



## Beyond Hedonia: 5 Keys to Enhancing Workplace Well-Being at Scale

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### The Importance of Well-Being at Work

Even though we spend the majority of our waking lives at work, for most people, work is not a primary source of happiness. In fact, recent data on the ways work can compromise health and well-being is alarming. Work now ranks as the fifth leading cause of death in the United States due to work-induced stress,<sup>1</sup> and workplace stress has also been found to be associated with cardiovascular disease and depression.<sup>2</sup> Employee well-being isn't just good for employees, supporting it also represents a significant opportunity for organizations. Research suggests that the relationship between happiness and success isn't just correlational, it's causal.<sup>3</sup> In other words, employee happiness positively impacts performance, job satisfaction, and overall career success<sup>4</sup> and even reduces health-care costs for organizations.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, organizations have started to catch on to these potential benefits and are investing in employee well-being. However, despite spending nearly US\$8 billion on employee well-being in 2018 in the United States alone,<sup>5</sup> data on stress, burnout, and loneliness show that we have a long way to go.<sup>1,6</sup> So, while the importance of happiness and well-being is not in doubt, developing effective practices that positively move the needle in today's workplace remains a largely unsolved challenge. In this article, we share how we conceptualize well-being at work, define 5 specific drivers of workplace well-being we have leveraged within organizations, and offer a broad view of some of the interventions we use with employee populations. We also share our research to date on the impact of our interventions on employee well-being as a way to demonstrate the strides that can be made in employee populations within a relatively short period of time. We conclude with generalizable best practices for practitioners who share the mission to support the health and well-being of employees everywhere.

### Beyond Hedonia: What Do We Mean by “Well-Being”?

When seeking to move the needle on happiness or well-being within organizations, definitions matter. To explain, we begin with an analogy in health care. “Health” can be defined as the absence of disease, or it can be defined—more holistically—to include the presence of energy, vitality, and overall well-being.<sup>7</sup> Within a given health-care system, the former definition is likely to lead to a focus on treating disease, whereas the latter is more likely to also focus on lifestyle factors, such as healthy eating, exercise, and community. Similarly, one's definition of happiness or well-being is going to influence how one goes about preserving or igniting it.

In this section, we share how we view well-being and why we view it in this way. Models of well-being are often divided based on *hedonic* versus *eudaimonic* aims.<sup>8,9</sup> The hedonistic perspective conceptualizes well-being as the presence of positive emotions and the absence of suffering.<sup>10,11</sup> Some equate hedonistic well-being with the term

“happiness.”<sup>8</sup> The eudaimonic view of well-being places greater importance on positive growth and development, often for the sake of the greater good.<sup>9-11</sup> Some researchers see the categorical divide as *living* well (experiencing positive emotion) versus *functioning* well (a combination of social and psychological well-being).<sup>8</sup>

Both hedonic pursuits and eudaimonic pursuits can contribute to well-being, albeit in different ways.<sup>10</sup> It is possible to have a happy and meaningless life, an unhappy yet meaningful life, or to have both happiness and meaning.<sup>12</sup>

Rather than choosing a side, we embrace the multiplicity of approaches to a life well lived. On a practical level, we neither want to deny that positive emotions are important nor do we want to make them our sole focus.

### Workplace Well-Being: A Whole-Person Approach

The perspective that thriving as a human can be derived from multiple aspects of one's personal and professional life is what we refer to as BetterUp as a “whole-person” approach. Rather than focusing on a specific or narrow view of well-being, we've developed a model that spans a broad base of research and can therefore be applied to a wide range of use cases. We take a “whole-person” perspective for multiple reasons:

