

## Two Things are Better Than One

# IMPROVING EMPLOYEE WELLBEING AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE



**Dr. Elissa Perry**  
Professor

**E**mployee wellbeing has never been more important as we emerge from a global pandemic into the “next normal” workplace. While HR professionals can contribute to organizational wellness from the top down (e.g., developing and administering organizational wellness related policies), they can also take a bottom up approach; helping managers employ evidence-based behaviors and practices that support employees’ wellbeing and improve their organization’s outcomes.

## A FALSE DICHOTOMY

Human resources (HR) has traditionally focused first and foremost on improving performance and financial returns. But, HR practices that improve employee performance can also increase work intensity and generate job stress. Regrettably, HR hasn’t always acknowledged these conflicting outcomes leaving managers with little to no advice for how to manage more productive yet potentially overtaxed employees.

What if the choice between improved organizational performance and employee wellbeing was a false dichotomy?



## WHAT IS WELLBEING?

The World Health Organization describes employee wellbeing as, "... a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." There are two things worth noting in this definition. First, it presents wellbeing as an umbrella term with multiple components. Second, it suggests that wellbeing is more than the absence of negative outcomes.

The research is clear that a focus on employee wellbeing can in fact provide mutual gain; employees benefit physically, mentally and socially and organizations perform better. Consider a study that found that FTSE 100 companies promoting a culture of health and engaging in best practices related to employee wellbeing outperformed those that didn't on average total shareholder return.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPLOYEE WELLBEING RIGHT NOW

A focus on employee wellbeing has never been more important. Even before a worldwide pandemic that resulted in economic upheaval (job insecurity, static wages, high unemployment), there was a shift from stable employment relationships to more precarious work arrangements like contingency and gig work. These shifts make it more challenging to hold employers accountable for work conditions and employees more reluctant to exercise their rights, and perhaps unsurprisingly are associated with a variety of negative physical and mental health outcomes (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24641559/>).

The increasing presence of chronic disease in the labor force, climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic have made physical health and safety a top of mind issue for a majority of employees but they have also impacted employees' mental and social wellbeing. Take climate change. It can pose a threat to physical wellbeing in the form of injury and stress that result from extreme weather events. Researchers now use the term "climate anxiety" to refer to what an American Psychological Task Force report (<https://www.apa.org/science/about/publications/climate-change>) suggests is a relationship between global climate change and increased stress and anxiety that can threaten mental health over time. And, while the Covid-19 pandemic clearly posed a threat to employees' physical wellbeing, it also increased stress and contributed to feelings of isolation that impacted employees' mental and social health.



## WHAT EMPLOYEES WANT

A common thread linking all of these trends is the negative impact that they are having on employees' physical, mental and social wellbeing. A recent survey (<https://www.oracle.com/news/announcement/people-believe-robots-can-support-their-career-2021-10-26/>) found that since the Covid-19 pandemic, a majority of workers have redefined "success" and are now prioritizing work-life balance, mental health and a meaningful job over a steady paycheck. How have -- and will -- HR respond to these changing employee needs?

Organizational policies (health and wellness benefits, flexible work arrangements) and wellness programs are important tools that contribute to a healthy workplace. However, these policies and programs will only have an impact if and when managers enact them and encourage their employees to use them.

Managers have an outsized influence on their employees and play an important role in creating healthy workplaces. While they have only so much influence on their employees' exercise, sleep, overall lifestyle and eating habits, they may be less aware of but more able to influence their employees' mental and social wellbeing through their management practices.

Below are three of the most important, evidence-based ways that managers can support employee' mental and social (and sometimes physical) wellbeing, increasing employee engagement and contributing to a healthier workplace.



**Are you still chasing greatness?**

Get your organization  
**Happyplacetowork** Certified

[www.happyplacetowork.org](http://www.happyplacetowork.org)





## Managers Should

### PROVIDE EMPLOYEES WITH CONTROL OVER THEIR JOBS

Unrealistic job expectations, unmanageable workloads and a lack of control over work can contribute to stress and lead to mental health problems. Research finds that people in demanding jobs who have little control over their work (limited ability to decide what to work on and how to complete the work) tend to be less healthy and have higher mortality rates than those with more control (<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2016-53231-001>; <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32271030/>).

As it turns out, millions of workers occupy these high demand/low control types of jobs including frontline service positions (retail sales, restaurant servers) and manufacturing roles (machine operators, welders) (<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2016-53231-001>). When employees have more control over things like their work hours, they report less stress and are more committed to their employers.

