

Chapter

Selected Well-Being Interventions for Hybrid-Working Employees

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Abstract

This chapter proposes four distinct techniques to boost subjective well-being, also called happiness, tailored for hybrid-working employees. These techniques suggested here are as follows: 1) selected goal-setting techniques around the ‘why of goal pursuit’ with a particular focus on self-concordance and approaching/avoidance driven goal strivings, 2) job crafting/leisure crafting, 3) acts of kindness and 4) gratitude exercises. The chapter discusses each technique on its merits by reviewing the related literature, and how they can be useful in boosting people’s subjective well-being for employees who are predominantly working in a hybrid format, and therefore, their experiences at work as well as at home impact strongly on their subjective well-being.

Keywords: goal setting, job crafting, acts of kindness, intervention techniques, subjective well-being, happiness

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has made a lasting impact on the way we work. A recent survey by the Office for National Statistics [1] revealed that most employees (84%) in Great Britain, who worked from home because of the pandemic, plan to work from home and in the workplace (‘hybrid work’) in the future. Similarly, recent survey data from Ireland indicates that 88% of employees who can work remotely would like to keep doing so [2], and over 80% of respondents in an international survey report that the hybrid working format is an important aspect of future employment decisions [3]. Organisations need to respond to these future remote work intentions, and at the same time address how they can best balance their needs and those of their staff. The pandemic has accelerated this process and has sparked a lively debate on the issues of remote working and the organisations’ ability to develop effective hybrid workplace policies [4]. While there are good reasons for employees to come back to their formal workplace, the pandemic has demonstrated that employees can get their work done from home and that hybrid working is likely to stay. However, in the long term, hybrid working is expected to contribute to the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life [5, 6]. The blurring of these boundaries poses a threat to a healthy work-life balance as employees find it increasingly difficult to rest from work,

either physically or mentally [4, 7, 8]. To address and mitigate these issues, we propose effective techniques to boost the subjective well-being of hybrid-working employees to support and maintain a healthy work-life balance. In doing so, this chapter contributes to the positive psychology literature by identifying techniques that are equally effective in the workplace and in the personal life domains, and therefore, addressing employees as human beings as a whole for example done by Foucault and Hadot and their spiritual exercises [9]. Although Hadot and Foucault conceptualise and interpret spiritual exercises differently, their account of spiritual exercises is useful as it allows modern-day hybrid-working employees to transform and take care of the self [10]. For example, spiritual exercises can help hybrid-working employees reflect upon the practical or existential issues in life in a philosophical way, and this will help them better understand themselves, identify opportunities for improvement, and gain inner peace and tranquillity [11]—which undoubtedly will boost their well-being. While spiritual exercises are meaningful, they tend to be practised individually and the remainder of this chapter will consider exercises that promote engagement with colleagues and others.

Focusing on techniques that are effective in both work and personal life domains is crucial because they are likely to be the most effective since the working and private spaces are intertwined for employees who work in a hybrid format. Therefore, identifying practical techniques to boost well-being which is equally effective for people's professional as well as personal lives is now more important than ever. This chapter proposes four distinct, contemporary and established techniques to boost well-being [12]. By focusing on both the working and private life domains, this chapter also extends the field to a non-working environment, such as leisure. Leisure scholars show that engagement with leisure activities also promotes well-being [13], which has clear linkages to Therapeutic Recreation Practice [14]. The four techniques selected have been shown to significantly boost people's well-being, in both a professional setting and the personal life domain.

- Selected goal-setting techniques around the 'why of goal pursuit'
- Job crafting/leisure crafting
- Acts of kindness
- Gratitude exercises

The four techniques are aimed at increasing people's subjective well-being, also referred to as happiness [15]; also, according to Diener ([15], p. 108) the term happiness 'because of its varied popular meaning as it might refer to the global experience of well-being, the current feeling of joy or to the experience of much positive affect over time.' Subjective well-being is, however, clearly defined and characterised as a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of their life [16]. The cognitive component typically refers to people's positive evaluative judgements of their life (i.e., life satisfaction), whereas the affective component typically refers to the frequent experience of positive affect and the absence of negative affect [17]. Subjective well-being is a distinct form within the wider concept of well-being, which has been conceptualised and measured in different ways ranging from psychological well-being [18], physical well-being [19] or social well-being [20].

2. Selected goal-setting techniques around the ‘why of goal pursuit’

Setting goals plays a major role at work (e.g. career development, promotion, qualifications) and in our private life (e.g. marriage, house, children). People constantly pursue goals, even subconsciously [21], and research in idiographic personal goal setting has become a rich tradition within personality psychology [22]. A ‘goal’ typically refers to the desired end state [23], yet the pursuit of goal can be recognised as one of the most effective happiness-increasing strategies, due to its positive effect on personal life and work performance outcomes [24]. However, not all goals are considered to be of equal importance to people’s subjective well-being. Some goals are more effective in improving people’s well-being than others because they better channel or express a person’s interests, values, talents, needs and motives [22]. When goals are not related to a person’s interests or needs, they are less likely to increase subjective well-being and, in some instances, they might even cause harm [25]. Hence, it is important to understand what kind of goal characteristics contribute best to people’s subjective well-being and understand how they are appropriate for the attainment of both work-related and personal goals.

