Wellbeing and Burnout in the Workplace: Organizational Causes and Consequences
Sabine Sonnentag, University of Mannheim, Mannheim, Germany
© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Abstract
Well-being is a multidimensional concept, with burnout being a specific job-related construct of poor well-being. This article provides definitions of well-being and burnout, and introduces the new concept of work engagement. It briefly presents theoretical models on job-related well-being and burnout. It summarizes empirical studies on workplace and personal factors contributing to job-related well-being and burnout as well as studies on job-related consequences of poor well-being and burnout. Interventions for improving job-related well-being are also described.

Conceptualizations of Well-Being and Burnout
Job-related well-being is a specific aspect of subjective well-being and comprises positive features such as work engagement, job satisfaction, job attachment, job involvement, and job morale; impaired job-related well-being includes experiences such as job tension, depression, burnout, and alienation from work. The well-being concept refers to both minimal and temporary changes in employee mood and more long-term disturbances in mental health (e.g., chronic anxiety or psychosomatic complaints). It is typical for work-related research to examine mental health and well-being in normally working samples who are not psychiatric patients.

Job-related well-being is a multidimensional concept. Based on the conceptualization of arousal and pleasure as two independent dimensions, Warr (1987) proposed a model of job-related well-being comprising three dimensions: the first dimension runs from displeasure to pleasure, the second from anxiety to comfort, and the third from depression to enthusiasm. Additionally, feelings of competence and aspiration can also be regarded as facets of job-related well-being.

Burnout is a specific and severe form of disturbed job-related well-being, originally mainly observed in human service professionals. According to Maslach and Jackson (1981), the burnout syndrome comprises emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (i.e., negative and cynical attitudes toward one’s clients or patients), and reduced personal accomplishment as the key dimensions. More recently, Demerouti et al. (2001) have conceptualized exhaustion and disengagement as the two main components of burnout. During the past decades, researchers have observed that burnout not only develops in human service professions but can also occur in all kinds of jobs.

While most research examined negative aspects of well-being, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) proposed to focus on work engagement as a positive aspect of job-related well-being. Work engagement comprises three dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption. It is a positive state of mind that becomes evident in the process of working. Whereas negative aspects of well-being such as burnout seem to be more influenced by job stressors, work engagement tends to benefit from job resources (e.g., job control).

Theoretical Models on Job-Related Well-Being and Burnout
During the past 50 years, researchers have put much effort into the development of theoretical models on the relationship between work situation factors and job-related well-being and burnout. Among the most prominent models are the job characteristics model (Hackman and Oldham, 1976); person–environment fit theory (Harrison, 1978); the job demand–job control model (Karasek and Theorell, 1990), along with its refinements (e.g., Demerouti et al., 2001); the vitamin model (Warr, 1994); and the effort–reward imbalance model (Siegrist, 1996).

In their job characteristics model, Hackman and Oldham (1976) specified five core job characteristics that are assumed to be crucial for high internal work motivation and employee satisfaction: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback from the job. These job characteristics are expected to impact critical psychological states (i.e., experienced meaningfulness of the work, experienced responsibilities for work outcomes, and knowledge of the results of work activities), which in turn impact the motivation and satisfaction as outcome variables. Furthermore, Hackman and Oldham proposed that moderators such as growth need strength, contextual satisfaction, knowledge, skills, and abilities have an effect on the relationship between core job characteristics and critical psychological states and also on the relationship between critical psychological states and outcome variables. Humphrey et al. (2007) provided a comprehensive overview over the empirical research on the job characteristics model.

Person–environment (P-E) fit theory (Harrison, 1978) proposes that strain occurs when characteristics of the job environment do not fit the individual. Two types of fit between an individual and the environment can be differentiated: the fit between the demands of the environment and the abilities and competencies of the person (demands–abilities fit), and the fit...
between the needs of the person and supplies from the environment (needs–supplies fit). According to P-E fit theory, well-being suffers when environmental demands exceed the person’s abilities and when the person’s needs exceed the supplies provided by the environment. Meta-analytical evidence shows that demands–abilities fit and needs–supply fit are indeed positively related to well-being indicators (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

The job demand–job control model (Karasek and Theorell, 1990) received much attention within work and organizational psychology. In its original version, the job demand–job control model describes two dimensions relevant for job-related well-being: job demands and job control. In this model, job demands refer to high workload and time pressure, and job control includes decision authority and intellectual discretion. The model proposed that the combination of high job demands and low job control becomes evident in so-called high-strain jobs that have severe negative effects on employee well-being. The original model further assumed that a combination of high job demands and high job control results in active jobs that have more effects on employee well-being. Later, other work situation factors, such as social support and informational control, have been incorporated into the job demands–job control model (Karasek and Theorell, 1990).