1. *Alignment with the latest research:* Leading researchers have identified that the “good life” can stem not only from positive emotions but also from such aspects as connections with others, meaning, success, or personal growth.<sup>9,11,13</sup>
2. *Alignment with the reality of work:* Seeking happiness doesn't necessarily engender happiness.<sup>14</sup> This is partially due to the fact that we can't control external circumstances that cause distress. In the workplace, employees encounter multiple stressors.<sup>3</sup> Rather than trying to calm the rapids of what has been dubbed the “white water world” of modern work,<sup>15</sup> we find it more realistic to work within the reality and teach employees how to paddle. In other words, we can't promise calm waters, but we can work with individuals to develop resilience and other skills that support well-being regardless of external factors.
3. *Enablement of personalizable goals:* We all want to “thrive” (our term of choice for well-being), but how we define thriving is largely subjective. To use overly prescriptive notions of happiness or well-being would be to unnecessarily shape the goals of those with whom we work. The reality is that not everyone seeks happiness in the form of positive emotion and the absence of suffering. In fact, many are relieved to

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**Figure 1.** BetterUp's Whole-Person Model of well-being.

understand that well-being can coexist with suffering and that well-being can be derived from a variety of areas within one's life.

4. *Sustainable gains:* A more holistic and comprehensive approach to well-being is more likely to yield sustainable gains. While hedonic pursuits alone can certainly contribute to well-being, these gains tend to be more short-lived.<sup>10</sup> One study that compared the benefits of hedonic pursuits to eudaimonic pursuits found that the former had a stronger impact on well-being at 1 month, while the latter yielded comparatively greater benefits at 3 months.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, a combined hedonic and eudaimonic pursuits leads to the highest levels of sustainable well-being.<sup>10</sup>

## The Whole-Person Model

Creating a new model through which to approach well-being when other well-regarded ones (such as Diener's SWB and Seligman's PERMA) exist begs the question: "Why?" Though we rest on the shoulders of giants, we needed a model of thriving (well-being) that was both specifically designed for a workplace setting and practically useful for organizations and employees.

Toward this end, in 2015, BetterUp did a thorough review into the research on developable psychological resources and leadership behaviors that contribute to a thriving workforce. This exploration materialized as the Whole-Person Model (WPM; see Figure 1). The model includes mindsets, behaviors, and their related outcomes. It is important to note, and our data supports, that these concepts are not independent from one another but rather interrelated. For example, if I feel a stronger sense of purpose, I am likely to feel more engaged in my work.<sup>16</sup> In addition, if I am able to develop strong relationships, I am also likely to benefit from greater resilience from improved social

support.<sup>17</sup> This is in alignment with the reciprocal "upward spiral" proposition of the broaden-and-build theory which suggests that the development of psychological resources can result in greater positive emotions and well-being, which in turn increases one's psychological resources and so on.<sup>18</sup>

## Five Key Drivers of Workplace Well-Being

In this section, we zoom into 5 of the key concepts of the WPM, illustrating how each can be leveraged to support workplace well-being. In practice, we don't limit our work to 5 aspects but going into each one is beyond the scope of this article. We discuss what each of these concepts is, what research tells us about their importance, and how each supports well-being at work. You will notice that each driver is related not only to well-being but also to metrics connected with organizational performance, such as reduced turnover. As shown in the research that follows this overview, well-being and success are inextricably tied together within organizations. Practically speaking, knowing that well-being ignites and supports performance can create additional buy-in for organizations to invest in well-being focused interventions. Later in the article, we will share the coaching intervention we use to boost the 5 drivers, as well as the changes we see as a result of coaching.

**Resilience.** Resilience is defined as the ability to positively adapt in the context of negative, traumatic, or stressful experiences.<sup>19,20</sup> In the workplace, higher levels of resilience have been associated with lower turnover, higher job satisfaction, and increased work engagement.<sup>21,22</sup> Resilient individuals experience greater well-being and success because they take challenges in stride and persist toward their goals, rather than focusing on the negative aspects of their work or ruminating on their failures. One example of a resilience-building technique

used in coaching is “reframing.” Reframing entails shifting one’s perspective of a challenge or negative experience as a reason to give up or feel defeated to seeing it as an opportunity to overcome or grow.

