

Workplace Mental Health through the lens of Flow and Meaning Experience: A Literature Review

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Abstract:

This paper explores the dynamics underlying positive motivational factors in the organization and workers' psychological well-being. From review of related studies, it is argued that living a meaningful life is connected to work-life in collectivist societies. However, this construct is yet to be significantly explored in areas like South-East Asia, Middle-East, and Africa. Besides, as some research findings indicate how positive mental health in the workplace is connected to dramatic benefits for employers, employees, and the bottom line, academicians and corporate bodies need to invest greater attention in exploring these positive psychological states regarding what makes life meaningful to their employees, and measures to restructure the work environment towards making workers to attain flow experience. Researchers are thus encouraged to focus on developing and adopting test materials measuring meaning and flow experience among Asian samples, including exploring psychosocial factors that predicts meaning and flow experience among workers.

Keywords: Workplace Mental health, Positive psychology, Flow, Meaning.

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Introduction

As we live in modern-day consumerist society, it is worrisome to mention that socio-cultural norms and people's values has been influenced, and societal agents like the media continuously reflects empty promises of pleasure, satisfaction and happiness with lower sense of well-being. This is in conjunction with the ever-challenging work demands employees are experiencing in today's competitive world of production and profit making. However, experiencing experiential well-being has been connected to a wide range of important work outcomes which includes job performance and profitability [1].

In interpreting well-being, subjective well-being as a self-motivated state that helps a person to establish a positive psychological atmosphere in facing life challenges [2]. Invariably, part of what constitute optimum productivity and profitability is said to be connected to experiential well-being which is a function of an employee's reflection and awareness at the moment of work. Hence, this form of well-being can said to be experience-oriented as it provides the individual with means to deal with challenges in the external environment [3].

Positive Psychology

Traditionally psychology is seen as a helping profession with much focus on helping people to overcoming their illness or difficulty in order to live a normal life. Furthermore, the advent of positive psychology attempts to make individuals attain a state of thriving and flourishing including living meaningful lives. In general terms, this aspect of psychology highlights how strengths and virtues enable individuals, communities and organizations to flourish. Being the first to initiate the concept, Martin Seligman, a former president of the American Psychological Association (APA) added to the paradigm of reducing symptoms of mental disorders with

more focus on unraveling positive mental health through human strengths and virtues [4].

Also from the positive psychology school, the broaden-and-build theory posits that people's momentary thought-action experiences are broadened due to positive emotions and as a result help them to build their enduring personal (physical, psychological and social resources) lives [5]. Being one of the proponents of well-being psychology, Fredrickson subscribes that positive emotions of joy, contentment, love, and interests appear to have a harmonizing effect in broadening people's transient thought action capacities, and widening the range of the thoughts and actions that come to the person's cognizance [6].

Experts like Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi have contributed immensely to this field and most of their works have given prominence to these three areas of positive experiences: well-being and satisfaction reflected the past, happiness and flow in relation to the present, including hope and optimism to the future. So far, positive psychology research has spread across disciplines like education, organizational functioning, career counseling, mental health, human resource, etc. [7].

Positive Psychology in the World of Work

"The field of positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: ...At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom. At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic" [7. p. 5].

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It could be deduced that positive psychology is well connected to the world of work considering some of the inherent variables and constructs its proponents and researchers has been focusing on in the last two decades. Based on Seligmans' PERMA theory, it is analyzed that people flourished from certain positive experiences which includes; positive emotions (when an individual find happiness through living a pleasant life; engagement (when an individual feel happy when they experience optimal experience or flow in their work and activities; and meaning (when a person experience happiness when they participate in what they feel are meaningful activities) [4]

As more attention is given to employee's well-being research in recent times, it is generally accepted that positive emotions can be linked to worker's occupational functioning and well-being based on the premise that the state of a worker's emotions goes a long way in influencing his performance in and outside the work setting. In the Malaysia context, there are handful number of studies focusing on well-being and economics. A recent finding shows that positive emotion is correlated to individual work performance [8].

