

Work wellbeing: A new perspective

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- Work wellbeing is integral to an organisation and part of the 'human' and 'social and relationship' capitals of the <IR> Framework.
- Board, senior leaders and managers need to be cognisant of the (often invisible) elements limiting organisational productivity and wellbeing.
- Work wellbeing and high performance team coaching can lead to optimal outcomes.

Wellbeing is a topical organisational issue — for employees and also for any senior managers and boards interested in reporting on the six 'capitals' of the Integrated Reporting (<IR>) Framework. A recent EY Integrated Reporting Update¹ noted that capitals' 'stores of value' are volatile; they can be increased, transformed or reduced over time as goods and services are produced. Workplace wellbeing is integral to 'human' and 'social and relationship' capitals, which are described as employees' competencies, capabilities, experience, and motivations to innovate; and networks of relationships that facilitate information sharing among stakeholders.

Corporate governance is about how authority is exercised in an organisation and the accountability mechanisms by which organisations and those in control are held to account. Principle 3 of the ASX Corporate Governance Council's *Corporate Governance Principles and Recommendations* requires listed companies to 'act

ethically and responsibly' and notes that this 'goes well beyond compliance with legal obligations and involves acting with honesty, integrity and ... being seen to be a good 'corporate citizen'.

On this basis, an organisation's board, leaders and managers are morally responsible for maintaining a 'good' workplace. Wellbeing is reflected in many indices of organisational performance, for example, employee turnover, industrial relations, workplace health and safety, learning and development, corporate ethics, behaviour of leaders and managers, diversity and equal opportunity, customer health, safety and privacy, and human rights.

Wellbeing is pertinent in reporting against the <IR> Framework's capital perspective or in reporting to stakeholders in other ways on how the organisation acts ethically and responsibly. Despite its apparent simplicity, though, wellbeing is a vague and ultimately ideological concept that is different for every person. Grounded in personal values it is based on moral judgments of right and wrong, good and bad. In addition, wellbeing is an individual and group level experience. This fact complicates the way wellbeing is assessed in workplaces. For example, should managers be more concerned about promoting individual or group level wellbeing? Are surveys the best way to discern wellbeing in workplaces? Is wellbeing the same in every work setting?

Local knowledge about wellbeing in the workplace is necessary for leaders and managers to address their human, social and relationship capital. This article explores how this can be addressed through organisational development initiatives based on knowledge about 'work wellbeing'. This is derived from *employees' personal assessments of their wellbeing experiences in their work setting*. When managers understand how wellbeing is fostered and/or limited they can intervene strategically to maximise gains and restrict deficits in the broad human capital.

Current approaches to wellbeing

Three issues compromising knowledge of wellbeing in work settings are as follows:

1. Wellbeing is viewed as a general concept.
2. Measurement takes place before meaning is clarified.
3. Wellbeing and health are confused.

These are discussed below.

1. Is wellbeing a general concept?

Many researchers, for example, Warr², consider workplace wellbeing to be a 'general' concept or 'one-size-fits-all' approach for organisations. Consequently, a pool of factors that potentially *may* influence workplace wellbeing is created. Assessing general wellbeing means many of these factors are included in generic survey questionnaires. Results from a single organisation (that is, yours) are compared to large data sets derived from many organisations (maybe in the same industry) using the same tool.

Recent evidence reveals wellbeing is not 'one-size-fits-all'. In fact, evidence unequivocally demonstrates it is unique in each work environment.³ Put another way, *a local, nuanced, shared awareness of collective or systemic wellbeing exists in each workplace*. Large-scale wellbeing surveys cannot reveal local unique features and/or organisational dynamics because they ask general 'one-size-fits-all' questions. A general approach to measuring wellbeing is unlikely to provide enough detail to improve 'human, social and relationship capitals'.

Describing meaning first and measuring second is the only defensible way to assess wellbeing in a workplace.

