Improving Post-Secondary Academic and Professional Staff Wellbeing: A Literature Synthesis

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Abstract: Numerous studies attest to the increasing levels of stress and reduced wellbeing reported by post-secondary academic and professional staff. Despite the growing wealth of research on individual and organizational (workplace) wellbeing, there is a lack of synthesis on the context and effect of interventions supporting the wellbeing of post-secondary staff. To support understanding these knowledge gaps, this literature synthesis provides an overview of studies on organizational and individual wellbeing, focusing on interventions and considerations to support post-secondary staff. As institutions invest in wellness programs and navigate contradictions, this review can support faculties and administrators in higher education when seeking to address staff wellbeing. This review describes a range of practices and considerations for supporting wellbeing and work-life effectiveness, with a focus on studies conducted in post-secondary settings whenever possible.

Keywords: Wellbeing, Wellness, Post-Secondary, Academic Staff, Professional Staff

Introduction

Numerous studies attest to the increasing levels of stress and reduced wellbeing reported by post-secondary academic and professional (i.e., those in administrative and support roles) staff[1]. The priorities of the neoliberal model that characterize current Anglo-Western universities emphasize business-like competitiveness, managerialist control, performance measures, and demand-driven funding (Pignata et al., 2017; Zabrodska & Kveton, 2013). These conditions are associated with changing expectations and working conditions, negatively impacting staff autonomy, communication, interpersonal relationships, and increasing job stress (Tytherleigh et al., 2005). In addition to numerous adverse health effects, impacts on staff wellbeing are "likely to have detrimental effects on student experience and attainment, and the success of the institution as a whole" (Watts & Robertson, 2011, p. 35). Understanding wellbeing at the post-secondary level is therefore essential to the effective functioning of the institution.

Despite the growing body of research on individual and organizational (workplace) wellbeing, there is a lack of synthesis on the context and effect of interventions supporting the wellbeing of post-secondary staff. While studies explore particular antecedents or influences on wellbeing in different contexts (e.g., workplace bullying, organizational culture, workload, burnout), the disparate foci and conceptualizations can hinder the design of comprehensive frameworks to support wellbeing (Grawitch et al., 2007). As institutions increasingly invest in wellness programs and navigate contradictions and knowledge gaps (Song & Baicker, 2019), this review can support faculties and administrators in higher education when seeking to improve staff wellbeing. Following a brief contextualization of wellbeing, this article examines key topics and recommended intervention strategies from the research literature.

This manuscript is drawn from a broader report on the same topic (Smith, 2019). This abbreviated review presents distilled strategies from the literature based on their frequency and applicability to higher education. This review addresses the questions: (1) What key issues in wellbeing have been identified in the higher education literature? (2) What suggestions exist for improving the experiences of staff?

This review similarly serves as a call to action for leaders in higher education faculties and institutions to act, despite the recognized challenges and barriers, to make wellbeing a priority institutionally. By taking purposeful action and engaging stakeholders in cyclical improvements, institutions can realize improvements to employee wellbeing.

Understanding Wellbeing

Wellbeing is central to the overall health and performance of individuals and the organizations they serve. According to Day and Randell (2014), healthy workplaces are "those that incorporate practices, programs, policies,

[1] Except where otherwise specified, terms such as 'employees,' 'staff,' and 'colleagues' will be used to refer collectively to both academic and professional staff throughout this article. As many interventions are applicable across groups in designing a wellness program, these groups are considered jointly throughout this article whenever possible.

or work designs that promote or enhance positive employee health and wellbeing or that remediate or prevent employee stress or other negative health and wellbeing" (p. 10). Given the importance of context in different workplaces, including organizational history, culture, and employee characteristics of post-secondary institutions, organizations need to understand wellbeing as it is experienced by these individuals and teams (Biron & Karanika-Murray, 2014).

Wellbeing is a broad and contested concept (Dodge et al., 2012), even when conceptualized in the workplace. In these spaces, wellbeing encompasses a multitude of psychological, physiological, job-related, and situational factors (De Jong et al., 2016). Taken together, workplace wellbeing represents:

- An employee's holistic health (e.g., physical, mental, social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and financial wellbeing),
- Satisfaction with their work (e.g., professional/occupational wellbeing),
- Work-life integration, and
- The functioning of the context (e.g., environmental, historical, relational, cultural, personal) in which the work is situated (Loughlin & Mercer, 2014).

