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EDITORIAL

It Takes Two to Tango: The Pursuit of Employee Well-being through 'Good Work'

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A few years ago, before the outbreak of COVID-19, stress was coined the health epidemic of the 21st century by the World Health Organization. It goes without saying that work stress is at the core of this societal problem. An extensive body of research in the I/O psychology field shows that various occupational hazards contribute to mental health problems in the work population: blurred work-home boundaries (Pluut & Wonders, 2020), illegitimate and nonpromotable tasks (Semmer et al., 2015), workload and excessive work behaviors (Molino, Bakker, & Ghislieri, 2016), job insecurity (De Witte, Vander Elst, & De Cuyper, 2015), dysfunctional and abusive leadership (Schyns & Schilling, 2013), and a psychologically unsafe climate (Dollard & Bakker, 2010) are but a few examples.

The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) recently published a report titled '*Better work: Society's new mission*'¹, which is a call to consider the quality of work (for everyone who is willing and able to work) as a societal challenge for businesses, institutions, social partners, and the government. In light of such societal problems as work intensification, burnout, and

work-life imbalance, the WRR report discusses who is responsible for 'good work' – that is, a healthy and safe work environment in which employees are productive – and argues that this responsibility lies first and foremost with work organizations:

"Quality of work is not an individual problem, but a problem of the modern work organization, and of society. The focus should not just be on how employees can deal with work stress, but first and foremost on how risk factors for stress on the job can be kept to a minimum. Companies and institutions are primarily responsible for improving connectedness and autonomy at work." (p. 119, translation by authors)

With this report, the WRR underlines the important role of employers and the value of 'good employership' in the pursuit of employee well-being. In this editorial, we aim to share our vision on two questions that are central to this matter. First, what does 'good employership' mean and what do we consider 'good work'? And second, who is responsible for what and to what extent when it comes to employee well-being? We approach these questions from two perspectives by integrating our knowledge in the field of I/O

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¹ G.B.M. Engbersen et al., "Het betere werk: de nieuwe maatschappelijke opdracht" (WRR-Rapport 102), Den Haag: Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid 2020. For English news items, see <https://english.wrr.nl/latest/news/2020/01/15/wrr-report-102-invest-in-quality-of-work-now> and [Let's have a better look at job quality, says Dutch WRR - Bio Based Press](#)

psychology (empirical perspective) and the labor law domain (normative perspective).² In doing so, we provide an interdisciplinary view on what good employership means – or should mean. We focus less on the physical environment of work and more so on the psychosocial aspects of the organization of work, to ultimately build a psychologically infused conceptualization of good employership.

What is 'good employership'?

From an I/O psychology perspective

The three levels of analysis in Organizational Behavior – individual, group, and organization – can help to gain insight in what it means to be a 'good employer'. Here, the main research question would be: Which factors at the level of the organization, the group, and the individual have an influence on the health, safety, and well-being of employees? Scholars have added a fourth level, pertaining to the leader, resulting in the IGLO framework (see e.g., Nielsen & Christensen, 2021).

Occupational hazards and workplace resources can occur at any of these levels and in any job (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018). In line with the dual perspective of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, good employership can be conceptualized on the one hand as building workplace resources that have the potential to promote well-being and on the other hand as mitigating or eliminating job demands that would trigger a health impairment process.

In their review, Nielsen and colleagues (2017) identified psychological capital (consisting of hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism) and job crafting as resources at the individual level; social support, person-group fit, and team climate at the group level; leader-member exchange, transformational and transactional leadership, and supervisor support at the leader level; and autonomy, HR

practices, perceived organizational support, and person-organization fit as workplace resources at the organizational level. In a similar vein, different characteristics at multiple levels of the organization may constitute psychosocial risks for health and safety at work, such as personality traits like type A or imposter syndrome at the individual level, interpersonal conflict and facetime norms at the group level, abusive supervision and supervisor excessive work behaviors at the leader level, and unsupportive work-family climate, work interruptions, overtime, and role ambiguity at the organizational level (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018; Roczniowska et al., 2022). Given that the various levels interact to determine employee well-being, good employers address demands and resources at the individual, group, leader, and organizational levels.

From a labor law perspective

The IGLO levels of analysis covered by OB and I/O psychology research can be complemented by a macro level factor: legislation. Governments and international institutions can help foster the quality of work for people by means of laws and regulations.

In the Netherlands, the Dutch Civil Code prescribes a general standard for '*being a good employer*' (art. 7:611). This standard prescribes that "the employer is obliged to act as a good employer." Whereas this open norm leaves room for discussion and adaptation to societal developments, it also causes ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the rights and obligations of both employers and employees as well as the role of legislation herein. The norm is supplemented by other Dutch legislation that focuses more concretely on obligations of employers with regard to mitigating physical and psychosocial risks at work (i.e., the Working Conditions Act).

