

The A&DC Thought Leadership Series

Enhancing Employee Productivity:

Go with the flow



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Flow:

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- Csikszentmihalyi, 1999.

Introduction

Today's working environment is more demanding than ever. Globalisation and the advancement of telecommunications means that the typical office worker is no longer adhering to the 9-5 working day. Instead, they are constantly tied to the workplace via their Blackberry, as well as attempting to juggle their longer hours and greater working demands with additional commitments outside of the office, eg caring responsibilities. Is it any wonder then that many 21st Century organisations are faced with an abundance of de-motivated employees, who cannot see beyond their seemingly endless workload?



Despite a steady economic growth in the last 50 years, in the UK particularly, the happiness of organisations' employees has remained rather static. Material wealth has grown enormously, with the average UK household spending £37,000 a year on consumer goods in 2005, (£1 trillion overall) up 43% since 1995 (Intel's British Lifestyles report, 2006). However, such material growth has not bought happiness with it, with ever-increasing levels of stress, anxiety and depression prevalent within today's workforces. Consequently, organisational leaders and policy-makers are beginning to realise that unhappiness in the workplace **costs money**. The Health and Safety Executive report (2005) claimed that a total of **13.4 million** working days

were lost in 2001 due to stress, depression and anxiety in the UK alone. What do organisational leaders infer from such a statistic? It's simple: happiness in the workplace is linked to enhanced productivity and financial performance.

So how exactly do organisations make their employees happier? Throw more money at them? Give them less work to do and more time to do it in? Despite being a necessary requirement of many employees, such rewards will not be effective in isolation. This paper aims to discuss one particular way in which employers can encourage happier working environments within their organisations – by creating 'flow' within the workplace. How flow is linked within the positive psychology field, and ways in which to create it within an employee's work, are now discussed in the following sections.

The positive psychology movement

Before the Second World War, the field of psychology had three distinct objectives that researchers dedicated themselves to understanding further: curing mental illness, making peoples' lives fulfilling and worthwhile, and nurturing high talent. However, such a breadth of focus was lost post-war, and psychological researchers began to dedicate their efforts to understanding the pathological aspects of the discipline. It was no longer a priority to make peoples' lives worthwhile, and attempt to understand the situations in which people flourish. Instead, psychologists spent decades attempting to identify and recognise mental disorders and their symptoms, and to heal psychological damage that had already been done. Such a focus on the 'healing' aspects of psychological illness, despite being successful in relieving symptoms, has done little to prevent these illnesses occurring in the first place. An ever-growing prevalence rate of mental illnesses (eg depression) is present in modern Westernised society, overtaking the success of cures or preventive measures.

In 2000, Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi introduced Positive Psychology in a special edition of the American Psychologist. Within this millennial issue, 15 articles were dedicated to understanding the field further. The articles' authors wanted to make the statement of, 'hey, lets focus our attention not only to what is *wrong* with people, and how they can be *healed*, to understanding more about what is *right* with people, and in what situations they *flourish*'. This area of the discipline appreciates that psychology is not just about weakness and damage, but about strengths and virtue also. It concerns itself with the issues around *prevention*, as opposed to cure, by highlighting the fact that the strengths of individuals can act as buffers against mental illness; courage, perseverance, honesty, interpersonal sensitivity, faith and work ethic among many others. It states that amplifying the strengths of individuals will enhance their mental and physical wellbeing, prevent illness and improve performance within a variety of settings, eg enhance subjective wellbeing, performance in the workplace, as well as flourishing in society as a whole.

The area of Positive Psychology operates on three distinct levels:

- **Subjective.** This is about the valued, subjective experiences of the individual to include; wellbeing, satisfaction and contentment (in the past), optimism and hope (for the future), and flow and happiness (in the present).
- **Individual.** Referring to positive individual traits to include; perseverance, creativity, forgiveness, interpersonal sensitivity, future mindedness, the capacity for love and wisdom.
- **Group.** Includes the communal virtues that move the individual towards a better sense of citizenship such as: responsibility, tolerance, altruism, moderation and work ethic.

This paper will now focus on one of the subjective experiences that operate within the positive psychology notion – 'flow', and how this concept can be applied within the workplace setting.

