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Editorial

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Well-being & Work – Challenges to Intervention in the Workplace

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Research on well-being at work is flourishing, reflecting the perspective that a strategic and proactive investment in developing healthy organisations can bring benefits to employers, employees and the wider society [1-4].

Claims regarding the importance and benefits of enhanced employee well-being have strong intuitive appeal. However, there is currently a lack of clarity, or consensus, over even basic elements [5], to the extent that an agreed framework for measurement remains elusive. Much debate and opaqueness surrounds the concept in terms of its definition, contributory influences and, more fundamentally, the extent to which it should be viewed as a promotion (enhancement) or attrition (prevention from harm) agenda. Rather, there is a rich but disjointed evidence base from a range of social science disciplines relating to the correlates of well-being and their relative importance [6].

Essentially, the evidence base reflects two traditions: work on happiness (subjective well-being: satisfaction, resilience) and human potential (psychological well-being; meaning, growth, engagement, aspiration, integrated functioning, and purpose in life) [7-10]. The multidimensional nature of well-being suggests a complex range of indicators that transcend any single discipline, e.g. psychological work highlights emotional well-being, psychiatric distress, social integration, and adaptive functioning; traditional biomedical perspectives tend to focus on quality of life, physical health, and mental health; whereas sociological and management perspectives tend to focus on human resource practices, job satisfaction, organisational climate and management style. At a societal level, well-being is often characterised as a narrow monolithic entity, with causes and effects often being confounded, e.g. social indicators and economic prosperity are commonly used as distant proxies [6].

Arguably, the methodologically top-down approach that typifies contemporary mainstream research in this area, much of this being correlational, has unwittingly contributed to this opaqueness; each study routinely discovering further variables, only for these to be incorporated in the next. While there is an academic merit in this, there is also a risk of the field becoming increasingly detached from the needs of its subject matter: employees, their employers and public policy architects. From the perspective of application, a net result of the ever-increasing array of variables is a risk of creating more heat than light.

Fundamentally, there is a dislocation between the academic interest and approach and the needs of stakeholders. A net result of the difficulty in identifying key variables for intervention appears to be a retreat by policy makers and employers to a work and well-being agenda dominated by a narrow focus on the individual, e.g. stress management/counselling and lifestyle-health issues, such as smoking cessation, healthy diets etc. [11], rather than attempting to address more fundamental aspects associated with the design and systems of work, and underpinning social relations.

A key challenge for researchers is to find ways to synthesise the complexity and opaqueness that surrounds work and well-being into an agenda that policy makers and employers can comprehend, engage with and act upon. Public policy and employer agendas routinely move faster than research [12], witness recently announced rises in State pension age across most Western States. Thus it is important that we aim to align work-related well-being research with stakeholders' agendas. Successful management of employee well-being at work relies on a strong conceptual framework to support the use of reliable actionable tools for use by organisations and practitioners.

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