BEworks
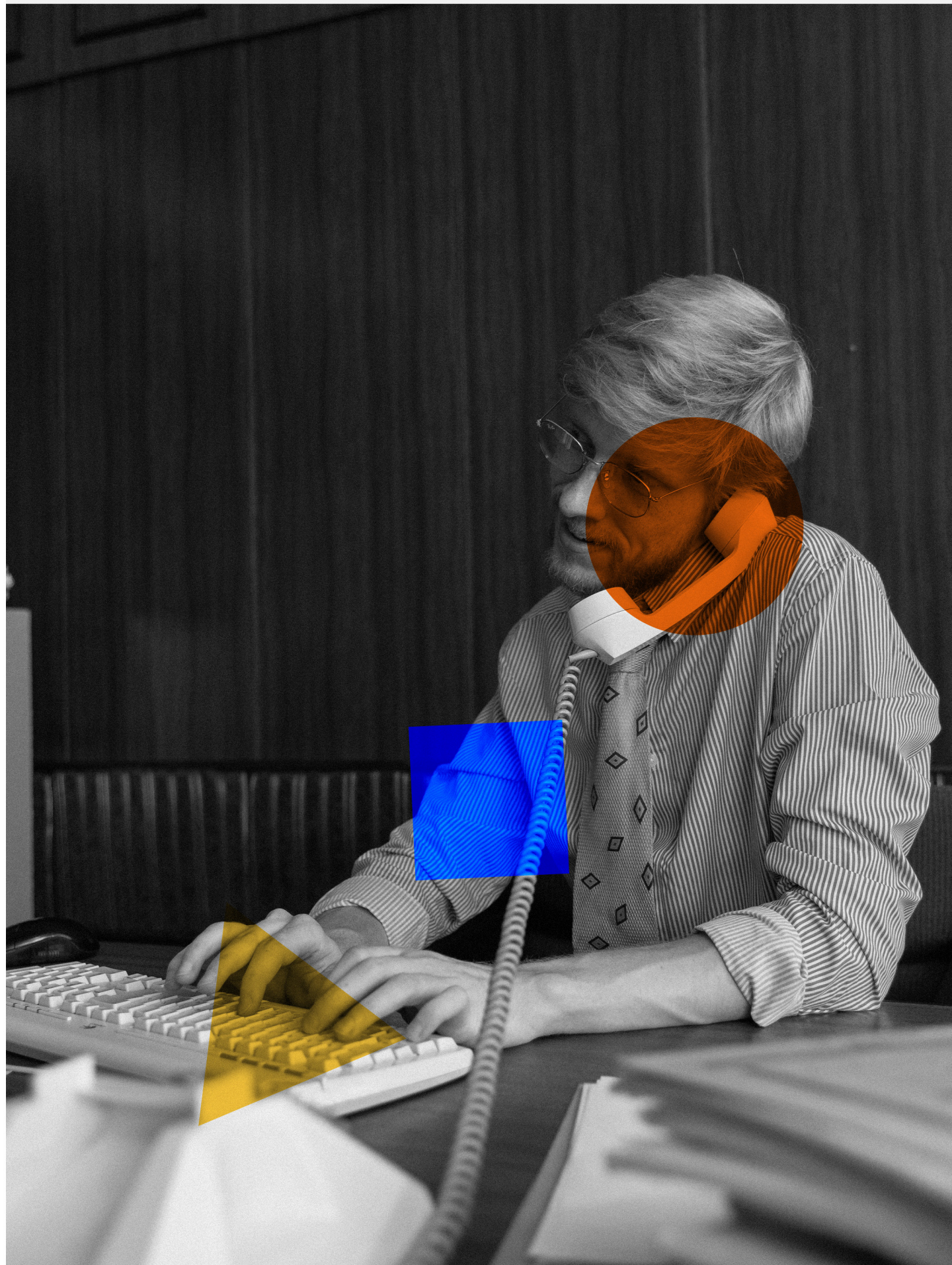
Using *Behavioral* Science to Improve Employee Well-Being

A renewed focus on employee well-being

Increasing the mental and physical wellness of employees represents a significant priority for organizations today[1]. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, many workers have been confined to their homes as they juggle the pressure to perform professionally with personal anxieties surrounding health, financial insecurity, work-life balance, and growing social isolation. Employees are increasingly feeling stressed and report ongoing collaboration issues with some dangerously close to burnout.

