

Are we missing the boat? Examining managers' perspectives on employee wellbeing in the foodservice industry*

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The purpose of this research note was to examine managers' perspectives on employee wellbeing in the foodservice industry. Particularly, this study conducted 14 semi-structured individual interviews with upper-level managers of various organizations within the foodservice industry. Thematic analyses were employed to analyze the data. The overall findings addressed the essence of considering employee wellbeing in the industry. Particularly, this study revealed managers' interpretation of employee wellbeing, identified major influences on employee wellbeing, reported the current measures, and presented the major challenges facing most organizations regarding improving employee wellbeing. From a theoretical point of view, this study used a qualitative approach and reflected managers' perspectives on the concept of employee wellbeing. Building on those findings, this study provides practical implications, which mainly involves using a forward-thinking, top-down approach to enhance employee wellbeing, and highlights the roles of organizational support and organizational culture. Based on the findings, this study also discusses future research directions and limitations.

Keywords: *employee wellbeing, work experience, foodservice industry, organizational support, organizational culture, qualitative research*

1 INTRODUCTION

Employee wellbeing has become a popular topic in both business and hospitality management literature over the past two decades (Kim et al. 2018). The foodservice industry acts as one of the most critical drivers of US economics, which represents 10 percent of the overall workforce (National Restaurant Association 2019). However, jobs in the foodservice industry are usually characterized by irregular and long working hours, which can easily lead to work stress, overload, and even burnout (Kara et al. 2013). Given the fact that most foodservice workers need to interact with and provide service to customers and the significance of service quality, employee wellbeing is becoming especially important for the foodservice industry.

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There has been a growing body of literature in hospitality management either directly or indirectly related to employee wellbeing, such as burnout (Kara et al. 2013), work engagement and commitment (Huertas-Valdivia et al. 2018), emotional labor (Shani et al. 2014), work–life balance (Hofmann/Stokburger-Sauer 2017), and psychological capital (Paek et al. 2015). This research stream also noted that organizational factors such as leadership style (Kara et al. 2013) and corporate social responsibility (Kim et al. 2018) also influenced how employees perceive their wellbeing at work. Managers play a critical role in this regard. They need to be responsible for multiple stakeholders – ranging from employees and customers to shareholders – while they also represent the organization and can directly influence the employees. However, very little research has focused on perspectives regarding employee wellbeing, especially in the foodservice industry. Thus, the purpose of this research note was to examine managers' perspectives on employee wellbeing and to identify both theoretical and practical implications.

2 METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative approach by conducting individual semi-structured interviews. It is believed that this research method can yield 'direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge' (Patton 2005: 1), explores the human aspect of the society, and powers the findings by providing insiders' perspectives (Phillimore/Goodson 2004). Particularly, the interviewees in this study were asked to: (1) illustrate their interpretation of employee wellbeing; (2) identify factors impacting employee wellbeing; (3) provide information on current practices/programs related to employee wellbeing in their organizations; and (4) identify major challenges to improving employee wellbeing.

The target population of this study was upper-level managers in the US foodservice industry, and participants were recruited through a purposive sampling method. A major professional non-profit organization in the foodservice industry provided a list of potential participants, along with their contact information. Two rounds of email invitations were sent asking them to participate in on-site interviews at the organization's annual conference. The sample included 14 managers from different food-service organizations.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription company, and verified by the researchers. The average duration of interviews was 19 minutes, ranging from 9 to 48 minutes. Following Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) suggestion, the researchers employed a deductive coding process, consisting of three steps: (1) identifying the major themes based on previous literature (Kara et al. 2012; Kim et al. 2018); (2) providing a definition of each theme; and (3) coding the texts and sorting them into different themes. The themes were discussed, reviewed, and refined by the researchers. The revised coding scheme is presented in Table 1 and an overview of the thematic framework is presented in Figure 1.

