Setting the foundations for healthy work and workplaces

Maria Karanika-Murray1, John Hudson1, Nadine Mellor1, Rich Pickford2, Tom Vickers3, Zara Whysall4, Sarah Pass4, & Emileigh Horton1

1 Department of Psychology

2 Nottingham Civic Exchange

3 Department of Sociology

4 Nottingham Business School

Context

Despite incentives to promote healthy and safe work, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that “some 2.3 million women and men around the world succumb to work-related accidents or diseases every year”[[1]](#footnote-2). The Mental Health Foundation reports that “74% of UK adults have felt so stressed at some point over the last year they felt overwhelmed or unable to cope” whilst “81% of women said this compared to 67% of men”[[2]](#footnote-3). Volumes of time, effort, and resources are invested into addressing health and well-being at work. A multitude of guidance has been published on what organizations can do to support healthy work and develop healthy workplaces.

In reality, a lot of the available guidance misses the perspective of the users, so that employers are unsure where to start, how to prioritize the advice, or how to implement actions. Often, those tasked with implementing guidance are resource-poor, time-poor, or lack the necessary skills, knowledge, infrastructure or even motivation, rendering ‘how to’ guides meaningless. As a result, more often than not, good intentions are derailed or fail to achieve desirable outcomes (Karanika-Murray & Biron, 2015) so much so that it has been argued that the probability of failure of any intervention is about 50% – not much better than chance (REF).

Organizational context, realities, and practicalities can make or break good intentions. So how can we turn words into deeds? How can organizations navigate their way through the multitude of advice? What is the essence of the available guidance for developing healthy work and workplaces?

Aims

We believe that if the foundation principles of healthy work and workplaces are in place, any specific initiatives and activities have stronger chances of succeeding. This working document goes one step back to look at these foundations.Rather than developing more of the same, we have examined existing guidance, discussed the experiences of employers, and used our own extensive research and practice to distill a number of foundation principles. Our aim is to offer a current and succinct list of principles that anchor existing guidance and best practice. It is aimed towards those tasked with developing good work and healthy workplaces. We hope that it can help organizations to maximize available resources, boost the success of initiatives, and help to support sustainable healthy work and workplaces.

Methodology

To develop this document, we followed three steps. First, we reviewed current key published guidance, focusing on their intended purpose, pitfalls, and recommendations. A detailed methodology is available from the lead author. Then, we held discussions with employers and practitioners on their experiences of implementing guidance. The debate was illuminating as it highlighted the gaps between guidance and practice, or rather the knowledge offered and the needs of organizations; the ideal state vs the often-messy process of creating healthy work and healthy workplaces. Then, we mobilised our own experience and expertise to identify the foundation principles that underlie efforts to develop and support healthy work and workplaces.

Foundation principles

1. Health and performance: Two sides of the same coin

The fact that performance and productivity, the reason for an organization to exist, go hand-in-hand with employee health and well-being goes without saying. Recognizing that this applies across the board, from accidents to physical to mental health and quality of working life is gaining more and more prominence. This principle goes beyond ‘good health is good *for* business’ (Black, 2008) to state that the two go hand-in-hand are indispensable for the organization's sustainability.

1. A shared responsibility

The prevention of ill health and promotion of good health at work should be a shared responsibility across all levels of an organization, from the individual employees and line managers when planning daily work, to the top leadership team and human resource/safety and health teams and strategic planning of work (Mellor & Webster, 2013). Health and well-being affect the whole organization and its functioning and must involve everyone.

1. A focus on organizational learning and building organizational maturity

For any safety and health initiative to have sustainable outcomes, learning has to take place from both successful and unsuccessful initiatives. In addition, learning has to be upstream from specific actions or interventions to the organization of work. Such learning forms part of the process of developing organizational maturity for safety and health, and there is strong evidence that a forward focus on building organizational maturity can bring substantial productivity improvements and cost-savings (REF).