The concept of 'flow'

Many people in this world dedicate a large proportion of their time to their pastimes without any obvious reward, such as money, recognition or fame. When these people are asked why they do these things, they state it is for the 'sheer enjoyment' that they derive from the experience. This enjoyment is often experienced despite them having to face sometimes painful and potentially risky efforts, as well as overcome difficult challenges that stretch them beyond their skill capability into areas of novelty and discovery. This feeling has been termed 'flow': an optimal experience that an individual lives through, which is characterised by a heightened, focal sense of consciousness when engaged in an activity that provides them with immense enjoyment at the time.

There are numerous definitions within the current literature that attempt to summarise flow. Csikszentmihalyi, who coined the term, stated in 1999 that flow is:

“a particular kind of experience that is so engrossing and enjoyable [that it is] worth doing for its own sake even though it may have no consequence outside itself”.

Researchers have found that flow can be experienced within a range of different settings (eg sports, work and playing music), and despite its numerous definitions, there are three core elements that are consistently present when flow is defined: enjoyment, immersion and intrinsic motivation. Therefore, it seems that when people are in flow, they are totally immersed in an activity with little or no reward associated with doing it, apart from the very fact that the task is enjoyable within itself. It would be appropriate to assume, then, that experiencing flow is like experiencing a form of happiness when engaged in a task. However, this assumption is often stated as too simplistic by researchers, who claim that the relationship between flow and happiness is more complex than this. When people are in flow, they are too occupied with the task at hand to be concerned with emotions. In this sense, the feeling of happiness would be a distraction from being in flow. It is only after an individual gets out of flow that they can look back at the experience and derive happiness from it. At any other point in time the feeling of happiness, as well as any other form of emotion at the time of flow, would just be a distraction from the experience.

Flow within the workplace

Research suggests that in order to experience flow, an individual must devote both *time* and *energy* in a particular task. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that people experience flow more often within their place of *work* rather than during their free time. This may be due to the inability of people to devote their energy to a challenging task when their time is unstructured. For example, when at home watching television, boredom is more likely to be experienced than flow, because sufficient time and energy is not required to complete it. When flow is applied within the workplace, the three elements of immersion, enjoyment and intrinsic motivation (above) can be applied to an activity, and thus can characterise flow within the workplace using the following necessary components:

- **Absorption.** Individuals are so absorbed in their work tasks, that everything around them becomes forgotten. The concept of time seems distorted also, in that hours can pass as minutes to the person in flow.
- **Work enjoyment.** Employees who enjoy their work and are happy within it have positive evaluations of their working life.
- **Intrinsic motivation.** The need for employees to perform a work-related activity with the aim of experiencing the inherent enjoyment derived from engaging in that activity. Intrinsically motivated employees are fascinated by the tasks that they perform, and are motivated by the intrinsic aspects of their work, with little regard for external rewards associated with task completion (eg pay, promotion).

Current research suggests that flow is achieved in the workplace when all three of the above elements are experienced simultaneously. Csikszentmihalyi has also suggested several other situational factors that influence the onset of flow experiences, including:

- **Clear goals.** These are highlighted at every stage of the task. To be in flow, an employee has to know exactly what is expected of him or her at any stage of a given task. Where there are conflicting demands or ambiguous instructions placed on an individual, they will be unable to experience flow in that particular activity.

- **Immediate feedback.** An individual should know if his or her actions are correct immediately if they are to experience flow. A Pianist, for example, can tell instantly if they have hit the wrong key due to the sound they hear. People who do not receive immediate feedback for their actions (eg innovators) may be able to internally validate their actions and continue experiencing flow.
- **An appropriate balance between challenge and skill.** To be in flow, a person must feel that their skills are matched to the level of difficulty or 'challenge' of the task at hand. If a person feels that the challenge is too easy compared to their skill level, they will become bored, and if the challenge is way beyond their level of skill, they will become frustrated and give up. Therefore, to be in flow, an individual's skills must be matched to the challenge of the task, ensuring that the goals are realistic and achievable and that the individual devotes both time and energy to it.
- **No fear of failure.** To be in flow means to be too engaged to worry about failure. The individual knows what is expected of them (clear goals), and knows that their levels of ability are adequate to the challenge of the task; therefore, they should have no concerns around failure, as this will be a distraction from the experience of flow (similar to happiness mentioned previously).
- **Control.** An individual should feel like they have control over their actions when experiencing flow. If the skills of the individual are appropriate to completing the task at hand, then that individual should feel that they can take control of the situation, and meet its challenges accordingly.

