Well-being in the workplace

Why it matters for organizational performance and how to improve it

Contents

The **Myers-Briggs** Company

Introduction

There is growing evidence that well-being, often called "happiness", influences a wide range of life outcomes, including our health, relationships, occupational performance, creativity, collaboration, and income[1]. However, despite over $40 billion (USD)[1] being spent by organizations on "wellness programs", less is known about well-being at work, which for many people is a significant part of their daily experience. Here we present the key findings from a three-year international study, undertaken by The Myers-Briggs Company (formerly CPP, Inc.). It investigates workplace well-being, the activities most effective for enhancing well-being, and the benefits for organizations fostering well-being for their employees.

What is well-being?

This study expands on the previous work of leading well-being researchers, such as Martin Seligman[2] and Ed Deiner[3] who found positive well-being, or "flourishing," is more than just feelings of happiness. Our most recent research shows workplace well-being comprises these factors:

- Positive Emotions – frequent feelings of happiness, contentment, pleasure
- Relationships – mutual feelings of caring, support, satisfaction
- Engagement – deep psychological connection and absorption in an activity or cause
- Meaning – having a sense of purpose and direction
- Accomplishment – pursuing success or mastery for its own sake
- Negative Emotions – low levels of anxiety, pessimism, depression

We refer to this as PREMAN later in the paper.

What did our research investigate?

Over 10,000 people from 131 countries, 6 different languages, 16 MBTI® types, and 23 broad occupation categories participated in the study between 2016–2018. Sixty-nine percent of participants were women. Participants ranged in age from 18–86 (average age 43) years. The study explored comparisons of workplace well-being across international regions, occupation categories, gender, personality types and age. Participants completed an online survey evaluating their workplace well-being and the most effective activities people use at work and outside of work to enhance their well-being. Further, we investigated the relationship between workplace well-being and organizational outcomes such as organizational commitment and job satisfaction, which have been found to be key factors affecting organizational performance.

New insights about well-being?

Relationships matter and positive emotions need improving

The Relationships factor was consistently rated the highest aspect of well-being over the three years of research. Having supportive, meaningful relationships is an essential element for people's workplace well-being that organizations need to foster and individual employees can nurture. In comparison to the other well-being factors, Positive Emotions was the lowest rated aspect of well-being (see Figure 1).
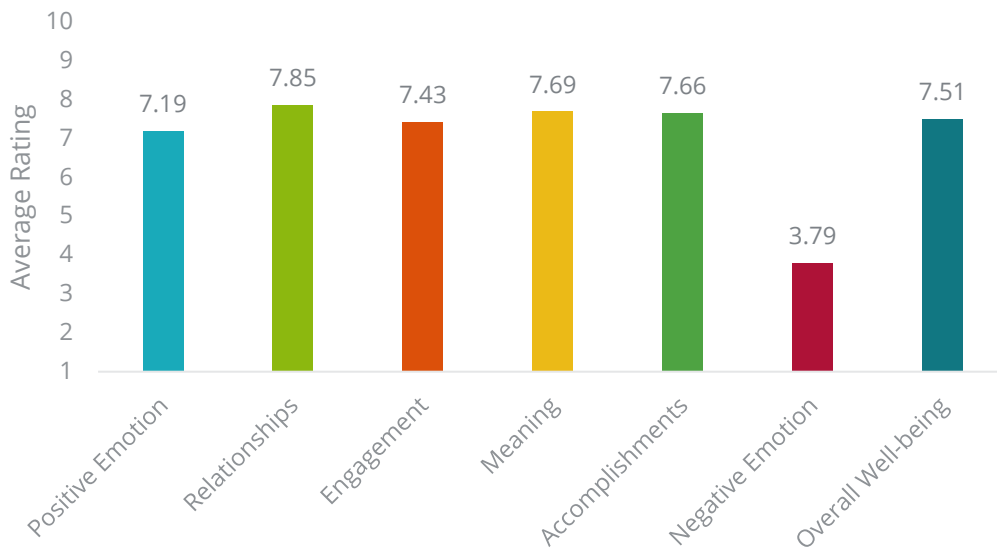
Figure 1. Well-being Factors Global Sample (2016–2018) – Note: low scores on Negative Emotion indicate lower frequency of emotions that negatively impact well-being.

