Autonomy

is a key driver of workplace wellbeing

Autonomy refers to the level of control, independence, and decision-making power employees have over their work — not just **what** they do in their role, but **how**, **when**, and **where** they do it, within professional boundaries.

When employees feel a sense of autonomy, they feel trusted and empowered, boosting motivation, innovation and engagement, increasing job satisfaction, and reducing stress.

Autonomy
Interventions

Inspire autonomy through leadership

Leadership, and leadership training, plays a powerful role in enhancing employee autonomy, a key driver of work wellbeing.

Leaders who support autonomy boost employee wellbeing, engagement, and retention

o A study of 512 Canadian employees found that leaders who coach, inspire, and foster employee development improve wellbeing by supporting greater autonomy at work.[1] These autonomy-supportive leaders emphasise trust, and empower employees to make decisions, take initiative, and contribute meaningfully, which in turn drives job satisfaction and emotional resilience.

o A study of 735 French employees across various organisations and industries found that employees whose supervisors supported their autonomy were more motivated at work, reported higher levels of job satisfaction, and were significantly less likely to consider leaving their jobs.[2]

Autonomy-supportive leadership starts with effective training

o An evaluation of a five-week leadership development program at a Fortune 500 company demonstrated that autonomy-supportive management can be taught and scaled. People Leaders who were trained to acknowledge employee perspectives, offer choice, and reduce controlling behaviours saw a marked improvement in their teams' motivation and engagement.[3]

Refer also to:
o **Leadership** driver

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Shift to a results-oriented work culture

Organisations that pivot from tracking hours to measuring outcomes often see gains across multiple domains. In U.S. healthcare and IT firms, adopting a results-only work environment—where employees control their own time—led to lower turnover intentions, reduced work-family conflict, and healthier behaviours like getting more sleep and exercise.[4,5]
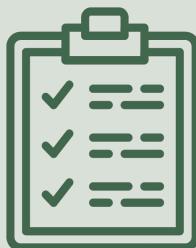
However, measuring outcomes must not become a vehicle for unrealistic workload pressures. Management should consider the following **best practices for shifting to a results-oriented culture:**

- o Co-design outcome targets with employees to ensure they are realistic and achievable
- o Ensure support and resources are in place to meet expectations
- o Monitor to ensure workloads remain manageable and deadlines achievable

Refer also to:
- o **Workload Pressures** driver

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory is one of the most widely used and respected frameworks for understanding how the work environment affects employee wellbeing and performance. At its simplest level, it tells us that when demands are high, and resources (e.g. support, time, training, etc.) are low, employees experience strain that reduces wellbeing.[6]

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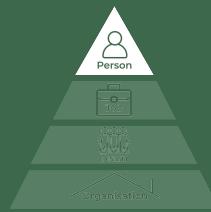
Provide employees with more autonomy over their schedule

Flexible working is most effective when employees have discretion over how it is implemented.
Evidence from multiple industries and countries shows that providing employees with more autonomy over their schedules:

Refer also to:
o **Flexibility** driver

o **Builds emotional resilience to work stressors:** A U.S. study of IT professionals with caregiving responsibilities found that increasing supervisor support for personal and family life, combined with greater schedule control, significantly reduced employees' negative emotional reactions to daily work stressors. These improvements were sustained over 12 months.[7] This is also a beneficial intervention for employees in high pressure roles.[8]

o **Mitigates work–life conflict:** A field experiment in a Fortune 500 firm found that employees with greater scheduling autonomy reported lower stress and less work–life interference; a critical benefit for parents, caregivers, and employees balancing multiple life roles.[9]

o **Drives engagement:** A large-scale study of over 1,300 U.S. retail employees in low-wage shift-based roles, found that greater schedule control improved work engagement, particularly when implemented with high supervisor support.[10]

