

MEASURING WELLBEING FOR HEALTHY WORKERS AND ORGANISATIONS

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
FROM THE NATIONAL
FORUM FOR HEALTH AND
WELLBEING AT WORK

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The University of Manchester
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**The National
Forum for
Health and
Wellbeing
at Work**



With multiple definitions of wellbeing and choice of metrics, how do organisations actually decide what to measure?

In fact, simple, evidence-based metrics are widely available to bring confidence to a robust, consistent assessment of overall wellbeing with opportunities to improve it in most workplace contexts.

This short guide from members of the National Forum for Health and Wellbeing at Work provides a working definition (what is wellbeing?) a summary of the evidence linking wellbeing and performance (why measure wellbeing?), and information to help with selection of metrics (how to measure wellbeing).

We aim to help organisations of any size make better evidence-based choices and choose metrics that drive improvements in worker wellbeing for better personal and organisational outcomes.

With a secure basis for assessing interventions line managers can better discharge their accountability for worker wellbeing, and workplace wellbeing professionals can better support them in this endeavour.





INTRODUCTION

Placing health and wellbeing at the heart of organisational strategies makes business sense. Productivity, staff retention and other key business outcomes have been shown to improve when employers genuinely care about employee wellbeing.

To create an authentic and sustained culture of wellbeing in a high performing organisation requires a clear definition of what wellbeing is, an understanding wellbeing trends, and their underlying drivers. Critical to success when selecting metrics is that they are:

- > Simple and easy to understand
- > Drawn from robust data sources (preferably readily available)
- > Relevant and credible to a wide range of stakeholders inside (e.g. employees, managers) and outside the organisation (e.g. shareholders, advocacy groups)

Over the past decade, subjective (or personal) wellbeing has grown in prominence among national and international policy, businesses, and academic agendas. The need for employers to demonstrate that they care about wellbeing has been amplified by four recent trends:

- > Generation Z and millennials with 'in-demand' skills such as digital, technology and artificial intelligence (AI) predominate in workforce talent pools. They are placing a higher priority on wellbeing than previous generations
- > The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the demands for employer care and blurred the causes and impacts of stress between work and home
- > Hybrid working is becoming the norm especially for knowledge workers. This presents wellbeing challenges and opportunities for employers and workers
- > Investor decisions are increasingly driven by Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) indexes, increasing in scope to embrace health and wellbeing considerations

HOW DO YOU DEFINE WELLBEING?

At its simplest, personal wellbeing can be defined as a subjective summation of how we feel, function, and evaluate our lives as a whole. This definition is at the heart of most globally accepted wellbeing frameworks and is widely used to assess national, organisational, and personal wellbeing trends. We flourish when we feel good, function well, and when we think that life is going well.

It is important to differentiate measures of subjective wellbeing (the personal sum of how people feel in themselves and function) from measures of underlying wellbeing drivers. Such drivers include external factors (e.g. education and learning, income, employment status, home and work environment, social networks) and internal factors (e.g. health, optimism, resilience, and self-esteem). The relationship between subjective wellbeing and its drivers is helpfully summarised below:

Figure 1:

New Economic Forum's (NEF) dynamic wellbeing model (Michaelson, Mahony and Schifferes 2012)





WHY MEASURE WELLBEING?

Tracking the sum of individual wellbeing perceptions in an organisation is a useful barometer of employee sentiment, even though it is influenced by factors outside of the organisation's control. Identifying and tracking relevant drivers of subjective wellbeing enables targeting of interventions towards the most relevant factors in an organisation. Trends in wellbeing metrics can also be used to identify entity-wide and local 'hot-spots' with common drivers to focus interventions.

There is a body of evidence demonstrating correlations between wellbeing trends and business outcomes such as high value staff retention, sickness absence or presenteeism, and improved organisational advocacy.

More recently, surveys of companies in Europe (2019) have shown that organisations with a high degree of worker autonomy (control) and direct involvement in decision-making, skills development focus, and management support, were most likely to achieve a win-win between worker wellbeing and organisational performance.

WHAT SHOULD I MEASURE?

It is important to differentiate and track trends in subjective wellbeing and shifts in multiple underlying drivers (or domains) of wellbeing.

Subjective wellbeing

Specific questions to measure subjective wellbeing can be readily integrated into employee surveys run annually or more frequently. The four questions are:

- 1 "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?"
- 2 "Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?"
- 3 "Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?"
- 4 "Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?"

These questions are at the heart of several internationally recognised wellbeing indices (e.g. Harvard, UK Office of National Statistics (ONS), What Works Centre for Wellbeing, and Business in the Community (BITC) frameworks).

Wellbeing drivers

What Works Centre for Wellbeing also describe five domains which contribute to our wellbeing (see figure 2). For each of these domains or drivers, evidence-based indicators can be defined that correlate with positive wellbeing. The most important domains have been shown to be 'health' and 'relationships,' followed by 'security' and 'environment' and then 'purpose'.

Some metrics, leading indicators, provide an early indication of positive outcomes. They are typically input oriented (e.g. risk assessments completed, workplace risk reduction training attendance). While they may show early improvement trends, longer term metrics are needed to demonstrate sustained improvements for outcomes such as anxiety and distress. These are known as lagging indicators and are typically output oriented (for example utilisation of Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) counselling sessions). Trends in lagging indicators may provide assurance of sustained success for a risk-reduction strategy.

Proxy measures

These are indirect measures of the desired outcome which can be useful when there is little or no stronger data available. Proxy measures can also provide a weak signal of a problem area for further evaluation. For example worker start and finish times (based on times of access to workplace IT systems) may be a proxy for a lengthening of the working day. They may also indicate workers taking control over how they plan their waking hours to balance personal and workplace commitments.

Tracking a broader spectrum of leading indicators can provide a more complete and culturally sensitive 'deep dive' picture of what affects a particular driver of wellbeing in your organisation. It may also be useful for demonstrating risk reduction.

Figure 2:

Five Key Drivers of Wellbeing
(After What Works Centre for Wellbeing, 2018)





NEXT STEPS - HOW TO MEASURE AND TRACK WELLBEING



Subjective wellbeing assessments can be integrated within existing, periodic employee surveys and used within work groups to provide a snapshot of employee sentiment. When considering wellbeing drivers we offer widely used metrics where evidence for positive impacts on wellbeing after interventions is strong and/or where there is evidence for a positive impact on organisational outcomes.

Such data is often subject to personal privacy, making conformance with local legislation an essential consideration. It is advisable to take advice from a competent work and health professional when selecting drivers to track, and methodologies for tracking. Consultation with employees and their representatives is also likely to be required for implementation of a successful strategy.

Local pilots are a useful to identify barriers, build stakeholder buy-in and generate improvement opportunities before wider implementation.

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CONCLUSION

Wellbeing is a personal subjective reflection of how well we are thriving. Many measurable factors in workplace settings can affect our wellbeing and performance, and at an organisational level they affect the productivity of an organisation. Before starting measurement, it is essential to ask yourself why each question is there, its relevance to your organisation, how it varies with your population demographic and how it will add value as an employer. By identifying areas for improvement, targeting evidence-based interventions, and tracking their impact, together we can improve worker wellbeing and improve the overall productivity of our organisations and national economy.

For more information about the National Forum for Health and Wellbeing at Work please contact lina.siegl@manchester.ac.uk.

For more details about specific wellbeing drivers that can be used by organisations go to <https://www.alliancembs.manchester.ac.uk/research/health-wellbeing-forum/>

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