

Strategies for Optimizing Psychosocial Health at Work

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This contribution points out the individual and organizational strategies that can be carried out in order to not to prevent or intervene in the disease but to promote the psychosocial health of employees. Based on the Positive Experiences Model, authors describe two main types of optimizing strategies both at individual and organizational level: 1) *preventive optimization strategies*, as interventions or actions addressed to the entire population of the organization although nobody has expressed psychosocial distress, and 2) *improvement optimization strategies*, as interventions addressed to those employees who do not show any psychosocial risk or distress problems, but with some subjective well-being indicators identified as susceptible to be improved. A total of 12 optimization strategies are briefly described. Finally, authors stress the importance of combining both individual and organizational optimization strategies.

Keywords: strategies, optimization, well-being, flow.

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There has been a long tradition from different disciplines (such as medicine, psychology...) to study the harmful elements that affect how people feel, whether at work or outside it. In this regard, and specifically at workplace, official occupational health surveys have tended to focus on the physical and/or negative psychosocial factors that may be influencing employees' health. This is the case of the Spanish National Survey of Working Conditions (2007), although one of its objectives is: "to know those job environmental factors that influence employees' health". However, it focuses on the influence of these factors on employees' un-health, i.e., in aspects of distress (stress, depression, chronic fatigue) but not on well-being. And this is curious considering that World Health Organization (WHO) already defined in 1949 "health" as "state of complete physical, mental and social, not the mere absence of disease."

This trend, however, is beginning to change in international contexts. In this regard, the Fourth European Survey on Working Conditions, carried out by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions included, in their quest for quality of life at work, or good working life, indicators of subjective well-being such as employee satisfaction. Among the data,

note that some of the most important factors in employee's satisfaction are job security, a positive environment at work and good opportunities to professionally learn and develop. Also the Gallup Institute (<http://www.gallup.com>) has specific indicators on subjective well-being (life evaluation, emotional health, physical health, healthy behaviours, work environment) which are evaluated through monthly surveys.

This need for going a step further and not only acting on the negative aspects but also assessing the strengths and empowering them is also beginning to be recognized in the world of organizations. The search for strategies to improve is one of the characteristics of the beginning of the XXI century; above all it is an essential condition to ensure the future success of an organization. Therefore, this positive turn has led to the birth of a new approach in research increasingly applied to the intervention area. This is the Positive Organizational Behavior (Luthans, 2002). The emphasis on the search and study of the positive factors that characterize organizations, and therefore the pursuit of health of the employee and the organization, represent a new challenge in the study of organizations today and give rise to what it is known as *Positive Occupational Health Psychology* (POHP). The POHP arises, therefore, from the integration of Positive Psychology with Occupational Health, and its focus is to

discover the characteristics of a "good organizational life" or a positive or significant organizational life (Llorens, Salanova, & Martinez, 2008). From this point of view, the objective of this paper is to point out the individual and organizational strategies that can be carried out in order to not to prevent or intervene in the disease but to promote the psychosocial health of employees.

Theoretical Approach towards Positive Experiences

From an Action-Research (AR) approach, a theoretical background is required as a starting point. This theoretical background (Research) will lead to select, for instance, the type and number of variables to be assessed; it will also help to interpret the results and then to choose the best strategy to improve/increase the expected results (Action). However, this AR approach gives researchers the chance to select which theoretical background better suits their interpretation of reality. In the current paper, we will consider the *Positive Experiences Model* (Rodríguez-Sánchez & Cifre, 2012) as a basis to develop the optimization strategies. The Positive Experiences Model is based on previous models such as Vitaminic Model of psychological well-being (Warr, 1998), Channel Model of Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), Job Demands-Resources Model of Burnout (JD-R; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001), the Dual Model (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) and the Resources-Experiences/Emotions-Demands Model (RED Model; Salanova, Cifre, Martínez, Llorens, & Lorente, 2011) both on Burnout and Engagement. Besides, some previous reviews have focused on intervening in order to increase work engagement. For instance, Leiter and Maslach (2010), based on the Dual Model, proposed

strategies such as: balancing demands and resources in order to reduce the rate at which work depletes employees' energy, enhancing employee health in order to increase personal resources, and improving workplace safety, since workplace accidents showed a relationship with exhaustion. However, in this paper we will focus on strategies to improve other positive experiences/emotions, such as subjective well-being and how to increase the chance of experiencing flow at work.

