

WORK DESIGN FOR HEALTH

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Goals

- **Why are you here today?**
- Introduce the work design for health strategy
 - Framework for understanding specific work conditions that affect health and well-being
 - Examples of feasible changes
- Share related resources
- Prompt some reflections & seed some conversations

Research-based Resources



Harvard
Business
Review

Human Resource Management

7 Strategies to Improve Your Employees' Health and Well-Being

by Erin L. Kelly, Lisa F. Berkman, Laura D. Kubzansky, and Meg Lovejoy

October 12, 2021



Source/Getty Images

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HARVARD T.H. CHAN SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH
MIT MANAGEMENT SLOAN SCHOOL

The Work and Well-Being Initiative
A joint Harvard and MIT research-for-action initiative

Home About Us Employer Toolkit Additional Resources News & Events

Worker well-being is critical to an organization's success
There's never been a better time for employers to invest in the well-being of their employees

- Plus many peer-reviewed journal articles
- On-going study of workplace changes to improve well-being among warehouse workers in the U.S.
- Very short list of other useful research

Work and Health

- **Why are you here today?**
- Introduce the work design strategy
 - Offer a framework for understanding how specific work conditions affect health
 - Provide examples of feasible changes for inspiration
- Share related resources
- Prompt some reflections & seed conversations

Work Design for Health

- **Work is a social determinant of health**
- Focus on changing the workplace, not the worker
 - “Primary prevention” or upstream
 - Dual agenda: ideally changes will benefit organization & employee but neutral or minimal cost for firm is also “success”
- Orient to positive psychological well-being, in addition to ill health

The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the 'Work Design for Health' website. It features the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and MIT Management Sloan School logos on the left. The main header text reads 'The Work and Well-Being Initiative' and 'A joint Harvard and MIT research-for-action initiative'. Below this is a red navigation bar with links for 'Home', 'About Us', 'Employer Toolkit', 'Additional Resources', and 'News & Events'. The main content area has a dark sidebar on the left with the title 'EMPLOYER TOOLKIT: WORK DESIGN FOR HEALTH' and three menu items: 'Overview — Work Design for Health: A Promising Approach to Worker Well-Being', 'Work Design Principle #1: Give Employees More Control over Their Work', and 'Work Design Principle #2: Tame Excessive Work Demands'. The main content area on the right has a breadcrumb 'HOME /' followed by the title 'Employer Toolkit: Work Design for Health' and a large graphic with the text 'WORK DESIGN for HEALTH' overlaid on a collage of diverse people's faces.

Mental & Physical Health

AJPH RESEARCH & ANALYSIS

Employee Cardiometabolic Risk Following a Cluster-Randomized Workplace Intervention From the Work, Family and Health Network, 2009–2013

Lisa F. Berkman, PhD, Erin L. Kelly, PhD, Leslie B. Hammer, PhD, Frank Mierzwa, PMP, Todd Bodner, PhD, Tay McNamara, PhD, Hayami K. Koga, MD, PhD, Soomi Lee, PhD, Miguel Marino, PhD, Laura C. Klein, PhD, Thomas W. McDade, PhD, Ginger Hanson, PhD, Phyllis Moen, PhD, and Orfeu M. Buxton, PhD

The U.S. Surgeon General's
Framework for

Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being

2022



Objectives. To examine whether workplace interventions to increase workplace flexibility and supervisor support and decrease work–family conflict can reduce cardiometabolic risk.

Methods. We randomly assigned employees from information technology (n = 555) and long-term care (n = 973) industries in the United States to the Work, Family and Health Network intervention or usual practice (we collected the data 2009–2013). We calculated a validated cardiometabolic risk score (CRS) based on resting blood pressure, HbA_{1c} (glycated hemoglobin), HDL (high-density lipoprotein) and total cholesterol, height and weight (body mass index), and tobacco consumption. We compared changes in baseline CRS to 12-month follow-up.

Results. There was no significant main effect on CRS associated with the intervention in either industry. However, significant interaction effects revealed that the intervention improved CRS at the 12-month follow-up among intervention participants in both industries with a higher baseline CRS. Age also moderated intervention effects: older employees had significantly larger reductions in CRS at 12 months than did younger employees.

Conclusions. The intervention benefited employee health by reducing CRS equivalent to 5 to 10 years of age-related changes for those with a higher baseline CRS and for older employees.

<https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2023.307413>

vs. many wellness initiatives

- **Focus on individual behavior change**
- Implicitly blame employees?
- **Limited evidence of effectiveness** (see Jones et al 2019, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*; Fleming 2024, *Industrial Relations*)

Workplace Wellness Programs Have Little Benefit, Study Finds

An Oxford researcher measured the effect of popular workplace mental health interventions, and discovered little to none.

 By Ellen Barry

Jan. 15, 2024



(Olly via Shutterstock)

Corporate mindfulness is bullsh*t: Zen or no Zen, you're working harder and being paid less

Mindfulness matters, but make no mistake: Corporations are co-opting the idea to disguise the ways they kill us



Diagnosis

- **Think about your current or last job...**



Key Work Conditions

Topic 1: Job Control (Autonomy)

I have the freedom to decide what I do on my job.
I have a lot of say about what happens on my job.