While Positive Emotions was found to be lower than other aspects of well-being at work, the overall low ratings for the Negative Emotion factor do not suggest most people are frequently experiencing negative emotions at work. Rather, they suggest optimism, contentment, happiness and satisfaction are experienced less often than other aspects of well-being such as Meaning or Accomplishment. Given the widely accepted effect of positive emotions on motivation, discretionary effort, creativity and ultimately Engagement in the workplace, this presents a significant area for improvement in workplaces around the world.

Well-being around the world

Most people in this international study reported experiencing positive well-being (the average overall well-being score = 7.51 on a 10-point scale) at work. Participants from Australia/New Zealand and Latin America (7.83, respectively) reported the highest levels of well-being, while participants in Asia (7.38) reported the lowest overall well-being (see Figure 2). These findings also demonstrate that people from distinctly different cultures, such as Australia/New Zealand and Latin America, can have very similar levels of workplace well-being. This suggests that country culture may have less of an effect on workplace well-being than previously thought.
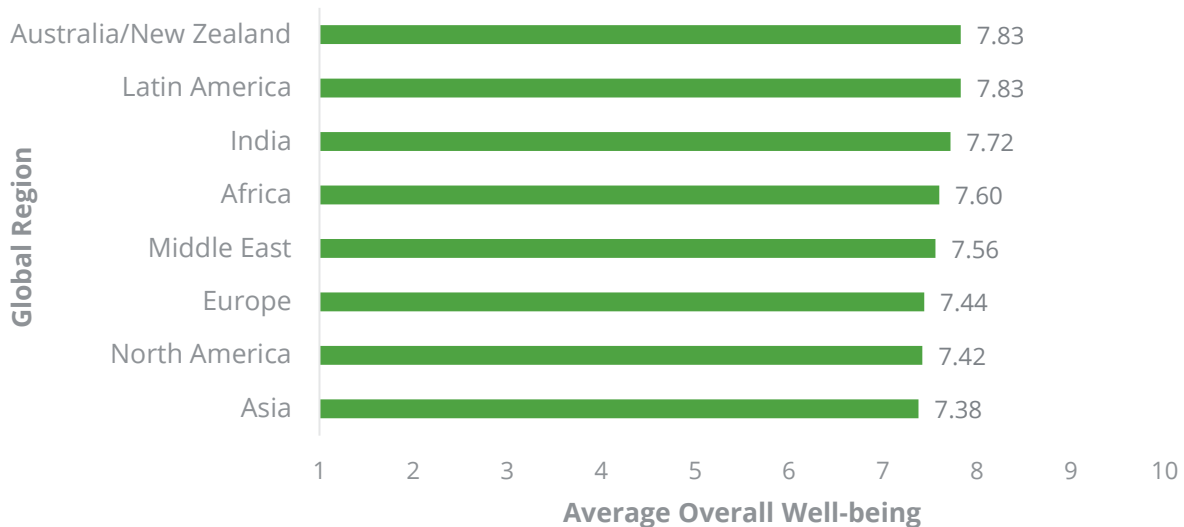

Figure 2. Overall Workplace Well-being by Global Region

Does age, gender or occupation influence well-being at work?

Over the three years of the study we consistently found men and women have very similar levels of overall well-being at work (overall well-being: men = 7.45; women = 7.52). Of note, women reported slightly higher levels of Engagement (women = 7.47; men = 7.29) and Positive Emotions (women = 7.22; men = 7.13) than men. This suggests women's overall well-being may be supported by emotions that link with the level of interest and enjoyment they experience from their work. Men appear to experience positive emotions slightly less frequently than women, which also coincides with their somewhat lower levels of Engagement, Meaning and Accomplishment when compared to women. This suggests the well-being of men in the workplace may be improved by identifying ways they can experience more positive emotions or addressing workplace factors that may impede experiencing positive emotions.

