

EDITORIAL

Well-being at work: current status and what's next

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Introduction

Scientific focus gradually shifted from devising effective ways of dealing with factors impeding human development (eradicating famine or bacteria causing infantile mortality) to investigating ways in which human can live not only longer but also happier lives. Considering that individuals spend most of their adult lives either working or sleeping, understanding what determines well-being plays a pivotal role in creating the context for people to live such fuller and happier lives. Subjective well-being (SWB) has been defined to comprise “all of the various evaluations, positive and negative, that people make of their lives, and the affective reactions of people to their experiences” (OECD, 2013).

A quick and dirty google search for the term “well-being” returns some 500 million thousand results. Searching for the term happiness returns a similar number of results, a number comparable to the one returned when searching the “faith”. This rising interest in understanding what happiness is and what are its causes is also reflected in the number of scientific papers focused directly or indirectly on well-being. This figure has almost tripled in the past decade, from 163 articles in 2008 to a staggering 397 by 2017 (only the first three quarters). Well-being became a hot topic for public authorities and policy-makers alike. In France, Commission on the Measurement of

Economic Performance and Social Progress proposed to include self-reported well-being alongside traditional indicators of country development, such as Human Development Index or Gross Domestic Product (Stiglitz, 2009). Impaired well-being has been linked to increased health risks for coronary heart disease, diabetes and several other chronic diseases (Steptoe, Deaton, & Stone, 2015).

Well-being at work

There is an intense interplay between subjective well-being and work. Work itself is one of the most influential determinants of subjective well-being, with unemployment being most reliable predictor of unhappiness around the world (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2017). From an organizational vantage point, subjective well-being is consistently correlated with job performance, the magnitude of this relationship being in the .30 - .40 range, above and beyond what many other non-cognitive predictors of job performance (Wright & Cronpazano, 2017). This interplay reveals that not only “a happy worker is a productive worker” but also that “a worker is a happy person”. If subjective well-being is so firmly bound to the work environment and has such high associations with various outcomes (reduced risk for multiple diseases, positive health outcomes and job relevant outcomes such as job

satisfaction and job performance) then one would expect SWB-focused measurement and interventions to be ubiquitous in organizations across the globe. But is it so?!

Well-being practices in the workplace: what happens globally?!

Although several large-scale surveys are monitoring the country-level well-being across the globe, few of them focus on identifying well-being-related practices within organizations. One such initiative is the State of Well-being Report (CEB/Gartner, 2017). CEB/Gartner is a leading global research and advisory company, being the leader in best practices and talent management insights. This survey investigated the organizational-level well-being practices on a sample of 134 global, multi-national organizations, acting in various industries. The headcount for the participant organizations ranged between 20000+ employees (13% of the sample) and 100-1000 employees (29% of the participating organizations). Most of the companies included in this study (41%) had a total headcount ranging from 1001 to 5000 employees.

Most of the organizations do have in place a formal well-being strategy. Out of the entire sample, only 8% responded that they do not have an official well-being strategy and 22% declared that they do not have a legal strategy, but are currently considering one. Also, for 57% of organizations the formal well-being strategies have been in place for at least four years (CEB/Gartner, 2017). The overwhelming prevalence of well-being strategies indicates that well-being ceased to be a topic of interest only to policy-makers and it has long left the realm of academic publishing, becoming the specific focus of the organizational strategy. Just 35% of the organizations that adopted a well-being strategy have also taken country or region-tailored programs.

However, the key drivers behind the organization's decisions to adopt such practices have to do with avoiding adverse outcomes, such as declining employee health problems (79% of organizations), and

controlling healthcare costs (60% of organizations). Many organizations regard the well-being strategies as effective ways of increasing employee engagement (51%) and employer branding and attractiveness (42%). There are critical region-level differences in top reasons behind adopting a well-being strategy. Organizations in Europe rate improving employee health as high objective (86%), followed closely by employer attractiveness (71%) and employee engagement (71%).

For most of the participant organizations the well-being strategies include a mixture of physical well-being programs (100%), emotional/mental well-being (91%) and financial well-being (82%). The physical well-being programs target health and stress primarily and include nutrition promotion, immunizations, health risk assessment and biometric screenings, exercise development and health education/classes. As for the emotional/mental well-being, most organizations have in place employee assistance programs (99%), counseling services (63%) and education/classes (49%). The education sessions and classes revolve mainly around stress (97%) and managing work-life balance (81%). According to this report, mindfulness also appears to have a very high adoption rate, 65% of the organizations organizing classes and seminars focused on mindfulness.

As for the financial incentives offered for various internal well-being initiatives, 64% of organizations provide some form of encouragement for the employees' involvement in physical well-being programs and only one-quarter of the organizations provided some sort of financial support or motivation for emotional/mental well-being initiatives.

What happens locally?!

Until 2017 few if any initiatives to assess well-being in the workplace had been started. In 2016 the Romanian marketing research agency D&D Research together with Business Review Magazine launched "Organizational Well-Being Index" the first structured attempt to measure the overall well-being and its primary determinants for Romanian

employees. The program coordinators (Cosmin Peleașă, Vlad Tureanu and Dan Petre) shared some insights regarding the well-being related practices encountered in the Romanian corporate environment.

