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## **Abstract**

The wellbeing of the workforce is potential a source of conflict in workplaces, both within Australia and internationally. The often disparate goals of employers who see workplace wellbeing as a productivity improvement and risk management strategy, and workers' representatives and unions who see workforce wellbeing as a health and safety issue sets up an immediate tension. However, the commonality of goals between these groups provide a pathway to improved labour relations in the workplace. This paper draws on the first stage of a research project examining workplace wellbeing in a large government human services organisation in Australia. Interviews were undertaken with five management representatives, eight union delegates and thirty current and former front line workers. The frontline workers were sampled randomly using a sampling frame stratified for gender, role, geography and team size The analysis revealed a history of conflictual relations between management and union representatives have hampered progress towards achieving improvements in workplace wellbeing. However, all parties identified similar factors that impacted positively or negatively on wellbeing. By providing independent evidence of workplace wellbeing, the sources of workplace stress and employees preferred support mechanisms the research project has stimulated a solution-focussed dialogue between the parties, while building stronger relationships between academics, policy makers, employee representatives and frontline workers.

## **Introduction**

The issue of workforce wellbeing has the potential to become a source of conflict in workplaces, both within Australia and internationally. The often disparate goals of employers and managers who see workplace wellbeing as a productivity improvement and risk management strategy, and the goals of workers' representatives who see workforce wellbeing as a health and safety issue sets up an immediate tension. However, the commonality and shared goals of these groups provide a pathway to improved labour relations in the workplace.

This paper draws on the first stage of a research project examining workplace wellbeing in a large government human services organisation in Australia. This organisation has experienced a history of conflictual relations between management and union representatives which have hampered progress towards achieving improvements in workplace wellbeing, with defensive communication and a lack of trust key factors in the tension between them. A lack of trusted evidence to support the union's key concerns, and the union's perception of lack of commitment by management to instigate cultural change and enhance workplace wellbeing have been sources of dispute.

Despite the different perspectives held by the parties, researchers found that both groups were highly committed to making changes to improve workers' wellbeing. This paper explores the potential for shared interests in relation to workplace wellbeing and investigates the common factors identified by both parties as impacting on worker wellbeing. It further explores the role of researchers in providing an independent, mutually accepted picture the factors influencing workplace wellness.

## Current debates surrounding workplace wellbeing

Workforce wellbeing is a concept that brings together physical, relational and mental health, along with a recognition that the social, emotional, cultural, spiritual and educational domains all contribute to overall satisfaction and happiness in life and work (Wellbeing Research Group, 2018).

Wellness and wellbeing are important in the workplace. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) identifies that workplace wellbeing:

Relates to all aspects of working life, from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how workers feel about their work, their working environment, the climate at work and work organisation (International Labour Organisation, 2018).

The ILO argues that the aim of workplace wellbeing measures is to complement occupational health and safety measures to make sure workers are safe, healthy, satisfied and engaged at work.

Improving workplace wellbeing has been identified as a way to improve productivity and reduce employee costs associated with recruitment, turnover, absenteeism and workers' compensation (Boxall & Macky, 2014; Guest, 2017; Proudfoot, Corr, Guest, & Dunn, 2009; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Van Rhenen, 2009). Meanwhile workers' advocates see workplace wellbeing as an end in itself and an important component of sustainable, long-term careers (Ravenswood, 2011).