Several studies have shown that there are differences in the reasons why people pursue their most important goals and how this impacts their well-being [26–28]. The question to what degree people strive for their most important goals applies equally to their professional, as well as their personal goals [22, 25]. An important prerequisite to setting happiness-related goals, either professional or personal, is that they are self-concordant [28]. Self-concordant goal pursuit is hereby defined as striving for a goal based on self-determined choice, whereas a non-self-concordant goal pursuit, or controlled goal pursuit, is when people strive for their goals due to external reasons and beyond internal self-choice. Typically, this represents some outside force where people feel compelled to pursue a goal because of some form of external pressure. Studies show that high levels of self-concordance are associated with a variety of positive outcomes, one of which is increased subjective well-being [25, 28]. Given the significant impact of self-concordant goal pursuit on increased happiness, a range of interventions has been developed. Most of these interventions have a strong focus on the provision of an autonomous supportive environment to help people develop self-concordant goals. For example, research [29] suggests the following specific behaviours that are linked to self-concordant goals of employees in the workplace, namely the following: asking open questions and inviting others to address problems; active listening and acknowledging the employees’ perspective; offering choices within the organisational structure and clarifying responsibilities; providing constructive, factual and non-judgemental feedback that acknowledges initiative; minimising coercive controls, such as rewards and comparisons with others; developing talent and sharing knowledge to enhance competence and autonomy.

Other scholars identified concepts such as transformational leadership [30] or executive coaching [31] to help employees develop self-concordant goals at work. We argue that some of these techniques to develop self-concordance are equally appropriate for personal goals and would be effective for those who work in a hybrid format. For example, Burton [32] indicates that when people set goals, they tend to follow their gut instead of being rational about it, which suggests greater levels of self-concordance [22]. Self-concordance is also linked to higher levels of trait mindfulness, which suggests that those who practise mindfulness and listen to their inner self more carefully tend to be more successful in setting self-concordant goals. Studies in sports

also found that athletes who have been coached in an autonomy-supportive way (i.e., enabling choice and agency) report higher levels of self-concordance [33] and equally where people were pursuing more recreational sports activities [34].

Another effective approach to help people strive for their most important goals in a happiness-increasing way is delineated by the goal-striving reasons framework [26, 35–37]. Unlike self-concordance theory, the goal-striving reason framework measures the degree to which people’s goal reasons are underpinned by approach rather than avoidance reasons, which is an important distinction that has been shown to be strongly related to people’s well-being [38]. The distinction here is that people who predominantly set approaching goals (i.e., moving towards a desirable outcome) show higher levels of subjective well-being than people who set avoidance-driven goals (i.e., goal is motivated to avoid an undesirable outcome). The goal-striving reasons framework applies the notion of approach and avoidance-driven motivation to the reasons why people pursue their most important goals. In essence, the goal-striving reasons framework promotes the pursuit of goals for approach reasons such as pleasure or enjoyment and for altruistic reasons (i.e., helping others, making the world a better place), and discourages people to strive for their goals out of avoidance reasons such as for self-esteem reasons or out of necessity (i.e., I have to do it otherwise I am in trouble).

The goal-striving reasons framework has been converted to a multi-component happiness intervention entitled ‘Happiness through Goal Setting’ [27], whereby people are equipped with the relevant tools and insights to modify their goal reasons into more happiness-increasing ones. The intervention has been effective in both person and online [39], which is vital as many hybrid-working employees depend on online interactions with their colleagues. The ‘Happiness through Goal Setting’ intervention is equally applicable to people’s personal as well as professional goals. The following exercises are the key elements of the training for each of the four goal-striving reasons (see **Table 1**). For a more detailed description of these exercises refer to Ehrlich and Milston [27].

Pleasure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match your goals to your heart (goals/implicit motive fit) based on research on goals/implicit motive fit [40, 41]. • Do something fun on a regular basis (keep a fun diary) based on the broaden-and-build theory and the importance of positivity [42].
Altruism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in acts of kindness based on acts of kindness studies [43]. • Reflect on the positive impact of your goals based on research around cognitive job crafting [44].
Self-esteem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce goal-striving for ego reasons through increased self-compassion based on the research by Neff [45]. • Developing Learning goals based on research on learning goals by Dweck and Leggett [46].
Necessity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid doing things out of necessity in relation to your most important goals and therefore reducing our desire to accumulate material wealth based on research around materialism and subjective well-being [47]. • Reduce social comparison based on research that shows the negative impact of social comparison on subjective well-being [48].

