How to achieve wellbeing in the workplace

Dr Ann Hemingway from Bournemouth University's Centre for Wellbeing and Quality of Life is managing the development of a new wellbeing consultancy package for commercial and public sector businesses and organisations involving academics from across the university.

Context and rationale

The importance of taking health and wellbeing into account when developing public policy has been internationally recognised over the last decade (Diener and Suh 1997; Helliwell 2006; Kahneman and Krueger 2006). The European Commission, for example, has made this an explicit policy goal through a high level policy group convened by Nikolas Sarkozy to explore the importance of quality of life (QoL) indicators in measuring social progress. The UK Government have prioritised wellbeing in the policy agenda, illustrated in reports by the Whitehall Wellbeing Working Group, the DEFRA Committee on Wellbeing, and the Sustainable Development Commission among others (Dolan and White 2007). Prioritising wellbeing in the policy agenda has been supported by extensive research showing that promoting health and wellbeing in the workplace improves the working environment and is beneficial for companies and employees alike (European Network for Workplace Health Promotion 2010). More importantly, whilst wellbeing is individually embedded, it is also framed by a well-functioning society and strong social capital.

Since wellbeing has been operationalised in a number of very different academic and policy fields (e.g. medical science, psychology, economics, sociology, social policy, management science, human resource management, organisational behaviour and environmental science), it is important to draw upon a range of expertise in developing robust models for public policy and consultancy.

Conceptual underpinning: 'Wellbeing and Humanisation in the Workplace' refers to two inter-related ideas. Promoting wellbeing in the workplace is a well established concept internationally, while the humanisation agenda is emerging from the Centre for Qualitative Research (Bournemouth University) as a developing concept albeit one that is informing public policy in areas such as the health service examining the personalisation of care (person-centre care/ service to enhance the quality of services). Humanisation focuses on the importance of person centred processes that support wellbeing (further details below) and a concern with helping people feel human. There is an increasing suggestion that people are starting to question interactions with organisations that leave them feeling that they are treated as numbers and statistics rather than valued individuals (Patients Association 2009).

Several important dimensions of humanisation have been identified (Todres, Galvin et al. 2009):

- *Agency*: finding ways to enhance people's sense of being active in an organisation.
- *Insiderness*: connecting with people's 'inward sense' of how they are: avoiding interactions and strategies that make people feel excessively like 'objects'.

- *Uniqueness:* finding ways in which a person can feel that they are being seen for themselves and not just how they fit into a category.
- *Togetherness:* finding ways that can enhance our need for belonging; to find familiar interpersonal connections so that our sense of isolation is reduced.
- *Personal journey:* finding ways to help people to connect with a sense of historical continuity.
- *Sense-making and loss of meaning:* exploring ways to communicate so that people don't just feel like a 'cog in a wheel'; rather, that what is being offered makes sense and is fair to them.
- *Sense of place:* providing a sense of security and belonging which adds to our wellbeing.
- *Embodiment:* a humanising perspective views wellbeing as a positive quality not just the absence of illness, a quality that makes life and work worthwhile and meaningful.

An enterprise niche that links the two related perspectives of Wellbeing and Humanisation together provides a creative original and distinctive framework for consultancy which focus on processes, perspectives and outcomes related to both perspectives. These two concepts underpin the development of this consultancy package that enables organisations across the pubic, private and charitable sectors to focus on wellbeing for their staff and customers/clients in a holistic manner. Considering the way they work, where they work and putting wellbeing at the heart of what they do. Organisations are more dependent on well-trained, highly qualified and motivated employees than ever before. In addition, the study of workforce health and wellbeing has enabled us to achieve a new understanding of health at work which encompasses both physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing and the social determinants of health. We believe our specific expertise and our unique enterprise opportunity is in integrating and applying Wellbeing and Humanisation theory and empirical research evidence within the workplace.

Here we cover some key ways in which the evidence shows us organisations can improve the wellbeing of their employees.

1. Recognising that employees are people
Underpinning everything is what we at Bournemouth University are calling 'humanisation' - focusing on how people feel as human beings. Building on the work of Professor Kate Galvin and Professor Les Todres there is now an increasing suggestion that people are starting to question interactions with organisations that leave them feeling that they are treated as numbers and statistics rather than valued individuals. Finding ways to enhance people's sense of being active in their organisation, avoiding interactions and strategies that make people feel excessively like 'objects', and providing them with a sense of control, security and belonging are just some of the approaches that organisations could take. The work of Professor Yannis Georgellis has shown that an individual who is satisfied with their job is likely to be more motivated and productive

2. Provide an appropriate physical working environment

Certain physical features can induce a stress response: a lack of natural lighting and non-opening windows; close-packed uncomfortable seating that invades personal space; or bland, monochrome colour schemes and harsh linear features, to name but a few. Once stressed, the individual is primed to respond badly to any subsequent events, making increased errors or reacting with irritability to situations normally well within their capabilities. Simple changes to the workplace can help alleviate the stress. Dr Paul Stevens tells us that studies show natural views through the window have a beneficial effect on health, reducing illness and increasing positive mood; even plants on desks can improve concentration at a task, reducing errors and fatigue, as well as improving air quality.

3. Provide an appropriate social working environment

It's well established that people with supportive friends (both in and out of work) deal better with stress. But human beings react to *any* interpersonal interaction as a social process, so the organisational structure of the workplace needs to be carefully considered. Whether in person (i.e., talking to a colleague) or symbolic (i.e., the perceived level of responsibility and control within your role), how we are treated and how enabled we feel have a direct effect on wellbeing. Strict adherence to timetables or procedures that in reality rely on factors out of the control of staff, or feeling that you are not being listened to when you have concerns, can result in high levels of sustained stress and in the long term can predispose us to physical illnesses such as Coronary Heart Disease.

4. Encourage environmentally-friendly behaviour

Most measures designed to improve pro-environmental behaviour also have a direct positive impact on wellbeing. These include self-organised work structures: more flexible working hours allowing for avoidance of inefficient rush-hour traffic; using carbon-neutral, natural materials which decrease levels of harmful chemicals, both in the manufacturing process and in the office; natural lighting and ventilation which reduce energy bills and the pollutants used in the operation and manufacture of air conditioning and lighting units; naturalistic planting schemes improve air-quality. As a rule of thumb, environments that are better for humans are those that are ecologically healthy and beneficial for our wellbeing on a local and global scale. This means that organisations can not only aim to reduce their carbon foot print but also aim to use local products in their buildings and furnishings and within their food and drinks provision.

5. Build a healthier work community

Many companies provide employees with information on healthy lifestyles. Companies can also integrate healthy messages into communications such as employee magazines or intranet. Other suggestions from Associate Professor Heather Hartwell include: organising seminars where information on healthy nutrition and physical activity is provided; offering healthy dietary options at the canteen; and distributing free fruit and vegetables among employees can increase consumption. Organisations may encourage/incentivise employees to be more active, such as subsidised gym memberships and creation of fitness facilities such as on-site showers and bike sheds.

Another strategy is to organise activities in which employees may participate; lunchtime walking or running groups are good examples.

This new consultancy package will be launched at an international conference hosted by Bournemouth University, Centre for Wellbeing and Quality of Life entitled "Resources, capital or personnel? Perspectives on Wellbeing at Work"
in October 2011.

Todres L., Galvin K.T. & Holloway I. (2009) The humanization of healthcare: A value framework for qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Wellbeing.* 1-10.

For more information on this conference and how you can use best evidence to create a healthy workplace contact aheming@bournemouth.ac.uk