adulthood to midlife. In contrast, *personal growth* and *purpose in life* were found to decrease with age, particularly from midlife to old age. However, *positive relations with others* and *self-acceptance* did not seem to vary with age. One possible interpretation of these age-related patterns would be the presence of important psychological challenges at the different life stages. For example, older people may have less access to opportunities for continued growth and development, which may explain their experiences of less personal growth compared with younger people.

Managing psychological well-being throughout the employment cycle

The examples discussed in the previous section demonstrate that among other factors (e.g. work characteristics, work-life balance, gender, personality and national culture), age-related intra-individual changes contribute to the changes in employees' psychological well-being. Therefore, pursuing age-diverse management strategies by particularly taking into account age-differences in psychological well-being may contribute to the effectiveness of occupational well-being interventions in organisations.

One way to deal successfully with workers' well-being throughout the whole employment cycle is to consider age differences when designing jobs. Recent research has demonstrated

that certain job design characteristics may have a differentiated impact on individual work outcomes (e.g. well-being, work engagement and performance) of employees from different age groups. Thus, some job design characteristics may lead to better outcomes for one age group more than another. Donald Truxillo and his colleagues (2012) made theoretical propositions about the relationships between a number of job characteristics, based on the Work Design Questionnaire (Humphrey and Morgeson, 2006), and employee's job satisfaction (among other outcome indicators). They suggested that the presence of certain job characteristics, such as task variety, feedback from the job, feedback from others, and interaction outside the organisation, may have a more positive impact on job satisfaction for younger (rather than middle-aged and older) workers. Other job characteristics (e.g. job autonomy, skill variety, social support-given, specialization) may be more beneficial for older (than younger) workers.

For instance, *job autonomy* refers to the degree to which a person is able to make and pursue his/her own decisions at work. Younger workers may need less autonomy, because they have to develop their knowledge and experience, while older workers have a greater experience and accumulated knowledge that can be utilized better at higher levels of job autonomy. Thus, older (compared with younger) workers would be more likely to experience greater job satisfaction if they are in relatively more autonomous jobs. Similarly, *specialization* (the extent to which one's job requires specialist skills) and *skill variety* (the degree to which a job demands the use of a variety of different skills) may be lead to higher job satisfaction for midlife and older (compared with younger) workers. Furthermore, *task significance* (the extent to which one's job is seen as meaningful and influencing other people's lives and work) may be of a greater importance for midlife and older (vs younger) workers, who are likely to be more focused on the meaning in their jobs than gaining work skills or career advancement.

In contrast to the above, *feedback from the job* (the extent to which one gets information about job performance from the job itself) and *feedback from others* (the degree to which colleagues and supervisors provide information about performance) may be more impactful for younger (vs older) workers' job satisfaction, because of younger people's greater interest in career advancement. Also, *task variety* (the extent to which a job requires a wide range of tasks) and *interactions outside the organisation* (the amount of work interactions with people, external for the employment organisation – e.g. customers and business partners) are believed to be more important for younger (compared with other age groups) workers, as higher levels of both of these job design characteristics may allow opportunities for development of useful job skills and networks, leading to career advancement. Therefore, these job characteristics may have more potential to increase job satisfaction of younger (than e.g. older) employees.

In addition to job design, during the past decade there has been an increased interest in how certain Human Resource Management (HRM) practices can contribute to the maintenance and improvement of the well-being and performance of employees from different age groups. For example, a study by Kooij and her colleagues (2013) demonstrated that the use of HRM practices that aim *maintaining* current skills and status at work (e.g. extra leave, reduced working hours, flexible working conditions such as working from home or some forms of shift work, health and safety training, etc.) can boost job satisfaction of older workers especially. However, HRM practices that are focused on employees' *development* (e.g. job enrichment, training in learning new things, career planning, continuous development of the job) are more important for younger (vs older) workers in terms of their job satisfaction. Moreover, HRM development practices can lead to improved performance for all groups of workers.

In summary, supporting employees' psychological well-being is crucial for managing successfully health and performance in organisations. Therefore, both employees and

employers should learn to recognise the signs of positive and negative well-being as well as how to manage it effectively. Moreover, understanding how and why well-being changes over the life course is a key prerequisite for sustainable management of workers' well-being (and performance) throughout the whole employment cycle. Among other factors, age appears to be a significant predictor of well-being. Therefore, considering age-differences in the workplace may be a step forward to improving individuals' well-being in organisations.

Selected references:

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