

EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS

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Purpose: The purpose of the study is to explore how Human Resources (HR) professionals understand the employee well-being (EWB) and how important it seems for employers in Poland as well as what programs that support EWB have been applied in organizations in Poland.

Design/methodology/approach: Based on the selective literature review, available reports and own quality research – the semi-structured interviews conducted among HR professionals from organizations in Poland, the author explores how employers can comprehensively support building employee well-being.

Findings: This research has shown that most of the HR professionals are aware of the important role of the EWB in determining an organization's long-term effectiveness and building a competitive advantage. However, the employers' approach to EWB is more reactive than proactive as only two of the interviewed HR professionals could explained how the EWB was rooted in the business strategy and executed within all of the four areas of integrated EWB.

Research limitations/implications: The research has some limitations as the sample of the HR experts was not very large – it consisted of ten HR professionals. Moreover, most of the professionals have represented large corporations. Therefore, it would be recommended to provide future research in various organizations as well as enlarge the sample.

Practical implications: The research has shown what actions has been undertaken by the employers to build employee well-being. There were mapped the main tools that support the four areas of integrated EWB used by the employers.

Social implications: EWB plays crucial role in sustaining Human Capital and it is an important aspect of corporate social responsibility. The paper might raise the awareness among the employers in Poland about the importance of Sustainable Human Resource Management.

Originality/value: The paper shows the integrated approach toward the EWB and explores how the EWB practices may be developed within the organization. The paper may be useful for entrepreneurs, managers and HR professionals.

Keywords: employee well-being, quality of working life, supporting working environment, burnout.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Dynamic social, economic, and political changes as well as unexpected crises like pandemic and armed conflict have an extreme effect on our society and business. These are only some of the stimuli that have detrimental impact on human functioning within the organization over the last years. Thus, it is not surprising that depression becomes a civilization disease that affects every fourth employee. So is burnout, which influences more and more employees of all ages. Due to the deteriorating health condition of the workforce and at the same time, the deficiency of talents, employers begin to take care of the Employee Well-Being (EWB). They have realized that investing in employees' well-being is a strategy that would pay off in the long term and bring many benefits to the main stakeholders of the organization. Especially in the face of the demographic decline and the aggressive war for talents, more and more employers consciously undertake such activities, which is in line with Sustainable Human Resources Management. In this process, Human Resources (HR) plays a fundamental role. Although this topic has been popular for several years, there is little literature on how organizations' HR understands and shapes the employee well-being within the organization (Kowalski, Loreto, 2017) particularly in Poland (Czerw, 2021).

Therefore, this article aims to explore how HR understands the EWB and how important it seems for Polish employers as well as what programs that supported EWB have been applied. Based on the selected literature review, available reports, and own quality research conducted among experts – the HR professionals from organizations in Poland, the author explores how employers can comprehensively support building employee well-being.

2. The phenomena of employee well-being

The popularity of employee well-being arises in the last few years together with the occupational stress and employee burnout due to the humanitarian crises that we have experienced such as pandemics and armed attacks. Humans spend most of the day at work, thusly the quality of work-life has a huge impact on their well-being. More research conducted during these years of pandemic focuses on the negative aspects of organizational stress than on the well-being at work. Studies show that employees are overloaded and their work is much harder than ever, suffering from insomnia and health problems (WorldatWork Report, WTW Report). Research shows that even 65% of professionally working Poles indicate symptoms of burnout (Bartosiak, 2021). In addition, burnout affects not only people with long work experience but more and more young professionals. This data is consistent with the international research on knowledge workers, which shows that 71% of employees had experienced burnout

within the last 12 months (Milburn, 2022). Furthermore, a massive wave of job resignations, called The Great Resignation, has been taking place for several months in the US by recently reaching Europe countries as well (Iacurci, 2022). According to the research conducted during the pandemic crisis, healthcare costs have risen dramatically (WTW Report), which led to the implementation of various wellness programs. These programs have typically provided a reward based on an individual employee's ability to meet a specific standard for health promotion or disease prevention. Such initiatives focused on e.g., exercise and disease management, become popular offerings in many organizations because of the multiple positive effects they can bring – to both the employee and the employer. The accumulation of crises has shown that only physical health care is insufficient. It is not surprising as almost 98% of employees expect their employer to take care of their mental health (Milburn, 2022). Today, however, wellness programs are evolving into a broader concept that goes beyond physical health - employee well-being. The phenomenon of well-being has gained enormous popularity and at times is even overused. However, more and more organizations are declaring to build employee well-being which seems to be a key element of sustainable HR and a socially responsible employer.

