Praise for *Wellbeing Intelligence*

"*Wellbeing Intelligence* is the book we all need to develop mental health self-care. It is full of practical, timely and science-based advice to foster healthier careers and organisations."

Dorie Clark, *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of *The Long Game* and executive education faculty, Columbia Business School

"We all know wellbeing is the major issue of the times. Yet we don't know what to do about it. In this immensely practical, beyond-the-hype book you have the guide you need to sustainably improve your own, your employees' and your organisation's wellbeing."

Herminia Ibarra, Charles Handy Professor of Organisational Behaviour, London Business School

"*Wellbeing Intelligence* is that rare thing: a practical but also incredibly clear and well-written book for individuals and managers in any workplace. At a time when burnout and workplace absence through mental health issues is a global problem, the authors have distilled clear action plans and better self-awareness – for ourselves and for our colleagues and teams. It deserves to be on every team leader's (and member's) bookshelf."

Isabel Berwick, "Working It" editor, *Financial Times*

"In *Wellbeing Intelligence*, Bhatti and Roulet offer a critical perspective on managing mental health at work. This book is an essential tool for anyone aiming to navigate the complexities of modern work environments with resilience and intentionality."

Hector D. Mujica, Head of Americas Philanthropy, Google.org

Wellbeing Intelligence

Wellbeing Intelligence

Building better mental health at work

Kiran Bhatti and Thomas Roulet

The Economist

Published in 2025 under exclusive licence from The Economist by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London EC1A 7JQ
www.profilebooks.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

We make every effort to make sure our products are safe for the purpose for which they are intended. For more information check our website or contact Authorised Rep Compliance Ltd., Ground Floor, 71 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin, D02 P593, Ireland, www.arccompliance.com

ISBN 978 1 80081 973 3
eISBN 978 1 80081 974 0

Typeset in Economist Serif by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

About the authors

Kiran Bhatti is a chartered counselling psychologist. She obtained her PhD at the University of Roehampton, where her research focused on psychometrics. She has many years of experience providing therapeutic support to a range of individuals and groups across the NHS, third sector and education settings. In addition to her clinical practice, Kiran writes and researches on employee wellbeing, workplace stress and mental health, and has published in the *MIT Sloan Management Review*, *Harvard Business Review* and research journals in counselling psychology.

Thomas Roulet is the Professor of Organisational Sociology and Leadership at the Cambridge Judge Business School, and a Fellow in Psychology and Behavioural Science at King's College, University of Cambridge. His work focuses on stigma, the future of work, mental health in the workplace and communication. His comments are featured regularly in the *Financial Times*, *The Economist*, Bloomberg, the *Telegraph* and *Le Monde* and on the BBC. In 2024, he was recognised as one of the Young Global Leaders by the World Economic Forum, and as an upcoming leadership thinker by Thinkers50, MT/Sprout and Nexxworks. He was made a Mid-Career Fellow of the British Academy in 2023. In 2020, he was listed among the "40 under 40 best business school professors" by Poets & Quants, and as a "business school professor to look for" by Business Because. He has taken his research and learning to dozens of firms and public organisations as a speaker and consultant and through the design of executive education programmes.

Also in the Economist Edge series

Branding That Means Business
Matt Johnson and Tessa Misiaszek

Innovating with Impact
Ted Ladd and Alessandro Lanteri

Giving Good Feedback
Margaret Cheng

Best Story Wins: Storytelling for business success
Mark Edwards

Influence at Work
Steve Martin

The Power of Culture: Bringing values to life at work
Laura Hamill

Choose Trust: Building relationships for business success
Stuart Maister and Kevin Vaughan-Smith

For our clients, colleagues and students who inspired us to develop the concept of wellbeing intelligence and share it at work and beyond.

Contents

Introduction

The last few years have been intense, from pandemics to political and economic instability, and no organisation has been spared. Yours is no exception. Staff turnover may have gone through the roof, and recruiting the right people – and motivating them – has become increasingly difficult. You've become used to cycles of quiet quitting, great resignations and roaring waves of recruitment.

Just today, you have a new resignation letter on your desk. Another person in your team has decided to leave: the work pressure, the stress has got the better of them. It seems like this is affecting not only those who joined in the last few years – who sometimes failed to connect with the organisation and their teammates – but also the people who have been working for the company for five years or more. You have been feeling quite demotivated yourself. Coming to work has become harder. It does not make much sense any more.