Topic 2: Job Control (Skill Utilization)

I get to do a lot of different things on my job.
My job requires that I keep learning new things.

Topic 3: Job Demands

My job requires that I work very fast.
I never seem to have enough time to get everything done on my job.

Topic 4: Social Support (Manager)

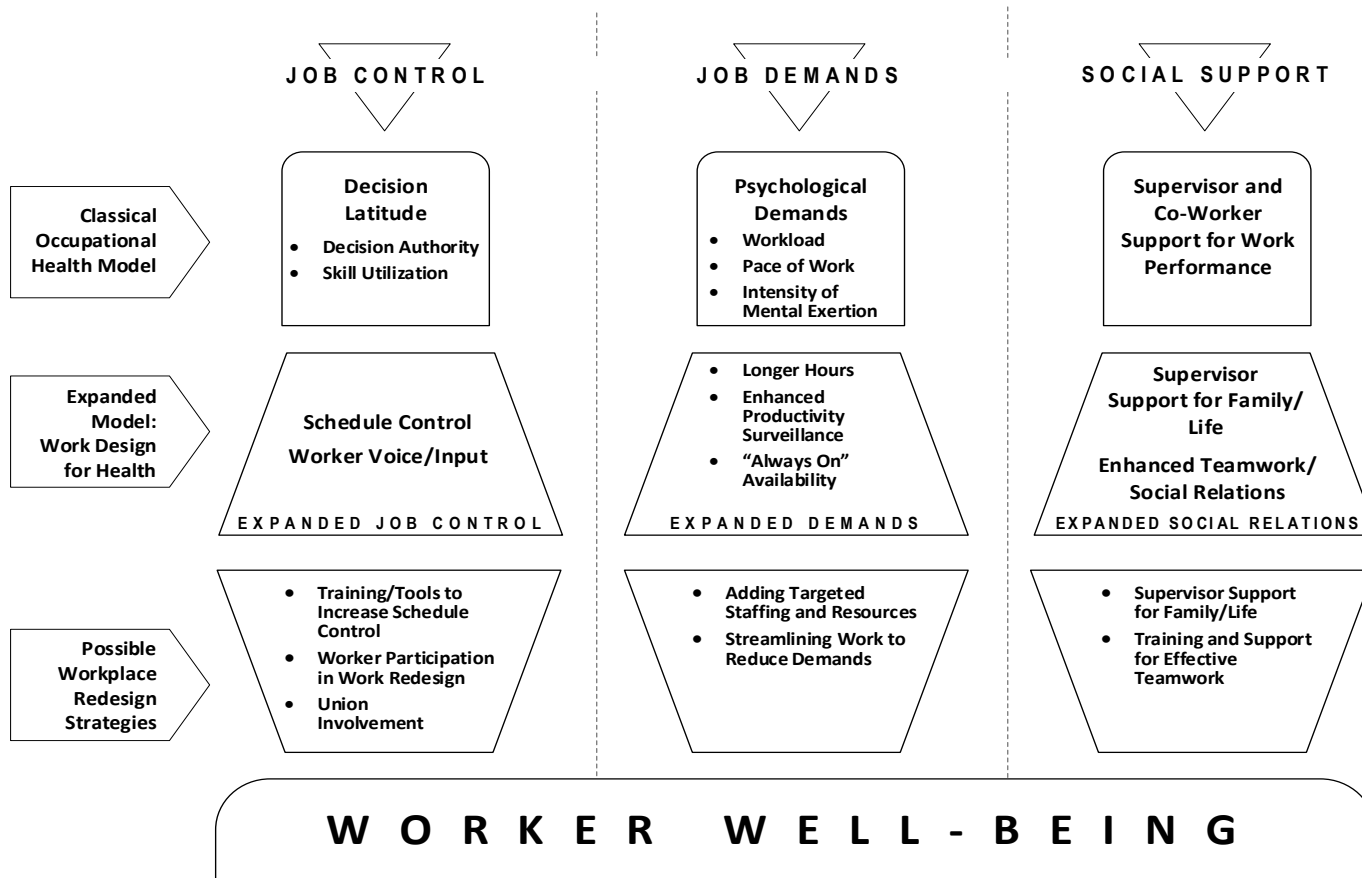
I can count on my manager for support when I need it.
My manager is helpful to me in getting the job done.

Topic 5: Social Support more broadly

I can count on my coworkers for support when I need it.
At work, I feel like I belong.

WORK DESIGN FOR HEALTH

Updating the Classical Occupational Health Model for the 21st Century



Source: Author's update and expansion of the classical occupational health model

From Lovejoy, Kelly, Kubzansky & Berkman, 2021, *American Journal of Public Health*. Link in resources page.

Work Design Principle #1: Give Workers More Control at Work

Job control = Discretion over how, when, and where work gets done.

