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RECOMMENDATIONS ON DIGITAL INTERVENTIONS FOR EMPLOYEE WELLBEING AND TEAMWORK

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Recommendations on digital interventions for employee wellbeing and teamwork

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Executive Summary

This Policy Brief is based on research and implementation activities from the H-WORK project. It provides occupational health practitioners, HR directors, and managers of SMEs and public organisations with recommendations on digital-based interventions to improve employee wellbeing and teamwork. In recent years, this type of workplace intervention has been increasingly adopted thanks to advances in ICT and their advantages over the less flexible and less accessible traditional face-to-face interventions. Also, digital interventions have proved effective in promoting desirable workplace outcomes, such as employee mental health and performance. However, there are challenges that come with digital interventions for wellbeing, in particular, user engagement and data management. These issues have been explored throughout the implementation of two H-WORK digital interventions (Sociomapping and HelloBetter). This experience has been used to develop recommendations for occupational health practitioners and managers considering the deployment of digital interventions in the workplace, designing engaging digital interventions, and making data security explicit when implementing such initiatives.

Introduction

Advances in ICT have enabled the spread of digital interventions to promote employee wellbeing and teamwork. These may be interventions originally designed to take place face-to-face and subsequently adapted to digital formats, or interventions exclusively designed for computer or smartphone apps.

Digital interventions have proven effective against undesirable workplace mental health outcomes, such as stress, insomnia, burnout, and depression; and in promoting desirable ones such as wellbeing and mindfulness. They have also promoted positive outcomes at the organisational level, such as work effectiveness. They offer advantages over traditional face-to-face interventions, such as increased geographical and temporal accessibility, cost-effectiveness, personalisation, and attractiveness. Thus, digital interventions constitute a promising avenue for the future of workplace interventions.

However, research has highlighted some crucial challenges when designing, developing, and implementing digital interventions for employee wellbeing and teamwork. These are relevant for occupational health practitioners, HR directors, and managers who may implement such initiatives. One of these concerns users' engagement and adherence, whereas another challenge relates to ethics, privacy, and data protection.

While digital interventions are typically designed for widespread accessibility, uptake can be low and the discontinuation curve steep. Engagement and adherence can also be understood in terms of usability, quality of the users' experience with technology, and related dimensions such as aesthetics, feedback, interactivity, perceived control, and several other design elements. These are important issues since digital interventions' benefits are linked to continued engagement.

Furthermore, the privacy of personal digital data, confidentiality, appropriate information handling, and data security are key issues which have been a consistent concern amongst potential users, for example because privacy policies are often difficult to understand for most of them. Also, omitting industry-standard encryption or transmitting data to third parties without disclosing it in a privacy policy have been identified as problems.

Key issues:

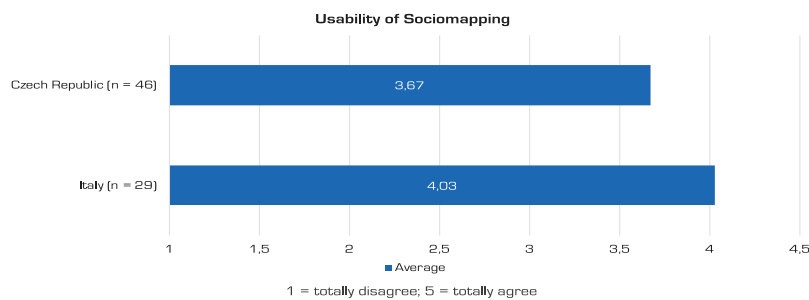
- Digital interventions for employee wellbeing and teamwork have been spreading in recent years.
- Digital interventions have proven effective in promoting workplace mental health and desirable organisational outcomes.
- Challenges concern engagement of users as well as ethics, privacy, and data protection.

Research and Analysis

In the H-WORK project, two digital interventions have been implemented, at a small-sized private retail company in Czech Republic and at a large public healthcare organisation in Italy.

Sociomapping

This was a group-level intervention to improve team communication based on real-time social network data visualisation within four team coaching sessions. As shown in the figure, its usability was rated positively by users when asked if they agreed the tool was usable or not.



This digital intervention for teamwork was well-received. As investigated in post-intervention interviews with participants, this was due to the use of visualisation tools, which are known to be facilitating mechanisms of workplace interventions effectiveness. The intervention also achieved high attendance rates. Out of 67 total participants, attendance ranged from 89% at first session and 51% at fourth session. Overall, this was a successfully implemented initiative with proper uptake and adherence.