Three years of data also showed well-being increases with age, with the youngest age group (18–24 years) reporting the lowest levels of well-being (overall well-being = 6.77) and the oldest age group (65+ years) reporting the highest level of well-being (overall well-being = 8.14). This is not surprising as both research and conventional wisdom highlight that many aspects of human development improve with age. It further supports a widely held hypothesis that people develop ways to support their well-being with experience. It also highlights the trend that as people progress through their careers, they have higher levels of well-being at work and presents an opportunity for younger people to learn ways to enhance their well-being from their older counterparts.

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After grouping participants from hundreds of occupations into 23 broad occupational categories we found notable differences in the level of well-being between some occupations. The three occupation categories with the highest and the three with the lowest overall workplace well-being are presented in (see Figure 3).
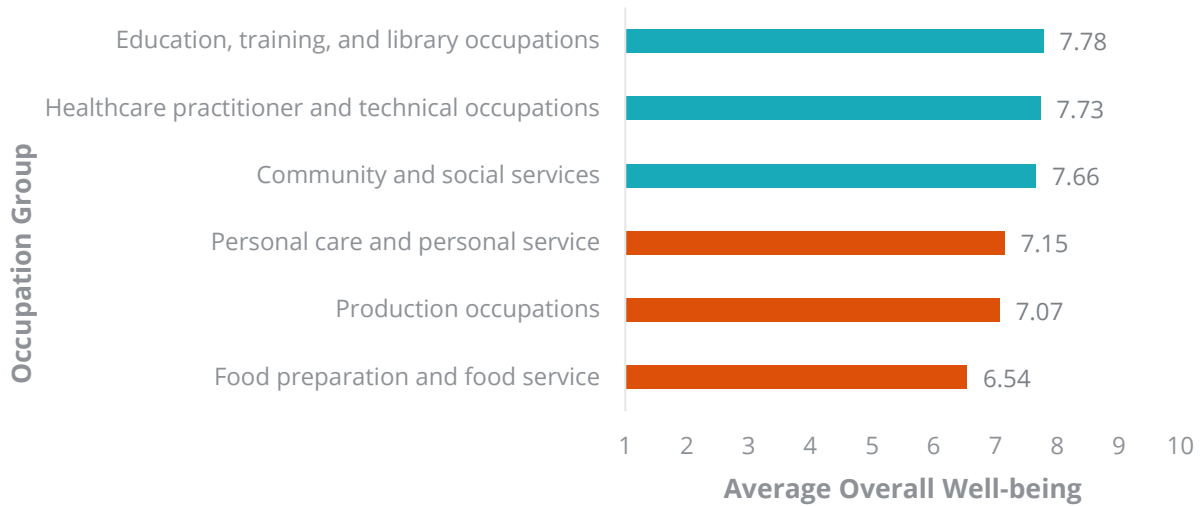
Occupation Group	Average Overall Well-being
Education, training, and library occupations	7.78
Healthcare practitioner and technical occupations	7.73
Community and social services	7.66
Personal care and personal service	7.15
Production occupations	7.07
Food preparation and food service	6.54

Figure 3. Overall Workplace Well-being by Occupation Category

The highest well-being was reported primarily among members of these professional occupations that involve **service-related** work:

- Education and training
- Healthcare practitioner and technical occupations
- Community and social services occupations

While the overall levels of well-being of the three lowest occupational categories still fell within a positive range, they comprised occupations that typically involve more **practical and physically oriented** work:

- Food preparation and service
- Production
- Personal care and service

These results indicate that well-being of people in specific occupational groups may benefit from targeted interventions in the workplace. Further research to identify key factors which may inhibit high levels of well-being for these occupations will also be important.

