

Career well-being: Practical tools and ideas for organisations to support employees

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To cite this article:

Mansfield, K. (2024). Career well-being: Practical tools and ideas for organisations to support employees. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 53(1), 68-79. <https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.5307>

Abstract

This article explores the way that career professionals can have career conversations which integrate work and well-being. As the boundaries between work and non-work have become more blurred, it is vital that career professionals and organisations support individuals to take care of themselves and not just to focus on getting and keeping a job. The article considers the published material on the topic of career well-being as well as the research and case studies developed by Career Counselling Services (CCS) through their *Balance* Career Coaching toolkit designed to support the overlapping needs of individuals and employers at work.

Key words: career; wellbeing; work

Introduction

I am writing about this topic from my perspective as a career coach working with individuals and organisations to support them with sustainable career management programmes. The pandemic shone a light on employee wellbeing in an unprecedented way resulting in a fundamental shift in employee attitudes to their emotional, social and physical connection to the workplace. Workplace norms were re-written. In this post-Covid

era of predicted global talent shortages with organisations seeking to capitalise upon the connection between diverse talent and competitive advantage, it has never been more important for employers to respond to the career needs of their employees in a much more holistic way.

At Career Counselling Services (CCS), we define holistic career coaching as a process which enables people to identify and utilise their resources to make career-related decisions and manage career-related issues (Nathan & Hill, 2006). Such holistic career conversations acknowledge the overlap between emotion and life issues and go beyond a traditional career discussion focused on skills, strengths and aspirations. Within such conversations it is important to recognise professional boundaries and to understand that acknowledging the impact of wellbeing on career does not mean that career professionals should stray deeply into life issues for which we may be unqualified and where other specialist help may need to be sought.

There is a shared responsibility for career management between organisations and the individuals who work within them. Employers often request 'self-driven employee career behaviour' as a desired outcome from career development programmes. Yet to make the benefits sustainable, employers must also create environments in which the employee can be pro-active but be supported by managers through easy access to up-to-date information about development and work opportunities. Holistic considerations may be age and gender related and include challenges such as mental and physical health, family, caring responsibilities, neuro-divergency, menopause, bereavement, divorce and more. Managers and career coaches cannot ignore the potential impact of these issues on career well-being, engagement, motivation and performance.

I start with an overview of some of the theories and concepts relating to career well-being before describing CCS's empirical research into this topic and subsequent creation of practical tools to support employers and career coaches to have more meaningful career conversations that pay more attention to contributing factors of career well-being. I illustrate the application of some of the tools in a detailed case study.

Theories and concepts: What is career well-being?

Career well-being is a complex and dynamic construct. The term is often confused with wellness at work initiatives which might offer short term positive benefits to physical and mental health but may neglect more fundamental aspects of career well-being such as opportunities for individuals to use their strengths, to find purpose and meaning in their work and to feel control over how they integrate work and life.

There are very few published studies that directly focus on career well-being as opposed to employee well-being at work. Kidd's (2006; 2008) research is exceptional in its direct use of the term in the academic literature. Seligman's (2011) work on happiness and well-being also makes a significant contribution to our understanding of this area although it does not directly use the term career well-being. Robertson's (2013) work offers an interesting exploration of the concept of career well-being as well as important insights into how

career guidance can positively impact on well-being. Within the context of organisations however, it is Gallup’s long-term study of well-being that informs much of what is known about the correlation between higher levels of employee career well-being and its positive impact on organisational outcomes such as higher levels of engagement and retention (Harter et al., 2003).

As Kidd (2006) noted, career well-being has often been conflated in the literature with job satisfaction, yet definitions of job satisfaction seem to overlook the importance of the role of context and social relationships as important contributing factors to career well-being.

Kidd (2008) describes the seven features of career well-being as:

1. career transitions;
2. interpersonal relationships;
3. relationship with the organisation;
4. work performance;
5. sense of purpose;
6. learning and development; and
7. work-life issues

Kidd’s research found that career well-being was ultimately ‘an ongoing state rather than a discrete outcome’ (Kidd, 2008, p.168). The research also considered the facilitators and inhibiting factors in relation to career well-being (see Table 1).

