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Social Wellbeing in the Workplace: HR Activities and Impact

Dobrostan społeczny w miejscu pracy – wpływ
i zadania działów personalnych

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of the article is to present the results of research on social wellbeing in the workplace, with particular emphasis on the activities and social impact of Human Resources departments.

Research Design & Methods: Qualitative research was carried out in the form of in-depth interviews using the author's interview questionnaire. The target group consisted of representatives of personnel departments.

Findings: The actions that companies take to influence the social wellbeing of employees as well as the measurements that companies use to evaluate their activities and wellbeing have been listed. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the idea of wellbeing in companies is discussed. Companies' plans for the future in the field of social wellbeing are presented.

Implications/Recommendations: Respondents have different understandings of the definition of employees' social wellbeing. They take many actions in the field of social wellbeing, which means that it is significant for them. HR departments are the biggest contributors to wellbeing activities, but management and the management board should also be involved. There are problems

with accurate measurement of wellbeing and the effect of wellbeing activities. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the importance of wellbeing.

Contribution: Filling a gap in the research on the social wellbeing of employees in the specific circumstances caused by the pandemic and the introduction of remote work. Filling a gap regarding the evaluation of wellbeing activities carried out in organisations.

Article type: original article.

Keywords: employee wellbeing, social wellbeing, COVID-19 pandemic, HR department.

JEL Classification: I31, J24, J53, J81, M54.

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie wyników badań dotyczących dobrostanu społecznego w miejscu pracy, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem działań podejmowanych przez departamenty personalne oraz wpływu działów HR na dobrostan społeczny.

Metodyka badań: Przeprowadzono badania jakościowe w postaci wywiadów pogłębionych z wykorzystaniem autorskiego kwestionariusza wywiadu. Grupę docelową stanowili przedstawiciele działów personalnych.

Wyniki badań: Zdiagnozowano działania, które podejmują firmy, aby wpłynąć na dobrostan społeczny pracowników. Stworzono listę mierników stosowanych przez firmy do oceny swoich działań w zakresie dobrostanu. Omówiono wpływ pandemii COVID-19 na ideę dobrostanu w firmach, a także przedstawiono plany firm na przyszłość dotyczące dobrostanu społecznego.

Wnioski: Respondenci w różny sposób rozumieją istotę dobrostanu społecznego pracownika. Podejmują wiele działań w tym zakresie, co oznacza, że jest on dla nich ważny. W działania wellbeingowe zaangażowane są głównie działy HR, jednak działania te powinny być podejmowane także przez osoby na stanowiskach menedżerskich oraz zarząd. Występują problemy z odpowiednim mierzaniem dobrostanu i prowadzonych w tym zakresie działań. Pandemia COVID-19 wpłynęła na zwiększenie ważności tematyki wellbeingu.

Wkład w rozwój dyscypliny: Uzupełnienie luki badawczej dotyczącej dobrostanu społecznego pracowników w szczególnych uwarunkowaniach spowodowanych pandemią oraz wprowadzeniem pracy zdalnej, jak również uzupełnienie luki dotyczącej ewaluacji działań wellbeingowych podejmowanych w organizacjach.

Typ artykułu: oryginalny artykuł naukowy.

Słowa kluczowe: dobrostan pracowników, dobrostan społeczny, pandemia COVID-19, dział personalny.

1. Introduction

It is believed that there is a type of social influence in the workplace understood as “beneficial outcomes resulting from prosocial behaviour” (Rawhouser, Cummings & Newbert 2019). In particular, prosocial behaviours observed in companies and targeted towards employees are strengthening their bond with the

company and may influence their levels of effectiveness and engagement. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem of declining social wellbeing has been observed in companies where workplace relationships deteriorated as the result of the compulsory introduction of social distancing and remote work (Benita & Ghayathri 2020).

What is more, the problem discussed in the paper is global as the same challenges can be seen all over the world. Virtually every country was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdowns with social distancing led to the necessity of remote or hybrid work. However, there are cultural differences in the way closeness is perceived and in workplace relationships, largely dependent on the position held and the hierarchical structure of the organisation.

