

Are happy employees healthier employees?

Kate Nowlan, President of the Employee Assistance European Forum reports on their summer conference in Dublin and the contribution of EAPs to the happiness at work debate



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The question of whether happy workers are healthier workers was debated by employee assistance professionals and clinicians from 23 countries at the Employee Assistance European Forum's (EAEF) conference. Some of the key themes to emerge from the conference are outlined here as well as a discussion of how employers can play their part in creating happier, healthier employees.

Happiness on the corporate agenda

The issue of happiness and wellbeing at work is one that is creeping up the human resources and occupational health agenda and becoming an integral part of services such as employee assistance and therapeutic counselling. As more employers recognise the potential for healthy and happy workers to deliver increased levels of productivity and sustained performance, employee happiness – and the wellbeing that is central to achieving this – is set to stay on the corporate agenda.

Graham Randles, Managing Director of nef consulting, a social enterprise consultancy, was keynote speaker at this year's EAEF conference. In his keynote, Graham outlined some of the latest thinking around creating the business case for building an employee's sense of wellbeing at work: 'The concept of engagement and demonstrating an individual employee's level of engagement with their employer is now well established in the business world. As a range of studies have shown, there is a firm correlation between employee engagement and high organisational productivity across all sectors of the economy. Research has also outlined how employee engagement can impact positively on levels of innovation and customer service, deliver positive outcomes in public services and increase staff advocacy in their organisations. And critically, when

it comes to building the case for investing in employee wellbeing, an employer with an engaged workforce can expect to see reduced staff turnover, low levels of accidents in the workplace and, significantly, reduced levels of absenteeism and presenteeism. An engaged workforce, it seems, has very firm links to a healthy one that has a positive sense of wellbeing.'

A dynamic model of wellbeing

According to the dynamic model of wellbeing created by the Centre for Wellbeing at the new economics foundation (nef), an independent think tank and internationally recognised leader in the field of wellbeing, an individual's personal resources (eg their health, resilience and optimism) combine with the context of their organisational system (eg work environment, relationships with co-workers and management) to allow them to function well in their interactions in the workplace, and therefore to have a positive experience of work.

The model outlines how a range of factors influence aspects of an individual's personal wellbeing and affect different areas of a person's life. 'It highlights how even the most modest improvement in wellbeing can translate into a positive experience for the individual employee and good savings on the bottom line for the employer,' explained Graham.

Getting managers on side to deliver happiness

Of course, creating a workplace environment and culture where happiness and wellbeing can flourish requires managers who can help to develop and support resilient employees, able to remain balanced and healthy under the most challenging conditions.

Dr Hansjörg Becker, from INSITE Interventions an EAP provider in Germany, addressed the conference to review the influence managers have over team members and the potential they have to impact on levels of happiness and wellbeing within the teams they lead. He explained how they might do this: 'A manager's position in a company – and their role in formal and informal communications – naturally puts them in a place where they can have significant influence over team members and employees. And when it comes to employee health and wellbeing it's really important that 'the role of line manager is not underestimated; we need to appreciate the influence they can have on the success and failure of such policies, including employee assistance programmes, workplace counselling and the bottom line impact on business success.'

Once managers have a better appreciation of their own wellness and how it can impact their behaviour and performance in the workplace, they can better understand the role that services like EAPs can play in supporting and guiding their employees in the same way. Without this appreciation, managers will not be in a position to be able to communicate the benefits of this type of service to their employees and, as a result, the opportunity for an organisation to help employees resolve issues affecting their health and performance at work will be lost.

Rensia Melles, Manager of Global Solutions at EAP provider, Shepell, agreed. She considered the cultural perspective of happiness, positioning it as subjective wellbeing that is based on an individual's evaluation of their life: 'The role of employee assistance and workplace counselling is vital to help employees achieve a balanced perception of their own wellbeing. Respecting the culture of an organisation and the personal culture and background of the employee is critical if the support available is to be non-judgmental and to offer the employee an open discussion of new ways of coping,' she said.

