

WELLBEING AT WORK: CREATING A POSITIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

Wellbeing at work (WAW) continues to increase in importance for employees and employers and across countries. While there are different definitions of what the concept entails, within the European Union (EU) one useful definition acknowledges that well-being is 'a summative concept that characterises the quality of working lives, including occupational safety and health (OSH) aspects, and it may be a major determinant of productivity at the individual, enterprise and societal levels'⁽¹⁾. The relevance of the concept is heightened further as the work environment continues to change assisted by increasing migration (especially from less developed to more developed countries), globalisation, the development of new technologies, the move from manufacturing to service-based economies, the ageing workforce and population, an increase in the number of women in the workforce, and the transformation of work patterns; these factors have led to a workforce for which psychosocial risks have increased in priority. Therefore, there is a need to keep employees healthier, which in turn could increase the length of time spent in the workforce and thereby assist with some of the factors mentioned above, such as the ageing workforce. OSH addresses the safety and health of the workforce; while the 'health' aspect is as relevant as the 'safety' aspect in ensuring workplace wellbeing, at times this may not be reflected in the policies within organisations.

Exploring the concept of WAW within the EU

Given the differences in interpretation of what WAW entails, a survey consisting of open-ended questions was distributed to countries within Europe to gauge their interpretation of WAW and to assess if any similarities existed across countries. This survey showed that:

- an official definition did not exist in many of the countries
 - just over one-third of respondents claimed that an official definition for WAW was in place within their country;
- the interpretation differs across countries, with as many as 11 different terms in use to describe WAW
 - none of the terms were unique to any particular country, with the most commonly used terms being
 - job satisfaction
 - good/fair working conditions
 - quality of work and
 - health at work;
- generally WAW covered physical and mental wellbeing, psychosocial issues and the working environment
 - the focus of any specific factor differed by country, so, for example, while Greece focused to a greater extent on physical wellbeing, in Lithuania there was a stronger focus on social wellbeing;
- there were differences in the scope of WAW across countries

⁽¹⁾ Schulte, P. & Vainio, H., 'Well-being at work: Overview and perspective', *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment and Health*, Vol. 36, No 5, 2010, pp. 422–429.

- more attention was paid to health promotion, psychosocial issues, musculoskeletal disorders and health surveillance
- less attention was paid to return to work (RTW), training and equality;
- the challenges for WAW that are equally applicable for all countries include
 - social problems and stress due to financial crisis
 - keeping momentum in tough economic times
 - the poor health of the general population
 - getting all stakeholders to work together
 - engaging effectively with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)
 - influencing healthcare professionals that work has recuperative effects
 - implementing lessons learned and
 - improving people's understanding of WAW;
- all of the respondents reported having legislation in place relating to some elements of WAW;
- all of the respondents reported having a WAW strategy in place;
- all of the respondents noted their respective countries' involvement in a broad range of activities to promote WAW, including:
 - guidance in the field of workplace health promotion (WHP) and healthy lifestyle, healthy eating, physical activity/exercise (e.g. cycle-to-work schemes), smoking cessation campaigns, drug and alcohol prevention, mental health promotion and RTW support, health examinations such as eye tests, early detection of glaucoma and cancer screening)
 - the promotion of 'family-friendly policies', such as those which pay specific attention to working time (e.g. flexible working arrangements, teleworking, promoting a culture of not working after hours), that aim to ensure a proper work-life balance
 - activities promoted at the national, regional, local and/or sectoral levels, and often supported and/or executed by occupational health services
 - the organisation of activities by companies, particularly within large and multinational enterprises that deploy their own corporate WHP, WAW and corporate social responsibility-related strategies, policies and programmes.
- These results support that, within Europe, the concept of wellbeing in the context of the workplace has different meanings within and across organisations and countries. This may be influenced by cultural and societal processes and constraints and also in how the concept has developed over time. However, it is useful to note that some researchers and stakeholders prefer the simple approach, such as focusing only on the mental wellbeing of workers, but others, including those at an international level, accept that the term is multifaceted and will incorporate work and personal factors. Despite how it is assessed, any assessment is useful in understanding and 'improving' on the concept.

Moving forward

This research shows that the concept is not consistent across countries. Previous research in this area has acknowledged that, in general, not only is the term 'wellbeing at work' ill defined, but many of the factors by which it is assessed lack a consistent and universally accepted definition. In moving forward with the concept in Europe, it would be useful to:

- acknowledge that the concept is dynamic and continues to change;
- aim for a holistic approach when promoting the concept;
- promote consistent measurement of WAW;

- consider the needs and limitations of SMEs in any approach; and
- acknowledge the linguistic, cultural and country-specific differences.

Examples

Organisations within Europe are addressing WAW and a few of these initiatives are highlighted. The first is drawn from the Netherlands and shows the 'vitality' concept used by the Dutch. The other initiatives are from a case study collection on WAW that the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) commissioned in 2012.

- **Vitality Package and Action Plan Healthy Company (2012–2014)**

The Dutch government has articulated its ambition to ensure that people can keep working until retirement age in a healthy, vital and productive way; this is known as the Vitality Package. Another initiative is the Action Plan 'Healthy Company', which the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment developed together with the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports, with the aim to promote *vitality and health*. The focus is on supporting SMEs to improve working conditions and promote a healthy lifestyle.

- **The holistic approach**

Osram, in the Czech Republic, developed a *holistic and comprehensive approach to wellbeing* for the employees by relying on several measures. It concentrates on skill development and improvements of health and wellbeing that aim to improve the quality of work, and have positively impacted on voluntary staff turnover. Osram also takes into consideration the *balance between work and family life* in order to support family members working in Osram (e.g. time schedule of work shifting according to their needs, support in getting transport to work). The company also implemented health promotion activities at the workplace.

- **Promoting safety and health**

VÍS Insurance, based in Iceland, actively *promotes occupational and safety health initiatives* within its operational processes. This is encouraged by fostering *good communication and enabling work–life balance and meaningful work*. Communication is at the centre of wellbeing at VÍS: among staff; between management and staff; and between customers and staff. The yearly employee survey allows specific response to situations facilitating the evolution of wellbeing. Managers make improvements based on the survey results, and meet with their employee(s) to discuss the findings. Regular social events for employees (with their families) also enhance communication and team spirit. Part-time and flexible working schemes, as well as free psychological services, are available. The training possibilities offered emphasise lifelong learning and professional development. The company has implemented several health promotion actions, including ergonomic interventions, targeted indoor air quality, office furniture and office noise. Moreover, the policies for relevant emergency situations (fire, aggression, volcano eruption, influenza) were updated and distributed.

- **A focus on psychosocial wellbeing**

Omnitel, based in Lithuania, places great emphasis on dialogue with employees, the discussion of the goals and values of the company and participation in decision making. Omnitel has implemented various methods of communication with employees. It has attempted to establish a favourable environment for the family and developed initiatives to help balance work and family commitments. Omnitel is committed to providing its employees with *opportunities to have good living conditions*. One of the key measures is that each of the company's employees receives a welfare package. As knowledge and professionalism are two of Omnitel's valuable resources, *the company focuses on continuous staff training*.

Further information

The full report is available in English on the agency's website at:

https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/literature_reviews/well-being-at-work-creating-a-positive-work-environment/view

More EU-OSHA information on Workplace Health Promotion is available at:

<https://osha.europa.eu/en/topics/whp>