

Accentuating the Positive

Building Hope, Optimism, Confidence and Resilience in Organisations

AIM WA/UWA 2007 Survey Results

By

John Cordery

Professor of Management, UWA Business School

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About the Author

John Cordery is Associate Dean (Research & Research Training) within the Business School at the University of Western Australia. He holds a PhD in Psychology from the University of Sheffield, and has a long-standing interest in how work can be made more fulfilling, enjoyable and productive for employees at all organisational levels.

About the Research

This research was initiated under the auspices of the AIM·UWA Alliance as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of the founding of AIM WA.

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Executive Summary

Positive experiences at work, whether they arise out of the work itself or the social and organisational context in which it is performed, are increasingly recognised as fuelling high levels of employee performance and psychological well-being.

In this report, we present the results of a study of 560 managers that sought to establish links between a number of aspects of positive work outlook, namely hope, optimism, resilience and confidence, with outcomes such as psychological health, job satisfaction and quit intentions.

The study found that positive work outlook was a powerful predictor of symptoms of psychological health, job satisfaction and intention to remain in a job.

The study also found that those studied reported higher than expected levels of symptoms of strain. In fact, **40%** of those surveyed reported having recently experienced symptoms that are indicative of low psychological well-being. The precise reason for this is not immediately apparent, though it may relate to workload demands associated with the current boom in the local economy.

The results also suggest that many of the factors contributing to a positive work outlook lie within the organisational space, and are therefore potentially able to be controlled by managers.

These factors include the existence of engaging work roles, fairness in the distribution and administration of rewards, a supportive interpersonal climate and a strong person-organisation match.

Introduction

It has long been recognised that the sort of things that cause people to feel enjoyment, motivation and commitment at work are not necessarily the same as those that give rise to dissatisfaction, stress and withdrawal. As a consequence, organisational improvement interventions are often found to be more effective when they focus on enhancing the positive aspects of employees’ work experience and behaviour, rather than just eliminating the negative. This approach of seeking to leverage strengths, rather than simply targeting weakness or performance gaps, has its recent origins in the positive psychology movement¹ and is having a profound effect on how we view the roles and responsibilities of leaders and managers in modern organisations².

Positive experiences at work, whether they arise out of the work itself or the social and organisational context in which it is performed, are reflected in feelings of *confidence*, *optimism*, *resilience*, and *hope* on the part of employees. Such positive outlooks are increasingly recognised as fuelling high levels of employee performance and psychological well-being.



Figure 1. The four facets of positive work outlook³

In this study, we set out to investigate some of the causes and consequences of feeling positive about one’s work for people in managerial positions. To do this, we surveyed members of the Australian Institute of Management, in Western Australia, asking them to describe their current outlook on work. We also asked them to describe aspects of the social and organisational environment in which they worked and to report on their psychological well-being, job satisfaction and quit intentions.

¹ Cameron, K., Dutton, J. & Quinn, R. (2003). Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline. San Francisco: Berrett Koehler.

² Spreitzer, G. (2006). Leading to grow and growing to lead: Leadership development lessons from positive organizational studies. Organizational Dynamics, 35, 305-315.

³ Luthans, F., Yussuf, C.M., & Avolio, B.J. (2007). Psychological capital: Developing the human competitive edge. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

What the Survey Measured

The survey was administered online, with an email being sent out to all members of AIM WA requesting their participation and providing the survey link. Respondents were given a fortnight to complete the survey, and no reminders were sent out.

In the survey, we investigated a number of potential causes and likely consequences of positive outlook, as indicated below.

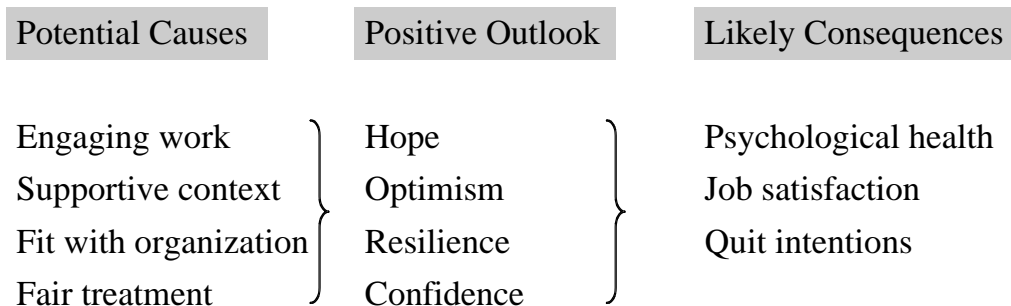


Figure 2: Conceptual framework guiding the research.

At the core of our investigation are the four facets of positive outlook. These are defined as follows:

Hope. A positive motivational state based on a belief that there are plausible pathways to desired goals.

Optimism. An attitude reflected in a positive expectation about what the future holds.

Resilience. A belief in one's capacity to cope effectively in the face of significant challenges, including failure.

Confidence. The belief that one possesses the capabilities necessary for effective task performance.

To tap these variables and others in our guiding model, we used a variety of standardized measures that have been used in previous research studies of positive outlook. In addition, we asked a series of questions designed to capture sample demographics (age, education, gender, length of job tenure) and to enable us to determine the types of industry that respondents came from.

The Study Sample

We received completed responses from 560 respondents, representing a response rate of approximately 7 percent. An examination of sample demographics indicates that the sample is broadly representative of the AIM Membership, and similar to the sample obtained for other AIM surveys.