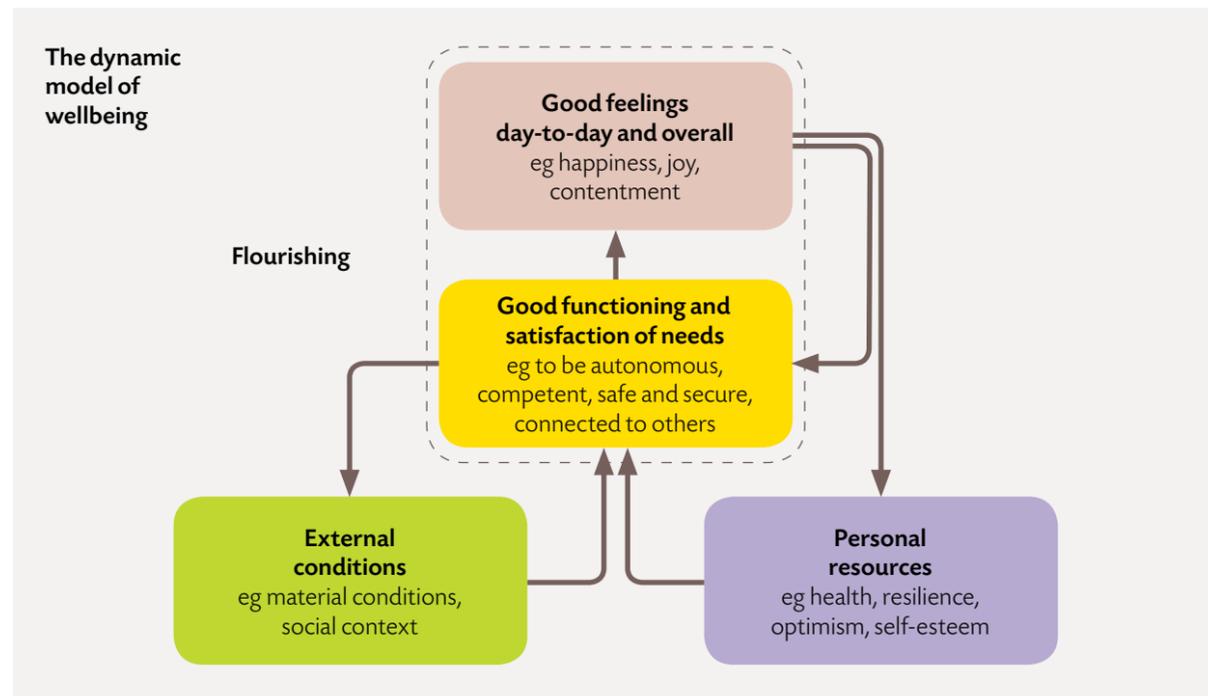
Rensia added: 'All too often a corporate culture does not reflect the culture of the country an organisation operates in. It is here that wellbeing professionals need to provide a bridge between the two "norms" and help to develop a way of working that promotes diversity and accommodates both sets of values and ways of working.'

The impact of life outside work on employee happiness

Employers were also challenged at the conference to address the impact of the 'spillover' of an employee's work into their life outside of work, and in doing so review the effect of work and happiness on an individual's capacity to sustain positive relationships.

Brendan Madden, Chief Executive of Relationships Ireland, encouraged EAEF delegates to recognise how employees in demanding roles, for example, could benefit from support and information to enable them to balance the competing demands in their lives. 'Romantic relationships – whether it's casual dating or marriage – can impact on job performance and financial status because of the potential they have to affect an individual's mental and physical health. In terms of mental health and wellbeing, studies indicate that people in committed relationships are generally happier than other people,' Brendan said.

Despite this, there are a number of relationship 'flashpoints' – for example, working mothers who face a 'second shift' when they arrive home from work, new fathers who are stressed by limited paternity leave or the difficulties faced by working couples to negotiate a fair share of domestic chores at home – which can all impact on employee happiness and productivity, according to Brendan Madden.



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To minimise the impact of ‘spillover’ on an individual’s happiness in the workplace and out of it, he emphasised the importance of support from employee assistance programmes and workplace counselling, but also called on employers to provide more comprehensive and planned support for significant life events, as well as couples counselling for those who are facing significant issues affecting their own and their joint happiness.

Practical tools to deliver happiness

The EAEF conference also provided delegates with the opportunity to experience some of the tools and tactics currently available to help employees feel happier.

‘Many employees are aware of how difficult it is to find the time or energy while they’re at work to focus on their physical, emotional and social wellbeing. And yet these things are so important to really help them be the best they can be. When you are thriving and pleased with your wellbeing, you are happier, more productive and more focused,’ said Nina Grunfeld, creator of Life Clubs, a series of practical and structured weekly self-help, personal improvement workshops, and author of *The Big Book of Me* and *The Life Book*. She added: ‘When we think of wellness and wellbeing, being physically fit is often the first thing that springs to mind and, indeed, it is a key component; but it’s not the only one. Wellbeing includes mental, emotional and spiritual health and it’s vital that all aspects are addressed if employees are to strive towards a healthier and happier life, whether they’re at work or at home.’