Is workplace well-being related to MBTI® type preferences?

The most widely used measure of personality in workplaces globally today is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI®) instrument (Myers, McCaulley, Quenk, & Hammer, 1998). However, prior to our research, there was no clear evidence if a person's personality type is related to their workplace well-being. It was also unclear whether people of different personality types use similar or different approaches to maintain or enhance their well-being. These research questions are important because MBTI researchers and practitioners are often asked by clients if some personality types are "happier" than others.

The Myers-Briggs® typology is composed of four pairs of opposite preferences which represent four different areas of personality that result in sixteen broad personality types. The four preference pairs are:

- Extraversion (E) and Introversion (I)—differentiating people who direct their energy primarily outward toward other people and events (E) from people who direct their energy primarily inward toward their inner environment, thoughts, and experiences (I)

- Sensing (S) and Intuition (N)—differentiating people who take in information primarily through the five senses and immediate experience (S) from people who take in information primarily through hunches and impressions and are more interested in future possibilities (N)

- Thinking (T) and Feeling (F)—differentiating people who make decisions primarily based on logic and objectivity (T) from people who make decisions primarily based on personal values and the effects their decisions will have on others (F)

- Judging (J) and Perceiving (P)—differentiating people who prefer structure, plans, and achieving closure quickly (J) from those who prefer flexibility, spontaneity, and keeping their options open (P)

The respondents in our research completed the MBTI® instrument and verification process to obtain a personality type corresponding to one of the 16 personality types. Of note, the MBTI® instrument measures personality characteristics that are within the healthy or non-abnormal range of personality.

Overall workplace well-being and PREMAN factor scores for each MBTI type are summarized in Figure 4. The figure shows a few notable patterns. Overall well-being was found to be lower for people with a preference for Introversion (I) compared to those with a preference for Extraversion (E). The I types also tended to report slightly higher frequency of negative emotions than the E types. Although the average overall well-being scores for all personality types indicated all types generally have positive well-being, people with ISTP preferences reported the lowest level of well-being of the 16 types (mean score of 7.06), while those indicating ENFP preferences (mean score of 7.88) reported the highest level of well-being. While this may seem to be a relatively small difference in well-being, the one-point difference on the 10-point well-being scale suggests a real difference between these types. Note too that these two personality types have three opposite preferences, which suggests personality type does affect a person's experience of their well-being.
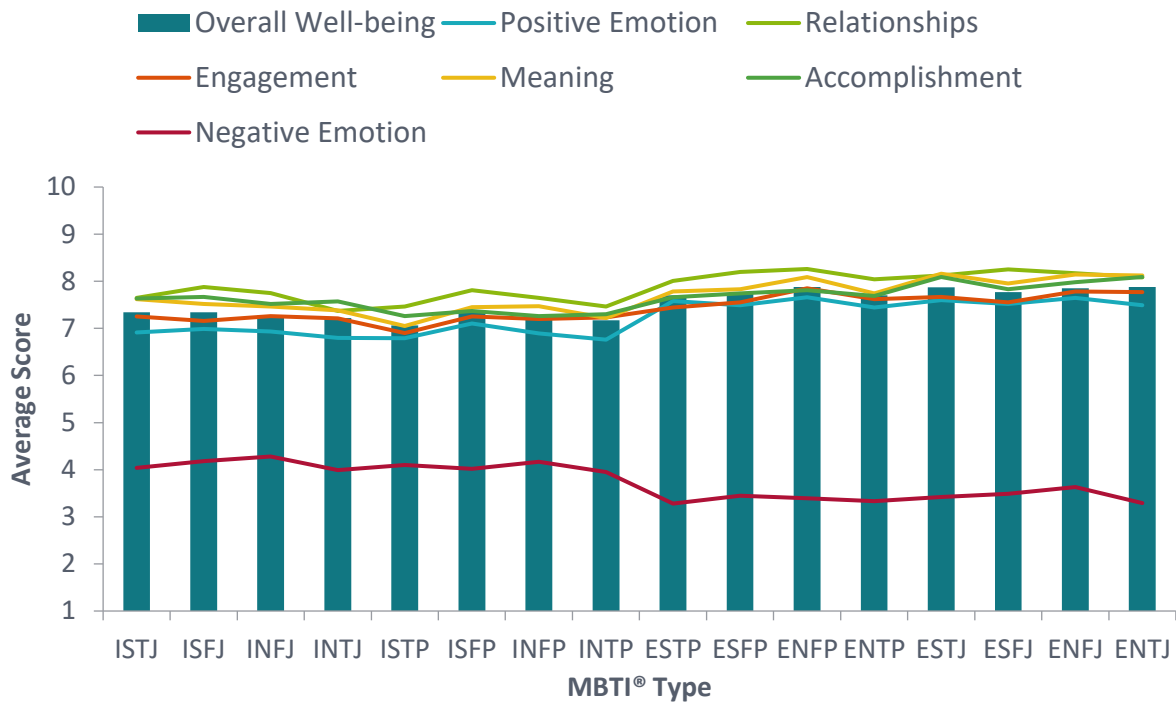
Figure 4. Average Overall Workplace Well-being and PREMAN Factor Scores by MBTI Type