Well-being measurement. Most, if not all the 100+ companies that have been approached for enrolling in the study declared that they already have in place surveys that focus on measuring some form of well-being, as well as its most common determinants. For most of the companies this was the key reason for not enrolling in the study, it would have been overlapping with the internal surveys. For many organizations well-being is assessed with measures that have been devised internationally either internally or by different surveying agencies. The studies are typically conducted on a yearly basis. The instruments rarely follow a test adaptation process, being most of the times translations of the original measures. The dimensions usually included in such surveys revolve around factors on which organizations can directly intervene: various job demands (mostly emotional and cognitive), work pressure, career development opportunities or the significance of work.

Well-being programs. Most of the well-being strategies have been adopted also by local subsidiaries of large multi-national companies. This approach is visible not only in the way in which companies measure well-being and attempt to understand its determinants, but also in the way in which well-being practices and interventions are implemented. Health-related well-being practices have become part of the standard benefits package in most of the Romanian corporate companies. Discounted or subsidized access to gym clubs, medical packages or life insurance are no longer perks offered only to senior management, but rather primary benefits that are made available for most employees. The top provider of gym clubs for corporate companies has quintupled its yearly turnover, from approximately 2 million Euro in 2007 to well above 10 million in 2016. The leading private healthcare provider in Romania increased its annual revenue with 40% in 2016, reporting a turnover well above 90 million Euro. Access to counseling programs, parenting, nutrition

and mindfulness workshops are not a rare sight in corporate Romania.

What works best?

There is a paucity of research in comparing the actual impact of well-being initiatives. However, the study “Organizational Well-Being Index” revealed that psychological and physical well-being habitudes. For example, people who work out regularly reported significantly less subjective work pressure, compared to the ones who do not regularly work out. Incidentally, they reported their jobs as being less emotionally demanding and overall felt less stressed on their jobs and less work family imbalance. The between-group differences in percentile scores ranged between 4 (work pressure) and 9 (emotional demands). However, these non-trivial differences are dwarfed by the ones obtained by comparing the answers of working adults declaring that they always found time for relaxation and unwinding to the ones declared that they never did. The mean subjective work pressure for the first group was slightly above the average level encountered in the general population (around the 60th percentile), while the mean values for the second group were similar to those encountered in the top 25% highest values observed on the general population. Mean level perceived emotional demands were similar to those found at in the bottom one third of the general population (29th percentile) for the first group and similar to that of the general population (54th percentile) for the second group. The mean-level differences in perceived stress are no less dramatic (13th percentile vs. 40th percentile). Overall, psychologically-oriented habitudes appear to be more effective compared to the physical-oriented ones.

Making “well-being” better

#1: Although overall subjective well-being as well as its principal determinants vary considerably on a regional and country-level, most organizations are employing global strategies, missing out on the opportunity to act locally by tailoring the policy and programs according to the region/country-level distinctiveness. The relationship

between well-being and large determinants factors, such as employment, job type or relationship status varies at a regional and country-level (Helliwell et al., 2017). For example, the effect size of socio-economic status on well-being is significantly higher in low-income countries, compared to average or high-income ones.

#2: Internal well-being programs are not integrated, organizations employing specific programs to targeted on narrow health outcomes and or specific well-being outcomes, rather than use a variety of applications within a particular succession. Segregating the actions and programs is a less than an optimal strategy for improving global well-being across the entire workforce. Solely working out at the gym is unlikely to lead to a sustainable and long-term increment in eudaimonic well-being. Conversely, attending individual counseling sessions will only do so much for increasing one's physical health.

#3: Mental/emotional well-being initiatives are mostly reactive, companies offering some form of support for employees who seek to improve their well-being. Consequently, the impact of such programs is confined to the employees who are already interested in well-being if not already involved in some other well-being related actions. Therefore, such programs are likely to benefit only for a small proportion of employees. Various proactive interventions have been shown to be effective in increasing well-being. For example, there is robust evidence that prosocial spending leads to improved well-being, and this relationship is culturally invariant (e.g., Aknin et al., 2013).

#4: For most organizations well-being programs tend to be equated with physical health, both regarding the number of applications and the financial support for such initiatives. Physical activities have only a moderate influence on overall well-being (Netz, Wu, Becker, & Tenenbaum, 2005). Such programs are an essential step ahead and are better than no actions at all. However, they are likely to be successful in preventing potential adverse general health and mental health problems. However, these programs hit only a narrow area of well-being, and organizations are likely to miss out on the

whole range of benefits derived from using a wider variety of well-being programs.

#5: Shifting the measurement focus so that it includes individual determinants alongside with the organizational ones. Organizations should seek to understand not only the organizational determinants, but also the personal antecedents of well-being. Like many other psychological outcomes well-being is multi-determined, being influenced by environmental, social and personal (dispositional and behavioral) factors.

#6: Measuring the efficiency and return on investment derived from well-being interventions. A staggering 93% of organizations declared that they do not take a formal approach to measuring the return on investment from current well-being programs (CEB/Gartner, 2017). If such measures are not implemented companies will be groping in the dark regarding the utility and actual impact of well-being programs.

Perhaps now, more than ever before, people and organizations across the world are aware that well-being matters. It impacts employees and organizations in the same degree, having both direct and indirect effects over a company's productivity and over the mental and physical health of its employees. In order to grasp all the benefits from various well-being programs, companies should build scientific-driven well-being programs. It is not enough to spend a great deal of resources on intervention programs or on benefits that will have only small to moderate effects on well-being. Moreover, such investments are unlikely to result in any type of competitive advantage for the organization. Thinking scientifically about well-being, what are its causes and its consequences and how can these be mitigated within a specific organizational framework will most take people and organizations to the next well-being level!

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