



what works
wellbeing

Wellbeing in small business PRACTICE EXAMPLES



About the What Works Centre for Wellbeing

We are an independent organisation set up to produce robust, relevant and accessible evidence on wellbeing. We work with individuals, communities, businesses and government, to enable them to use this evidence make decisions and take action to improve wellbeing.

What is this report based on?

In March 2018, we put a [**call out for examples from small businesses**](#) across the country to hear what steps they were taking to improve staff wellbeing. This report represents a collation of practices that emerged from that call.

What can we learn from these examples?

These examples present ideas and inspiration for what is possible for smaller businesses to implement, but they have not been fully evaluated for their effectiveness.

The Centre is planning to publish case studies on interventions in medium and larger organisations in 2019. We welcome other practice examples where evaluations have been conducted. Please do get in touch with us to share these studies.

whatworkswellbeing.org

info@whatworkswellbeing.org

[@whatworksWB](https://www.instagram.com/whatworksWB)



What can small businesses do to improve the wellbeing of their employees?

We know that work, and the quality of the work that we do has an important impact on our wellbeing. Being employed is good for our wellbeing. Being in a 'good' job is even better for us. Having higher levels of wellbeing is not just good for us as individuals; it is also good for the employer. Potential benefits to employers who choose to invest in employee wellbeing include¹:

- reduced staff turnover
- reduced costs of absenteeism and presenteeism due to ill health
- higher creativity
- better performance.

Improved wellbeing in the workplace also benefits wider society.² So there are plenty of reasons why it makes sense to invest in employee wellbeing, and plenty of things that employers can do³. This includes providing jobs, ensuring those jobs are of good quality and recognising the impact that the organisation has on the wider community.

For large companies with many employees and extensive human resources infrastructure, opportunities for investing in the wellbeing of employees can include providing training, making changes to ways of working or investments in organisation wide changes.⁴ The UK's largest employer for example, the NHS, announced in 2015 an investment of £5m to improve employee wellbeing.⁵

For smaller organisations, with a smaller and potentially more flexible work force, it may be harder to identify opportunities to improve employee wellbeing or find the time and resources to invest in it – but there are things that small businesses can do that are not expensive or complicated. This discussion paper summarises an investigation we carried out into what smaller businesses can do to improve the wellbeing of their employees and other interventions which have a wider impact on the wellbeing of the communities in which they operate. Six small businesses, one medium sized and one Community Interest Company that have implemented policies and practices that can improve wellbeing were interviewed between May and July 2018 to inform this discussion paper.

1 Why Invest in Employee Wellbeing?

View our employers' factsheet to read more on this

2 Good work: the Taylor review of modern working practices

"..while having employment is itself vital to people's health and wellbeing, the quality of people's work is also a major factor in helping people to stay healthy and happy, something which benefits them and serves the wider public interest."

3 Where are you on the wellbeing journey?

Previous work on presenting some examples of what SMEs and larger businesses are doing to promote employee wellbeing.

4 Job quality and wellbeing

See our review of the evidence on what needs to happen alongside job redesign to improve employee wellbeing

5 Simon Stevens announces major drive to improve health in NHS workplace



What are the drivers of wellbeing in the workplace?

There are many overlapping factors which determine our wellbeing at work. The What Works Centre for Wellbeing have categorised them into five main drivers, with associated themes and sub-themes.⁶

How people experience these themes and sub themes, including the relationship with their line manager or their mental health can all be identified and measured. This can help employers understand the range of employee experiences across the organisation and where improvements can be made.

- **Most important:** Health and Relationships
- **Followed by:** Security and Environment
- **Then:** Purpose

Looking within the workplace itself, and in response to the Taylor review of modern working practices,⁷ the UK government have also identified five principles which underpin the quality of work, which are to be measured in order to progress the UK ambition for good jobs for all.⁸ These principles are:

- overall worker satisfaction
- good pay
- participation and progression
- wellbeing, safety and security
- voice and autonomy.

We now have a good idea about what a good job looks like. There are nine characteristics of a good job, as identified by a report from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Employers can use the list of characteristics in **figure 1** on the following page to understand where there are gaps in their offer to employees and where there is potential to improve the quality of work.

⁶ *Developing an evidence-informed workplace index*

This methodology note describes the themes and subthemes which drive employee wellbeing and which can be measured by employers

⁷ *Good work: the Taylor review of modern working practices*

⁸ *Good Work A response to the Taylor Review*

Figure 1: ‘Good jobs’ that lead to higher wellbeing tend to give staff...