Sound familiar? It has been for many people at work. Although wellbeing issues in the workplace are not new, they have been reinforced by the changes the workplace has experienced in the last few years. These changes will only accelerate, and it's hard to say whether they will all be positive. When the home-based workforce doubled with the shift to remote work caused by national lockdowns in 2020, many looked at this sudden shift with rose-tinted glasses; and plenty of organisations reported a peak in productivity.[1]

But the loss of boundaries between work and life also had negative implications for mental health, with employees struggling to disconnect. The burnout epidemic spread like wildfire as some workers were laid off or furloughed, leaving fewer people behind to manage a reeling boat in the middle of the most significant storm of the century. In March 2020, according to Gallup, the percentage of US adults who reported experiencing worry during their workday suddenly jumped by 20 points, from 38% to 58%.

Add to this a more general sense of uncertainty about the future – everything from the climate crisis to the dangers of artificial intelligence – and it's little wonder that our awareness of mental health challenges in organisations has been heightened. These have become so acute that they can no longer be ignored. Managers, employees and human resource teams are faced with a wave of burnout, a rise in anxiety levels and depression. And this tsunami has organisational implications that require shifts in mindsets and culture. Almost half of the workforce report experiencing stress – the highest it has ever been.[2] Yet surveys show that the support for employee wellbeing has declined since 2021 among senior leaders.[3]

On its own, awareness of mental health issues in the workplace isn't enough to deal with one of the biggest challenges faced by organisations today: the preservation and nurturing of their people. Research also shows that, in our understanding of work, the drivers of wellbeing vary from one person to the other. Therefore blanket approaches are unlikely to work. Instead, individuals need to improve their understanding of their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. In a nutshell, wellbeing skills need to be democratised in the workplace and available to everyone.

Currently, the way we learn and develop these skills takes

either a single-minded psychological approach or a gimmicky and unsatisfying managerial approach. There have been many articles in management journals and books on mental health in the workplace in the last few years. They tend either to take a solely clinical approach on what mental health is all about or, conversely, they approach it narrowly by looking at how it affects the bottom line of organisations, talking in generalities rather than taking into account the people who have to deal with mental health challenges on a daily basis. They are descriptive. Similarly, psychology research has also given a prominent space to mental health and relevant interventions in organisations, but without necessarily considering the practical implications for people on the ground.

For a long time, mental health remained a rather abstract and elusive concept for most people at work. They might have perceived it as a potential threat to their team and organisation but were unclear about what that might mean in practice.

Because of the sudden new visibility of the issue, many have started to put a name on some of the challenges they experience. And they are also increasingly more likely to see it first hand, playing out in front of their eyes. But people are often clueless about how to tackle those issues, whether on an organisational level or simply how to talk to colleagues who are experiencing mental health challenges. What would be the right words? The right tone? The right attitude and approach? How can they improve and refine their approach to wellbeing?

So people know that mental health challenges exist, but they do not know how to address and approach them. Insight might sharpen sensitivity to challenges, but unpacking the complexities of dealing with them is missing. What's needed is a more prescriptive approach that answers two key questions. How can you concretely improve and address mental wellbeing

at work? And how can everyone in organisations develop wellbeing skills over time and with experience?

The aim of this book is to pass on practical skills that focus on understanding and addressing mental health in the workplace. People need more than self-help mental health books or basic diagnoses that mental health issues in organisations are rife. They already know that. Mental health skills need to be a well-defined area of organisational and individual development. This book offers the keys to develop these skills.

A new perspective

To explore those questions, we want to make use of the wisdom of mental health practitioners who have worked for decades to support people within and outside the workplace. Their skills are derived from models and techniques that have empirically proven effective. We want to bring the topics of organisational management and mental health together, building on our expertise as a psychologist and management professor respectively.

Interdisciplinarity is often presented as the paragon of good academic research. Yet we thought of our respective careers as silos for the first years of our relationship. (Beyond writing a book together, we are also married to each other.) We quickly realised the synergies in our skills and the wide appetite for such a multidisciplinary perspective: Kiran bringing the technical expertise and proven methods of psychologists to improve wellbeing, and Thomas the organisational and managerial viewpoint.

Like many, and probably like most of the readers of this book, we have struggled with our wellbeing at work and in our personal lives, from anxiety and stress to depression. Experiencing those struggles first hand has pushed us to read, explore and practise

so that we can understand and help ourselves better (and each other). The principles we found have guided our own careers and we have also passed on what we have learnt to clients and students alike.

Now we want to share what we've learnt and practised more widely. This is the book we wished we had had when we wanted to support ourselves and others in our organisations. It offers a toolkit that is versatile but effective, based on approaches and methods that everybody can learn, apply and refine to improve their own – and others' – wellbeing at work.

Who is this book for?

The answer is simple: everybody who has a keen interest in understanding their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others and wants to act to improve it. Understanding mental health in its full complexity, its sources and outcomes, is not an add-on for organisations; it is a must-have. Through our wellbeing intelligence (WBQ) model, we want to encourage people not just to be sensitive to wellbeing issues and challenges at work, but also to adapt their behaviour and take action. The book offers a "first aid kit" for wellbeing that will help you to understand your own mental health and to identify colleagues in difficult situations who need support.

