Determinants for positive mental health and wellbeing at work – a literature review

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1. Introduction

In general it can be stated that it is beneficial for your health to be employed. There is strong evidence that work itself, despite its risks, reduces the risk of depression and improves mental health (Waddell & Burton, 2006; van der Noordt, IJzelenberg, Droomers, & Proper, 2014). Mental health, like mental illness, is a vaguely defined concept. Mental health is a non-contextual concept which can be defined as the absence of mental illness, and with the opportunity to develop and flourish with high levels of emotional, psychological and social well-being (Keyes, 2005). The concept of wellbeing at work is inclusive. It relates to the physical environment, work-related risks, organization of work and tasks, relationships with colleagues, personal health and work ability and even family-related stress (Suomaa, Yrjänheikki, Savolainen, & Jokiluoma, 2011). It can also be seen as an important determinant of productivity at the individual, corporate and community levels (Schulte & Vainio, 2010).

"Healthy factors" for mental health in the workplace are factors and circumstances at work that may have a preventive and/or promotional effect on mental health and wellbeing of the workers. These factors can be reversed risk factors and serve as a resource (buffer) against negative consequences of various risks at work. They may also be factors that, by themselves, create positive health benefits for the individual and the workplace. The large numbers of work-related mental unhealthy call for action in improving working conditions, but which are the important determinants of positive mental health and wellbeing at work to be influenced? A review of indicators for healthy workplaces has recently been performed (Lindberg & Vingård, 2012), but we have not found any comprehensive review concerning mental health at work. Hence, the aim of this study was to review current knowledge concerning determinants for mental health and wellbeing at work.

2. Method

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using the electronic databases EBSCO (includes Academic Search Elite, Cinahl, PsycINFO och PsycARTICLES), Emerald, PubMed, Scopus and Web of Science for relevant articles published 2000 to October 2014, written in English, German or Scandinavian languages.

Search terms: work OR workplace OR "healthy workplace" OR "healthy work" OR "healthy work" environment OR "good work" environment AND "depressive disorder" OR depression OR "behavioral symptoms" OR "anxiety disorders" OR "stress, psychological" OR "common mental disorders" OR "mental health" OR "sustainable mental health" OR "mental wellbeing" OR "mental well-being" OR "job well-being" OR "job well-being" OR "positive mental health" OR "good mental health" OR "positive mental wellbeing" OR "positive mental well-being" AND prevention OR promotion.

Of the originally found 7421 publications 27 were included after eliminating duplicates and scrutinizing titles, abstracts and full text articles. The remaining articles included 7 review-, 12 cohort-, 5 cross-sectional and 3 qualitative studies.

3. Results

In this literature review of what characterizes a healthy workplace regarding mental health and wellbeing the most frequently investigated factor was the impact of leadership on mental health. It was found that "good leadership", i.e. fair, supportive and empowering, gave positive health changes (Lohela, Björklund, Vingård, Hagberg, & Jensen, 2009), and increased well-being (Stansfeld, Shipley, Head, Fuhrer, & Kivimaki, 2013; Tuomi, Vanhala, Nykyri, & Janhonen, 2004); that increased quality of a staff-oriented leadership reduced sickness absence in the company (Munir, Burr, Hansen, Rugulies, & Nielsen, 2011); and that
transformational leadership increased psychological wellbeing and job satisfaction among workers (Munir, Nielsen, Garde, Albertsen, & Carneiro, 2012).

Improved mental health was also predicted by control at work preferably in combination with psychological flexibility (Bond & Flaxman, 2006). High control was associated with wellbeing (Stansfeld et al., 2013) and had a buffering effect against high demands, with the result that psychological stress was not increased in such situations (Dalgard et al., 2009). Stress was also reduced by having increased time control, so working life did not encroach on privacy (Moen, Kelly, & Lam, 2013; Munir et al., 2012).

Other factors at work which were found important for the individual's mental health and wellbeing was a reasonable workload (Arnetz & Blomkvist, 2007; Stansfeld et al., 2013; Tuomi et al., 2004); balance between effort and reward (Buddeberg-Fischer et al., 2008); positive social climate (Arnetz & Blomkvist, 2007); the opportunity for empowerment and training (Tuomi et al., 2004); clear goals for the organization (Arnetz & Blomkvist, 2007); job security (Tuomi et al., 2004); and good physical working environment and other health promotive initiatives within the organization (Ybema, Evers, & van Scheppingen, 2011).

4. Discussion
Working conditions arise in the interaction between the individual and the organization, not least the psychosocial conditions. Prevention and establishment of good working conditions cannot be put on the individual; it must be organized in the workplace for the employees in that special context. For example, work needs to be organized so that it enables good psychosocial and physical conditions. However, it should be noted that also the individual has a responsibility to assist and facilitate good working conditions. Improvement strategies are based on the idea that it is possible to change contextual factors in order to improve the employee's working conditions and health. As organizations and jobs are created units they are also possible to change (Bolin, 2009). It has been shown that individual efforts against stress only seem to have short-term effects. But if they are combined or completely replaced with organizational interventions they can be expected to have more lasting and perhaps even permanent effects (Hasson, 2005).

Keywords: Work, mental health, wellbeing, review, leadership

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References