1. Opportunities for workers to exert influence and drive change

Whilst well-being and performance go hand in hand, the time and costs associated with implementation mean that it may not always be in the interests of employers to prioritize safe and healthy workplaces. However, it is always in the interests of employees. Empowerment of workers is the most important measure that can be taken to secure more universal implementation of healthy workplaces. It can also support bottom-up implementation of other measures. This implies more than simply worker voice, extending to afford workers control over the organization of work. In order to achieve this, recognition of trade unions and their involvement in all significant decisions should be a minimum to achieve this, but it can be further strengthened by taking steps such as resourcing trade union facilities and paid time for trade union reps and including trade union representation on executive bodies[[3]](#footnote-4) (Johansson & Partanen, 2002). In some cases, cooperative business models may be the most effective measure to give workers influence.

1. Employee engagement

The MacLeod Review (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009) propelled the concept of employee engagement into the consciousness of organizations, practitioners and academics (Yalabik, et al., 2013). Findings from the review highlighted the positive links between employee engagement and organizational outcomes. Consequently, organizations, policy-makers, and academics began to pay greater attention to employee engagement (Bailey et al., 2017), which is one of the most significant concepts in the management field (Crawford et al., 2014; Fletcher et al., 2018). Major political, economic, and demographic challenges shifting the landscape of our working lives, the current uncertainty has resulted in unprecedented challenges. As a result, there is an even greater need to make fundamental changes to how we work. To support well-being, productivity, and sustainability, employee engagement is increasingly important and requires ‘renewed focus’.

1. Leadership development

Often, health and well-being are considered separately from leadership development. Managers in the organization receive leadership training without any mention on how their role and style of management might affect the health and wellbeing of their teams. Management competencies frameworks outline the competencies needed for leaders to achieve greater work performance but no competencies are to be found on the ability of leaders to influence the well-being of their teams. This is a missed opportunity knowing that good management principles can have positive effects on workers’ health. Poor management on the other hand can have deleterious effects. Evidence suggests that destructive leadership (being non-inclusive, abusive, blaming, putting people under tremendous pressure, etc.) not only undermines or destroys a team’s effectiveness but also has a pitiful impact on workers’ health. For this reason, leadership is now considered as an important occupational health factor in its own right (Montano, Reeske, Franke & Huffmeier, 2017).

1. The wider social context

All things in perspective, it is important to also acknowledge that healthy work is shaped by wider social contexts, which vary by sector, place, and social demographics. For example, in the case of care work state funding regimes and the involvement of private equity firms, both have a major impact on working conditions. For London and the South East, there is the impact of a lack of affordable housing close to workplaces. For domestic workers immigration controls have a major negative impact on health at work. This means that in some cases achieving healthy work may require changes beyond the workplace, and alliances beyond a single organization (Vickers, 2019).

1. Challenging assumptions: Understanding the data in situ

Understanding work and well-being within the workplace must take place at the right level. Using a national, sector or organization-wide view may not help you to correctly understand the issues present. Deeper understanding is key and this is about examining the data in situ. For example, although the current ‘jobs miracle’ narrative focuses on the record high level of UK employment and low in unemployment, the picture is different at the local level. Specifically, in Nottingham, for example, even at a regional perspective the low levels of employment and higher than average unemployment and economic inactivity are not shown until you drop down to the local authority/city scale. This is also true for well-being measures, which show Nottingham citizens being more anxious and reporting lower levels of life satisfaction. Research has shown[[4]](#footnote-5) how commonly held assumptions about work, such as the above, can be challenged and highlighted the need to put national statistics in the local perspective to obtain the right level of information.

1. Communicate communicate communicate

Even the most carefully considered plans can struggle to succeed or gain acceptance if employees do not really know about it or understand the reasoning behind it. Research suggests that communication can play a key role in the success of well-being-related interventions, in addition to the benefit it has to employee well-being more generally; for example information provision is shown as an influential factor differentiating organisations successfully implementing interventions from those that ‘fail’ (e.g. Sorensen & Holman, 2014), as well as increasing the chances of employees attending to and engaging with well-being initiatives (e.g. Neilsen et al, 2007). So, if you are consulting with staff to find out about stress ‘hot spots’ or priorities, do they all know about it?  If you’ve carried out a staff survey, were results shared with them when you said you would, or were they left for months without hearing anything? These might seem like very simple and obvious things, yet they are things that research suggests often fall by the wayside when set against competing priorities or simply the urgent day-to-day business of organizational life. They are also simple things that, if not done properly, can severely compromise staff engagement with and outcomes of employers’ efforts to improve employees’ well-being and performance.

