
Sense of Place: Building mentally healthy work environments in the construction industry

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Work and mental health

A mentally healthy workplace has been defined as one in which:

- 'risk factors are acknowledged and appropriate action [is] taken to minimise their potential negative impact,' and
- 'protective or resilience factors are fostered and maximized.'¹

This means that, in a mentally healthy workplace, steps are taken to eliminate risk factors for loss, suffering, illness, and distress, as well as to provide a work environment in which workers are able to flourish.

The Australian Government Productivity Commission identifies strong links between employment and mental health.

Employment can improve mental health in several ways, including providing people with:

- a sense of identity and providing regular interaction and shared experiences with people outside of one's immediate family
- a sense of collective effort and achievement, and
- a structured routine, purpose and the need to plan and prioritise time and activities.²

Many workplace health initiatives have specifically focused on reducing sickness, presenteeism or sickness absence, which are all known to present a substantial cost to organisations. However, it is increasingly recognised that workers who are mentally and physically healthy are also more productive. This understanding has, to some extent, shifted the emphasis from strategies designed to prevent ill-health to those designed to promote good health in workplaces. It is argued that workers' mental wellbeing should be understood as being more than the absence of depressive symptoms. Rather, a state of mental wellbeing also constitutes the presence of a positive state of life satisfaction.³

Understanding the determinants of positive wellbeing is important because it enables the design and implementation of interventions that will create a mentally healthy work environment.

Positive psychology

Understanding the 'conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions' is the overarching goal of the positive psychology movement⁴. Positive psychology is based on the premise that there is a need to focus scientific research and interest 'on understanding the entire breadth of human experience, from loss, suffering, illness, and distress through connection, fulfilment, health, and well-being'.⁵

¹ Harvey, S. B., Joyce, S., Tan, L., Johnson, A., Nguyen, H., Modini, M. & Growth, M., (2014), Developing a mentally healthy workplace: A review of the literature, A report for the National Mental Health Commission and Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance, University of New South Wales, Sydney.

² Australian Government Productivity Commission. (2019). Mental Health Draft Report, Canberra.

³ Hakanen, J. J., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2012). Do burnout and work engagement predict depressive symptoms and life satisfaction? A three-wave seven-year prospective study. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 141(2-3), 415-424.

⁴ Gable, S. L., & Haidt, J. (2005). What (and why) is positive psychology. *Review of General Psychology*, 9, 103-110.

⁵ Linley, A., Joseph, S., Harrington, S., & Wood, A. M. (2006). Positive psychology: Past, present, and (possible) future. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1(1), 3-16.

Challenges for the construction industry

Construction projects have many 'moving parts' as a multitude of different organisations come together in a temporary project organisation to deliver a bespoke project, often within a tight timeline and in the context of conditions of risk and uncertainty.

Construction projects are temporary coalitions of permanent and temporary organisations working interdependently to achieve project outcomes, while also managing their own business interests. There is a heavy reliance on subcontracting to undertake most trade-based construction work and the workforce is transient, with workers frequently moving from site to site.

Competitive tendering processes often give rise to short term 'arms-length' relationships between project participants and tensions and conflicts can arise. The construction industry is also very male-dominated and characterised by a culture within which expectations of presenteeism, total availability for work and very long work hours negatively impacts the mental health and wellbeing of both male and female workers.

Within this challenging industry environment, it may be difficult to realise the conditions or processes that enable people to flourish and experience a sense of connection, fulfilment and engagement that contribute to mental health and wellbeing. The fragmented nature of the construction industry's supply networks may make it difficult to foster a sense of common identity and collective effort and achievement identified by the Australian Government Productivity Commission as having a positive impact on workers' mental health.

However, initiatives designed to create a 'Sense of Place' within construction projects are likely to yield substantial benefits in terms of workers' mental wellbeing and performance.

The aim of this review

A comprehensive review of the peer-reviewed positive psychology literature was undertaken to identify the work environment conditions that contribute to high levels of mental health and wellbeing.

