

MEASURING WHAT COUNTS: WORKPLACE WELL-BEING OF PROJECT PROFESSIONALS

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Workplace well-being is correlated with improved work performance. However, limited research has focused specifically on the workplace well-being levels of project professionals (PPs) who deliver strategic projects, programmes and portfolios for organisations in various industries including the construction industry. Improving PPs' workplace well-being could improve strategic project outcomes for organisations. Funded by the Association for Project Management (APM), this study measures PPs' workplace well-being using a psychometrically validated scale, the A Shortened Stress Evaluation Tool (ASSET), and benchmarks the results against normative ASSET's General Working Population 2017 database (GWP 2017) to evaluate the relative state of well-being in the project management community. Three of the ASSET core scales were used: '6 Essentials', 'Health well-being', and 'Psychological well-being' scale. Self-reported data were collected from 184 global APM members using an online survey. The results indicated that PPs' health and psychological well-being are at approaching high-risk or high-risk levels in the subscale of 'Strain on psychological health' and 'Sense of purpose'. In addition, all the work stressors that affect PPs' well-being, measured by the '6 Essentials' scale (i.e., 'Resource and communication', 'Control', 'Balanced workload', 'Job security and change', 'Work relationships', and 'Job conditions') are at approaching high-risk or high risk levels. Interventions to improve PPs' wellbeing through addressing the high-risk stressors in personal, team, organisational and professional level are identified.

Keywords: well-being, ASSET, APM, stress, psychological health

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, nations around the world have recognised that economic measures of success are insufficient to accurately measure how well a country's people are living. Well-being is suggested as a way to amplify the economic measures and provide a more complete picture of a country's success (OECD, 2017). This thinking about having economic and well-being components to measurements of success has moved into organisations across sectors and industries as to improve workplace performance outcomes. For example, the Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills published a comprehensive report that concluded employees' well-being has a

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significant impact on workplace performance in terms of labour productivity, financial performance, and the quality of output and services (Bryson *et al.*, 2014). A subset of the working population, project professionals (PPs), delivers on strategic projects in many sectors and industries, creating key outcomes for their organisations. To date, however, limited research has focused on assessing the level of workplace well-being for PPs in comparison with the general working population and to identify key factors which enhance or detract from their workplace well-being (Cui *et al.*, 2016).

Identifying ways to capitalise on workplace wellbeing strengths of PP's and addressing weaknesses in PPs' workplace well-being is an avenue for improving PPs' workplace well-being and therefore strategic outcomes for their organisations.

Against this backdrop, this funded study by the Association for Project Management (APM) aims to deepen our understanding of: 1) the current level of PPs' workplace well-being compared to a valid benchmark of workplace well-being, 2) the factors which support or detract from PPs' workplace well-being; and 3) the preliminary direction of targeted interventions likely to improve PPs' workplace well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and Impact of Workplace Well-Being

Well-being and workplace well-being have gained increasing attention since WWII. Despite this attention, an agreed-upon, singular definition of well-being or workplace well-being has not yet emerged. The Organisation for Economic Operation and Development (OECD, 2017) defined well-being in two broad domains: material living conditions (i.e., income and wealth, jobs and earnings, housing conditions); and quality of life (i.e., health status, work-life balance, life satisfaction). Ryff (1989) defines well-being in of six elements: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. Vakkayil *et al.*, (2017) describes workplace well-being as having both cognitive and affective components, referring to the quality of work experienced by the employee such as an overall feeling of health, job satisfaction, and positive emotions. Common to the various definitions of well-being/workplace well-being, there is general agreement that it includes three elements: psychological, physical, and social well-being. According to Grant *et al.*, (2007), psychological well-being (PWB) refers to one's ability to handle the stresses of daily life and maintain a positive attitude and sense of purpose; physical well-being refers to the physical health such as amount of exercise and sleeping habits; social well-being refers to having a positive and supportive social network.