Delegates participated in a Life Clubs workshop that supports employees to identify and define their own happiness. Individuals are encouraged to discover the values that make them happy so that they can use them in their everyday life.

‘When your values are conscious and clear to you, making decisions becomes easier and you can tell whether something is right for you or not. As a result, you’ll feel more comfortable in your own skin and the world you live in,’ explained Nina.

Five ways to wellbeing

One route to promoting wellbeing – and thereby happiness in the workplace – has been developed by nef consulting in the form of its ‘five ways to wellbeing’ that can improve an individual’s understanding of and knowledge about their own happiness.¹ With a range of ideas and options to improve and sustain wellbeing, this template can be adapted to support employees from a range of different backgrounds.

1 Connect - with the people around you, family, friends, colleagues and neighbours. At home, work, school or in your local community. Think of these as the cornerstones of your life and invest time in developing them. Building these connections will support and enrich you every day.

2 Be active - go for a walk or run. Step outside. Cycle. Play a game. Garden. Dance. Exercising makes you feel good. Most importantly, discover a physical activity you enjoy and that suits your level of mobility and fitness.

3 Take notice - be curious. Catch sight of the beautiful. Remark on the unusual. Notice the changing seasons. Savour the moment, whether you are walking to work, eating lunch or talking to friends. Be aware of the world around you and what you are feeling. Reflecting on your experiences will help you appreciate what matters to you.

4 Keep learning - try something new. Rediscover an old interest. Sign up for a course. Take on a different responsibility at work. Fix a bike. Learn to play an instrument or how to cook your favourite food. Set a challenge you will enjoy achieving. Learning new things will make you more confident as well as being fun.

5 Give - do something nice for a friend, or a stranger. Thank someone. Smile. Volunteer your time. Join a community group. Look out, as well as in. Seeing yourself, and your happiness, linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding and creates connections with the people around you.

Measuring employee happiness in the workplace

Conference delegates also learned of new tools available to measure the workplace effectiveness of EAPs, with the adoption of tools to conduct routine outcome monitoring.

The Workplace Outcomes Suite² is a tool that can illustrate the effectiveness of EAPs in the workplace by measuring improvements in productivity and enabling EAP providers to scientifically demonstrate the correlation of EAP interventions to workplace outcomes.

The WOS focuses on five measures which are central to understanding the effects of EAPs in the workplace: absenteeism, presenteeism, work engagement, life satisfaction and workplace distress. The WOS tool asks users to indicate their level of agreement (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree) with each of the statements for the past 30 days. The absenteeism measure asks users to report the number of hours they have missed work – whether they have been absent for a whole day or were distracted while at work, over the past 30 days, because of a personal issue.

‘The WOS stands apart from other outcome measures because it is short, psychometrically tested and validated, workplace-focused, easy to administer and free of charge. This is important because of the major obstacles that have been linked to other outcome measures: they are simply too long, consider only one aspect and/or are expensive to purchase or administer,’ said Dr David Sharar who co-developed the WOS with Dr Richard Vennox.

‘The purpose of the WOS is to test the strength of the association between counselling or coaching and work effectiveness so it can identify whether employees are improving at work. It will not authoritatively explain why or prove that counselling or coaching has caused the improvements at work. However, the stronger the correlation between EAP and work effectiveness, the stronger the association and the likelihood that they also contributed to work effectiveness,’ he explained.

The future of the happiness debate

It is clear that happiness, whether it is defined in the context of engagement or wellbeing, is now well established on the agenda of organisations throughout the world. And as more organisations invest in defining, supporting and sustaining the happiness and wellbeing of their employees, it is certain that benefits in the form of performance, productivity, staff retention and engagement will be generated.

As the issues and experiences discussed at this year’s EAEF conference have demonstrated, employee assistance professionals and workplace counsellors have a central role to play here; through the effective delivery of interventions to guide and support individuals who require assistance, happiness can be nurtured and mechanisms to uphold and prolong happiness, whatever that means for the individual in question, can be shared.

References

- 1 www.nef-consulting.co.uk
- 2 (WOS), developed by Dr David Sharar, Managing Director, at Chestnut Global Partners, and Dr Richard Lennox, VP of Commercial Science.