Models of Workplace Wellbeing Interventions

Wellbeing interventions are purposeful, usually voluntary, actions undertaken by individuals and organizations to reduce stress and/or increase health, wellbeing, and performance. Interventions intended to improve employee wellbeing require time, energy, and resource investment in order to achieve its goals (Loughlin & Mercer, 2014). Interventions must be: derived from strong evidence and needs assessment (Karanika-Murray et al., 2012); tailored to the context and needs of employees (Pignata et al., 2017); and perceived as authentic and meaningful (Randall & Nielsen, 2012).

Some notable models in the literature include job demands-resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001), workplace wellbeing model (Kelloway & Day, 2005), and model for employee happiness (Warr, 2008). Although numerous studies have presented robust and influential models for investigating certain aspects of wellbeing, such as the continuum for mental health and wellbeing (Keyes, 2002), few explicitly encompass the wide range of influences that exist in the literature. Therefore, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to improving employee wellbeing, even when implementing empirically-tested interventions (Day & Randell, 2014). The lack of an empirical and all-encompassing model requires organizations to test interventions and to undertake their own efforts to evaluate effectiveness (Gilbert & Kelloway, 2014).

Of course, "any solution or action plan is only as good as its implementation" (Biron & Karanika-Murray, 2014, p. 356). The ongoing assessment of intervention allows for the early identification of new opportunities and challenges (LaMontagne et al., 2012), and reinforces the need for long-term approaches to wellbeing, rather than one-time efforts (Karanika-Murray et al., 2012). While an organization's wellness strategy may involve a variety of programs, a plan which meets the varying needs of the organization can significantly improve wellbeing measures (Nielsen, 2014).

Bureaucratic and Systemic Challenges

Recognition

Recognition of employees and colleagues rewards or celebrates important work, milestones, or achievements. This practice is consistently highlighted as fundamental to supporting organizational wellbeing. Recognition contributes to positive collegial and managerial interactions, and its absence is a likely indicator of a malfunctioning work environment (Clark & Sousa, 2018).

Recognition programs should purposefully tie rewards to performance, employee needs, and expectations. By rewarding particular behaviours and events, organizations not only express appreciation and gratitude, but reinforce organizational values and the presence of a supportive organizational culture (Saunderson, 2004). Organizations must therefore be conscious of what they reward, as any recognition practices must be perceived to be meaningful and justly awarded (Daniel & Metcalf, 2005).

Employees should also be involved in awards committees, and in the selection of rewards, to limit opportunities where inconsequential or disconnected recognitions are implemented (Brown & Cregan, 2008). These programs must be effectively communicated and integrated in the workplace culture in order to take root (Saunderson, 2004). As part of a broader survey of organizational culture, organizations might use an assessment instrument (Daniel & Metcalf, 2005; van Straaten et al., 2016) to investigate recognition practices. This inquiry may also uncover issues of role inequity, bullying, nepotism, or other obstacles to effective recognition (Brown & Cregan, 2008).

Job Security and Status

The nature, conditions, and context of staff appointments can have a substantial influence on wellbeing. Job security concerns among contingent staff are one of the most serious stressors faced by these individuals (Tytherleigh et al., 2005). Long-term contract or temporary work fails to reward these individuals with the support, recognition, and compensation that supports effective performance (Kelloway & Day, 2005; Mudrak et al., 2018). From a wellbeing perspective, job insecurity is associated with stress, anxiety, depression, maladaptive coping, incivility, and position turnover (Reevy & Deason, 2014). These effects reinforce the importance of job security on both individual wellbeing and organizational performance.

Beyond contract issues, organizational hierarchy and role autonomy create job characteristics that are frequently associated with employee satisfaction, performance, and wellbeing. Excessive bureaucratic and administrative demands, uneven workloads, micromanagement, and a lack of opportunity for career advancement are associated with employee stress, reduced productivity, cynicism, and disengagement (Franken & Plimmer, 2019; Kinman, 2014).

