Operational Design

is a key driver of workplace wellbeing

Operational design plays a foundational role in shaping employee wellbeing by influencing how easily and effectively individuals can carry out their work. It encompasses the structures, processes, workflows, and administrative mechanisms that underpin day-to-day operations.

Well-designed and streamlined systems enable employees to focus on meaningful tasks rather than expending effort on avoidable procedural hurdles.[1,2] In contrast, poor operational design, including excessive bureaucracy, unclear procedures, redundant approvals, and technological inefficiencies, can drain time and energy, heighten frustration, and undermine motivation.[3,4]

Over time, such conditions contribute to burnout and disengagement.[5,6]

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Operational Design
Interventions

Simplify administrative processes to reduce job demands (1/2)

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 are low (e.g. support, time, training), employees experience strain that reduces wellbeing.[7]

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

Excessive bureaucracy, redundant approvals, and unclear procedures create unnecessary job demands that drain cognitive resources and undermine employee wellbeing.

- Organisational interventions that simplify procedures and clarify roles are associated with lower stress, reduced burnout, and higher engagement.[4]
- Similarly, reducing organisational “red tape” and adopting more proactive and flexible processes has been shown to enhance motivation, performance, and job satisfaction.[1]
- Streamlining approval chains, consolidating reporting systems, and clarifying workflows can therefore reduce administrative burden, improve efficiency, and support employee wellbeing.

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Operational Design
Interventions

Simplify administrative processes to reduce job demands (2/2)

- A field study across 34 U.S. primary care clinics used a cluster-randomised design in which intervention clinics received structured feedback on work conditions and implemented locally tailored organisational changes focused on workflow redesign, role clarity, and improved communication among clinicians and staff. Clinics implementing these participatory interventions reported **significant reductions in burnout and emotional exhaustion, as well as improvements in job satisfaction, teamwork, and perceived work conditions**, with workflow-focused changes showing the strongest association with burnout reduction.[8]

- A large-scale organisational intervention in Australian hospitals redesigned workload allocation, clarified recruitment and staffing systems, and improved access to training and professional development for nurses. The intervention was associated with **reductions in psychological distress and intentions to leave, alongside significant improvements in job satisfaction and staff retention**, highlighting the importance of system-level job redesign and workforce support in improving employee wellbeing.[9]

Key considerations:

- Simplification efforts are most effective when paired with employee involvement, ensuring reforms address real operational bottlenecks.
- Leadership support is critical to sustain streamlined processes and avoid reforms being perceived as cost-cutting measures.

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Operational Design
Interventions

Use lean management to streamline work and support wellbeing

Lean management is widely recognised for improving operational efficiency through waste elimination, workflow standardisation, and quality improvement. Increasingly, research indicates that well-designed lean interventions can also enhance employee wellbeing when they explicitly attend to job quality, employee voice, and managerial support.

Studies consistently show that employee involvement is central to lean's ability to improve workplace wellbeing:

- A longitudinal study of 11 Danish public and private organisations found that lean implementation productivity, but gains in employee wellbeing such as reduced stress and higher job satisfaction, emerged only when workers were meaningfully involved in redesigning their work processes. In contrast, top-down implementation approaches were associated with increased strain and diminished job control.[10]
- A study of UK hospitals found that lean-based workflow improvements such as clearer patient handoff protocols and reduced documentation burdens, improved staff morale, reduced frustration, and supported better patient outcomes, particularly when frontline clinical staff were involved in identifying and resolving workflow bottlenecks.[11]
- A study of Australian manufacturing firms found that lean interventions combining process redesign with workforce training and participatory practices improved job satisfaction and perceptions of organisational support. In contrast, lean initiatives narrowly focused on cost reduction or output targets without meaningful work redesign or employee involvement had neutral or negative effects on employee wellbeing.[12]

Refer also to other drivers:

- **Workload Pressures**
- **Employee Voice**
- **Management**

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Operational Design
Interventions

Use job redesign to improve operational systems and employee wellbeing

Job redesign is a powerful strategy for improving how work is organised and performed. It involves working collaboratively with employees to deconstruct existing roles, identify key challenges, and co-develop practical solutions. By modifying roles, workflows, operational systems, and support structures, job redesign can reduce inefficiencies, eliminate job demands, and increase role clarity. A growing body of evidence shows that such changes are consistently associated with improvements in employee wellbeing.

