

EDITORIAL

Addressing Well-Being in a Changing Workforce

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The topic of well-being in the workplace has gained significant attention from researchers and organizations due to its impact on workforce productivity and the costs associated with managing mental health challenges. In recent years, the body of literature on this topic has expanded considerably, emphasizing the effects of evolving workforce dynamics following the COVID-19 pandemic. Key changes in what is called the 'post-pandemic workforce' (Wang et al., 2023) include increased remote work, flexible work arrangements, and virtual team collaboration, business disruption and operational changes (Khor et al., 2023). Additionally, growing uncertainty, coupled with the increasing integration of artificial intelligence and automation across industries, has reshaped work environments at almost every level (Wang et al., 2023).

Scholars consistently highlight the negative consequences these changes have on employee well-being. These include feelings of job insecurity, social isolation, stress and anxiety, as well as emotional exhaustion (Wang et al., 2023). Furthermore, findings from large-scale global surveys bring out that employees across the world report experiencing these consequences, suggesting that the impact of these new organizational policies and work arrangements is widespread.

According to the Gallup 2024 Report - *State of the Global Workplace*, 20% of the world's employees experience daily loneliness, equating to 1 in 5 employees. The prevalence of loneliness is slightly higher

(22%) among workers under 35 years old and increases further (25%) for individuals who work exclusively from home. In contrast, only 16% of those who never work from home report experiencing significant loneliness at work on the day prior to the survey (Gallup, 2024). Workplace loneliness comes from feelings of isolation and lack of meaningful relationships with colleagues and/ or supervisors.

Another concerning result is the decline in young employees' (<35 years old) well-being in 2023 compared to 2022 (Gallup, 2024). This decline, measured through life evaluations, daily negative emotions, burnout, and perceived organizational support, underscores the need for targeted interventions. Employees who are actively disengaged from their work report significantly higher daily negative experiences - including stress (54%), anger (32%), and worry (52%) - compared to those actively engaged. Interestingly, these percentages are even higher than those reported by the unemployed (Gallup, 2024).

The Gallup study also highlights that unemployment exacerbates loneliness, with 32% of unemployed adults reporting frequent loneliness compared to 20% of those employed. This finding suggests that work can have a positive impact on well-being, but this benefit diminishes if individuals experience loneliness in the workplace.

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Loneliness in the workplace

Discussions about the effects of loneliness often refer to a seminal study by Berkman and Syme (1979). A nine-year follow-up study examined mortality rates across age and gender groups, focusing on four key types of social connections: marriage, contact with close friends and relatives, church membership, and group membership (both formal and informal). Men who were unmarried, those who reported fewer contacts with relatives, or weren't church members showed significantly higher mortality rates. Among women, the married ones didn't have significantly lower rates of mortality than married ones. However, women with frequent contact with relatives, church membership, or participation in group activities exhibited notably lower mortality rates compared to those with lower social connections (Berkman & Syme, 1979).

More recent studies support these findings, consistently linking loneliness to both mental and physical health challenges. Loneliness has been associated with increased risk of cardiovascular disease (Paul et al., 2021), elevated mortality risk (Henriksen et al., 2019), immune dysfunction, and metabolic syndromes (Hawley, 2022). Meta-analyses demonstrate that loneliness exerts moderate to strong effects on depression, anxiety, suicidality, and overall mental health and well-being (Park et al., 2020). Studies investigating loneliness in the workplace further indicate that loneliness correlates with lower job performance and satisfaction, poorer quality of work relationships (Bryan et al., 2023), increased stress and burnout, and reduced general well-being (Bryan et al., 2023).

Loneliness consistently and negatively influences job satisfaction among employees. In a national representative longitudinal sample of Dutch employees investigated each year for a period of nine years, Lowman and colleague (2023) found that the effect of loneliness on job satisfaction remains over time, suggesting that loneliness can be a permeating force with a detrimental influence on how employees perceive their job and, consequently, engage with their work.

