

Measuring What Matters: Assessing Workplace Mental Health and Well-being

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Introduction

Mental health issues and their negative impacts on individual well-being, organizational productivity and economic growth are increasingly being recognized in the workplace globally. They are also consistently in the top 10 causes of years lived with disability.

One out of every two people in the world will develop a mental health disorder in their lifetime, according to a large-scale study co-led by researchers from Harvard Medical School and the University of Queensland.¹

Interventions by employers to reduce the impact of mental health conditions make sense not only since employees spend a significant proportion of their waking hours engaged in work, but also since there are demonstrable returns on investment from well-placed interventions by employers.² With numerous products and services on offer and a global wellness economy predicted to reach nearly \$7 trillion in 2025,³ it is not surprising that employers struggle to choose interventions wisely.

In developing effective employee well-being programmes, leaders should seek to answer three important questions to improve mental health: What works? Where should they apply it? How will they know it is making a difference?

When seeking to assess the impact of any intervention, measurement is essential. While the adage of “what gets measured, gets managed” is often repeated, it fails to show that not everything readily measured matters and not everything that matters can be (easily) measured.⁴

Using the right measurements

Measuring sustained improvements in mental health and well-being matters is not easy. Drawing on existing data, such as completed risk assessments, healthcare claims, data from employee health checks and participation rates (in well-being or training activities) should be resisted before considering the complex relationship between such data and sustained health improvement. It is not enough for employers to invest in well-intentioned initiatives; they also need to invest in science to understand what actually works.⁵

Good mental health and well-being choices are founded on relevance and evidence of effectiveness. It is important to have an agreed definition of the problem to be solved, a baseline measure and a vision of what “good” looks like – what are the desirable outcomes? Within any large organization, a multistakeholder approach is recommended to ensure that relevance, quality and value are all considered.

A desire to focus on measuring the prevalence of common mental health conditions and their reduction is tempting. However, for most employment sectors, a more realistic goal is to reduce the prevalence of common mental health conditions that affect well-being and productivity and are influenced by work, both quality and quantity.

Although well-recognized, and validated scales to assess common conditions such as depression and anxiety exist, the World Health Organization (WHO) concluded that the evidence of benefit from disease screening followed by targeted intervention for depression and anxiety was inconclusive.⁶ Overall, workplace screening programmes were not shown to reduce mental health symptoms, improve positive mental health, or lead to sustained improvement in work functioning, productivity, or job satisfaction. There were also significant concerns regarding the potential for acting on false positive results, and for bias and breaches in confidentiality.

That is not to say that there are no circumstances where the focus on reducing foreseeable work-related mental health outcomes may be beneficial. Emergency services and crisis management organizations may seek to reduce cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulting from exposure to traumatic incidents. In such cases, clear baseline diagnostic criteria, evidence-based interventions, and special care to address individual confidentiality and data privacy concerns are essential.

Once a baseline is established, an early indication or leading indicator of progress and “quick wins” are needed to demonstrate movement towards a longer-term outcome measure of success (lagging indicator). This can be helpful to assure stakeholders that efforts are meaningful, and can be crucial in maintaining continued investment.

Success is commonly measured and communicated in the business environment through short-term, quarterly reporting cycles and annual reports. Consistent regular communication of the importance of well-being to frontline workers, managers and investors is, therefore, critical to maintaining support for the delivery of sustained health outcomes which may be measured in years. Simple guidance for employers on measuring well-being – together with an appendix of leading and lagging indicators of personal and business performance – has been produced by the UK’s National Forum for Health and Wellbeing.⁷

Leadership training has also been acknowledged by many, including the WHO, as one of the most impactful workplace interventions for the promotion of a healthy psychosocial work environment. However, demonstrating its true value lies beyond attendance figures and raised mental health awareness; evaluation to determine whether it drives leadership behaviour to address barriers to better mental health is needed.

“ **Only then can the true value of mental health and well-being at work be realized so that individuals, organizations and societies flourish sustainably.**

Stavroula Leka, Professor of Organizations, Work & Health, and Director, Centre for Organizational Health & Well-being, University of Lancaster

Taking an integrated measurement approach

Several instruments have been developed, and with increasing validity and growing data sets that enable well-being measurement and benchmarking across sectors. Many share common design features, such as having subjective well-being (e.g. how one feels and functions) at their core. They also reflect the diverse drivers that contribute to an individual’s sense of well-being.

There are several advantages when employers adopt this integrated approach to measurement:

- A summative, single trackable measure of overall subjective well-being can be a valuable barometer of mood in an organization.

