"It's not how it looks!" Exploring managerial perspectives on employee wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

The literature on employee wellbeing (EW) has largely focussed on employees' subjective experiences and has generally assumed that managers' interpretations of EW are consistent and non-problematic. Tensions inherent in managing complex expectations, and diverse results, have not been adequately investigated, and ways in which EW practices are viewed by senior managers have not been sufficiently examined. This paper attempts to fill this gap by exploring the perceptions of senior managers with human resources (HR) responsibilities affecting EW. There is a specific focus on the tensions experienced by these senior managers and the related tactics they adopted to successfully manage them. We gathered data from focus groups made up of 20 senior managers from companies operating in the Milan County in Italy. An analysis of this data identified four predominant dimensions of EW, as well as the tensions felt by the managers and the various tactics they used to overcome them. Finally, we classified the interpretative tactics into four broad resolution strategies (i.e. *flexible*, *integrative*, *separated* and *reciprocal thinking*) that senior managers adopted to cognitively address their experience of tensions.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the issue of employee wellbeing (EW) has become central to the human resources management (HRM) debate. EW was initially conceived as a long-term consequence to be considered when designing an HRM system (Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Quinn Mills, & Walton, 1984). More recently it has been pointed out that EW is a crucial factor in efforts to ensure that HRM and organisational practices have a positive impact on employee performance (e.g. Katou & Budhwar, 2006; Wood & De Menezes, 2011; Wood, Van Veldhoven, Croon, & de Menezes, 2012). However this link can be influenced by a number of confounding factors including those associated with perceptions of the exchange relationship between employers and employees (Mihail & Kloutsiniotis, 2016) and the nature of high commitment HR practices (Latorre, Guest, Ramos, & Gracia, 2016). Currently in discussions on EW the importance of a manager's role in the promotion of EW has become increasingly recognised. For example,

Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, and Kalleberg (2000) demonstrated that the effects of high-performance work systems on EW were mediated by the degree of trust between workers and their managers. Similarly, Baptiste (2008) found that strong support by line managers working within a climate of trust promoted good relationships between employees and managers, which in turn led to high levels of EW. Other research findings have shown that emotional support provided by supervisors and managers, as well as opportunities for continuing education, information transparency and open communication were factors that have had important implications on EW (Fried & Tiegs, 1993; Markey, Ravenswood, Webber, & Knudsen, 2013; Ruiz-Quintanilla & Blancero, 1996). Further, it was found that middle managers' active support mediated the relationship between team-based work organisation and EW (Nielsen & Randall, 2009), and that perceived managerial support has been associated with a reduction in burnout and other negative health-related issues (Thompson & Prottas, 2006).

Surprisingly, most studies on employee wellbeing and managers have been based on data collected from employees and not from senior managers. However, managers' perceptions and interpretations are particularly important in understanding the nature of EW on the ground. Caldwell (2004) pointed to three

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advantages in perception mapping of managers while concurrently evaluating progress in implementing HRM. The first advantage is that it captures the complexity inherent in implementing policy. Managerial perceptions provide the possibility to uncover limitations more clearly, especially those related to the roles and styles of HR personnel and their impact on the ground. The second advantage is that perceptions reveal contingencies inherent in practice implementation. An understanding of perceptions replaces the naive image of universally applicable best-practices with a more intimate understanding of how they are applied across contexts. The third advantage focuses on managerial perceptions as likely to reveal the overarching assumptions that guide individual actions in a particular context.

Though issues associated with managers' perceptions of HRM practices have been explored in various contexts, much of this work has concentrated on the importance of the perceptions of line managers in the effectiveness of HR practices (e.g. Currie & Proctor, 2001; Renwick, 2000; Thornhill & Saunders, 1998). Others, such as Wright, McMahan, Snell, and Gerhart (2001), have compared perceptions of HR managers with those of line managers and found significant differences between the two groups. Overall, this literature emphasises the importance of managers' perspectives, both for understanding the legitimacy of HR practices (Legge, 1995), and for making such practices effective (Watson, Maxwell, & Farquharson, 2007). However, what have been less explored are issues associated with the perspectives of senior level managers, who are most often responsible for the design of HR policies and practices affecting EW, and who have a more comprehensive organisational view. In fact, only a few studies have focussed specifically on senior managers and EW, and the results have not been consistent, and have gone off in multiple directions. One study found evidence that EW may not be an important HRM outcome from the perception of senior managers; their HRM priorities were dominated by concerns for performance management or leadership development (Maxwell & Farquharson, 2008). In another enquiry that focussed on the perspectives of Australian senior HR managers, Brown, Metz, Cregan, and Kulik (2009) found that senior managers considered EW as important for organisational performance and spent time addressing wellbeing issues raised by employees. Nevertheless, they typically dealt only with issues directly related to work and outsourced the rest to more specific programs, such as employee assistance programs. In yet another example that illustrates the differences of perspectives, Galabova and McKie (2013) found that senior managers interpreted EW in multiple ways with certain dimensions interpreted depending on the national perspective. While Finnish managers interpreted EW predominantly as a reflection of physical and mental health, their counterparts in Scotland associated it with the enjoyment of work and its impact on personal life, while in Bulgaria it was related to an appraisal of labour conditions and salary levels (Galabova & McKie, 2013).