There is no question that stress carries a serious cost – for individuals, businesses, and the economy. Indeed, a joint analysis conducted by researchers at Stanford University and Harvard Business School estimates that workplace stress costs businesses nearly 200 billion dollars per year in healthcare costs in the US alone. The losses associated with stress-related absenteeism, high turnover rates, and eroded productivity are even greater. Adding to this, companies' suboptimal management of employees leads to more than 120,000 deaths per year in the US alone from stress-related health failures such as stroke, and cardiovascular and metabolic illness[2].

To combat this, leaders in the past have invested in workplace wellness programs[3] that provided workers with perks such as mindfulness training, access to yoga, gym memberships, healthy snacks in the kitchen, office napping pods, and other programming meant to foster healthy attitudes and behaviors. What leaders have discovered, however, is that these programs were not always effective, either because they did not directly treat the issue at hand or because employees were quick to habituate to the perks (rendering it ineffective or easy to abandon). Moreover, the pandemic has uprooted many of these wellness programs. Not only has the pandemic changed how and where people work, it has changed people's assumptions, preferences, and attitudes toward work.

Leaders today are therefore in uncharted territory, seeking new toolsets and evidence-based approaches to make an impactful (and measurable) difference on the well-being of employees and productivity. Consequently, many leaders are now turning to behavioral science for answers.

---

[1] https://futureworkplace.com/ebooks/2021-hr-sentiment-survey/

[2] Goh, Joel, Jeffrey Pfeffer, and Stefanos A. Zenios. "Workplace Stressors & Health Outcomes: Health Policy for the Workplace." Behavioral Science & Policy 1, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 43–52.

[3] Mattke, S., Liu, H., Caloyeras, J., Huang, C. Y., Van Busum, K. R., Khodyakov, D., & Shier, V. (2013). Workplace wellness programs study. *Rand health quarterly*, 3(2).

BEworks

What do we really mean by well-being?

To begin, we must set the foundation and understand what is "well-being" broadly, and not just for employees. Our work in 2021 reveals that well-being is one's overall health and happiness, and is comprised of four dimensions:

1. **Having basic needs met:** Having access to the require economic resources, having political freedom, good physical health, having decent standard of living

2. **A feeling of purpose:** Being engaged, having goals, expressing intrinsic interest, feeling accomplished and competent, and feeling in control over one's life

3. **A feeling of connection:** Having close, meaningful, supportive relationships; feeling that you are cared for, and that you can trust and belong

4. **A feeling of happiness:** Feeling satisfied, and having an otherwise pleasant mood

How can we improve employee well-being?

Knowing the broad definition of well-being gives us a starting point, and helps us more narrowly hone our understanding of *employee* well-being. In our work spanning across the last 2 years, we have found that there are two broad categories of factors that affect employee well-being:

1. Factors that create well-being

2. Factors that help recover poor well-being

Factors that create well-being

In 2020, we conducted research to create a Workplace Diagnostic Toolkit, where we uncovered the five psychological factors that are critical for creating employee wellness and success, especially in the work-from-home environment:

1. **Trust:** employee's trust in their colleagues, leadership, and the organization as a whole, as well as the organization's trust in its works, as reflected in monitoring levels within the company

2. **Creativity:** availability of alone time, flexibility, and a supportive work culture

3. **Collaboration:** a shared understanding and ease of communication with colleagues

4. **Connection:** availability of designated downtime, and other workplace features that allow employees to overcome isolation and social disconnection

5. **Psychological Safety:** freedom to express concerns, detach from work, and achieve autonomy

Importantly, the impact of these five factors may vary according to the organization or employee type. Collecting data to understand which of these factors are most predictive of well-being in your employees is therefore critical.

Factors that recover poor well-being

Many employees have no choice but to be on the frontlines, and face daily distressing circumstances that affect their well-being. What can we do when employees are already in a state of poor well-being?

Recovery from a state of poor well-being is primarily about re-building people's psychological resilience. In general, "resilience" is the ability for people to bounce back or recover from stress, to adapt to stressful circumstances, and to stay healthy and thrive despite adversity[4]. In our resilience training for workers, we have created a toolkit of resilience-building techniques that are based on the clinical psychology literature.

In general, these techniques fall into three categories:

1. **Psychological:** internal resources that are always available to empower the person— which include techniques for shifting their perception/interpretation of events; finding meaning, mindfulness & gratitude; and self-soothing and emotional regulation.

2. **Physiological:** basic techniques for fortifying one's physical health and mitigating stress. This includes breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation

3. **Interpersonal:** strategies to help people build the best social support network. This includes techniques to help people think about what their psychological needs are, and matching those needs to available social resources (including family, friends, support groups, counsellors, distress lines, etc.)