According to the Positive Experiences Model (Rodríguez-Sánchez & Cifre, 2012) (see Figure 1), there would be a series of individual factors (socio-demographic factors such as age and gender, autotelic personality, positive affect, personal resources such as self-efficacy, coping and savouring strategies) that act as a prism to perceive job environmental factors such as (extra) job resources (i.e., job control, feedback, task variety, opportunity of skill use, supporting leadership, work-home facilitation, couple strategies for coping) and challenge demands (i.e., quantitative and qualitative overload, time pressure). In addition, in order to optimize subjective well-being and experiences of flow, the model follows the spiral of motivation, focusing on challenge demands and (extra) job resources. The perception of these job environmental factors would impact on the degree of employee's subjective well-being and flow, which in turn would influence positive outcomes (improved performance, extra-role behaviours, and customers' satisfaction). Then, the aim of the optimization strategies will be optimizing or increasing personal, task and environmental resources as well as the challenge (extra) job demands.

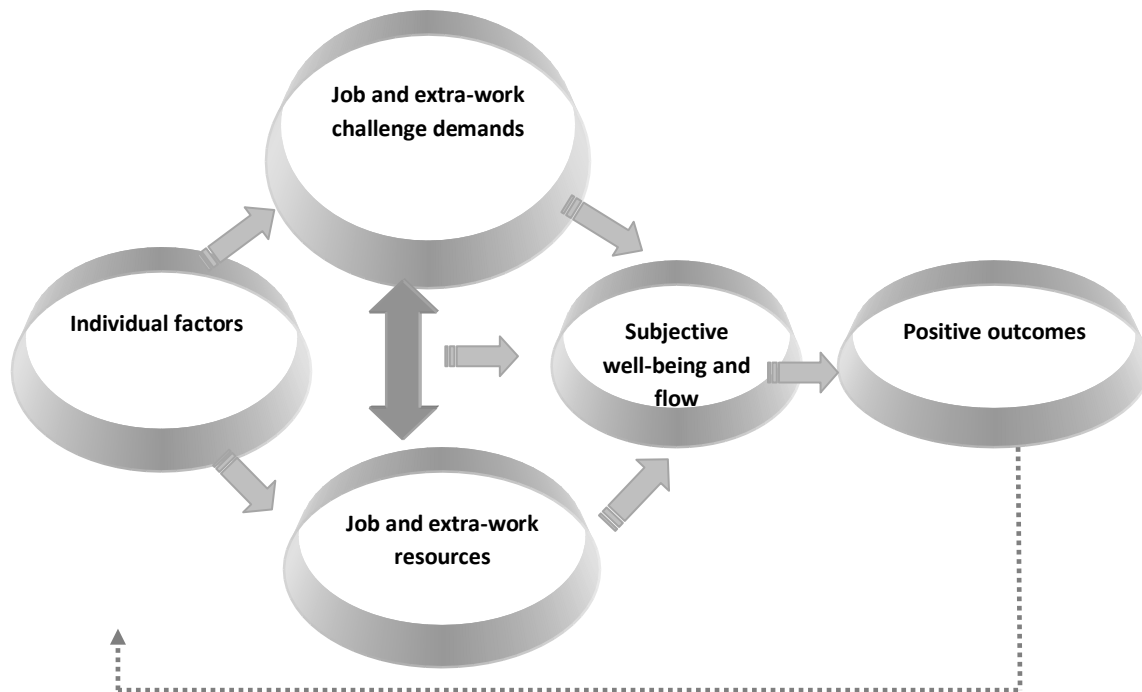


Figure 1: Positive Experiences Model (Rodríguez-Sánchez & Cifre, 2012)