In the **healthcare sector**, where job demands are high and operational complexity is substantial, several job redesign interventions have demonstrated meaningful benefits for employee wellbeing:

- An Australian job redesign intervention targeting operational strain among nursing staff addressed bottlenecks, unclear workload allocation, and staffing challenges through the introduction of a workload assessment tool, enhanced access to professional development, and improvements to recruitment and staffing processes. This intervention led to significant reductions in psychological distress and emotional exhaustion, alongside increases in job satisfaction and staff retention.[9]

- Similarly, an intervention focused on reducing non-core tasks, redistributing responsibilities, and clarifying work boundaries for medical specialists and nurses resulted in improvements in work engagement, self-rated health, and performance, as well as reduced emotional exhaustion.[13]

- In primary care, a cluster-randomised intervention that improved practice workflows, strengthened communication processes, and enhanced role clarity led to significant reductions in clinician burnout and improved perceptions of team effectiveness and operational efficiency.[8]

Refer also to other drivers:
- **Stress**
- **Autonomy**
- **Workload Pressures**

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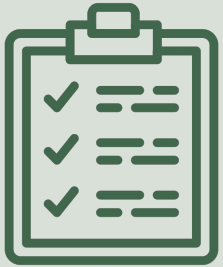
Operational Design
Spotlight

Understanding technostress: what the evidence shows

Technology can either exacerbate employee overload or free workers to focus on meaningful tasks. Poorly designed digital workflows are associated with technostress and reduced employee satisfaction, whereas well-designed systems and tools, supported by effective training, can enhance engagement, role clarity, and overall work wellbeing.[14]



Effective interventions combine two core elements:

1. Reduce digital job demands while building employee capability by simplifying digital workflows, minimising unnecessary system complexity, and providing effective training and support to help employees use technology confidently and efficiently.[15]

2. Redesign work to remove repetitive administrative tasks and protect job security, freeing employees to focus on meaningful, value-adding activities while clearly communicating how changes will support roles and employment stability, thereby reducing work–life conflict and improving job satisfaction.[16]

Refer also to other drivers:
- **Job Security**

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Operational Design
Interventions

Reduce technostress

- **Prepare the organisation before implementation** by ensuring leadership commitment, a culture that supports change, and sufficient employee capability to adapt to new tools and ways of working.[17]
- **Design digital tools for simplicity and ease of use** by making interfaces intuitive, minimising unnecessary steps, and reducing cognitive load in everyday workflows.[14]
- **Embed in-system support features** such as clear prompts, guides, and accessible help menus to support learning and reduce user frustration during task execution.
- **Build digital capability through targeted training** that increases user competence and confidence, thereby reducing technostress and supporting psychological wellbeing.[18,19]
- **Connect learning directly to real work contexts** by supporting employees to apply new digital skills within their actual roles, rather than relying solely on generic training environments.[20]
- **Sustain engagement through managerial support and employee control** by encouraging supportive leadership behaviors and allowing flexibility in how individuals use digital tools, as consistent and self-directed use is key to building resilience and engagement.[17]

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Operational Design
Interventions

Provide effective training on the processes that underpin people's work

Operational systems function effectively only when employees and managers can navigate them with confidence. Providing high-quality, role-relevant training on organisational processes, particularly when new technologies or procedures are introduced, supports clarity, competence, and autonomous functioning at work.[21] In the absence of adequate onboarding or ongoing learning opportunities, even well-designed systems can generate user frustration, errors, and disengagement, undermining employee wellbeing by increasing inefficiency, role strain, and stress, especially in complex or rapidly evolving environments.

- Evidence from a six-month blended learning program on electronic health record (EHR) systems for wellness staff in Qatar illustrates these effects. By investing in structured, role-specific training, the intervention eased system transitions, enhanced user confidence, and improved daily workflows, leading to measurable gains in job performance and significantly higher satisfaction with the EHR system itself.[22]

- More broadly, research indicates that training interventions aligned with organisational change, including digital transformation, workflow redesign, and compliance initiatives, can reduce role ambiguity and perceived job demands. Such interventions support both operational efficiency and positive psychological outcomes when learning is closely connected to employees' actual work contexts.[23,24]

Training on operational processes is most effective when it includes opportunities for feedback, reinforcement and hands-on practice, all of which strengthen knowledge retention and transfer.[20]

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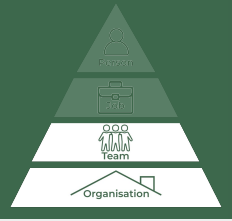
Operational Design
Interventions



Streamline communication and protect time

Inefficient communication practices, including excessive meetings, frequent interruptions, and digital spillover, contribute to cognitive overload and undermine employee wellbeing. Evidence suggests that simplifying communication norms and deliberately protecting uninterrupted work time can improve both productivity and health outcomes.

- **Reduce unnecessary meetings and improve meeting quality** by critically reviewing meeting purpose, frequency, and participation, as employees' perceptions of meeting effectiveness are strongly associated with overall job satisfaction, even after accounting for pay, supervision, and job design.[25]
- **Protect focus time through uninterrupted work blocks** by establishing norms that minimise interruptions, as field studies show that protected focus time increases engagement, enhances performance, and reduces strain, particularly in knowledge-intensive roles.[26, 27]
- **Implement boundary-control policies** such as right-to-disconnect guidelines or no-email windows to safeguard recovery time, reduce work–life conflict, and support employee wellbeing in increasingly digital work environments. [28, 29]

- These strategies are most effective when embedded in organisational culture and reinforced by leadership modelling, not left to individuals to self-manage.
- Regular employee feedback and pulse surveys help identify pain points, track progress, and sustain improvements over time.

