

Why the Workplace Needs Positive Psychology

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It is no secret that the 21st Century workplace is a different world. Developments in technology have paved the way for any number of changes, including globalization, the rise of the knowledge worker, and the creation of significantly more niche markets. The net result is high competition and a strong focus on customizing products and services to individual needs. In order to keep up with such a fast-paced system, companies have needed to rely more heavily on creativity and innovation, and capitalize on the unique intellectual and personal strengths of their employees. In turn, this requires an organizational structure that allows for more cross-talk and flexibility, task designs that take advantage of human capital, and an organizational strategy that gives the company a unique, competitive edge. The rapid changes in a high-tech world create significant uncertainty in markets, and this requires creative solutions and the ability to either move with the tide, buck the trend, or create a new current. In all cases, this requires strategic decisions that shape the goals and mission of the company, which will in turn affect the company's structure, human capital needs, management practices, et cetera (cf., Donaldson, 1996; Rousseau, 1997). In this highly-competitive business milieu, companies are looking for the methodologies that will turn "good" into "great" (cf., Collins, 2001). To do this, organizations need to germinate the right capacities in the form of people who can develop a company's products, competitive edge, strategic plan, and so on.

But, this leads to a number of new issues in management. For example, it is no longer so much a matter of getting employees to *do* their work, but rather how to get them to do *good* work, or their *best* work. Today, companies need all of their employees to be creative, which requires employees to be motivated, and to put their all into their work. But, how can a company foster that

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when work-life balance and burnout are becoming more of a concern? Another challenge is the increasing complexity of the solutions/products that a business needs to generate, as these tend to require collaboration. But, how can such teams develop a creative synergy that will capitalize on the many intelligences available? Moreover, both teams and companies benefit from diversity (cf., Jayne & Dipboye, 2004), and yet teams often devolve into “groupthink,” and companies can have biases towards promoting certain “types”² of people. Even when companies embrace the *idea* of diversity, they have difficulty bringing the requisite mindset and culture into the company. How can businesses and groups capitalize on their diversity? For that matter, what can organizations do to make sure that the right people get on board and stay with the company?

What all of these questions have in common is that they are trying to go beyond fixing problems and into promoting excellence. It is precisely because of this perspective that the business world needs to turn to the branch of psychology that deals with human flourishing and human strengths, namely positive psychology (Donaldson & Ko, 2010; Seligman & Csíkszentmihályi, 2000). Indeed, the field is working on all of the questions above, and the remainder of this paper will highlight some of the researchers and topics that are being addressed in positive psychology.³

Positive Organizational Psychology Research

Good Work. One of the most critical factors to a company’s success is the production of high-quality products, which requires employees to have good judgment, high efficacy, and high performance, all of which fall under the purview of recent research on “good work.” Good work is defined as being of very high quality, meaningful to the individual who performs it, and socially responsible. The full nature of good work, how to do it, and how to promote it, is being studied extensively by a consortium at Harvard University (www.goodworkproject.org;

² Defined by one, or a combination, of ethnicity, race, religion, creed, education, age, gender, etc.

³ It is beyond the scope of this paper to summarize each and every study. This paper is meant to be a springboard for further research, review, and consideration. Many of the works cited here were chosen because they are highly accessible in scope and content, and most of the researchers noted in this paper work on both theoretical and applied problems. In addition, this paper is presented as an overview because every company is different, and positive psychology research will apply uniquely to each. Nearly all of the researchers mentioned here consult for companies, come in as speakers, and/or do research on companies.

<http://pzweb.harvard.edu/index.cfm>), which has produced multiple publications on the subject (for a good overview, see Gardner, Csíkszentmihályi, & Damon, 2001).

Personnel Selection and Company Fit. Choosing the right people is obviously an integral part of having a successful company, but whom to hire? Several factors need to be considered, including personality, complementarity of strengths and talents within the company, and fit with the company's structure, strategy, goals, and mission. Organizations can benefit from any number of research initiatives in positive psychology, particularly with respect to strengths (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004), job design (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010), and work identity (directly related to company fit; e.g., Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2008). These elements can be essential to minimizing turnover, which can be highly expensive to a company in terms of financial costs and loss of intellectual capital (cf., Mitchell, Holtom, & Lee, 2001; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995).

Performance, Engagement, and Burnout. One of the major causes of turnover is burnout, which can come from any number of factors, including stress and boredom. Positive psychology researchers are studying a number of solutions, particularly in terms of engagement (Nakamura & Csíkszentmihályi, 2003), meaning (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003), optimal experience (*flow*; Csíkszentmihályi, 1997; Csíkszentmihályi & LeFevre, 1989; Davis, 2010b), and self-efficacy (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998), all of which are connected with satisfaction on the job (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990), reduced turnover and sick leave, and higher job performance (Csíkszentmihályi 1990, 1996, 1997; Fredrickson, 2001). Further research assesses the attributes of the job that enable these solutions, including topics like person-job fit and job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; cf., Fisher, 1993). Recent research by Ko (2011) has provided an overview of the factors that contribute to happiness on the job, as has recent work by Amabile and Kramer (2011).

Mentoring. One of the primary ways of developing “home-grown” talent, providing on-the-job-training, and integrating individuals into the company, is through mentoring. In addition, mentoring has been used to increase diversity in firms by helping people capitalize on their unique strengths and insights to thrive within the company, in addition to typical mentoring functions like protection, exposure to senior staff, and informal training (Ragins, 2007; Kram, 1985). A number of researchers in positive psychology are determining the factors that contribute to good mentoring (e.g., Nakamura, Shernoff, and Hooker, 2009), and others are building models of mentoring programs that companies can use (e.g., Davis & Nakamura, 2010). In addition, mentoring helps to create a positive work environment, build teams, and enable people to bring their talents and capacities to bear within the organization.

Teams. Because of the wealth of knowledge available, and the extensiveness of many projects, teamwork is becoming commonplace in the working world. While team effectiveness has been under study for decades (see Guzzo & Dickson, 1996, for a review), several positive psychology researchers have been analyzing flow in teams, as research shows that these optimal experiences facilitate stronger team dynamics and more creative results (Csíkszentmihályi, 1996; Sawyer, 2003). The dynamics of team flow are still under investigation, though some inroads have been made (e.g., Sawyer, 2007; van den Hout and Davis, 2010).

Creativity and Innovation. One of the primary goals of knowledge work is to generate a unique, high-quality, and competitive product, which means harnessing creativity to develop innovations and add value. Because this is such a fundamental contribution to a company’s bottom line, organizations will need the research findings of positive psychologists who are finding ways to develop, harness, and apply creativity. Recent research has analyzed the processes through which group members work together to produce creative works (e.g., Sawyer, 2006, 2007), the characteristics of highly creative, field changing individuals (Csíkszentmihályi, 1996), and the

possibility that people can develop these characteristics to a greater or lesser extent (Davis, 2010a). Amabile and her colleagues have also done extensive work on creativity in the workplace, including the role of affect on creativity (Amabile, et al., 2005) and the relationship between motivation, rewards, and creativity (Hennessey & Amabile, 1998).

Conclusion

With increasing demands in the workplace, and a greater need for knowledge work, innovation, and creativity, organizations will need to find ways to enable their employees to do and be their best. Because of positive psychology's unique focus on flourishing, and its transform-good-into-great angle on many of the factors that contribute to solid organizational performance, it will become an essential contributor to success in the business world. Whether in showing management how to develop and use human capital, guiding organizational policy, or enabling workers to make their best contributions, positive psychology has been, and will continue to be, a boon to the workplace.

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