Traditionally, Human Resource Management (HRM) is understood as the process of employing, developing, and managing people in organisations (Armstrong & Taylor 2020). Contemporary challenges make it necessary to change the scope of responsibilities of Human Resources (HR) departments. In most companies HR departments are the ones responsible for introducing and carrying out wellbeing activities (Tabor-Błażewicz 2021). Thus, this article focuses on the social impact of HR representatives which – through implementation of processes and practices – may have an influence on the level of social wellbeing among employees.

Taking into consideration the increasing role of social wellbeing in workplaces and the changing roles of HR departments, the goal of this article is to present activities aimed at enhancing the social wellbeing of employees in companies, which should lead to a better understanding of the role social wellbeing plays in current business practice and the potential social impact of HR departments.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Interest in wellbeing stems from positive psychology, and was started by M. Seligman in the 1990s (Czerw 2017). The concept has been transferred to management science and practice due to the belief that taking care of the wellbeing of employees translates into better job performance, and thence into improved economic performance for the entire organisation (Kundi *et al.* 2021).

However, there is still no consensus for a uniform definition of wellbeing. Instead, different concepts and attitudes exist, e.g. White (2017) discusses comprehensive wellbeing, subjective wellbeing, personal wellbeing and relational wellbeing, Zheng *et al.* (2015) find three dimensions: life wellbeing, workplace wellbeing, and psychological wellbeing whereas Kulig-Moskwa and Nogiec (2018) identify physical wellbeing, psychological wellbeing and social wellbeing .

According to Seligman's PERMA model, wellbeing consists of five elements: positive emotions (P), engagement (E), positive relationships (R), meaning (M), and accomplishment (A) (Seligman 2012). Wellbeing at the workplace can be character-

ised by job satisfaction, commitment, lack of occupational stress, benefits to work-life balance, quality of work, and a sense of happiness. Therefore, it is a condition that makes employees motivated, engaged, and satisfied with their work (Singh & Chaudhary 2019). Wellbeing should include both job-related experiences such as job satisfaction or job attachment, as well as dimensions such as satisfaction with pay or co-workers (Danna & Griffin 1999).

Whereas physical wellbeing (health) and psychological wellbeing (happiness) are focused on the individual, social wellbeing is focused on interactions (Van De Voorde, Paauwe & Van Veldhoven 2012). Social wellbeing is thus defined as the experienced quality of employees' interpersonal relationships, perceived trust and social support which is provided in the work community (Björk, Bolander & Forsman 2022). It can also be seen as the ability to communicate, develop relationships which are meaningful, and maintain a support network (Strout & Howard 2012).

Awareness of the topic grew considerably during the COVID-19 pandemic when employers had to deal with physical and psychological problems of their personnel. Forced social distancing resulted in a lack of face-to-face contact and a breakdown in working relationships (Kniffin *et al.* 2021). Co-workers and family proved to be extremely important sources of support during the pandemic (Usman *et al.* 2023). The post-COVID era has brought new challenges, hybrid models of work (remote and stationary work combined) whose impact on wellbeing is not yet exactly known have been introduced (*Wyzwania kierowania...* 2022). Therefore, the subject is very significant, and the current political and economic situation contributes to its further growth.

Research suggests that businesses are responsible for the subjective wellbeing of employees, and that business activities that enhance subjective wellbeing may translate into desirable instrumental outcomes relevant to business performance (Chia & Kern 2021). The impact of social capital on subjective wellbeing differs depending on the component of social capital which is under analysis, e.g. social networks, social trust, and institutional trust are the components that show a higher correlation with subjective wellbeing (Portela, Neira & Salinas-Jiménez 2013). Research also underlines the role of HRM practices that contribute to employees' wellbeing, such as e.g. participation, development, career paths, highly selective recruitment (Liu *et al.* 2017). Socially responsible HRM may lead to an enhanced state-based positive affect at workplaces and thus increase employee vitality (Abdelmotaleb & Saha 2020). However, there are still considerable gaps in the research into this field, and the changing situation makes research in this area even more important. A gap in the research was diagnosed in the area of specific actions taken by companies in the field of the social wellbeing of employees and how to measure and evaluate these types of activities.

