

The New Worker

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Disability Management Parallels Positive Psychology in Work Organizations

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Background:

All work organizations encounter problems with lost time secondary to employee injury or illness. To some degree, all work organizations must adopt disability management, which is the organizational planning for preventing and reacting to lost time associated with employee injury or illness. Proactive Disability Management Programs (DMPs) have become viable and practical human resource management strategies that follow positive psychological principles.

DMPs became human capital strategies after a series of economic studies in the 1990s showed that disability costs in the workplace average 8% of company payrolls and that some organizations were spending as much as 31% of payroll on various consequences of employee disability (Berkowitz). DMPs target *human* factors in the workplace and are designed on psychological principles that govern *human* behavior. For example, underlying assumptions of proactive disability management are that (1) work is a central theme in the lives of individual employees, and (2) following the onset of injury or illness, employees want to continue working, and (3) if reasonably accommodated, they can and will return to work. DMPs are thus *human* capital strategies following psychological laws of *human* behavior. DMPs have economic consequences in work organizations.

People acquire disabilities through aging and a multitude of mishaps, diseases, and infections, and as with most human problems, disability has been historically viewed through the lens of a medical-disease model. Since World War II, vocational rehabilitation has tended to follow a similar model, one that has paralleled the evolution of psychology, a science largely devoted to healing (Seligman). Until recently, psychology and the human sciences in general have not looked seriously at the positive side of human beings since the days of Sigmund Freud.

Over the last decade, Positive Psychology has captured the attention of human behavioral scientists from around the world. Seligman, Peterson, Csikszentmihalyi, and others (see the *Handbook of Positive Psychology*) have shown that the “good life” can be found in thriving communities that focus on positive affect, good citizenship, responsibility, altruism, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic. Positive psychologists have begun recognizing that “the best things in life” can be found in meaningful work. Moreover, meaningful and “healthy” work can be experienced with or without disability in organizations that are committed to positive psychological principles that result in managerial philosophies and actions that include proactive disability management.

The Science of Positive Psychology and Disability Management:

When Martin Seligman urged the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1998 to refocus its mission from exclusively defining and treating mental illness to also finding pathways to mental health and well being, it followed

the lead of at least one other profession: Organizational Disability Management. That is, since the mid-1980s, the programs of Disability Management in the workplace have grown from simply allowing the injured or ill worker to collect disability payments to the development of the “proactive” processes of keeping employees well, preventing injuries, and assisting impaired employees to transition back to work as quickly as feasible.

The traditional medical-disease model of workplace disability (in which only physicians made return to work decisions) was congruent with the mental illness/treatment approach applied in the pre-positive stage of psychology, during which psychiatrists and psychologists diagnosed and treated people with mental illness only. Indeed, it remains true that if you do not have a classifiable mental disease, you cannot receive funding for assistance from a psychologist or psychiatrist. However, it has become clear to disability management specialists and organizational leaders that most employees experience the "good life" through rewarding work and that impaired workers better respond to return-to-work efforts if they perceive that they are valued and respected employees prior to any injurious incident or illness.

DMPs continued to recognize that if an injury or illness does occur, the organization and not the physician alone can assist the impaired employee with a meaningful transition to work, one executed with purposeful dialogue and reasonable accommodation. What is more, DMPs in the context of viable human resource and human capital paradigms have begun to demonstrate that absence prevention and productivity maintenance are realized through effective well being and safety programs. These realizations have led to the proactive (preventive) approach of disability management used in well-managed companies today.

In this paper, we discuss the evolution of DMP's and the paralleling development of Positive Psychology. We offer suggestions of how Positive Psychology can enhance Disability Management in the context of proactive human resource programs.

Specifically, we will focus on the emerging concepts of transformational leadership, work-life balance, emotional contagion in groups, flow, and job accommodation.