2. Measurement or meaning

This in turn suggests that the first step in measuring wellbeing is to *understand what it means in an individual workplace*. Meaning is expressed in a single page concept schematic supported by rigorous, evidence-based description. The schematic shows all dimensions that 'constitute' wellbeing in that workplace. Description indicates where wellbeing is strong or lacking, what undermines it, how sub-groups may be affected and why, and where to intervene to improve both wellbeing and productivity.

With an understanding of meaning it is a simple process to develop quantitative surveys. Items are created from original data and, over time, additional items can be used to assess wellbeing as systemic change occurs.

Describing meaning first and measuring second is the only defensible way to assess wellbeing in a workplace. Without the first step leaders and managers have no grounds for confidence that what is being measured is local wellbeing. Survey items may simply be irrelevant. The organisation does not need to be benchmarked against other workplaces. After all, local rather than generic wellbeing matters more.

3. Confusing wellbeing and health

Wellbeing is not the same as mental and/or physical health.⁴ Health *may* be a subset of wellbeing but not the reverse. Therefore, workplace health initiatives (for example, massage, gym memberships, sports clubs, dietary advice, employee assistance programs) will likely have limited impact on wellbeing at work. The latter depends on a wider range of (often

hidden) factors in peoples' workplace experience. Health and wellbeing are never interchangeable concepts.

In summary, feelings, attitudes, beliefs and behaviour *are* the constituents of workplace experience. Increasingly, organisational psychology uses direct emotional experience as the basis for understanding workplaces as well as the science of wellbeing research.⁵ This meaning-based 'psychology of feeling' does not violate the rules of scientific method. It acknowledges that *workplaces are sets of relationships where meaning is an integral component*. Employees' local knowledge about wellbeing is the most complete data source for analysis, evidence-based interventions and strategic management.

'Work wellbeing': A new concept

A local concept of 'work wellbeing' is obtained by analysing employees' personal wellbeing experiences — loaded with feelings, meaning and thoughts — in their current work setting. I'm using two examples from my research to illustrate what work wellbeing is and how it can be used as a governance reporting tool for the relevant capital under the <IR> Framework or in other forms of reporting.

'Property' and 'Finance' are professional services organisations in the private and public sectors respectively. Each concept schematic is a single page showing the distinctive constitutional dimensions of their local work wellbeing. Figure 1 below is a comparison of these two concepts. (Note: each coloured 'box' in Figure 1 is accompanied by a comprehensive description. The apparent simplicity

of the concept schematic belies the associated detail gained from analysing interview data which constitutes the ‘flesh and blood’ of the wellbeing dimensions. Space limitations preclude examples here.*)

The concepts reveal how work wellbeing is experienced in these organisations. Concepts are also a benchmark for ongoing, intra-organisational research about wellbeing. Questionnaires are developed from the original data and results provide a way of assessing changes.

Here’s how to make sense of Figure 1.

Basic descriptions of work wellbeing

Property and Finance experience work wellbeing differently, as shown in the top **purple** block in Figure 1. The collective experience of work wellbeing is described as ‘collaborative productivity’ in Property. This basic description indicates work wellbeing is experienced when work activity is collaborative and/or team-based, productive and goal oriented.

In contrast, work wellbeing in Finance is described as ‘intelligent evolution’. Wellbeing is the outcome when work tasks are carried out in thoughtful, measured ways and understanding evolves with the application of collective intelligence to complex issues and projects.

The basic descriptions show each concept is quite contextualised with distinctive approaches to tasks, teamwork, using knowledge, generating intellectual property and deadlines. Differences are also implied in the kinds of people who could be attracted to each organisation and preferred styles of managing and leading. Implications for human, and social and relationship, capital can be discerned from the comprehensive textual descriptions accompanying each box*.

Domains

Employees describe wellbeing experiences intuitively (and apparently without conscious recognition) from three perspectives: *for themselves*, *with others* and *from the organisation*.