Given the critical impact of loneliness, organizational intervention should focus on fostering an environment that facilitate connections, collaboration and support among members. Managers seem to play an important role in any well-being intervention. Scholars indicates that managers who promote open communication and actively support their teams help create a sense of psychological safety, which reduces feelings of isolation (Edmondson, 2018). Managerial practices such as regular check-ins, empathetic listening, and recognizing employees' efforts contribute to enhanced feelings of connection and belonging. Additionally, leaders who model vulnerability by admitting mistakes and inviting feedback foster a culture of trust and inclusivity, Edmondson (2018) state.

To sustain even further the importance of managers' behaviours, studies suggest that poor management practices can exacerbate loneliness and dissatisfaction. Lack of managerial support has been linked to high rates of burnout, reduced motivation, and lower workplace cohesion (Kossek et al., 2021). For remote or hybrid teams, managers can address loneliness by using technology to facilitate and to maintain team interactions, such as holding regular virtual team events, and promoting informal social interactions (e.g., virtual coffee chats) (Wang et al., 2021).

Engagement and psychological climate as moderators of workplace well-being

Research also highlights the importance of managerial engagement in promoting organizational well-being. Work engagement is defined as the energy, dedication, and involvement employees invest in their work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), and it has been positively associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviour and even productivity (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). The Gallup Report (2024) show that when managers are engaged is more likely that employees will also be engaged, with a correlation of $r = .58$ (calculated at country-level). This finding

suggests that the role of managers in driving employee engagement and well-being, especially considering the evolving dynamics of today's workforce. Some authors argue that the managers account for approximately 70% of team engagement (Clifton, & Harter, 2019), emphasizing that managerial influence can outweigh other antecedents, such as job characteristics, in determining employee engagement.

Although the concept of a "culture of engagement" (Shuck & Reio, 2013) has been overlooked in research, recent literature emphasizes that employee well-being in the workplace can be nurtured through supportive leadership, coupled with reasonable job demands, and organizational policies that promote work-life balance (Monteiro & Joseph, 2023). These findings align with the growing recognition of the manager's role in shaping not only employee engagement but also overall organizational health and culture.

Further exploration into interventions designed to enhance employee well-being reveals a variety of organizational strategies. Quigley et al. (2022) categorized these interventions into several types, including health promotion programs, physical activity interventions, leadership support programs, flexible working arrangements, emotional well-being initiatives, or participatory interventions. Their study demonstrates that interventions aimed at improving well-being through manager support lead to greater employee satisfaction and a decrease in emotional exhaustion. However, these positive outcomes are often mediated by changes in the workplace culture (Quigley et al., 2022). Specifically, support from supervisors, relevant and constructive feedback from managers, policies that promote work-life balance, and justice of managerial practices appear to be key drivers of employee well-being, all these factors being closely linked to the psychological climate within the workplace. In conclusion, managerial engagement is a central pillar in fostering a culture of well-being and in creating a supportive organizational environment that encourages work-life balance, fairness, and a positive psychological climate.

Implications for organizations

The increased prevalence of remote and hybrid work, flexible work arrangements, digital technologies and automation do constitute significant challenges for employees. Coping with these changes and challenges can have detrimental influence on employees' well-being, who experience loneliness and feelings of isolation, stress and anxiety, and disengagement from their work. As recent surveys show, negative experiences at work are reported by employees worldwide (Gallup, 2024).

Organizations can tackle these challenges by recognizing the critical role managers play in supporting their team members' well-being and by promoting a culture of engagement. They can invest in leadership development programs that focus on developing managerial skills such as empathetic communication, providing support, providing and encouraging constructive feedback, promoting work-life balance, creating opportunities for interactions and team support. These practices not only help employees feel supported but also foster a sense of belonging, which can combat feelings of isolation and boost overall engagement. Managers act as models for their subordinates, they are more likely to inspire similar levels of engagement in their teams, which, in turn, enhances job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Another key implication for organizations is the need for comprehensive and targeted well-being interventions. Policies that encourage flexibility, support of employees' mental health, and a balanced approach to work and life demands can create a psychological safe climate and a culture that foster engagement. For young employees, particularly those under 35 who reported frequent experiences of loneliness in the workplace (Gallup, 2024), targeted interventions could include mentorship opportunities, career development support, and contexts for peer interactions and social connections. Fostering employee well-being is not a one-time initiative but a continuous process that requires attention to managerial engagement, workplace culture, and supportive policies to support a more resilient workforce.

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