National and also EU and International Labour Organization (ILO) initiatives may increase employer's motivation and ability to implement interventions that address physical

² The authors do research in the field of Empirical Legal Studies (ELS), adopting an interdisciplinary approach to study law and behavior, for instance to gain insight in the

functioning of the law in practice and to investigate (behavioral) assumptions underlying rules and regulations.

and psychosocial risks at work. At the level of the European Union, the Framework Directive on occupational health and safety (Directive 89/391/EEC) introduces measures to encourage improvement in the safety and health of workers. Employers across Europe have a legal obligation concerning the prevention, assessment, and combating of workplace risks, thus including psychosocial risk management. The principles laid down in this EU Directive set (minimum) requirements for national legislation of EU member states. Meanwhile, the ILO has recently added safety and health to its Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, which means that ILO member states must now commit to respecting and promoting the fundamental right to a safe and healthy working environment.

Pathways to ‘good work’

Various concepts in the I/O psychology literature are closely related to good employership in the sense that they are about offering a healthy and safe work environment for workers, for instance workplace health promotion (e.g., Alonso-Nuez et al., 2022), decent work (a concept proposed by the ILO, but for an I/O psychology perspective on it, see Blustein, Olle, Connors-Kellgren, & Diamonti, 2016, or Duffy et al., 2017), and socially responsible human resource management (Omidi & Dal Zotto, 2022). All of these concepts refer to employee-centered and micro-level corporate social responsibility practices (see Low, 2016), which are fostered by the collaborative values and beliefs that are central to clan and adhocracy organizational cultures (Espasandín-Bustelo, Ganaza-Vargas, & Diaz-Carrion, 2021). This stream of research builds a business case for being a good employer, in line with a mutual gains perspective (Lau & May, 1998). That is, a focus on employees as internal stakeholders can lead to organizational improvements such as lower absenteeism and turnover (Grawitch, Gottschalk, & Munz, 2006), higher organizational legitimacy (Del-Castillo-Feito, Blanco-González, & Hernández-Perlines, 2022), and increases in a firm’s intellectual

capital (Martinez, López-Fernández, & Romero-Fernández, 2019). As Karnes (2009) put it: “If the employer is genuine in developing good relations, the data is overwhelmingly favorable in regards to the payback” (p. 195).

This literature offers various perspectives on good employership that can be seen as pathways to a healthy and safe work environment, or ‘good work’:

- *Leadership.* The quality of connections between employees and their managers seems a key ingredient for workplace well-being. Karnes (2009) posited that organizational leadership is at the core of good employment relationships: organizations that have the ability to lead properly, that is with social skills and high levels of emotional intelligence, can improve and build upon employer-employee relations. A review by Inceoglu, Thomas, Chu, Plans, and Gerbasi (2018) provides insights into the different types of leadership behaviors that can influence employee health and well-being as well as the differential processes that underlie this relationship. They identified social-cognitive, motivational, affective, relational and identification mechanisms by which leaders have an impact on employee well-being. These findings suggest that leadership may be one of the most influential factors in the pursuit of ‘good work’, given its association with some of the factors we will be discussing next. For instance, leaders have a critical role to play in creating a psychologically safe work climate (Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017), can stimulate or discourage the use of work-family policies (Crain & Stevens, 2018), and must show diversity-valuing behaviors to ensure implementation of an organization’s mission on inclusion (Dwivedi, Gee, Withers, & Boivie, in press;

Korkmaz, Van Engen, Knappert, & Schalk, 2022).

- *Diversity and inclusion.* Health and well-being of employees are largely dependent on the extent to which organizations accommodate employees' need for relatedness at work (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017). Good employers promote social inclusion and a sense of belonging for all its employees. Moreover, it is important that they have HR policies in place that are aimed at providing equal opportunities to all its employees and ensure fair treatment regardless of gender, age, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or social background (see Barrena-Martínez, López-Fernández, & Romero-Fernández, 2017). It starts with recruiting a diverse workforce, to promote greater equality of employment opportunities, but organizational imperatives to actively address bias and ensure equal pay and professional prospects are also needed. Such efforts toward inclusion closely resemble the discrimination-and-fairness perspective on diversity management (Ely & Thomas, 2001), which "is characterized by a belief in a culturally diverse workforce as a moral imperative to ensure justice and fair treatment of all members of society" (p. 245).
- *Training and development.* Development and growth are core values supporting health, safety, and well-being at work (Zwetsloot, Van Scheppingen, Bos, Dijkman, & Starren, 2013) and enabling employees to develop their skills and career is a core facet of internal CSR activities (Barrena-Martínez et al., 2017; Del-Castillo-Feito et al., 2022; Turker, 2009). Employee growth and development programs provide employees with the opportunity to expand their knowledge and improve their abilities and competencies, for

instance through on-the-job training or leadership development (Grawitch et al., 2006). Continuous development and lifelong learning have become particularly important in light of rapid technological changes and new employment models (Comyn, 2018). With the increasing prevalence of precarious work, it is imperative that organizations promote the sustainability of careers (McDonald & Hite, 2018). Building individual employability is about enhancing the career development of employees within the organization, but they will also be better prepared to search for and find employment and promotional opportunities elsewhere.