This book is not just for "managers" or "leaders" with positional and organisational authority; it's for anyone navigating any workplace.

Workplace stress does not differentiate between different sectors and contexts and neither does the book. It does not differentiate between age groups, or individual experience. The book is relevant for people working at the biggest corporations or the smallest business; for police officers, teachers and healthcare workers; for not-for-profit and government organisations.

That's not to say that senior leaders don't have a crucial role to play; top executives set the tone and the culture for their organisations and can give visibility to mental health issues by sharing their own experiences. For example, Winston Churchill experienced depression before the First World War and shared how creative activities helped him address this challenge.[4] The behaviours of top executives can have a huge cultural impact, helping to normalise discussions about mental health and making mental health challenges more likely to be detected and addressed. We exhort leaders to be mental health advocates. But to do so, they first need to understand what that means.

We are not, of course, suggesting that benefiting from the practical knowledge of psychology will make you all psychologists. Counselling psychologists have often received years of training, practised with multiple types of patients and conditions, and developed unique skills to support others. In many cases, you simply won't be able to fully address people's mental health issues; they will need professional help. But you can still provide support and understanding. By building up your knowledge of mental health and your wellbeing intelligence, you will be able to provide some genuine relief without the risk of making things worse.

A holistic perspective on wellbeing

Our perspective on wellbeing is holistic, but with a distinct focus on mental health. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines wellbeing as "the state of being healthy and happy". We recognise that wellbeing can include both physical and mental health, but also believe that both aspects overlap and are difficult to distinguish: 46% of people with a mental health issue in England, for example, have a long-term physical condition.[5] In this book, we'll focus on the mental health aspect of wellbeing, while considering physical

and mental health to be interdependent. And although there are hundreds of books on the best diet, the best exercise routine and how you can take care of your body, practical routines to strengthen mental health are surprisingly missing from existing models of wellbeing. This book aims to fill that gap.

How to use this book

This book unfolds over ten chapters in four parts.

Part 1 explores the present state of wellbeing, and the short- and long-term mental health challenges faced by organisations today. It defines the key mental health phenomena in organisations so that you are aware of the definitions attached to sometimes abstract ideas such as anxiety or depression, and other associated issues. And it introduces our concentric circle model of wellbeing intelligence as a road map for better wellbeing at work.

Parts 2–4 look at the three circles of wellbeing intelligence.

This starts with a focus on the self – helping you to understand your own wellbeing. Self-awareness is also a major first step to understanding the mental health of others. Part 2 provides a clear and actionable approach to your own mental health and distils several self-assessment tools and frameworks commonly used in counselling.

Part 3 looks at the group level. What should leaders and team members know about mental health when working together and in one-to-one relationships? What can they do to detect issues and to support each other?

Part 4 explores approaches, policies and strategies to improve mental health and wellbeing at an organisational level.

In sum, what follows is a toolkit that offers practical models, frameworks and assessment tools to help everyone to be not only wellbeing aware but also wellbeing intelligent.

PART 1

Why do we need wellbeing intelligence?

Estephania had been in disarray for the past few weeks. She had never experienced such a difficult situation in her ten years as commercial director at Software Inc. Yes, sales had been at their lowest for a while, but Software Inc was still in good shape despite the global recession. Yet the sales team she managed had become impossible. She did not even know where to start. Members were disengaged, and had lost enthusiasm for their work, the company or the products. Conflicts between team members had become rampant.

She had tried everything from the carrot to the stick: encouraging those who were making more effort and scaring others by telling them the consequences of their disengagement. It was time to explore a new course of action and a new method. She had thought that this situation was due to a problem of management or uncertainty about the future of the company, but she had started to realise this was probably only a small part of the story. To add to her confusion, she herself was struggling with a difficult situation at home, which made her more irritable at work.

Estephania's instincts are right. She needs to think beyond classic management tools. The problem is not a managerial one; it is about wellbeing. Her people are mentally and emotionally exhausted, and their frustration with management is only the symptom of an issue that has spread in the team. Like many other people at work right now, Estephania needs wellbeing intelligence (WBQ).

Part 1 introduces the topic of wellbeing in the workplace from the dual perspective of management research and counselling psychology. What is wellbeing? What are core wellbeing issues,

and how can we identify and define them? The objective is to demystify things like stress, anxiety and other mental health struggles. Those who have experienced them know why they matter and why we should care both individually and collectively. But wellbeing also needs to become a key priority for everyone at work, whether they are affected personally or not.