A broad and deep review of staff positions, organizational hierarchy, and work processes is central to addressing issues of job security, status, and autonomy (Brown & Cregan, 2008; Reevy & Deason, 2014). High numbers of contingent positions, unmet professional needs, and limited career and job management are likely considerable sources of stress within the organization, and possible antecedents to other outcomes which reduce both personal and organizational wellbeing (van Straaten et al., 2016). Consulting with staff over the ways in which they are able to influence and take meaningful control over their portfolios. Includes addressing bureaucratic, inefficient, and excessive administrative processes; challenging inequitable hierarchies; as well as aligning duties with organizational values can address these issues (Conrad et al., 2010). As contingent staff are also in the least secure positions, this intervention must be initiated from a perspective of care by those in leadership positions, to reduce the perceived threat to their positions. Zábrodská and colleagues (2018) note that reducing administrative duties for academic staff may be particularly beneficial. Providing additional administrative support, reassigning duties, and training resources for completing paperwork efficiently may lessen stress and renew focus on academic work (Pignata et al., 2017).

Workload

Mounting workloads and the pressure to do ‘more with less’ are commonly cited challenges for post-secondary staff (Kearns & Gardiner, 2007; Kinman, 2014; Watts & Robertson, 2011). Unmanageable workload is associated with poor work-life integration, stress, burnout, disengagement, job dissatisfaction, and decreased work performance (Stoeber & Damian, 2016; Sturges, 2012). When the quantity of job demands exceeds the employee’s current (perceived) capacity to complete work during scheduled hours, they are more likely to take work home or stay overtime, limiting their ability to recover (Zábrodská et al., 2018).

As noted by Kinman (2014), improving the experience of “exhausted, demoralized and dissatisfied” (p. 231) employees should therefore be central to post-secondary planning. This requires organizations to engage in strategies that: “redesign, reduce, and redistribute workloads” (Pignata et al., 2017, p. 6); provide opportunities to improve performance efficiency; and, help employees become aware of their work habits, productivity, and workload challenges (Dunn et al., 2006).

A strategic plan for fairly distributing and rewarding workload begins with a critical review of staff portfolios, duties, and performance. Although this process will differ significantly for support staff and academic staff (Kinman, 2014), improving work processes for both groups is an established need (Pignata et al., 2017). A review of workload may also identify areas where additional resourcing, staffing, training, and processes can be improved.

Helping staff learn new skills, foster positive mindsets, and develop their own resources and job aids can effectively support coping with workload stress (Pignata et al., 2017). Similarly, job sharing strategies (e.g., team teaching or collaborative projects), job rotations for intensive roles, differentiated workload policies, and credit systems are recommended for balancing job demands (O'Meara et al., 2018).

Workplace Community and Culture

A foundational goal of any long-term wellbeing strategy must be a change in the workplace culture. An organization's culture "conveys a sense of identity and helps to share meaning among individuals interacting in a given workplace" (Biron & Karanika-Murray, 2014, p. 98). Workplace cultures are embodied and "reinforced by leadership styles, procedures and perceptions of what's valued, rewarded and punished" (Purcell, 2019, para. 10). Wellbeing interventions require the ongoing commitment, action, and communication of the ways in which the organization is developing a culture of wellbeing (Reevy & Deason, 2014).

Leadership

The role of leadership is essential to promoting positive working conditions in academic settings (Mudrak et al., 2018), to the extent that leaders can make or break the success of organizational change (Nielsen, 2014). The front-line, middle, and senior leaders in an organization perform both functional (i.e., in carrying out plans) and symbolic roles (i.e., embodying the vision) in wellbeing interventions (LaMontagne et al., 2012).

Transformational leadership approaches can positively influence employee wellbeing. Supportive, considerate, and empowering relationships (Salanova & Llorens, 2014) between managers and staff can foster: perceived organizational support (Pignata et al., 2017); positive work attitudes (Grawitch et al., 2007); reduced stress (Biron & Karanika-Murray, 2014); and, a sense of accomplishment, meaning, and fulfilment at work (Mellor et al., 2012).