While our research does not clearly explain why E types report higher levels of well-being than I types, it is possible that many workplaces offer environments which are more conducive to the well-being of E types, or E types are more inclined to experience and report higher levels of workplace well-being than I types. However, similarities between the MBTI types were evident when we investigated the individual well-being factors.

Table 1 presents the rank orders based on the average scores for each of the PREMAN factors for each of the MBTI types. The table shows that for nearly all participants in the survey, regardless of MBTI preferences, Relationships are reported as the highest rated factor of workplace well-being. Similarly, for most participants across MBTI type preferences, Accomplishment is rated the second highest element of workplace well-being. It is interesting to note that Negative Emotions are the lowest rated factor of workplace well-being for all types. Positive Emotions are the second lowest workplace well-being factor for all types, with one exception (those with ESTP type preferences).

ISTJ	ISFJ	INFJ	INTJ
Relationships	Relationships	Relationships	Accomplishment
Accomplishment	Accomplishment	Accomplishment	Meaning
Meaning	Meaning	Meaning	Relationships
Engagement	Engagement	Engagement	Engagement
Positive Emotion	Positive Emotion	Positive Emotion	Positive Emotion
Negative Emotion	Negative Emotion	Negative Emotion	Negative Emotion
ISTP	**ISFP**	**INFP**	**INTP**
Relationships	Relationships	Relationships	Relationships
Accomplishment	Meaning	Meaning	Accomplishment
Meaning	Accomplishment	Accomplishment	Engagement
Engagement	Engagement	Engagement	Meaning
Positive Emotion	Positive Emotion	Positive Emotion	Positive Emotion
Negative Emotion	Negative Emotion	Negative Emotion	Negative Emotion
ESTP	**ESFP**	**ENFP**	**ENTP**
Relationships	Relationships	Relationships	Relationships
Meaning	Meaning	Meaning	Meaning
Accomplishment	Accomplishment	Engagement	Accomplishment
Positive Emotion	Engagement	Accomplishment	Engagement
Engagement	Positive Emotion	Positive Emotion	Positive Emotion
Negative Emotion	Negative Emotion	Negative Emotion	Negative Emotion
ESTJ	**ESFJ**	**ENFJ**	**ENTJ**
Meaning	Relationships	Relationships	Meaning
Relationships	Meaning	Meaning	Accomplishment
Accomplishment	Accomplishment	Accomplishment	Relationships
Engagement	Engagement	Engagement	Engagement
Positive Emotion	Positive Emotion	Positive Emotion	Positive Emotion
Negative Emotion	Negative Emotion	Negative Emotion	Negative Emotion