We spend a significant part of our life at work, and the boundaries between work and home life are more blurred than ever. What happens at work can have life-changing consequences. This first section of the book focuses on raising awareness of wellbeing issues and shaping our understanding of how they evolve and manifest themselves.

1

Wellbeing at work and why it matters

Let's start by laying the foundations for wellbeing intelligence: clear definitions, a rationale for learning about wellbeing, and the conditions under which you can develop it

If you were to ask Estephania to consider the wellbeing of her team members and her own wellbeing, she might well ask: what does that mean? The word is commonly used but nobody seems to be able to offer a robust or consistent definition. It's often associated with people meditating in front of a sunset, or smiling and laughing in a social setting. Such caricatures do not mean we should overthink it. Wellbeing can simply be defined as feeling good about yourself, the world around you, and life in general. It refers to overall good quality of life. Given how much of our life we spend at work, wellbeing at work clearly matters.

American psychologist Margaret (Peggy) Swarbrick has identified eight dimensions of wellbeing, as outlined in Figure 1 on the next page. For Swarbrick, people's levels of wellbeing can fluctuate depending on a range of factors. For example, financial wellbeing, which relates to earning potential or savings, might vary according to the cost of living or other economic factors; if we suddenly have to take a pay cut, we may feel less financially well. This might negatively affect our overall wellbeing, even

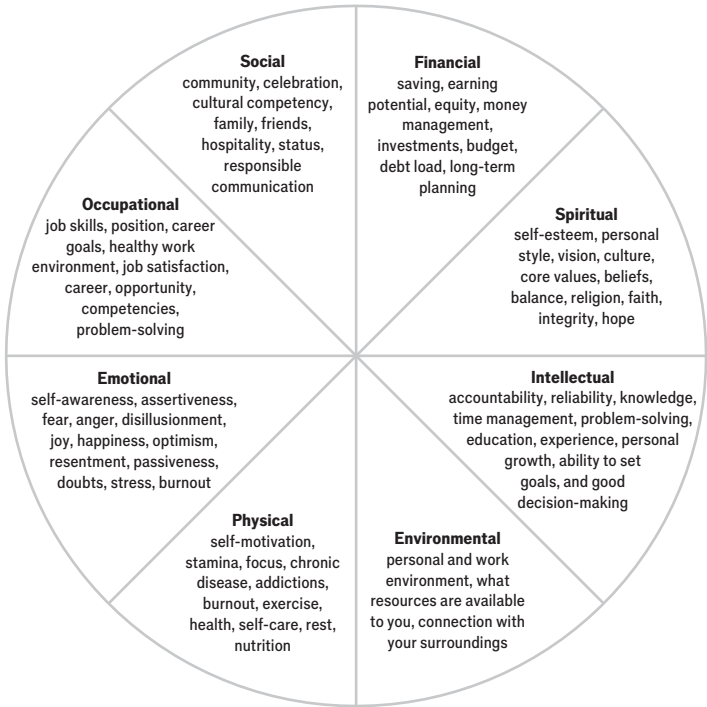

Figure 1: **Swarbrick's eight dimensions of wellbeing**[1]

if we're experiencing high wellbeing in other areas of our life. Although there are many aspects to wellbeing, each aspect will feed into each other and into our overall quality of life. We may just have completed our first half marathon, but that sudden pay cut will still have an impact.

Although this book has a specific focus on what Swarbrick calls "occupational wellbeing", we will not treat occupational wellbeing in isolation. If you think about it, wellbeing at work is not *just* about those occupational factors. It also needs to factor in our financial and intellectual wellbeing; take into account

the interconnectedness of our physical and mental health; and consider the environmental, spiritual and social spheres that contribute to and set the scene for how we feel. Wellbeing at work is about wellbeing in the round.

This perspective on wellbeing also leads to a focus on a central pillar and enabler of our wellbeing: our mental health. Without mental health, wellbeing in its multiple dimensions is only a distant possibility. Across the world, there are people with mental health issues, though the awareness of such issues varies between cultures and institutions. According to the World Health Organisation, mental distress and depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide.[2] The term "disability" in itself signals that mental health can be a factor of exclusion in society and in organisations. It is estimated that 4.4% of the global population live with depression, and 3.6% of the global population are affected by anxiety disorders.[3]

If geographical or cultural barriers are not stopping mental health issues, the barrier between people's professional and personal lives is just as porous. Estimates suggest that people spend, on average, up to 90,000 hours at work in their lives – leaving aside the extra hours worked beyond contractual minimums, household and caring tasks or the people who work multiple jobs. Wherever you work and whatever the specific make-up of your career, you spend a significant proportion of your life working and at work. It's bound to have an impact on your mental health and wellbeing.