1. The people make the place: Support the shared workplace experience

The people make the place and the place makes the people. Healthy and productive work is a shared experience of those working in the same organization. The important of a positive organizational culture for supporting health and well-being cannot be overestimated. There is research evidence that the collective evaluation of the workplace, the culture of the organization is as, if not more, important than well-designed jobs and good leadership (REF). Although we can describe the culture of a given organization, in practice, changing an established culture is difficult because culture is deeply rooted in the organisation; it is based on employees’ values and beliefs, and is reinforced through structure and policies. To create a workplace culture that can support healthy work, focus should be on developing a culture that is proactive, preventative, and can benefit more people. Leading by example is essential, as is reviewing the policies and practices to identify any that do not promote health and well-being.

1. Ongoing maintenance: Making changes stick

Promotion of wellbeing and reduction of work-related health and safety risks requires behaviour change, which is typically a gradual process, often involving relapse to previous ways of behaving. Given the importance of behaviour change in successful work-related health and safety initiatives (see Whysall, Haslam & Haslam, 2007, 2006a, 2006b, 2005), efforts to reinforce, support, and maintain health-promoting or risk reducing measures over the longer-term (6 months and beyond) is essential.  Attempts to reinforce, maintain and monitor the effects of interventions can make the difference between initiatives that have an impact on health and productivity and those changes that fizzle out before they have had any material effect. Indeed, maintenance of changes and ongoing reinforcement is the last of Hutton et al.'s (2003) key principles for successful change (comprising of leadership, public learning, accommodating diversity, meeting differently, and following through).

Conclusions

We have listed eleven foundation principles, which have repeatedly emerged from our research and practice on developing healthy work and healthy workplaces. These are not prioritized in any way; rather they are all interlinked and together form a mind-set that attends to:

* **The purpose of a work organisation:** The principle that health/well-being and performance are inseparable
* **The workplace:** The principle that organizational climate and culture as a shared experience drive much of the day-to-day work and therefore achievements of the organization in terms of health and performance
* **Its people:** The principle that communication, engagement, and employee voice are essential elements in managing modern work organizations
* **Its leadership:** The principle that good management enhances workers’ positive mental thus managers needs to be trained on health and well-being related competencies
* **The social context:** The principle that we ought to attend to the broader social context and its influences on work, health, and performance
* **The information available to guide our decisions:** The principle that evidence-based practice is also about understanding local data and using feedback to inform organizational learning
* **Forward looking:** The principle that such ongoing organizational learning is essential for supporting organizational maturity for health, well-being and performance and ultimately for building healthy workplaces.

The guidance documents from which some of these recommendations are built are listed in the end, with links to download them where possible. We will keep developing this working document with input from the users, both employers and employees.

References and further resources

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* Work, Well-being and Performance Research Group -<https://www.ntu.ac.uk/research/groups-and-centres/groups/work-well-being-and-performance>
* Nottingham Civic Exchange: Good Work Nottingham <https://www.ntu.ac.uk/goodworknotts>
* Work Futures Research Group
* Engage for Success TAG <https://engageforsuccess.org/new-from-the-tags>

Good Work Nottingham

Good Work Nottingham aims to provide a clear case for improving the quality of work in Nottingham. Good Work Nottingham will gather evidence and test new approaches as we move towards Nottingham becoming a Good Work City. This programme will combine research, community representation, and engagement with employers. The programme has a focus on Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, and a broader objective to influence policy at a national level. This report forms part of a multi-strand programme to discover what good work means for people and how we can realise that vision.

1. <https://www.ilo.org/moscow/areas-of-work/occupational-safety-and-health/WCMS_249278/lang--en/index.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/news/stressed-nation-74-uk-overwhelmed-or-unable-cope-some-point-past-year> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.tuc.org.uk/union-reps/health-safety-and-well-being> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. The *Laying the Foundations of a Good Work Nottingham* report on the latest local data on employment across the city has set the scene for exploring how a city like Nottingham could promote good work. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)