Conditions facilitating career well-being	Threats to career well-being
Opportunities for voluntary mobility, successful adjustment to new role	Involuntary mobility, lack of opportunities for mobility, problems adjusting to a new role
Support, feedback and recognition	Interpersonal difficulties, lack of support, feedback or recognition
Autonomy, power	Adapting to organizational change, alienation, inequitable treatment
Using skills, performing well	Dissatisfaction with performance, overload
Purposeful, optimistic orientation	Pessimism, uncertainty about the future
Developing skills	Lack of challenge, lack of opportunities to develop
Work/Life Balance	Difficulties with personal life spilling over into work

Table 1. Kidd’s (2008, p.177) facilitators of and threats to career well-being

Some of these can be described as contextual factors that can be positively influenced by organisations, such as the opportunities for mobility, development and support. Others can be seen as factors that the individual can take greater responsibility for such as using their skills, performing well and adapting to change. There is of course an interplay between

the individual and the environmental factors, with the extent to which an individual can fully utilise their skills dependent on contextual opportunities to do so. The descriptions of these facilitators and inhibitors highlight some of the challenges that organisations may face in trying to marry the individual aspects with what the organisation can do. The role of managers is a critical variable between the two for example, that can positively or negatively influence the conditions of well-being.

Seligman (2011, p.15) similarly defined the interplay between context, relationships and individual factors in his work on well-being. He linked well-being to flourishing, which he described as a complex and dynamic construct that is difficult to define and measure. He suggested that it is 'just like the "weather" and "freedom" in its structure: no single measure defines it exhaustively...but several things contribute to it; these are the elements of well-being, and each of the elements is a measurable thing.'

Seligman (2011) identifies five contributing element of well-being which he summarised with the PERMA acronym.

- Positive emotion
- Engagement
- Relationships
- Meaning
- Accomplishment

This suggests that there are elements that can be positively influenced to support employees to achieve greater levels of career well-being. But what can employers gain from such an investment, and do they have the resources and skills to provide this kind of support?

What is the benefit to organisations of focusing on career well-being?

Much of what we know about career well-being and its link to organisational outcomes stems from scientific analysis of Gallup's annual world poll on well-being; a large, continuous, and diverse survey that includes 160 countries, covering 98% of the world's population since 2008 (Harter et al., 2003). Gallup concur that there is no standard way of measuring well-being and attempt to measure it through five elements: career, social, financial, community and physical wellbeing. Career well-being was found to be the most important and the one which impacts most significantly on all the other areas of well-being. Gallup define career well-being as '*you like what you do every day*' (Rath & Harter, 2010). For instance, lower career well-being impacts individuals' physical, financial and social well-being.

The research allowed for broad criteria to acknowledge that 'career' might not occur formally in the workplace, resonating with Arnold's definition of career: 'The sequence of employment related positions, roles, activities and experiences encountered by a person' (Arnold, 1997, p16).

The research found that employee groups with higher levels of career well-being offered several benefits to employers including:

- increased productivity and profitability;
- higher levels of employee engagement and retention;
- higher levels of communication; and
- greater alignment between employee strengths and organisational goals.

The Gallup data (Rath & Harter, 2010) offers particularly interesting insights into the relationship between work engagement and well-being. It suggests that employee engagement is the single biggest driver of career well-being, yet higher engagement levels do not necessarily mean employees are thriving at work. Higher levels of work engagement do not prevent burnout and other mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Employees with high engagement and low well-being in their lives are still 61% more likely to suffer burnout. However, where well-being is considered high across the other areas of well-being (outside of work), the benefits of engagement are enhanced.

Of significant note, is Gallup's finding that identifying and harnessing the strengths of employees is a strong component of both engagement and career well-being. Where employees are engaged and thriving from a well-being perspective, and using their strengths, burnout levels are practically non-existent.

