

EDITORIAL

Interventions Aimed at Enhancing Employee Well-being: Current State of Knowledge and Next Challenges

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Introduction

The concern for employee well-being has grown steadily in the past 40 years. Some of the early theories of the '70s and '80s (e.g., the *Job Characteristics Model* - Hackman & Oldham, 1975; the *Stress, Appraisal and Coping theory* – Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; the *Conservation of Resources Theory* – Hobfoll, 1989) are seen as the foundations for the present perspectives that dominate the literature on stress and well-being (e.g., the *Job Demands Resources Theory* – Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; the *Broaden and Build theory* – Frederickson, 2001). This increased interest regarding the understanding of employee well-being generated thousands of research studies that tested and refined the theories mentioned above. Numerous meta-analyses of cross-sectional (e.g., Alarcon, 2011; Halbesleben, 2010) and longitudinal data (Lesener, Gusy, & Wolter, 2019) generally confirmed the main assumptions of these theories.

At the first glance, research on employee well-being was on the right track towards explaining what makes people feel good or not-so-good at work. However, things started to change when researchers and practitioners started to use these models and theories to develop and to test interventions aimed at improving occupational well-being. Although initial meta-analyses that estimated the overall

effectiveness of stress interventions were optimistic regarding the magnitude of the effect size (e.g., Richardson & Rothstein, 2008), more recent work tempered this trend. Systematic reviews of the controlled trials reported small-to-medium effects of the interventions aimed at reducing burnout (Maricuțoiu, Sava, & Butta, 2016) or aimed at enhancing work engagement (Vîrgă, Maricuțoiu, & Iancu, 2019). Furthermore, similarly small effect sizes were reported by meta-analyses that estimated the effectiveness of the interventions that focused on variables specific to the research field (e.g., interventions focused on enhancing psychological capital - Lupșa, Vîrgă, Maricuțoiu, & Rusu, 2019; or interventions focused on job crafting behaviors – Oprea et al., 2019). These recent findings created a gap between the solid evidence regarding the theoretical developments and the evidence regarding the effectiveness of the interventions.

When conducting an intervention aimed at enhancing employees' well-being, researchers and practitioners enroll participants in the program and guide them through the intervention protocol that was developed based on a particular theoretical perspective. Most face-to-face interventions were conducted on groups of employees (Maricuțoiu et al., 2016), while online interventions usually involve guiding

participants through the intervention using an online platform developed for delivering this type of services (Vîrgă et al., 2019). Regardless of the delivery method (i.e., face-to-face or online), interventions focused on changing the employees' level of understanding and employees' attitude towards own well-being, which in turn should change their workplace behaviors and, consequently, should lead to enhanced well-being. This stepwise sequence of changes is problematic for two main reasons.

The need for a broader perspective in developing interventions

Firstly, it is reasonable to expect that the effect of the intervention diminishes from one step to another. New attitudes do not always generate new behaviors, and new behaviors are not always enhancing employees' well-being. To address this problem, researchers started to incorporate elements of behavioral theories in their interventions. For example, Constantini and her collaborators (2020) successfully used elements of the *Theory of Planned Behavior* (Ajzen, 1991) to help participants in a job crafting intervention. Their results are encouraging, and the findings of this study should persuade researchers to identify methods and strategies to manage the process that diminishes the effect of any intervention. Therefore, some research questions that could be worth addressing by future research studies include:

- What are the mechanisms that might reduce the diminishing effects? Are there any mediator variables (e.g., intentions to use the new information) between the new information and the new behaviors?
- Can we reduce the diminishing effects using behavioral theories such as the *Theory of Planned Behavior* (Ajzen, 1991) or the *Technology Acceptance Model* (citeare)?
- When developing interventions, can we account for participants' attitudes towards the intervention content, to

enhance the use of the new behaviors?

The psychosocial context of the interventions

Most evidence regarding workplace well-being is focused exclusively on the employee and overlooks the psychosocial context. However, recent evidence regarding the importance of the psychosocial context is gaining importance. For example, recent reviews suggested that working partners share significant well-being variance (Matei, Maricuțoiu, & Vîrgă, 2021) and pointed out that one's general well-being should be analysed in relation with the partner's general well-being. More specific workplace evidence also emphasised the importance of the psychosocial context. For example, research studies showed that supervisors' agreeableness level is associated with high levels of subordinates' burnout (Hunter et al., 2013) and with high levels of subordinates' job insecurity (Petrișor et al., 2021). These examples supported the idea that employee well-being variables have large amounts of shared variance with variables that describe the psychosocial environment (i.e., supervisors' personality, supervisors' behaviors, or partner's well-being).

The second problem regarding the present intervention paradigm is that interventions are focused almost exclusively on the employee and are less concerned with the psychosocial context. In the dominant intervention paradigm, the main change mechanism assumes that employees should develop new strategies for dealing with stressors (e.g., coping skills, interpersonal strategies that help them enhance job resources). This is problematic because the intervention only addressed the personal strategies that can help the employee and does not address the cause of the employee stress. After learning new personal and interpersonal strategies, the participants continue to work in the same, unchanged, and stressful workplace.

Initially, the stress-related interventions aimed at increasing the employee's personal resources (e.g., knowledge, coping

mechanisms, psychological capital variables). As these interventions showed limited efficacy (Maricuțoiu et al., 2016; Lupșa et al., 2019; Virgă et al., 2019), researchers focused on instructing employees to act in a proactive manner to increase their job resources. Job resources are job characteristics that help the employees in dealing with the demands of their workplace (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), therefore their development should logically lead to enhanced employee well-being. The most frequently studied job resources are: autonomy in taking decisions, feedback, social support (e.g., from the colleagues or from the supervisor), team cohesiveness. As one might observe, all these job resources require interactions with other employees or with supervisors: autonomy is approved by supervisors, feedback requires someone to provide it, while social support and team cohesiveness cannot be understood outside the psychosocial context of the employee. So far, most strategies used to increase job resources are unilateral: the employee is instructed to seek job resources (e.g., autonomy, feedback, or support) but it is unclear whether the supervisor or the co-workers are able (or sometimes willing) to provide these resources.

Based on previous arguments, the next steps in developing and implementing interventions should investigate:

- What are the interpersonal mechanisms that allow the significant persons from the employee psychosocial context (i.e., the partner, the supervisor) to have an influence on the employee well-being?;
- Are there similar interpersonal mechanisms for increasing and for decreasing the employee's well-being?
- To what extent these mechanisms can be used to enhance the effectiveness of the interventions?
- To what extent these mechanisms can be used to preserve the effectiveness of the interventions for longer periods?

- How can the significant persons from the employee psychosocial context (i.e., the partner, the supervisor) can help when it comes to enhancing employee's job resources ?

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