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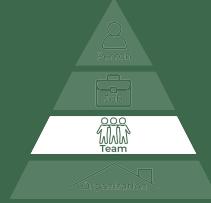
Empower employees to collaboratively resolve workplace challenges

Employee problem-solving teams identify, analyse, and resolve workplace challenges through structured and collaborative decision-making. These teams typically focus on process improvements, operational efficiency, quality control, and workplace wellbeing. They are often cross-functional and may be temporary (formed to tackle a specific issue) or permanent (such as continuous improvement teams) in nature.

o   An evaluation of employee representative problem-solving teams implemented across 11 American retail chain stores led to improvements in work climate and employee health and wellbeing.[11] The teams were tasked with developing, implementing, and evaluating action plans tailored to the needs of their specific store using a 5-step problem-solving process: familiarisation, skill building, prioritisation, action, and reaction.

o   Research into the impact of collaborative problem solving in a large Danish government organisation found that the resulting improvement in working conditions led to increased employee wellbeing. **Manager support was identified as a key factor in its success**.[12]
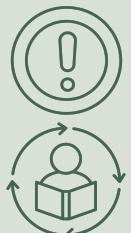
Workplace research and participatory intervention literature indicates that gendered dynamics can dampen women's contributions in group processes.[13–17] To address this, interventions should be intentionally designed with gender-sensitive strategies to support and encourage equitable participation. Refer also to the **Inclusion & Belonging** driver.

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Build more autonomy into new and existing roles

Job redesign involves working collaboratively with employees to deconstruct their roles and develop solutions to key challenges. One of the most powerful ways job redesign enhances employee wellbeing is by increasing **autonomy**. A 2010 study found that giving employees more control and input in their work is a key reason these efforts lead to better wellbeing and stronger performance.[18]

Refer also to:
o **Stress** driver

o In the construction sector, a Hong Kong–based study found that high workloads and limited decision-making power were major contributors to burnout. By redesigning jobs to promote greater autonomy and clarify role expectations, the organisation significantly reduced employee burnout over the course of a year.[19] For industries prone to overwork and mental fatigue, these findings highlight the value of empowering employees at the **task level**.

o Similarly, a **participatory job redesign** study in a call centre showed that when employees were given more control over how they structured and completed their tasks alongside constructive feedback, they reported higher wellbeing and were rated as more effective by their supervisors.[20] Notably, the intervention did not rely on perks or incentives; it worked by fundamentally **reorganising how work was done**, reinforcing autonomy as a critical driver of both wellbeing and performance.

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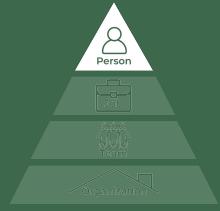
Empower employees to craft roles that fit them best

Job crafting is a bottom-up, employee-led approach to job redesign that empowers individuals to shape their work in ways that better support their wellbeing—whether by modifying tasks (*task crafting*), adjusting workplace interactions (*relationship crafting*), or reframing how they view their role (*perspective crafting*). By aligning job demands and resources with their strengths, interests, and values, employees can reduce workplace stressors, increase access to supportive resources, and experience fewer negative emotions, along with higher motivation, job satisfaction, and overall wellbeing.[21-23]

A 2017 systematic review found that employee-led job crafting interventions, **particularly when supported by coaching**, were more consistently associated with improvements in wellbeing and work motivation than traditional top-down redesign efforts.[24] This may be because coaching facilitates a more immediate and personalised alignment between job characteristics and employee needs.[25]

In a university-based intervention, employees who received **job crafting** training were more likely to seek out job resources, contributing to greater task performance, work engagement, and career satisfaction.[26] Similarly, employees in a Dutch police district who engaged in job crafting reported fewer negative emotions, stronger self-efficacy, and a greater tendency to pursue development opportunities.[27]

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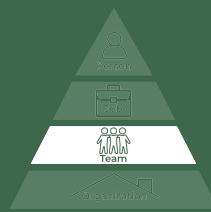
Foster cultures of mutual support

Supporting employees' core psychological needs for **autonomy** (choice and flexibility), **competence** (effectiveness and mastery), and **relatedness** (connection and inclusion) can strengthen satisfaction and engagement at work.