Table 1. Overall Workplace Well-being and PREMAN Factors Sorted by MBTI Type

In summary, these findings highlight that people of all MBTI personality types can and do experience positive well-being in the workplace, with most personality types indicating that mutually supportive relationships at work is the greatest contributor to their well-being. Our research also highlights the opportunity to improve the frequency and experiences of Positive Emotions at work, as this factor was rated lower by all personality types in comparison to other well-being factors. Reassuringly, all personality types indicated lower levels of Negative Emotions at work compared to the other positive well-being factors.

Is workplace well-being related to organizational outcomes?

To take an objective look at the potential impact of well-being for organizations we included, in the 2018 survey, a set of established organizational outcome measures that relate to organizational performance. The measures included both positive organizational outcomes, such as employee commitment and job satisfaction, along with negative outcomes, such as employee turnover intention and job search behavior. The key findings are summarized in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Correlations between Overall Workplace Well-being and Organizational Outcomes
Green factors = Workplace well-being is positively correlated with organization performance outcomes
Red factors = Workplace well-being is negatively correlated with organization performance outcomes
Correlation results with** indicates statistically significant result: $p < .01$.
OCB = organizational citizenship behaviors

As expected, higher levels of workplace well-being related to higher levels of job satisfaction, normative (i.e. obligation to remain with the organization) and affective (i.e. emotional attachment and identification with the organization) commitment. Higher levels of well-being also correlated with increased individual and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs), such as greater discretionary effort helping co-workers and contributing to organizational objectives. Higher levels of workplace well-being also correlated with employees being less likely to have plans to leave their current organization or look for a new job. These findings indicate there are benefits from improving workplace well-being for both individual employees and the performance of organizations.

How can we enhance well-being at work?

Most effective work activities for well-being

Participants rated the effectiveness of a wide range of activities for enhancing their well-being. Overall, the most effective activities used at work were:

1. Focusing on work tasks that interest me

2. Focusing on a work task that makes me feel positive

3. Undertaking work where I learn something new

4. Taking breaks at work when needed

5. Undertaking challenging work that adds to my skills and knowledge

While it is not surprising to find focusing on work tasks that make people feel positive to be one of the more effective ways to support well-being, the findings also highlight the importance of people having autonomy in their occupational roles to undertake work that fits their interests, engage in learning and have time to take breaks when needed. It also underscores the importance for individuals to take time to develop awareness of their intrinsic work interests and their development needs, so they can consistently source opportunities to learn throughout their careers. For employers and managers, it reinforces the importance of taking time to learn about their employees' interests and development needs and create opportunities for employees to shape their work so it aligns with their interests and learning objectives.

Most effective activities outside of work for well-being?

The approaches and activities used outside of the workplace that were found to be the most effective for well-being were:

1. Spending time with family or friends

2. Listening to or playing music

3. Reading

4. Focusing on positives

5. Exercising, playing sports, or going for walks

While participants could select from a diverse range of approaches they use outside of their workplace, such as "adjusting expectations" and "playing video games", the most effective activities were found to relate to positive experiences with family and friends, and engaging in activities, such as reading, exercise or music. It is well known that people have pursued these activities throughout human history and their relevance for well-being appears to be just as significant today. Of note, the internally self-directed approach of "focusing on positives" was one of the most effective strategies for well-being. This highlights a mental strategy that can be learned and practiced by anyone.

Our research also examined the activities used both outside of work (general well-being tips) and at work (work well-being tips) that each MBTI type group reported as most effective for their well-being. Although several activities were found to be effective across multiple MBTI types, differences were also evident between types. The differences align with what would be expected for opposite personality types. For example, the Extraverted types tended to rate activities involving others as effective for their well-being, while some of the Introverted types rated

activities that could be undertaken without other people as effective. The most effective activities for each of the 16 MBTI types are summarized below, with the top three general and work-related tips for each of the types.