3. Well-being in the literature review

Although employee well-being has been of research interest across multiple disciplines for over 20 years, there is no single universal definition that has been accepted so far (Hati, Pradhan, 2021). Its origins are rooted in the current positive psychology. According to the American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology well-being is defined as a state of happiness and contentment with low levels of distress. In other words, it is understood as an overall good physical and mental health or good quality of life. Ryan and Deci underlined that EWB consists of two elements: hedonism and eudemonism. Hedonism means the feelings of an individual like satisfaction and joy whereas eudemonism arises from the feeling of having a good life and having a purpose in life (Ryan, Deci, 2001; Czerw, 2021). When looking at the discourse in the field of human resource management, EWB is recognized as a state of employees to realize of his/her own potential to cope with the normal stress of life, work productively, and be able to contribute to their community (Wilson, 2013). Most researchers point out that EWB is determined primarily by work and can be influenced by workplace interventions (Juniper et al., 2011). Similarly, International Labor Organization (ILO) indicates that EWB relates to all aspects of working life, from the quality and safety of the physical environment, to how workers feel about their work, work environment, the climate at work, and work organization (ILO). Unsurprisingly, researchers have been using interchangeably various terms such as work well-being, quality of working life, work quality of life,

or workplace well-being (Hati, Pradhan, 2021). Regardless of the field through the prism of which the EWB is considered, researchers agreed that the EWB is a multidimensional phenomenon (Zheng et al., 2011). Thus, in the literature, there can be found various concepts of an integrated model of EWB. For instance, it was proposed that employee well-being consists of three core components: subjective well-being, workplace well-being, and psychological well-being (Ryff, Keyes, 1995; Page, Vella-Brodrick, 2009). However, one of the most comprehensive approaches toward EWB includes four components (Tab. 1) (WorldatWork, Willis Towers Watson): physical, mental/emotional, financial and social health.

Table 1.

The integrated approach toward well-being

Integrated Employee well-being			
Physical	Financial	Emotional	Social
Includes the ability to sustain energy throughout the day and measure employee general health	Includes worries about current and future financial states and financial problems that negatively affect an employee	Relates to mental health concerns such as stress, satisfaction, and anxiety	Relates to trust among team and feeling respected at work

Source: Based on Page, K.M., Vella-Brodrick, D.A., (2009), The 'What', 'Why' and 'How' of Employee Well-Being: A New Model. *Soc Indic Res* 90, 441-458.

A few streams of literature analysis research on EWB within the management can be observed. The first one deals with the antecedents of EWB. There have been indicated main determinants of EWB: the personal, interpersonal, and organizational ones (Wright, Cropanzano, 2004; Hati, Pradhan, 2021; Sirgy, 2012). According to the research personality traits (neuroticism, extravertism, consequences), along with the age, physical fitness, emotional intelligence and work-related behaviors (stress, workaholism) determine the EWB. Thus, older employees have a higher perception of workplace well-being (Sirgy, 2012). Involvement in any sort of physical activity also may boost employee well-being while reducing occupational stress and remaining healthy (Hati, Pradhan, 2021). Moreover, emotional intelligence influences a higher perception of psychological well-being. Among the organizational factors that influence the quality of life, the work environment, wellness programs, flexible working, and job design were mentioned (Hati, Pradhan, 2021). On the contrary, workaholism and burnout were specified as the indicators of low EWB at work (Bakker, Oerlemans, 2005). Research also indicated that healthy and strong relationships at work, as well as social support, significantly influence EWB at the interpersonal level. Therefore, positive relations between managers and their subordinates help to create EWB (Hati, Pradhan, 2021).

The second stream deals with the consequences of employee commitment and retention as well as better performance (Wright, Cropanzano, 2004; Hati, Pradhan, 2021). Physically healthy employees have better work attendance and lower turnover (Wright et al., 2010). EWB is positively correlated with employee motivation and job involvement as well as organizational commitment (Wright et al., 2010). Employees with high well-being are more

productive and resilient. These positive attitudes help in turn to achieve higher job performance. These individual benefits influence organizational productivity (Wright, Cropanzano, 2004). Thus, workers' well-being is a key factor in determining an organization's long-term effectiveness and builds competitive advantage (Hati, Pradhan, 2021).

4. Research methodology

Despite the popularity and importance of employee well-being, there is a scarcity of empirical research that studied the relationship between human resource management practices and employee well-being (Hati, Pradhan 2021). Moreover, there is a lack of study that considers the integrated EWB model in a single study. Reports of consulting companies show that more than a half of employers are looking for effective solutions to improve employee well-being focusing on all the aspects of the integrated employee well-being (WTW Report). Therefore, this study aims to understand whether the EWB is important for employers as well as what programs and instruments employers use to build EWB.