Workplace Well-Being and Its Antecedents

Conceptual models of workplace well-being and its antecedents have been developed in order to support efforts by organisations to improve performance. Notable models of workplace well-being have included: The Job Characteristics Model (Hackman and Oldham, 1980), the Vitamin Model (Warr, 1987), the Demand-Control-Support Model (Johnson and Hall, 1988), and the Job Demands-Resources Model (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). These models are not yet supported by psychometrically validated survey tools which could be used to assess workplace well-being and identify strengths and weaknesses contributing to assessed levels thereof. For this study, we chose the A Shortened Stress Evaluation Tool (ASSET) developed by Johnson and Cooper (2003) as it is a psychometrically-validated measurement that assess workplace well-being with an available and substantial normative benchmark (Faragher *et al.*, 2004; Johnson and Cooper, 2003) as well as the antecedents of well-

being (i.e., six workplace stressors), and its performance outcomes (i.e., organisational commitment).

RESEARCH METHODS

Measures

Due to the objective and length restriction of the paper, we chose to present three of the ASSET core scales: '6 Essentials', 'Health well-being', and 'Psychological well-being scale'. By doing so, we can depict the well-being levels of PPs as well as the antecedents that affect their well-being levels, with a view to recommending ways of improving it. First, '6 Essentials' measure the essential six workplace stressors that affect one's health and psychological well-being levels. The six subscales (stressors) of '6 Essentials' are: 'Resources and communications', 'Control', 'Balanced Workload', 'Job Security and Change', 'Work relationships', and 'Job conditions'. Second, the 'Health well-being' scale is measured by two subscales: 'Strain on physical health' and 'Strain on psychological health'. Third, the 'Psychological well-being' scale is evaluated by two subscales: 'Positive emotion' and 'Sense of purpose'.

ASSET's questions in the '6 Essentials' scale are phrased consistently in the negative, such as "I am troubled that..." and "I do not feel...". The questions of the 'Health well-being' scale ask respondents to identify what physical health issues (such as eating issues and insomnia), and what psychological health symptoms (such as anger and tiredness) they have experienced in the previous three months. For the 'Psychological well-being' scale, it includes questions consider the frequency of experiencing selected positive emotions (such as inspired and alert) and sense of purpose (such as specific job goals and clear job goals).

Questions of all the scales are assessed by respondents using 4-point, 5-point and 6-point scales. All responses are converted to a mean score calculated for each item and converted to sten scores ('standardised ten score' - on a scale of 1-10: 1-3 = 'more positive', 4-6 = 'typical', 7 = 'cautionary' and 8-10 = 'more negative', or the opposite if reverse coded) to facilitate comparison to the normative General Working Population or GWP. For this study, we benchmarked the PPs' results against the GWP 2017, the norm group, which includes 70,000 responses gathered from 2013 to 2017. The respondents were a range of organisations and industries in the public and private sectors, and in the UK and other countries.

Procedure and Sample Characteristics

The survey population was drawn from the global membership of the Association for Project Management (APM) who completed ASSET online, including demographic questions. Geographic distribution of the respondents comprised: Europe (48%), Asia (45%), and 7% from Africa, Australia and America, collectively. Fifty-five per cent of respondents were female, 60% were either married or living with a partner. The average age of respondents was 38. Industries represented included: construction (20%), education (13%), IT (12%), logistics (10%), and consulting (9%). Job functions included: project or program managers (35%), academic or trainers (16%), with the rest described as project planners, project administrators, and change managers. Forty-eight per cent reported working full-time and working more than 40 hours per week. The useable sample was 184 respondents, representing about 1% of the membership of the APM.

RESULTS

Results are graphically displayed in Figure 1: dark green = more positive than the GWP 2017 (low risk); light green = similar to the GWP 2017; yellow = less positive than the GWP 2017 (approaching high risk); and, red = significantly less positive than the GWP (high risk). The dark bar extending across the 10-point scale graphic represents the sample's results. Overall, the results indicated that PPs' health well-being is at high risk levels in the subscale of Strain on psychological health while the subscale of Strain on physical health is similar to the GWP 2017. For PPs' psychological well-being, it is at approaching high risk levels in the subscale of Sense of purpose while the subscale of Positive emotions is similar to the GWP 2017. As for the subscales of the '6 Essentials', which are the antecedents of one's well-being levels, the results revealed that four work stressors represented by the subscales of 'Resources and communication', 'Balanced workload', 'Work relationships', and 'Job conditions' are at the high risk levels. Meanwhile, the other two subscales of 'Control', and 'Job security and change' are at approaching high risk levels.