- Employers have direct influence over work culture and increased incentives to address aspects identified that are bad for business and mental health.
- Bullying, discrimination, harassment, lack of autonomy, excessive workloads and the inability to achieve a work-life balance are all shown to impact mental health negatively.
- By identifying entity-wide and local “hotspots”, employers can prioritize interventions based on common themes and/or organizational units.
- An organization can focus on the promotion of good work, the development of skills that promote psychological well-being and the facilitation of support pathways for employees who are struggling.

A group of researchers at the University of Oxford have developed a body of applied research based on the principle that workplace well-being is driven by how people feel at work and about their work.⁸ Accordingly, measures of job satisfaction, happiness and the degree to which work is found to be meaningful are measured and correlated with an overall sense of well-being.

The group’s well-being index – which combines the measure of work happiness, purpose, job satisfaction and stress – not only correlated company performance (measured using return on assets as well as correlated with market value, but also predicted future performance and returns on investment. In its most recent study, the group analysed 15 million well-being surveys by employees at over 1,600 publicly listed companies into a well-being index.⁹

“ **This is the most comprehensive study to date linking employee well-being to financial and stock market performance.**

Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, Professor of Economics and Behavioural Science, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford

Other studies have demonstrated that when the delivery of employee health and well-being is aligned with the delivery of business goals, key business outcomes such as productivity and staff retention have been shown to improve.¹⁰

In the United States, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have developed the Total Worker Health (TWH) programme,¹¹ which prioritizes a hazard-free work environment for all workers. It brings together all aspects of work and integrated interventions to collectively address worker safety, health and well-being.

“ **The total worker health approach goes beyond the goal of simply avoiding harm for workers by simultaneously promoting work as an enriching venue for the emergence of worker well-being through health-giving policies, interventions and actions.**

L. Casey Chosewood, Director, Office for Total Worker Health, NIOSH at Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Mental health is a priority area within their programme and employers are guided towards the protection and promotion of workers' physical and mental health. The NIOSH Worker Well-Being Questionnaire (NIOSH WellBQ) is embedded within the TWH programme to help assess multiple drivers of well-being, including an individual's quality of working life, circumstances outside of work, and physical and mental health status.

Resources available include those to improve supervisor and co-worker support, tools to build a supportive culture, steps to minimize work-to-personal-life and personal-life-to-work conflicts, and strategies to build workers' engagement and trust in management.

The TWH programme enables the setting of an internal baseline within an organization, the identification of priority areas and the tracking of changes over time to assess the impact of interventions.

A team at Columbia University, together with partners, has recently developed a specific mental health at work index drawing on existing evidence.¹² It helps organizations assess the maturity of their mental health strategies and provides targeted guidance to facilitate improvement in areas where there are gaps. It is informed by and aligned with the International Standards Organisation (ISO) global standard for psychological health and safety at work published in 2021,¹³ and those of the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB).¹⁴

According to Kathleen Pike, President and Chief Executive Officer of One Mind at Work: "Early findings from the Mental Health at Work Index reveal that only one in four organizations have a mental health strategy, and very few organizations have the data they need to include their mental health programs and services in their ESG reporting. Because the Index assessment categories are aligned with the ISO, SASB and WHO guidelines, organizations that complete the Index receive targeted, prioritized areas for improvement, helping to ensure their efforts align with the guidance from these global standards."

Mental health and ESG

Governments are also encouraging increased transparency concerning mental health and well-being. Examples include the National Standards for Workplace Psychological Health and Safety in Canada, where voluntary guidelines and resources help organizations promote mental health and prevent psychological harm. In 2019, a UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing Economics recommended that employers should routinely measure worker well-being and publish the results in annual accounts.

Increasing scrutiny of environmental, social and governance (ESG) practices of organizations, particularly by investors to determine investment and advocacy positions, is also driving a need to demonstrate impactful improvements in employee well-being. Accordingly, ESG index organizations are integrating measures of employee well-being within their benchmarking indices.

Investment research firm MSCI acknowledged that the COVID-19 crisis forced many companies to take a closer look at workforce management, including employee well-being. Rating agency S&P Global has also embedded well-being questions in ESG indices, seeing employee well-being as a key component of good human capital management.¹⁵ Both organizations have recently launched a corporate sustainability assessment, which takes into account job satisfaction, happiness, stress and purpose at work as part of its ESG evaluation.

In summary, measuring the impact of mental health interventions at work is essential for the well-being of employees, legal compliance, improved productivity, cost savings and the overall success of an organization. As mental health issues become more prevalent, employers will increasingly need to invest in addressing them through better measurements and more effective interventions. It also contributes to the positive workplace culture needed to attract and retain top talent. The good news is that a range of evidence-based tools are increasingly available to help employers measure impacts, demonstrate the validity of their interventions to be relevant to stakeholders and continuously improve.



Endnotes

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