**Purpose.** Purpose can be defined as a feeling that one’s work is significant and contributes to an overall goal that goes beyond the self.<sup>23</sup> The clearest outcomes that can be attributed to having a sense of purpose at work are increased well-being and life satisfaction.<sup>23</sup> Having a sense of purpose has also been associated with greater longevity.<sup>24</sup> Purposeful individuals experience greater well-being and success because their actions align with their values, which allow them to bring greater passion and energy to their work. Purpose can be found by seeking out opportunities that align with our values, or it can be created by attending to and accentuating the meaningful aspects of one’s work. Even less glamorous work can be purposeful when viewed through the lens of helping people, creating rewarding relationships, or working toward a valued future.

**Stress reduction.** Stress is defined as experiences or demands that enact physiological and cognitive responses that negatively impact well-being.<sup>2</sup> Experiencing high stress at work can impair productivity<sup>25</sup> and negatively impact physical and psychological health.<sup>2</sup> Stress is highly prevalent in modern society and building the tools to cope with stress can support healthier and more productive lives. Managing stress can also help employees be successful by preventing burnout and improving relationships. Being mindful of one’s stress levels and experimenting with strategies to keep them in check are a great place to start. There are many evidence-based strategies that can be used, from meditating and experiencing nature to journaling or improving work–life balance.

**Emotional regulation.** Emotional regulation is a process whereby a person tries to influence which emotion they have, how they experience the emotion, or how they express the emotion.<sup>26</sup> Emotional regulation has been documented to be associated with improved social relationships,<sup>27</sup> as well as job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions.<sup>28</sup> The workplace can elicit many emotions, good and bad. The ability to manage and regulate our emotions can help us be happier and more successful by allowing us to communicate clearly in emotionally charged situations and also create a positive and inclusive work environment. Like many of the previously discussed concepts, awareness of our emotions is the first step toward growth. Using a mood tracking tool or asking for feedback from colleagues on how our emotional expressions influence others can help us develop a better understanding of our emotional landscape and where we might have room to improve.

**Relationship building.** Positive relationships at work have been defined as those that are mutually beneficial.<sup>29</sup> High-quality relationships at work have been associated with job satisfaction, meaning, positive emotions, and even life satisfaction.<sup>30</sup> Scholars have also shown that quality relationships between leaders and their coworkers are associated with many valuable organizational outcomes, including employee job performance, satisfaction, commitment, role clarity, and turnover intentions.<sup>31,32</sup> Having high-quality relationships at work supports well-being and success not only by providing an important source of meaning and pleasure but also by enabling the sharing of resources and information. A simple way to build relationships at work is by creating opportunities for informal interactions between coworkers. This could be through lunch events, coffee chats, or just making time to talk about topics other than work during meetings.

These constructs, along with others in the WPM, allow for a more complete understanding of workplace well-being, one that may not be fully realized by isolating and studying one construct at a time. With this view, we can begin to understand the specifics of how well-being is cultivated at work and focus on interventions that address and improve multiple aspects of wellness rather than isolating and focusing in on only 1 or 2 aspects. Next, we examine the effectiveness of our coaching and platform model on these measures.