ISTJ

General well-being tips

- Reading
- Exercise
- Adjusting my expectations

Work well-being tips

- When needed, help co-workers
- Undertake work where I learn something new
- Align my work goals with my career goals

ISFJ

General well-being tips

- Reading
- Eating meals with others
- Adjusting my expectations

Work well-being tips

- Align my work goals with my career goals
- Structure my work so I have flexible work hours
- Seek assignments that give me a sense of purpose

INFJ

General well-being tips

- Reading
- Adjusting my expectations
- Mindfulness techniques

Work well-being tips

- Seek assignments that give me a sense of purpose
- Undertake work where I learn something new
- Remind myself of why my work matters

ENFP

General well-being tips

- Reading
- Mindfulness techniques
- Meditation

Work well-being tips

- Undertake work where I learn something new
- Invest time getting to know co-workers
- Seek assignments that give me a sense of purpose

ENTP

General well-being tips

- Adjusting my expectations
- Watching television
- Yoga

Work well-being tips

- Seek assignments that give me a sense of purpose
- Align my work with my career goals
- Acknowledge recognition I receive for work

ESTP

General well-being tips

- Eating meals with others
- Reading spiritual literature
- Attending parties

Work well-being tips

- Seek assignments that give me a sense of purpose
- Take meal breaks at work
- When needed, accept help from co-workers

INTJ

General well-being tips

- Exercise
- Eating meals with others
- Mindfulness techniques

Work well-being tips

- Undertake work where I learn something new
- Seek assignments that give me a sense of purpose
- Manage my work to ensure I have leisure time

ISTP

General well-being tips

- Adjusting my expectations
- Mindfulness techniques
- Reading

Work well-being tips

- When needed, help co-workers
- When needed, accept help from co-workers
- Remind myself of why my work matters

ISFP

General well-being tips

- Eating meals with others
- Reading
- Participating in my religious group

Work well-being tips

- When needed, help co-workers
- Invest time getting to know my co-workers
- Manage my work to ensure I have leisure time

ESFP

General well-being tips

- Participating in my religious group
- Listening to or playing music
- Exercise

Work well-being tips

- Invest time getting to know co-workers
- Manage my work to ensure I have leisure time
- Discuss positive work experiences with others

ENFJ

General well-being tips

- Eating meals with others
- Exercise
- Mindfulness techniques

Work well-being tips

- Seek assignments that give me a sense of purpose
- Undertake work where I learn something new
- Remind myself of why my work matters

ENTJ

General well-being tips

- Reading
- Walking
- Listening to or playing music

Work well-being tips

- Seek assignments that give me a sense of purpose
- Align my work goals with my career goals
- Invest time getting to know my co-workers

INFP

General well-being tips

- Mindfulness techniques
- Exercise
- Meditation

Work well-being tips

- Seek assignments that give me a sense of purpose
- Undertake work where I learn something new
- Structure my work so I have flexible work hours

ESTJ

General well-being tips

- Walking
- Listening to or playing music
- Watching television

Work well-being tips

- Align my work with my career goals
- Undertake work where I learn something new
- When needed, help co-workers

INTP

General well-being tips

- Exercise
- Participating in my religious group
- Using stress management techniques

Work well-being tips

- Undertake work where I learn something new
- Seek assignments that give me a sense of purpose
- When needed, help co-workers

ESFJ

General well-being tips

- Eating meals with others
- Reading
- Mindfulness techniques

Work well-being tips

- Invest time getting to know my co-workers
- Align my work with my career goals
- Structure my work so I have flexible work hours

In further qualitative analysis of these activities, we found that how people engage in the same well-being activity differs depending upon their personality type. For example, several extraverted and introverted types reported eating meals with others as effective. However the qualitative analysis found extraverted types enjoy eating with a wide range of family and friends, whereas introverted types preferred to share meals with family and close friends. This demonstrates that a person's personality type influences whether they benefit from, and how they engage with, activities to enhance their well-being.