- *Support for healthy lifestyle.* Employers can help promote healthy lifestyle behaviors by offering specific health programs and services on-site. Examples are health checks, sports facilities, exercise programs, healthy menus, employee assistance programs for alcohol and drug addiction, stress management interventions, and mindfulness trainings (Alonso-Nuez et al., 2022; Grawitch et al., 2006). The use and effectiveness of such health promotion initiatives are highly dependent on the work environment (Van der Put & Van der Lippe, 2020). Recognizing that workplaces are not always conducive to health and certain organizational practices can make it difficult for employees to care for their own well-being, employers are encouraged to "do" health promotion (Shain & Kramer, 2004). That is, organizational health promotion ideally targets not only personal health behaviors but also organizational risk factors, and is embedded in a health-promoting culture that has the support of management (DeJoy & Wilson, 2003).

- *Employee involvement.* Participation is at the heart of healthy and safe work environments (Zwetsloot et al., 2013). To get employees involved in decision-making and fulfill their need for autonomy, employers can think of such practices as participatory decision-making, self-managed work teams, empowerment, consultation with workers, taking action in collaboration, and transparent communication, some of which are closely related to inclusive leadership (Korkmaz et al., 2022). Employee involvement may be the most popular way to build a healthy and safe workplace because it allows the organization to draw on a diverse set of perspectives and skills to solve its problems (Grawitch et al., 2006).
- *Recognition and rewards.* Good employers allow employees to be rewarded for their efforts, contributions, and achievements at work (Grawitch et al., 2006). Rewards can take many forms, and they can convey or confirm competence, but they can also feel controlling and therefore frustrate employees' need for autonomy (Deci et al., 2017). It is therefore important to build workplaces that are first and foremost supportive of intrinsic work values, such as meaningful work relationships and personal development, such that employees are intrinsically motivated for at least parts of their jobs. Moreover, recognition program should be carefully designed so as not to undermine autonomous motivation and engagement in the workplace. While adequate compensation and fair appraisal processes are dimensions of 'good work' (Duffy et al., 2017; Omid & Dal Zotto, 2022), pay, contingent bonuses, and status are examples of extrinsic rewards that may undermine autonomous motivation. Positive feedback and showing appreciation (i.e., verbal rewards), however, can enhance intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2017) and are key to the employer-employee relationship (Karnes, 2009).
- *Work-life balance.* Decent work should allow for free time (for non-work activities) and rest (Duffy et al., 2017), but employers can go one step further and create healthy and sustainable workplaces by helping employees balance the multiple – and sometimes conflicting – demands of their life domains (Grawitch et al., 2006; Kossek, Valcour, & Lirio, 2014). Work-life balance has been implemented in various organizational policies and practices that give employees the flexibility to balance their personal and professional lives (see Barrena-Martínez et al., 2017). Today, most developed countries uphold an employee's statutory right to request flexible work arrangements (e.g., flexible working time, working from home). Access to such work-life policies increasingly drives the job search decisions of employees (Sánchez-Hernández, González-López, Buenadicha-Mateos, & Tato-Jiménez, 2019). Work-life balance can therefore be a major selling point for employers, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- *Psychosocial safety and employee voice.* Good employers provide working conditions in which employees feel physically, psychologically, and interpersonally safe and should have policies and practices in place for the protection of worker health and safety (Duffy et al., 2017; Grawitch et al., 2006). Socially responsible organizations also adopt policies and practices that promote social dialogue and fair and open communication (Barrena-Martínez et al., 2017), to truly encourage employee voice on health and safety matters. Examples of

formal voice mechanisms are work councils and grievance procedures, while informal discussions and open door policies allow for informal voice (Mowbray, Wilkinson, & Tse, 2015). Trust and justice are core values associated with a blame-free and psychologically safe culture (Zwetsloot et al., 2013), one in which employees are allowed to make mistakes, dare to take risks, experiment with new ideas, voice concerns, report incidents, and seek and give feedback (Edmondson, 1999). Psychosocial safety climate may be the cause of causes as it is a precursor of a multitude of factors in the work environment (Dollard & Bakker, 2010).