Those were reported to be using their strengths were found to be six times as likely to be engaged and more than three times as likely to report having an excellent quality of career well-being than those who were not. These individuals claimed to work up 40 hours a week and enjoy their work, whilst those who do not have the opportunity to use their strengths reported feeling burned out after just 20 hours of work per week. (Rath & Harter, 2010). Individuals with thriving career well-being were also content with work overlapping with their personal lives and viewed it as almost inevitable.

There seem to be clear benefits for organisations in paying attention to the career well-being needs of its employees yet the reality of operationalising the learning from these studies and concepts and turning them into lived experiences for employees working with organisations presents many challenges.

The rationale for a new approach to career well-being

The complexity of this topic means that for many organisations it is difficult to navigate the practical ways in which they can positively influence the career well-being needs of diverse groups of employees. They may face several barriers in doing so. For example, managers and leaders may not feel that they have the skills or confidence to have career conversations that address these wider holistic issues. It is often easier for managers to focus on performance and avoid conversations that focus on development and career aspiration. As a result, a gap is often reported between well-intentioned talent management programmes and individual career aspirations.

In our (CCS) experience of running career coaching for organisations we have noticed that many individuals who seek career coaching, state a desire or a hope to change their job or career. Often through career coaching it materialises that clients are not unhappy

with the role or career that they have chosen, but rather recognise that they are not paying sufficient attention to the way in which they manage their careers. Some are overly focused on work at the expense of their personal lives. Others are pre-occupied with 'doing a good job' but neglect career behaviours that are important when building a successful organisational career.

The fact that career well-being issues can be addressed through career coaching may raise resourcing issues for some organisations. However, we have found that those organisations that consider ways to develop the skills of those working within organisations as career coaches and which equip line managers with basic career conversation skills see sustainable benefits over time. So, our goal in this project was to create a set of practical career coaching tools that could be used by career coaches working in organisational contexts. The aim will be to help employees to develop a set of effective career management behaviours by enabling them to better navigate organisational careers and recognise the overlap between their own needs and those of their employer. We wanted to develop a questionnaire and tools that would fill the space between the employer's need to maximise productivity and the individual's need to manage their own career needs and well-being.

Underpinning research

Our experience suggested that those individuals who were successful in their careers recognised that in the context of working within an organisation, it was not enough to be good at your job, but instead that there were a set of career behaviours that needed to be cultivated across several key areas. This led us to develop a hypothesis that effective career managers 'balanced' the career needs of their whole selves alongside the needs of their employer as opposed to the over-emphasis of one at the expense of the other.

To test this hypothesis and to inform the design of the tools, we completed empirical research based on qualitative interviews with 40 individuals in mid-career. These interviews explored the factors that participants felt contributed to their career success, what aspects allowed them to thrive at work and how they managed their energy and self-care. The research took place over the course of one year.

Thematic analysis identified key behaviours that were viewed as contributing to successful career management. Key aspects included having a *successful and supportive relationship with a manager* and the need to actively combine good career management with *effective self-care*. This included work-life integration but also importantly how energy resources were channelled at work. The findings concurred with Gallup's research (Rath & Harter, 2010), suggesting that those who were able to use more of their strengths at work, were better satisfied with work-life integration as well as career more generally.

Ultimately the project led to the identification of seven career management factors that could inform the development of the tool. These are set out in Table 2.

Career management factor	Example quotes from the research
Self-Focus – Employer focus	'A manager who encourages you out of your comfort zone, with support' 'Getting constructive feedback' 'Being known for something – standing out because of your commitment to the organisation's values'
Building relationships	'My ability to build relationships'
Career development strategy	'Actively managing career development'
Learning and development	'Putting yourself in learning situations'
Use of personal energy	'Understanding that I need to spend my energy on the things I can control'
Adapting to change	'Being seen as a can-do person'
Work-life balance	'Work smart and force myself to switch off after hours'

Table 2. CCS Balance Career Management Factors and underpinning research insights

Through the analysis of these interviews, we were able to confirm our hypothesis that those who described themselves as thriving in their careers were better able to balance their own needs with those of their employers.

