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Primary challenges for employee health and wellbeing

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This short review listing the primary challenges for employee health and wellbeing was built utilizing three different sources: Textbook knowledge, expert opinions, and artificial intelligence. The review reveals three main topics, namely: (1) Stress and its effects on mental and physical health; (2) uncertainty coming with constant and partly dramatic organizational and societal change; and (3) work-life balance and detachment. This list of challenges may be useful for researchers designing new theories and research and for practicing managers.

1. Introduction

How do we know what the primary challenges for employee health and wellbeing are? Aren't they numerous and isn't there an endless number of contingencies such as age, industry, sector, and culture (national or organizational), to name but a few, that one would need to take into account? While this is certainly true, there are some ways to approximate a set of challenges that might be helpful in drafting an agenda for research to be conducted now and in the future to be published in a section on employee health and wellbeing in this journal.

In writing this short statement, I took three different approaches to develop a list of the primary challenges for employee health and wellbeing that leaders and organizations face which—while not perfect and complete—might be useful for researchers and managers alike.

First, there is the proverb that the best way to learn something, is to teach it. This paper begins with a course description for students enrolled in a Master's psychology degree program with a focus on work & organizational psychology and executives in MBA programs who take courses in organizational behavior.

Second, in order to get an idea about the main challenges, this researcher asked experts in the field. Associate editors involved in this section of the journal who all have been carefully selected because of their expertise were consulted. They all are experienced scholars with years of research and teaching practice in organizational psychology and they have published widely on employee health and wellbeing. And while they are certainly not fully representative on any given category, they comprise a diverse group in terms of age, gender, cultural background, personal experiences, and methodological approaches in their research.

And finally, this paper makes use of the intelligence of the "swarm", i.e., this researcher has distilled the information available on the internet utilizing artificial intelligence.

1.1. What does the textbook reveal?

This research draws on 20 years' experience teaching courses in organizational psychology and organizational behavior (OB) in different programs. In the introductory session, these courses always discuss today's challenges to managers and employees. This researcher's first OB class was part of a full-time MBA program at Aston Business School back in 2003. The course was based on the then just published 10th edition of Robbins' OB textbook (Robbins, 2003) and the main challenges it listed were as follows:

1. Managing a diverse workforce
2. Managing within global markets/environments
3. Developing organizational ethics
4. Increasing productivity and wellbeing
5. Virtual work environments.

Apparently, employee wellbeing at that time seemed to be one of the pressing issues but was deemed of similar importance as company profits. In a more recent course taught just a few months ago and which is now based on Robbins and Judge's (2022) substantially revised edition of the same text, the challenges are:

1. Responding to continuing globalization
2. Understanding workforce demographics/managing workforce diversity
3. Improving ethical behavior/creating a positive work environment
4. Employee wellbeing at work
5. Impact of social media.

So, as can be seen, employee wellbeing has been a key topic continually over the past 20 years. And if there is a difference between then and now it has only grown in importance as it now "deserves" a bullet point on its own. Moreover, one can certainly argue that other topics on the list directly or indirectly also contribute to employee health such as the impact of social media or the need to create a positive work environment.

Let's get into a little more detail. When discussing this list of challenges for managers and employees in these classes, the focus is on the following three points:

1. Impact of social media on employee wellbeing
2. The line between work and non-work has blurred and managers are increasingly dealing with conflicts that arise between work and life away from work
3. Positive organizational scholarship; how organizations develop human strengths, foster vitality and resilience, and unlock potential.

One could argue that the first of these points is one factor contributing to the second point. Being constantly online, checking social media all the time, posting about work-related things when at home but also having to worry about what one's appearance on social media channels such as Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook from one's past may tell future employers is certainly a factor of increasing relevance which blurs the borders between work and life.