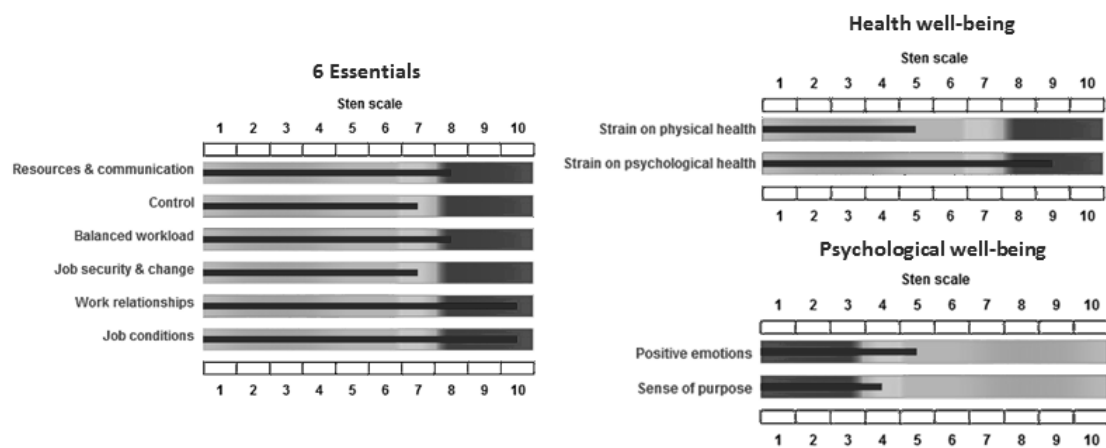


Figure 1. ASSET sten scores of the core scales for PPs

The six workplace stressors measured by the '6 Essentials' were found to be the leading indicators on health and psychological well-being (Johnson and Cooper, 2003). Figure 2 presented the high-risk items of the '6 Essential' subscales (i.e., 'Resources and communication', 'Balanced workload', 'Work relationships', 'Job conditions' and 'Control'), with a view to recommending targeted ways to enhance the PPs' wellbeing in the discussion section. Particularly, PPs are significantly less positive than the norm group in terms of getting sufficient feedback on performance and training, working in unsocial hours, spending excessive travel, experiencing technology overload, dealing with unrealistic deadlines, having negative working relationships with their boss and co-workers, working on dull and repetitive work, dealing with difficult customers, feeling lack of enjoyment and account not taken of staff ideas/suggestion about the job. Against this backdrop, the corresponding interventions were discussed in the next section.

DISCUSSION

"Project-based work has long been characterised as frenetic, fast paced, and dynamic" (Pinto *et al.*, 2014 p.578). PPs typically encounter high expectations and severe pressure to deliver projects on time and within budget, and to reconcile changing expectations of scope due to dynamic factors such as new initiatives from the project sponsor (Smith *et al.*, 2011). Without making a judgement whether PP's have a more

highly stressed environment than other working population, it is clear that respondent PPs are more adversely impacted, at higher risk of lower health and psychological well-being, than are the GWP 2017 (the norm group) benchmark population as shown in Figure 1.