3. The Empirical Research Method

The aim of the research described in this paper is to understand the role of HR departments in enhancing the wellbeing of employees and activities undertaken by HR departments with the same aim.

As for the research questions, they were phrased as follows:

- What projects, actions and (or) events do organisations undertake to improve social/relational wellbeing of employees in times of post-COVID hybrid work systems?
- What are the evaluation tools/metrics used for measuring the effectiveness of the forementioned activities?
- What changes were brought by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What is the outlook for the future and what are the post-COVID plans in the field of social wellbeing?

To achieve the purpose of the research, a qualitative method was chosen to obtain an in-depth picture and description of specific projects carried out in enterprises. Qualitative approaches are essential in understanding respondents’ experience of wellbeing (Camfield, Crivello & Woodhead 2009). Thus, the first step of the research process was to create a questionnaire for in-depth interviews.

The second step involved choosing the research sample. The targeted sample of HR professionals at a managerial level was selected based on their LinkedIn profiles. Invitations for an interview were sent to 30 HR professionals. 7 of them declined to participate in the interview, 14 people did not answer, and 9 agreed to take part in the research. Due to work obligations, 2 respondents cancelled their interviews. Finally, the author obtained data from 7 respondents. Detailed data describing the participants are provided in Table 1.

During the third stage of the research 7 in-depth interviews were conducted. The interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. The transcriptions of the interviews were coded with letters and numbers: R1 for the first person, R2 for the second one, etc.

Table 1. Profile of Respondents

Respondent's Code	Respondent's Position	Years of Experience in HR	Gender	Employment Sector	Number of Employees in the Company
R1	Jr HRBP	1–5	female	IT	1–250
R2	HR Manager	1–5	female	IT	1–250
R3	Head of People & Culture	16–20	female	healthcare	251–500

Table 1 cont'd

Respondent's Code	Respondent's Position	Years of Experience in HR	Gender	Employment Sector	Number of Employees in the Company
R4	Director for Culture and Development	16–20	female	technology and communication	5,001 and more
R5	Director of HRM Department	11–15	female	banking	501–1,000
R6	HR Director	over 20	female	consulting	0–250
R7	HR Manager	11–15	female	production	251–500

Source: the author.

The fourth stage of the research process consisted of analysis and comparison of the interviews. A synthesis was made and conclusions drawn. The research was conducted in September–October 2022.

4. Findings of the Empirical Research

At the beginning of the interviews respondents were asked about their understanding of the social wellbeing of employees. The answers varied and their scope was broad. The elements that were mentioned in defining social wellbeing at the workplace include:

- stability of employment,
- material and financial security,
- mutual respect in the workplace,
- satisfaction with the workplace and the nature of the work itself, lack of desire to leave,
- the work having a sense of purpose of work,
- a sense of being well rested, fulfillment, being ready to fulfill duties with willingness,
- pleasant working conditions and potential for development (both vocational and personal),
- activities aimed at realising employees' potential,
- good and strong relations with supervisors and co-workers,
- managers' openness to talk about employees' needs,
- atmosphere in the workplace,
- challenging tasks and ambitious goals,
- support for employees and managers in improving psychological and physical health and in proper nutritional habits,
- psychological resilience.

Defining social wellbeing was not an easy matter for the respondents. Interviews showed that the concept of employee wellbeing is a new idea, which is not yet fully understood. Narrowing it down to social wellbeing adds to the difficulties for respondents. Often, in their later responses, they combined the social wellbeing and general wellbeing of employees and treated them as one.

