

## ***Impact Case Study***

### **UoA 19: Business & Management Studies**

#### **Advancing HR practice through employee wellbeing strategies**

##### **1. Summary of the impact**

Research has linked employee wellbeing to employee motivation and engagement, which can in turn drive increases in productivity and improved levels of product/service delivery. This case study illustrates how academic research and enterprise-based activity, through a university spinout company, has helped to create a significant positive impact on promoting and improving employee wellbeing. This has been achieved across a variety of national and international organisations, including several high profile private and public organisations, involving over 50,000 employees across Europe. This has resulted in a number of positive outcomes such as national and international awards in the area of HR as well as increased employee engagement and reduced employee absenteeism.

##### **2. Underpinning research**

The subject of this case study refers to a body of research aimed at: developing more effective methods of auditing psycho-social work conditions; investigating the relationship between working conditions, employee wellbeing and employee behaviour; and identifying effective tools and strategies to improve employee wellbeing.

Under European, UK and Irish legislation there is a legal imperative for companies to monitor the risks of psychosocial hazards within the workplace. Prior research determined the need for a holistic and systemic approach to foster the creation of a healthier workforce (McHugh, 1998; McHugh, 2001; McHugh, 2002). The UK Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) Management Standards (MS) approach has been developed to help organisations manage the risk of psychosocial work hazards. Following on from this a number of large-scale studies have been conducted across a range of public and private sector organisations to investigate the empirical evidence to support the adoption of the MS approach in tackling workplace stress (Kerr *et al.*, 2009; Houdmont *et al.*, 2012; Houdmont *et al.*, 2013). For example, within the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) three longitudinal census surveys were conducted involving datasets of 11,500, 17,000, and 10,500 over a ten-year period (Houdmont *et al.*, 2012; Houdmont *et al.*, 2013). Data was obtained on a range of health and wellbeing parameters, including the HSE Management Standards for stress. The resulting survey data was used to study interrelationships and longitudinal patterns as well as the linkages between organisational health and employee wellbeing to outcomes such as engagement, absenteeism and performance (Kerr *et al.*, 2009; Houdmont *et al.*, 2012; Houdmont *et al.*, 2013). One study demonstrated the adverse changes in psychosocial hazard exposures, work-related stress prevalence and stress-related sickness absence associated with the onset of an unprecedented economic recession. Its findings indicated the need for a concerted focus on psychosocial risk management activities during austere economic times as a means by which to promote worker health and minimize sickness absence (Houdmont *et al.*, 2012).

Among other research outcomes was the establishment of a relationship between psychosocial working conditions and employee wellbeing (Kerr *et al.*, 2009), providing empirical support for the use of the MS approach in tackling workplace stress, as well as a study validating the use of an abbreviated MS scale (Houdmont *et al.*, 2013). The Irish Health and Safety Authority (HSA) have adopted the MS approach. In 2010 a research study was commissioned by the HSA to validate a

Republic of Ireland (ROI) version of the UK HSE Management Standards Indicator Tool (called the 'Work Positive Profile') and establish appropriate scoring norms. A key outcome of this research was the development of a new workplace psychosocial risk audit tool. This research activity involved working closely with over 30 public and private sector organisations, processing over 8000 survey responses, and providing clear recommendations for organisational improvement based on psychosocial risk scores.

Staff members: McHugh in post at Ulster since 1989, Kerr in post at Ulster since 2005.

### 3. References to the research

There were a number of publications in peer-reviewed journals, a selection of which include:

Houdmont, J. Randall, R. Kerr, R. & Addley, K. (2013) 'Psychosocial risk assessment in organisations: Concurrent validity of the brief version of the Management Standards Indicator Tool', *Work & Stress*, Vol. 4, No. 27, pp. 403-412. [DOI:10.1080/02678373.2013.843607](https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2013.843607)

Houdmont, J. Kerr, R. Addley, K. (2012) 'Psychosocial factors and economic recession: the Stormont Study', *Occupational Medicine*, Vol. 2, No. 62, pp. 98-104. [DOI:10.1093/occmed/kqr216](https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqr216) (top 50 most read paper, 2012)

Kerr, R, McHugh, M, McCrory, M. (2009) 'HSE Management Standards and stress-related work outcomes', *Occupational Medicine*, Vol.8, No. 59, pp. 574-579. [DOI: 10.1093/occmed/kqp146](https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqp146)

McHugh, M. (2002) 'The absence bug: a curable viral infection?', *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, Vol. 8, No. 17, pp. 722-738. [DOI: 10.1108/02683940210450510](https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940210450510)

McHugh, M. (2001) 'Employee absence: an impediment to organisational health in local government', *International Journal of Public Sector and Management*, Vol. 1, No. 21, pp. 43-58. [DOI: 10.1108/09513550110387066](https://doi.org/10.1108/09513550110387066)

McHugh, M. (1998) 'Rationalization as a key stressor for public service sector employees: an organizational case study', *Occupational Medicine*, Vol. 2, No. 14, pp. 103-112. [DOI:10.1093/occmed/48.2.103](https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/48.2.103)

### 4. Details of the impact

Our research has achieved a notable impact outside academia during the assessment period. The strength and diversity of this impact is evident in the broad range of impacted variables at a national and international level, and across overlapping spheres of economic, organisational and health and welfare impacts.

