



**The British
Psychological Society**
Promoting excellence in psychology

British Psychological Society response to The Smith Institute

Making Work Better: An Independent Inquiry into Working Life in Britain

About the Society

The British Psychological Society, incorporated by Royal Charter, is the learned and professional body for psychologists in the United Kingdom. We are a registered charity with a total membership of just over 50,000.

Under its Royal Charter, the objective of the British Psychological Society is "to promote the advancement and diffusion of the knowledge of psychology pure and applied and especially to promote the efficiency and usefulness of members by setting up a high standard of professional education and knowledge". We are committed to providing and disseminating evidence-based expertise and advice, engaging with policy and decision makers, and promoting the highest standards in learning and teaching, professional practice and research.

The British Psychological Society is an examining body granting certificates and diplomas in specialist areas of professional applied psychology.

Publication and Queries

We are content for our response, as well as our name and address, to be made public. We are also content for the Smith Institute to contact us in the future in relation to this inquiry. Please direct all queries to:-

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About this Response

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We hope you find our comments useful.

David J Murphy CPsychol
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	<p><u>Summary</u></p>
	<p>The British Psychological Society hopes to make a valuable contribution to this important inquiry that has been set up and thank the Smith Institute for the opportunity to respond.</p> <p><u>Introduction</u></p> <p>Human beings have a fundamental psychological need to communicate which, the evidence shows, begins at a very early age (Fonagy, 2013; Southgate, Van Maanen, & Csibra, 2007; Tronick, 1989) and also a fundamental psychological need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Despite dramatic changes in the world of work, there is still strong evidence that we partially meet these needs in the course of engaging in work (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Rousseau, 1998).</p> <p>Furthermore it is well established that we are motivated to seek meaning in our activities (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Frankl, 2006) and in his review of evidence from a number of different fields, Baumeister (1991) identified four needs in relation to meaning-seeking: 1) purpose, in terms of goals and fulfillments 2) values 3) sense of efficacy and 4) a basis for self-worth (Baumeister, 1991). Of course, the work place is for many employees a focal point for meaning-making where “The interpersonal dynamics that unfold between people ... create a powerful context in which work meanings are composed” (p 129, (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003).</p> <p>Therefore, Psychology has a valuable contribution to make because of its focus on people as social beings rather than brains, and its discovery that we are fundamentally motivated to communicate, to belong and to make meaning in social contexts. Since humans are fundamentally motivated to communicate, to belong and to make meaning in social contexts, when these needs are met worker well-being will result; when they are not met, we might expect less favourable outcomes. These considerations will inform the selection and presentation of evidence in the ensuing sections of the report.</p>
	<p><u>Stage one: The nature of working life in Britain today</u></p> <p>Life in the workplace – good and bad?</p> <p>This will explore the nature of work in firms and organisations of different types/sizes; policy changes and rights at work (equal pay, equal opportunities etc), the experience of people in different jobs; the perceptions of workers, managers and owners; and emerging trends, such migrant workers, casualisation, self-employment etc. It was also look at the experience of older people at work and at occupational health.</p>
	<p>Comments:</p> <p>Given the objectives of the report, a focused review of relatively recent psychological research evidence was made to search for areas of concern. Three areas in particular are highlighted:</p>

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Job insecurity 2. Workplace bullying and harassment 3. Psychological contract breach <p><u>Job insecurity</u> A number of factors have contributed to major restructuring of many organisations, with much resultant downsizing and outsourcing. This has resulted in large increase in job insecurity (Sparks, Faragher, & Cooper, 2001). While some research has shown a non-linear, slight U-shaped relationship between self-reported job performance and job insecurity (Selenko, Mäkikangas, Mauno, & Kinnunen, 2013), a recent meta-analytic review comprising 133 studies clearly confirms the negative impact of job insecurity¹ on workers (Cheng & Chan, 2008).</p> <p><u>Workplace bullying and harassment</u> Psychological research indicates that workplace bullying and harassment is, unfortunately, not uncommon (Tehrani, 2003). Although a recent meta-analysis has shown there are challenges for researchers in establishing the true extent of the problem because of reported prevalence varying as result of measurement methods and sampling procedures (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010), a new study provides a “comprehensive resource” which will facilitate a better evaluation of the phenomenon (Neall & Tuckey, 2014). However, with empirical reports (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2010) showing that between as many as 10 and 20% of employees reporting occasional bullying, albeit a smaller percentage (3-4%) reporting serious bullying, this is a problem that warrants particular attention, given its negative psychological impact, not only for the victims but also the witnesses of this practice, and presumably also at some level, the perpetrators.</p> <p><u>Psychological contract breach</u> Psychological contracts are defined as ‘an employee’s subjective understanding of promissory-based reciprocal exchanges between him or herself and the organization (p. 35, Conway & Briner, 2005) and form the building blocks of trust in employment relationships between employees and employers. Research has shown that even when there is an increased level of demands of the job, when organisations live up to their promises, employees report less strain and more satisfaction (Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003). A recent meta-analysis showed that psychological contract breach had a negative impact on a whole range of important indicators including: job satisfaction, turnover intentions, affective reactions (Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007). It is clear that psychological contract breach in organisations, where it occurs, is an unhealthy aspect of workplace practice.</p>
	<p>What makes a good job? This will examine characteristics of good work and work quality in a modern economy, such as pay and pensions, security, status, opportunity and career progression, training, autonomy, employee voice, organisational form and design; and the connections and balance between work and family and social life. It will also look at new forms of work, such as social enterprise and volunteering.</p>
	<p>Comments:</p> <p>Psychological research shows the importance of 1. Social identity and 2. Employee</p>

