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Five Ways for Workplaces to Support Employee Happiness

The latest research on well-being at work can help your organization thrive.

Most of us spend the lion's share of our waking hours focusing on work. If we're not at work, we're thinking about it. We rush off to answer emails after the kids are in bed. Some of us never turn off.

No wonder the workplace loomed large at this summer's 6th World Congress of the International Positive Psychology Association. From fostering purposeful work to encouraging authenticity in the workplace, the Congress offered research and practical tips on the keys to well-being at work.

Here are some of our biggest takeaways that can help your organization support employees and help us all thrive in our professional lives.

1. Character strengths matter in the workplace

We all have our character strengths. Australian organizational psychologist Aylin Dulagil describes them as "innate, malleable, positive characteristics that are enjoyable, come easily, and are energizing."

Strengths like curiosity, creativity, and perseverance can offer a lot to the workplace. But what type of organizational climate helps bring out these strengths in us? According to Dulagil, it comes down to having a clear organizational purpose. If workers have a strong feeling about the mission of their workplace, even those who aren't aware of their strengths are more likely to be using them.

It also helps if our strengths are a good fit for the type of job we have. German researcher Claudia Harzer's work suggests that



we perform better and are more satisfied at work the more our individual strengths align with our job tasks.

"It's intrinsically motivating to behave authentically, to go with your inner drive," she said at the Congress, noting that if employees can apply four or more character strengths in the course of

their job duties, they are more likely to have positive experiences at work. However, in the case of less complex jobs, workers may need to apply six strengths or more to see the same benefits.

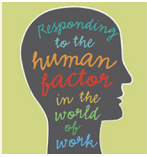
We can practice and learn how to better use our signature strengths at work, Harzer has found, and it increases our sense of work being a "calling"—which also leads to more positive experiences.

2. Feeling capable is crucial to work-life balance

For those of us trying to balance work and parenting, it helps if our workplace has family-friendly policies like generous parental leave. But the work of Australian researcher Xi Wen Chan suggests that how much employees are empowered to feel self-efficacy—the belief in ourselves and our ability to get the job done well—is actually more important than policies, in terms of benefits for the employee and the organization.

In a 2015 study, Chan and her coauthors surveyed employees about both work and non-work activities, including their levels of self-efficacy around regulating work and life (how confident they were in achieving work-life balance). The study results indicated that increased feelings of self-efficacy boosted people's satisfaction with their job and their family life.

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How can employers help their staff feel more competent? Some ideas from the study authors include allowing employees to negotiate their job scopes, supporting them in their activities outside of work (through flexible hours or sabbaticals), and implementing family-friendly policies that managers can approve for individual employees.

3. Happy employees feel like they matter

Do you feel like your work matters?

American researcher David Yaden, in conjunction with the organization BetterUp, has found that people fare better when they think their work matters and they receive validation from their organization and coworkers. They are more satisfied with their job and their life overall, they are more likely to be promoted, and they are less likely to quit.

Julie Haizlip, an American researcher who focuses on health care professionals, has found that mattering—the perception that we make a difference in the lives of others and are significant in the world—can help fend off burnout and boost resilience. She stresses the importance of organizational climate on employees' sense of mattering. "You can create your own meaning, but you can't create your own mattering," she says. Her research finds that the increasing use of electronic medicine, which reduces the person-to-person contact between clinicians and their clients and colleagues, may be a significant barrier to health care workers' sense of mattering.

One solution is having friends at work. "Having a best friend at work makes you feel like you matter," she says. Another solution: being kind to fellow health care workers and patients. "Being nice seems soft, but it is hard. Difficult or not, it also has the greatest likelihood of enabling us to develop the skills needed to create a healthy work environment," Haizlip wrote in a recent commentary in the American Journal of Critical Care.

4. Everyone needs to feel authentic at work

McGill professor Patricia Hewlin's research stresses the importance of being authentic in the workplace. False conformity—when we suppress our own values to appear to embrace organizational ones—can lead us to feel emotionally exhausted, become less engaged, and think about quitting, among other negative outcomes.

According to Hewlin, one major problem is that the ability to experience authenticity in the workplace is a privilege. For example, women who may become or are pregnant, those who wear the hijab, those who are HIV-positive, and those who have a different sexual identity than the majority at work feel less able to express their authentic selves.

One step toward more authenticity is for managers to acknowledge that some level of disagreement can actually be good for business, and to ensure that employees can voice opinions without fear of negative consequences.

5. Feeling engaged is key to well-being at work

Dutch researcher Wilmar Schaufeli focuses on engagement at work rather than happiness. He defines engagement as a "positive, affective-motivational state of fulfillment with vigor, dedication, and absorption."

Those who are engaged at work are motivated by a healthy sense of pride and satisfaction in their work; unlike workaholics, they can stop their tasks when they don't enjoy them anymore. Schaufeli's work finds that employee engagement varies by location: It's higher in countries with less corruption and more integrity, gender equality, democracy, and individualism.

How can companies boost employee engagement? By increasing job "resources," which are positive characteristics in ourselves and our work environment that help us reach our goals, reduce stress, and grow. Schaufeli has identified 30 resources, including team climate, recognition, participation in decision making, trust in management, value alignment, and more. These offer a roadmap for building engagement—and probably for improving many other aspects of the workplace, too.

The Greater Good Science Center partnered with the International Positive Psychology Association to produce videos at the 6th World Congress on Positive Psychology, and Greater Good staff led a workshop there.

By Elise Proulx | Greater Good Science Center | August 6, 2019

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