The purpose of this review was to develop a multi-faceted model that could be used as the basis of performance measurement and benchmarking tool for use in construction project environments.

The 'Sense of Place' model

From the literature, six conditions were identified that were strongly, empirically linked to positive mental health outcomes (see Figure 1). These are:

1. Sense of community

A sense of community describes 'a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together'.⁶ In a workplace, community is a resource through which workers' needs for belonging, influence, and connection are fulfilled.⁷ It is made up of the following components: membership; influence; integration and fulfillment of needs; and shared emotional connection. A sense of community is positively related to experiencing higher levels of mental wellbeing^{8,9}

2. Engagement

Work engagement describes 'a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state of work-related well-being'.¹⁰ Work engagement is sometimes regarded as the opposite of job burnout¹¹, but is also believed to be made up of three components: vigour, dedication and absorption.¹² Work engagement has been found to have a long-term effect in reducing depressive symptoms and improving life satisfaction.¹³ Work engagement has been found to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety over a two-year period, indicating work engagement has an important protective effect for mental health.¹⁴

3. Respect/civility

A respectful workplace is one in which people feel worthy and recognised and incivility is not tolerated. In contrast workplace civility reflects 'behavior that helps to preserve the norms for mutual respect at work; it comprises behaviors that are fundamental to positively connecting with another, building relationships, and empathizing'.¹⁵ In the workplace civility 'demands that one speaks in ways that are respectful, responsible, restrained, and principled and avoid that which is offensive, rude, demeaning, and threatening'¹⁶. Workplace incivility is associated with psychological distress and strategies to improve respect and civility in the workplace can significantly reduce burnout.¹⁷

4. Life balance

Life balance describes a situation in which workers experience 'satisfaction and perceptions of success in meeting work and nonwork role demands, low levels of conflict among roles, and opportunity for inter-role enrichment, meaning that experiences in one role can improve performance and satisfaction in other roles as well'.¹⁸ Life balance is strongly and consistently positively related to job and life satisfaction and negatively related to anxiety and depression across samples from seven different countries/cultures.¹⁹

⁶ McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(1), 6-23.

⁷ Boyd, N. M., & Nowell, B. (2014). Psychological sense of community: A new construct for the field of management. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 23(2), 107-122.

⁸ Boyd, N. M., & Nowell, B. (2017). Testing a theory of sense of community and community responsibility in organizations: An empirical assessment of predictive capacity on employee well-being and organizational citizenship. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 45(2), 210-229.

⁹ Peterson, N. A., Speer, P. W., & McMillan, D. W. (2008). Validation of a brief sense of community scale: Confirmation of the principal theory of sense of community. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 36(1), 61-73.

¹⁰ Bakker, A. B., Schaufeli, W. B., Leiter, M. P., & Taris, T. W. (2008). Work engagement: An emerging concept in occupational health psychology. *Work & Stress*, 22(3), 187-200.

¹¹ Maslach, C. & Leiter, M. P. (1997). *The truth about burnout: how organizations cause personal stress and what to do about it*, Jossey-Bass publishes, San Francisco.

¹² Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., González-Romá, V., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). The measurement of engagement and burnout: A two sample confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3(1), 71-92.

¹³ Hakanen, J. J., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2012). Do burnout and work engagement predict depressive symptoms and life satisfaction? A three-wave seven-year prospective study. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 141(2-3), 415-424.

¹⁴ Innstrand, S. T., Langballe, E. M., & Falkum, E. (2012). A longitudinal study of the relationship between work engagement and symptoms of anxiety and depression. *Stress and Health*, 28(1), 1-10.

¹⁵ Pearson, C., Andersson, L., & Porath, C. (2000). Assessing and attacking workplace incivility. *Organizational Dynamics*, 29, 123-137.

¹⁶ Gill, M. J., & Sypher, B. D. (2009). Workplace incivility and organizational trust. In P. Lutgen-Sandvik & B. D. Sypher (Eds.), *Destructive organizational communication: Processes, consequences, and constructive ways of organizing* (pp. 53-73). New York: Routledge.

