



Overview

A large part of how people define who they are is by what they do. Work can be a key part of our social identity and good for our health. Evidence has shown that people who are employed have lower rates of psychological health problems. However, work is not a universally positive experience.

Poorly designed jobs, work that is not well organised, and challenging work environments can create or exacerbate mental health conditions. For some people with physical or mental health conditions or disabilities, a lack of the right support from employers can make finding and keeping a meaningful job difficult, while for many people who are unemployed, navigating the current welfare system to find work, claim benefits, or seek suitable support can be an extremely negative experience.

Successive UK governments have attempted to address issues around work, health, and disability, but this has yet to achieve real traction. The British Psychological Society (BPS)'s report '*Psychology at Work*' – to be published in November 2017 – brings together evidence from across the discipline to demonstrate how policy makers can better tackle these interconnected challenges. This briefing summarises the report's key findings and recommendations.

Creating a psychologically healthy workplace

- 86 per cent of people have said they value interesting work and 76 per cent rate a sense of accomplishment as important as, or more important than, pay.
- High levels of engagement at work have significant benefits for employees, such as increased levels of energy and dedication. Conversely, boredom, and a negative work environment, can create detrimental outcomes for employees and organisations.
- Trends in employment practice since the economic crash of 2007/8 reflect a focus on cost-cutting and 'doing more with less'. For employees this often results in longer or less sociable hours or uncertain employment which can negatively impact wellbeing. Job insecurity is associated with a doubling of the risk of developing a common mental disorder.
- The level of control an individual has over their work is a key contributor to psychological health. This is particularly relevant for those on zero hour contracts; although they can choose to decline work, in practice they may feel pressured to accept or be unable to afford to make that choice.
- Good management is also important for employees' mental health and wellbeing. Managers can support this by putting the best psychological theories into practice in the workplace.

BPS RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Future policy statements from government that address work and health should specifically include the need to promote psychological and physical wellbeing in the workforce, and note the evidence on the health costs of poorly designed work.
2. The government should incentivise employers to introduce evidence-based interventions that promote a psychologically healthy workforce.
3. The National Institute of Health and Care Excellence should actively seek ways to increase the uptake of its Mental Wellbeing at Work Public Health Guidance and Workplace Health Management Practices.
4. Employers should maintain transparent two-way communication with their employees on the psychological impact of work arrangements and job insecurity, and offer effective support.
5. Senior managers should regularly discuss employee health and wellbeing at board level to ensure a proactive approach to mental wellbeing at work.

Supporting neurodiverse people in the workplace

- Neurodiversity typically encompasses a range of conditions that affect cognitive functions such as thinking, attention, memory, and impulse control. Cognitive difficulties can vary from mild everyday challenges to longer-term conditions such as: ADHD, dyslexia, and Tourette Syndrome.
- Neurodiverse people are often subject to discrimination and are also more likely to be unemployed and incarcerated, both of which affect their employability.
- Disability legislation creates a legal obligation for employers and organisations to make 'reasonable' disability adjustments to workplaces and education access in order to accommodate disability. However, choosing the most effective adjustments for neurodiverse people is difficult.
- There are a number of effective interventions that an employer can implement to support neurodiverse people, ranging from 'light-touch' support such as regular communication and feedback from line managers, through to career counselling, breaks and flexitime, formal coaching, and adjustments to the workplace environment.
- Although the government's Access to Work scheme provides support for neurodiverse people, there are gaps in the research into the effectiveness of the programme. The lack of services and inconsistency for adults with neurodiversity places undue burden on unemployment, criminal justice, and social care budgets.