The **reach** of the impacts is outlined below.

The findings from our research investigating the impact of the recession on work-related stress and employee absenteeism have been disseminated through a wide range of national and international media outlets including the Daily Mail, Huffington Post, the Independent, and NHS online (**6** – numbers in bold refer to evidence in Section 5).

A university spin-out company, Managing Wellbeing Ltd ([www.managingwellbeing.com](http://www.managingwellbeing.com)), was created to develop web applications to support our organisational strategies to improve employee wellbeing. Working alongside the Republic of Ireland's (ROI) Health and Safety Authority we developed a new indicator of health and wellbeing, the 'Work Positive Profile' (**1**). The 'Work Positive Profile' is a refinement and development of the Work Positive Survey. To date, over 30 organisations have taken adopted this survey tool, representing over 25,000 employees.

Alongside validating and psychometrically improving the ROI national psycho-social risk audit tool we provided a clear positive impact for the organisations involved. This has fed into their HR strategy with regard to enhancing social capital by providing detailed management reports identifying ways to improve employee health and wellbeing and manage psycho-social risk to over 30 organisations, as well as individual employee feedback identifying opportunities to improve wellbeing to over 8,000 employees **(1)**.

To encourage the adoption of this new indicator and to improve access to the service we created an automated online version of the 'Work Positive Profile' (accessible at [www.workpositiveprofile.com](http://www.workpositiveprofile.com)). A variation of this health and wellbeing audit tool has been deployed by other organisations nationally and internationally, including NATO **(1)**, London Metropolitan University, and Business in the Community.

The success of our organisational wellbeing support has generated international interest. For example we worked with Eli Lilly, a multi-national pharmaceutical company, in the ROI and this resulted in them receiving global recognition at corporate level for best practice in employee wellbeing. Consequently, other sites across the Eli Lilly group are actively considering adopting a similar template to that used within ROI **(3)**.

The **significance** is outlined below.

Our engagement with a range of organisations has had a significant impact for the beneficiaries. We have had direct influence on organisational health and wellbeing strategies impacting on over 50,000 employees. Some of the prominent organisations that have participated include Danske Bank (formally Northern Bank) **(2)**, Northern Ireland Civil Service **(4)**, Police Service Northern Ireland (PSNI) **(5)**, and University College, Cork.

Managing Wellbeing's web tool, the 'WELL Hub', facilitates health support and employee access to support services by clearly signposting support services both inside and outside of the organisation. Currently, over 45,000 employees now access health and wellbeing related information within their organisation through one of their organisational 'WELL Hubs'.

Danske Bank, the PSNI and Northern Ireland Civil Service have embraced our strategy of creating voluntary 'Wellbeing Champions' within their workforce. This has increased employee engagement in wellbeing throughout the workforce **(2,4,5,7,8)**.

Working in partnership with the Northern Ireland Civil Service we have developed and co-authored (with Occupational Health Service personnel) the NICS WELL Programme 2012-2014 launched in September 2012 **(4,8)**. This is an innovative multi-level health and wellbeing initiative that generates a significant and sustainable increase in the engagement and skills development across all 28,000 NICS employees. The NICS WELL programme is based around a central wellbeing website (WELL Hub) and a network of voluntary WELL champions across all departments. This approach has helped the Northern Ireland Civil Service to break down departmental barriers; draw together existing experiences and best practices; and share these throughout their organisation **(4)**. Feedback has been universally positive from staff, managers, HR and union representatives **(4)**. Engagement levels have been excellent. Since programme launch in September 2012, there have been over 20,000 website visits, direct interaction with over 10,000 NICS employees and over 100 voluntary WELL Champions have been trained to deliver 140 wellbeing events driving positive sustained behavioural change with the workforce **(4)**.