Each of the businesses we interviewed described interventions which can be linked to addressing some of the recognised drivers of wellbeing, principles of quality work and through improving the characteristics of what makes a good job.

The snapshots on pages 6-10 provide some examples of what some employers have done to improve employee wellbeing, which also in turn delivers benefits for the employer and society. It also **identifies some of the challenges they faced** in implementing these interventions, and how this relates back to what we know works to improve wellbeing.

Opportunities for small businesses: what the practice highlights

Small business employers were enthusiastic about the potential impact that these interventions have had on their employees and their business. While this investigation did not give us the opportunity to evaluate interventions in terms of their impact, the businesses we spoke to were very positive about the perceived changes.

Wellbeing interventions were carried out to address specific business needs, particularly with respect to retention and productivity of staff: The interventions described by employers targeted some of the drivers of wellbeing at work (eg through improving health) or strengthening particular characteristics of a good job (eg creating a safe and pleasant work environment), broadly with financial and sustainability goals in mind for the business, rather than a deliberate recognition and choice that had been made to invest in employee wellbeing.



Small businesses have a wide range of options available that can improve wellbeing, which in turn address business needs and which needn't be expensive. Building relationships and improving communication between employer and employees can be a cost effective way to improve wellbeing, while improvements to the physical work environment, or perks and incentives which target particular drivers of wellbeing such as health, can pay off in terms of higher productivity and reduced sickness and absenteeism.

By applying a wellbeing lens to potential interventions, a small business can identify a wide range of options, which can be beneficial to employees' wellbeing and their business.

...and challenges

But, wellbeing is not a instinctive framing for small businesses: It was difficult to identify small business to be included in this investigation. The Centre issued a public call for small businesses (less than 10 employees) that were interested in showcasing their investment in employee wellbeing. This call received little response and the businesses we spoke to did not frame their interventions as explicitly addressing wellbeing.

Furthermore, sustaining interventions and understanding their longer term impact is difficult in small businesses. Staff turnover and business pressures make investing in individual members of staff difficult.

Next steps

This paper identifies a number of ways in which small businesses have invested in employee wellbeing, demonstrating that there are practical and cost effective measures that all businesses can take.

Using a wellbeing lens to explore what interventions are possible, and drawing on the evidence of what works to improve employee wellbeing would help businesses to exploit the full range of options to maximise the benefit to employees and their business. However, applying the wellbeing framing and the generalisable findings on what works is challenging for small businesses that face very specific business and staffing challenges.

More research is required to understand how smaller organisations can integrate wellbeing evidence in a way that is pragmatic and sustainable for their businesses. This could potentially be supported by the identification of challenges that are common for businesses within a specific sector, [Cut] and with relevant and targeted guidance and advice from collective bodies and agencies. Evaluations of interventions are also required to test and improve interventions.



Improving work/life balance

Truffles Coffee

A coffee shop serving food and drinks in Bromley, Kent. Owned by a young (and time scarce) couple who took over the business two years ago, and who employ 10 staff (full and part time)

Rationale behind intervention

Waiting staff are young with little experience and need supervision. Owners were seeking to instil in them a sense of responsibility, purpose, belonging and discipline so that the owners can improve their own work/life balance.

Intervention

- **Monthly 10-minute one-to-one meetings** with staff to monitor wellbeing
- **Encourage staff to take regular breaks** during quiet periods, walking in the park and in pairs
- **Social responsibility:** support ex-offenders, with training and help with practical matters
- **Quarterly outings**

Evidence supporting intervention

Relationships

Interacting with other people in a working environment helps build and strengthen social relationships. what have consistently found to improve wellbeing.⁹

Reported experience

Taking breaks in pairs during the day has helped staff form a bond. This has been good for everyone and the business.

The management's commitment in social responsibility has encouraged staff to take part in other community activities.

But, management has found staff turnover a big challenge and as a result quarterly outings have not been possible in recent months.

Long working hours while standing

Kent Flower Company

A small family run florist in Bromley, employing three full time staff (husband, wife and friend) and one part time staff member (daughter)

Rationale behind intervention

Employees have long working hours, on their feet. If one member of the team gets unwell, others must come together and cover that person's work. Team work is essential.

Intervention

- **Encourage staff to take longer breaks** during quieter times
- **Intuitive approach to wellbeing:** they play music in the shop and when possible sit down and talk in pairs, have a laugh, cup of tea and always engage with their customers.

Evidence supporting intervention

Health

Taking part in physical activity can be good for our wellbeing. It makes us more satisfied and happier with life, and we feel less anxious and depressed.