Demerouti et al. (2001) extended the job demand–job control model into a more general job demands–job resources model. Importantly, Demerouti et al. suggested that in addition to job control, other resources (e.g., feedback, reward, participation, supervisor support) can also buffer the negative effects of job demands on poor well-being or burnout. In addition, this model stated that job resources in the workplace have motivational power and increase work engagement (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

In his vitamin model, Warr (1994) proposed that job-related well-being is affected by job characteristics in a way similar to the effects of vitamins on physical health. Basically, the vitamin model suggests that some job characteristics have a linear effect, whereas others have a nonlinear effect on well-being. Among the job characteristics assumed to be linearly related to well-being are physical security, a valued social position, and availability of money. Job characteristics assumed to show a curvilinear relationship with well-being include opportunity for personal control, opportunity for skill use, externally generated goals (i.e., demands), variety, environmental clarity, and opportunity for interpersonal contact. More specifically, the vitamin model assumes that well-being increases as these latter job characteristics increase; however, at a very high level, these job characteristics will cause a decrement in well-being.

The effort–reward imbalance model (Siegrist, 1996) builds on the assumption that the effort a person invests in his or her job and the rewards he or she gets are crucial for the person’s well-being and health. Effort may result from extrinsic (e.g., obligations and demands of the job) and intrinsic (e.g., resulting from a high need for control or approval) demands. With respect to rewards, money, esteem, and status control (e.g., job stability, career advancement) can be differentiated. In essence, the model proposes that a lack of reciprocity between effort and rewards is experienced as stressful and leads to impairments in health and well-being. Empirical studies tend to support this view (Van Veghel et al., 2005).

Predictors of Job-Related Well-Being and Burnout

Empirical research has identified job stressors and job resources as the core predictors of job-related well-being and burnout. In addition, personality variables can also explain interindividual differences in job-related well-being and burnout. With respect to job stressors (i.e., events and conditions in the work situation that evoke strain reactions), there is evidence that employees who face a high workload and time pressure report a poorer job-related well-being (De Lange et al., 2003) and higher levels of burnout (Crawford et al., 2010). Moreover, so-called hindrance stressors (e.g., hassles, interruptions, situational constraints, organizational politics) are related to poor job-related well-being and burnout (Crawford et al., 2010), with hindrance stressors often showing larger effect sizes than workload or time pressure. Probably, job conditions that make it difficult and effortful for employees to accomplish their tasks are more detrimental than the sheer amount of work. Research further showed that work-related critical incidents (i.e., unexpected and severe events such as the death of a patient a health professional is caring for) predict symptoms of anxiety and depression (de Boer et al., 2011). Moreover, workplace bullying is related to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression as well as burnout (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012).

Overall, longitudinal studies support the view that the effect of job stressors on poor well-being and burnout is stronger than the effect of poor well-being or burnout on the exposure and perception of job stressors (Sonnentag and Frese, 2012). This pattern of findings speaks for a stronger causal effect from stressors on strains than from strains on stressors. However, with respect to workplace bullying, it turned out that this stressor predicted mental health problems to a degree similar in size as to which mental health problems predicted workplace bullying (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2012). Thus, the experience of workplace bullying might contribute to a vicious cycle, with vulnerable employees suffering most from this type of job stressor.

When it comes to the predictors of work engagement, it is important to differentiate between two types of job stressors. Challenge stressors such as a high workload are positively related to work engagement, whereas hindrance stressors (e.g., situational constraints, hassles, social conflicts) are negatively related to work engagement (Crawford et al., 2010). Combining these findings with the findings on the predictors of poor well-being and burnout, challenge stressors reveal an ambivalent nature: they are related to high work engagement and to strain symptoms and burnout. Possibly, they are energizing and – at least under some circumstances – depleting at the same time.

Job resources are conditions at work that help perform well or deal with stressors in a positive way. Job control (i.e., autonomy) and social support belong to the most frequently studied job resources. Studies have shown that job control is positively related to well-being (De Lange et al., 2003; Humphrey et al., 2007) and low burnout levels (Crawford et al., 2010). When employees have some discretion about how to do their job, they experience a better well-being and are less exhausted. Also, social support was found to be a positive factor in the workplace, showing negative
correlations with burnout (Halbesleben, 2006). Employees who receive a high level of social support from their supervisors and coworkers enjoy a better well-being than persons who lack social support. Similarly, job resources are also positively related to work engagement (Christian et al., 2011; Crawford et al., 2010). In addition, leadership variables predict work engagement (Christian et al., 2011).