In addition to defining and operationalizing a wellbeing strategy, transformational leaders strive to guide and inspire staff to achieve wellbeing goals, internalize the importance of personal wellbeing, and self-direct ongoing change (Mellor et al., 2012; Nielsen, 2014). Leaders should serve as wellbeing role models, active communicators of the wellbeing strategy and initiatives, and a resource in supporting the wellbeing of their individual staff (Nielsen, 2014). While promoting wellbeing may manifest as another responsibility for leaders to juggle (LaMontagne et al., 2012), a wellbeing focus can support a shift away from mainly 'managing' administrative duties, to 'leading' transformational change and 'guiding' teams to exemplary performance (Loughlin & Mercer, 2014).

Engagement

Engagement in workplace wellbeing literature may refer to either a) the involvement of employees in the planning and direction of wellbeing initiatives, and b) their personal commitment toward their work and contribution to the organization's goals (Salanova & Llorens, 2014). Stoeber and Damian (2016) consider work engagement to be realized when employees feel their work is meaningful, and feel involved and passionate about their work.

According to Day and Randell (2014), employee engagement is of fundamental importance "as employees must be actively involved in the shaping of organizational practices to truly produce long-term win–win benefits for both employees and organizations" (p. 14). Engaged and committed employees are also more likely to interpret negative workplace events in more positive ways, experiencing fewer negative emotional responses than less committed employees (Reevy & Deason, 2014). Therefore, these affective and physical state effects implicate engagement as a facet of employee wellbeing.

Beyond day-to-day work engagement, employee participation in implementing wellbeing interventions is foundational in the success of the initiatives. Employees should be included throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages, as this optimizes the fit of the intervention to the context, employee perceptions, and improves reception of the initiative (Karanika-Murray et al., 2012; LaMontagne et al., 2012). Participation may also help guide staff towards developing their own, personally meaningful strategies for managing their wellbeing (Clark & Sousa, 2018). The current state of employee engagement can be regularly measured through surveys and promoted through personal skills and collegial relationships to support the enjoyment of and commitment to work (Salanova & Llorens, 2014).

Work-Life Integration

Literature on work-life integration has increasingly recognized that controlling 'work' and 'home' life is not necessarily a balance of two distinct spheres, but a continuous negotiation of how and when these domains manifest in a person's life (Ren & Caudle, 2016). Staff must consciously manage long-term, and often competing, goals in each area with the demands of everyday responsibilities (Hyman et al., 2005). Boundaries are therefore always relative to the demands of each domain, the goals of the person, and their happiness or ability to cope with the current state of work-life. What is clear, however, is that excessive spillover from work to home life reduces a person's ability to recover, their perceived time to participate in family and non-work life, and negatively impacts their wellbeing (Zábrodská et al., 2018). Academic and support staff also face distinct challenges and opportunities in their work-life integration and may therefore require separate interventions (Pignata et al., 2014).

Strategies might include shifting working hours, workload portfolios, time management (e.g., techniques which improve efficiency, contain work within working hours, or reinforce social or family time), interpersonal resources (e.g., using family, friends, or support services such as child care to mitigate demands), as well as unofficial behaviours (e.g., occasionally working from home, tele-commuting; Clark & Sousa, 2018; Kearns & Gardiner, 2007; Sturges, 2012). On the other hand, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted complications to working from home which may not have been accurately represented in previous studies.

Staff who use more time management behaviours are likely to see themselves as more effective and have lower stress levels than their colleagues (Kearns & Gardiner, 2007). Listing and prioritizing tasks, allocating time, being organized, minimizing distractions and interruptions, and relating tasks to overall goals or plans are associated with improved productivity and wellbeing (Clark & Sousa, 2018). Rather than focusing on continuously 'doing more,' organizations and individuals can also reframe perceptions of engagement towards performance-based outcomes and improving quality over quantity. This approach reduces the simple focus on time spent performing work tasks (Sturges, 2012). This shift aligns with the goal of helping employees maintain control of how and when the boundaries of work-life change.

Physical and Spiritual Wellbeing

Although in different stages of integration into wellbeing programs, physical and spiritual wellbeing interventions are converging as mindfulness-based, meditation, and non-Western exercise or relaxation programs (e.g., yoga) become increasingly popular (Hilton et al., 2019). Although often separate in the literature, these sections are positioned together to draw attention to sites of overlap.

