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Study Title: An Examination of Activities to Improve Employee Well-being

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Summary or Abstract:

This study examines whether completing self-guided activities improves employee well-being and job satisfaction, and if these effects endure over time. With the cooperation of the Virginia League of Social Services Executives (VLSSE) and various LDSS directors, employees of 24 local departments of social services were invited to participate in the study.

After the sample was finalized, we randomly assigned participants to one of three different conditions: a gratitude intervention, a combination of gratitude and increasing social ties (a “mixed” condition) interventions, or a wait-list control condition. Those assigned to the gratitude group were asked to reflect on that for which they were grateful at work. Participants assigned to the mixed group were asked to alternate between practicing gratitude and increasing social ties (seeking out new or improving existing social interactions with coworkers and/or clients) throughout the study. Both the gratitude and mixed groups engaged in brief (5-minute) self-directed activities. Finally, the wait-list control group participated in one of the two other conditions, but only after one month had elapsed. Participants were asked to complete their assigned activities at least twice a week over the course of a 4 week period. Reminder emails were sent to participants to complete assigned activities. Participants were then asked to complete a survey after the intervention (at Week 4), and again at four and eight weeks after the intervention period was completed (Weeks 8 and 12, respectively).

A total of 104 employees participated. Each employee was randomly assigned to one of three groups mentioned above: a gratitude intervention group (32 participants), a mixed intervention group (30 participants), and a wait-list control group (42 participants).

Analyses suggested that, compared to individuals in the control condition, certain individuals in the gratitude group experienced numerous benefits. Specifically, individuals who are relatively higher on the personality trait agreeableness (propensity to trust and cooperate) experienced increases in gratitude and positive job-related emotions. Second, individuals who had been in their position at Virginia Social Services for a relatively shorter amount of time showed an increase in gratitude and a decrease in job stress. Finally, the more the participants completed the gratitude activity during the intervention period, the greater experienced decreases in negative job-related emotions, job stress, and increases in job satisfaction. In addition, the more socially-oriented the gratitude participants’ electronic journal entries, the

more social connectedness, happiness, and positive job-related emotions they experienced post-intervention.

The results of the study suggest that, at least for some employees, keeping a bi-weekly work-related gratitude journal can help to increase several aspects/indicators of work-related well-being. In particular, the findings imply that employees who are more trusting and agreeable and those who are new to their positions are likely to enjoy the greatest well-being gains from documenting work-related gratitude reflections. In contrast, trying to “force” workplace social interactions may not be beneficial and may even “backfire.” Although the sample was small and not representative of all social services employees, these results are suggestive and require more exploration with a larger sample.

Although not examined in our study, other research on well-being consistently suggests that the following additional strategies may help to boost employee well-being:

- Identifying and using one’s strengths at work (e.g., organization skills, assertiveness) – instead of focusing on overcoming one’s “weaknesses”
- Setting SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-related) goals
- Engaging in job crafting (see <http://positiveorgs.bus.umich.edu/cpo-tools/job-crafting-exercise/>)
- Practicing mindfulness: “purposeful attention and awareness of the present moment, approached with an attitude of openness, acceptance and non-judgment”
- Maintaining a regular exercise routine