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AUSTRALIA**

The opportunity to thrive

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Introduction

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Over 50 years of research and practice informs current knowledge about workplace mental health.

We now understand that multiple factors influence workplace mental health, ranging from the design of jobs to the quality of relationships at work. We also understand that mental health is not a single phenomenon, but ranges from negative outcomes such as chronic disease and mental illness to positive outcomes such as job satisfaction and engagement.

With increasing calls internationally for organisations to work towards creating mentally healthy workplaces, the pressure is on to draw upon our accumulated knowledge and experience to help inform and shape organisational practices that will achieve these outcomes.

To this end, PwC's People & Organisation team in Perth and the University of Western Australia's Accelerated Learning Lab have been collaborating over the last year to explore ways in which together we can positively contribute to the way organisations address health and wellbeing among employees.

One of the outcomes of this collaboration is this white paper, in which we unpack some of the research surrounding the less explored benefits or positive side of mental health – namely employees thriving at work – with the intent to open up discussions around what we as leaders can do to improve the positive mental states of our employees.

In this white paper we focus on what it looks like for an employee to thrive, begin exploring how we can measure thriving, and discuss what we can do to create the opportunity for employees and organisations to thrive.

We acknowledge that this paper is just the starting point. The development of thriving employees and thriving organisations will require collaborative efforts from all parties and we hope we can be part of this journey with you.

The opportunity to thrive

In recent years there has been a notable increase in the focus on mental health in the workplace, with initiatives such as employee assistance programs (EAP), physical activity programs, mentoring programs and wellbeing surveys being adopted by organisations. National initiatives such as 'Go Home on Time Day' and 'Mates in Construction' have also served to increase societal focus on the importance of mental health in the workplace. These organisational and national initiatives are an important first step toward creating mentally healthy workplaces.

Organisations are also becoming more aware of the role they play in improving their employees' mental health, and the positive economic benefits of doing so.[1] As a result, organisations are deploying more and more resources to provide care and support for their employees, hoping to equip them with the tools needed to cope with and manage their own mental health. This has enabled many organisations to mitigate poor mental health outcomes (e.g. stress, mental illness) and the negative effect these issues can have on the business. However,

...good mental health encompasses much more than the mere absence of poor mental health.

Being mentally healthy also includes positive states of mental health such as feeling engaged and empowered at work, being motivated and productive, and having a work-life that enriches the home life rather than impeding it. Decades of research has shown that employees who experience these positive states of mental health experience greater overall wellbeing, perform better at work and help drive stronger organisational performance. In other words, positive mental health is all about thriving people and organisations. There is an untapped opportunity for organisations to gain a competitive edge through developing positive mental health in their employees in addition to mitigating poor mental health.

When the employee thrives so does the organisation

Does this mean that strategies and programs for mitigating poor mental health are less relevant? No, not at all. The focus on mitigating mental ill-health issues, such as providing EAP, is crucial in supporting employees who may need support and coping strategies during a tough time. We know this because measureable results can be seen in outcomes such as the reduction of workers compensation claims, and time off work due to psychological illness. However what these programs often lack is an influence on developing positive mental health. As much as we need to focus on bringing employees experiencing mental health issues 'back to baseline', we need to develop positive mental health in employees, enabling them to thrive **beyond** the baseline.

A focus on thriving is more relevant than ever

Driven by economic globalisation, advancing technology and demographic shifts[2] the nature of work is changing, increasing in complexity and uncertainty. While this presents exciting opportunities for organisations it also poses many threats and challenges to employee mental health and organisational performance. For example, employees may experience increased job insecurity with temporary contracts and casualised work; intensified and increased work demands; and poor-work life balance due to long working hours and technology that removes the physical barrier between work and home (e.g. checking email on phones).[3]

The changing nature of work requires a more adaptable, engaged and capable employee, and therefore

...the changing nature of work needs the thriving employee.

A thriving organisation goes beyond focusing on mitigating poor mental health and actively develops thriving employees who flourish in the face of uncertainty and change.

What does thriving look like?

The evidence overwhelmingly shows positive mental health not only contributes to overall wellbeing but also facilitates strong and sustainable employee and organisational performance. But what does positive mental health among employees actually look like?

Positive mental health at work is about more than simply feeling happy and relaxed

It's about employees:

- having positive experiences where they feel satisfied, engaged and empowered through their work, motivating them to perform at a high level
- being and feeling confident and capable enough to successfully pursue challenging goals
- integrating work effectively into an overall healthy life leading to further improvements in performance and mental health at work.