HelloBetter

This was a web-based individual-level app for stress management. The tool was designed to provide an interactive and engaging experience through articles, videos, audios, and exercises. However, the intervention reached fewer participants than expected. In the Italian site, for example, out of 312 registered employees, 89 only signed in once. The majority of users signed in from two to six times and less than 10% signed in seven times or more. Out of eight sessions, seven people started session 2 and fifteen people started session 4. In total, five people completed the course. One main barrier related to users concerns on data security. To access the digital platform, users needed to sign-up with their e-mail address which commonly include clues to a person's identity, such as name, surname, year of birth, or gender. Although it was explicitly declared that this information would not be processed and complied with GDPR, this request was perceived as a potential threat to anonymity and privacy, thus discouraging workers from taking part in the online training courses.

Key findings:

- In the H-WORK project, two digital interventions for employee wellbeing and teamwork have been implemented in Czech Republic and Italy.
- The group-level intervention to improve team communication based on real-time social network data visualisation received positive usability ratings and achieved high attendance rates.
- The individual-level app intervention for stress management, despite its focus on user experience design, reached few participants due to concerns for data security.

Recommendations for Practitioners and Managers

- **Recommendation 1. Consider deploying digital interventions for employee wellbeing and teamwork.** Given their advantages over face-to-face actions and their effectiveness in promoting workplace mental health and performance, occupational health practitioners and managers of SMEs and public organisations should consider designing, developing, and implementing digital interventions for employee wellbeing and teamwork within the context of their wider organisational approach to workplace health promotion. However, the implementation context should be assessed in terms of whether it is ready to receive such type of initiatives. In the case of digital interventions, relevant factors to be considered would be the adequacy of the technological infrastructure (e.g., computers, smartphones, internet) available in the organisation, and the level of technology readiness or digital literacy of employees. These issues can be assessed pre-intervention with interviews or questionnaires, to ensure intervention-organisation fit and avoid overloading the intervention's users.
- **Recommendation 2. Ensure digital interventions are engaging.** Organisations willing to implement digital interventions should ensure that employees consider them to be usable and engaging. Throughout the intervention activities, users should be provided with an interactive and engaging experience that meets their needs, requirements, expectations, and preferences. The usability of digital platforms where interventions take place should be ensured. For example, the thoughtful use of colours on digital interfaces can make data and information easier to read. Also, real-time feedback and monitoring from the platform can increase understanding of abstract topics such as wellbeing and teamwork. Providing guidance by actual professionals may also add value to reduce drop-out and increase adherence and engagement. These approaches will promote continued participation in the intervention and will thus maximise its benefits to users. Since usability and engagement perceptions may vary across individuals, they could be investigated in a preliminary test of the implementation tool using interviews or questionnaires to collect feedback from potential users. User participation in the design of digital wellbeing interventions, or in needs assessment work, is essential from a workplace health promotion perspective. It is fundamental to maximising use by employees, especially those harder to reach cohorts and lower paid staff within an organisation. Meaningfully involving users, tailoring services and interventions to target groups' contexts, and delivering credible messages are effective approaches in this regard.
- **Recommendation 3. Make security explicit.** When implementing digital interventions for employee wellbeing and teamwork, occupational health practitioners and managers should make personal data protection practices visible to potential users. These should encompass measures to ensure anonymity, privacy, and prevent violation of personal information. Most of all, compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation should be underlined. This may help potential users perceive that their security is looked after, thus encouraging them to partake in the intervention. One formal way to increase the visibility and understanding of data protection practices might be to provide intervention recipients with information via data management sheets or infographics.

However, it is also important to avoid making requests that might make employees suspect that information about identity is being collected and processed, e.g., e-mail addresses.

- **Recommendation 4. Appoint key intervention staff.** Key staff should be appointed to managing the intervention by occupational health practitioners and managers. A steering group composed of even a few contact persons should be established that intervention recipients can address for help, e.g., technical assistance with the digital infrastructure or questions about data protection. Also, in the case of interventions implying the presence of facilitators, properly trained facilitators should be appointed to deliver the intervention, who can ensure that recipients have an accurate understanding of all the intervention's functions and components.

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