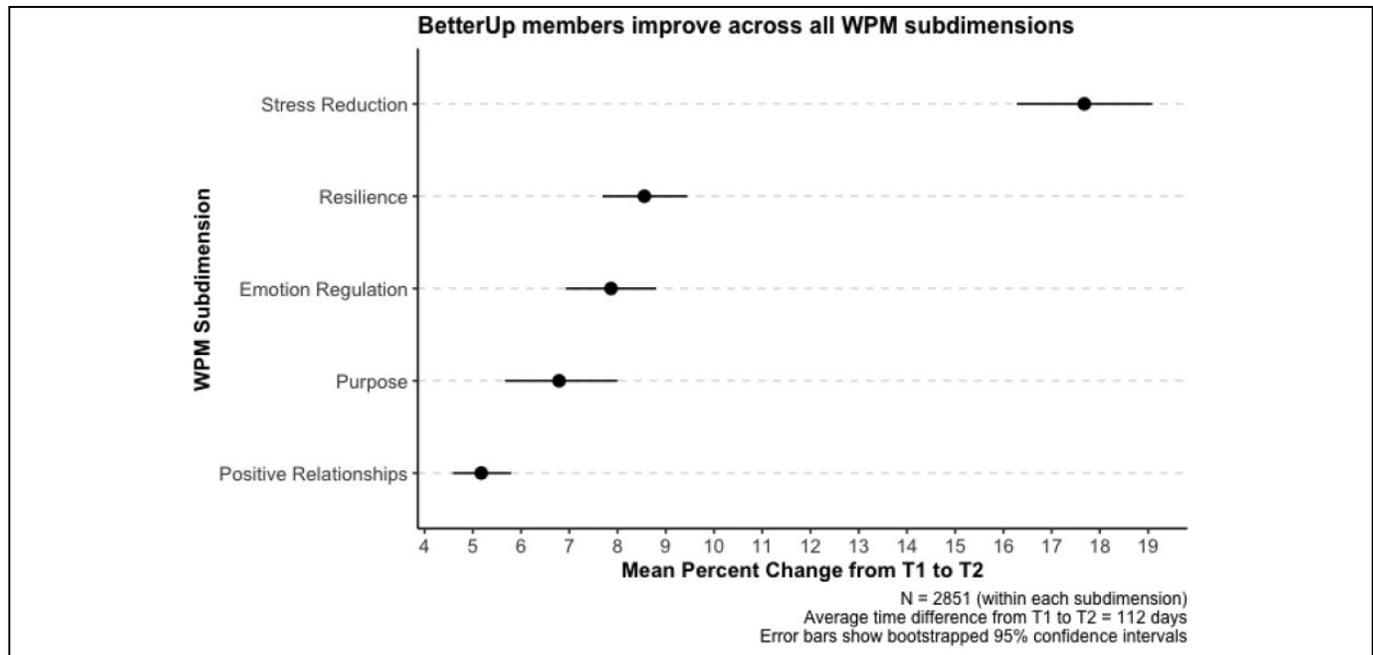
## Evaluation of WPM

BetterUp is a mobile-first leadership development platform used by organizations worldwide to drive the well-being and performance of their workforce. The intervention is multifaceted, and although a detailed overview is beyond the scope of this article, the following are a few important features used to move the needle on well-being and performance for employees:

- *Evidence-based leadership coaching:* Each member (individual employee) who partakes in BetterUp is matched with a certified coach. Coaches undergo a rigorous selection process where only 8% of applicants are accepted, ongoing training, and quality control—allowing BetterUp to ensure that each member is coached using an evidence-based approach.
- *Assessment and metrics:* The WPM assessment was designed to help members start their coaching engagements with an awareness of their existing levels of these resources so that they can begin to intentionally shift them as desired. In reviewing the assessment results with the member, the coach is able to help the member identify strengths and growth opportunities as well as determine in what areas the member would like to make changes.
- *Experiential learning:* A member’s experience is accentuated with interactive learning resources, many of which are designed in partnership with the BetterUp Science Board.<sup>33</sup> These resources provide evidence-based tools and strategies that members can use to grow and improve.

The evaluation for this study included aggregated data of all BetterUp members who completed both the WPM assessment at the start of their engagement with BetterUp (time point 1) and the follow-up assessment at a later date (time point 2), approximately one-third of the way into the standard year-long program offering. All measures were taken during 2017 and 2018. A total of 10 036 members were enrolled into BetterUp during this time period. Members were excluded from the analysis if they had not completed assessments at both time points. A total of 2851 members, with an average of 112 days between each time point, were included.

After receiving an e-mail communication announcing the availability of coaching, members enrolled in BetterUp. During their enrollment, they were asked to complete a beginning assessment that included the WPM assessment and additional items assessing needs, motivations, and reasons for seeking coaching. All these initial activities occurred through either a web or app-based platform and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Following this assessment, members were matched to 3 coaches based on a number of personalized variables including location, language, and preferred coaching style. Once a coach was selected, the member was encouraged to schedule a session. Members could then schedule with their selected coach at their own discretion for the duration of their engagement. After a minimum of 90 days in the program, members were invited to complete a Reflection Point, which included the WPM assessment. On



**Figure 2.** Participant improvements after 3 months.  
 Note. 3 months is approximately 1/3 of a standard coaching program.

average, follow-up assessments were assigned approximately 112 days after a member's start date.