Critically, we have learned that not all techniques work for everyone. In response, our training focuses on helping workers identify which techniques are most suitable for their well-being needs and comfort level. Based on the techniques they identify, they are guided through an activity to create their own resilience plan.

[4] Carver (1998); Tusaie & Dyer (2004)

BE in action - case study:

In our work with a Canadian financial services company in 2020, the Diagnostic Toolkit was used to better understand their employee work-from-home challenges. We collected data from 277 employees, and found that among the five psychological dimensions and 16 sub-constructs that were analyzed, three stood out as both striking and counterintuitive drivers of work performance and satisfaction: **shared understanding, depth of relationships, and psychological detachment**.

Shared understanding: a psychological sub-construct of collaboration. Online collaboration suffered when teams didn't have a clear understanding of project goals, deadlines and team member roles. Shared understanding turned out to be of critical importance for both Work-from-Home performance and satisfaction.

Depth of relationships: Our research found that employees who were able to build and nurture meaningful relationships with colleagues while WFH were better equipped to tackle challenges, improving both their performance and satisfaction.

Psychological detachment: a sub-construct of psychological safety. Many employees felt they couldn't stop thinking about work during non-working hours. This inability to psychologically detach from work had a detrimental effect on WFH satisfaction, but it did not significantly impact WFH performance.

The behavioral approach to improving employee well-being

Ability to improve employee well-being starts from understanding them psychologically

Getting at the crux of what would improve employees' well-being requires going beyond the first step of collecting employee self-reports (via surveys, interviews, or anecdotes) about how they are feeling.

To successfully create well-being, we must dig deeper and uncover the psychological and behavioral drivers of employee's performance and satisfaction. Armed with that information, we can devise ways to circumvent the specific problems that are causing employees to feel exhausted and demotivated. Instead of focusing on the *what*, we should be focusing on the *why*. Getting to the heart of the 'why' requires a behavioral approach.

High level overview of the behavioral approach to improving employee well-being

At BEworks, we use a systematic, scientific method to diagnose the employee state of mind. In particular:

A. **Discovery:** establish current intuition and assumptions informing our understanding of employee well-being; analyze the current state (including any baseline data), and establish key target behaviours and metrics of success

B. **Well-Being Diagnostics:** determine the key factors necessary for your employee's well-being through a combination of assessment through our proprietary wellness research and new data collection with your employees

C. **Intervention Development:** generate ideas for interventions that would improve employee wellness, that are grounded in the latest psychological insights

D. **Experimentation:** conduct empirical research using state-of-the-art scientific methods to evaluate the interventions with employees

E. **Strategic Recommendations:** provide guidance on which interventions to implement and what the next steps should be

This approach allows you to gain a deep understanding of the psychological mindset of employees and gives you confidence about what should be implemented and what should not.

BE IN ACTION: A CASE STUDY

In 2021, we worked with Canadian Tire Financial services to assist workers who may face stressful situations that impact their well-being. For context, customer service operators at financial institutions have received unprecedented volumes of calls from distressed customers. Furthermore, these calls are more emotionally charged and likely to escalate than ever before. To be sure, the issue of difficult callers is linked with the stress brought on by recent financial volatility. But the trend predates the pandemic. As the world continues to undergo its digital transition, the easiest customer service issues are now largely outsourced to chat-bots, while more complex issues are left to the human beings.

In recognition of this change taking a toll on workers' mental health, we designed a training protocol aimed at helping the company's representatives develop better handling skills and resilience in the face of emotionally difficult client conversations. This program, rooted in the psychology of empathy and de-escalation, equipped workers with practical knowledge of escalation triggers, and offered them experience with applying de-escalation techniques developed by leading conflict resolution experts. While our client is still in the early stages of quantifying the impact of this program, their preliminary observations of changes to employee well-being and retention are tangibly positive.
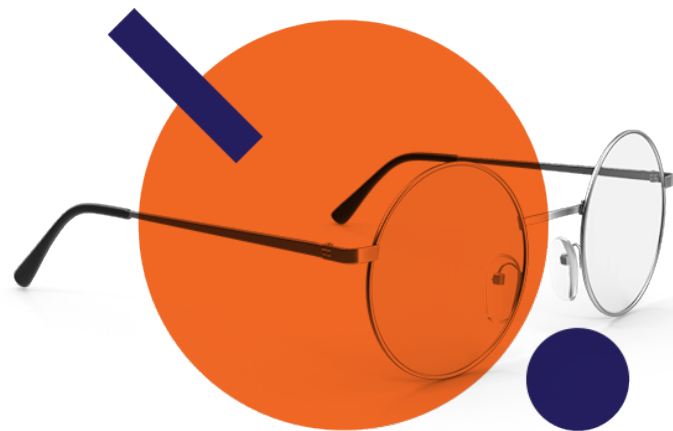
"Our work with BEworks to help with more difficult and emotional calls has been insightful and helpful. It has not only provided a new perspective on the role of emotions and motivation during a heated customer discussion, but it has also increased manager and supervisor well-being during and after their own difficult customer calls... This training has gone a long way in helping us be more skillful with one of the difficult aspects of doing a front-line, customer-facing role"

