

Employee Well-Being: Recent Developments and Directions for the Future

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Employee well-being, traditionally conceptualized and assessed with employees' evaluations of their jobs or lives or with various psychological and physiological indicators of strain or health, defines one of the most important fields of inquiry in applied psychology. Evaluative well-being indicators such as job satisfaction predict work behaviors important for organizational effectiveness, while reducing strain and improving employees' health has substantial cost implications. But the benefits of understanding employee well-being go beyond effectiveness and cost considerations; that is, understanding what organizations and individuals can do to increase work-derived well-being is a worthwhile quest because it can lead to the development of programs and practices that ultimately increase the quality of life, which is an important societal outcome in itself.

The purpose of this essay is to describe and illustrate recent trends in research on employee well-being conducted in applied and organizational psychology, and to suggest some directions for future research on the topic. By no means should this be interpreted as a comprehensive review of research on well-being or even on work-related well-being. Instead, this essay should be seen as a selective review of research on employee well-being that fits within three interrelated themes that have been recently examined by organizational research and that, in my [biased] view, offer most promise for producing interesting and impactful research in the future. These themes include (a) conceptualizing and explaining various well-being states, (b) dynamic models of work-related well-being that examine employees' fluctuations in well-beings over multiple days or within days, and (c) theory and research that explore the consequences of work experiences, events and work-derived well-being for employees' functioning outside work (e.g., in the family domain).

The most common approach to understanding general well-being relies on the assessment of subjective well-being (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003) as a general subjective evaluation of life in terms of pleasantness versus unpleasantness or as a summation of evaluative reactions to life stimuli encountered in various situations or domains (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 2004). In the organizational domain, traditional studies of employee well-being have typically

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examined between-individual differences in various well-being indicators, and attempted to uncover their antecedents or consequences. Such studies, for example, have found that both personality traits and job features influence job satisfaction, and that satisfaction, in turn, predicts behavioral outcomes such as citizenship behaviors at work (e.g., Ilies, Fulmer, Spitzmuller, & Johnson, in press). In these studies, well-being indicators have been measured with 'single-shot' retrospective assessments of general subjective evaluations, a method that implicitly assumes that well-being is stable.

A different approach relies on capturing momentary well-being states, such as moods and emotions, that are conceptualized as affective reactions to stimuli at work and are thought to have immediate influences on work behavior (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996; Ilies, Scott, & Judge, 2006). A conceptual model that has been applied to the study of employee well-being and that specifically considers the role of momentary affective states in organizational behavior is Affective Events Theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). In summary, AET proposes that various events at work have immediate affective consequences (i.e., they are affective events) in that they generate emotional reactions and changes in momentary affect (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). In turn, emotions and momentary affect influence employees' behavior (their "affect-driven behavior" such as citizenship behaviors; Ilies et al., 2006) and these momentary also can have cumulative effect on more stable attitudes.

Furthermore, recently, evaluative constructs such as job satisfaction (that are treated as stable attitudes in AET) have been conceptualized as transient evaluative states that are influenced by temporally sensitive factors such as events or experiences at work. In this respect, Ilies and Judge (2004), suggest that job satisfaction accounts for the covariation between stimuli and responses at work and is manifested through discrete evaluative states. The recent approach in work psychology examining affective and evaluative states as indicators of daily or momentary well-being is promising because it enables studying the effects of work events and discrete experiences, thus complementing the traditional approach of examining the effects of stable job characteristics (e.g., autonomy) on

worker well-being (see Ilies, Schwind, & Heller, 2007).

The discrete conceptualization of work experience and behavior in AET and the recent focus on employee well-being as temporary states, coupled with methodological advances that allow researchers to model fluctuations in well-being states over time (e.g., time series, hierarchical linear modeling) and with the advent of experience-sampling assessment methods that allow multiple measurements of psychological states or physiological constructs in situ (i.e., at work), have led to the development and testing of intraindividual models of work behavior and well-being. In this respect, several authors have proposed conceptualizations of job performance as episodic behavior, arguing that fluctuations in episodic behavior across time are influenced, in part, by well-being states such as positive affect (e.g., Beal, Weiss, Barros, & MacDermid, 2005; Ilies et al., 2006; Motowidlo, Borman, & Schmit, 1997). Ilies et al., (2006), for example, used a longitudinal design involving multiple daily responses provided by full-time employees, from work, for a period of two weeks and found that day-to-day variations in citizenship behaviors at work were associated with similar fluctuations in well-being states such that experience-sampled positive affect and job satisfaction predicted experience-sampled reports of organizational citizenship behavior over time.

In another experience-sampling study, conducted over 4 weeks, Teuchmann, Totterdell, & Parker (1999) found significant within-individual correlations between time pressure – a job demand – and both negative mood and emotional exhaustion, in a sample of accountants. These correlations indicate that respondents reported heightened negative mood and emotional exhaustion on days when they perceived time pressure at work to be high. Such negative effects of high job demands (workload, time pressure, etc.) on workers' well-being have been observed in other intraindividual studies (e.g., Ilies, Schwind, Wagner, Johnson, DeRue, & Ilgen, 2007); nevertheless, it remains to be seen if or how such daily effects cumulate to produce chronic strain.