The thriving employee:

Is satisfied engaged and empowered

Feeling **satisfied** with work is the first step towards positive mental health.[4, 5] But satisfaction alone is not quite enough. Positive mental health is not simply how the employee *feels about* work but also includes how *work makes* the employee feel.

The next steps toward positive mental health for the employee is becoming engaged and empowered. **Work engagement** is about being suitably challenged and motivated which leads to feeling energised, enthusiastic and immersed in work.[6, 7] **Empowerment** is experienced when the employee feels they are performing well, are self-directed and making a meaningful contribution to the organisation.[8]

Feels capable and performs well

Mental health is not simply the sum of positive and negative experiences.[9] Employees experience positive mental health when they **feel capable and confident** in what they can achieve[4] and feelings of competence are **balanced with actual competence**.[4, 10] Enhancing positive mental health includes developing employees to have the confidence they need to set challenging goals, and ensuring they have the knowledge and skills needed to achieve these goals.

Integrates work and home into a healthy life

Over the years there has been a growing emphasis on encouraging **work-life balance** to improve employee wellbeing and performance.[11, 12] However, thriving is not just about having more time away from work but it also includes **integrating the work and home lives** to achieve positive mental health and stronger performance. Employees who experience a healthier work-life are likely to experience flow-on effects such as greater wellbeing outside of work[13] and **better recovery** during non-work time.[14]

Why are thriving employees important to an organisation?

For decades, research has highlighted that employees who experience states of positive mental health are more committed to the organisation[12, 15] and perform better,[15-17] including performance beyond the required tasks of their job.[10, 18, 19] Thriving employees also behave more safely,[20] are more creative, proactive and open to new experiences.[21]

In addition to experiencing positive mental states, research shows that the thriving employee also experiences reduced strain and stress, burnout, mental illness (e.g. depression and anxiety), substance abuse and physical ill-health (e.g. musculoskeletal disorders).[20, 23-26]

For the organisation this means reduced costs associated with absenteeism, presenteeism and compensation claims.[21, 27]

Thriving is contagious

A thriving employee can positively influence the thriving of others. For example, thriving leaders are able to transfer their positive moods to others, and this impacts on the efforts of others, leading to happier employees who perform better.[33]

Thriving creates an upward spiral

Thriving creates positive feedback loops in employees. For example, when employees are satisfied in their roles, they are more likely to perform well. Successful performance leads to higher levels of job satisfaction and so on, creating a virtuous cycle of performance and satisfaction.[28]

Thriving has a positive effect on home life

Thriving at work can actually have benefits for life at home, and vice versa. Employees and their families have been found to be happier at home following days employees were more engaged at work. [29, 30] A happier home life then feeds back into positive work outcomes. Employees who are happier at home are happier and more committed at work.[31]

Higher engagement at work also enables better recovery during non-work time leading to greater engagement and better performance at work the following day.[32] This cycle of work-home enrichment enables thriving individuals to take the positive effects of thriving home, and then translate them back into higher performance.

When employees thrive so do organisations

Research also shows that thriving employees contribute to greater organisational performance across a range of measures. Benefits for organisations with a thriving workforce include:
- greater productivity and profitability [22]
- greater customer satisfaction/loyalty [22]
- reduced employee turnover [12, 15, 22]
- reduced absenteeism [21]
- stronger safety performance.[20, 22]

Positive recovery is about stimulating our minds, not switching off

Working requires employees to use a large amount of energy therefore, during non-work time, they need to be able to recover effectively. Employees that recover better are stronger performers and experience positive mental health at work.[31] But what do we know about recovering from work? Well, there is exciting new research changing the way we think about our time away from work and recent insights reveal that positive recovery is about stimulating our minds. Positive recovery activities are those that engage the employee in a non-work task enabling them to 'detach' from work and restore work-related mental energy.

Activities which have been found to improve recovery include playing sport,[60] learning a new skill (e.g. dancing, musical instrument) and those which enable feelings of control.[59] Recovery is negatively impacted when employees engage in activities which inhibit detachment such as checking work emails. Recovery may also be inhibited if employees experience high work demands (e.g. long working hours) because they lack the energy to engage in positive recovery activities and may instead choose passive activities such as watching television.[60]

How do we build thriving organisations?

