

Wellbeing at Work

How to build resilient and thriving teams

Jim Clifton and Jim Harter



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By Jim Clifton and Jim Harter

13-minute read

Synopsis

Wellbeing at Work (2021) explores how the different spheres of our lives contribute to our overall sense of well-being. It also outlines how leaders can positively impact their employees' well-being, and sheds light on the link between employee well-being and organizational success.

Who is it for?

- Stressed-out workers
- Managers learning how to lead in a pandemic
- Wellness enthusiasts looking for inspiration

About the author

Jim Clifton is the chairman and CEO of Gallup, an analytics and advisory company. He's also the author of the *Wall Street Journal* best seller *It's the Manager*.

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What's in it for me? Build a feel-good work environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has threatened our well-being in many different ways, and people across the globe have experienced mental health issues as a result. As an organizational leader, how can you step in to help your employees regain and maintain their wellness?

That's where these blinks come in. They look at the latest trends and research in employee engagement and well-being to uncover the link between mental health, productivity, and organizational success. You'll learn how to support your people in every aspect of their lives, from their physical health to their financial security.

This is a beginner's guide to building an organizational culture of total well-being.

In these blinks, you'll learn

- why it's profitable for coworkers to befriend each other;
- how community projects can benefit your bottom line; and
- what employees really need from their leaders during a crisis.

Enjoying your job is the key to a long and happy life.

What does a good life look like? You might imagine a work-free existence with lots of money, endless leisure time, and carefree socializing with family and friends. But despite dreams of early retirement, a work-free life might not actually make you happy.

Not convinced? Consider a pioneering piece of research conducted in the 1950s. In the study, psychologists interviewed hundreds of British and American 95-year-olds to try and learn the secrets of their longevity.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these long-lived folk reported living fairly stress-free lives. They prioritized leisure time with friends and family, and they all had a cheerful outlook on life. They took each day as it came, rather than worrying about the future.

But when it came to their working life, the results seemed counterintuitive. Rather than spending their time on stress-busting vacations, the respondents had spent their lives... at work.

The key message here is: Enjoying your job is the key to a long and happy life.

These men and women had all worked an average of sixty hours a week until they were 70 or 80 years old. And, astoundingly, half of the men had never gone on vacation during their entire working life!

This just goes to show that work is not the enemy of well-being, contrary to what many of us may think.

In fact, the researchers discovered that work can actually protect our well-being. But not just any work – it has to be satisfying work.

One thing that separated this contented group of 95-year-olds from the rest of the world's population was how much they *enjoyed* their work. Ninety-three percent of the men and 85 percent of the women said

they got a huge amount of satisfaction from their work, and that it was a lot of fun.

In contrast, over the last decade, only 36 percent of American workers said they felt engaged with their work. This means that 64 percent of workers aren't getting enough fun and satisfaction from their jobs!

There are huge benefits to our well-being when we enjoy our work. Not only can it improve our daily lives, but, as this research shows, it could also have a big impact on how long we live.

When employees like their jobs, everybody wins.

As we learned in the previous blink, our well-being suffers when we're unhappy with our jobs. People who don't like their work are much more likely to experience boredom and anger on a daily basis. Research has even found that employees who don't enjoy their livelihoods have higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol circulating in their bloodstream.

Career discontent is a big problem for employers, too. That's because disliking work is associated with lower levels of work engagement. The less engaged an employee is, the worse their job performance is.

So how can employers help their employees enjoy their work more?

The key message here is: When employees like their jobs, everybody wins.

The best place to start is with management. Research shows that having a bad manager can destroy your workday. Bullying supervisors can cause a range of unhealthy behaviors in their subordinates, from insomnia to alcohol abuse.

But managers don't have to be abusive to have a negative effect on their subordinates' well-being. Having a manager who's uninvolved or indifferent can also make employees feel emotionally fatigued, and this leads to higher rates of employee disengagement. Unfortunately, the average employee reports that the time they spend with their manager is the *worst* part of their day.

Employees who believe that their well-being is important to their managers consistently outperform employees who think that their managers don't care about their well-being. With this in mind, organizations can give their employees' career well-being a boost by training their managers to behave like *coaches* rather than *bosses*.

Rather than only jumping in when things are going wrong, coaching managers proactively set their employees' goals and check in with them during weekly feedback sessions. Coaching managers also ensure that well-being is part of the conversation. They don't just talk to their workers about career goals; they explore well-being goals, too. And they discuss how employees can integrate other aspects of well-being, like social activities and physical health, into their working lives.

Having a best friend at work boosts well-being and productivity.