Managers can ensure that employees have clear job expectations, manageable workloads and reasonable deadlines and provide them with some control over their work. One way to do this is by prioritizing work outcomes over face-time and visible busyness. When managers focus on results, employees experience less work-nonwork conflict and better health outcomes. Giving employees responsibility for monitoring their attendance, or allowing them time to exercise or pursue pet projects may improve both their wellbeing and their productivity (Kulik, C. T. (2022). We need a hero: HR and the 'next normal' workplace. Human Resource Management Journal, 32(1), 216–231. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12387>). Managers also can give employees more control by inviting their opinions and including them in decision making.

**Bottom line:** HR should communicate the benefits of emphasizing work outcomes over work time. Remind managers to develop realistic job expectations and manageable workloads for their employees and consider how they can give their employees greater control over how, when, and where they do their work.



## Managers Should

### ENGAGE IN FREQUENT CHECK-INS AND PROVIDE NEEDED SUPPORT

Engaging in frequent check-ins with employees serves multiple important purposes. First, frequent check-ins provide managers with opportunities to share feedback with employees when it has the greatest impact (immediately after effective or ineffective performance).

Second, they provide managers with opportunities to surface issues, obstacles and other sources of job stress that could result in turnover. Frequent check-ins allow managers to get to know their employees and their unique needs so that they can support them in the way that is most helpful (for example through flexible work arrangements, training and development opportunities).

When managers ask employees about their personal challenges and express concern, employees who are struggling with high levels of work-nonwork conflict become more satisfied with their jobs, experience higher levels of health and are less likely to leave (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3022973/>). Support can also come in the form of managers expressing gratitude. When managers (and coworkers) express gratitude, employees have lower stress levels, stronger employee relationships and lower turnover. Despite its powerful effects, showing gratitude tends to be an underutilized resource in the workplace. That's unfortunate not to mention inefficient given that it's a resource with a limitless supply.

Third, check-ins and other opportunities for two-way communication provide employees with opportunities to have a voice in their organizations. Too much or too little communication and limited opportunities to be heard, can lead to stress.

**Bottom line:** HR can encourage managers to meet regularly with their employees so that they can share timely feedback, identify the support employees need, and provide employees with opportunities to have a voice in the workplace.



## Managers Should

### FOSTER EMPLOYEES' SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AT WORK

Workplace relationships play an important role in employee wellbeing. The more high-quality relationships an employee has with other organizational members, the more embedded they are in the organisation and the less likely they are to leave their employer.

Unfortunately, connections are in short supply in today's workplaces. A Better Up study (<https://www.betterup.com/blog/how-to-build-a-culture-of-connection-with-shawn-achor-and-farrell-redwine>) of over 3,000 US workers found that about 43% of employees didn't feel connected to their coworkers and 22% didn't have a single friend at work.

Managers can connect employees to one another which is especially important during the onboarding process and when people work independently and/or remotely. Social networks, group memberships, and regular social engagement affect wellbeing and wellbeing is positively associated with increased engagement in work. Social connections (with other team members, support staff, other managers, senior executives) not only open up information channels but help employees create support systems which affect their organizational commitment and social integration.

And consider this...employees who participate in office chit-chat experience more positive emotions, go out of their way to help co-workers and end the workday in a better frame of mind (Kulik, C. T. (2022). We need a hero: HR and the 'next normal' workplace. Human Resource Management Journal, 32(1), 216–231. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1748-8583.12387>).

**Bottom line:** HR should communicate the importance of employees' workplace relationships and suggest some ways that managers can deliberately foster them (such as mentorships, informal social gatherings).





## In Summary

While HR professionals can contribute to organizational wellness from the top down (through wellness related policies), they can also take a bottom up approach; helping managers engage in behaviors and practices that contribute to a positive, health supportive work climate.

Managers who provide their employees with some control over where, when, and how they perform their jobs, frequently meet with their employees, and foster their employees' social connections will help to create a workplace climate that supports their employees' wellbeing.

And a health supportive work environment can positively impact all stakeholders, not just employees. Improving employees' wellbeing and their engagement at work, reduces the scope of many of the problematic issues that managers face (absenteeism, lowered job performance) while at the same time reducing employee related costs, improving productivity and contributing positively to the companies' bottom line.

## Elissa L. Perry

PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY AND  
EDUCATION

Elissa L. Perry is a Professor of Psychology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her book, *Human Resources for the Non-HR Manager* ([www.NonHRManager.com](http://www.NonHRManager.com), Routledge 2023) provides managers with evidence-based information and advice related to their people management activities.

