

Are Productivity and Well-being Mutually Exclusive? Not if you use your brain

Can we be highly productive at work without sacrificing our health and well-being? You know the scenario — getting through another hectic, high-pressure time by cutting short on sleep, exercise and recovery time in an effort to meet the demands. Research shows that the same strategies that keep you healthy and well also keep your productivity and performance at their best. Productivity and wellness are not a matter of ‘either/or’ — the same effective strategies turn them into ‘both/and’. Employees can be both high-performing, highly productive, and mentally and physically well.

This article highlights some recent findings from neuroscience and human performance studies that demonstrate it is possible to achieve gains in performance while maintaining excellence in wellness. The evidence-based key to this is in how we manage our brains, including with mindfulness, positive emotions, mental fitness and recovery time. What do we know currently from this research?

Being mindful — anywhere, any time

A key finding is that the practice of mindfulness is strongly linked to both improved well-being and improved performance. Mindfulness is a moment-to-moment awareness of one's experience, without judgment. It is the opposite of going through one's day on autopilot. Regular practice of mindfulness improves concentration and focus. It boosts working memory (the busy part of our brains that holds immediate tasks in mind), and enhances cognitive flexibility (basically, big picture thinking). Mindfulness then can support all the essential skills for working efficiently and maintaining high performance.

On the well-being side, the benefits of mindfulness include reduced rumination (worry), a reduction in stress, and less emotional reactivity (having a short fuse or over-reacting).

Mindfulness can be practiced anywhere, at any time, which makes it an easily applied skill in busy organisational environments. Right now, pause in your reading and be mindful (pay attention) for a moment to your immediate environment. What sounds can you hear? What is the light like? What is the temperature? Take a breath in — and out — and resume reading with your focus refreshed.

The power of positive emotions

Experiencing positive emotions like joy, hope, satisfaction, achievement and gratitude signal to our bodies and brains that fight or flight is not required, and help us move into a calm state, both physically and mentally. Experiencing positive emotions is also linked to both enhanced performance and well-being.

Research by Barbara Fredrickson

(Professor in the department of psychology at the University of North Carolina) has shown that people experiencing positive emotions recover more quickly from all the physiological changes brought on by stress. Other studies have found associations between positive emotions and improved immune function, lower risk of diabetes, and lower risk of hypertension. Fredrickson's research has also demonstrated that teams are likely to perform better when team members experience a higher ratio of positive to negative emotions.

Positive emotion broadens the scope of attention and cognition, and therefore the behavioural options that are available to us. The intensity of the emotion — how strong the feeling feels — does not determine the benefits; rather, it is the frequency of experiencing positive emotions — how often you have a good feeling — that helps



you think more broadly and creatively, and therefore enhances performance.

Mental fitness and neuroplasticity

A strong body of research evidence supports the importance of mental fitness for both well-being and performance. The ability of our brains to recover from strain, grow new neural pathways and keep on developing is called 'neuroplasticity'. Neuroplasticity is essentially the ability of the brain to reorganise its network of neurons, in a positive way. Neuroscience researchers have found that the functioning of our brain can be improved through particular lifestyle habits.

Why is this important? When the different parts of the brain are better integrated, they work together more harmoniously — our brain is healthier. Higher levels of brain integration have been associated with improved reasoning, emotional stability, decreased anxiety and improved performance.

As well as these benefits, mental fitness is important in our fast-paced world because our environment — and what we need to do to manage it — is constantly shifting. We need a flexible, integrated brain to successfully work out how we need to respond, what we need to do, and how to achieve our goals.

Time off boosts both performance and well-being

Scheduled time off is another key well-being/performance booster. Harvard Business School Professor Leslie Perlow's research found that taking time off, rather than working more hours, actually boosted individual and organisational productivity. The well-being benefits of time off have been well documented, with reasonable hours of work linked with increased exercise, better nutrition and sleep.

The well-being benefits of sleep are widely recognised. What is perhaps less well-known is that sleep is also essential for performance. Quality sleep helps to reset our brains so we can look at challenges and problems from different perspectives and generate more creative solutions. The functions of learning and memory are also improved while we sleep, probably because the connections between the neural pathways that help us perform these tasks are strengthened as we sleep.