Overall, existing studies have pointed to the need for further exploration into senior managers' perspectives concerning EW. One important justification for further research is because these managerial perceptions on how human resources functions, along with the various practices associated with it, have important strategic implications that affect the entire organisation (Hayes, Rose-Quirie, & Allinson, 2000; Rees & Johari, 2010). Senior managers, however, may value certain things differently and they may hold inconsistent images of EW, emphasizing certain dimensions over others. This opens up an important area for EW literature where the focus of research needs to take into account the perspectives of senior managers. Such managers are likely to experience tensions in the management of EW — tensions from contradictions, ambiguity and unpredictability stemming from the conception of EW

and its relationship with managerial roles, outcomes, performances and practices. For example, certain practices can enhance one dimension of wellbeing while diminishing another (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007). Similarly, a manager's strategy-oriented role might be in opposition to a people-oriented role that aims for employee engagement and motivation (Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005). Moreover, the ambiguous and complex relationship between EW and performance (Van de Voorde, Paauwe, & Van Veldhoven, 2012) can also be a potential factor in the experience of tensions in managers' perceptions. Finally, espoused ideals and the proclaimed company approach to EW may not always translate into aligned practices (Rynes, 2004). Despite the importance of these tensions, and their potential impact on the effectiveness of EW initiatives, there is a gap in the literature about how senior managers experience tensions and attempt to address them. To fill this gap, we explored tensions in the perceptions of senior managers with HR responsibilities in the industrial setting of northern Italy, making use of data collected in focus groups involving 20 managers from 20 different companies in Milan County. This area is Italy's most industrialized and economically developed county, accounting for about 10% of the national GDP with a population of about 5% of the country (ISTAT, 2013).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we present our theoretical framework by discussing the concept of EW and reviewing the literature on tensions experienced by senior managers when they design HRM policies and practices that affect EW. Next, we present the research context, the methods adopted and the results obtained from our empirical study. In interpreting our findings, we focussed specifically on tensions experienced within the dimensions of EW that were derived from the data, as well as identify ways in which managers cognitively addressed these tensions. Finally, we conclude by exploring the implications of our findings for further research and managerial practice.

2. Employee wellbeing and managers' experience of tensions

Employee wellbeing is an inclusive concept which has both cognitive and affective components. At a general level, EW refers to the quality of work as experienced by the employee (Warr, 1987), and an overall feeling of happiness and health (Currie, 2001). For wellbeing to exist work must be evaluated as satisfying, and positive emotions must be experienced more frequently than negative emotions (Bakker & Oerlemans, 2011; Diener, 2000). Earlier work in this area has attempted to delineate various dimensions of EW in multiple ways. A two-dimensional model developed by Daniels (2000) consists of five factors of affective wellbeing (i.e. *anxiety–comfort*, *depression–pleasure*, *bored–enthusiastic*, *tiredness–vigour* and *angry–placid*). Fisher (2010) suggested that wellbeing is an aggregation of engagement, job satisfaction and affective organisational commitment. One of the most significant contributions in this line of research was made by Grant et al. (2007), who distinguished three key dimensions of EW: psychological, physical and social wellbeing. The psychological dimension is related to happiness and subjective positive experiences at work (Van de Voorde et al., 2012). The second dimension is related to physical wellbeing and health (Danna & Griffin, 1999; Game, 2007). Employee stress is the major aspect that has been widely studied in this dimension (Lochmann & Steger, 2002), the others being injuries, diseases and the availability of healthcare services for employees (Grant et al., 2007). The third dimension, social wellbeing, relates to the quality of relationships at work, including both peer relations and hierarchical relationships. This dimension also includes organisational support, reciprocity, social exchange and trust (Grant et al., 2007; Guinot, Chiva, & Roca-Puig, 2014; Van de Voorde et al., 2012).