Table 1.
Goal striving reasons and relevant interventions within the Happiness through Goal Setting approach.

3. Job crafting/leisure crafting

Another important happiness-increasing intervention for hybrid-working employees is job crafting. Job crafting acknowledges the fact that employees proactively shape their tasks around their needs and wishes, which can be done at the workplace, at home or virtually. Slemp and Vella-Brodrick [49] claim that job crafting is a promising yet relatively unexplored approach that employees can use to boost their well-being. Job crafting can be executed on three different levels: 1) task level (e.g. changing the nature or scope of the task), 2) relationship level (e.g. deciding how and with whom to collaborate) and 3) cognitive level (e.g. reframing the meaning and purpose of certain tasks to create more meaningful work). Various job crafting examples have been put forward [50] and these would work equally well for hybrid-working employees. One of the most influential job crafting studies was conducted by Wrzesniewski, Dutton and Debebe [44] who showed that some of the cleaning staff in a hospital actively crafted their jobs to make their jobs more meaningful. Those active crafting activities ranged from talking to patients to comfort them, helping relatives of patients find their way around the hospital or even changing the environment for patients in coma to provide a more stimulating atmosphere, which was believed to help with their recovery. All of those activities were not in their job description, but this group of cleaning staff did it anyway to find a higher purpose within their job. Berg, Wrzesniewski and Dutton [51] present a variety of practical examples of what job crafting can look like on a task, relationship and cognitive level. One of the examples of task crafting (changing the scope/nature of tasks) is quoted from Berg et al. ([51], p. 166):

“I really enjoy online tools and Internet things . . . So I’ve really tailored that aspect of the written job description, and really “upped” it, because I enjoy it. I spend hours exploring what else we’re paying for with this service . . . So it gives me an opportunity to play around and explore with tools and web applications, and I get to learn, which is one of my favorite things to do. (Associate/Coordinator #3, Non-Profit)”

Some scholars also developed relevant job crafting training interventions. For example, Van de Heuvel and associates [52] created a short training intervention (4 weeks) based on the Job Demands-Resource model, which asks participants to reflect on their demands and resources at work to shape their work environment in a way that increases resources and decreases demands. This resulted in a personal crafting plan with self-chosen job crafting goals.

The concept of ‘crafting’ has also been successfully applied to leisure time. One reason for this is the fact that some job roles leave relatively little space for job crafting because of a high degree of standardisation of tasks or a negative organisational culture where crafting activities are not encouraged [49]. Leisure crafting is characterised by Petrou et al. [53] as a technique to help people structure their leisure time according to three core principles 1) goal setting, 2) learning and 3) human connections. By applying these three core principles to a hobby or leisure activity, people can obtain more meaning from their leisure time, which contributes more effectively to their well-being. Research on the effects of leisure crafting as well as relevant training interventions are emerging and so far, only a handful of leisure crafting studies are available [53]. Despite this, leisure crafting is likely to become an influential technique to increase subjective well-being, in particular for those who feel that job crafting for them is limited. A variety of training courses are available for job crafting and leisure crafting [52].

4. Acts of kindness

Performing acts of kindness is gaining more and more importance as an intervention technique that enhances people's well-being—be it at work or elsewhere [43]. Acts of kindness are commonly defined as 'voluntary, intentional behaviours that benefit another and are not motivated by external factors such as rewards or punishment' ([54], p. 63). There is now a substantial body of literature demonstrating how acts of kindness could be performed to be beneficial to one's well-being and how to make them more effective.

It is generally recommended that people avoid taking the approach to 'be kind to others as much as I can', but rather identify how to be kind to others to obtain the greatest personal happiness boost from their actions. Furthermore, performing different acts of kindness has been shown to boost happiness more than performing similar acts of kindness repeatedly—so variety is key [43]. The frequency and timing of people's acts of kindness are important as well. Research shows that performing several acts of kindness in one day increases happiness more than performing a daily single act of kindness throughout an entire week [53]. Dunn, Aknin and Norton [55] show that the size of your kind action does not seem to matter. For example, gifting \$5 or \$20 does not make a significant difference with regard to their own happiness benefits.

However, receiving feedback on how one's act of kindness has been perceived by the recipient typically increases the happiness of the giver. Another strand of research has shown that the act of kindness needs to be genuine, which means it needs to be heartfelt rather than a mechanical, cold act. This obviously differs from person to person, and what is an authentic, heartfelt act of kindness for one person might be a more or less meaningless act for another person. So, investing time to understand what the beneficiary appreciates helps in preparing appropriate acts of kindness. However, for those who work remotely, getting to know colleagues can be challenging, since most online meetings offer limited time for casual conversations, including compliments and act of kindness. The occasional corridor or water fountain chats have become rare, so it is important to find time and plan for them. For example, hybrid-working employees can create 'kindness rounds', where colleagues are encouraged to compliment and acknowledge each other's success and achievements [56]. Research also suggests that the happiness-boosting effect of an act of kindness can be increased if people see the positive impact of their actions on others [55]. Finally, remembering one's acts of kindness can also have happiness-boosting effect of equal strength to performing the actual act of kindness itself [57].