Work can mean a lot of things to us individually and collectively. Yes, it is a paycheque; it provides a wage and is a way to make a living. But work can be so much more: the chance to make an impact, a sense of achievement, a source of pride and a way to build lasting connections with others. A review of the scientific literature on the relationship between

life satisfaction and the work domain establishes a clear link between work satisfaction, feelings of self-worth and, ultimately, life satisfaction.[4] When people enjoy work, they feel better about themselves, and they enjoy life as well. That makes sense: work can be a great source of joy and self-esteem. In turn, increased life satisfaction limits people's negative feelings towards their work. When people enjoy life, they tend to have a more positive outlook on work too.

The opposite is also true, and bad experiences at work can turn into a vicious rather than a virtuous cycle of wellbeing. Poor satisfaction at work can have a negative effect on feelings of self-worth and life satisfaction. When people feel miserable at work, they tend to lose confidence and life gets bleak. There are many workplace factors that drive mental health difficulties. Being constantly assessed and judged; being put under consistent pressure; cultures of competition or aggressive leadership styles: all can have an impact on people's mental health and lead to high levels of stress. Work can make people unhappy, and not only at work.

In a nutshell, work and mental health are strongly interconnected: poor mental health at work can spread outside work and exacerbate life difficulties, and personal difficulties can spill over into the work environment. Social scientists call this a "work–life spillover". People often make sense of life through work, and find solace and purpose in it when the work they are doing is impactful. But when they are in distress, struggling to fulfil job roles and duties and unable to connect fully with colleagues, they may begin to avoid going into work, and start to disengage with other areas of life too.

Mental health issues should be a central preoccupation because they matter hugely for society and for people. They are "disabling" because they disconnect individuals from what can

motivate them, fuel them and give them purpose in life and at work. People with mental health issues are unable to reach their full potential. Collectively, this makes the economic and social costs of mental health far-reaching.

Mental health and working cannot and should not be separated. Your mental health can influence how you work. Equally, your work environment can influence your mental health. Work can be both the cause of, and the solution to, feeling happier, engaged and well.

Mental health at work

Globally, one third of women and one fifth of men will experience depression over their lifetime.[5] It is estimated that 4% of people worldwide suffer from an anxiety disorder.[6] Within the UK, it is estimated one in six adults experience a common mental health difficulty (anxiety or depression) within any given week.[7] It's also estimated that about 15% of the workforce in England experiences symptoms of mental health problems at work.[8]

But the prevalence of mental health issues is not only about trends and numbers. Both professionally and personally, individual lives can be deeply affected. For example, it is estimated that each year 300,000 people with long-term mental health conditions lose their jobs.[9] And those figures do not include those with undiagnosed mental health problems, such as stress, burnout and worry. The numbers also do not include those people who have not disclosed their difficulties and who have not received a formal diagnosis. The real number of people suffering mental distress may be much greater than reported.

Even allowing for these factors, it's clear that the number of people experiencing and reporting mental health difficulties at work is increasing at a worrying rate. It's not surprising that

organisations are increasingly aware that it's an important factor in whether people can contribute and succeed at work, and a crucial determinant of their performance.

The invisibility of mental health at work

Despite these concerning figures, wellbeing is not something that you can always "see" at work. Mental health issues can be invisible because they are often unspoken, especially in a world where many work interactions have shifted online. Yet, if you dig deeper, the experience aligns with the numbers: it would be hard to find an organisation where people have not experienced some degree of mental health challenge.

It's tempting to think that visible physical illness is more measurable and can be "seen". But, as Chapter 2 explores, there are a range of scientifically robust survey tools and more informal ways to identify the presence of mental health issues at individual, group and organisational levels. But people still need a fine-grained understanding of wellbeing issues, what causes them and how to describe them. Individuals might be experiencing a mix of anxiety, stress and depression, and the combination of those factors might not fall into one easily defined category.

Experiencing mental health problems can also be a source of stigmatisation and social exclusion. Not understanding mental health issues often means negating their existence. From the perspective of those who have not experienced them, mental health issues can sometimes be perceived as having no material basis or cause. Some people may be tempted to see mental health issues as an effort to grab attention, as a fake affliction that people can conquer by sheer willpower. As a result, people with mental health issues might experience less sympathy at work than those with visible physical health issues. Such beliefs

often need to be addressed as the first thing an organisation can do to create a positive culture towards mental health and help make mental health issues more noticeable.

The only way for those problems to be visible is if people speak about them – particularly their own challenges. Enabling a work context where people are comfortable speaking about how they're feeling and trust that they won't be stigmatised as a result depends on the way mental health is perceived.