Optimizing strategies

The classic and basic objective of psychosocial interventions has been to propose strategies for preventing

psychological damage (such as work stress or bullying) or, if the damage already exists, minimizing such damage. However, optimization strategies are “those strategies addressed to find the means and/or ways to develop employees as people at work in the best manner, maximizing resources” (Rodríguez-Sánchez & Cifre, 2012, p. 123). These resources may be already available for the employee, or he/she will have to make an effort to search for them. That is, these strategies would no longer be targeted to avoid the employee to not feeling bad at work, but that he/she would feel enhanced. Re-adapting the classification of Salanova, Cifre, Martínez, and Llorens (2007) of work stress strategies, we can say that optimizing strategies can be conducted from a *preventive* and/or an *improvement* point of view (optimization aim), and are focused on both the individual and the organization (optimization focus). Table 1 shows the classification of such strategies, identifying and classifying the key ones.

Table 1: Optimizing strategies according to their focus and aim (based on Rodríguez-Sánchez & Cifre, 2012)

	FOCUS	
AIM	Individual Strategies	Organizational Strategies
<i>Preventive Optimization Strategies</i>	Increase of positive emotions (relaxation, finding positive meaning) Time Management Individualized training, skill acquisition	Personnel Selection Career Development Management development Team Development Internal Communication Work and family conciliation
<i>Improvement Optimization Strategies</i>	Coaching Job-crafting	Job (re)design Training and Development

Preventive Optimization Strategies

The strategies for preventive optimization are interventions or actions addressed to the entire population of the organization although nobody has expressed psychosocial distress. This is the case, for instance, of activities such as occupational health campaigns which report the keys of successful organizational communication. The aim is to promote this factor throughout the organization, avoiding the occurrence of a future problem of this kind. The key to be successful within this preventive optimization is that Human Resources Management has to keep in mind occupational health of employees in the entire core processes (job analysis, planning).

Individual preventive optimization strategies

Individual preventive optimization strategies are mainly based on preventive activities or actions which goal is to influence the optimization of individual resources. That is: the focus of optimization is the employee. In addition, preventive optimization strategies, as its name suggests, are carried out in order to prevent any decrease in the level of optimal employees' health: they are performed to keep employees' health conditions. Besides, this type of optimization takes into account that the employee is a key agent in his/her own development: he/she must have a proactive attitude towards optimizing his/her job. Of all these strategies, we emphasize three by its importance:

Increase in Positive Emotions, Time Management, and Individualized Training.

In order to *Increase in Positive Emotions*, we must consider that the mere absence of negative emotions does not automatically mean the existence of positive emotions (subjective well-being). Thus, there are a number of techniques no longer conceptualized to avoid negative emotions (i.e., anxiety, depression) but to create personal strength, resilience and well-being in the workplace (see Fredrickson, 2000, for a further description). Most of the techniques that cause positive emotions are indirect, since they do not act directly on emotion but on some of its components (physiological, behavioural or cognitive).

In this sense, *relaxation therapies* range from the classic ones such as meditation and yoga (from India and Asia) to more modern forms such as progressive relaxation (developed in the Western countries). According to Fredrickson, these therapies are kept over time for a practical reason: they work. The explanation of *why* they work depends on the theoretical framework. Laboratory research has become clear that cultivating one of the key components of an emotion involves starting the entire multi-component process. In this case, the different relaxation exercises (such as images exercises, muscles, meditation, and mindfulness) seem to trigger the emotion of contentment, which in turn will be accompanied by a decrease in physiological arousal, which is incompatible with negative emotions such as anxiety. In turn, from a preventive point of view, these therapies have shown that their practice changes people by increasing their personal resources (such as empathy and spirituality) becoming more resilient to stressors, improving immune function, and even prolonging their life.