Development of the *Balance* Career Coaching Tools

The seven categories set out in Table 2 were developed into the *CCS Balance Career Management Factors* (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The CCS Balance Career Management Factors

Within these seven categories, *self-focus versus employer-focus* serves as an umbrella concept. Each category was then developed further with an associated set of career related behaviours underpinning them. From here, a self-scoring behaviourally based questionnaire, the Balance questionnaire was developed allowing individuals to rate which categories they were managing well and those where they may wish to improve.

As an example, I share a resource which provides more information on why the Use of Personal Energy category is important to effective career management and which sets out associated positive behaviours.

Use of Personal Energy
Why is this important?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enables an efficient and effective use of personal resources • Gives ideas to use strengths inside and outside of work • Strengthens resolve to decide whether to take on new responsibilities • Can reduce anxiety about things outside of sphere of control
Effective behaviours
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising opportunities that play to strengths • Collaborating with people who raise energy • Doing some self-management activities • Identifying your strengths • Communicating clearly whether now is a good time to take on extra work • Recognising when you are reaching your 'limit'

Figure 2. The use of personal energy

To make the research practical and useful to employers and individuals, a set of 30 career coaching tools were developed. In creating the tools, we sought to connect various theories and approaches with practical application and drew on elements of positive psychology, (strengths), Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) (Grimley, 2007), work engagement and solutions-focused approaches were created across the various categories.

I give a few examples below of some of these tools before illustrating how the tools were practically applied in one case study.

Category	Example of tool	Purpose	Drawing on
Self v Employer Focus	<i>Aligning your vision with your employer</i>	To be able to make career and development decisions in line with an employer	CCS research
Building Relationships	<i>Perceptual Positions</i>	To encourage an individual to build empathy in managing relationships	NLP
Career Development Strategy	<i>Writing the next chapter of my career story</i>	To create a coherent and meaningful future career narrative	Cochrane's (1997) narrative career theory
Learning & Development	<i>What is my preferred learning style?</i>	To understand different and preferred ways of learning	Kolb's four learning styles (Loo, 2004)
Use of Personal Energy	<i>Using my strengths</i>	To identify opportunities to play to strengths and raise career well-being	Seligman's (2011) positive psychology and Gallup research
Adapting to Change	<i>Gains and Losses</i>	To focus on the potential gains of impending organisational change	Kahneman and Tversky's (2013) Prospect Theory
Work-Life Balance	<i>Work-Life Balance Commandments</i>	To realise that work life balance is very personally defined. Encourages the individual to define their own 'commandments'	Kirchmeyer's (2000) Work-Life Balance Theory

Table 3. Example tools

The questionnaire and the tools are designed to be used as part of career coaching discussions. We have found that the questionnaire and the tools empower the individual through first recognising patterns in their career management behaviour and then in identifying ways in which they can positively improve this. In turn, this benefits organisations as the outputs can be combined with personal development plans, in-house career conversations, external career coaching and talent management programmes.

An illustration of how the *Balance* career coaching tools can be used

I first describe how Atif presented for career coaching before describing how the career coach used the *Balance* career coaching tools to support him.

Box 1: Case Study – how Atif presented for career coaching

Atif has worked in Financial Audit for the last five years since qualifying. He has very strong business, technical and analytical skills and has good understanding of financial audit methodology. He is very ambitious, would like to become a Senior Audit Manager and has voiced some dissatisfaction that his vertical career is not progressing quickly enough.

He believes that he has met all the technical objectives set and he is beginning to feel demotivated. He is feeling left behind because many of his peers have joined private accountancy firms. He also feels that his manager is not delegating fulfilling projects and work.

He has had some feedback recently that he doesn't come across very confidently or assertively in client meetings and he tends to hesitate or defer when it comes to decision-making about audit judgements. He realises that this behaviour will not help him in his managerial aspirations.