Table 1 Coding scheme

Theme	Definition	Quotes
Health and Safety Needs	The need to be safe and healthy (both physically and mentally) in workplace.	'You have to have a strong mind and strong body, and I think you have to mentally prepare yourself to go through what the day is going to entail.'
Economic and Family Needs	The job fulfills their economic needs and family obligation.	'Financial wellbeing, because money is very important, your finances are very important, and they play a really important role in your life.'
Social Needs	The need to build connections and social bonding in the workplace.	'It's extremely important that that relationship is built and maintained, and that they feel welcome into the space and that they want to be there.'
Esteem Needs	The need to be appreciated and valued in the workplace.	'I think when people understand that they have a voice in it ... at any and every level, is making sure that everyone is heard.'
Actualization Needs	The need to create value and contribute in the workplace.	'It's my responsibility that this goes right and I got to make sure that they have the means to do the job right.'
Knowledge Needs	The need to seek more knowledge in the workplace.	'I like fixing problems ... I always try to figure out some kind of problem or provide a process, to get something done.'
Esthetic/Creativity Needs	The need to be creative/maintain esthetics in the workplace.	'In whatever line job that you choose to do, there has to be some portion of it that's creative.'
The Need for a Positive Overall Work Experience	The need to have a positive work experience.	'The wellbeing can be everything from workplace experience, whether it's white noise, an open floor plan, and building temperature.'

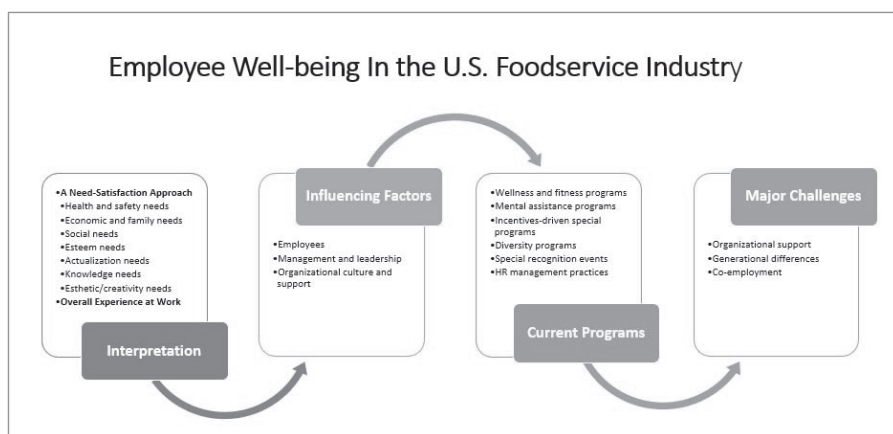


Figure 1 Major themes

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 What is employee wellbeing?

This first objective was to obtain managers' interpretation of employee wellbeing. Eight themes emerged, including (1) *health and safety needs*, (2) *economic and family needs*, (3) *social needs*, (4) *esteem needs*, (5) *actualization needs*, (6) *knowledge needs*, (7) *esthetic/creativity needs*, and (8) *overall experience at work*. The first seven themes are highly consistent with the traditional approach in employee wellbeing research, which is built upon the need-based theory and suggests that employees derive their satisfaction to the extent their job meets their needs (Kara et al. 2013). Among these seven types of need, the most important are economic and family needs, social needs, and esteem and actualization needs.

Regarding *economic and family needs*, interviewees constantly stressed the importance to many front-line employees' lives of having jobs, and the significance of being compensated at a fair rate. Interestingly, *work-life balance* was frequently mentioned by the respondents. Work-life balance is probably one of the most important aspects of hospitality research and practice, and mainly involves the interplay of professional and personal life (Hofmann/Stokburger-Sauer 2017). This theme has not been previously listed as a dimension of economic and family needs, but it was deemed important for the participants. As one participant explained, 'If I have trouble at home, it is going to [affect] my work performance.' For them, work-life balance is 'always challenging' and they 'really need to find those areas where you [they] can have that balance because it's so important to the mental and physical health'.

Social needs are another prominent theme, and mainly concern social networks and relationships at work. Relationships have long been seen as an essential component in one's evaluation of their work experience (Grant et al. 2007). This also holds true for the participants, as one respondent explained: 'The wellness and happiness in the workplace come with the people I work with and for and it is those personal connections that define how you're treated as an employee.' Social bonding can be further expressed by a sense of belonging, as another participant commented: 'If I were to leave the job, it wouldn't be I'm sad to leave the company, it would be I'm sad to leave my coworkers.'