Applying the insights to improve well-being at work

This study reveals the latest evidence-based way of evaluating and exploring workplace well-being, which was found to comprise the factors of Positive Emotion, Relationships, Engagement, Meaning, Accomplishment and (low) Negative Emotion. The findings indicate there are notable differences in the levels of well-being between occupational groups and that well-being progressively increases with age. This highlights where strategies can be focused to support specific occupational groups experiencing relatively lower well-being, as well as drawing on the wisdom and experience of senior-aged workers to help mentor their younger co-workers to enhance well-being. Furthermore, MBTI personality type preferences were also found to influence the kind of activities people of different types report as effective for supporting their well-being. Of note, there were also a select number of work-related activities that appear to be equally effective for most personality types. This finding illuminates the importance of organizations considering different personality needs when looking for ways to enhance the well-being of their staff.

The importance of well-being in the workplace is underscored by our findings that the higher the level of well-being a person is experiencing, the higher their commitment to the organization, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviors and the lower their intention to leave or disengage with their current organization. With recent organizational research indicating up to 80% of people in large organizations are not engaged with their work and the related incalculable loss in productivity resulting from this, improving the well-being of employees presents a crucial lever for addressing this issue. By fostering the well-being of employees, organizations can benefit from more committed employees who are more likely to exercise loyalty and increase discretionary effort towards organizational objectives. This is a salient point in an era where organizations are competing for the best talent and where the most talented employees can choose who they work for and how much will they offer of their intellect, creativity and collaboration at work.

A notable insight from the study is that positive and supportive relationships at work are important for people's workplace well-being, irrespective of their gender, personality type or geographic region. This aligns with numerous studies demonstrating the benefits of work relationships for employee performance[1]. Our current study confirms that for organizations to achieve high levels of performance and support their employees' well-being, it is essential they deliberately invest in creating work environments that nurture and support healthy social relationships between their employees. This includes organizational leaders focusing on building cultures and work teams that foster constructive relationships, and providing opportunities for employees to establish and maintain positive relationships with their co-workers. We also note the relatively lower levels of reported Positive Emotion in the study. This reinforces the need for organizations and individuals to find ways to increase the frequency of positive experiences at work. While emotional experiences originate from within each person, there are numerous and well-documented ways organizations can foster positive emotion for people at work and minimize factors inhibiting positive emotions. Identifying with employees the relationships, work practices, policies and cultural norms that support feelings of enjoyment, optimism and humor at work offer a starting point for organizations to address this issue.

With an increasing investment by organizations each year to provide "well-being and wellness" benefits to employees, our study illuminates what people say are the most effective ways to support workplace well-being. The most significant approaches employers can employ is to provide opportunities for people to undertake work that aligns with their interests, involves learning, fosters positive emotional experiences and affords autonomy to rejuvenate when needed. This presents a challenge in an era of constant and rapid change for organizations and

society as whole. To thrive in this environment, it is becoming clear that workplaces that support their people to flexibly move between practices of "slowing down" to rejuvenate, with practices of "speeding up" to stimulate learning and growth, are be best placed to manage and sustain the well-being of their people[6]. Where this is achieved, individuals, organizations and ultimately societies will benefit.

Organizations wanting to improve productivity, creativity, profitability, cooperation, retention, and employee health, need to evaluate the well-being of their staff regularly. This will enable employers and employees to identify and collaborate on informed strategies that are the most effective for enhancing well-being in their workplace. It is also important for organizations to consider the findings of this well-being research to ensure they invest in strategies and approaches that have been found to be effective and avoid strategies which have limited or no evidence for supporting workplace well-being.

For information about evaluating and addressing workplace well-being, contact the authors of this paper and The Myers-Briggs Company.

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