Reported experience

These measures make the team more relaxed and it creates a happy feeling in the shop. They believe it helps that they work with flowers and the shop is perfumed with invigorating scent and colourful flowers help them to relax

The team feel happy and supported as most of them are members of the same family and will do whatever it takes to finish the tasks in hand.

⁹ **Team working**



Staff retention and reliability

Hair and Beauty salon (anon)

A hair stylist in London, employing 7-8 staff

Rationale behind intervention

The business faced challenges with staff retention and reliability, including incidents of theft. Staff spend long hours on their feet and the air quality inside the salon is poor (hair spray)

Intervention

- **Encourage regular breaks**, staff to be more active and develop their skills
- **Give employees more control** over their job
- **Spend time with employees** to get to know them
- **Celebrate employees birthdays**, having a half yearly outing and going out for events and meals
- **Provide masks for poor air quality**

Evidence supporting intervention

Relationships

Interacting with other people in a working environment helps build and strengthen social relationships.

Reported experience

Lack of time was a challenge to supporting individual members of staff.

Manager was suffering backache and wrist ache, and stress due to landlord and staffing concerns. The Manager was off sick so was unavailable to discuss the experience in more detail with the researchers.

¹⁰ [Job quality and wellbeing](#)

¹¹ [Belonging at work](#)

Embedding the new owner

One Stop Motorist Centre and Bodyshop

A small, busy garage in St Ives, Cambridgeshire, carrying out serving, repairs and MOTs. Employs 10 staff. Under new management.

Rationale behind intervention

Both the new owner and the manager wished to further develop positive social relationships between staff in the workplace, embedding the new owner and resolving tensions between staff.

Intervention

- **Hold team meetings during working hours** - so that staff are paid for their time. Allocate two hours for team meetings, on the last Friday of each month.
- **Staff survey** – identified environmental concerns that could be fixed quickly
- **Public recognition for staff and their achievement** – through the website and social media
- **Engage the local community:** a classic car show has been planned on the garage premises

Evidence supporting intervention

Purpose

Managers that understand their staff concerns by finding out very specific information about what can be changed and how helps changes to job quality be successful in improving wellbeing.¹⁰ Empowering employees with a voice to influence decisions and create a sense of belonging is beneficial not only for wellbeing, but for business outcomes too, particularly during adversity.¹¹

Relationships

Shared activities work best when they are regular and inclusive. The meetings also help develop social connections, development of skills, responsibilities within the workplace and give staff an opportunity to have a say in a supportive workplace.

Reported experience

Commitment to staff wellbeing was transparent. Use of a staff survey and rapid action to address issues raised sent a clear message to staff that their wellbeing mattered this included installation of an improved kitchen and the creation of a crew room where staff could eat their lunch away from noise and fumes.

The social opportunities provided through work have led to the development of new social relationships outside work for some staff. This includes new friendships forming between families of staff and support being shared in the form of childcare, pet and house sitting.



Retaining knowledge and skills

Forms Plus

A Print Management Company based in Cornwall, creating bespoke forms and label printing, who employ 12 staff (full and part time)

Rationale behind intervention

The Directors of Forms Plus believe that healthy and happy team is more motivated and dedicated. They want to retain knowledge and skills of their current staff and recognise that staff spend long hours in sedentary work, sitting and looking at the computers.

Intervention

- **‘Health Plus’ workplace health programme**, promoting healthy habits including healthy team lunches and a hydration challenge.
- **Site visit by a physio and occupational health experts** to talk about the importance of the musculoskeletal health, included and assessment of employee’s workstations.
- **Health check to all those who wanted it** using body composition scales.
- **The workplace champion ‘Clare’, organised wellbeing events** and activities and the team are encouraged to organise walks and take part in community sport games supported by their friends and families.

Evidence supporting intervention

Health

Taking part in physical activity can be good for our wellbeing. It makes us more satisfied and happier with life, and we feel less anxious and depressed.

Reported experience

The team now know what the guidelines are for musculoskeletal health and take turns reminding everyone to do desk stretches in the afternoons.

Several individuals have set personal health goals following their body composition analysis.

Some great events were organised by team members The team also took part in voluntary work for their community.

Mental health issues in workplace

Bentwood Community Print

A community interest printing and design company, that provides a safe and supportive work and training environment for people in recovery from mental illness. Employ 13 staff and support 20 clients each week

Rationale behind intervention

Provide ‘stepping-stone’ opportunities for people who wanted to work, but whose mental health difficulties made this challenging for them. Sought to develop interpersonal and workplace skills whilst simultaneously building confidence, self-esteem and self-worth.