Talking about mental health can, however, be tricky. Because mental health is a primarily invisible and a potentially sensitive challenge, it's often hard to find the right way to approach it. The fear of doing things incorrectly, of saying something wrong, means that it can be tempting to say and do nothing. Consequently, mental health might remain unaddressed with all the problems accumulated both at an individual level (e.g. burnout and people having to take time off to recover) and at an organisational level (e.g. a culture of overwork from which people struggle to disconnect).

Existing research shows that those who receive emotional support for mental health from their colleagues are not always aware of it.[10] The simple act of listening might not feel like mental health support, but it can be especially effective because it does not feel like "treatment". This evidence also suggests that a deep understanding of mental health is needed to tackle issues with care and sensitivity. And deep understanding starts with clear definitions of the core labels.

The costs of poor mental health for organisations

Visible or invisible, there are many tangible consequences of poor mental health in the workplace. These can include poor team morale, loss of productivity, high employee turnover, disengagement with work, lower work quality, disidentification

(when employees feel emotionally distant from their organisations) and many other negative outcomes. If left untreated or unacknowledged, mental health difficulties can develop into longer-term problems, meaning greater resources and investments are needed over time to help organisations cope with them.

On an individual level, poor mental health will obviously affect a person's experience within their organisation but, as we have seen, it is by no means isolated to their workplace. Physical health is also affected by the physiological consequences of poor mental health, including back, neck and shoulder pains, increased blood pressure, nausea and heart problems.[11] Evidence suggests that mood and anxiety disorders are associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease.[12] The behavioural consequences of workplace stress, such as poor diet and sleep, will also contribute to poor physical health.

The vicious cycle of mental and physical challenges can be aggravated by what are often called "self-medicating" behaviours or coping mechanisms. Those reactions can include smoking, substance use or alcohol use, ultimately worsening physical and mental health altogether. Substance abuse might "take the edge off" in the short term, but the backlash can be terrible. Recent research has even found that a poor day at work could increase potentially fatal risk-taking – like going through a red light on the drive home from work.[13]

As the boundaries between work and life have been eroded, our professional activities are often a very large share of how we perceive our lives in general. Workplace stressors are increasingly beginning to seep into the home environment and negatively affect family relationships and dynamics. For example, how many of you have had to carry out extra work over a weekend, meaning less time with your family, putting you in a

bad mood and making you short-tempered? Work–life spillover and cumulative work stress can begin to undermine many of the benefits of family and partner relationships, as the sense of support and security from people close to you, typically used to overcome stressors, becomes threatened.

The devastating consequences that poor mental health can have for individuals and their relationship with work also has wider implications. Individuals experiencing poor mental health at work are likely to report greater levels of burnout and are less likely to remain in secure employment. Such instability has a compounding effect and creates a vicious cycle that progressively excludes them from the workforce, depriving organisations of their skills and expertise. And the vicious cycle lingers because unemployed people are more likely to experience worry, anxiety and depression, further preventing a healthy return to work. Being unable to work because of mental health reinforces anxiety and depression.

Figure 2 on the next page shows how poor mental health at work can create a vicious cycle in which mental distress and its consequences perpetuate poor mental health and affect both individuals and organisations. In contrast, when mentally healthy individuals are able to fully engage in their working lives, they benefit themselves, their team, their organisation and the wider community.

At an organisational level, poor mental health can be devastating. The link is clear: increased stress and other mental health challenges reduce motivation and productivity for workers, which in turn affects the organisation. As we have seen, it is also likely to increase staff turnover. Luckily, the converse is also true: positive satisfaction goes hand in hand with wellbeing at work and improves productivity, which reminds us that organisations have it in their power to turn those vicious cycles around.[14]

Figure 2: **Vicious and virtuous cycles of mental health at work**

The key to understanding how mental health affects organisations is to look at what social scientists call "mediating" mechanisms. Mental health affects a range of factors (such as individual performance, work motivation, engagement, citizenship behaviour and organisational climate), which themselves affect organisational performance. For example, an individual's poor mental health may have a rapid impact on a team's cohesiveness, as colleagues may have to take on additional work to meet organisational demands. In this sense, burnout may trigger yet more burnout as the load is passed on to others. Figure 3 shows this trickling-up effect from individuals to group and organisational levels.

An expert in Chinese antiques shared her story after leaving a prestigious art dealers. As her colleagues experienced burnout from increased workloads, she ended up taking on their work too, tackling tasks that were beyond the scope of her expertise, such as preparing the antiques for sales. This not only caused her own workload to grow, but also frustration at not being able to do her work correctly, and the feeling of being undervalued contributed to her own burnout.