Who is responsible for what?

'Good employeehip'

Similar to legislation on the duties of the employer, national and international laws also prescribe obligations of employees. For instance, in addition to 'being a good employer', article 7:611 of the Dutch Civil Code prescribes a general standard for '*being a good employee*'. In OB literature, examples of 'good employeehip' can be found in concepts that describe the employer-employee relationship, such as organizational citizenship behavior (Organ, 2018).

Yet, we must be wary of the implications of a focus on good employeehip. Research shows that 'good' behaviors such as organizational citizenship may be at odds with the health of employees (e.g., causing citizenship fatigue; Bolino, Hsiung, Harvey, & LePine, 2015) and their ethical decision-making (Bolino & Klotz, 2015). Moreover, if we think of individual and nonwork predictors of well-being, we find ourselves on a slippery slope because it might lead to blaming the individual employee for ill-being. An over-individualization of the responsibility for well-being may come at the expense of focusing on policy and how work is organized to bring about employee well-being (Maravelias & Holmqvist, 2016).

On EU level, Directive 89/931/EEC prescribes that it is each worker's responsibility "to take care as far as possible of his own safety and health and that of other persons affected by his acts or omissions." Of great importance here, however, is that the Directive also states that "the employer shall have a duty to ensure the safety and health of workers in every aspect related to the work" and that "the workers' obligations in the field of safety and health at work shall not affect the principle of the responsibility of the employer."

A developing norm

Responsibilities in the relationship between employer and employee remain subject of an ongoing discussion. Both from a practical and legal perspective, good employership can be considered a norm – and as with any norm, it is subject to (societal) change (see also Karnes, 2009).

When we observe the employer-employee relationship in the Dutch historical context, for instance, we see a shift in the responsibilities allocated and the expectations that the parties have towards each other (Roozendaal, 2011). The industrial revolution was characterized by strong intensification of labor, a dominant position of the employer, and employment relations without legal restrictions. The position of the employee became less precarious only at the end of the 19th century, when the first legal initiatives on work safety and labor hours were introduced. When the female employment rate increased during the 1980s, employment conditions were adjusted to account for care duties. During the 1990s, the emergence of a particular type of employment relation from the United States, in which the individual employee carried almost all responsibility for the work, influenced several Dutch industries. And the economic growth that has characterized the last couple of decades came with increases in employers' demands for overtime and extended availability, which has led to the blurred home/work boundaries and the accompanying challenges we are now so aware of, accelerated by the rise of telework.

These examples illustrate why our current notions of good employership cannot be observed in a vacuum. Knowledge of historical developments is needed to understand why certain beliefs about the responsibilities of employers and employees exist – and, additionally, to recognize and acknowledge that the (collective) vision on good employership will be a permanent ‘work in progress’.

Shared responsibility

Historically, then, it seems there have been multiple shifts in the focus of responsibility from the individual employee to the employer (and vice versa), but legislation to safeguard employee well-being has expanded over time. Meanwhile, institutions such as the Dutch WRR and the ILO increasingly urge us to move to a shared notion of responsibility.

In our view, shared responsibility does not imply distributing the elements of responsibility among the parties involved, nor do we encourage to put responsibility in between the parties. In fact, shared responsibility might just result in no responsibility being taken at all. With our vision on shared responsibility, we aim to place emphasis on the partnership of the actors in the employment contract. To pursue well-being of employees, collaboration between individual workers and (representatives of) the organization is crucial (De Prins, Stuer, & Gielens, 2020).

Apart from the accountabilities determined in laws and regulations, both the employer and employee should have a strong sense of responsibility in order to ensure safety and health in the workplace. Feeling responsible is important because work-related matters of well-being often address a ‘gray area’ for which the law does not dictate clear rules. In such cases, ‘doing the right thing’ should be intrinsically motivated, with legislation primarily functioning (both literally and figuratively) as a safety net. Assuming responsibility should also be reflected in the attitude that the parties have towards each other: is there suspiciousness and controlling behavior, or a trusting relationship in which

both parties feel treated fairly? Ideally, an open and genuine dialogue between the employer and employee is central to the employment relationship – not only to create a feeling of shared responsibility, but also because well-being often requires a tailor-made approach.

We believe that many of the pathways to ‘good work’ that we discussed are ways to foster this workplace dialogue, showing how I/O psychology scholarship can inform legal and organizational policies on good employership. We hope that the key questions put forward herein inspire scholarly work and debate on what it means to be a good employer. Most importantly though, we hope that our vision on good employership functions as a call for action for employers to go the extra mile in taking care of their most valuable asset: the employee.

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