Intervention

- Create a supportive workplace where staff and clients in recovery could work come to terms with their illness, where they feel safe and accepted.
- Skills development tailored to individual needs.
- All clients are provided with a staff mentor.
- Community outreach to raise other employers’ awareness of mental illness and of their work

Evidence supporting intervention

Relationships

Good people management practices are important for employee wellbeing. At BCP clients are supported through encouragement, advice and help with work (and wider) problems by managers and mentors who all have a good understanding of mental health needs.

Interacting with other people in a working environment helps build and strengthen social relationships.

Purpose

Giving people training to develop personal resources, skills, or problem solving, so they are able to make their own jobs better may have positive effects on wellbeing.

Positive engagement with the local community can contribute to a sense of being part of something bigger, doing worthwhile work and of making a difference.

Reported experience

Over a third of the 60 + people BCP supported over the past five years have moved into paid employment and are no longer dependant on state sickness benefits. It has been reported from Borough councillors and former Mayors that BCP has played a big part in reducing stigma and Employers in the local area have been made better aware of mental health issues and regularly contact BCP for advice in how to initiate conversations or deal with specific workplace issues. Funding is stop/start and this makes long term planning difficult Outcomes are not effective for those who are referred to BCP against their will.



Attracting and retaining staff

Lemon and Lime Interiors

A Professional Property Presentation company who offer 'homestaging' services (preparing homes for sale) based in Melbourne, Derbyshire, employing six members of staff

Rationale behind intervention

The Director felt that encouraging employees' physical and mental fitness would have a positive effect on wellbeing and would help reduce the risk of staff being off sick for long periods of time, and help attract and retain enthusiastic employees with fresh ideas.

Intervention

- **Pilates classes and discounts on nutrition programmes** offered through the Directors daughter's clinic
- **Step counters purchased for all staff**, and recorded
- **Flexible working**
- **Celebrating achievements** ('cake day')

Evidence supporting intervention

Purpose

Setting targets and hitting them can create positive feelings of achievement and the fitness targets in the case of this organisation are likely to contribute towards such feelings.

Health

Taking part in physical activity can be good for our wellbeing. It makes us more satisfied and happier with life, and we feel less anxious and depressed.

Reported experience

The fitness and wellbeing initiative has encouraged social connection between employees and has motivated staff to help each other out. Employees have felt more motivated to get out and do extra exercise and, as a result, have reported feeling more productive and switched on when working. The main challenge has been finding the time to implement these changes.

Business reinvention

Lintott Control Systems Ltd

A Water and Wastewater technology company based in Norwich, with 105 permanent staff, 91% male

[This is an example from a medium sized business]

Rationale behind intervention

Having experienced trading difficulties around 2012, as part of the business turnaround initiative, the management team sought to strengthen the workforce's sense of purpose and ownership to improve creativity and innovation in order to deliver competitive advantage.

Intervention

- **Communication with staff** – initial open, honest and transparent overview of the company's situation, followed by regular team briefings
- **Culture and values framework** developed
- **Investment in training**
- **Introduction of a range of incentives** for good work
- **Social relationships encouraged** through Christmas parties and a community engagement programme, where staff can take off two days per annum
- **Staff satisfaction survey and focus groups**

Evidence supporting intervention

Relationships

Good people management practices have benefits for organisational performance AND employee wellbeing. At Lintott these were addressed by developing clear roles and responsibilities for staff and by using the Culture and Values work to encourage staff to develop a sense of pride and ownership.

Purpose

Strong emphasis on enhancing skills and improving access to learning and development opportunities has a beneficial effect.

Positive engagement with the local community is also known to contribute to a sense of being part of something bigger, doing worthwhile work and of making a difference - all of which are important elements of job quality.

Reported experience

Some employees were initially resistant to change. Improved trust between management and staff. Staff feel part of 'one company' rather than a particular department. Staff behave in a more responsible manner and bought into the culture and values. Greater appreciation by staff toward the role of management and better understanding by management to the role of different business functions. Appreciation of the benefits of skills development and enthusiasm for training. Better engagement with the local community and students from local colleges.

You can see all of our resources on work and learning at:
whatworkswellbeing.org



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We are an independent organisation set up to produce robust, relevant and accessible evidence on wellbeing. We work with individuals, communities, businesses and government, to enable them to use this evidence make decisions and take action to improve wellbeing.

The Centre is supported by the ESRC and partners to produce evidence on wellbeing in four areas: work and learning; culture and sport; community; and cross-cutting capabilities in definitions, evaluation, determinants and effects.



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