Many employers assume they should only concern themselves with their employees' *professional* lives. Even the best managers may refrain from taking an interest in their staff's personal lives because they fear overstepping boundaries. But the truth is that our work lives and our personal lives have a reciprocal influence on each other: we inevitably bring our feelings about work home, and we bring our personal lives into the office. With that in mind, employers must support well-being in *every* aspect of an employee's life.

Let's start by looking at how leaders can positively impact their people's *social well-being*. Social well-being is generally measured by how many meaningful friendships you have. But what do friendship and work have to do with each other? A lot, it turns out. In fact, three in ten Americans say they have a best friend in the workplace.

The key message here is: Having a best friend at work boosts well-being and productivity.

Having a best friend in the office doesn't only mean you have a positive source of energy around you every day. Research shows that employees increase their performance and deliver better results if they work alongside someone they consider a close friend. And if an organization doubles the percentage of its employees who have a best friend at work, then they can expect a lower number of workplace accidents, a boost to their customer satisfaction ratings, and around a 10 percent increase on their profit margins.

So how can organizations strengthen their employees' social relationships? It all starts with your employee onboarding program. The short version? Ensure that you include socializing!

When you have a new employee to orient, make coffee breaks and lunches with new coworkers part of the onboarding agenda. Also make sure new recruits know who they can rely on in their team, as well as which people they'll be partnering with in upcoming projects.

Managers should take the time to ask each team member whom they get along with and whom they enjoy working with. These discussions give managers the opportunity to put those people together on future projects – thus encouraging friendships.

You can determine how successful your onboarding has been by measuring how many of your new recruits have developed friendships in the organization within their first year.

Organizations can boost financial well-being without raising employees' pay.

One crucial aspect of overall well-being is *financial well-being*. This is also the aspect of well-being where many of us could use a boost. Seventy-five percent of Americans say they worried about money in the past week. For employees, low financial well-being is the biggest contributor to feeling stressed and worried on a daily basis.

And employees who are stressed and worried can't perform at their highest levels of potential. Knowing

this, it's also in an organization's interest to focus on boosting its workers' financial well-being.

The key message here is: Organizations can boost financial well-being without raising employees' pay.

Financial well-being doesn't mean having a high level of *income*; it means having a high level of financial *security*. After all, being wealthy doesn't mean you're financially secure. A person could make a lot of money and lead a lavish lifestyle that results in mounting credit card debts. In contrast, someone could achieve financial security while living more frugally on a modest income.

People who feel financially secure believe they have enough money to do most of the things they want to do in their daily lives. Their security comes from being able to pay their bills each month without worrying – and from being comfortable enough so they're not constantly thinking about money.

It's more important, then, for companies to focus on helping employees achieve financial security rather than boosting their income. Importantly, studies have found that a person's *perception* around having enough money for their wants and needs has three times the amount of impact on their well-being than their actual income.

In practical terms, how can organizations increase employees' financial well-being? It's simple: help them manage their financial lives so that they don't live beyond their means and accumulate debt. Employers could, for instance, provide financial planning and savings tools – or bring in financial advisors to offer advice.

Your organization is only as resilient as your workforce.

Do you have the energy to do all the things you want to do? If you're anything like most Americans, probably not! Just 20 percent of Americans report feeling active every day of the week, and just one in ten believe they're in prime physical health. With worrying statistics like these, it's about time organizations started focusing on the physical well-being of their employees.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown just how debilitating a serious illness can be. And Americans suffering from preexisting conditions like diabetes, obesity, and heart disease are many times more vulnerable to it. To protect your employees, your organization's most valuable asset, you as an employer must think beyond hand sanitizer and plexiglass partitions. If you're serious about safeguarding your workforce, you need to encourage them toward healthy habits.

The key message here is: Your organization is only as resilient as your workforce.

We all know that we learn faster and are better at problem-solving when we're well rested. But getting enough sleep is also the cornerstone of healthy living. In fact, studies show that getting less than seven hours of sleep a night greatly increases your risk of hypertension,

stroke, and obesity. So it's worrying that over a third of Americans are sleeping fewer than seven hours a night.

Your employees probably already recognize the importance of getting a good night's sleep, but leaders can help enforce this practice by communicating the latest sleep research to their workforce. Talking about sleep should be an explicit expectation for your organization's managers.

Additionally, leadership teams should be aware of the *contagion effect*, which explains how behaviors can be contagious. With this in mind, leaders should model healthy habits themselves. Instead of staying at the office late into the night, they should make a point of going home at a reasonable hour – and coming back alert and ready to tackle the new day.