Figure 1: Concepts of work wellbeing — A comparison of two workplaces

Workplace 1: ‘Property’	Workplace 2: ‘Finance’
Basic description of work wellbeing: ‘Collaborative productivity’	Basic description of work wellbeing: ‘Intelligent evolution’
Dimensions	Dimensions
Ethical corporate behaviour (Indicated by alignment of collective values & corporate actions)	Comfortable change (Indicated by degree & pace of change)
High quality workplace (Indicated in physical & human environments)	Sanctuary (Indicated by high quality work, secure benefits, manageable work pressure)
Recognition (Indicated by appreciation & rewards)	Acknowledgment (Indicated by recognition from managers & feedback, rewards, praise)
Socio-emotional connectedness (Indicated by respectful, helpful, trusting interpersonal interactions)	Decent behaviour (Indicated by friendly, inclusive, supportive relationships with everyone)
Care for health (Indicated by organisational support for self-responsibility & initiatives for health)	Self-care (Indicated by reasonable performance expectations & lifestyle benefits)
Expand potential (Indicated by personal & career growth through challenge, control, achievement)	Career growth (Indicated by stimulating work & management support)

Legend

Domain: Principles Relationships Self

These preferred perspectives are ‘domains’ of reference called *self*, *relationships* and *principles*, respectively.

The **green** (*self*), **blue** (*relationships*) and **orange** (*principles*) boxes in Figure 1 reveal a shared, underlying domain structure across the concepts. This structure becomes clear from the content of dimensions in each domain.

Dimensions

Dimensions describe the constituents of collaborative productivity and intelligent evolution. In Figure 1 it is apparent that two dimensions constitute each domain in these concepts. Four pairs of dimensions in the self and relationships domains, although differing in detail, are nevertheless parallel in focus.

The *self* domain focuses on:

- Career development and achievement:** Expand potential (Property) and career growth (Finance).
- Caring for personal health and work life balance:** Care for health (Property) and self-care (Finance).

The *relationships* domain focuses on:

- Friendly work relationships:** Socio-emotional connectedness (Property) and decent behaviour (Finance).
- Receiving recognition for contribution:** Recognition (Property) and acknowledgment (Finance).

Additionally, two unique *principles* domain dimensions comprise each concept. Principles dimensions *differentiate* the concepts.



Work wellbeing needs an aligned executive team. The most effective method of achieving alignment is 'high performance team coaching' guided by an external facilitator.

5. **Property:** High quality workplace and ethical corporate behaviour

6. **Finance:** Sanctuary and comfortable change

What can be deduced from these results?

Property and Finance have similar content in the constitutional dimensions of self and relationships domains. Self domain focuses on career development and achievement, caring for personal health and work life balance. Relationships domain preferences friendly work relationships and recognition of employees' contributions.

In contrast, principles dimensions completely differentiated Property and Finance. Principles domain reflects collective preferences for how the organisation behaves towards employees (the internal community) and the local external community and/or society. Property's high quality workplace reflected the importance of the emotional and interactional environment in the work setting. Ethical corporate behaviour described the complexities to be negotiated when striving to act ethically as an organisation or an employee.

Principles dimensions in Finance focused on collective experiences of contentment, or distress and disruption, due to the turmoil of workplace change. These dimensions provided unexpected insights into the impact of inadequately managed organisational change processes.

Application: Organisational development

Locally defined work wellbeing is an accurate, comprehensive account of employees' views about what matters and what does not. It specifies how wellbeing is created, compromised and undermined through work processes. The concept schematic plus accompanying description provides a sound basis for decisions about human capital and targeted interventions for organisational change.

Research

This article outlined a new approach called work wellbeing. It requires a commitment to understanding the meaning of wellbeing before measuring it and instituting change processes based on this knowledge. It is a transparent and evidence-based approach to underpin strategic change. And, although individual wellbeing is important, interventions to improve performance and human wellbeing are actually best directed at the group.