To assess the impact coaching has on well-being, mean percent change was calculated from time point 1 (program start) to time point 2 (Reflection Point). For purposes of this article, we report only those measures discussed in relation to well-being, resilience, emotional regulation, purpose, positive relationships, and engagement. A non-parametric bootstrap method, which did not assume normality, was used to determine 95% confidence intervals (CIs). A 2-sided *t* test was used to compare changes in constructs as a result of participation.

**Results**

Improvements in the mean WPM subdimension, represented as mean percent change, for each of the measures selected are shown in Figure 2. As was the case for other subdimensions measured in the WPM, there was a significant positive increase in these measures, indicating an overall positive impact of coaching.

There was a significant 8.57% increase in resilience (95% CI, 7.6645-9.4578, *P* < .001), with indicative individuals improving their ability to cope and deal with setbacks. A mean change of 7.87% was observed for emotional regulation (95% CI, 6.9206-8.7497, *P* < .001), resulting in improved control over emotions. Purpose improved by 6.77% (95% CI, 5.6965-7.858, *P* < .001), implying that individuals surveyed found their work more meaningful following coaching. Positive relationships increased by 5.19% (95% CI, 4.6175-5.7758, *P* < .001), signaling that individuals measured were more satisfied with their work at time point 2. Finally, stress reduction increased by 17.67% (95% CI, 16.176-19.17, *P* < .001) indicating that individuals were better able to cope with stress at work than they were prior to coaching.

**Implications for Practitioners**

Although we don't recommend a prescriptive approach for addressing organizational well-being and have designed our model to be

customizable based on an organization's unique culture and needs, we can share the following key learnings. Although by no means an exhaustive list, we believe the following can be generalizable to other practitioners who share the mission to promote well-being in organizational settings.

1. *Clarify the meaning of well-being.* As we shared above, when it comes to moving the needle on well-being, definitions matter. Definitions of well-being and happiness are not standard across researchers or practitioners. When designing or implementing a well-being intervention within an organization, it's important to identify a shared definition, as one's understanding of, and approach to, well-being is likely to influence every aspect of an intervention—from the planning and implementation stages as well as to the broader impact.<sup>34</sup> One way to ensure a shared definition within a specific intervention is to follow the often-standard practice of developing a logic model.<sup>34</sup>
2. *Avoid oversimplification.* While simplification and streamlining can be vital (no one can attend to an infinite number of parameters), we've found that when it comes to well-being, oversimplification can be a missed opportunity. In his book *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being*, Martin Seligman, a member of our Science Board, writes, "I used to think that the topic of positive psychology was happiness, that the gold standard for measuring happiness was life satisfaction, and that the goal of positive psychology was to increase life satisfaction. I now think that the topic of positive psychology is well-being, that the gold standard for measuring well-being is flourishing, and that the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing." We agree that critical benefits come from moving beyond a single construct, particularly when working with real people in the real world of work. A model of well-being that includes multiple concepts

and pathways offers individuals far more room to personalize their goals and to take ownership over their own well-being, regardless of external circumstances.