Many of the 'flow factors' identified above are similar to the classical job characteristics that have been commonly identified to predict employee motivation at work and job satisfaction. Research suggests that 'motivating' job characteristics are strongly related to work-related flow, or the experience of absorption, work enjoyment and intrinsic work motivation. These job characteristics and their links to the situational factors of flow are described below:

- **Task identity.** Individuals being able to place their work within the whole of the organisation, or having a piece of work that is identifiable, are more likely to experience flow within their workplace. This relates to the '**clear goals**' aspect of flow, in that the individual is able to see clearly where their work stands within the rest of the organisation, and has a clear understanding of how to move from where they currently are to where they wish to be.
- **Feedback.** Providing feedback on the effectiveness of ones role performance is a critical job characteristic that predicts work motivation and job satisfaction, and is parallel to the '**immediate feedback**' component required for flow to occur within the workplace.
- **Skill variety and task significance.** Providing a diverse set of work activities that require different skills from the employee will enhance job satisfaction and work motivation. This is similar to the **challenge-skill balance** component of flow, in that a range of skills may be required to complete more challenging tasks, and thus may be used in different tasks of an individual experiencing flow.
- **Task autonomy.** Having ownership of ones work is a recognised motivating job characteristic, and this can be matched to the sense of '**control**' that people feel they have over tasks when experiencing flow.

These links suggest that if organisational leaders install the classical 'motivational' job characteristics into the workplace, then both organisation and individual employee will benefit; the individual will have more opportunity to experience flow, will be more satisfied within their place of work, motivated to fulfil their roles and, therefore, have enhanced productivity for the organisation with better quality outputs.

How can flow be achieved in the workplace?

The parallels between the experience of flow and 'motivating' job characteristics (outlined above) seem to stem from the *job resources* that are available to the individual within their work. Job resources are defined as the aspects of the job that are required to achieve work goals, personally develop and reduce job demands (eg social support, coaching). Therefore, it is apparent that increasing the job resources within an organisation will enhance the opportunity for employees to experience flow within their work.

So what job resources need to be implemented, and how, in order to achieve flow within the working environment? Firstly, employees need to be set clear, transparent goals, and must recognise that the tasks that they complete have an identifiable purpose within the organisation. Employees must have no conflicting demands placed upon them within any one task, otherwise flow will be difficult to achieve. They must know where they currently are within a task, where they need to be next, and how exactly they will get there without any ambiguity surrounding their actions.

Secondly, feedback of task performance must be as immediate as possible, to ensure that the employee can remain on target to achieving their goals. Setting goals and feeding back performance will undoubtedly be a core responsibility of Supervisors and Line Managers within organisations, ensuring that open, two-way communication channels between them and the employee are set in place, so that there is no confusion surrounding the tasks set, and feedback of performance can be as instant as possible.

Thirdly, a variety of tasks that accommodate a range of skill sets must be set in place, so that the employee will always have an activity to complete that will be appropriately balanced to their skill level at that particular time. The difficulty here is to ensure that the equilibrium between job demands (challenges) and personal skills is always appropriately set. Experience developed over time will mean that challenging tasks will become easier to complete for the employee, so it is important for them to have a consistent supply of challenging tasks within their work, which invite personal growth. However, research has shown that flow can still be achieved when task challenge exceeds skill level (high challenge, low skill), and vice-versa, when employee skill level exceeds the challenge of the task (low challenge, high skill). How 'challenging' a task is will be a subjective evaluation, and therefore it will be difficult for employers to 'match' the skill set of an individual to any single activity. It is important, therefore, to ensure that the employee has a range of skills offered to them (in the form of training and development programmes) that they can perform in numerous work-based activities that vary in the types of challenges they provide. Such a process will reduce the likelihood of boredom creeping in to performing tasks, and will provide a suitable set of challenges that keep the employee constantly engaged in them, thus enhancing the opportunity for flow to occur.