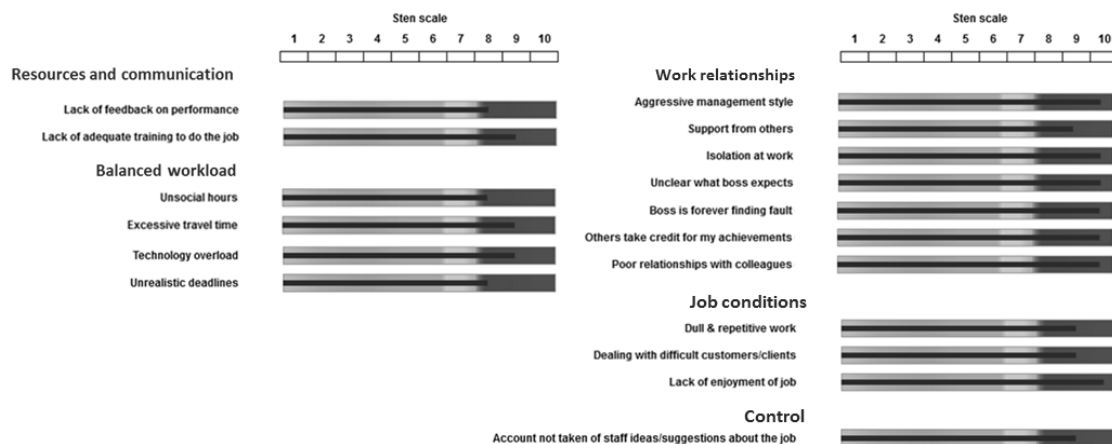


Figure 2. High risk items under the 6 Essential subscales

Specifically, none of the '6 Essentials' scales show that PPs is similar to the norm group. The 'Control' and 'Job security and change' scales measured them as approaching high-risk, whilst the 'Resources and communication', 'Balanced workloads', 'Work relationships', and 'Job conditions' scales were indicated as the high-risk areas that need to be improved in the sake of enhancing PPs' well-being levels. The 'Resources and communications' scale of '6 Essentials' indicated that PPs were at high-risk compared with the norm group, caused by lack of feedback on performance and lack of adequate training to do the job. Perceived lack of feedback on performance made PPs feel stressful because they are unsure whether their work progress is on the right track against the project outcomes and cannot predict what should be done next (Faragher *et al.*, 2004). For PPs who work at non-managerial positions which accounted for 75% of the survey respondents, the feedback is likely coming from project managers. Meanwhile, Meredith and Mantel (2009) has found that project managers tend to engage mostly in task-related activities (i.e., task assignment and specification of the way work is to be conducted), rather than personal-focused motivational activities (i.e., feedback and recognition). This tendency stems from project managers' perception that task-oriented activities directly advance project progress, whereas personal-oriented activities are unfamiliar and time-consuming activities that do not have immediate impact on task or project progress (e.g., Meredith and Mantel (2009); Awikael and Unger-Aviram, 2010). To help project managers break such a perception, organisations not only need to reinforce the importance of providing regular and constructive feedback in terms of improving performance, but also need to establish a structure and process for project managers to give multi-directional feedback. For example, it could be achieved through sharing successes and recognising strong individual performance in weekly team meetings and conducting post event reviews when things go wrong. In addition, perceived lack of training to do the job made PPs feel stressful as they are likely not acquiring skills to meet performance standard (Smith and Sainfort, 1989). Based on the results of the demographic questions in the survey, it showed that 55% of respondents have not acquired any project management qualifications. Under the

circumstance, organisations should help address the issue by supporting PPs to receive proper project management training either in house or externally.

PPs were worse off than the norm group in terms of having 'Balance Workload'. This finding is consistent with previous research by Jugdev *et al.*, (2018) who found that project managers are particularly susceptible to burnout due to having to perform in crisis-ridden environments and the pressure to be available 24x7. Based on the survey results, excessive travel time was highlighted as a particularly serious issue, as were technology overloaded and unrealistic deadlines. Excessive travel time could include the frequency of business travel, daily commuting or frequent project site visit. Although interventions are difficult to be generalized because they must fit the particular requirements of the project in the organisation for which the project is being done, the following are some of the possible interventions for remote project sites or congested commuter systems: 1) provide intermittent overnight stays versus daily commute to PPs; 2) offer flexible start and end times for work to enable PPs to commute at less congested times; and 3) offer compressed work weeks such as four days on and one day off. In addition, PPs reported that they felt overloaded by the technology in their work, but the questionnaire did not allow them to specify what they meant by that. This is a limitation that should be addressed in future studies. One can speculate that it refers to the pace and nature of new software developed for managing project, e.g., cloud-based project management tools. This speculation may be supported by the finding that PPs perceived that they lacked adequate training to do the job. Furthermore, unrealistic deadlines have been consistently shown to be common stressors in project management (Soderlund, 2005). Although it is unlikely that organisations will voluntarily apply less time pressure on PPs, they can enable PPs to set more realistic deadlines by providing them with training on learning project planning techniques and mastering the related software, such as Microsoft Project, in order to perform the job more accurately and efficiently.

PPs felt that they had insufficient control over their work because their ideas or suggestions about the job were not being taken seriously. On the contrary, increasing control can help people to encounter negative effects of other work stressors such as work-life imbalance and heavy workloads (Noor, 2002). It is possible that existing work practices that result in lack of feedback, insufficient job training, and low decision latitude cannot be easily changed at the organisational level. However, professional project management organisations such as APM and Project Management Institute (PMI) and government agencies such as Health and Safety Executive (HSE) could become powerful agents of transformation through developing best practice guidelines for member firms or related industries.