3. *Invite individuals to define their own goals.* When working with individuals, it's beneficial to support them in an effort to define their own goals, as opposed to prescribing a uniform goal for all participants. As mentioned, a definition of well-being that includes multiple avenues and pathways enables personalization. Individuals are more likely to achieve goals that are specific, flexible, and personal.<sup>35</sup> In the context of well-being, this is particularly valuable, given that the process of creating meaningful goals can in and of itself be a key component for boosting well-being.<sup>36</sup> In the workplace, supporting an employee in setting a meaningful long-term goal can infuse their day-to-day tasks with a sense of direction and purpose.<sup>36</sup> Given this observation, we've found it important to avoid prescribing uniform goals, and instead leverage coaching to help individuals set personally meaningful goals, paired with content and guidance on what the research tells us about effective goal setting.<sup>35</sup>
4. *Make measurement part of the intervention.* It's understandable that organizations would include metrics of success to ensure a return on investment for any large-scale intervention. Perhaps less self-evident is the fact that sharing metrics with participants can be a critical aspect of the intervention itself, boosting success. In coaching, goal setting and feedback go hand in hand.<sup>37</sup> The feedback can stem from a variety of sources, including assessments, feedback from one's coach, and feedback solicited from others. Some may wonder how one can get input from others on their own well-being, but this ties back to how one approaches well-being. If, for instance, positive relationships are seen as a key component of well-being, external input from those with whom one interacts is quite relevant.
5. *Offer high-quality support.* Change is hard. Our study's results are just one of many that show it's possible to move the needle on well-being in a relatively short period of time. But it's important to recognize that successful outcomes rely upon a combination of individual effort and expert guidance. Coaching can be an extremely effective mechanism. We do recommend leveraging coaching within a well-being intervention but add the strong caution that this must be done in tandem with rigorous quality control. Some ways to do this include working with certified coaches, providing ongoing training, measuring and tracking results, and inviting plenty of participant feedback.

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## Fostering Happiness Through Balance and Integration: A Garmin Case Study

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When considering interventions geared toward impacting employee health, happiness, and a thriving work environment, it is difficult to know what will be the most beneficial to the most people to achieve maximum organizational impact. Evidence-based interventions abound—and many of them “move the needle” in some way on happiness and well-being. But is it enough to yield population-level impacts that will return value to the organization? In response to this challenge, it is helpful to step back and look at how science is defining happiness if the goal is to first increase and promote it for individuals.

The answer to questions such as “What is happiness?” and “What makes people happy?” are not simple ones. Philosophers and, more recently, scientists have examined these questions for millennia. There are 2 general trains of thought—the hedonic and eudemonic camps.

### Defining Happiness

The hedonic view suggests that happiness consists of good feelings and life satisfaction<sup>1</sup> that result from the ability to pursue and accumulate pleasant experiences while avoiding the negative and unpleasant as much as possible. From this perspective, end point measurements are subjective life satisfaction scores and are dependent on mood.

The eudaimonic view proposes that happiness is a by-product when we live a purpose-driven, meaningful life,<sup>2</sup> also incorporating integrative relationships that maximize our potential along a trajectory that both interests and challenges us. From this perspective, scientists tend to measure things like a person’s subjective sense of accomplishment, success in relationships, engagement/state of flow at work,

number of positive emotions, and the amount of meaning experienced in daily activities. The term “well-being” is typically substituted for happiness in these studies.

Many debates go back and forth about which is correct, but neuroscience is starting to give us a more concrete answer. If you look at how the brain works, it seems to say that happiness is found in an integration of both perspectives.<sup>3</sup> We are hardwired to pursue both modes of happiness. The “reward system” in our brain is constantly looking for ways to make life better. This system, powered by a chemical called dopamine, has a central control mechanism located in the middle of the brain that continually gathers information from both inside and outside our bodies. When the reward center detects an opportunity to “make life better” by either going after something that looks good or avoiding something painful, it fires up projections to 2 other areas of the brain.<sup>4</sup> One area is older on the evolutionary spectrum and more instinctual. We will call this the downstairs brain—it is all about our appetites for food, money, sex, and power. This area of the brain is simplistic and very quick to decide: “Yes! That will feel good—go for it!” Or “No! That will be bad—run away!”

In contrast, the other reward circuitry center lies within the cerebral cortex and is a newer and more advanced area of the brain. We will call this the upstairs brain, and it takes its time deliberating a decision because it factors in the bigger picture. Does this present decision impact any other goals? Will it impact other people? Will the advantages outweigh the disadvantages?

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