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Future of Wellbeing at work: Applying the PERMA model



“If all you do is work to fix problems, to alleviate suffering, then by definition you are working to get people to zero, to neutral.

Positive psychology is another arrow in the quiver of public policy and psychology through which we can raise wellbeing above zero.”

- Martin Seligman

Article Summary:

A summary article looking at Wellbeing initiatives and interventions in organisations and mapping these to the PERMA model. An analysis of what areas we need to focus on to truly impact wellbeing above zero and the suggestion of moving away from an over reliance on our managers.

Contents and Takeaways:

- Overview of the Challenge and Opportunities with Wellbeing at Work
- Introduction to the PERMA model of wellbeing
- An outline of initiatives in organisations and how these connect to the PERMA model
- A diagram outlining how Psychological wellbeing underpins Physical and Financial wellbeing
- Using the PERMA model: Questions to consider for diagnosing current wellbeing approach •
Final thoughts: An introduction to self-managing teams

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Alex and Joshua have been pioneering the application of positive psychology with individuals, teams and organisations for many years, in all sizes of organisation from start up to blue chip, in the UK and across the Globe with people at all levels of seniority and experience.

We help people be their best version of themselves, for performance and for wellbeing at work and beyond.



FUTURE OF WELLBEING AT WORK: APPLYING THE PERMA MODEL

Wellbeing in the workplace: a challenge and an opportunity

The challenge: there is increased awareness, fuelled by the media and data insights, that despite high engagement levels, negative symptoms of low wellbeing are on the rise in our organisations. The costs of this, to our health, happiness and performance, are massive.

We want to do everything we can to support our people's wellbeing, but we can struggle with how to position wellbeing, how to fit it into our people strategy so it aligns meaningfully with leadership, performance, D&I and employee engagement.

The opportunity: there is a holistic, robust and simple model of wellbeing available that can help us on many levels:

- It is relevant to **all of us**, not just those in crisis, so it helps us take a proactive, preventative approach to strengthening organisational wellbeing.
- It is underpinned by evidence based-research which connects people's wellbeing *and* performance, so it directly aligns with our business needs, helping us build a **clear strategy**
- It is **simple** enough to help everyone understand and take accountability for their own and others' wellbeing.

This model is the PERMA model, introduced by Martin Seligman in 2011 through his explorations into the positive wellbeing areas of flourishing and thriving. With 5 core pillars, equally important and combining to give a foundation of positive wellbeing *that can be learned*, this is pioneering work in the very new area of positive psychology.

The model comprises research which establishes five separate pillars of wellbeing: **Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning** and **Accomplishment**. This is a simple and neat framework which can help us diagnose where to target attention and which interventions will be most impactful.

But how does it fit with the existing approaches out there?

Is it just another model or is it an underlying theory that supports other models?

There are a variety of different interventions and initiatives in organisations that relate to wellbeing. We have looked at those that were recently showcased in the [REBA Wellbeing awards](#) (Feb 2018) as well as other studies focused specifically on wellbeing and case studies shared at relevant events and conferences.

It will be interesting to outline this and see how these connect to the PERMA model, as well as components of more typical wellbeing models currently used in organisations for example Ryff's 6 factor model (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) which has also been tested internationally.



An outline of initiatives in organisations and how these connect to the PERMA model

| Typical Wellbeing Component | Mental / Self-acceptance / Autonomy | Work-life balance / Environmental mastery | Social / Collective / Positive relations | Spiritual / Purpose | Personal growth | Physical | Financial |
|---------------------------------|---|---|--|------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| PERMA Element | Positive Emotion | Engagement | Relationships | Meaning | Accomplishment | | |
| Typical Intervention/Initiative | Counselling | Workload | Diversity and Inclusion work | Work on meaning | Coaching | Medical programme | Benefits strategies |
| | Line manager first aid training for mental ill health | Overtime paid | Relationships | Emotional Intelligence | Mentoring | Nutritional advice | Legal advice |
| | Treatment for depression | Flexible location | Cyber support | | Talent development | Sleep advice | Financial advice |
| | Compassion with colleagues | Job share | | | | Substance abuse support | |
| | Emotional support | Child care | | | | Healthy food and water | |
| | Stress relief i.e. yoga, mindfulness | | | | | Physical activity | |
| | | | | | | Sunshine | |

Looking at this table, would we say the five components of this PERMA model are being equally addressed (and understood) in organisations?

Positive Emotions

In the first column we can see an overload of interventions being made available to address mental illness, and very little for supporting a positive focus on emotions and *psychological wellbeing for all*. This demonstrates skewed attention, with interventions targeted at those experiencing crisis-points rather than being made available to all of us.

This focus on positive emotions from the PERMA model is not just a ‘nice to have’ but directly linked to our success and performance as well as our physical health. For example, those who experience positive emotion such as joy, pride or excitement can come up with many more solutions to problems than those experiencing negative emotions. Positive emotions can have an undoing effect on cardiovascular aftereffects of negative emotions. Both critical evidence-based research findings by Frederickson and Seligman support the impact of a positive focus on wellbeing which importantly “can be learned”.