Transformational Leadership:

Just as the development of Positive Psychology required visionary leadership (which manifested itself especially in the contributions of Martin Seligman and his colleagues), the evolution of how injured workers are treated in the workplace also required visionary leadership. In the early stages of engaging with injured workers, the employer encouraged the worker to go on workers' compensation (WC) and, in effect, leave the company. When employees took to the idea of not having to work again by staying on WC, the employer, in these early efforts, sought out third party providers to find a comparable job (i.e., comparable in pay level) for the employee outside the company.

Early advocates for a better approach include work economist, Munroe Berkowitz, who stated: "... traditional rehabilitation services often fail to develop active, equal, and valued partnerships with employees in implementing the rehabilitation process" (1991). Rochelle Habeck, a disability management consultant at the University of Michigan, who has conducted research on and written about the significant difference between traditional "Rehabilitation" and "Disability Management." Habeck found that where the leadership representing employers has been progressive, i.e., "transformative," and where companies have fewer labor-management conflicts, there are fewer disability claims.

In Positive Psychology, the new approach to assisting human beings is based on strengthening assets and preventing

as opposed to treating of illness or dysfunction. Beyond that, Positive Psychology seeks to not only study positive emotion and identify positive personality traits (i.e., character and virtues) but also help build positive institutions, including strong families and viable workplaces. Disability management, as opposed to traditional rehabilitation, sought to develop and apply methods of prevention and early intervention as basic elements to keep the employee population safe and well and, if necessary, assist impaired employees in navigating effectively through the quagmire of the disability-claims process, the medical treatment process, and the personal (family) process to recovery. Disability management programs became integrated not only in terms of benefits, but also in terms of human capital strategies. State-of-the-art disability management programs now advocate for prevention and early intervention through integrating Safety Programs, Wellness Programs, Employee Assistance Programs, Leadership Effectiveness, and Conflict Resolution as well as applying similarly positive resources before and after lost time resulting from employee injury or illness.

Company leaders and disability managers now recognize that individual employees do not stumble onto happiness, well being and productivity. They actively seek it out in work environments that enable not lost time but *opportunities* to experience work-life balance, positive emotion, and flow.

Work-Life Balance:

Originally, employers recognized no connection between the employee's workplace responsibilities and anything else in his/her life. As work intensified in terms of the competitive nature of the work environment, employers were urged to balance their expectations from their employees for loyalty and dedication with the recognition that taking external pressures (especially family pressure) into consideration and designing accommodations for that reality significantly improved worklife effectiveness and productivity. The Family and Medical Leave Act was promulgated, in part, on the notion that one's personal life had to have some degree of balance with job commitments.

Losing interest and even burnout are directly attributable to increased stress, and the condition is true for blue-collar workers as well as management-level employees. In fact, the stress is heightened as both workplace and family pressures combine. Stress-derived injuries and subsequent disability claims continue to rise, and the workplace is identified as the crucible for these onsets.

Enlightened DMPs have helped employers to recognize the need to assist employees better handle these pressures. The gamut of strategies developed in state-of-the-art DMPs, such as well operated Employee Assistance Programs, the use of flexible hours, job modifications, job sharing, engaging employees in the decision-making processes that most affect them, and transition-to-work methods, is now part of the human resource strategies mix in most well-managed companies.

Emotional Contagion in Groups:

Emotional contagion has been shown to play a significant role in work-group dynamics. A better understanding of the conditions and concepts of emotional contagion can lead to greater insight into, and understanding of, employees' workplace behavior. Recently, the concept has taken a role in the formation of effective DMPs.

The concept of emotional contagion in groups was first researched by Sigal G. Barsade of the Yale School of Management in (2001). Barsade defined the process as one "in which a person or group influences the emotions or behavior of another person or group through the conscious or unconscious induction of emotion states and behavioral attitudes."

The results of Barsade's research confirms that people do not live on emotional islands but rather as group members experience moods at work. These moods ripple out and, in the process, influence not only other group members' emotions but their group dynamics and individual cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors (for example, interpersonal conflict) as well. Thus, emotional contagion, through its direct and indirect influence on employee and work team emotions, judgments, and behaviors, can lead to subtle but significant ripple effects in groups and organizations. Whereas positive emotional contagion can enhance productivity, negative emotional contagion can reduce it.