¹ It is to be noted further that colleagues in sociology have published recent research showing the detrimental effects on job security of the new prevalence of zero-hours contracts (Wood & Burchell, 2014)

engagement in contributing to the characteristics of good work from a psychological perspective, and this should not surprise us given our fundamental needs for communication, belongingness and meaning-seeking.

Warr has made a significant contribution to the psychological understanding of what makes for a good job (Warr, 2007; Warr, 1971) and identifies factors such as the opportunity for personal control and skill use, contact with others, supportive supervision as important. More revealing perhaps is Bandura's work on agency and self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001) which indicates that to be our "best selves" we will be engaged in work that connects to others' endeavours and do so in a way that we are able to build on our sense of personal and collective efficacy.

Therefore to return to the important motivating aspects of:

1. Social identity
2. Employee engagement

Social identity

Early psychological research in the field of employee motivation focused on the person as an individual rather than as a member of a social or organisational setting. More recent psychological research, however, has developed to investigate the employee as a social member in an organisational setting, encouraging an attitude of "us" rather than "me", recognising that contemporary work contexts require that employees align themselves with teams, groups and at times, the organisation as a whole (Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004). Furthermore, the search is for factors that energise and sustain work-related behaviours. Although Ellemers, *et al*, 2004, acknowledge there is no single best way to motivate people at work, they present evidence to suggest that better outcomes result when people are encouraged to connect with collective goals. The most recent meta-analytic research evidence also points to importance of rewarding employees as teams to enhance motivation and job satisfaction (Garbers & Konradt, 2014). Thus recognising workers in terms of their identity as part of a collective endeavor makes for the experience of good jobs (Cornelissen, Haslam, & Balmer, 2007).

Employee engagement

Recent psychological research indicates the importance of meaningfulness on employees' engagement at work (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). Meaningfulness is defined in terms of value of work purpose judged from the perspective of the employee in the organisational context. What makes for a good job is when there are sufficient opportunities for what has been termed "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), that is, being completely immersed in one's endeavour whatever it may be. Furthermore a CIPD report (Lewis, Donaldson-Feilder, & Tharani)², highlights five behavioural competencies for managing for employee engagement:

1. Open, fair and consistent
2. Handling conflict and problems
3. Knowledge, clarity and guidance
4. Building and sustaining relationships
5. Supporting Development

Therefore, facilitating employee engagement using psychological principles and practices makes for the experience of a good job.

² <http://www.cipd.co.uk/publicpolicy/policy-reports/engagement-behavioural-framework.aspx>

	<p>What “voice” do employees want? This part will look at workplace relations and role of trade unions and other representatives; employer attitudes and management styles; institutional and cultural barriers; as well as the significance and appetite for employee ownership.</p>
	<p>Comments:</p> <p>Locus of control is a well-researched variable in the psychological literature, see especially (Rotter, 1990); the research shows a distinction between those people who have an internal locus of control (that is, who believe that they can control their own lives) and those who have an external locus of control (that is, those who believe that their lives are more controlled by factors beyond their control, such as other people, or fate). However recently researchers have looked at specifically <i>work</i> locus of control and found it was more strongly related to employee well-being and job performance than general locus of control (Wang, Bowling, & Eschleman, 2010).</p> <p>Therefore, this psychological research points to the importance of having a voice at work for beneficial effects.</p> <p>In addition, other research in the context of organisational change shows that “having a say” can take on quite a different purpose. Going beyond worker well-being, having a say can produce favourable outcomes for both employees and managers in organisations going through transformation (Ferdig & Ludema, 2004), even in the context of deep initial different in viewpoints on certain matters. Ferdig and Ludema (2004) adopted a number of different methods, including carefully and systematically examining conversational patterns that occurred during an extensive change process that proved to be very successful. They identified five qualities of “conversation” that contributed to what they termed, transformative self-organising change:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A spirit of freedom – choosing how and whether to engage 2. A spirit of inclusion – co-constructing meaning and action in dialogue 3. A spirit of inquiry – framing and reframing conversational focus 4. A spirit of spontaneity – thinking provisionally 5. A spirit of possibility – seeking a hoped-for future reality
	<p><u>Stage two: Policies to make work better</u></p>
	<p>Comments:</p> <p>It is recognised that Stage two of the Inquiry will consist in “a series of roundtable events and discussions with stakeholders and experts on what needs to change” and it is to be hoped that the British Psychological Society will be able to contribute directly to these important deliberations.</p> <p>However, to make some preliminary offerings in terms of what psychological research suggests, we highlight the following 3 areas for consideration:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A focus on creativity. 2. A focus on positivity. 3. A focus on size.