Finally, through job resources such as supervisory coaching and social support, the fear of failure can be minimised from work activities. These resources will leave the employee able to dedicate all of their resources to the task at hand, therefore improving the opportunity for flow to occur. Building supporting working environments that foster personal development through coaching can allow employees to fully concentrate their efforts on a project or task. This will enable them to explore alternative, more innovative ways of approaching activities and achieving their goals without the fear of failure restricting or hindering their performance. Giving employees more task autonomy in this way, with the knowledge that they have support from their colleagues and managers, will enable them to engage deeper with work tasks, and therefore allow them to experience flow more often within the workplace.

The personality of the employee and creating flow in the 'correct' activities

A final point to consider, in attempts to encourage flow into the workplace, is to ensure that employees are experiencing flow in the 'correct' activities. Research has suggested that employees can seek to obtain flow in activities that are neutral or even destructive to the self and/or organisation (eg online shopping while at work). Therefore, it is essential for organisations to ensure that the activities generating flow within their employees are the correct ones that heighten their 'in-role' performance (ie the officially required behaviours that directly serve the goals of the organisation).

Research has suggested that individuals who are highly conscientious will be able to transfer their work-related flow into higher in-role performance, as they tend to be well organised, careful, goal-orientated, diligent and thorough. Individuals with these qualities are more likely to engage in work-related tasks that will enhance their in-role performance, and will therefore experience flow in the 'correct' types of task (ie those that are beneficial to the organisation). Those employees low in conscientiousness may not be as well prepared and diligent, and may therefore obtain flow from tasks that are less effective in enhancing in-role behaviours, eg secondary work tasks that are not as important to achieve. It is the role of the organisation to provide guidance to employees as to the types of activities that should generate flow, and to ensure that the tasks employees are seeking flow with are benefiting the organisation by directly meeting their objectives, and thus enhancing employee in-role behaviours.

Implications of Flow for Talent Management

The beginning of this report outlined a current concern facing many organisations around the world: how to bring happiness into their employees working lives. A workforce with happiness will be more satisfied within their jobs, more motivated to perform them well, and therefore enhance the productivity and financial performance for the organisation. A priority for most organisations in the 21st Century, therefore, will be to ensure that they are focusing on improving the happiness and wellbeing of their employees, both now, and into the future.



This report has provided one way in which happiness could be introduced to the workplace, by maximising the opportunity for flow to be experienced. By creating flow, employees can begin to feel good about the work they do, and will bring a positive attitude and a sense of meaning to their working lives. Talent management initiatives must consider the use of flow within the working environment, and maximise the opportunity for employees to experience it within the tasks that they do. Offering bonuses and promotions simply isn't enough to make employees happy and energised within their work. They need flexibility, task autonomy, clear goals, and feedback of performance. They need to be set challenging tasks that invite personal growth, calling upon their strengths and development areas to enhance these skills within their working roles. They need to be coached into areas of ambiguity, supported by their colleagues, without the fear of failure lingering in the back of their minds. Organisational leaders must now begin to move away from the 'healing' aspects of work psychology, where stress and depression within the workforce are expected and treated on an ad-hoc basis. Instead, they now must look at *preventing* such situations in the first place, by playing to their employees' strengths, understanding where they flourish, and using these skills to energise them within their roles. Only then, will happiness be truly experienced within the workplace.

For more information on how A&DC can assist you in energising your staff, please refer to the Energise section on our website (www.adc.uk.com).

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About A&DC

Founded in 1988 by Nigel Povah, author of 'Assessment and Development Centres', A&DC is one of the leading experts in the Assessment and Development field. We combine our expertise in business psychology and behavioural change to create and deliver end-to-end solutions to HR issues across the talent management spectrum.

We work in partnership with our clients to unlock human potential, using best of breed processes to enable them to select, promote and develop talented people who can contribute effectively to business growth and cultural enhancement. Always, we apply recognised best practice, putting our clients in a position where they can minimise risk and optimise return on investment in these critical areas of people strategy.

Based in Surrey, our Consultants operate across the UK. Through our international partners, we ensure that our comprehensive portfolio of products and services is delivered through specialists with a high degree of local cultural and business insight.

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