



What difference do shared activities and wellbeing interventions make to the social atmosphere at work?



## the big picture

How we feel about where we work matters. It gives us a sense of purpose, a feeling of being in control of our lives, personal growth, positive relationships and improved self-esteem.

Beyond the the social and personal benefits of wellbeing at work, there is considerable evidence that higher levels of staff wellbeing are good for employers. It has links to performance and creativity while reducing staff costs.

There is strong and consistent evidence - from multiple, [large scale scientific studies](#) conducted in many countries - that the social aspects of work are associated with wellbeing.

However, creating a positive social atmosphere in a workplace is not simple. Many organisations have employees from diverse backgrounds who may commute long distances from different areas. Lots of actions could potentially be taken - but which will work?

Starting with nearly 1,400 scientific papers and reports, we narrowed our focus onto 8 studies of the best possible evidence to examine which actions to improve workplace social atmospheres are also best for improving wellbeing.

“Everyone gets on... If they didn't, a lot of people would be unhappy; I know I would”

Claire, 60, cleaner interviewed by Wendy Jones, for [What is a good job? Modelling, measuring and improving job quality](#) (2014)

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## what evidence did we find?

### one minute digest: key findings



**Shared activities can improve wellbeing and performance** by improving workplace social atmospheres.



**Interventions that seek to improve wellbeing through improving perceptions of fair treatment at work** do not yet have strong enough evidence of their impact.



### Dig deeper: what the data tells us

#### Shared activities: what works?

It doesn't have to be big or complex. Shared social activities involve workers doing things together as a group. Examples in the studies included:

- workshops
- internal mentoring programmes
- action planning groups based around specific issues
- social events.

Wellbeing in the studies used was mainly measured as job satisfaction.

#### There are three types of evidence



##### **strong**

We can be confident that the evidence can be used to inform decisions.



##### **promising**

We have moderate confidence. Decision makers may wish to incorporate further information to inform decisions.



##### **initial**

We have low confidence. Decision makers may wish to incorporate further information to inform decisions.



##### **poor quality**

We have low or no confidence in this evidence. It may be low quality or not relevant to the UK.

Strong, promising and initial evidence refer to high, moderate and low quality evidence / confidence as per GRADE and CERQual guidance. For further information on these classifications, please see the Centre's [Methods Guide](#).

All evidence should be considered alongside questions of possible benefits and risks, affordability, acceptability, feasibility and wider impacts, including equity issues, in the user setting. Where the evidence is less strong, these other considerations become even more important.

All the cases in the review included the following features. However, it's difficult to know if these are necessary for success because we don't have a comparison to understand if the studies would have been successful without these aspects.

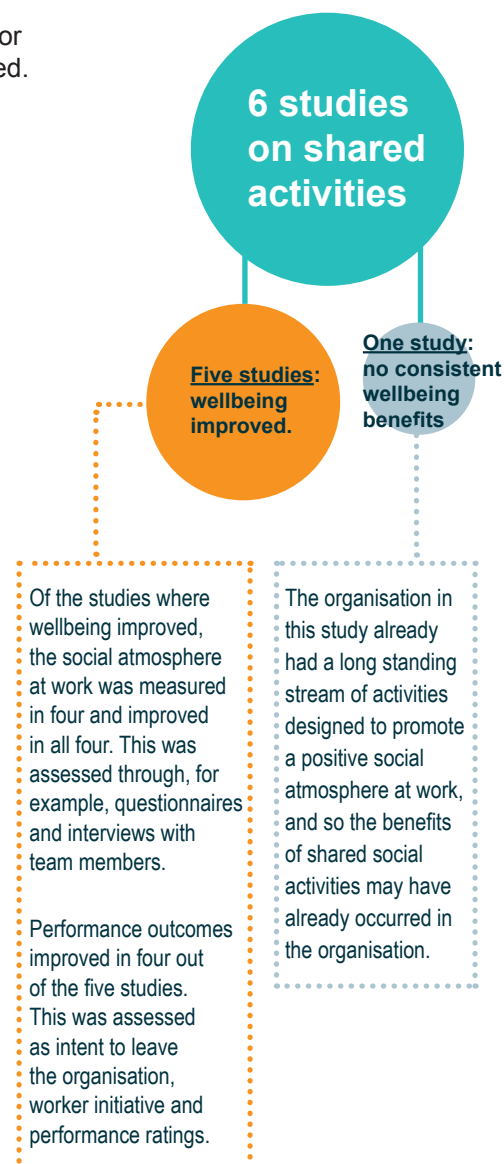
**Inclusivity is important**, including engaging people who might be reluctant or unable to interact in shared activities was an aspect in all the studies reviewed.

**Multiple components and sustained activity.** All of the successful cases in our review featured a number of workshops or activities – from as few as three one-hour workshops to a more extensive programme delivered over several years. In no case was there a one-off activity.