The art dealers ended up losing key people in a specialised field in which expertise is narrow and rare. On top of that, clients were being turned away by the poor quality of service

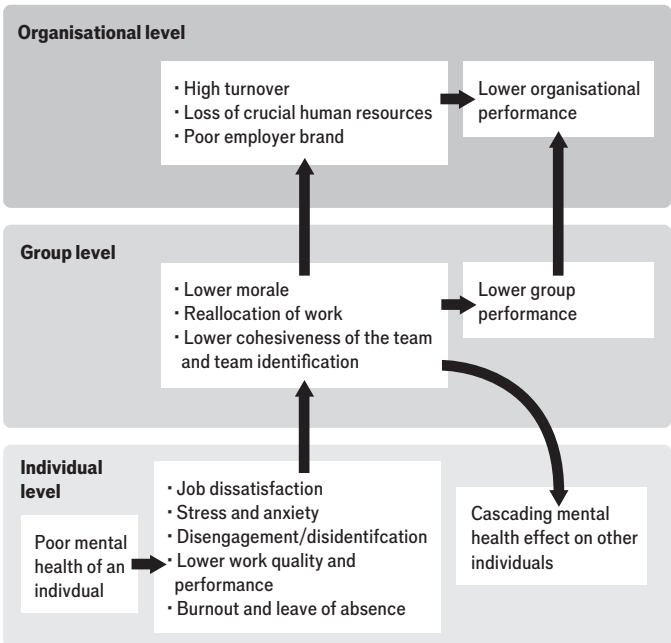

Figure 3: **Consequences of mental health issues at the individual, group and organisational levels**

from employees who were willing to do well but were not trained to carry out their tasks. This is a clear example of how the organisational context can lead to mental health issues, which then affect a range of other factors, ultimately damaging the bottom line. Inevitably, the firm's prestige and status (which were strong selling points) declined – and so did sales.

The risk of a domino effect is real: one individual's struggle can have widespread consequences on their team and their organisation. A controversial piece of research in 2022 explored the existence of this contagion effect of depression and anxiety by looking at how employees from organisations with high levels

of mental health difficulties can even have an effect on their new colleagues when they move organisations and potentially "implant" anxiety and depression within their new team.[15] This is particularly true when mental health issues affect managers; because of their additional visibility and influence within organisations, those issues are more likely to affect a broader set of employees. Although this idea of mental health "super-spreaders" is contested, there is ample evidence that when people are affected, their network of collaborators is more likely to be affected too. This does not mean that people should hide their distress or stop role modelling positive attitudes towards their own wellbeing issues: disclosing mental health challenges helps other people put their own experience of those challenges into perspective.

Group-level consequences, whether they are simply about low morale or, more likely, performance, tend to trickle up to the organisational level. Employees are less likely to identify with their organisations (i.e. feel like their personal identity and self-perception overlap significantly with the identity and image of their organisation) when they are frustrated with their work. High levels of turnover will then turn into higher recruiting costs and a weaker employer brand or ability to attract the best talent. Mental health costs can occur on both sides of the equation, raising costs and lowering the value of the best employees. For example, experiencing high levels of stress and anxiety at work can result in both increased employee presenteeism (as employees compensate for what they feel is a mental health-related loss of productivity) and absenteeism (because mental health issues might ultimately force people into leave of absence).

Mental health in the workplace is an issue not only for organisations but also for society as a whole. Untreated problems

can cause additional costs to health, social and educational services. It is estimated that poor mental health costs UK employers up to £45bn each year,[16] meaning that more money is lost from poor mental health at work than NHS funding for mental health services in the UK.[17]

And because individuals with mental health difficulties at work are less likely to remain in secure employment, they are more likely to receive welfare benefits.[18] The situation is made worse if efforts are not made to support people so they can get back into employment.

On every level, it is vital to invest in individuals' mental health at work. Organisations and leaders are in a prime position to contribute to this investment. When people thrive at work, their mental health benefits. This creates a healthy cycle in which both the individual and the organisation prosper. Organisations that lead on mental health can build up a stronger employer brand to attract more talented and diverse employees. They can limit turnover and retain, develop and motivate their team members. Organisations that develop the right mental health skills can make their teams more cohesive and resilient, which is much more likely to offer a competitive advantage.

The upward potential of investing in a wellbeing-intelligent workplace is also obvious. Work can boost wellbeing, and investing in workplace care is a vital asset. Studies show that individuals who are satisfied in their jobs are less likely to be absent from work and more likely to improve their work performance. And in some instances, high job satisfaction can protect against burnout and lack of engagement. In addition, those who feel happy at work are not only more efficient and effective but are also more cooperative, so they can support others and build a resilient work community. A sense of satisfaction at work can facilitate learning and teamwork,