The 'Work relationship' scale of the 6 Essentials revealed that PPs were at high-risk compared with the norm group. Almost all the subscales under the Work relationships scale were at high risk. PPs felt they did not have enough support from their bosses and colleagues. This, taken together with a high level of concern over poor relationships with bosses and colleagues, leads to the inference that this could be a complex issue. In general, good relationships at work not only can make people feel energised at work, but it also enables high levels of work engagement and job satisfaction even if they work under stressful working conditions (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008). Conversely, poor relationships lead to strain and affect health and performance negatively (Faragher *et al.*, 2004). Particularly, PPs reported that their bosses have aggressive management styles, fail to provide clear goals, and tend to focus exclusively on fault finding. To address these issues, organisations could

consider training managers on the keys to team formation (Tuckman and Jensen, 1977) so that they know how to support project teams from forming to performing stage. This is especially important on projects where team members may lack prior working relationships. It is also important for organisations to review and revise project practices, if necessary, to support fair and timely staff performance actions on retrain, reassign and replace. In addition, collegial relationships should be fostered at work to support better performance outcomes (Nagami *et al.*, 2010). This is especially true on project teams where new relationships may need to be formed to support effective team performance (Tuckman and Jensen, 1977). Some possible interventions to improve the relationships include: provide training for all project team members on how to use appreciation to build relationships and intrinsic motivation (Dysvik and Kuvaas, 2008), how to create positive emotional work environments (Vacharkulksemsuk and Fredrickson, 2013), and how to practice active and constructive listening skills.

As for PPs' work condition, job enjoyment or satisfaction within this subscale represents the highest risk, followed by dealing with difficult customers/clients, and dull/repetitive work. Personal characteristics such as marital state, gender, age, and education levels contribute to an individual's level of job satisfaction (Gazioglu and Tansel, 2006). Nevertheless, interventions to improve PPs' job satisfaction include: 1) clearly define and communicate the meaning or purpose of the project to PPs; 2) support PPs to align their personal purpose with the project's purpose; and 3) implement job crafting (Tims *et al.*, 2016), which allows team members to redefine how to get the work done and to consider innovative ways to share work to enhance overall team and individual satisfaction; and 4) implement strengths assessments and strengths-based management to support effective job crafting, alignment with purpose and job satisfaction. In fact, Seligman *et al.*, (2005) found that when people identify and use one of their signature strengths in a new and different way every day for a time interval of up to 6 months, their happiness levels were significantly improved while depression symptoms were alleviated. In practice, PPs tend to work hard to manage weaknesses in order to prevent project failure. Strength-based training provides them with a new lens to focus on what is right, what is working, and what is strong. Consequently, as PPs are more engaged and energised at work, the high-risk items under job condition, such as dull and repetitive work, and enjoyment of work, could also be improved. Finally, to enhance PPs' abilities to successfully deal with difficult customers/clients, organisations may need to provide training on teaching influence and negotiation skills.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to explore the workplace well-being of project professionals using the ASSET scale, with a specific focus on global members of the Association of Project Management. Several key findings emerge from the study. The results revealed that PPs' health and psychological well-being are at approaching high-risk or high-risk levels in the subscale of 'Strain on psychological health' and 'Sense of purpose'. Particularly worrisome are the scores for all the work stressors that affect PPs' well-being (i.e., 'Resource and communication', 'Control', 'Balanced workload', 'Job security and change', 'Work relationships', and 'Job conditions') are at approaching high-risk or high-risk levels. This is a concern, but it also provides an opportunity for intervention.

This study provides pointers regarding the areas of concern in relation to the workplace well-being of project professionals. Employer organisations, the industry, and the government need to take cognisance of these findings, actively engage with project professionals, and implement intervention strategies to address the high-risk problem areas.

This study is not without its limitations. The survey was cross-sectional in nature, hence test-retest reliability could not be investigated. In addition, the self-reporting nature of the survey, coupled with the voluntary nature of participation, might reflect individuals with very strong views either way about workplace well-being. We acknowledge the potential bias inherent in this as a limitation of the study.

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