As work is becoming more complex and uncertain, the **demands** on employees are increasing. Many organisations are attempting to tackle this issue by limiting the demands they place on their workers (e.g. time pressure, complexity, workload). It is often thought that reducing or removing demands on employees will enable them to experience positive mental health and prevent mental ill-health (e.g. stress, burnout). However, it's not that simple. Some demands can challenge employees and promote growth. Employees need challenges in their role for stimulation, motivation and engagement. For instance, sustained time pressure in a role can be stressful, but some time pressure can be motivating and result in greater creativity and proactivity.[34] It's when the demands become too great that the effects become detrimental.[35]

So, how do we mitigate the negative effects of job demands, while keeping our workforce motivated and challenged?

Balancing demands with **resources** is the answer. Organisations can provide employees with resources (e.g. rewards, feedback, support, training), build resources into work and organisational design (e.g. autonomy, enrichment, development) or these resources can be generated by the employee (e.g. proactively learning a new skill). Resources help the employee overcome challenges, achieve work goals, and buffer against the negative impacts of certain demands.[36, 37]

Designing work effectively enables thriving organisations to provide a healthy balance between the demands they place on their workers, and the tools or resources they embed to manage these. Achieving a positive demands-resources balance involves optimising demands to be challenging but not stressful and providing employees with enough resources to facilitate thriving.[38]

It's all about the way people work

Work design practices are some of the most impactful factors to positively influence mental health and thriving.

Work design encompasses all aspects of the way people work including the job itself (i.e. task characteristics) and working relationships (i.e. support provided). Good work design facilitates thriving.

Thriving starts with good job design

Job design is an important element of work design and includes the types of tasks required, how tasks are completed, and the level and variation in knowledge and skills required. Good job design facilitates thriving by enabling the employee to grow, become more confident, competent and seek further challenge.[38] It is critical for employee mental health and performance that job design moves away from streamlining tasks for perceived efficiency and toward a model of creating jobs that cultivate development, motivation, empowerment and engagement.

Job design can be used to provide employees with resources. For example, autonomy is a type of resource which enables employees control over their work. There is a wealth of evidence to show that employees who have greater autonomy are more proactive, creative and committed to the organisation.[34] Thriving can also be enhanced when employees perceive the job to be important,[39] have low amounts of repetition, and optimised levels of challenge[38] and complexity.[40]

Job design is an effective way to help employees cope with increased work demands associated with organisational change. For example, restructuring or downsizing can be detrimental to organisational performance and 'survivors' of the change may be less committed and experience worse mental health.[41, 42] Providing additional resources to employees through job design helps them to manage the substantial increase in work demands associated with this change.[43]

...and is supported by strong working relationships

Employees experience more positive mental health when they have strong relationships with their supervisors and colleagues.[25, 44, 45] Good quality relationships can assist employees to cope with greater demands,[44] and can reduce the likelihood of mental ill-health.[24]

Supervisor support is considered to be the most important relationship for employees experience with work.[45] Supervisors can enhance thriving by providing strong support and feedback, demonstrating confidence, behaving with integrity,[48] and building trusting relationships with employees.[49]

Support from colleagues also contributes to employee thriving,[17] particularly when colleagues are exposed to similar stressful situations (for instance, shop floor customer service roles).[45] Support from colleagues can be effective when facilitated by work design such as enabling social activities during breaks[46] and also built into work design such as through structural social support.[47]

Building structural social support into work design[47]

In an Australian training hospital, junior doctors were experiencing high demands as a result of rising patient numbers and a shortage of junior doctors. Junior doctors frequently worked on overtime shifts where they had less supervision from senior doctors. It was recognised that junior doctors were not being proactive or improving work methods out of fear of looking foolish or risking career repercussions which limited the patient care being provided. An advanced nurse position was created to work alongside junior doctors to provide technical and emotional support. As a result of this structural support, junior doctors experienced increased feelings of competence and less overload, greater use of more skills and became more proactive. In other words, they began to thrive.

Are flexible work policies an example of good work design?

Flexible work policies are a popular way organisations have sought to overcome demands on workers and capitalise on the opportunities provided by advancing technology.[50] In fact, many organisations rely on flexible work policies to overcome the many challenges employees are facing around excessive work demands.[38] Popular flexible work policies include *virtual working* (i.e. teleworking) where employees are given the authority and technology to work away from the main work site,[51] and *flexible working hours* where employees can vary their start and finishing times (often limited to ensuring they are in the office during core office hours).

But do flexible work policies actually have a positive impact?

The answer is… it depends.