Given the nature of this intervention technique, it seems self-explanatory that acts of kindness could be performed at work as well as in private life domain. This is especially important as positive effects in one domain also have positive spill-over effects in other domains [42]. Hybrid-working employees can be kind to one another by, for example, holding the door open, offering advice or providing a compliment both at work and in their private lives. Sometimes, all this can happen without being aware of it. However, as previously explained, acknowledging the acts of kindness, remembering and focusing on the positive impact of their actions on others can boost people's well-being [55, 57].

5. Gratitude exercises

Gratitude exercises have been identified as an important happiness-increasing intervention technique and have been found effective in a number of different

settings including at work and in one's personal life [50, 58]. Peterson and Seligman ([59], p. 30) define gratitude as 'being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen, taking time to express thanks'. The components of gratitude are numerous and include behaviours, emotions and cognitive elements [60]. Gratitude exercises and associated interventions have been found effective in boosting well-being across different age groups and professions, from college students [61] to soldiers [62].

Gratitude exercises are flexible and can be performed with various people (friends, colleagues, neighbours) in a range of different places—onsite and online. Gratitude exercises are recognised as another important technique to increase subjective well-being, and they are useful in various life domains. According to Wood, Froh and Geraghty [63], there are three main types of gratitude exercises: the gratitude list, grateful contemplation and behavioural expression of gratitude. The first refers to writing a list of things for which one is grateful. Ideally, this is done on a regular and daily basis. The second exercise, grateful contemplation refers to a short intervention that can boost positive mood in the short run. The exercise encourages people to think and reflect upon the things they are grateful for. Finally, the behavioural expression of gratitude refers to the act of expressing gratitude to someone, which can be done in writing or in person [63].

The three gratitude exercises could all be applied by hybrid-working employees. For instance, a meeting (both with colleagues and with friends) could start by creating a gratitude list and sharing positive thoughts. Here, the gratitude intervention can be verbal, with the use of gratitude affirmations. Another gratitude exercise is thanking people, which could be verbal or written. Some behavioural expressions of gratitude could be writing gratitude notes to both colleagues and friends. Other simple gratitude behaviours could be smiling to acknowledge someone's presence and asking them about their day. Another well-recognised way to practise gratitude is to keep a gratitude journal where the entries act as reflections of what the writer is grateful for. Gratefulness journaling can increase people's positive emotions and improve their personal growth and accomplishments [60]. It can also strengthen friendships and social relationships [64], and stimulate engagement in prosocial behaviours, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic [65]. According to scholars, this gratitude intervention can increase people's empathy and affect, and in turn, their well-being [65]. There is evidence showing that the perceived friendship quality, generated by gratitude journals, can also create long-term life satisfaction [64]. Gratitude exercises also encourage collaboration along with prosocial and moral behaviour, and research shows that those who received expressions of gratitude are more likely to help others in return [66] and that it can reduce depression [67]. Gratitude exercises are most effective when they are varied, performed daily and regularly over an extended period of time, and they are more pronounced when combined with other positive psychology interventions [58]. Overall, appreciating what we have is the key and such reflections boost well-being.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter proposed effective techniques to boost the subjective well-being of hybrid-working employees to support and maintain a healthy work-life balance. In doing so, this chapter generates greater awareness of these techniques and adds to the positive psychology literature by identifying techniques that are equally effective in the formal workplace and in personal life domains. Organisations and

employers should first identify what a healthy work-life balance looks like and design policies to sustain this. The four identified techniques could form part of such policies to support a healthy work-life balance and improve well-being among employees who opt for hybrid working arrangements. Focusing on the techniques that are effective in both work and life domains is crucial because they are likely to be the most effective since our work and private lives are currently so blurred. The four techniques: 1. selected goal-setting techniques around the 'why of goal pursuit'; 2. job crafting/leisure crafting; 3. acts of kindness; 4. gratitude exercises), represent the latest developments in the field of Positive Psychology and were found to be effective in the workplace as well as in people's personal life. Further studies should investigate other types of well-being interventions, especially those outside the formal workplace, such as leisure activities. We also call for studies to demonstrate which techniques are more effective in enhancing subjective well-being over a longer period of time. Furthermore, research should also focus on interventions for specific age groups, such as older people or young adults in particular working contexts as well. This will advance our understanding of the most appropriate techniques for specific age groups of hybrid-working employees.


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