Managers should also have conversations about the importance of making time for another healthy habit: physical activity. Studies show that exercising for just two days a week increases happiness and drastically reduces stress levels.

Organizations can also boost their employees' physical well-being by redesigning the workplace to encourage movement. Research shows that sitting down for more than four hours at a time is linked to a greater risk of obesity – even for people who exercise regularly.

Organizations can attract the best talent and boost profits by helping their local community.

How much do you like where you live? Your answer to this question determines your level of *community well-being*. And it might make all the difference between having a great life, or just a good one. People who report that they love where they live also tend to say that their life is better than they could have ever imagined.

The link between thriving communities and thriving organizations is clearer than you might think. Over a third of job seekers believe that it's very important for a potential employer to have a positive influence on the community. Today's employees aren't just looking for a steady paycheck; they also want to know that their work has meaning and that their organization leaves a positive impact on the world.

The key message here is: Organizations can attract the best talent and boost profits by helping their local community.

The most visible way for businesses to give back is to develop *corporate social responsibility*, or CSR, programs. Research shows that these programs go beyond just helping the communities; they also have real benefits for employers. Businesses with better CSR projects than their competitors outperform their competitors financially, too. In other words, doing good can help boost your bottom line.

So, how can organizations integrate community well-being into their business practices?

First, leaders should start taking notice of the community challenges that matter most to their employees. The best way to achieve this is simply to ask employees where their interests lie. Employees with young families may have a particular passion for helping their community's children thrive, for instance.

To maximize the positive impact on a community, managers should also look for ways to harness their people's unique talents. The talent of your salespeople might best be utilized by fundraising for a local charity, and your marketing team might shine when helping out with the graphic design needs of a community outreach project. Whatever the community challenge might be, make sure that the expertise of your people is being put to good use.

Doing good makes us feel good, and companies can magnify their employees' feelings of community well-being by encouraging them to share news of their good deeds with their coworkers. Leaders should find time to publicize the different community projects that people have been working on and make them visible in the organization.

Senior leaders can accelerate a culture of well-being, but bad managers will slow down progress.

When it comes to your employees' well-being, your company culture can either make or break your efforts. As you'll discover in this blink, there are several things you can do to *accelerate* a well-being culture in your organization. On the other hand, there's one big risk factor that threatens this well-being culture.

Let's start by looking at how you can accelerate a well-being culture.

The first factor involves your organization's *rules*: Do your company policies encourage or discourage different aspects of well-being? The next accelerator is *communication*, which entails the messaging put out by your leadership team. These messages need to be consistent with a culture of well-being.

The key message here is: Senior leaders can accelerate a culture of well-being, but bad managers will slow down progress.

Other accelerators include *incentives* and *recognition*. Do you have an incentive system that inspires employees to take part in well-being initiatives, and do you recognize and celebrate the employees who get involved? Finally, you can also use your employee *development schemes* as an accelerator for well-being culture. So when you put together an employee's development plan, ensure that it also includes personal well-being goals.

But there's one big obstacle to building a culture of well-being: *incompetent managers*. An organization's managers are the most important factor in the performance and overall engagement of employees. When well-being is threatened in times of stress and uncertainty, like during the COVID-19 pandemic, employees look to their managers for guidance.

Specifically, employees need four things from their managers – and whether or not they receive them can strongly impact their sense of well-being. First, employees look to their leaders for a sense of *hope*. They want to know whether there's a plan for the future to ensure things will get better. They also want a sense of *stability* from their leaders; they need to know that they will be provided with the right resources to carry on with their jobs.

Employees also need to be able to *trust* their managers. They need to feel they're getting relevant information at the right time – even if that information is negative. Finally, when their well-being is threatened, employees need *compassion* from their leaders. Research suggests that employees worry less and feel more confident in their roles when they believe that their leaders have their best interests at heart.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks:

Employees don't work in a vacuum. When they show up at the office, they bring the rest of their lives along with them. When life is going well, they're more engaged and productive; on the other hand, a stressful personal life can mean their work performance also suffers. That's why it's so important for leaders to build a culture of well-being in the workplace: when your people are thriving, your business will, too.

Actionable advice:

Tap into your employees' strengths.

Globally, just 33 percent of employees say their jobs give them the opportunity to use their unique strengths each day. This poses a challenge to employee well-being: people whose strengths aren't used are more likely to suffer from boredom and low energy. So it's imperative that managers identify and tap into each of their employees' unique skill sets. Research finds that strengths tend to stay the same for ten years or more, so developing the great qualities that your employees already have will help them thrive in the long term.

Got feedback?

We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to remember@blinkist.com with *Wellbeing at Work* as the subject line and share your thoughts!