Our advice and supporting web tools have improved the effectiveness of workplace practices regarding Human Resource Management and enhanced corporate social responsibility policies. Our on-going engagement has resulted in organisations winning award recognition for the first time at a local and national level (e.g. CIPD People Management Awards – PSNI; Orange National Business Awards – PSNI and runner-up Danske Bank; Irish News Awards - PSNI and Danske Bank; Business In The Community – Danske Bank) **(7,9)**, as well as internationally (e.g. Outstanding Health and Safety Contributor – Eli Lilly) **(3)**.

The adoption of our WELL Hub and wellbeing strategies have preceded improved health and welfare outcomes, such as increased employee engagement and reduced absenteeism **(2)**. This is supported by the recent report from CIPD on absence management that identifies the work with the PSNI as representing best practice in this area **(10)**.

We have also engaged directly with a wide range of national and international organisations to conduct wellbeing-based risk assessments, such as: Carlow County Council, Danske Bank, Eircom, Eli Lilly, Electricity Supply Board (ESB), Dublin City Council, Dun laoghaire and Rathdown County Council, London Metropolitan University, Merck, NATO, Northern Ireland Civil Service, Novartis, and University College Cork. This activity has helped these organisations identify opportunities to improve the effectiveness of workplace practices **(1,3-5)**. For example, identifying wellbeing areas of most interest to staff **(2,10)**, and opportunities to manage psycho-social risk **(1)**.

The evidence of impacts and indicators are outlined in Table 1.

<b>Table 1: Advancing HR practice through employee wellbeing strategies - Research Impacts</b>			
<b>Key Research Areas</b>	<b>Impacts and Dates</b>	<b>Evidence</b>	<b>Impact Indicators</b>
Relationship between working conditions, employee wellbeing and behaviour	Further research understanding with findings resonating beyond academic sector (2010-13)	Coverage within a wide range of national and international media outlets including <b>(6)</b>	A range of indicators have underpinned this research activity, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The development of new wellbeing instruments (e.g. audit tools <b>(1)</b>, WELL Hub)</li> <li>• Increase employee engagement <b>(2,4)</b></li> <li>• Reduced employee absenteeism <b>(2)</b></li> <li>• Organisational charters, policies and guides <b>(4,8)</b></li> <li>• Award</li> </ul>
Improving methods of auditing psychosocial work conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed and validated a national tool for conducting psychosocial work audits (2010-13)</li> <li>• Modified version used in Europe (2011-12)</li> </ul>	Testimonials from national bodies <b>(1)</b> and organisations that have deployed the audit tool <b>(2,5)</b>	
Developing HR strategies to improve employee wellbeing	Impacted on new health and wellbeing strategies for organisations with over 50,000 employees in Europe (2010-13)	Testimonials from organisations that have adopted our HR strategies <b>(2-5)</b>  Organisational programme guide <b>(8)</b>	

Developing HR tools to improve employee wellbeing	Developed new online tool, the, to help organisations improve employee wellbeing. Online tool adopted by 4 organizations representing 45,000 employees (2009-13)	Testimonials from organisations that have adopted the WELL Hub <b>(2,4,5)</b>	recognition for organisations we have worked with <b>(3,7,9)</b>
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## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Health and Safety Authority Factual Statement, Senior Occupation Psychologist
2. Danske Bank Factual Statement, HR Business Partner
3. Eli Lilly Factual Statement, Director of Occupational Health
4. Northern Ireland Civil Service Factual Statement, Director of Occupational Health Service
5. Police Service Northern Ireland Factual Statement, Chief Medical Officer
6. Links to media coverage (e.g. Daily Mail - <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2104939/Work-related-stress-soared-recession-number-people-going-sick-rose-quarter.html>; Huffington Post - [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/02/21/work-stress-soars-recession\\_n\\_1290904.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/02/21/work-stress-soars-recession_n_1290904.html); Independent - <http://www.independent.ie/breaking-news/national-news/recession-boosts-work-stress-3025165.html>)
7. Danske Bank award evidence (runner up Orange National Business Awards 2010) - <http://www.taffhousing.co.uk/sites/default/files/PRESS%20RELEASE%2028th%20July%202010.pdf>; Business in the Community and Irish News (2010) - <http://www.danskebank.com/en-uk/About-us/Facts-about-us/Pages/awards-rankings.aspx?tab=3>
8. Northern Ireland Civil Service NICSWELL Programme guide
9. Police Service Northern Ireland award evidence (CIPD 2011 - <http://www.cipd.co.uk/pressoffice/press-releases/amey-public-service-provider.aspx>; Irish News 2010 - [http://www.irishnews.com/wea2013/winner\\_2010.html](http://www.irishnews.com/wea2013/winner_2010.html); Orange National Business Awards 2010 - <http://www.policeoracle.com/news/PSNI-Awarded-Top-Accolade-28096.html>
10. 2012 CIPD annual survey report on Absence Management