



OPTIMISM: TAPPING ITS POSITIVE POWER'

Can the power of positivity boost your employees' health and improve their productivity?

As a multinational employer, the question of whether your employees' glasses tend to be "half full" or "half empty" may not seem that relevant to managerial decision-making, employee retention, increased sales, and the cost of your medical claims reduction. Well it is! The evidence is strong; optimism makes a difference in these matters as well as in levels of productivity, disease generation, progression, and recovery. Yet, it seems few organisations know this or are looking at it.

Optimism is a state of mind, a belief that the outcome of an endeavour will be good. In today's workplace, business acumen and professional skills are not enough to guarantee success - a positive mental outlook is not only hugely beneficial for the individual, but it can have tangible benefits for an employer.

In contrast, a workplace filled with employees that feel undervalued or helpless is a significant problem for an employer. In such an atmosphere, problems rather than solutions become the focus of attention and people devolve responsibility for solving issues because they don't believe that they can actually deliver change.

Studies quoted in our whitepaper support the fact that a happy and motivated workforce could improve employee productivity by as much as 12%.¹ Other research has shown that positive employee behaviours and attitudes can influence business outcomes² as employee satisfaction, behaviour and turnover can help predict the following year's profitability and have strong correlation with customer satisfaction.

Here is some data to consider:

- a stressful or pessimistic workplace can lead to an increase of almost 50% in voluntary turnover³
- disengaged employees have been shown to have 37% higher absenteeism, 49% more accidents and make 60% more errors in the workplace⁴
- compared to pessimists, optimists have been shown to have a 55% lower risk of death from all causes and a 23% lower risk of heart-related death.⁵

An optimistic work environment can genuinely help overcome the negative numbers listed above.

In order to help you do this, we have published a whitepaper offering valuable insights and guidance on the steps you can take to maximise optimism in the workplace and help 'pessimistic' employees learn the cognitive skills that can help them to be happier and healthier, improving productivity, resilience and reducing absenteeism.

Workplace effects of optimism

Attitudes do not necessarily create competition in the workplace, but they can enhance the competitive environment. A negative or 'pessimistic' attitude in the workplace creates an atmosphere of distrust among employees and can cause employees to attempt to achieve success at the expense of each other. A workplace with a positive attitude sees competition is as a motivator that inspires employees to perform at their best and ultimately improve productivity.

Research indicates that the employees' outlook has a direct impact on the growth of an organisation:

- **Reduced absenteeism**

Researchers found that individuals scoring high on optimism had a smaller increase in recorded sick days after a major life event such as a death or the onset of severe illness in the family, compared with those scoring low on optimism.

- **Increased healthcare costs**

Healthcare expenditure at high-pressure companies – where levels of pessimism are generally higher – is nearly 50% greater than at other organisations. The American Psychological Association estimated more than US\$500 billion is lost to the US economy because of workplace stress and 550 million workdays are lost each year due to stress on the job. The analysis attributed 60-80% of workplace accidents to stress and it's estimated that more than 80% of doctor visits were due to stress related conditions.

Case study: powerful predictor of sales success

Ever wonder if your attitude really makes a difference to your insurance sales results?

Well it turns out, it does!

During the mid-1980's, MetLife, a co-founding member of MAXIS GBN and leading insurer, hired Dr. Martin Seligman to help them improve their hiring processes. Before Dr. Seligman arrived, MetLife was spending approximately US\$150 million dollars every two years on the training and development of 5,000 sales representatives, approximately \$30K per person. Over the same period, the turnover of the sales team would be 50% and 80% of these reps were gone after four years.

Dr. Seligman, a psychologist who studied optimism and positive psychology, created an optimism screening test and followed a group of MetLife new hires over the course of a year.

The result? Those who passed the optimism test outperformed those who failed it by 8%. In the second year, the optimists outsold the pessimists by 31%.