Esteem and actualization needs were also frequently discussed by the interviewees. One interviewee explained his/her esteem needs in terms of 'being valued and being taken care of'. Similarly, another respondent defined employee wellbeing through 'the way your management treats you and how you're respected among your employees as well'. Indeed, esteem needs rely on a sense of being appreciated and valued, while actualization needs largely involve a sense of contribution. For instance, one participant depicted his/her interpretation of employee wellbeing as 'a sense of contribution and building towards something'. Interestingly, we noticed that some interviewees applied a similar management style where actualization needs were highlighted. For example, one of them explained: 'It goes back to if they [employees] feel valued, if they're challenged and have that sense of successfulness.' This also aligned with the transformational leadership style, which underscores inspirational motivation and considers individuals.

Furthermore, we noticed that participants tended to correlate the quality of their *overall experience at work* with employee wellbeing. This aligns well with the classic definition of employee wellbeing in the business literature, which concerns the overall quality of the workplace experience (Grant et al. 2007). A positive experience at work particularly leads to increased employee productivity and a stronger desire to be

successful. As one interviewee shared, ‘It becomes a place of “I’m looking forward to coming here because I feel respected and people are real” versus “I’m here to fill a seat and do a job.”’ The association here highlighted participants’ actualization needs, which is exciting as intrinsic motivation is essential for organizations’ performance, survival, and sustainability.

3.2 Does employee wellbeing matter?

All respondents agreed on *the importance of employee wellbeing*, both at individual and organizational levels. Focusing on individuals, enhanced employee wellbeing often resulted in ‘employees that will stay with you longer, that provide the company with continuity and are motivated for the work that they do’. From the perspective of organizations, employee wellbeing is more than a term to describe the status of the workforce; it has evolved into a tool for ‘attracting and retaining any talent that you want to be working for you’. This is consistent with the findings of industry reports, suggesting that the majority of workers believe in workplace wellness programs, and that those who have already enrolled in these programs are approaching their work with more energy, motivation, and commitment (Principal Financial 2017). In addition to low-cost health care plans, in the US a matching 401(k) retirement plan, paid vacation days, wellness programs, and other similar initiatives are becoming new attractions to recruit or retain top talent.

Additionally, the findings outline the *influencing factors* on employee wellbeing, including (1) *employees*, (2) *management and leadership*, and (3) *organizational culture and support*. First, most respondents agreed that employees themselves play a critical role in determining their own wellbeing, as this construct is highly subjective and depends on their ability to handle stress and maintain a work–life balance. Second, most participants stressed the importance of management and leadership, which is consistent with the existing literature (Kara et al. 2013). As a manager, they were aware of their responsibilities and the importance of an open and communicative management style. As one respondent explained, ‘When you get that kind of cooperation and empathy from your managers – that to me is like, you can’t put that in dollars and cents.’ Some respondents also noted the influence of digital communication, commenting that ‘People are refraining from physical human communication and it’s becoming all digital.’ This can be detrimental as ‘There has to be that physical personal touch or else your message is not being conveyed.’

Lastly, organizational culture and support are found to be essential in improving employee wellbeing. The importance of a *top-down approach* has been repeatedly stressed, because ‘If the company doesn’t have their own mission statement, or idea of what wellness means, or wellbeing means, then it’s really hard to drive forth.’ To receive support, employee wellbeing should be embedded in the organizational culture. As one interviewee expressed, ‘I think a lot of it is going to have to go into instilling culture and traditions within an organization that can go beyond the physical.’

Various *employee wellbeing-related programs* were reported, which fit into the following categories: (1) wellness and fitness programs (for example fitness centers); (2) mental assistance programs (employee assistance programs); (3) incentive-driven special programs (point-based tracking programs); (4) diversity programs; (5) special recognition events; and (6) Human Resources (HR) management practices such as employee networking groups and personal development programs. Interestingly, food-related wellness programs were also mentioned, maybe because the participants

all came from foodservice-related organizations. Examples of these food-related wellness programs include 'a mindful program' which discourages employees from eating unhealthy foods in cafeterias – offering discounts on selected healthy food items, partnering with dietitians on-site, having an innovation chef to promote diverse food choices, and embracing 'a menu of change' by adopting healthy ingredients for foods.