When organisations foster peer support and inclusive practices, employees are more likely to experience a sense of control, ownership, and motivation in how they work.

- A field experiment with 26 workplace teams found that when employees were trained to support one another's needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they reported higher need satisfaction and greater autonomous motivation than control groups. The intervention emphasised perspective-taking, communication, and collaboration, suggesting that autonomy can be reinforced through everyday peer interactions.[28]

- The ADVANCE Project TRACS, a university-wide initiative to improve gender equity in STEM, introduced mentoring, work–life integration support, and inclusive decision-making training to create a more supportive academic environment. Faculty who engaged with the programme, regardless of gender, experienced greater satisfaction of their autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs, which was associated with higher job satisfaction over time.[29]

Together, these findings suggest that nurturing autonomy collectively through inclusion, collaboration, and supportive systems can help build a more motivated, capable, and resilient workforce.

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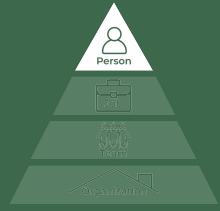
Invite office-workers to participate in ergonomic decisions

Participatory ergonomics (PE) is an approach to workplace and job design that actively involves workers in identifying and addressing ergonomic issues. It recognises that workers have valuable firsthand knowledge about their tasks, tools, and work environments that should be considered in the design of safer, healthier, and more productive workplaces.[30–31]

A systematic review found **evidence that PE interventions positively impact a variety of health outcomes** and reduce musculoskeletal symptoms, injuries (and in turn workers' compensation claims), and sick days. The review noted a number of **key facilitators and barriers to the PE process**, including: [31]

o **Facilitators:** active buy-in from workers, management, and unions (where relevant); involvement of an ergonomics expert; and access to resources such as training.

o **Barriers:** lack of acceptance and resources; workplace instability, or wider economic pressures (e.g. recession).

A PE intervention among workers with musculoskeletal disorders in an Italian manufacturing facility revealed that enabling employees to modify and choose their workstation setup such as using height-adjustable desks, lift-assist devices, sit-stand chairs, led to enhanced feelings of usefulness and job satisfaction.[32]

→ The foundational principles of participatory ergonomics are just as relevant for remote employees. For practical support, consider the **Ergonomics e-Learning for Office Workers** program created by the Institute for Work & Health.

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Making the most of this resource

1 Measure

Conduct an employee survey to assess four core dimensions of employee wellbeing: **job satisfaction, happiness, stress, and sense of purpose.** Collectively, these provide a scientifically validated, multidimensional view of how employees experience work.

Equally important, organisations should measure **the drivers of workplace wellbeing** - the underlying working conditions, relationships, and organisational factors that shape those experiences.

2 Understand

Once you've got the data, the next step is to **identify which drivers most strongly predict wellbeing outcomes within your organisation.**

Workplace wellbeing is multidimensional, shaped by a range of drivers, but not all drivers exert equal influence in every context.

By applying **data analysis at scale**, organisations can uncover which factors most powerfully explain wellbeing within their organisation.

3 Act

Once you have identified your priority drivers, the next task is to **select and implement interventions** that address them effectively.

The Playbook provides a curated selection of **evidence-based interventions** to help you act with confidence to choose interventions that are both empirically grounded and contextually feasible.

Don't forget to build **evaluation** plans into your intervention design.

→ Read **our guidance** document before getting started, to ensure you get the most out of the resources.

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Sharing this resource

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Autonomy

is just one key driver of workplace wellbeing

These are just some of many evidence-based interventions recommended in the Work Wellbeing Playbook.

All recommendations and academic citations, organised by driver, are available for free on our website:

www.worldwellbeingmovement.org/playbook