Negative moods are highly infectious, and as a result, employers are learning, under the prodding of DMP innovators, to teach recognition and protection skills. Perhaps the most important skill to help contain contagion is teaching employees to achieve and maintain independence from group think. Awareness is certainly a start, but the key is active prevention and early intervention.

Managerial Mediation and Conflict Resolution Skills training programs intend to go beyond awareness alone. Unresolved conflict has been shown to be one of the most costly issues in the workplace. A classic management study determined that 25% of the typical manager's time is spent responding to conflict. That figure rises to 30% for first line supervisors. As noted, Habeck's research has shown that management-labor strife leads to increased WC losses. It has been estimated that a quarter of the management salary budget represents no small investment in shielding productive work from the destructive effects of conflict. Leadership Effectiveness Training includes skill development in interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, and problem solving. Transformational leaders invested in proactive disability management do not fear conflict but know how to prevent and effectively manage it.

Flow:

If employers could choose one attribute they would want in their employees, it would certainly be motivation. Individuals who are highly motivated (and happy) generally experience satisfaction at work through an optimal mental state called "flow," which was introduced to the world by a positive psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Director of the Quality of Life Center at Claremont Graduate University in California. Flow is what distinguishes a constantly productive employee from one who is not as productive.

Csikszentmihalyi recognized that a person who is fully engaged (immersed) in what he/she is doing is energized by it. This total immersion in the activity (e.g., the work process) reveals that one can experience high levels of satisfaction in challenging tasks that match skills.

With Csikszentmihalyi's assistance, Disability Management professionals can induce flow experiences. He identifies these experiences as:

1. Having clear goals.
2. Concentrating and focusing.
3. Having a distorted sense of time.
4. Receiving and analyzing feedback.
5. Balancing ability level and challenge.
6. Sensing control over the activity.
7. Finding the activity rewarding.
8. Being absorbed in the activity.

The Csikszentmihalyi concept of the value of flow is much broader than just a work process. One can be deeply immersed in play or other leisure activities as well. However, employers are constantly searching for ways to make their employees more productive, and flow was tailor-made for the workplace.

Job Modification/Job Accommodation

In a well-established, proactive transition-to-work program, job modification, job accommodation, and job sharing can facilitate an injured employee's return to work. Job modification is the process of subtracting from, or adding to, a job description or transitional work role while maintaining its essential functions. "Essential Functions" is a primary concept of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Job modification might include eliminating unessential lifting, changing hours, relocating a job within a particular work environment, or changing the job/transitional assignment in a manner that results in both employer satisfaction and employee success. Transition-to-work programming, in general, is an effort to create a win-win outcome following lost-time injury or illness. Jobs can be modified in terms of their physical demands, time allocation, environmental requirements, supervision, and in countless other ways that are a function of employer-employee joint (creative) problem-solving. By creating transition-to-work assignments and modifying jobs, employers maintain a pathway for employees to return by rehabilitating themselves while at work. Transition-to-work programs have replaced the self-limited paradigm of "light duty."

Job accommodation is a specific method advanced by the collaborative effort between employer and employee to modify work or to accommodate the needs of an impaired employee so that the essential functions of the job may be carried out to the mutual satisfaction of both employer and employee. Job accommodation is not a new concept, but in 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act advanced the practice of "reasonable accommodation" by making it mandatory that qualified individuals with disabilities be given the opportunity to begin or maintain work with reasonable accommodation.

The U.S. Department of Labor comments, "The process for making such accommodations is no different in principle than implementing workplace procedures designed to build productive work environments. As with all such procedures, open lines of communication and clearly defined steps help to facilitate the process and achieve positive outcomes for both employers and employees." An excellent resource for job accommodations and assisting in the employment of individuals with disabilities is the Job Accommodation Network.

Conclusions

Disability managers and transformational leaders have the good fortune of Positive Psychology research, which parallels disability management program development and proves that human beings have specific pathways to well being, happiness, and productivity. These pathways are available to employers and employees in proactive work organizations that integrate not only insurance programs but human capital strategies designed to keep people at work, engaged, creative, and too satisfied to become or remain disability claimants.

