

Hacking happiness

Demanding clients, time pressures, tax and accounting deadlines – stress is a daily feature of life in an accountancy practice or small business. *Richard Curtis* considers what might be done to alleviate matters.



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TEN SECOND SUMMARY

- 1 A new course on wellbeing at Yale University becomes the most popular subject of study.
- 2 Does technology and an inability to switch off have a negative effect on employees?
- 3 Take time to relax and regain perspective. Consider a short exercise break, yoga, meditation or a holiday.

Life should be straightforward for most of us nowadays shouldn't it? For many, improving living standards and the benefits of modern technology and healthcare should mean that many of the mundane worries of the past are no more. But if that's the case, why are so many of us suffering from feelings of dissatisfaction or, more seriously, depression? Why do so many people no longer feel happy and why were there 64.7m prescriptions for antidepressants in England in 2016 – more than double the number dispensed in 2006? Does social media mean we spend too much time trying to “keep up with the Jones” or other individuals?

For those experiencing such thoughts, perhaps the first thing to appreciate is that they are not alone. This was reinforced recently when I read that a course by Professor Laurie Santos of Yale University – “Psychology and the Good Life” – had become noteworthy for being the most popular ever at the university. A study programme by Professor Santos – “The Science of Well-Being” – is now available on the Coursera website and means that we can all learn what psychological science says about happiness.

Getting started

Laurie's course starts with the well-known principle that wealth, material possessions and good educational grades don't make for happiness before going on to consider whether the pursuit of such goals might undermine one's sense of wellbeing. What we need to understand is that our own misconceptions may make it difficult for us to see what makes us happy. Instead we need to really understand what will make us content and how we can work to achieve a truly satisfying life.

An early lesson is the false assumption that “knowing is half the battle”. When it comes to achieving a true sense of wellbeing and happiness, the reality here is that merely knowing something is not enough to change behaviour – instead we must change our habits. As well as the usual university course requirements of reading materials and assessments, Laurie's programme aims to do this by course “rewirements” – rewiring our automatic habits and strategies. The course involves measuring happiness levels at the start, before working through rewirements such as identifying character strengths, being grateful, performing random acts of kindness, making social connections, meditating, taking more physical exercise (if possible) getting more sleep and savouring experiences. By putting these lessons into practice, the aim is that happiness will have improved when it is remeasured at the end of the studies. I've already signed up!

Wellbeing at work

Perhaps understanding that there are ways and means to help achieve happiness and wellbeing is something that we should learn at a young age



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rather than assuming they will come as part of the package of modern life. If we have adopted such strategies in our teens perhaps we will be better prepared for the all-too-real stresses and strains of the workplace.

In May, the CIPD published its survey, *Health and Well-Being at Work*. This noted “grounds for concern” as 22% of organisations reported that mental ill health was the primary cause of long-term absence compared with 13% in 2016. This reflected a 2017 government-commissioned review of mental health that concluded “The UK is facing a mental health challenge at work that is much larger than we had thought.”

Obviously, the wellbeing of employees should be a major concern of employing organisations, but why things seem to be worsening is unclear. Awareness of mental health issues has improved, but a “stubborn implementation gap between aspiration and practice” remains. An ageing population may mean workers have increased caring responsibilities that put pressure on the work-life balance and even Brexit might be influencing people’s sense of wellbeing as they worry about the future.

Technology may also affect mental wellbeing and 87% of those surveyed reported an inability to switch off after work hours as the main negative effect on employees. Perhaps yoga or meditation might help here.

Further, not only is “presenteeism” – people coming to work when unwell – on the increase, so it seems is “leavism” – using annual leave or even periods of sickness to catch up on work.

Action needed

Some organisations are taking a proactive approach, but the CIPD report suggests that too many place employee wellbeing low on their agenda and are likely to take a reactive approach to this subject. Further, nearly 30% of those who include stress as one of the top three causes of absence do not take steps to reduce it.

Acas – the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service – has a long history of working to improve working lives and recently published *Health, Work and Wellbeing*. This confirms that key to encouraging an attendance culture is for the employer to be proactive, with regular case reviews of absent individuals and a focus on rehabilitation. While this may work with physical symptoms, it seems that employers are less sure how to react to mental health issues and may see mental illness as a sensitive and difficult-to-understand subject. Unfortunately, many employers ignore the issue, which only adds to the sense of isolation experienced by those with such problems. Positive workplace pressure, which can create a “buzz” and a creative environment may morph into a more harmful form and affect a person’s ability to cope. And outside factors such as relationship, family or debt problems can create stress and compound the otherwise normal pressures. The report does include some positive ideas for beating stress, such as:

SIX STEPS TO IMPROVING WORKPLACE WELLBEING

1. *Turn healthy choices into a new favourite habit.* Healthy lunches, staying hydrated, regular exercise and a healthy lifestyle in the office is a key element in improving workplace wellbeing.
2. *Dedicate more time to mindfulness.* Consider meditating for a few minutes before work, focus on one task at a time and switch off digital devices a few times a day.
3. *Make an effort with colleagues.* Try to maintain a good relationship with work colleagues, this could improve your mood. If it’s not possible, try to resolve difficulties sooner rather than later.
4. *Never stop working on work-life balance.* Even hard workers need an occasional break to prevent burnout. Set some time aside for personal tasks and hobbies.
5. *The correct posture.* Improving posture could reduce depression and tiredness.
6. *Don’t ignore your problems.* If workplace wellbeing is not improving, raise issues with the employer directly. A better working environment ensures improved staff morale and productivity.

- an “open door day” for the manager;
- more relevant training;
- greater involvement in future changes;
- more effective job design; and
- a consistent policy for dealing with bullying.

The employment consultants, Reed, include **Six tips to improve workplace wellbeing** on their website.

Getting the balance right

As well as balancing the demands of her own recruitment business, Georgiana Head has much experience of advising others in business and coping with the attendant stresses and strains of achieving an acceptable work-life balance. She said that one of the best pieces of advice she received about wellbeing was from a previous boss at a large tax recruitment firm in London.

“He said that, when working constantly to deadlines in a fee-earning role, try to take some form of holiday once a quarter. He explained that regular time off gives a sense of perspective. In fact, it’s quite hard to follow the advice – it requires real discipline to book a holiday four times a year – but when I get it right I really notice a difference in how I deal with stressful situations.”

Perhaps it is achieving that sense of perspective that is most important. Stress can be beneficial – it’s what drives us on to achievements and new incentives to boost ambition and drive are sensible ways to improve workplace wellbeing. But don’t let that ambition – whether it’s a promotion, a better car, more money or matching the lifestyles of others – override everything else. Take some holiday breaks, but don’t forget shorter breaks for exercise. Are flexible working hours possible? Each of us probably needs to “rewire” our own approach to life but, with work such an integral part of it, employers have a role to play for the benefit of their businesses and the people in it.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Coursea – The Science of Well-Being:
tinyurl.com/TSOWB
CIPD – *Health and Well-Being at Work*:
tinyurl.com/CIPD-Well
Acas – *Health, Work and Wellbeing*:
tinyurl.com/Acas-Well
Reed – *Six tips to improve workplace wellbeing*:
tinyurl.com/6tips2wellbeing