Speaking to this second factor, a university organized a public debate some years ago inviting a philosopher who had just published a book on the topic of work-life boundaries which was entitled "Work-Life-Bullshit" (Vašek, 2013). Vašek argues in this book that the discussion of people developing burnout was off point and that in the new world of working, everybody was given autonomy to make their own decisions about when, where, and how to work and that many people would actually be more happy and healthy because of the blurred lines between work and life spheres and the flexibility it brings. Following his talk, there was discussion with human resource directors, researchers, and students from sociology, economics, and psychology, where it was agreed that this "brave new world" depicted in Vašek's propositions could indeed be wonderful for the lucky few extremely well-qualified and sought-after people without family responsibilities who could earn a living from well-paid portfolio work with quick episodes of intense work such as writing code that could just as well be done on a nice beach followed by episodes of relaxing and inspiring traveling of the world. However, the major share of the discussion was devoted to the downsides of such flexibility that may come together with insecurity, precarious health insurance, or (non) eligibility for a decent pension. Moreover, there is still a sizable share of the workforce and for the foreseeable future it will comprise the majority of employees, who cannot enjoy the benefits of this new world: Employees in healthcare, those working in the construction industry or operating machines in other industries, those tending the farm fields and cattle, and those stacking the shelves and sitting at the tills of supermarkets may only dream of the nice picture that Vašek is painting.

Now, the third point of positive organizational scholarship, while seemingly a challenge to managers, may be part of the solution to cope with the other challenges. Positive psychology has made huge progress over the past two decades since Martin Seligman's seminal text was published (Seligman, 2002) and while its methods have been proven, its effects have not universally found their way into all managers' minds; they might do so more and more in the future.

1.2. What do the experts say?

The question of identifying the one most pressing challenge is posed to the six associate editors of this specialty section and also answered independently before receiving their responses. The exact question was "What do you see as the most important challenge for employees' health and well-being today and in the future?" and I am grateful to Anja Baethge, Nina Junker, Joana Story, Sharon Toker, Dina van Dijk, and Xin-an Zhang for providing timely and highly relevant answers. The most difficult thing for them (including this researcher) was to limit the answer to just one challenge. So, here's the combined answers in the original form with the keywords at the front added by this author:

1. *Uncertainty* and *pressure* combined lead to mental and physical exhaustion.
2. *Responsibility for employee wellbeing*: With the introduction of ISO-45003, it is now clear that organizations are responsible

for maintaining a psychologically healthy workplace. However, some companies struggle to implement these recommendations and may argue that employees should take responsibility for their own wellbeing through activities such as yoga and mindfulness.

3. *Need for more prevention and health-promoting work conditions*: Organizations have been creating programs to address health and wellbeing concerns about employees. The problem seems to be that employers are addressing only when employees have issues but are not focusing on preventing issues (with good management). Therefore, organizations seem to highlight these programs as "legitimizing" forms of "caring" when in reality they are not tackling what is causing employees' wellbeing issues. In other words, organizations, because of their programs, may be patting themselves on the back by saying that they care, while continuing with bad management practices that reduce the health and wellbeing of employees.

4. *Work-life balance*: The biggest challenge for employee health and wellbeing is the balance between work and family. The balance is hard for many because imbalance toward either side can create problems. If one puts too much effort into work, their family suffers. The opposite is true for someone who puts more effort into family.

5. *Detachment from work*: Maintaining a good work-home and engagement-disengagement balance in the face of high workload and extended availability in an ever-changing digital and global world is and will continue to be a challenge for all of us.

6. *Dramatic changes*: One of the most important challenges for employees' wellbeing today is the dramatic changes in the world of work such as the rise of the gig economy, remote work, freelance work, and instability and insecurity at the workplace, along with the increasing need for autonomy and flexibility at work (in particular among young people). Additionally, as leisure and personal life become more essential, the significance of work as a source of personal identity appears to be diminishing.

7. *Constant change*: Adapting to the constantly changing (work) world and staying updated with the rapid technological progress.

It is interesting that all of the answers can be related in some ways. A key topic is change. Whether we refer to constant change, or dramatic change, or the uncertainty that comes with change, it is always key for employees to stay up-to-date with new developments, or to be able to cope with an environment that is less predictable. All of this puts pressure on employees (see the first point) and also makes "recharging the battery" more important than ever (see points six and seven). At the same time, however, points four and five refer to the difficulties to detach and maintain good work life balance. Points two and three complete the picture by asking whether organizations do the right thing or do enough to help employees coping with these challenges. On the one hand, employers are the ones responsible (see point two) and they indeed do a lot (point three) but what they do often seems to be off point, for instance because it addresses the symptoms but not the problem. What is really needed is

organizations taking a genuine interest in and care for their employees' health by preventing the symptoms from occurring and this can only be achieved by creating good conditions in and around work.