Complementing traditional studies of generalized effects of work (e.g., job demands) on employee health and well-being (e.g., studies on burnout), an important extension of the research on the dynamic effects of work experience on employee well-being concerns

the day-to-day spillover of these effects outside of the work environment, particularly to the family domain. Generally, work-family spillover is defined as the “effects of work and family on one another that generate similarities between the two domains” (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000, p.180). Psychological mechanisms based on spillover theory have long been proposed as linkages between work and family roles or domains (e.g., Staines, 1980). As interest in the interface between work and family balance has increased, more complex work-family linkage models have been proposed and tested. For example, the most recent work-family spillover studies have utilized repeated in situ assessments of employees’ experiences and feelings in both their work and family roles, and have tested dynamic models linking work affect and attitudes (assessed at work) to affective states and attitudes assessed in the family domain (e.g., Heller & Watson, 2005; Ilies, Schwind, & Wagner, in press).

At a more general level, Ilies, Schwind, and Heller (2007) proposed an intraindividual model of employee well-being that links work events and experiences to individuals’ functioning outside of the workplace (reflected in affective state experienced off work or evaluations such as marital and life satisfaction) through the well-being states experienced during or at the end of the workday (e.g., affect, job satisfaction). This model goes beyond specifying work-to-family spillover effects by considering the effects of actual work experiences on well-being constructs from the family domain (these effects can be realized, at least in part, via affective or attitudinal spillover). One study that examined the intraindividual effects of job demands on daily well-being is reported by Sonnentag and Zijlstra (2006), who found that the amount of time employees spent on work-related activities after work decreased their level of well-being (reported at bedtime). Similarly, in an experience-sampling study of full-time employees, Ilies, Schwind, Wagner, et al. (2007) found an indirect effect of workload (reported from work) on the extent to which employees engaged in social behavior with the family (reported by spouses) – arguably an indicator of well-being – through work-family conflict.

In sum, recently, there has been some exciting research on well-being states at work, on intraindividual models of well-being, and on dynamic mechanisms that link daily work

experiences, events and work-related well-being to indicators of well-being outside of the work environment. Below I suggest some directions for future research in these area that, in my view, have the potential to produce interesting investigations that would enhance our understanding of the ways in which work influences employee functioning and well-being.

First, multilevel research examining factors that can limit the negative effects of excessive job demands on well-being states can and should be expanded beyond examining the role of traditional job characteristics such as decision latitude (or job control) and social support. That is, research can integrate the literatures on leader-member exchanges, perceived organizational support, or other mechanisms of coping with high job demands within the demands-control-support framework, as well as examine different classes of job demands (e.g., emotional display rules) to understand the effects of various job demands on employee well-being more fully. In addition, following Shmotkin (2005), who distinguished between experiential well-being, which is derived through introspection and self-awareness during the experience of an activity, and declarative well-being, which relates to reporting a well-being state, future research on experiential well-being states, such as flow (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) or personal expressiveness (Waterman, 1993), would nicely complement the current research streams on declarative well-being states, such as positive affect at work or job satisfaction.

Second, research that examines the effects of employees’ daily work experience on well-being states relevant to other life domains, such as the family, has the potential to produce interesting and important findings. There is research showing that job satisfaction at the end of the workday predicts affective states experienced at home (even when the spouse rates these affective states; Ilies, et al., in press) and it does so more strongly when employees integrate (vs. segment) their work and family roles. These results suggest that employees can use psychological segmentation mechanisms to limit the negative effect that excessive job demands may have on their family life. Future research should examine work-family integration within a more comprehensive framework that includes stress-recovery strategies (see Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). In addition, following those who

suggest that various sleep parameters are indicators of daily well-being that are important for employees' functioning and satisfaction at work (see Scott & Judge, 2006; Sonnentag, Binnewies & Mojza, 2008), intraindividual research that links work events and experiences to sleep quality and aims to uncover factors that minimize the effects of work stressors on sleep would lead to useful recommendations for managers and employees alike. Importantly, research on employee sleep quality should go beyond self-reports (e.g., by using actigraphic sleep monitors; Sadeh, Sharkey, & Carskadon, 1994), to eliminate common-rater and artifact-effects concerns.

To summarize, in my view, recent conceptual and methodological developments in the study of employee well-being have led to several exciting streams of research, such as those described in this essay. Findings from studies focusing on the immediate effects of the work environment and of work experiences on well-being states at work or in the family have increased and have the potential to further increase our understanding of the psychological mechanisms that explain employee well-being. To the extent to which researchers can link such mechanisms (i.e., their cumulative effects) to chronic between-individual differences in health and well-being, these findings will have important applications for designing organizational programs, and suggesting individual strategies, aimed at enhancing employee well-being.

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 CPI™: California Psychological Inventory (462, 434, 260)
 FPI™: Freiburger Persönlichkeitsinventar
 NPQ™: Nonverbal Personality Questionnaire
 ABCD-M: Chestionarul Big Five Minulescu
 BFG™/BFA™: Big Five Questionnaire / Big Five Adjectives
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