Also *searching for a positive meaning techniques* are used in this context. These techniques focus on the meanings people build from pleasurable activities. As pointed out by Fredrickson (2000), it is about changing the style of coping from "learned helplessness" to "learned optimism". For this, different studies have shown that religious or spiritual beliefs are very supportive for people to build the positive meaning of life, which in turn will provoke positive emotions. Some of the ways used to find the positive meaning are to: (a) Reconsidering the adverse events in a positive light (also called positive reappraisal), (b) giving to ordinary events a positive value, and (c) pursuing and achieving realistic goals. According to Fredrickson, these techniques have the value to create an "upward spiral" in terms of positive emotions: finding a positive meaning to life causes positive emotions, and these in turn will make the person more receptive to pleasant events or full of meaning, making that he/she increases his/her chance of finding them.

On the other hand, *Time Management* is becoming a key strategy to be used from a preventive point of view. Increasingly in many organizations, employees negotiate the time that a task needs to be completed, and they are free to carry it out at night, during weekends, at home, and the like (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). This is especially due to the fact that the opportunity to be performing a task with a high concentration is essential for employees to have high levels of flow and lead to greater subjective well-being. Thus, strategies for time management are very effective since its objective is training to use the time effectively by setting realistic deadlines for the completion of tasks and

goals achievement, and avoiding “time thieves” (e.g., continuous interruptions, never-ending meetings). To profit as much as possible this Time Management courses, a customized (and not general for the entire organization) planning is needed.

Finally, *individualized training* is considered in order to meet new challenges. This type of training refers to the optimization strategy which aims the employee to acquire new skills related to his/her job. Specifically, individual training aims to impact on increasing specific self-efficacy to a particular task or activity. While this type of training activity can be integrated into the organizational training plan, here it is proposed as a strategy highly personalized focused on optimizing the resources of the person for his/her future development, i.e. focusing at individual level.

Organizational preventive optimization strategies

Organizational preventive optimization strategies refer to those activities carried out from the Human Resources Department, considering the psychosocial health of employees in all management processes, and thereby promoting the development of employees in general. In this case, the goal is that optimizing the health of the organization become part of the organizational culture. In this section we describe some of the management and development processes of Human Resources that can best contribute to the optimization of subjective well-being and the flow experience of employees in general.

Before entering, it should be noted, however, the existence of a number of factors, according to Nielsen, Taris, and Cox (2010), that relate the process of intervention implementation through organizational strategies and their results:

1. It is essential the support and involvement of supervisors and managers.
2. The intervention effects are contingent on the dose received (the higher doses, greater effects).
3. Positive attitudes of the participants are also essential: the more positive attitudes, the better results are obtained from the interventions.
4. Importance of previous appraisal: the more is evaluated and monitored the participants' attitudes toward intervention, the greater the awareness of those participants on the results of it.

Starting with the main processes, *Personnel Selection* plays a key role. In this sense, not only the selection process by itself is important (searching for the best job and job-holders match) but also the integration process. Then, a key aspect to consider during the selection process in general, but especially in the final stages, is to perform a realistic contrast of expectations. It will provide the basis of the psychological contract, so important for employees' subjective well-being (see Salanova & Schaufeli, 2009, for a more detailed process of socialization and development of psychological contract). Thus, the period of actual incorporation of the selected candidate organization in the final stages of the selection is crucial. A well-designed plan of reception according to organizational characteristics (e.g., size, industry, history, culture) will become a key for the information and integration of new employees at the starting point and will provide with a key resource such as role clarity about his/her tasks and also about his/her role in the group and organization.

The second process that we consider also necessary as a preventive organizational strategy is *career development*, understood as the sequence of work activities and positions held by a person throughout his/her life, along with attitudes and reactions associated to this process (Dolan, Valle, Jackson, & Schuler, 2003). Moreover, the career development process must fit both individual goals and organizational needs. In order to achieve that, both organization and employees have to build together a career plan. The career plan implies to review periodically the competences and performance of the employee, using for instance techniques such as coaching or mentoring. Moreover employee has an active role in this process which in turn will have a positive impact in his/her subjective well being through two main sources: perception of career development opportunities and use of competence opportunities. With this strategy organization ensures to retain and optimize talent, thanks in part to the optimization of psychosocial health.