Executive group coaching

Character is a skill that evolves over the life cycle.⁶ The workplace is an ideal learning location for character (also known as 'soft skills' for example, personality traits, goals, motivations and preferences).⁷ Experiential learning opportunities can help leaders, managers and employees develop soft skills and change behaviour.⁸

There is widespread agreement on character skills needed for work:

- conscientiousness (being responsible, caring, dependable, organised, persistent)
- self-esteem
- sociability
- self-management
- integrity
- attitude (for example, willingness to learn; take direction or initiative)
- work ethic
- adaptability
- honesty
- social skills (for examples, teamwork, problem solving, communication, teaching others and leadership).

Corporate leadership is a practical exercise because it involves people. Working effectively together as a team is not automatic. Indications that an executive team's character skills need to be developed include: uncoordinated or conflicting decisions and actions; wasted time in meetings; silo mindsets; unresolved team conflict; unclear role responsibilities and/or accountabilities; lack of knowledge sharing; poor coordination across functions; low morale; or a corporate culture that discourages employees from speaking up. Teams like this can't drive consistent action plans deep into their organisation or fully engage employees in executing corporate objectives.

Work wellbeing needs an aligned executive team. The most effective method of achieving alignment is 'high performance team coaching' guided by

an external facilitator. This experiential learning intervention helps align the team in preparation for leading cultural transformation.

In high performance team coaching group behaviour patterns are explored. This enables the team to understand limiting factors that hold them back and lead to confusion and disengagement in the work environment. Executive team members learn about their own and others' strengths, leadership style, working practices and contribution to the group. Outputs include agreed personal action plans outlining members' intentions to develop character skills. Perhaps the biggest advantage accruing from the process is that it promotes trust, respect, bonding and constructive interpersonal relationships, thus enabling the team to provide help to each other, stay the course and work together effectively.

Conclusion

It can be challenging for a board, senior leaders and managers to recognise the (often invisible) elements limiting organisational productivity and wellbeing. Detailed, relevant and local information about factors undermining productivity and wellbeing is needed to remedy the roots of problems. This article has set out why an enlightened approach to the task using rigorous organisational development initiatives: work wellbeing and high performance team coaching can lead to optimal outcomes. Outcomes are a defensible platform for organisational transformation and evaluation of human and social and relationship capital. ■

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Notes

- 1 Ernst & Young, 2013, 'The concept of 'capital' in Integrated Reporting'. [www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/The_concept_of_capital_in_Integrated_Reporting_July_2013/\\$FILE/EY%20'Capital'%20in%20Integrated%20Reporting%20July%202013.pdf](http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/The_concept_of_capital_in_Integrated_Reporting_July_2013/$FILE/EY%20'Capital'%20in%20Integrated%20Reporting%20July%202013.pdf)
- 2 Warr P, 2007, *Work, happiness, and unhappiness*, Lawrence Erlbaum, New York
- 3 Frost P J, 2003, *Toxic emotions at work: How compassionate managers handle pain and conflict*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Mass. See also Fyhr G, 2002, "Planned Barriers" against destructive psychological processes in care organizations', *The Qualitative Report*, 7(2). Retrieved 14 April 2005 from www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR7-2/fyhr.html. See also Kahn W A, 1990, 'Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work', *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), pp 692-724.
- 4 Seedhouse D, 2001, *Health: The foundations for achievement*, 2nd edn, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, UK.
- 5 Basch J and Fisher C D, 2000, 'Affective events-emotions matrix: A classification of work events and associated emotions'. Paper presented at the First Conference on Emotions in Organizational Life, San Diego. See also Marsella A J, 1994, 'The measurement of emotional reactions to work: Conceptual, methodological and research issues', *Work & Stress*, 8(2), 153-176.
- 6 Heckman J J, 2012, 'Noncognitive skills and socioemotional learning', The Brookings Institution. www.brookings.edu/~media/events/2012/12/06%20learning%20developing%20world/noncogskills%20sociolearn_brookings_static_20121203b_mcp.pdf
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