Table 2. Actions Taken by Companies to Improve Employees’ Social Wellbeing

Processes	Projects/Programmes	Attitudes
Communication, frequent meetings Evaluations with the focus on development Ergonomics of the workplace Healthcare – information about and campaigns of preventive examinations, promotion of a healthy lifestyle Promotion of diversity, training on diversity and respectful communication	Integrations Voluntary activities Sports activities, sport challenges Consultations with psychologists, meditation, crisis support Long-term supplementary leave Work-life balance in hybrid conditions – training, educational campaigns Building a sense of financial security of employees, including education of financial management Events for families – competitions for employees’ children, presents for newborns, additional hours to spend with family Fun events – e.g. Christmas Sweater Day Common canteen for production and office employees Dedicated areas in the building 1) for creative work/silence, 2) for fitness, 3) for co-work in a pleasant environment	Focus on employees’ needs Focus on self-awareness, identification of values, physical-spiritual balance Creating a good atmosphere at work Creating an atmosphere of trust, being open, trustworthy advisors Employees nominate colleagues who display the values adopted by the company – a form of appreciation and praise of the desired attitudes Giving honest and prompt feedback Building respect to each other through setting rules for e-mails and meetings Flexibility in giving days off when employees need them for their private matters Being interested in employees’ private life and their private needs or challenges

Source: the author.

In response to question 1 of the research “What projects, actions and (or) events do international organisations undertake to improve social wellbeing of employees?” respondents listed many different actions taken. In Table 2 they have been grouped into categories, depending on their specifics. The “Processes” category includes

long-term and repeated activities, e.g. taking care of ergonomics, healthcare, or communication processes. The next category is “Projects/Programmes”, which includes shorter initiatives, e.g. integration trips, and newly introduced programmes, e.g. consultations with a psychologist. The third category entitled “Attitudes” contains activities aimed at shaping certain attitudes that support wellbeing in the workplace.

The HR department is a key-player in building awareness among employees and managers, dealing with educational campaigns, and crisis support. HR professionals are natural promoters of this type of activity. HR plays a strategic role and must have a prominent role in the company’s structure – the higher the prominence, the greater the effectiveness. In some companies the HR department is where discussions about wellbeing start.

„The greatest value of this is if everyone gets involved, but of course someone has to start and often it is the HR department or communication department, or even in large companies, there is a department already dedicated to engagement or empowerment, and it is also very important that the board is aligned” (respondent no. 6).

However, respondents stressed that introducing and carrying out wellbeing activities should not only be the responsibility of the HR department. Managers at various levels and the board must also be involved in the activities. A lot depends on them when it comes to the wellbeing of employees. Employees are also encouraged to be open and share their ideas on improvements that could be introduced.

“The awareness of all managers how important these activities are also helps in the implementation of good habits in the company. In our company, every employee is involved in creating a wellbeing strategy – they express their opinion on a subject and have the opportunity to submit ideas” (respondent no. 5).

The response to research question 2 “What are the evaluation tools/metrics used for measuring the effectiveness of the aforementioned activities?” was not easy for respondents. It was clear that fewer evaluations are carried out in the area of social wellbeing. Engagement surveys and satisfaction surveys were mentioned most often with the observation that wellbeing is only a part of these surveys. Then, sometimes with hesitation, respondents talked about observations, meetings and others. Overall, it was stated that there are not many appropriate tools and that the evaluation process should perhaps receive higher priority in the future. Table 3 summarises the tools mentioned during the research.

Research question 3 concerned changes in the area of wellbeing which were brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Evidently, attitudes towards the wellbeing of employees, which was often treated as a minor issue, were changed by the COVID pandemic. It accelerated the intro-

duction of remote work and was the starting point for building a wellbeing strategy in many companies.

Table 3. Evaluation Tools Used to Measure Social Wellbeing and Social Wellbeing Activities

Qualitative	Quantitative
Observations Frequent conversations, small things such as “How are you today? Is everything OK?” Frequent pulse-checks: “Are you happy at work?”, “Are you happier than yesterday?” Meetings Exit interviews	Engagement surveys Satisfaction surveys Employer evaluation questionnaires Percentage of employees benefiting from programmes (level of interest) Organisational Health Survey – a cyclical annual survey among all employees and goals (KPIs) for improving indicators Surveys on each wellbeing activity Fluctuation rate Rotation rate Absenteeism rate Sick leave rate

Source: the author.