Engagement

The second column shows there is also much attention being paid to work/life balance, but surely there is more of an opportunity here to bring engagement more clearly into the wellbeing discussion. If people are truly, deeply engaged in what they are doing, then they are in the state of flow, shown to be peak experience for people, and closely connected to both our wellbeing and performance.

Engagement initiatives as they currently stand on this table are all very practically focused on the simple ability to do the job functionally and are limited in supporting “Flow” (Csikszentmihályi, 1990) through the discovery and use of strengths and its impact on job experience/engagement levels.

Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment

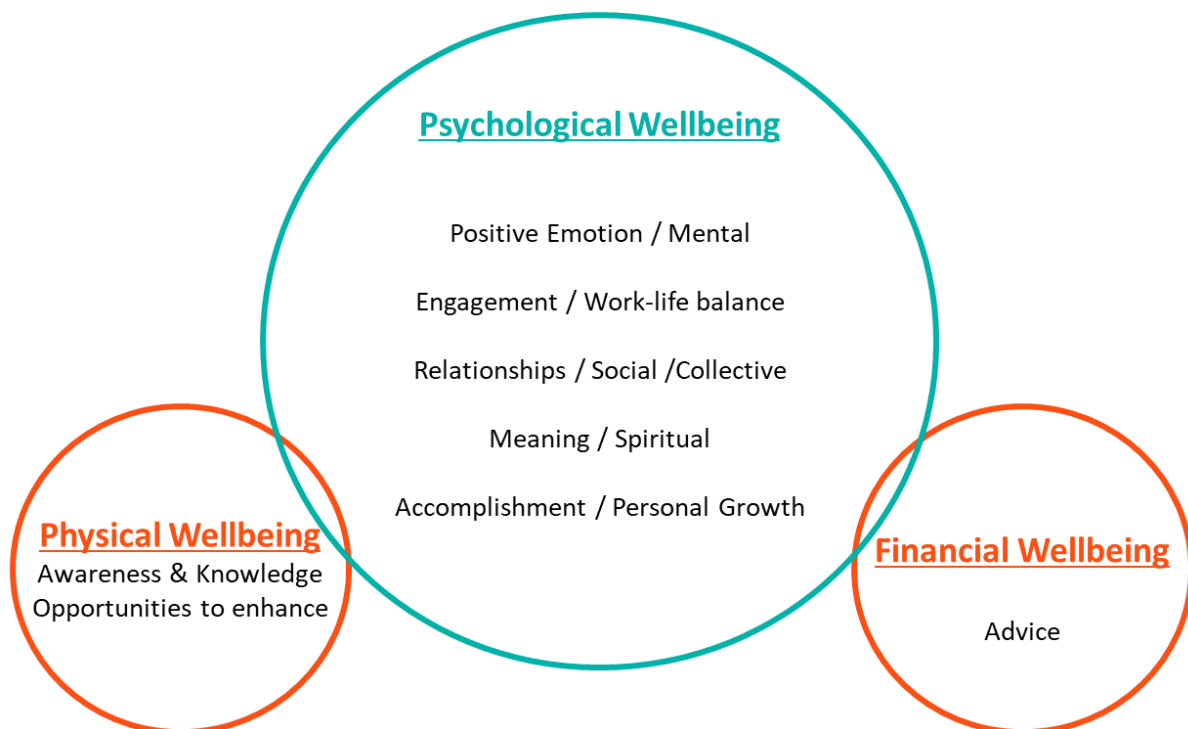
Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment are addressed somewhat by current initiatives, and are likely addressed more explicitly through existing leadership or management skills training. Is it that these pillars are being attended to, but just not associated with wellbeing yet?

Using the PERMA model

Clearly PERMA covers more than just mental wellbeing. Could it be more appropriate to suggest that PERMA covers psychological wellbeing rather than mental which conjures up negative connotations?

Could we summarise that a focus for wellbeing in an organisation could cover simply Psychological wellbeing, Physical wellbeing and Financial wellbeing? Perhaps psychological wellbeing being the core fundamental with causal impact on both physical and financial wellbeing?

How Psychological wellbeing underpins, both Physical and Financial Wellbeing



With all of this in mind, it may well be valuable for us to take time to reflect on/diagnose our current wellbeing approach, and answer these questions:

- What interventions/support do we provide for our people within these 3 areas: Psychological, Physical and Financial?
- Is our current approach focused on treating symptoms, or is it strategic, preventative and positive?
- How could we best enable our individuals, teams and organisation to thrive?

A final thought:

Wellbeing interventions often focus on developing managers' capability for looking after their team's wellbeing. Should we be considering something else, rather than putting more responsibility onto the shoulders of our managers (potentially detrimental to their own and others' wellbeing)?

Perhaps a step change is required? Perhaps we could focus on a move towards teams that self manages?

Self-managing teams are not a new concept, see Laloux's (The Future of Management Is Teal, n.d.) work on the evolution of Teal organisations. Holacracy is another example, and to organisations far removed from being self-managing, the examples can seem rather extreme and scary (particularly with well-publicised pitfalls – (Hsieh, n.d.).

Perhaps there is something in between that can help us with current issues we face?

Much greater empowerment for teams but in the direction of overall company vision?

Is this the future of Wellbeing work?



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