1.3. Third, what does the algorithm tell us?

Finally, this researcher used the relatively new opportunity to ask ChatGPT (in the version from January 2023). Asking almost the same question that was posed to the editors but this time in the plural—"What are the primary challenges for employees' health and well-being today and in the future?"—elicited this full and unedited answer:

1. Managing stress and burnout: Many employees experience high levels of stress and burnout due to the demands of work and other factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Improving mental health: Mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, are becoming increasingly common among employees and can have a significant impact on their wellbeing and productivity.
3. Promoting physical health: Many employees have sedentary jobs and may not be getting enough physical activity, which can lead to health problems such as obesity and cardiovascular disease.
4. Addressing chronic diseases: Chronic diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease, are becoming more prevalent and can have a significant impact on employees' health and productivity.
5. Addressing health disparities: Certain populations, such as low-income and minority employees, may face greater health challenges and may have less access to healthcare and other resources.
6. Addressing the impact of technology: The increasing use of technology in the workplace can have both positive and negative effects on employees' health and wellbeing, such as the impact on sleep patterns, sedentary behavior, and mental health.
7. Addressing the impact of remote work: The shift to remote work during the pandemic has caused an increase in isolation, mental stress, and a lack of physical activity.
8. Addressing the impact of a gig economy: The gig economy is on the rise, and this could have a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of gig workers, who may not have access to the same benefits and protections as traditional employees.

2. Synthesis and discussion

The above three approaches to determine the biggest challenges for employee health and wellbeing, while overlapping to some extent, also are not perfectly identical. If we see them as complementary, we can develop a list that may be rather exhaustive. The list below provides a good summary of all the above points mentioned in textbooks, given by the experts, and distilled from the internet by ChatGPT:

1. Stress and its effects on mental (especially burnout) and physical health (including chronic illness), together with an understanding of the responsibility of organizations to take care of these problems, especially in the preventive stages and not only by addressing the symptoms;
2. Uncertainty along with constant and partly dramatic organizational and societal change; especially due to new technology (including social media) and new forms of the work organization (such as remote, virtual, or hybrid work, and the gig economy); and
3. Work-life balance and detachment.

This list may be useful for organizations setting up programs focusing on employee health and to assist leaders in their strategic thinking and also in their day-to-day management. But this list may also guide researchers in selecting relevant topics when thinking about new research and for understanding how their existing work and data can be used to address some of these challenges. The past two decades have brought immense progress in designing research studies and analyzing the resulting data. More and more common are diary studies and the respective (multilevel) tools to analyze the (often very complex) data (e.g., Junker et al., 2022). Also, longitudinal studies with multiple measurement points analyzed with (latent) growth models are now much more common than in the past (e.g., Junker et al., 2021). It would be good to combine such complex approaches, and also consider team and organizational levels in multilevel models and multiple perspectives such as leaders, followers, and other stakeholders simultaneously.

In this spirit, it is hoped that research in these areas will continue to help identify effective strategies for promoting and protecting employees' health and wellbeing, and thereby helps addressing the primary challenges that employees face today and in the future. Some work has identified key routes to better health. Among the most promising are interventions resulting from research in positive psychology such as mindfulness (e.g., Bartlett et al., 2019), strengths-based assignment of jobs and tasks (Peterson et al., 2010), or allowing employees to experience flow at work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Salanova et al., 2006). A second route to better health and wellbeing is good leadership, also inspired by positive psychology research that shows strong effects of positive emotions and feedback (Fredrickson, 2009). Another approach to good leadership that has received focus in the past years is identity leadership (Haslam et al., 2020). When leaders are successful in creating shared identities among their team members, this leads to better health and wellbeing (e.g., burnout, see van Dick et al., 2021) because team members support each other and together develop a sense of collective efficacy (Frenzel et al., 2023) which helps them address the big challenges which confront them.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

RD declared that they were an editorial board member of Frontiers, at the time of submission. This had no impact on the peer review process and the final decision.

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