The method used in the study allowed for the collection of qualitative data. The individual in-depth interviews (semi-structured IDI), using a partially structured interview scenario, with the HR experts were used. Partial structuring of the interview was one of the elements of the procedure of increasing the reliability of the study. At the same time, considering the open-ended questions and freedom of expression of the respondents were aimed at meeting the condition of theoretical validity.

The interview focuses on following set of research questions:

- What are the main challenges that HR forces in your organization are facing today?
- How do you understand employee well-being?
- How do you implement (if you do) the EWB policy or programs? – Is it rooted in business strategy?
- What kind of instruments and programs which support EWB does your organization offer?
- What are the crucial aspects when implementing the EWB programs in an organization?

Data collection took place in March and April 2022. Due to the possibility of carrying out the research, the interviews were conducted by phone and using a platform for remote work (MS Teams) and lasted from 30 to 60 minutes each.

The selection of the research sample was deliberate. HR leaders were selected as experts who perform strategic functions in the HR area and have at least 10 years of experience in HR, holding the positions of HR Business Partners or HR Managers.

The data analysis process started with the transcription of all interviews. The content has been analyzed, coded, and grouped into marked thematic groups. The groups were then further categorized to identify patterns. The findings were analyzed and verified through the examination of the results with each of the other participants.

Table 2.

Characteristic of the respondents and their organizations

No	Sex	Job title/tenure in HR	Characteristic of the Organization
R1	W	HR BP/13	Large production company from the textile industry, international range and Polish capital
R2	W	HR Manager/7	Large service company from the financial industry, international range and foreign capital
R3	M	TR Manager/20	Large production company from the food industry, international range and foreign capital
R4	W	HR Manager/12	Medium service company from the e-commerce industry, international range and polish capital
R5	M	HR Director/30	Large, production company from the chemical industry, international range and Polish capital
R6	W	HR Manager/9	Medium production company from the IT sector, international range and Polish capital
R7	W	HR Manager/17	Large production company from the automotive industry, international range and foreign capital
R8	W	HR Manager/12	Large service company from the cleaning sector, international range and foreign capital
R9	W	HR BP/10	Large production company from the chemical industry, international range and foreign capital
R10	W	HR BP/7	Large production company from the steel industry, international range and foreign capital

Source: own data.

5. Findings

When analyzing the most common and distressing problems, the respondents showed an increase in the employee turnover and reluctance to return to work from office (R4, R6, R8), lack of qualified workforce (R10, R8), overloads and time pressure (R2, R3, R7, R8), burnout and exhaustion of employees with longer work experience (R2, R3, R7, R8) as well as lack of communication and trust (R4, R2, R6, R9, R10). These problems indicated the most important challenges that Human Resource is facing today including: the elimination of the “digital competency gap” (R4, R7, R9, R10), the “poor mental condition of employees” (R4, R5, R6, R7, R8, R9, R10) as “some employees have difficulties to cope with emotions” due to the pandemic, (R8) but also because of the war “as we have some employees from Ukraine” (R7, R10) which showed us the “need to build employee resiliency” (R1, R2, R3). Respondents also mentioned “loosening the relationship with the company” (R4) which implies the need for integration and rebuilding strong relations (R6, R2). Another challenge is the adjustment of the compensation system to the changing market and employee expectations (R4, R9, R10).

Notwithstanding, there were also voices related to the need of promoting more responsible and sustainable programs as well as focusing on the pro-ecological actions (R1, R2, R3).

Another area of study concerned the understanding of the employee well-being as well as its implementation within the organization. When analyzing the concept of employee well-being, the respondents indicated that the EWB meant a healthy balance in life in all areas – “it is a reconciliation of roles in all areas of our life” (R4), the happiness and engagement at work – “definitely it is the willingness to continue employment, even after many years” (R9). It is the “work-life balance” (R8) and sustaining the “hygiene at work and family life” (R3).

Others underlined the holistic approach to employees in the workplace by saying:

- “This is the sense of integrity and fulfillment in life and at work” (R5),
- “It is an authentic employer concern of me as a person and an employee at the same time” (R1),
- “The feeling that the company is taking me seriously” (R7).

Some respondents viewed EWB through the prism of material aspects: “the employee is satisfied with the position, remuneration, benefits, equipment, and devices” (R3). Others noticed that EWB meant “health and sense of satisfaction from work and working environment, relations at work, and financial security” (R2). EWB can be observed through “the organizational citizenship behaviors” (R8), and the “communities – employee networks that are formed within the company and that support employees” (R10). However, there was also a comment that viewed the EWB as “just a sudden fashion and additional benefits package” as what employees need indeed is “the change of work so that they don’t rush” (R4).

When asked if and how the EWB was implemented in the organization, four of the respondents admitted that it was an important aspect of either the business strategy (R1, R2) or the HR strategy (R1, R2, R3, R6). Others named particular programs that had been implemented to improve one of the aspects of the integrated EWB being important in a particular organization. All of the mentioned programs and initiatives are arranged according to the relevant integrated EWB area and included in the table below.