Integrating yoga and movement programs into work time can "provide a time-effective, convenient and practical method for reducing the costly effects of stress and back pain" (Hartfiel et al., 2012, p. 611). Participants in employee yoga programs have shown significant improvements in stress, anxiety, and pain management; improved mood, interpersonal relationships, self-efficacy, attention, energy, and satisfaction; as well as productivity (Pereira et al., 2015). Where significant results were not found, the interventions and program participation did not show any adverse effects (Chu et al., 2014). These researchers note the importance of adherence to the program in achieving these benefits.

As spiritual wellbeing begins to influence conceptions of workplace wellness, scholars report a growing importance on the value of life experience beyond simply doing work, and more on being, belonging, and becoming in the workplace (Garg, 2017). In the workplace, spiritual wellbeing refers to staff satisfaction with their work life, and the sense of fulfilment and meaning staff derive from their work (Garcia-Zamor, 2003). Spiritual workplaces tie the purpose of self and work, beyond the immediate task and material gain, to a greater humanistic potential (Garg, 2017).

Meditation and mindfulness-based interventions are among the more common approaches to workplace spiritual and overall wellbeing, and interest continues to grow in this area (Lomas et al., 2019). Systematic reviews of literature on mindfulness and mediation report an association with improved performance, resilience, and decreased stress, as well as a myriad range of other positive health outcomes (Hilton et al., 2019; Lomas et al., 2019). Organizations planning to address spiritual wellbeing should be mindful that these activities are fundamentally undermined if they are approached as an effort to manipulate employees' commitment and perceptions, or

approached as a short-term remedy for workplace issues (Garg, 2017). While spiritual workplaces can improve both wellbeing and organizational performance, these efforts cannot be approached superficially, or for monetary gain. Humanistic organizations must remain true to the articulated "higher" goals of the work in order to establish themselves as "worthy" of employees' commitment (Garcia-Zamor, 2003, p. 361).

Conclusion

This review highlights the possibilities for connecting "evidence-based findings from health, exercise science, and wellness models" in the design of wellbeing strategies (Hedge & Pazell, 2017, p. 411). A healthy workplace goes beyond the physical conditions, involving psychological, social, professional, and other contextual factors (Loughlin & Mercer, 2014). Given the realities of workplaces, every staff group needs the capacity to work efficiently under stress and recover effectively (Leiter & Patterson, 2014). Harrison and Stephens (2019) reference the need to embed wellness into every aspect of the organization and each staff position, which they term "wellness-in-practice" (p. 618). As voluntary wellness initiatives are likely to be used by staff who are already motivated and engaged in improving their health, supporting all staff towards achieving healthful behaviour is essential (Hedge & Pazell, 2017). This requires understanding the needs of these staff, and designing solutions to effectively engage all employees in health-promoting habits.

Post-secondary organizations must acknowledge their stressors and coordinate plans for helping staff to cope in face of their job demands (Berg & Seeber, 2016). Academic and professional staff cite common stressors that suggest that they are responding to similar stressful job variables, such as management processes, colleague or supervisor relationships, job demands, and contextual factors (Pignata & Winefield, 2015).

Addressing organizational and individual wellbeing requires a long-term plan, and the continual investment, engagement, and support of all stakeholders. Understanding wellbeing in the higher education context requires cycles of data gathering, response, and assessment, a process which the majority of institutions fail to pursue (Mattke et al., 2013). Without a direct connection between current workplace issues and appropriate interventions, wellbeing programs are unlikely to be value-added (Harrison & Stephens, 2019).

Post-secondary leaders should be wary of assuming that corporate best practices will transfer effectively into higher education contexts (Pignata et al., 2015). Additional inquiry is needed to understand how and under what conditions these benefits can be realized for staff (Karanika-Murray et al., 2012; Ott-Holland et al., 2019; Randall & Nielsen, 2012). However, studies conducted in this context are limited, which leaves little recourse but to draw from other areas and evaluate plans as they unfold (Gilbert & Kelloway, 2014). There is therefore a need for further research on the effectiveness of these strategies in various post-secondary contexts, particularly on programs specific to both academic and professional staff given the differences in their work and organizational positions in higher education.

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