3.3 Major challenges in enhancing employee wellbeing

Acknowledging the significance of employee wellbeing, it is also important to understand the major challenges faced by foodservice organizations regarding enhancing employee wellbeing. The following challenges were identified: (1) *organizational support*, (2) *generational differences*, and (3) *co-employment*. First, organizational support is generally associated with allocated resources and internal support. Such a top-down approach can ensure that 'the right people are in the right positions' and that 'positive morale gets communicated throughout the organization'. As one participant directly pointed out, 'If you don't get what we call top cover, it's usually not going to work and you're not going to get the funding you need and everything else.' Meanwhile, there are difficulties in balancing organizational performance and employee wellbeing. As one respondent replied, 'There is a balance between getting the work done and then second, find[ing] the needs for the employees.' Therefore, even though employees want the 'emphasis on health and wellness', it is up to the company and the leaders to make decisions based on how this 'fits into corporate finance goals and productivity'.

Generational differences, which normally refer to 'old mindsets', is another challenge. Some of these old mindsets exist in managers, resulting in a lack of awareness of employee wellbeing. One respondent explained, 'I think they have just a little bit of an antiquated way of looking at the workplace, and they don't necessarily feel the same need to engage us that way.' In addition, one interviewee emphasized that there are 'five generations of workers' in their organizations, all with different needs and perspectives. For millennials, 'They would take a pay cut rather than work for a company that they felt they didn't believe in the mission.' Consequently, 'If they're not really innovating on that front, it's just really hard to get them to understand that this is the need and this is where we need to start going towards.'

The 'old mindset' also existed among employees, especially front-line employees. This has become a major barrier in promoting initiatives related to employee wellbeing. For example, one respondent noticed that most front-line employees 'just want to come in, punch the clock, get paid their eight hours and go home'. Lack of awareness may thus lead to inefficiencies and even failure of some employee wellbeing programs. One participant expressed his/her concern, saying that 'You might be spending money on a program that nobody's participating in' and 'You've spent this money for no reason.'

Another challenge involves *co-employment*. Contractors, co-employees, or hourly associates are common in the foodservice industry, but they are normally excluded from employee benefits. This directly affects their feelings, as one interviewee explained: 'Those employees sometimes feel slighted because they see everything at the XXX employees get and they couldn't get it.' Another interviewee shared a similar insight, stating that 'When it comes to wellness, I have to say that, for our hourly associates at XXX, it's not a concern to them.' This may be perceived as workplace injustice and negatively impacted employees' performance and commitment.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Employee wellbeing is a popular topic of strategic value. Employees, leaders, and managers alike believe that employee wellbeing is the key to increasing work performance, productivity, and loyalty. Accordingly, this study investigated managers' insights into employee wellbeing in the foodservice industry in the United States. From a theoretical perspective, this study provided new insights into the definition of employee wellbeing. Hospitality studies tended to approach the concept of employee wellbeing by dimensions (for example Kara et al. 2013), while the business literature tended to focus on the type of employee wellbeing, such as health or relationship happiness (Van De Voorde et al. 2012). The findings of this study, interestingly, provided support to both arguments, as the results not only confirm the multi-dimensional nature of employee wellbeing but also underline the interrelationship between a particular need and the overall evaluation. Therefore, future research should take this into consideration and try to use a more holistic approach to study employee wellbeing.

The practical implication of this study mainly lies in the identification of major influences and challenges that are critical to organizations' success in improving employee wellbeing. To start with, although the importance of employee wellbeing has been widely recognized, the interpretation of employee wellbeing should move beyond the traditional scope. Instead of being seen as a fancy and popular term or a standard 'gig', employee wellbeing is becoming a new tool that can help attract and retain talent and differentiate one organization from another. After all, what matters most to the new generation is to be respected, valued, and appreciated.

Additionally, there is a need to employ a *human-centered* approach to employee wellbeing. Due to generational differences, some leaders and organizations may be skeptical about the effects of employee wellbeing. A situational approach may be needed here where employees' and even prospective employees' perceptions and viewpoints should be learned and considered. Lastly, a *top-down approach* is very much needed to enhance employee wellbeing. Such an approach not only comes with organizational support, but is also vital to reviving the organizational culture. Only organizations that fully embrace the concept of employee wellbeing can take the most advantage of these programs and maintain a happy and productive workforce.

This study is not without its limitations. First, it used a purposive sampling method, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Therefore, future research should replicate this study in different sectors and among various populations. Second, although this study provided new insights into the interpretation of employee wellbeing, further empirical support is needed. Future research can extend this line of research, exploring the importance of employee wellbeing for different generations within the industry. Lastly, the sample size of this study seems small, but it did reach theme saturation. Future studies can build upon the insights of this study and test the effectiveness of programs and measures related to employee wellbeing.

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