Exercise is another dual performance/well-being enhancer. Exercise helps our brains work at optimum capacity by helping nerve cells to multiply, strengthening their interconnections and protecting them from damage. Exercise also helps boost blood flow to our brain, and encourages neurogenesis (new brain cell growth) to help our brains work faster and more efficiently. Exercise has been shown to improve mood, assist recovery from stress, reduce anxiety and boost immune functioning.

Build the habits of a mentally fit organisation

How can this research inform new initiatives to improve performance and productivity

in organisations? While each of these skills requires a level of individual commitment, we know that it is difficult for individuals to maintain good habits if those around them are not actively supporting the new behaviours. Therefore, any initiatives to integrate these skills do require organisational and, in particular, leadership commitment to be successful.

In our experience, it is helpful to integrate initiatives into 'business as usual'. This helps the practice of these habits to become automatic. Setting effective daily and longer-term performance/well-being habits are more useful than setting goals. Habits become automatic with practice, and therefore require less cognitive effort to implement. Habits are effective for individuals and teams and, with practice, become part of organisational culture.

Examples of effective habits:

- › Starting meetings with a simple mindfulness practice to ensure everyone is fully focused and present
- › Senior leaders and people leaders actively model and support staff to take regular recovery breaks, and to include exercise during the work day
- › Walking meetings
- › Team discussions around how to boost positive emotions on a daily basis — celebrating successes, praise and acknowledgment, a team challenge, something fun like a daily quiz
- › Agreement on reasonable hours of work and the value and importance of 'switch off' time.

Manage distractions

Initiatives to help people manage distractions and avoid multi-tasking are also useful and fit within this framework of improving productivity and well-being. Up to 40 percent of productivity can be lost by employees flip-flopping between tasks. A recent Australian study of 435 employees from a variety of career levels found that distraction in their workplaces was a significant problem, and was leading to large chunks of unproductive time. The survey responders described the most common distractions as unnecessary emails, meetings and general distractions from working in open plan offices.

These findings echo what we hear from employees. Across organisations and career levels, people tell us that unnecessary interruptions and distractions contribute to measurably poor productivity and, just as importantly, to negative feelings of being overwhelmed by volumes of work. When we are feeling overwhelmed, we are more likely to overwork, eat poorly, skip exercise and sleep less well, with all the associated costs to well-being.

Organisational initiatives to reduce unnecessary distractions can include:

- › Protocols and encouragement for everyone to limit access to email and instead check only at specific points in the day

- › Changing work environments to control distractions related to open-plan working e.g. making more quiet rooms available
- › Mindfulness practice again — to develop better concentration skills and minimise multi-tasking.

A number of organisations we are working with are actively working towards implementing some or all of the above initiatives and creating a culture shift where improved productivity and well-being are equally valued and viewed as complementary rather than competing.

“*Setting effective daily and longer-term performance/well-being habits are more useful than setting goals*”

Some of the initiatives that have been particularly successful have included:

- › Agreed 'no meeting' times each day or week so people can focus on other work
- › Planned shared recovery times (where meetings are also not booked), for example around lunch times. This helps to avoid the "No-one else is taking a break so I had better not" thinking that is so prevalent in busy organisations
- › Agreed 'no email' times, including agreements around out of hours responding. For example, no sending emails before 6am or after 6pm
- › Using mindfulness practice to start and finish meetings
- › Team exercise challenges
- › Senior leaders asking "how can we help you be more productive and improve your well-being" and following through on the suggestions
- › Acknowledging, "what is going well" to boost positive emotion — this was particularly useful in an organisation where there were a large number of challenges and difficult to notice the small wins amongst these.
- › Starting meetings with sharing a success or a mistake — both generate positive emotions. Discussing mistakes supports using a broad/curious mind perspective.

Where organisation-wide initiatives are difficult, for whatever reason, specific teams can initiate changes, and supported by senior leaders, these teams can then provide a different way of working for other teams in the organisation **HR**



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