Three different types of control to consider:

- *Autonomy over how work is accomplished*
- *Employee voice, influence in the workplace*
- *Control over work schedule (and location)*

Case Study focused on control over schedules: Challenge “just-in-time” schedules

Many retail employers use “just-in-time” schedules

Randomized trial to improve schedule stability at the Gap, Inc.

- *More employee input into scheduling through an app*
- *More consistent shifts (similar daily/weekly start and end times)*
- *More adequate work hours for part-time employees*

For employees: better sleep quality and less stress (especially evident for parents and those working a second job)

For business: higher sales and labor productivity, driven by better retention of experienced employees

WorkLife Law <https://worklifelaw.org/projects/stable-scheduling-study/>
Kesavan et al. 2022. *Management Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2021.4291>



Work Design Principle #2: Rein in Excessive Job Demands

High work demands create health risks. Long hours but also competing obligations, high time pressure, and “overload” (too much work to complete)

Two directions to pursue:

- *Strategically increasing staff & other resources*
- *Streamlining work to reduce demands*

Case Study: Streamlining Work for Busy IT Professionals

IT Executives concerned about high burnout and turnover

Fortune 500 firm with global workflow + lean staff

Multi-faceted STAR intervention tested in randomized trial:

- Team discussions on cutting “low-value” activities
- Legitimate to decline some meetings, take “heads down” time
- Also: shift control over when and where worked so employees & team decide, encourage managers to support personal life

For employees : reduced work stress, burnout, psychological distress; improved work-life interface; better sleep; improved cardiometabolic risk for those at higher risk at baseline & older workers; more parent-teen time and improved wellbeing for teens
For business: higher job satisfaction, significantly lower turnover.
Null effects on company measures of productivity.



Work Design Principle #3: Improve Social Relationships in the Workplace

Positive relationships at work improve worker health and well-being.

Three types of social connections matter most:

- *Supportive interactions with managers and with coworkers*
- *Effective teamwork*
- *A sense of belonging at work*



Case Study: Fostering social belonging reduces burnout and turnover among 911 dispatchers

Emergency dispatcher jobs are stressful and often undervalued

Intervention to foster social belonging and professional pride

- *Weekly emails from supervisors encouraged sharing of stories about challenges and the value of 911 dispatcher work*
- *Online platform to share stories*

Example: story of a dispatcher who saved the life of a woman in a domestic violence situation by connecting her to the right support

For employees: decrease in burnout, enhanced well-being and organizational commitment

For employers: quits (voluntary turnover) fell by half



Linos, Elizabeth, Krista Ruffini, and Stephanie Wilcoxon. 2022. "Reducing Burnout and Resignations among Frontline Workers: A Field Experiment." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 32(3):473–88.

Taking Action

Taking Action: Ideas for Leaders from the *Overload* study of professionals

- **Be open to work redesign – to looking at current state and then collectively crafting changes in policies, practices**
- Ask about and listen for overload (and other concerns, strains)
- Encourage teams to identify and reduce low-value work
- Clarify expectations, so not assessing an employee's contributions by always-on availability, "facetime" expectations
- Don't celebrate or reward long hours or instant responsiveness as signs of employees' commitment or productivity
- Recognize the value of time away from devices – deep work + time fully off
- Make the default employee control over when & where work, with team planning
- Explicitly acknowledge and support lives and priorities outside of work
- Change up your own routines for personal, family, health reasons & share that

Research-based Resources



Research-based Resources

Work Design for Health Toolkit:

Covers framework, 3 key dimensions (control, demands, support), many examples of workplace changes, implementation guidance. Updated version coming in September 2024.

<https://workwellbeinginitiative.org/employertoolkit>

Erin's HBR article on strategies to improve employees' health and well-being:

Short introduction to framework, some examples of workplace changes.

<https://hbr.org/2021/10/7-strategies-to-improve-your-employees-health-and-well-being>

Erin's AJPH article + commentary from another work and health scholar:

More details and citations on the research behind the Work Design for Health approach, plus discussion of specific contemporary stressors (e.g., just-in-time scheduling, monitoring via technologies, caregiver and work-family challenges). If you have trouble accessing the article or academic articles cited here, email Erin.

<https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306283>
<https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306368>

Erin's book *Overload*:

Reports on a major experiment conducted in a US Fortune 500 firm, focusing on impact and change strategies. Guidance for managers and employees who want to pursue this type of change in appendix.

<https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691227085/overload>

Jeffrey Pfeffer's book *Dying for a Paycheck*:

Stanford GSB professor describes the link between work conditions and health, drawing on his research on the costs of these conditions for firms.

<https://www.harpercollins.com/products/dying-for-a-paycheck-jeffrey-pfeffer>

NIOSH WellBQ and Total Worker Health Toolkit:

The US federal agency on occupational safety and health provides a good free questionnaire for assessing employee health and identifying key concerns. The Total Worker Health initiative, consistent with a work design strategy, offers a toolkit for employers with a "**Worksite Score Card**" to identify priorities and possible actions.

<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/twh/php/wellbq/index.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/twh/php/toolkit/index.html>

US Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health:

<https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/workplace-well-being/index.html>

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