BPS RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The government should actively promote its Access to Work Scheme in an audience-friendly way that explains what support is available in easy to understand language.
2. The Department of Health (DH) should widen access to early diagnosis and support services for all developmental neurodiverse conditions, irrespective of their severity, as a preventative public health measure.
3. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Ministry of Justice, and DH should introduce systematic ways of utilising the latest psychological evidence to inform policy and build their evidence base for best practice. They should incentivise research into the evidence gaps on neurodiversity through the DWP's Innovation Fund and via collaborative research projects through the Work and Health Unit.
4. Employers should proceed with the presumption that a minimum of 10 per cent of employees are likely to have a neurodiverse condition affecting executive functions.
5. Employers should actively create a culture of disclosure to encourage employees to seek the right support when they need it. Employers should make it easier for their staff to disclose neurodiverse conditions and this should be swiftly followed by a workplace needs assessment and implementation of any strategies and provision of equipment that are recommended.

Supporting people into appropriate work

- While rates of unemployment are at their lowest for 10 years, there are 1.6 million people in the UK who are actively looking for work. Around 754,000 people are claiming unemployment benefits and 3.7 million people are claiming the main out of work benefits.
- The government's approach to benefits is not fit for purpose. The principles on which the UK welfare and benefits system are founded do not take sufficient account of the psychological factors at play. Incorporating psychological evidence and theory into a new approach and applying it in practice could lead to a more effective welfare system that works for everyone.
- The current system suggests that when the individual is 'well enough' they will be able to engage in employment. From a psychological perspective, this is too simplistic and does not capture the complexity of how people interact and relate to employment. In reality, work as a health outcome only appears to be achievable to a small proportion of those who participate in government

schemes – for example 2016 research from Lancaster University found that nearly 70 per cent of those completing two years on the Work Programme had not gained sustained employment.

- Therefore, the term ‘work’ should be replaced with ‘meaningful activity’ to reflect the benefits of undertaking everyday activities within family and community life. This would help to avoid stigma about unpaid work and attach value to a positive component of people’s social identity.
- There is qualitative and quantitative evidence of the negative impact of the Work Capability Assessment. A redesign is urgently required that takes into account psychological evidence on the best way to support individuals. The assessment process must be individualised to take account of a claimant’s current context and support structure and should focus on strengths and capacity rather than deficits or difficulties.
- The current sanctions policy operates on the principle that avoiding punishment would be the key motivator for individuals to seek employment. This is a misapplication of psychological behaviourist principles and could increase the risk of learned helplessness among an unemployed population whose self-esteem is already potentially comparatively low.
- Coercing people into unpaid work does not lead to lasting employment in the vast majority of cases. A system focused on achieving outcomes through encouragement and recognising the value of meaningful activity would be much more effective.

BPS RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The DH and DWP should utilise ‘meaningful activity’ rather than ‘work’ as an outcome measure and explicitly recognise that some individuals’ welfare journey will not end in paid employment.
2. Following the commitments in the green paper ‘Work, Health and Disability: Improving Lives’, the government’s approach to welfare should be based upon encouragement and incentives rather than punitive measures and coercion to encourage job uptake.
3. The Secretaries of State for Health and Work and Pensions should suspend the use of sanctions in the welfare system and commission an independent review of the link between the sanctions regime and the mental health and wellbeing of individuals.
4. The government should commit to undertaking an end to end review of its approach to the Work Capability Assessment process in order to enable the culture change needed to make it beneficial.
5. The Joint Work and Health Unit should establish baselines and set measurable objectives to increase mental health awareness among professionals involved in individuals’ health and work journey.

About the British Psychological Society

The BPS is the representative body for psychology and psychologists in the UK. We are responsible for the promotion of excellence and ethical practice in the science, education, and practical applications of psychology. We have over 60,000 members across the UK, ranging from students to qualified psychologists.

We support and enhance the development and application of psychology for the greater public good. We set high standards for research, education, and knowledge, and seek to disseminate these to increase wider public awareness of psychology and its importance. As part of this work we want to ensure that the value of psychology to society is recognised by policymakers and used to inform policy development across government.

For further information, and to obtain an embargoed copy of BPS’s report on Psychology at Work, please contact Dr Lisa Morrison Coulthard at Lisa.MorrisonCoulthard@bps.org.uk or 0116 252 9510.