Within career development process, there may be also opportunities for those who have as main professional aim to lead groups. This leading responsibility entails a number of features that usually require previous training in management skills to perform these functions successfully, namely *management development*. The management development in organizations has to be addressed to develop competence related to the functions of a manager, which are mainly according to Yukl (2002): 1) develop and maintain relationships, 2) obtain and communicate information, 3) make decisions, and 4) influence people. In order to do this, the manager has powerful resources available such as providing feedback and social recognition that, despite having demonstrated its impact on psychosocial health of employees, are scarcely used in organizations (Salanova & Schaufeli, 2009). Hence, those leaders whose goal is to achieve a manager position must have enough skills and competences to develop this functions in a group and promote employees well-being. According to Yukl (2002), the main management skills that a manager has to develop are: planning and organizing, problem solving, clarifying roles and objectives, report, monitor, motivate and encourage, consult, delegate, support, develop and guide, deal with conflicts and develop teams, networking opportunities, recognize and reinforce. In addition, this taxonomy should include other important skills or abilities such as emotional intelligence and coaching to develop also the manager team. These competences are characteristics of some of the leadership styles analyzed in research. In fact, according to Salanova and Schaufeli (2009), research has shown that some leadership styles, such transformational leadership, are important not only for individual, collective and organizational performance, but also on indicators of subjective well being such as the engagement and morale of the group, which includes collective motivation, satisfaction and confidence in the group itself. In addition, transformational leadership and proactive coping contributes to growth opportunities (Peiró & Rodriguez, 2008).

Management development is closely related to *team development* because the leader plays a key role in the motivation and implication, and as we mentioned above, it is the main responsible of the morale of the group. At the same time, the team also plays a role on the employee

psychosocial health because the group provides key social resources (e.g., social and technical support, social network, contacts) for the members of the organization. The responsible for providing a healthy atmosphere based in sharing resources is mainly the leader.

Another strategy is *Internal Communication*. Classically, there have been three types of *Internal Communication* in organizations: vertical descent, vertical upward, and horizontal. Communication within the organization itself is a basic tool that facilitates the development of other key resources for the promotion of psychosocial health of employees: task, social and organizational resources, such as feedback, recognition, social support. Well-used communication channels become a key element for the transmission of culture and organizational values and strategic issues for survival such as its mission and vision. As indicated by Salanova and Schaufeli (2009), a way to increase social resources is the creation of informal communication channels that facilitate the development of trust over time through repeated encounters and interactions between members organizational

Finally, since the massive incorporation of women at the labour market, organizations have become aware of the need of promoting activities to facilitate work and family interaction in order to avoid work and family conflict, and its negative consequences on health and performance. The *work and family conciliation* activities can be mainly classified into schedule and place flexibility, benefits for the children care (e.g., baby-sitter payment), and other activities such as the adaptation of job load to be more or less temporary, or giving advice and a training policy in both personal and professional life (e.g., career counselling, financial/fiscal counselling) and in the interaction between the personal and professional life (e.g., time management, conflict management) (Cifre & Salanova, 2007). These policies of conciliation (especially the informal ones) involve a change in the values of the organizational culture that must be accepted by all members of the organization, starting by the organization manager and group leaders.

Improvement Optimization Strategies

Improvement optimization strategies are interventions addressed to those employees who do not show any psychosocial risk or distress problems, but with some subjective well-being indicators identified as susceptible to be improved, with the aim of increasing their psychosocial health and the chance of experiencing positive experiences at work. Again, we show these strategies according to the focus of the interventions: individual strategies vs. organizational strategies.

Individual improvement optimization strategies

The individual improvement optimization strategies are mainly based on those activities addressed to optimize employees' resources with the own employees as key or active agents in order to boost their individual resources. We will briefly develop the newest and well known strategies such as *Coaching* and *Job-crafting*.