More recently, there has been a growing critique of the organisational perspective on workplace wellbeing. Guest (2017) has argued that the wellbeing research, based in HRM and psychology fields, has lacked a critical approach that integrates workers' needs with the socio-political and organisational context of their wellbeing. As a result, Guest (2017) proposes a new analytical framework, drawing on a human rights perspective of employment relations and 'quality of work life' literature that includes considering engaging work, organisational support and employee voice, and a good work environment in our understanding of workplace wellbeing. In particular, Guest includes equal opportunity as a key aspect of a good work environment and outlines five domains of HR practice that have been shown to impact on employee wellbeing and a positive employment relationship. These domains are:

- Investing in employees
- Engaging work
- A positive social and physical environment
- Voice
- Organisational support

Ravenswood and colleagues (2017) take Guest's work a step further, by arguing that not only do we need to address equal opportunity as a key element of workplace wellbeing, but that we also need to take a gender perspective to understanding wellbeing. Research is needed to explore the long-term impact of unequal pay and workplace sexual harassment on women's wellbeing. But furthermore:

Research needs to move beyond what is essentially surface level analysis of the issues for wellbeing at work in relation to gender, and to consider why women might have lower wellbeing in relation not only to their family demands, but also in relation to how we organise work in our societies and their experience at work (Ravenswood, Harris, & Wrapson, 2017).

Kirton (2018) has also begun preliminary explorations into whether UK unions can utilise workplace wellbeing narratives to strategically frame their gender and equality agenda. In a qualitative study

of unions' equality work from 2005-2016, she reflects on whether the 'wellbeing concept could have any purchase within collective action and equality aims' (p20).

Foster (2018) argues that a focus on workplace health and wellbeing undermines the recognition of disability in the workplace and prioritises an able-bodied conception of wellbeing. However, she ignores the wealth of evidence relating workplace fairness and inclusive practice to employee satisfaction (Boedker et al., 2011; Leiter & Maslach, 1999). She does at least consider if the language of wellbeing does present opportunities to 'positively universalise workplace disability and well-being concerns' (p187).

Much of the debate around the concept of wellbeing arises out of the different perspectives of the employment relations and HRM disciplines. As Kochan and colleagues (2019) note employment relations approaches focus on organisations, collective actors, and labour markets, with an emphasis on historical context whereas the organisational psychology or HRM approaches offer micro- and meso-level focuses on the workplace. As a result, organisational and HRM discussions of wellbeing tend to focus on individual traits or capacities and concepts such as resilience, while employment relations take a more collectivist approach that focuses on the socio-political and organisational context of wellbeing.

Resilience is commonly described as an individual characteristic or trait that allows an individual to adapt and cope in challenging or difficult situations. Psychological resilience is defined as "the flexibility in responding to challenges and changing situational demands" and as "the ability to bounce back from negative emotional responses" (Gritti, 2015 p.451-2).

Kuntz and colleagues (2017) have argued that resilience should be understood as a behavioural construct rather than an attitude or individual trait. They argue that employee resilience is "a suite of adaptive, learning and networking behaviours ... that contribute to organisational resilience". They identify support-seeking, collaborative crisis management and continual performance improvement as key resilient behaviours. However more recent literature tends to highlight the importance of social support and social networks that underpin individual resilience (White et al., 2019).

In contrast to the individualised focus on resilience, psychosocial organisational factors identified as contributing to workplace wellbeing include high workload and pace, rotating work schedules, shift and night work, high role stressors, job insecurity and career concerns, poor interpersonal relationships – including bullying – and job content that provides limited stimulation or meaning (Hurrell, 2005). Further studies have explored the organisation of work and the impact of workload and deadlines on workers' wellbeing and ability to gain adequate sleep (Moen, Kelly, Tranby, & Huang, 2011), and their ability to detach from work.

Broader organisational environment factors identified in the literature include organisational culture, inclusive leadership, a vibrant cohesive workplace, engaged employees (Lowe, 2011), and work-life balance (Bardoel, Pettit, De Cieri, & McMillan, 2014). Researchers have also identified the importance of supportive management (Gilbreath & Benson, 2004; Hone, Schofield, & Jarden, 2015; Wood & de Menezes, 2011), and supportive colleagues (Hone et al., 2015). These factors also resonate with Leitner and Maslach's (1999) six organisational factors that contribute to individual burnout: workload, control, rewards, community, fairness, and values.