Creativity

Although creativity has been recognised for its value in human functioning for some time from different sub-disciplines within psychology, see for example, (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Rogers, 1963; Sternberg, 1985), recent research in organisational psychology has shown the its beneficial effects on work recovery and job performance (Eschleman, Madsen, Alarcon, & Barelka, 2014). This research suggests that organisations and their employees might benefit from awareness raising in relation to creative engagement and encouraging employees to specifically engage in creatively immersing activity away from work.

Positivity

A whole new area of psychology has emerged following the seminal work of Martin Seligman (Seligman, 2002) who had originally identified the concept of “learned helplessness” (Seligman, Rosellini, & Kozak, 1975). Seligman was motivated to change what he saw as the erstwhile focus of psychology away from what was wrong with us as human beings and his earlier work on the conditions which served to render our efforts futile and hopeless, to what could be developed as positive. At the turn of the 21st century he and his co-author edited a special edition of the *American Psychologist* in Janurary 2000, devoted to Positive Psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). While it is still early days since the launch of this new field in psychology, early indications are positive. A summary of empirical validation of positive psychology interventions (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005) has been cited over 2000 times and some organisational researchers welcome the shift in focus for gaining a deeper understanding of the processes which enhance quality of life of employees (Roberts, 2006).

Size

Research conducted by evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar at Oxford University suggests that that optimal upper limit to the size of work group or section in an organisation might be 150 (Dunbar, 2010). He predicted this number based on evolutionary theory and the fact that among primates generally a relationship obtains between species’ “typical” social group size and the size of its neocortex. Dunbar predicted that based on humans’ neocortex size the group size would be 150. He has discovered that this number has received an extensive amount of empirical support from both historical and contemporary sources. The upshot for organisational groupings is that 150 is an optimal size, any bigger than that and they run the risk of failing to function effectively.

With regard to this brief outline of these three potential areas of focus, we would hope to discuss them in more detail with the Smith Institute in the fullness of time should this be of interest.

Conclusion: British Psychological Society Recommendations

Comments:

The Society bears the following in mind: our need to communicate will have the consequence that workplace dialogue assumes paramount importance in work settings; our need to belong will result in workplace identity playing a crucial role in our successful participation in the work environment; our drive to make meaning out of experience will give rise to particular sorts of endeavours and engagement. With

these fundamental empirically validated psychological needs established and based on the evidence reviewed in this report, The Society makes the following recommendations:

1. The Society believes that attention should be paid to dealing with the issues in relation to job insecurity, bullying and harassment at work and psychological contract breach. In relation to psychological contract breach in particular, managers should be careful not to provide unrealistic promises, as although such promises might provide short-term motivational impact, the longer term effects are likely to be deleterious. Where unfulfilled promises become a reality based on unforeseen changing circumstances, reasons should be provided to employees.
2. Care should be taken at the point of selection and recruitment in order to ensure appropriate psychological fit between the incoming employees and what is needed in the organisation. This is of paramount importance for both employee and employer.
3. Given the centrality of meaningfulness on psychological well-being at work, attention should be focused on job design for employees' engagement at work.
4. Workers need to communicate and engage in conversation and dialogue should not be underestimated and procedures should reflect our human custom in this regard. This need not result in everyone having a say on everything, which would be unworkable. Rather consideration is needed to establish a principled approach for dialogic engagement and practice.
5. New psychological research, which has focused on the creative and the positive, provides some ground to think that aspects of our quality of work life can be enhanced using their proposals and are tentatively offered for consideration to be included in standard operating procedures at work. Finally, deliberation over optimal organisational unit size might be given some thought, for beneficial psychological engagement and overall organisational functioning.

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