With regard to approach toward the EWB and the programs offered, the respondents often pointed out the crucial role of the top management in the company. Their awareness and understanding of this approach were indicated as a key in the process of creating EWB within the organization (R4, R7, R9, R10). Another important factor turned out to be the communication and promotion of the programs offered, as sometimes it appeared insufficient and some employees were not able to benefit from them (R10).

Table 3.

Programs and instruments of integrated employee well-being indicated by the respondents

Elements of Integrated EWB	Programs and Instruments
Physical EWB	Ergonomic programs improving workplace environment: ergonomic equipment in the office and at home, ergonomics tests provided at work, better work organization – elimination of overtime programs (50% less), workplace safety programs, flexible work, additional paid days off; Health-related programs: medical insurance and coverage, behavior health coverage, immunizations, elder care assistance, canteens for workers, healthy snacks, diet and nutrition programs, better social facilities at work, sports benefits, and exercises programs at work (<i>multisport cards, facilities at work</i>);
Financial EWB	Remuneration increases based on the salary reports and the inflation rate, pay gap analysis and elimination of the gap, additional bonuses, e.g., for preparing to home office; Transparency of the reward system, security of pay; Educational programs: financial education and counselling, law counselling and consultations;
Emotional EWB	Mental health coverage, yoga (also virtual), meditation, employee assistance programs; Education and mental health promotion programs, wellness coaching, trainings and individual counselling, webinars and workshops on: stress management, time management, parental skills development, resilience, diversity, etc.
Social EWB	Equal chances programs, inclusion programs, creation of employee networks (sport community, working parents' network), volunteering events supporting environment and local community. More social, both formal and informal events within the organization, social events for employees and their families, "Virtual experts' meetings with coffee", charity events initiated by employees-volunteers such as help for Ukrainian friends, participation in business run, etc., firm's library

Source: own data.

6. Discussion

Most challenges indicated by the HR professionals were connected with building a more widely understood employee well-being. According to the respondents, EWB was an essential and complex phenomenon that consisted of many aspects. All respondents indicated mental and physical health as its components. However, both the material (R4, R1, R7) and the social aspects were mentioned as well (R1, R7, R8, R10). As results from the analysis of the programs, only one manager viewed the EWB as a "modern trend and a fashion". A more integrated approach to the EWB has been observed in large organizations rather than in medium ones. Only three respondents indicated that there was a comprehensive approach toward the EWB in their companies (comprehensive programs within the four areas that are based on their employees' needs) (R1, R2, R5). Others viewed some initiatives that were implemented mostly in the area of physical and mental health. Only two respondents underlined that EWB was a priority and had its place in HR as well as in business strategy (R1, R2). Most HR

professionals, among EWB initiatives that the company undertook, mentioned: improvements in workplace ergonomics, flexible working, and an enriched benefits package with some benefits that focused on mental and physical health. Some showed the importance of building strong relations and communities within the companies (R2, R7, R8, R10). According to the respondents, the responsible attitudes and support from the top management as well as efficient communication in this regard was an important aspect of the EWB program's effectiveness. Only few organizations (two respondents) evaluated existing EWB programs so far (R1, R2). A new trend was noticed in the area of employee development, as the offered training focused not only on soft skills and building resilience but also on financial investments and creating employee material well-being (R2, R7).

The research allowed emerging problems that arise when implementing the EWB programs. For example, work organization, high pressure, and low digital competencies of production workers did not allow employees to take full advantage of the webinars and counseling programs being offered (R10). Moreover, despite the need, employees from smaller towns were avoiding the mental assistance programs due to some existing stereotypes.

These studies are not free from limitations as the sample of experts was limited to 10 respondents and most of the professionals represented large organizations. Therefore, further qualitative research in this field is needed. The results allowed to notice some trends and showed the areas for further exploration, for example it would be interesting to conduct the research across organizations from various sectors.

7. Summary

The fast pace of life and emerging crises have a negative effect on employees. Many employers understand these struggles and respond to them by supporting employees and taking care of their mental and physical well-being. This can be seen in an enlarged benefits package offered to employees that covers additional medical insurance, counseling programs, or education programs that will help to create employee resilience and well-being. There is no doubt that employee well-being is a key factor in determining an organization's long-term effectiveness and builds a competitive advantage in today's organizations. Most HR professionals are aware of this phenomenon and try to respond to the emerging employees' needs. However, this issue is still developing. As can be seen from the research, the employers' approach to EWB is more reactive than proactive as only two of the 10 HR professionals could have explained how the EWB was rooted in the business strategy and executed within all of the four areas of integrated EWB.

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