In exploring how organisational factors intersect with the broader socio-political environment Munro (Munro, 2011a, 2011b) has identified systemic-level challenges that intersect with organisational processes to impact significantly on individual wellbeing. When exploring worker wellbeing it is important to ensure that the systemic factors that cause tension and ill-ease in

workers are taken into consideration along with organisational and individual factors. A systemic perspective acknowledges that workers and the organisation are operating within a broader system of social, inter-organisational and legal forces. For human service workers system includes interactions with clients and with other service providers, and the need to operate within legislative and regulatory frameworks. The competing demands of risk management, compliance and the limited availability of resources to deliver services evoke a range of individual stressors and challenges for human services workers.

Given the extensive academic debates that surround the factors that contribute to workplace wellbeing, it is unsurprising that unions and management struggle to operationalise the concept of wellbeing in a consistent way that promotes cooperative relations in the workplace. In exploring the concept of cooperation between unions and management, Bray and colleagues (2019) emphasise that while there are significant barriers to cooperation, the attitudes and behaviours of the parties matter. They emphasise that it is important to take 'a more nuanced approach than critical perspectives, which blame employers for the lack of cooperation, and managerialist perspectives, which blame trade unions and workers' (p3). Furthermore, it is too simplistic to see cooperation as 'always present or never possible or wise'.

## **Methodology**

This paper is drawn from a broader project exploring workplace wellbeing in a large public sector organisation human services organisation in Australia. The project was commissioned by the human resource management unit of the organisation with the aim to inform the development and implementation of a reliable, valid workforce wellness indicator appropriate to the organisation. This indicate could then be used to assess the effectiveness of workplace initiatives seeking to support staff and enhance the wellbeing of staff. The underlying purpose of the development of the wellness indicator was to provide an appropriate, evidence-based workplace wellbeing measure to support the organisation's efforts to:

- reduce work-related stress and vicarious trauma
- increase staff workplace satisfaction and productivity
- reduce sick leave, extended leave and compensation claims
- reduce turnover rates
- improve service provision and thus raise client satisfaction.

While the research was commissioned by the organisation, the researchers were keenly aware that the support of unions was critical to the success of the project. As such, regular consultation and briefing sessions were held with both senior managers of the organisation and with union delegates. As a result, all parties were supportive and engaged with the project.

Arising out of the union briefing session, eight union delegates agreed to participate in in-depth, semi-structured interviews to provide their perspectives as both frontline workers and as union delegates. Interviews were conducted outside the organisation's premises in union meeting rooms to ensure that confidentiality was maintained. Interviews took between 60 to 90 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed. Union delegates have been given pseudonyms and any identifying factors such as locations or regions have been removed from the data.

On completion of the senior managers' briefing, twenty-seven senior managers were asked to participate in discussion groups around the topics of:

- Major stressors and threats to wellbeing
- Current practices that support wellbeing
- Priority actions needed to improve wellbeing.

The senior managers were also asked to complete individual feedback forms that allowed for reflection and identification of key wellbeing issues in the workplace. These were completed within the meeting and handed back to the researchers and the conclusion of the session. Data from the discussion groups and the individual feedback forms was collated and analysed. The senior managers' data has been aggregated and no identifying features relating to individual senior managers, their positions or regional responsibilities is provided in this paper.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with two members of the senior managers' team. These were conducted via Skype or telephone and were digitally recorded and transcribed. Identifying factors such as title or role have been removed and interviewees have been given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

A key part of the project also involved interviews with 23 frontline workers and six ex-frontline workers, conducted in person or by telephone or Skype. The frontline workers were randomly selected using a sampling frame stratified by gender, geography (rural/metro), length of service (short/long) and team size (large/small). Focus groups were also held with the direct line-managers of the frontline workers. This paper draws primarily on the data from the interviews with union delegates and frontline workers, and the discussion groups and feedback forms of senior managers.