**Attempts to make sure the workers generally looked forward to the activities**, for example by asking staff to make suggestions for the kind of activities they would like to see.

**All of the cases in our review had input from someone external to each work group.** We can't draw any conclusions from this. It could be that outsiders can offer fresh perspectives on issues, bring new skills and experiences. However, we don't have any examples where social activities were initiated from within the workgroup. It may be that organisations are more likely to run an evaluation when they pay for external input.

## Number crunching: weighing up the evidence



## Case study: Improving the social environment in a multi-ethnic workplace

**An eight-month-long programme of activities was started to improve performance and retention in a 13 strong multi-ethnic cleaning team in a Danish municipality. Two of the staff were native Danes, the rest were migrants from five different countries elsewhere in Europe and Asia.**

**The activities included:**

- Danish lessons for migrants - three hours per week for six months
- Technical training which included group work - eight half days
- A workshop on job satisfaction and teamwork - two half days
- Increased frequency of staff meetings and a greater focus on collaboration in those meetings
- Social events, including a summer party.

**The activities involved inter-ethnic teamwork whenever possible, and the technical training and workshop were facilitated by external providers.**

**Before the start of the activities, most of the cleaners were positive about the planned activities.**

**At the end of the eight months, the cleaners reported increased collaboration, communication, trust in colleagues, job satisfaction and the meaning of work. The cleaners' supervisor had noted more collaboration and more initiative.**

Case study source: Hardman Smith, L., Hviid, K., Frydendall, K. B., & Flyvholm, M. A. (2013). Improving the psychosocial work environment at multi-ethnic workplaces: A multi-component intervention strategy in the cleaning industry. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 10, 4996-5010.

## Fair treatment: what works?

We found only [two studies](#) that investigated attempts to improve wellbeing through promoting fair treatment at work. One study was simply an email message that gave workers advanced warning, with some justification, for a new policy on monitoring workers' internet activity at their work stations. The other was based on a more extensive overhaul of an appraisal system to make it fairer.

Fairness and fair treatment at work are clearly important and there is a wealth of research demonstrating that teams with higher perceptions of fairness have higher wellbeing. But we did not find consistent or robust evidence for actions that improve wellbeing through improving fair treatment at work. That is, we do not know which actions promote a sense of fairness at work that subsequently improves wellbeing.

Related reading  
in our wk &  
learning series

[What works: job quality  
and wellbeing](#)

[What works: learning in  
the workplace](#)



## how can we turn this evidence into action?

1

### Employers, managers and business leaders

Good social relationships at work are important. Carry out activities that aim to strengthen social relations and evaluate them to understand if they have been effective, or not.

The [2012 Public Services \(Social Value\) Act](#) indicates public sector organisations should consider the social value of contracts. Public sector organisations could encourage good practice through service commissioners prioritising purchasing goods and services from suppliers that can demonstrate a commitment to good social relationships within their workplaces.

2

### Employees and team members

The social atmosphere in work matters. When looking for work, find out how companies encourage shared activities between workers. Employers should be able to give several examples, such as group training workshops, internal mentoring programmes and problem-solving groups.

Small behaviours which increase the levels of team wellbeing can be important. We don't yet know what works to increase pro-social behaviours at a team level, but individuals can still play a part. In first joining a team, you may not have all the technical know-how, but you may be able to contribute to the wellbeing and performance of your team through small, helpful acts and improving the social environment.

Are you carrying  
out activities in  
your workplace  
to improve social  
relations?

Are you evaluating the  
impacts?

Evaluation can help  
understand if your  
activities work, and who  
they do and don't work  
for.

It is important to report  
even when there are  
no or negative results  
- this helps others to  
understand what does  
and doesn't work.

## 3

**We need more trials: research implications****What is worth the time and cost? Which activities work better for specific groups and challenges?**

Which activities are more important for dispersed workers, or teams with particular challenges? How could a company radio help, compared to a basement table-tennis table? Are they really worth the cost and time?

**The role of small actions and behaviours, such as courtesy, or kindness**

We know from research that prosocial behaviours are linked to higher performance. But what works to increase prosocial behaviours? And what are their impacts on wellbeing? This appears to be a key area for future trials.

**Building trust**

Experimental studies have also shown how workplace trust is linked to higher job satisfaction and an increase in workplace trust can improve performance. However, our search of the literature found no studies which had considered 'what works' as well as measuring wellbeing. This is another key area for future trials. What can be done in different contexts to increase trust, which ultimately improves wellbeing and performance?

**Understanding what works to promote a sense of 'fairness' in a workplace**

A wealth of evidence indicates fair treatment at work promotes wellbeing, however we don't yet know which actions promote a sense of fairness at work that subsequently improves wellbeing. Carry out proportionate evaluations: innovative activities are taking place across workplaces to improve social relations, yet they are not being evaluated. Proportionate evaluations would help us to understand which are worth the effort.



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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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