Atif has a young family and works long hours. He has always believed that this will get him 'noticed'. He enjoyed the fact that during the pandemic he got to see more of his family. Now he is expected to travel into the office 4 days a week.

Atif saw an internal career coach, frustrated with his lack of development and feeling quite stuck. The coach had some hunches that there were some underlying issues relating to his perceptions of career success, as well as parental and spousal expectations of how quickly his career should be developing as well as his work-life balance. There was also a sense that he needed support to have a more impactful career conversation with his line manager.

Through skilled listening to define the issues more deeply, the coach was then able to draw on several of the *Balance* tools to help Atif reflect more deeply on what his feelings and concerns really were about his career and to identify some strategies to move forward.

It became clear that Atif had been very focused on a linear career development path and that his frustration in relation to how slow this was, was impacting his confidence. He struggled to associate career with lateral development and his 'tunnel-vision' meant he was missing other opportunities to embrace personal growth.

The coach used the planned happenstance tool, which draws on Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz's (1999) theory which posits that careers are significantly affected by chance events, and that it is important to embrace unexpected opportunities. This approach encourages the cultivation of the skills of curiosity, persistence, flexibility, optimism and risk-taking to manage careers effectively and cope better with change. The tool encouraged Atif to think about the extent to which he was demonstrating these career skills and how he could develop the competencies further. This helped him to start to see how he could develop within his role and start to build confidence in his ability to influence his own career development more positively.

In Atif's case, there were significant overlapping issues between life and work. Too much energy was both being consumed by activities not playing to his strengths and by the fact that he was spending long days in the office and not seeing his children at the end of day. This was affecting his motivation and enthusiasm.

In the Use of Personal Energy category, a tool drawn from positive psychology called 'Using my strengths' enabled Atif to start to reflect on the activities and skills that really gave him energy and to identify specific projects that he could suggest to his manager he would like to lead on. The tool helped him to recognise the connection between spending time on things that gave him energy and how this would contribute positively to how he was viewed by others.

In the Work-Life Balance category, the 'Work-Life Balance Commandments' tool enabled Atif to identify his dealmakers and dealbreakers when it comes to his own self-care and family life. He was willing to work long hours, but these needed to be far more on his terms. In terms of what made his heart hurt, it was not being able to eat dinner with his children at least every other evening of the week. He was very happy to log on afterwards to complete work if needed but he recognised that he needed to have a conversation with his manager to try to set a new boundary around this and ensure that he would leave the office by 4pm twice a week. His manager was amenable and if anything, liked and respected the more assertive side to Atif sharing what was important to him outside of the workplace.

This approach to career coaching benefitted the organisation as Atif and his manager have now begun a much more open dialogue around career. The focus on his engagement with projects that play to his strengths have resulted in much more positive feedback, which has boosted his confidence. His manager has now started delegating more fulfilling projects to him and has signposted other development opportunities outside of his immediate team as she recognises how valuable he is to the organisation.

Conclusions

The case study demonstrates the practical application of the *Balance* tools in supporting individuals with their career well-being and acknowledges the inevitable overlap between life and work. Through sensitive use of the tools, Atif's career coach created the frame and the environment for a career conversation that enabled Atif to recognise this and to explore his career development in the context of his whole life. This enabled him to identify goals and actions steps that contributed to his career well-being at a much more fundamental, holistic level than would have been possible, had the career conversation focused on his career aspirations alone.

Ultimately, career coaching tools can only be of value to individuals and employers when there is a clear purpose and rationale, and the tools are de-briefed as part of career coaching discussions. The tools were selected with care and purpose by Atif's career coach to address some of the contributing factors to his career issues.

We have found that the questionnaire and tools when used in this manner connects to some of the ideas on career well-being explored in the theories and concepts section, through enabling individuals to reflect on what 'sustains' them and enables them to thrive. For organisations, the tools can help to provide a framework for enabling their employees to thrive by paying attention to environmental factors that impact well-being such as the

role of managers, support and feedback, and opportunities for skills development and the application of strengths.

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