The solution is redesigning the way people work, not just when and where they can undertake their work. Advantages of flexible work policies, particularly virtual working, can include better individual performance and reduced work-related stress.[52, 53]

For example, a parent who needs to take their child to the doctor in the middle of the day has the flexibility to do so, and finish work at home later in the day. However, flexible work arrangements do not always lead to positive mental health outcomes for employees,[53] particularly if this type of working is not suited to the individual and their working needs. Challenges include employees:

- experiencing worse relationships with colleagues [53]
- finding it harder to separate the work- and home-lives [3]
- feeling the need to compensate with extra effort which undermines advantages [54]
- being perceived to be less motivated and dedicated [55]
- experiencing slower wage growth and fewer promotions [56, 57]
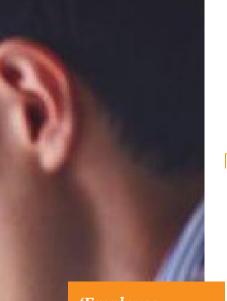- only experiencing benefits if they have control over the flexibility.[50]

An intervention to improve flexibility and promote thriving [58]

STAR (Support, Transform, Achieve Results) training was implemented at a Fortune 500 company in the United States. Employees at the company were traditionally well compensated but also expected to work long hours, be available for conference calls frequently outside of work hours and travel whenever required. STAR involved training supervisors on strategies to provide two types of support to employees: 'personal support' focused on support for employees' personal and family lives; and 'performance support' focused on supporting employees' job performance.

The training was designed to: increase awareness of the benefits associated with improving work-home integration; break-down the stigma associated with employees seeking flexibility by discussing work-home challenges openly; and importantly, to encourage supervisors and employees to explore new ways of working.

STAR was successful in that supervisors became more supportive of home-life issues that impacted work, and employees experienced improved control over work schedules and enhanced work-life integration. Best of all, STAR changed work design practices for the better by involving multiple levels of the organisation, providing the greatest benefit for those most in need of assistance, and there was no evidence that work hours increased.

Why and how do we measure thriving?

Why

Measurement is crucial to developing and implementing effective intervention strategies to improve mental health and performance. However, organisations typically experience difficulties when trying to do so. Generally, mental health/wellbeing data is confidential and many organisations are unsure how to discuss issues with employees without making people feel like they're prying.

A focus on thriving and positive states of mental health helps to overcome many of the challenges organisations face when attempting to evaluate employee mental health.

How

Measurement is important to understand the current level of thriving, strengths of the organisation, priority areas for improvement, to track change over time, and needs to be done reliably and in an integrative way.

In comparison to mental illness, positive mental health characteristics can be measured by the organisation in a less invasive and more relevant way to business. Thriving and positive mental health metrics can actually be used to inform the development of effective strategies.

All aspects of the thriving employee relate to psychological constructs which can be measured using reliable and valid tools.

Critical points for measuring positive mental health

- Just like mental illness, positive mental health characteristics can be measured reliably, but it is crucial that effective measurement tools are used. A staff survey is not necessarily a psychological measurement tool. For example, 'employee engagement' has become a catch-all to evaluate a range of work-related attitudes, perceptions and behaviours.[61] These surveys can provide useful information but do not usually measure the state of work engagement.

- Do not rely on trying to observe states of mental health because very different underlying processes may appear similar on the outside. For example, employees who are workaholics may appear to be engaged because both states share similar work behaviours such as hard work and commitment.[62] However, only work engagement is related to positive mental health whereas workaholism is related to poor mental health.[62]

- Thriving involves strong and sustainable performance. It is important to include measures of performance to fully evaluate thriving. This will help guide effective intervention strategies that improve performance in a healthy way and increase the value of the measurement exercise.

The way forward

A huge opportunity exists for organisations to broaden the focus on mental health. When organisations go beyond strategies to avoid ill-health, to incorporate strategies to develop positive mental health, they are able to realise the full benefits of a thriving workforce.

From better performance, to driving business improvements, cultivating a thriving workforce is one of the keys to unlocking sustainability and success in a now uncertain and volatile business landscape.

The first step is asking the right questions

- How can your organisation develop an integrative and holistic mental health strategy?
- How, when and what should your organisation measure to track improvements in mental health and performance?

- How can you ensure your organisation's measures of engagement are reliably measuring engagement?
- How can your organisation build a culture that supports thriving employees?
- How does your organisation develop leaders to provide appropriate feedback?
- How can your organisation encourage employees to take part in recovery activities?
- How can your organisation ensure job resources are balanced with job demands?
- How can you design work that promotes positive work experiences?
- How can your organisation make its flexible work policies more effective?
- How can your organisation facilitate employees to have high quality and meaningful connections with their colleagues?

Credits

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