“Raising awareness of our fragility and the fragility of business has triggered a tendency to look at the employee from different perspectives: business, behavioural and spiritual” (respondent no. 3).

A number of permanent activities and cyclical activities have been implemented for employees strengthening new habits, ensuring work-life balance. In production companies physical barriers have had to be implemented to provide health safeguards for production workers. The companies which already had a wellbeing strategy intended to adapt their programmes to an online or hybrid form (e.g. on-site healthcare training into webinars on healthcare; massages in the office changed into active breaks with a trainer on Teams).

It should be emphasised that the necessity for “social distancing” during the pandemic resulted in a weakening in contacts and relationships. The offices emptied and co-workers tried to maintain contact through online communication and software. Integration events were cancelled. For some employees remote work became so satisfying that they did not want to return to the office, which made it more difficult to build bonds with a company.

“During summer time, at the time of loosening the restrictions, the company organised a trip to the mountains for a whole group of employees. During the trip,

the authorities tried to find time to talk to each individual, at least for a while, to build a bond” (respondent no. 2).

In response to research question 4 “What are the outlooks for the future and what are the post-COVID plans in the area of social wellbeing?” most respondents admitted that interest in employees’ wellbeing will grow.

The research showed that companies plan to maintain current activities and implement new ones to strengthen their relations with employees. There will be consistent implementation of the wellbeing strategy, expanded awareness of managers’ mindfulness towards the needs of employees, continuation of activities with the management board and in the regions. Companies are planning to systematically increase the wellbeing budget and to pay more attention to evaluation procedures with more detailed measurement.

In the case of remote workers, an increased number of integration meetings are planned, implementation of communication applications, joint contacts, getting acquainted with each other or joint coffee breaks online. Attention is also paid to visual identification through sending packages of gadgets or clothing with the company’s logo to employees who are working from home.

“We increase the number of meetings to create a bond, because it is more difficult to part with the organisation when that bond exists. We have at least two meetings a year, every month through a common work communicator. For example, people from Brazil are very active in speaking, make a lot of comments, and are interested in the relationship in real time. We also try to take care of visual identification, for example, send small things with the company logo in company colours that surround these people at home” (respondent no. 1).

5. Conclusions

The subject of the social wellbeing of employees is of growing interest to enterprises. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the introduction of remote work definitely contributed to this increase. However, it should be underlined that some companies had already introduced programmes aimed at taking care of employees and increasing their job satisfaction. The lack of a uniform understanding of the social wellbeing of the employee among HR professionals is problematic.

Companies are introducing a wide variety of activities promoting physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Each of these elements can contribute to the growth of the other elements, e.g. joint sports activities aimed at improving physical wellbeing can lead to better relationships, which in turn increases social wellbeing. Therefore, it is difficult to consider them separately.

It should certainly be emphasised that the HR department has an initiating and strategic role, i.e. it has an important role to play in the social wellbeing of employees. However, HR should be an ambassador of a broader understanding

of this concept and act, not alone, but in cooperation with managers and the board. It is also suggested that some initiatives are bottom up, they come from employees. This is because they know best what their needs are.

Taking care of the social wellbeing of employees takes on a special importance in the case of remote work, when bonds with the organisation weaken, which can affect staff retention and increase the turnover rate. Therefore, companies will retain social wellbeing activities in the future and will be one of the responsibilities of HR departments.

The research was carried out on deliberately selected groups, which limits the possibility of scaling their results to the population. What is more, it sampled only one geographical area and was conducted in a short period of time.

Further studies could be conducted on larger groups and over a longer time span, which would give a more accurate picture of the consistency of the results. It would also be valuable to recognise how the organisational and national culture as well as the size of organisation affect the social wellbeing of employees and relationship-building in post-COVID times.

Despite these limitations, examples of actions taken by companies are very valuable and can serve as a benchmark for other managers. In practical business terms, the research contributes to a better understanding of what types of actions can be taken by companies to improve employees' social wellbeing, and what kinds of measurements they may use to evaluate social wellbeing activities.

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