After a year, the "super-optimists" (those who scored extremely high on the optimism test but who may have failed the aptitude test) had outperformed those who passed MetLife's aptitude test by 21% and by a huge 57% in the second year!

MetLife took this information, expanded their optimistic sales force, and increased their market share by 50%. A good result!

Health is a state of mind and body

There seems to be no doubt that what happens in the brain influences what happens in the body. A study found that optimists who maintained a positive attitude were significantly less likely than their pessimistic counterparts to succumb to cancer, heart disease, respiratory disease, stroke and infection.

So, what are the health benefits of a positive outlook?

- Better control of blood sugar due to an increase in physical activity and healthy eating and less use of tobacco for patients with Type 2 diabetes
- Living an average of 7.5 years longer
- A 55% lower risk of death from all causes
- A 23% lower risk of heart-related death
- Healthier, heavier babies
- A stronger immune response to a vaccine
- Greater resistance to developing a cold
- Predicted lower disability pensions from psychiatric and non-psychiatric causes
- Protection against some distress in patients with certain cancers who are undergoing chemotherapy
- A greater decline in patients' tumor marker during cancer treatment.

And the health impacts of a negative outlook?

- 70% more likely to die of a heart attack or stroke
- Six times more likely to have a stroke
- Over four times more likely to have another heart attack in the next 10 years
- Two and a half times more likely to develop heart disease
- Nine times more likely to have high levels of calcification- early sign of developing heart disease
- Enhanced production of pre-inflammatory cytokines – the inflammation caused by these has in turn has been linked to certain cancers, Alzheimer's disease and arthritis.

1. <https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/research/centres/eri/bulletin/2009-10-3/ops/>
2. http://www.keepem.com/doc_files/clc_articl_on_productivity.pdf
3. <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/pdfs/87-111.pdf>
4. <https://hbr.org/2015/12/proof-that-positive-work-cultures-are-more-productive>
5. Archives of General Psychiatry, November 2004



How to build optimism and increase workplace wellbeing

Organisations that recognise that the physical wellbeing and psychological health of employees are key indicators of organisational success and so create an optimistic work environment, are likely to reap the financial benefits. And, these companies will probably experience far lower levels of work disruption due to absenteeism and presenteeism when compared to peer organisations in their industry.

Here are some simple, low-cost or no-cost practices you can incorporate into the workplace to cultivate a culture of optimism.

Express gratitude

- Put out a “Gratitude Box” for employees to express thanks for something a colleague or leader has done.
- Introduce a “Thumbs up Thursday” asking your team to list one thing that happened that week that was really good.
- Have a ‘staff shout out’ board and list the name of an employee and why they deserve a shout out every week.

Foster social connections

- Plan a social gathering outside of work or host an activity for families
- Offer video conferencing configurations that allow remote participants to easily see content and hear participants.
- Design work space for socialising, both in person and virtually.

Do good to feel good

- Partner with your Corporate Social Responsibility team to create or promote volunteering activities for your colleagues.
- Communicate about the link between service and emotional health.

Promote physical activity

- Promote at least 10 minutes of physical activity, several times a day.
- Encourage everyday fitness boosters like the use of stairs, biking to work, parking at the back of the parking lot to get additional steps, etc.
- Organise a group fitness class with a fitness instructor or share stretch-at-your-desk resources.

Create learning opportunities

- Partner with Human Resources to have a “Learning Fair” about learning opportunities within your organisation (e.g., online training, workshops, self-study materials, etc).
- Stay in regular communication with your employees.

Encourage laughter and smiles

- Bring in a Laughter Yoga instructor for a workshop or series.
- Host a series of classes on meditation, mindfulness or yoga.
- Organise a “What makes you smile?” photo sharing event where employees can submit photos of things that make them smile.

Take a look at just some of the key findings from our [Optimism whitepaper](#) here – and visit maxis.gbn.com or speak with your account executive to get the complete white paper. Your business will thank you!