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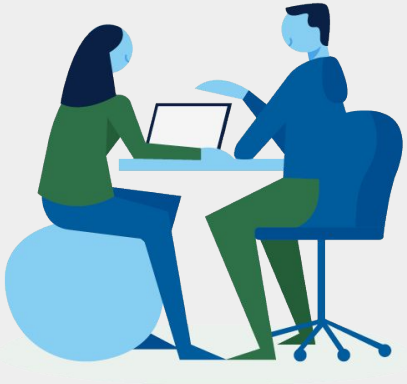
Operational Design
Interventions

Promote healthy and productive email use to streamline communication

Email is a core operational system. When poorly designed, it increases cognitive load, creates constant interruptions, and extends work into non-work time. A long-term systematic review shows that clear email norms and structured practices reduce digital strain, improve task efficiency, and support sustainable work patterns by lowering mental load and protecting employee boundaries.[30]

- **Establish clear email norms and standards:** Define expectations for tone, response times, subject lines, CC use, and appropriate channels to reduce ambiguity and unnecessary volume.
- **Implement structured email triage frameworks:** Provide shared conventions for urgency, escalation, and response expectations to reduce decision fatigue and reactive work.
- **Set organisational guidance on CC and distribution list use:** Clarify when copying others is necessary to prevent information overload and role diffusion.
- **Enable boundary- and focus-protective email system defaults** by promoting scheduled or delayed sending, making working hours visible, reducing default notifications, and configuring systems to minimise interruptions during core work periods.



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

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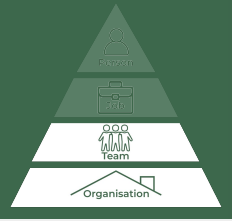
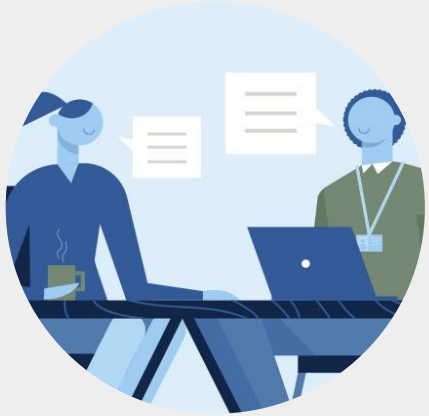
Operational Design
Interventions



Reduce meeting load (1/2)

Another way to streamline communication is to reduce meeting load.

Meetings are a core element of daily operations that shape how employee time, attention, and energy are allocated at work. When meeting systems are poorly designed, characterised by excessive frequency, unclear purpose, and weak facilitation, they increase cognitive load, fragment attention, and undermine employee wellbeing.



Research indicates that excessive meeting load undermines daily wellbeing, dissatisfaction with meetings contributes to broader job dissatisfaction, and poorly structured virtual meetings exacerbate fatigue and psychological strain.[31–33]

Evidence from meeting science indicates that organisations can improve employee wellbeing by treating meetings as a system to be intentionally designed rather than an ad hoc activity.[34]

See next slide for best practice recommendations.

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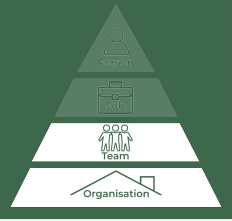
Operational Design
Interventions



Reduce meeting load (2/2)

- **Govern meeting load at the system level** by auditing meeting volume, limiting unnecessary recurrence, and protecting focus time to prevent attention fragmentation.[31]
- **Standardise meeting purpose and structure** through organisational norms requiring clear objectives, agendas, time limits, and ownership, improving efficiency and reducing wasted effort.[32,34]
- **Design shorter, time-bound meetings by default** to counter the tendency for meetings to expand to fill available time, improving pace and effectiveness.[35,36]
- **Intentionally design virtual meetings** by limiting back-to-back video calls, clarifying when synchronous interaction is necessary, and structuring interaction to reduce video conference fatigue.[33, 37]
- **Build meeting capability as an organisational skill** by training leaders and facilitators and reinforcing expectations through performance and operating standards.[34]

  Measure and continuously improve meeting quality by tracking employee satisfaction with meetings as a component of job quality and operational effectiveness.[32]

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Operational Design
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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

Cite this resource:

Regier, C., Cunningham, S., Fleming, W., Kirienko, A., Kaats, M., & De Neve, J. (2025). *Work Wellbeing Playbook: A Systematic Review of Evidence-Based Interventions to Improve Employee Wellbeing*. World Wellbeing Movement.

William Fleming's research is supported by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Oxford Health Biomedical Research Centre [NIHR203316]. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Operational Design

is a key driver of workplace wellbeing

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

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

www.worldwellbeingmovement.org/playbook