In the present world of customer happiness, it is pertinent that while most companies in both Eastern and Western blocs are reaping the benefits of improved productivity from their workers or customer's positive emotions, little attention has been given to this area of human functioning in the workplace. The positive psychology paradigm stipulates that problems can be solved by not simply focusing on the problem, but also by focusing on positive approaches that promotes a more desired outcome. In present-day high demanding society, life satisfaction spreads across various aspects of a person's existence, from family to office. Besides, it is of great importance for adults to initiate how to pay more positive attention to the workplace as this tends to promote adaptive functioning in other human endeavours [9]. With the focus on human flourishing and optimum functioning, positive psychology was very much welcomed in the organisational setting with the emergence of concepts like positive organizational behaviour [10]. In addition, as most companies and organisations are becoming more profit-driven, there are growing pressures on the employees who are cut-up in the middle of challenging work demands on one hand, and out-of-work life challenges on the other. Furthermore, the cross-cultural differences remains a cogent factor towards explaining how people in both divides (individualism/collectivism) express their positive or negation emotions [11]. For instance, emotions. Asian are not encouraged to show their negative emotion. For instance, Asians are often discouraged to express their negative emotion [12]. In their Malaysian study, the link between flow experience, organizational citizenship behaviour and work-family conflict among some hotel employees was examined. Result revealed that flow has a positive and significant relationship with organizational citizenship behaviour. It was also reported that employees who experience flow tends to see their work enjoyable and intrinsically motivating, hence, making them to willingly engage in extra work duties [12]. Moreover, it was reported that Indians were reported to express their sense of gratitude in a wider spectrum involving teachers and strangers, as compared to Anglo Americans who expressed theirs to closed-family members alone [13]

Flow within the Organisation

In his prominent book "Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience", Csikszentmihalyi describes the flow state as one in which a person performs optimally with apparently less effort, total concentration, and having a feeling of being in control without thinking about it [14]. He identified certain factors as encompassing an experience of flow which includes; an intense and focused concentration on the present moment; integrating full awareness and action; having a sense of personal control over the activity; having a subjective experience of time being altered; and having the experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding [14]. It is believed that a person experiences flow when all these factors come together, and can be experienced independently of each other.

Flow at work is seen as a short-term peak experience which is a function of concentration, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation, and is positively associated with various dimensions of optimum productivity and job performance [15]. To measure the flow construct within the work setting, the work-related flow scale (the WOLF-S) has been widely used and adopted with satisfactory factorial validity in a range of studies carried out in various cultural societies across different countries including Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Italy, South Africa Australia and Pakistan [16]. This instrument consists of three scales that is designed to measure absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation.

It is pertinent to note that there are growing interests on how the human capital can experience flow in the work setting. While there are various studies in different settings reflecting flow and optimal experience as correlates with higher levels of psychological well-being, like job satisfaction and competency [17], positive affect at work, including some positive work-related outcomes [18, 19].

With variables like absorption, work enjoyment, and intrinsic work motivation, the link between flow at work and job performance among 113 employees from different work settings was examined. Findings from moderated structural equation modelling analyses generally reveal that flow experience at work is predicted by motivating job characteristics [18]. Moreover, in an exploratory study, Burke and his colleagues examined the relationship between flow experience of at work and indicators of satisfaction, engagement and psychological well-being among some selected nursing staff working in Turkish hospitals. Using self-report questionnaires, data were obtained from some 224 participants in Ankara. Results from hierarchical regression analyses indicated that flow experience is a predictor of significant rises in explained variance on most work outcome measures but not on indicators of psychological well-being [19]

In one study among Taiwanese samples that investigate the link between flow experience and job performance among 150 elementary school teachers. Results from hierarchical regression analysis indicated that flow experience positively influences job performance [20].

So, experiencing optimal experience or being in a state of flow in situations of everyday life puts the worker in better psychological state when going through challenging periods in and out of the work setting. It is worthy of note that while

most companies and organisations in Western societies are reaping rewards from incorporating flow into their managerial and employee work life, little is yet to be seen of such in Eastern societies among organisations and academicians in countries like Malaysia.

Connecting Meaning to the Workplace

When Victor Frankl expressed his experiences in the concentration camps, most of his ideas were more connected to how human suffering and psychological discomfort can be resolved through acceptance and living a meaningful life. The sense behind his logotherapy is to awaken people's sense of responsibility to accomplish a concrete meaning in their existence [21]. He stressed that living a meaningful life is a determinant of psychological well-being, hence, it is important for people to find meaning in their existence. Over the time, researchers have reflected meaningfulness to be more important to workers than any other work-related rewards like increased salaries and promotion opportunities [22].