Derek Moore
Canadian Tire Financial Services

Getting started using a *behavioral* approach

To help you incorporate the behavioral approach to your employee wellness goals, here are a few questions that can get you started:

1) What employee sentiments or behaviors are you observing? Is there a problem? If so, what is your sense on the scope and magnitude of the problem?

2) Who is the target employee? What is the behavior you want to change in the target population? Why?

3) What research, if any, have you done already with the target employee?

    a. What methods were used?

    b. What did you find?

    c. Were there any gaps in insights with this prior research?

    d. What are some outstanding questions you have?

4) What hypotheses do you have about the psychological needs of the target employee? How do you know this? (E.g., through employee surveys, anecdotes, manager reports, etc.)

5) What hypotheses do you have about the psychological barriers that employees face, both at and outside of work?
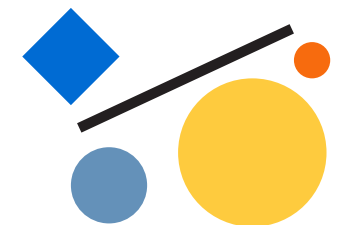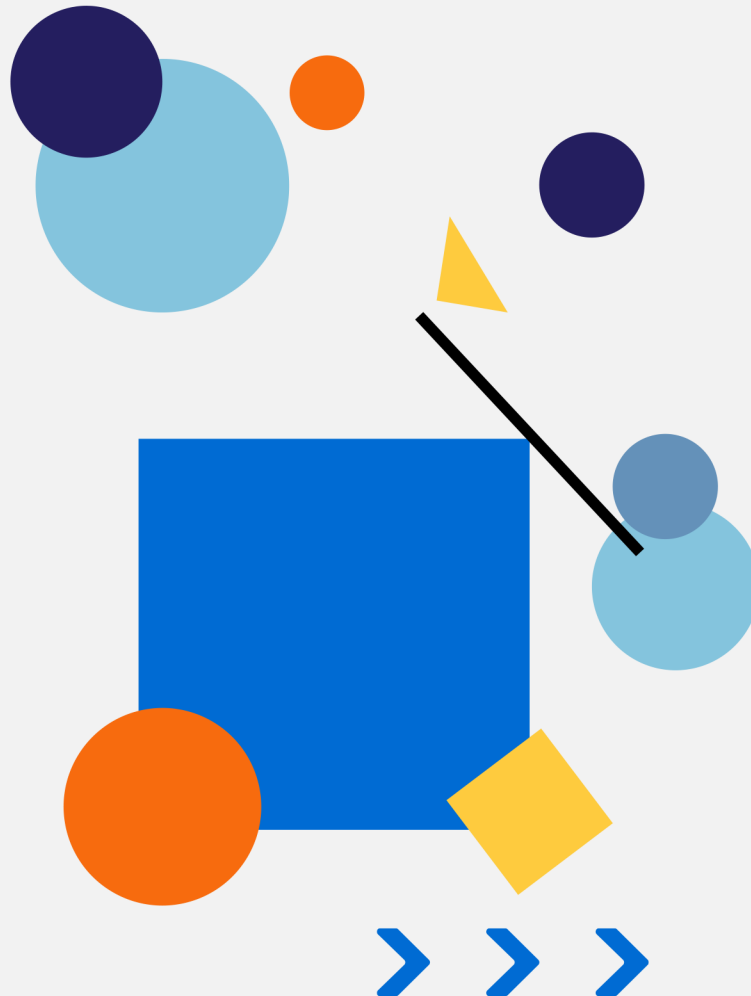
BEworks

BEworks

For more information:
T: 416-920-1921
E: info@BEworks.com

Ⓕ BEworks　Ⓣ BEworks　Ⓘ BEworksInc　Ⓛ BEworksInc