Interview data was analysed using Nvivo software. A coding frame was developed drawing on issues and themes identified in the wellbeing literature and in the interview protocols. However, coders also identified themes arising out of the interviews, allowing knowledge to be generated through an "interplay between the concepts of a broad conceptual framework and analysis of the substantive subject matter" (Glucksmann, 2000, pp., 15).

## **Findings**

Despite perceptions that management and union have distinct agendas, the findings revealed significant overlap in positions and some key differences.

### **Key issues identified by union delegates**

Among the union delegates there were certainly discussions of each of the elements identified by the senior managers and there was significant overlap in their perspectives of these issues with the other frontline workers interviewed. The union delegates, (who comprised both frontline workers and managers themselves) representing the broader experiences of workers across the whole organisation, picked up on the workers' experiences of wellbeing and the managers' perspectives of the organisation. The delegates identified three key issues that they felt undermined workers' experience of wellbeing. These included an individualised perception of the nature of wellbeing across the organisation, that workers felt that their professional judgement was not valued and that the organisation placed more emphasis on compliance than service quality. Each of these perspectives is discussed below.

#### *An individualisation of the risks associated with wellbeing.*

Amongst the union delegates, there was significant concern that many managers, at both the frontline level and at more senior levels, see wellbeing as an individual responsibility. As one

participant, Bill identified, the message that workers hear is that if an individual experiences poor wellbeing then the organisation as a whole will not continue to support them, but rather will act to reduce the risk for the organisation and this may result in the worker being 'cut loose'.

...the problem is not us, it's Bill and it's the workforce and – look, if you can't do the job, if you have a mental breakdown, you're no longer suitable. Off you go. We no longer have a need for you. That's the organisation.

Same at the local level. Hang on, are you really suitable for this job? Maybe you need to be looking for another job. If you don't cope under the stress ... maybe you should be doing checkout or something, I don't know. That was the messages that people were getting (Bill).

Another union delegate, Joe, also identified that workers respond to this risk of being 'cut loose' by being increasingly secretive about the mental and emotional wellbeing and hiding their wellbeing state from their managers.

So there's an issue there with frontline workers being medically discharged if they don't like you. So you've got to, you've got to keep stuff from them, from some management (Joe).

Bill also suggested that this attitude underpins the organisation's approach to recruitment, with managers suggesting that they should recruit for resilience in their personnel. While management do express concerns around resilience, this is not always the primary focus of recruitment or training. A senior manager's response to the issue of recruiting for resilience is discussed below.

#### *A lack of trust in their professional judgement*

A further concern identified by the union delegates was the perception that the organisation did not trust their workers to make professional judgments about their clients and their work. In part some of the anxiety in this area stemmed from a new model of group supervision that had been introduced in the organisation. Under this model, experienced workers were asked to present details of recent cases for the group as a whole to analyse and develop strategies to resolve.

it's like they have no confidence or trust in the individuals at that ... coal face level to be able to make decisions. Has to be made somewhere else...

I'm actually going out there and being asked to go and do assessments... And then when you make assessments, you get someone who's been 2 years in the job who's reviewing your assessment. You think, 'are you f\*\*ing serious?' So, the whole things turned upside down (Rob).

A number of union delegates and frontline workers identified that this perceived lack of trust had a significant impact on their sense of wellbeing and on their commitment to the job.

#### *Compliance processes rather than assessment and analysis of the situation*

There was also a perception amongst the union delegates that the organisation had become so focused on risk that they were losing focus on the needs of clients. Joe explains how his work had changed in response to risk management and ensuring greater compliance with the rules.

And then you do ... an ... after consultation, and that's where managers are supposed to debrief with you and make sure you're okay and all that sort of stuff.

Instead what it's being is, 'so what happened?', 'what information have we got?', 'oh okay so we want this and this on the safety assessment, and we want this and this on the risk

assessment' and 'we want dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, and okay better make sure [this goes] out and better put that in, make sure that goes in'. and – and it's all about compliance...