It has been argued that job resources, particularly job control, buffer the negative effects of job stressors on well-being (e.g., Karasek and Theorell, 1990). Empirical evidence for this buffer hypothesis, however, is mixed (De Lange et al., 2003). It has been suggested that the resources must match the stressors that they should buffer, otherwise they are only of little help (Daniels and de Jonge, 2010).

Job-related well-being and burnout depend not only on employees’ job stressors and job resources but also partly on their personality. Alarcon et al. (2009) identified negative affectivity (i.e., low levels of emotional stability) as a strong predictor of burnout. It might be that employees with high levels of negative affectivity see their work environment in a more negative light and are less able to cope with job stressors. In addition, other individual difference variables such as low general self-esteem, low general self-efficacy, and an external locus of control are related to elevated burnout levels (Alarcon et al., 2009). Also, work engagement seems to depend on personality factors. Particularly, conscientiousness, positive effect, and proactive personality are substantially related to work engagement (Christian et al., 2011).

Person-related factors have also been examined as moderators of the relationship between job stressors and poor well-being or burnout. For instance, emotional stability was found to buffer the negative effects of job stressors (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2009). Recent research has demonstrated that also processes happening off the job play a role for job-related well-being and burnout. For example, when employees mentally detach from work during their leisure time (i.e., temporally disengage from the demands of their jobs), they enjoy a better well-being, particularly when job stressors are high (Sonnentag, 2012).

Taken together, job-related well-being and burnout have multiple causes that lie partially in employees’ work situation, partially in their personality and their life off the job. It seems that particularly the combination and interplay of various factors are responsible for a person’s job-related well-being.

Consequences of Job-Related Well-Being and Burnout

Low job-related well-being and burnout are not only unpleasant experiences but they may also threaten the individual’s functioning within the work organization. Research shows that poor job-related well-being is negatively associated with task and contextual performance (Ford et al., 2011). This negative relationship between poor well-being and performance was found for various performance measures (self-reports, supervisor and peer ratings, organizational records), suggesting that the empirical correlations cannot be reduced to a pure perceptual bias. Interestingly, the effect sizes tend to be higher for these more psychological well-being indicators than for physical symptoms (Ford et al., 2011). When looking specifically at burnout, research demonstrates significant correlations between burnout and objective performance indicators as well as customer satisfaction (Taris, 2006). Moreover, burnout also matters for safety issues: employees with elevated burnout levels experience more adverse events, accidents, and injuries (Nahrgang et al., 2011). In contrast to burnout and other impairments of job-related well-being, work engagement was found to be positively related to task and contextual job performance (Christian et al., 2011).

When interpreting these findings, one has to take into account that most studies used cross-sectional designs. Thus, the results do not necessarily imply that poor well-being and burnout have a causal effect on performance. It might be that performance has an effect on job-related well-being or that both well-being and performance are influenced by other factors such as a leadership behavior or organizational climate.

Intervention Programs

Different kinds of interventions aim at the protection and improvement of job-related well-being. Most interventions are oriented toward the individual, i.e., to the way an individual perceives or deals with unfavorable work situations. Other individual-oriented interventions are designed to directly influence the individual’s psychological and physical well-being, for example, by progressive muscle relaxation, cognitive-behavioral interventions, or meditation techniques. Empirical evaluations of these programs provide evidence for the effectiveness of interventions based on the behavioral–cognitive approach as well as on relaxation or meditation (Richardson and Rothstein, 2008), with behavioral–cognitive interventions showing the largest effect sizes. Interestingly, multi-method approaches (i.e., interventions that combined methods and exercises from a variety of conceptual frameworks) resulted in smaller – albeit still significant – effect sizes (Richardson and Rothstein, 2008), perhaps because they are less successful in giving employees a clear focus and guidance about what to do in a stressful situation. In addition to these specific stress management approaches, interventions that aim at lifestyle changes and that increase efficacy beliefs are also successful in improving well-being (e.g., Chen et al., 2009). For instance, workplace interventions that stimulate increased physical activity are associated with better well-being (Conn et al., 2009).

Another approach to improve job-related well-being focuses on workplace interventions. During such workplace interventions, jobs are redesigned, for instance, by increasing employee job control, by reducing job stressors, or by increasing job resources. Empirical studies show beneficial effects of such workplace interventions on job-related well-being (e.g., Holman et al., 2010). Overall, the effect sizes of all intervention programs vary largely in size, suggesting that they have to be tailored to the specific requirements of the situation and to employees’ needs.
Daniels, K., de Jonge, J., 2010. Match making and match breaking: the nature of
Bibliography

540

See also: Ethical Codes, Professional: Business Codes; Human Resource Management, Psychology of; Leadership in Organizations, Sociology of; Organization: Overview; Organizational Climate; People in Organizations; Stress at Work; Workplace Autonomy; Workplace Safety and Health.

Bibliography