The term *coaching* has become very common in the organization and refers to the process of informal development in which supervisors or leaders not only provide individual and personalized feedback to the

employee, but also guide the employee to the continuous improvement and to reach his/her personal goals and good performance. Moreover, in the coaching process the supervisors clearly communicate the expectations, feedback, and improvement proposals, and help the employee to develop and learn problems and take new challenges (Heslin, Van-de Walle, & Latham, 2006). Therefore, coaching strategy is a very positive way to optimize employee's psychosocial health and productivity (Olivero, Bane, & Kopelman, 1997) mainly through three mechanisms: a) The acquisition of specific skills and knowledge of work, b) the promotion of employees' motivation and effort, and c) the social learning process. In other words, through the coaching strategy it is possible to influence the development of personal resources such as self-efficacy, coping strategies and savoring.

The second individual optimization strategy is *job-crafting*. This term refers to "the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work, which directs attention to the proactive, bottom-up ways in which employees alter the task, relational, and cognitive boundaries of their jobs" (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 179). Whereas job design addresses structural features of jobs that are created and enforced by managers, job crafting focuses on the proactive changes employees make to their own job boundaries. Hence job-crafting includes all the strategies that employees use to re-design their own job so that they can achieve satisfaction, psychological well-being as well as engagement. By means of this optimization strategy the employees can design, enrich and develop their own job so that it can facilitate processes such as flow experience. In fact, job-crafting techniques are closely related to what already Csikszentmihalyi (1988, 1997, 2003) mentioned in his studies on the search for challenges in daily life, and of course also in the context of work as the quintessential source of flow experiences.

Organizational improvement optimization strategies

Organizational improvement optimization strategies are those activities carried out from the Human Resources Department addressed to optimize psychosocial health indicators. In fact, they employees might not be 'in risk', but its improvement would enhance much more their psychosocial health in the future. We develop *job (re) design* and *training and development* as key strategies.

The *job (re) design* is one of the classic well known techniques in human resources development. In fact, it is an activity that is derived from job analysis and aims the improvement through technological and human aspects, in order to achieve organizational efficiency and job satisfaction (De la Calle & Ortiz de Urbina, 2004). Actually, job must ensure that employees remain motivated to work effectively, develop at work and are not isolated (Schabracq, 2003). As we mentioned above, job design addresses structural features of jobs that are created and enforced by managers, so the job (re) design process comes, in general, from the Human Resources department and it is a formal and structured process. This process comprises different techniques as work enrichment, which well implemented may contribute to improve employees motivation and performance. Hence, if the job (re) design allows the employee to build its own identity, perceiving him/ herself as competent, self-determined and social

valued, the employees will put efforts to recognize, look for and create new opportunities to impact in their job and their environment. In this way, employees will build their job characterized by more autonomy, more challenging, and by more opportunities to develop knowledge and competences (Grant, 2007). All in all this will influence again in the improvement of employees psychosocial health.

Finally, *Training and Development* are both terms that have been used indistinctively, but although the main aim of both is to improve the current and future performance of employees, the terms are different. *Training* is defined as the systematic approach for affecting individuals' knowledge, skills, and attitudes in order to improve individual, team, and organizational effectiveness (Goldstein & Ford 2002), and *Development* is related to the systematic efforts affecting individuals' knowledge or skills for purposes of personal growth or future jobs and/or roles (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009). Although, they are quite close concepts, originally training was more oriented to employees whereas development to the managers. However, nowadays in organizations training and development are oriented to the same target: the employees of the organization regardless the position. In fact, there is a number of research that show the benefits of training not only for the improvement of employees performance, but also for the optimization of their health, that in turn has benefits both for teams and organizations (for an overview see Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009).

Final note

Although individual and organizational optimization strategies are important by them-self, the combination of they both is the optimal situation. In fact, according to LaMontagne, Keegel, Louie, Ostry, & Landsbergis (2007), high-level strategies resulted by the combination of both organization and individual approaches are the ones with greater consequences for the organization and people when intervening on job stress. We can expect the same results when intervening on optimization. Therefore, as far as possible, organizations should implement strategies not only to avoid damage but also to optimize psychosocial well-being. And this should be conducted through optimization strategies focused on the combination of various individual and organizational strategies, individualized to the person when possible, to optimize not only employees' psychosocial health but also to increase health and performance of teams, organizations and, in turn, society.

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