Meaningfulness allows individuals to transcend, either through promoting positive social relationships or connecting to God. Furthermore, people are expected to experience meaning when they see their lives as significant, purposeful, and understandable [23]. In addition, there are suggestions that income provides every individual with the ability to achieve set goals and fulfill their basic needs, which can be said to invariably lead to more satisfaction with their lives [24]. So, experiencing meaning in the workplace entails a person seeing his work as being significant and purposeful. Furthermore, meaningful work is seen as the significance of work in which the employee experiences the job as being largely meaningful and cherished [25]. Hence, while this concept is rarely discussed among experts and academics, it is believed that meaning in life is more likely to be used by psychologists and therapists [26]. While some organisations have shown some interests into making the working environment more meaningful to workers, it is believed that meaningful work experience can foster improved performance, commitment, and satisfaction among workers [27].

Moreover, there are recent research interests in connecting meaning to workplace setting. In a study that examined the relationship between purpose and meaning in life and job satisfaction among the elderly (55 years and above) in South Korea [28], findings revealed meaning in life are strongly correlated with overall job satisfaction among the elderly with vocation serving as mediating effect. Furthermore, in trying to find what actually makes life meaningful in the workplace, it is pertinent for a staff to spend extra efforts on existing tasks that he finds enjoyable. An instance is where a lecturer discovers she's more meaningfully fulfilled when conducting research and discovering new windows in the laboratory. So it is possible that she is meaningfully fulfilled at work even if it increases her overall workload.

In another study, the correlates between psychological meaningfulness, work engagement and organisational commitment among some 415 employees from various companies and positions in Gauteng, South Africa was examined [29]. Through the use of a cross-sectional survey design, results showed positive relationship between

psychological meaningfulness, work engagement and organisational commitment. Viewing the possibility where work engagement and commitment is connected to experiencing meaning indicates how well their positive mental state can boost their productivity. However, just like flow-related studies, studies on existential meaning are yet to get much attention in most collectivist societies either for therapeutic research and practice or for organisational and workers well-being

Conclusions

Positive psychology is presently seen as a new window towards unraveling human strengths and potentials not only in the clinical setting, but also in the organizational and work setting. Being an additional "recipe" to other aspects of mainstream psychology, positive psychology has spread across disciplines like education, organizational functioning, career counseling, mental health, and human resource. As it offers some valued resources like flow and meaning, it is expected these variables should be incorporated into organizational work setting as it's shown to foster the well-being of the employee on one hand, and increase productivity on the other.

It is expected that company executives need to reconsider their ways of improving productivity and performance at work in present-day challenging economic atmosphere. While most Western-based organizations have been profiting from the vast opportunities abound in a workplace rich in positive mental health, an in-depth understanding about flow experience among non-Western employees can be tagged as being insignificant.

The implications of positive mental health in the workplace are seen to be imminent to institutions and organizations in the Eastern bloc. With increasing competitive and challenging markets in the Asian continent, it is expected that researchers and private bodies exert greater focus on longitudinal studies in which data collected overtime can be used to establish how flow experience or meaning-related work outcomes is connected to productivity. In addition, as the WOLF-S scale has gained certain degree of acceptance and factorial validity across different cultures and countries, it is of great need that psychometricians in South-east Asia for instance, to invest greater attention in adopting and exploring workers' well-being within the working environment with a focus on developing a psychological tool to measure flow among Asian workers.

Another implication is that corporate bodies and management hierarchy redesign work demands and challenges by ensuring workers see their workloads as intrinsically rewarding, sustaining their sense of personal control, and upgrading their skills and experience through periodical trainings so as to meet up with modern-day work challenges. This according to Csikszentmihalyi is a determinant to experiencing flow and peak performance, thereby, improving productivity.

Furthermore, as stress and anxiety problems cannot be ruled out from any organizational setting, examining what makes life meaningful to every individual is yet to gain any momentum in Asian societies. While some studies have shown the correlation between meaning and job performance [28, 29], organizations and management needs to pay

attention the existential concerns of their workers which cut across within and outside the work setting. Incorporating meaning-centered programmes in trainings and workshops, and also ensuring workers participate in community service tasks as part of the organization's social responsibility for societal benefits can be seen as a step towards a workplace embedded with positive mental health.

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