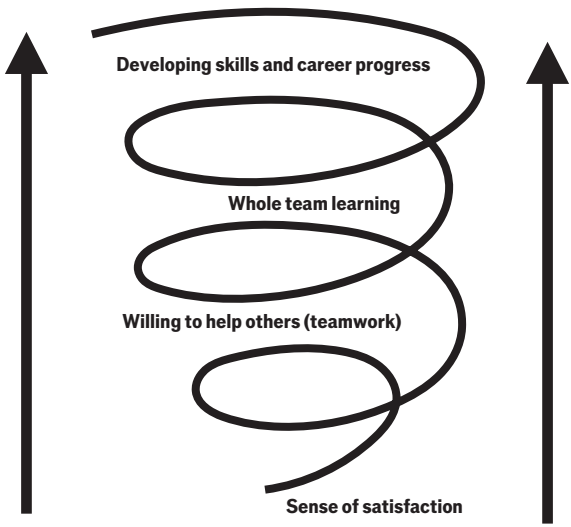

Figure 4: **The positive spiral of wellbeing benefits**

allowing individuals to develop and grow. This in turn causes a positive upward spiral, reinforcing our positive feelings at work. Figure 4 illustrates how wellbeing generates goodwill and feeds effort to support others, strengthening team learning and consequently individual and group development.

Positive work experiences also add value and meaning to people's lives. Engaging in work allows people to make use of their strengths and provides opportunities for challenge and growth. All these things create a healthy self-esteem, building resilience and support for times of distress. Good workplace wellbeing not only provides benefits in the present; it also supports the future.

American psychologist Abraham Maslow's theory of needs offers a visual approach to human motivation.[19] His hierarchy of needs is usually shown as a pyramid or ladder that individuals

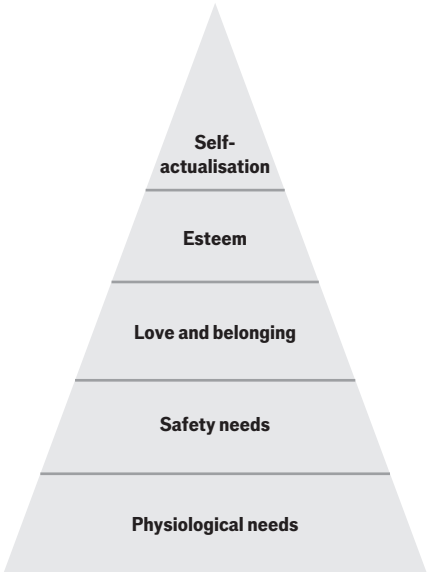

Figure 5: **Maslow's pyramid of motivational needs**

climb, and identifies the factors that they need to grow and thrive (see Figure 5). Positive wellbeing at work supports people's ability to make their way up Maslow's hierarchy; wellbeing intelligence is often about identifying what needs are not satisfied. Maslow's "ladder" helps organisations and individuals think about why they struggle to find the motivation to grow and experience positive self-esteem when more basic needs such as a sense of safety or love are not fulfilled.

At the base of the pyramid, being employed on a fair basis provides the resources to meet basic physiological needs: food and shelter, the most basic human survival needs we all require. As people move up the pyramid, work can help to accomplish our safety needs by providing financial security. It can also foster a sense of belonging, a feeling that you are part of a

community, working together and achieving shared goals. Work is also vital in meeting our esteem needs. All these lead to the ability to fulfil your self-actualisation, the needs you meet to reach your whole human potential, which is not only a source of motivation but also a source of wellbeing. This includes skills development, refining your talents, continuing education and meeting broader life goals.

At all levels, good workplace experiences can be beneficial to our growth needs and, indirectly, to our mental health. The hierarchy of needs reminds us of the multidimensional nature of wellbeing: everything matters to wellbeing and wellbeing matters to everything we do. But each aspect matters in a different way, with more complex interactions than often assumed.

Wellbeing intelligence takes skill to uncover the sources of any wellbeing issues, how those sources depend on each other, and how to address them analytically. What follows will provide readers with the analytical tools to understand and address these issues practically at work.

2

Four mental health challenges at work

Remember Estephania, watching her team members disengage from their work? She feels they no longer have any enthusiasm or energy. And she is herself feeling deflated by the combination of work challenges and personal ones. She does not even know where to start. We would advise her to approach this as a clinician: the first step in addressing an issue is to recognise and understand what is happening. And that means understanding the core mental health challenges that she and her team members might be facing.

This first step is not easy because everyone's mental health and working life experience is unique. However, Estephania would probably feel much more confident about her ability to understand others' situations if she knew about the four most common wellbeing challenges in the lives of working-age adults: stress, burnout, anxiety and depression.

This chapter describes each of these challenges and their associated symptoms. The aim is not to provide a diagnosis but rather to aid awareness and recognition of when wellbeing is at risk. It is not uncommon for these symptoms to overlap and even feed each other. For example, stress can lead to anxiety, and vice versa; in most cases, it won't be easy to categorise the