The Psychology of Work: Managing Workers in Terms of Work's Meaning

The defining study on the **meaning of work** was published by Arthur Brief and Walter Nord in 1990 in a collection of essays titled *Meaning of Occupational Work* (Lexington Books).

One of the sources for the collection was the work of George England and William Whately in which they posited “common patterns” among workers in respect to “work’s meaning.” The “patterns” were defined as:

- alienated worker: for this individual, work is not central to his or her life: it is pursued for neither economic nor expressive reasons; and it is not seen as fulfilling any obligation to the larger society.
- economic worker: the meaning of work for this individual revolves solely around good pay and high security.
- duty-oriented worker: this individual regards work as highly central to his or her life, undertakes it for expressive reasons, and regards it as a social obligation.
- balanced worker: here, work is highly central to the individual’s life; and it allows both economic and expressive goals to be satisfied.

“Alienated workers” tended to be younger and female and rated their satisfaction with the work as low. “Economic workers” in general were found to have less education and were somewhat more likely to be males.

“Duty-oriented” workers in general were older and somewhat more likely to be females, worked as managers or in sales, and usually earned good salaries. “Balanced workers” were usually older males with more education. Balanced workers put in the longest hours and earned the highest salaries.

The “meaning of work” is, of course, more complex than the patterns would suggest. Still, recognizing the basic patterns, and by extension, the employees who fit a particular pattern, is essential to how managers approach employees and guide them to become better employees.

(Updated research on the meaning of work was created by Amy Wrzesniewski of NYU. CEC reported previously on Wrzesniewski’s classification of work as (1) a job, (2) a career, or (3) a calling. For a copy of CEC’s report on Wrzesniewski’s work, email Dina at dina@cecassoc.com and reference Wrzesniewski.)

What are your reactions to the classifying of workers? If you choose to respond, reference your position in the workforce as either manager or one being managed.

Against Happiness: Arguing the Upside of Being Down

This book by Eric Wilson includes the following paragraph:

At the behest of well-meaning friends, I have purchased books on how to be happy. I have tried to turn my chronic scowl into a bright smile. I have attempted to become more active, to get away from my dark house and away from my somber books and participate in the world of meaningful action.... I have contemplated getting a dog. I have started eating salads. I have tried to discipline myself in nodding knowingly.... I have undertaken yoga. I have stopped yoga gone into tai chi. I have thought of going to psychiatrists and getting some drugs. I have quit all of this and then started again and then once more quit. Now I plan to stay quit. The road to hell is paved with happy plans.

This is the first anti-Positive Psychology book.

If you know someone who could identify with the description above, you might direct him/her to an extended excerpt from the book [here](#).

The Workplace Issues That Employers Want Addressed by the Next President

While ostensibly employers and employees will have different opinions about what the important issues in the workplace are, a recent survey identified the issues as perceived **by the employees**.

The top workplace-related issues as determined by U.S. workers in a poll take in April are:

- increase the proportion of U.S. workers who earn at least a living wage. 87 %
- reduce the number of jobs that are outsourced overseas. 86 %
- provide health care coverage for all U.S. citizens 83 %
- improve workplace safety regulations 76 %
- expand family leave options for workers 70 %
- make law enforcement of workplace discrimination laws a priority 69 %
- make it easier for professionals to work in the U.S. 40 %
- amnesty for illegal immigrants 25 %

This survey of 1,125 respondents was taken by the Employment Law Alliance, www.employmentlawalliance.com and reported in *HRMagazine*, the publication of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

Why Going to Work Is to Your Advantage

In a study done by the Combined Insurance Company, www.combinedinsurance.com, “two-thirds of the disabling injuries suffered by workers in a typical year **occur while they are off the job.**”

This company also reported that the “most common injuries that make people miss work” are:

- strains/sprains 49%
- fractures 21%
- cuts 5%

They also reported that in 2003 there were four times as many homes in foreclosure due to disability than due to death.