Everything, [organisation] does today is butt covering. And as sad as that is, that's what it is. It's just butt covering.

We're accountable for everything. The pressure is just unbelievable, it is really bad. (Joe)

Significantly, Joe's concerns with risk management and compliance were to some extent echoed by a senior manager as discussed below.

### **Key issues identified by senior managers**

Senior managers were asked to identify what they thought were the major stressors and threats to frontline workers' wellbeing. The most commonly identified issues included

- Administration and new technology around the introduction of a new information management system (approx 50%)
- Workloads – including number and intensity of cases (approx 45%)
- Difficult clients (approx 30%)
- Lack of management support (approx 30%)
- Time management issues for frontline workers – ie their autonomy and self-management (approx 30%)
- The nature of the work itself. (approx 30%)

While many of these issues identified by senior managers resonated with the findings from the interviews with frontline workers and the union representatives, a number of these perceptions were actively challenged by the frontline workers. These challenges frontline workers provided to the senior managers' perceptions are discussed below.

#### *Workload, flow and management*

It is notable that the key issues highlighted by the senior managers, while important for frontline workers, also tended to have implications for workload management and allocation of resources. That is, a managerial perspective. This is not to suggest that the managers did not have insights into the particular concerns of the frontline worker and the union delegates. Certainly the introduction of the new management information system was a source of significant stress and workflow pressures for the frontline workers interviewed.

#### *Organisational values and worker commitment*

While much of the focus of senior managers was on the practical aspects of workload and work intensity, there was a recognition that their workforce was highly committed and that their values aligned with those of the organisation. However there was also a recognition of the tension that arose for workers between the goals of the work and the nature of the organisation as a whole.

Generally speaking people come into this work for the right reasons and a really strong value base, but they become disenfranchised by the fact that they're seeing their organisation isn't necessarily, from a centralised or policy perspective, isn't necessarily, that's not aligned with the principles. So, long story short, the principles themselves they feel connected to; but not the behaviours of the organisation itself (Senior Manager).

#### *Collective support for wellbeing*

One particularly insightful in-depth interview was conducted with a senior manager who was responsible for developing organisation-wide policies for good practice amongst frontline workers. This manager accurately identified many of the key concerns and sentiments expressed by frontline workers, noting in relation to managers and office culture

what I'm hearing from practitioners, is that if there is something that is going to keep them working, it is going to be the relationship that they have with their manager, or their colleagues, and/or their colleagues. That, it's that connection, that solidarity that will see them through all of those other systems or practice issues that may be difficult. (Senior Manager)

#### *Professional judgement and compliance*

The same senior manager also identified the need for line managers of frontline workers to provide support for the decisions made by the workers, to 'stand by' their decisions and acknowledge workers' professional autonomy. If either of these elements was lacking it could undermine worker wellbeing and their capacity to cope with external stressors. This manager linked a lack of support directly to turnover rates and intention to leave the organisation.

This system is so risk-averse. You know, literature around the world around Western [client service] systems have been set up in a very risk averse way...

There's probably a level of frustration about some pretty seismic system issues ... that has generated a cynicism. I think people are expressing, certainly, that they are extremely tired. So they are worn out, people are looking for other opportunities (Senior Manager)

#### *Resilience and recruitment*

The in-depth interview with a senior manager responsible for recruitment and retention identified a range of factors that were addressed in the recruitment process.

And the things that they are assessing are key capabilities that the organisation have determined as critical for day one in the role. So, an example of what those key capabilities are, are things such as display resilience and courage, commit to customer service, working collaboratively... think and solve problems and technology. So, the idea of the assessment centre approach is to really also give candidates a bit more of a job preview, right, around what actually the – they can expect in the role (Senior Manager).

It was notable that the organisation identified resilience as a key component in the recruitment process. When pressed to explain how they sought resilience the senior manager identified that they examined how candidates responded to a setback, through a behavioural test in the role-playing activity. While this approach could capture day-to-day responses to challenges in the workplace, it is unlikely to capture the nature of ongoing challenges experienced in the job.