¹⁷ Leiter, M. P., Laschinger, H. K. S., Day, A., & Oore, D. G. (2011). The impact of civility interventions on employee social behavior, distress, and attitudes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 96(6), 1258-1274.

¹⁸ Kossek, E. E., Valcour, M., & Lirio, P. (2014). The sustainable workforce: organizational strategies for promoting work-life balance and wellbeing. *Work and Wellbeing: Wellbeing: A Complete Reference Guide, Volume III*. Edited by Peter Y. Chen and Cary L. Cooper, John Wiley & Sons, pp. 1-24.

¹⁹ Haar, J. M., Russo, M., Suñe, A., & Ollier-Malaterre, A. (2014). Outcomes of work-life balance on job satisfaction, life satisfaction and mental health: A study across seven cultures. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 85(3), 361-373.

5. Social support

Social support refers to a situation in which one person or group needs help to achieve an objective and another person or group provides resources to help.²⁰ In the workplace, social support refers to the degree to which workers perceive that their individual wellbeing is valued by their supervisors, co-workers and others within the broader organisation in which they work, and the perception that these other parties will provide help to support the individual worker's wellbeing.²¹ There is strong evidence of the association between social support, job satisfaction and productivity.²² Social support is also negatively related to burnout and acts as a protective buffer against sources of work-related stress.²³

6. Resilience

Resilience is increasingly understood, not as a stable set of personal characteristics, but as a process arising from the interplay of the individual with their work environment.²⁴ In the workplace, resilience describes the ability of an individual worker or work group to respond to everyday problems and challenges associated with work and be able to 'bounce back' when setbacks are encountered and remain effective in challenging situations. Beyond this, resilience in the workplace also incorporates the lasting benefit and learning that occurs through successfully coping with adverse situations.²⁵ Resilience in the workplace is positively linked to mental health.²⁶ Importantly workers' resilience can be facilitated by the work environment, including leadership and the prevailing workplace culture.²⁷

Next steps

The conditions and processes identified in the literature as contributing in a positive way to workers' mental health and wellbeing form the Sense of Place model depicted in Figure 1.

A survey/benchmarking tool was developed to measure the extent to which these conditions/processes are present in a work environment. This survey/benchmarking tool can be used to assess the extent to which construction workplaces have successfully fostered some of the factors that the positive psychology literature indicates can protect workers' mental health and wellbeing.

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Figure 1: The 'Sense of Place' model



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²⁰ Dovidio, J.F., Piliavin, J.A., Schroeder, D.A., & Penner, L.A. (2006). *The Social Psychology of Prosocial Behavior*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

²¹ Kossek, E. E., Pichler, S., Bodner, T., & Hammer, L. B. (2011). Workplace social support and work-family conflict: A meta-analysis clarifying the influence of general and work-family-specific supervisor and organizational support. *Personnel Psychology*, 64(2), 289-313.

²² Baruch-Feldman, C., Brondolo, E., Ben-Dayan, D., & Schwartz, J. (2002). Sources of social support and burnout, job satisfaction, and productivity. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 7(1), 84-93.

²³ Rossiter, L., & Sochos, A. (2018). Workplace bullying and burnout: the moderating effects of social support. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 27(4), 386-408.

²⁴ World Health Organization. (2017). *Building Resilience: A Key Pillar of Health 2020 and the Sustainable Development Goals*. World Health Organization: Geneva.

²⁵ Cooper, C., Flint-Taylor, J., & Pearn, M. (2013). *Building Resilience for Success: A Resource for Managers and Organizations*. Basingstoke, GB: Palgrave Macmillan.

²⁶ Kinman, G., & Grant, L. (2011). Exploring stress resilience in trainee social workers: The role of emotional and social competencies. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 41(2), 261-275.

²⁷ Näswall, K., Kuntz, J., & Malinen, S. (2015). *Employee Resilience Scale (EmpRes): Technical Report*. Resilient Organisations Research Report 2015/04. ISSN 1178-7279.