
OPINION RESILIENCE WEEK SEPTEMBER 2020

Professor Andrew Smith: The changing nature of work, resilience and mental wellbeing

15th September 2020 6:00 am



15th September 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many changes in the nature of work. These challenging times may reduce wellbeing and there is a need to review current knowledge about work and wellbeing, and develop approaches to cope with new issues. The first phase is education and many organisations are now used to online communications which provide a useful tool to either access established training or develop new packages. There are two key points to make about work and mental wellbeing. First, it is important to consider both positive wellbeing (happiness, satisfaction and positive mood) and also negative outcomes (stress, fatigue, anxiety and depression). Secondly, there are many established factors which influence these outcomes. Generally, positive characteristics lead to positive outcomes. For example, control and support at work, and psychological capital (e.g. high self-esteem, self-efficacy and optimism) are associated with greater job satisfaction and a more positive mood. In contrast, mental health problems are related to high job demands, interpersonal problems such as bullying, negative coping styles (e.g. wishful thinking, avoidance and self-blame) and treating stress as a threat rather than a challenge. The best predictor of both types of wellbeing are the combined effects of the different risk factors. For example, the most resilient people will have high social support, high psychological capital, use positive coping styles and perceive job stress as a challenge. This approach to resilience is more useful than those that focus on a narrow range of personal characteristics.

After the education phase, it is important that the organisation and staff apply the generic material to their own specific context. This can then lead to a problem-solving phase where staff are encouraged to discuss small “nudges” that could lead to greater wellbeing at work. These may be related to working practices but can also cover work-life balance, and need to be done in the context of health and safety recommendations relating to COVID-19. Finally, it is important to get commitment for proposed actions from both staff and management. This engagement will allow the wellbeing process to evolve and become a key part of the psychological contract between staff and the organisation.

Professor Andrew P Smith

School of Psychology, Cardiff University, 63 Park Place, Cardiff CF10 4AS, UK