#### **Frontline workers' perspectives on issues identified by senior managers**

A relatively common statement from the frontline workers was that the stress they experienced did not arise from the nature of the work itself, nor from dealing with 'difficult clients'. Many of the frontline workers said they really enjoyed the challenges of the work itself and noted that while clients could be challenging and present multiple issues that needed to be addressed, the clients were not the greatest sources of stress.

The introduction of the new information management system was identified by most frontline workers and by union delegates as a key source of stress. However, staff did not reject the system itself, but identified that the real source of the stress was the lack of training and support to assist them in adopting the new system. A number of interviewees felt that the new information system had exacerbated problems with administration as a backlog of these tasks developed while they were trying to learn the new system.

The introduction of the new information system was also seen by frontline workers as emblematic of the bigger issue of management support. When senior managers identified this issue, they seemed to be suggesting that staff needed more direct management of their activities and actions and more training in how to make decisions. When frontline staff discussed the issue of management support, they explored two factors that made for good and supportive managers. One of these was good workplace leadership which aimed at creating a supportive and encouraging workplace culture. In these discussions staff felt that a good manager could make all the difference to their day to day work, influencing the culture of their workplace and the supportive collaboration between colleagues.

#### *Organisational culture and leadership*

For many frontline workers, the issues of workloads and time management also related strongly to having a good manager. A good manager was identified as being able to recognise the need to balance the number of cases that a worker took on, against the complexity and intensity of these cases. Similarly, for most staff the issue of time-management tended to be framed more as an issue of self-management and autonomy. Once again, this was captured well in the in-depth interview with the insightful senior manager:

So what I think the stuff around workload issues isn't necessarily about the workload plan or anything like that, it is actually about how do leaders in our organisation mediate the priorities of the organisation and communicate what those priorities mean for [clients] in a way that actually connects and helps caseworkers to understand how to do both or what needs to give (Senior Manager).

#### **Commonalities and overlap**

The analysis revealed a number of significant areas where union delegates senior managers and frontline workers expressed similar attitudes and identification of the factors that contributed to wellbeing. While there was overlap in the key themes identified by the union delegates, senior managers and frontline workers there were notable differences in the overall perspectives.

Union delegates demonstrated a broad critique of the overall impact that a managerialist agenda appeared to be having on the organisation and identified a number of overarching issues that were impacting on the wellbeing of frontline workers. They had a tendency to attribute a more individualist agenda to senior managers than the senior managers themselves expressed.

Senior managers were focused on more logistical issues of management and control, however they were also able to recognise the importance of collective understandings of wellbeing, the impact of organisational culture and the importance of highly committed frontline workers whose values aligned with those of the organisation.

While Frontline workers were aware of the major concerns of the senior managers, their perspectives on these same issues tended to focus on the relational aspects of the work and the nature of wellbeing rather than the logistical and mechanical aspects. Frontline workers were looking for leadership and support from above. Union delegates and frontline staff both noted that they were committed to the organisation's goals and values, but when those goals were subverted to achieve compliance or manage risk, that impacted on their emotional and mental wellbeing.

The implications of these findings are important for stimulating cooperation between the parties. The findings show that while there are differences across the perspectives of union delegates, senior managers and frontline workers, there is a compatibility of interests between all of the groups. The findings also show that there is a level of mutuality between the groups within the organisation. Each group does recognise the interests of the other groups as legitimate. This leads to the potential for mutual responsibility for wellbeing within the employment relationship. A key element for future progress will be ensuring workers' and delegate's voices are heard by senior managers.

Research conducted by an independent body showed significant overlap in the perceived areas of concern. Such research has the potential to present findings in a way that are accepted by both unions and employers, this paving the way for shared commitment, cooperation and collaboration in enhancing the wellbeing of the workforce.



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