51% of survey respondents were women, and the average age for the sample was 42 years. Over 70% of respondents were tertiary educated, and just under half were in either middle or senior management. The average tenure in the current job was 5 years. A range of industry sectors was represented, with the most common being government and mining.

Key Findings

Psychological health

The average number of symptoms of poor psychological health respondents reported they had experienced in the weeks preceding the survey was 2.5, which is higher than that reported in panel data obtained from the Australian population⁴. Such symptoms might include losing sleep through worry, or feeling anxious or depressed about things.

The findings show that forty percent of managers reported having experienced three or more symptoms of low psychological well-being over the weeks immediately preceding the survey.

A score of greater than 2 on the GHQ-12 (standard scoring) is generally taken as an indicator of low well-being⁵, and so these results suggest that the average respondent in this sample was experiencing some degree of stress at the time of the survey. One can only speculate regarding the reasons for this, though it is possible that this reflects stresses and strains associated with managing in a boom economy with its labour shortages and high labour turnover.

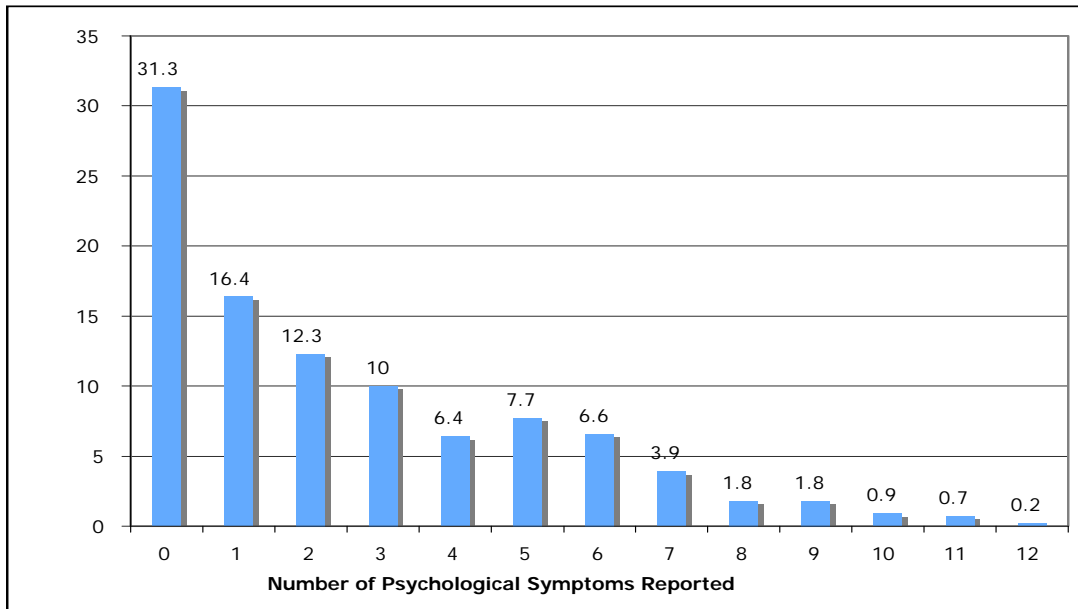


Figure 8: Percentage of managers reporting symptoms of psychological ill-health

Turnover intentions

⁴ Donath, S. (2001). The validity of the 12-item General Health Questionnaire in Australia: A comparison between three scoring methods. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 35, 231-235.

⁵ Clark, A. (2003). Unemployment as a social norm: Psychological evidence from panel data. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 21, 323-351.

Over half of respondents reported having occasional thoughts of leaving their current employer. One third expressed the view that they would leave within the next few years, while over ten percent planned to change jobs in the next few months.

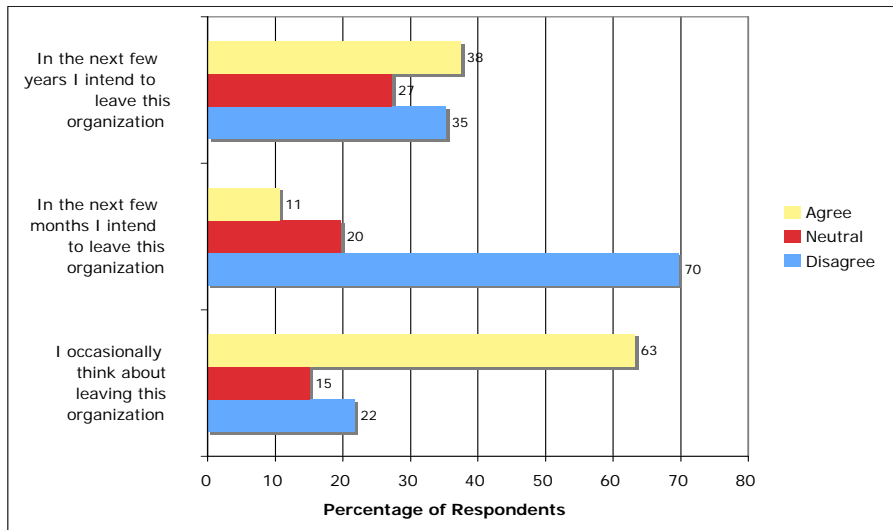


Figure 9: Percentage of managers reporting quit intentions⁶

Job Satisfaction

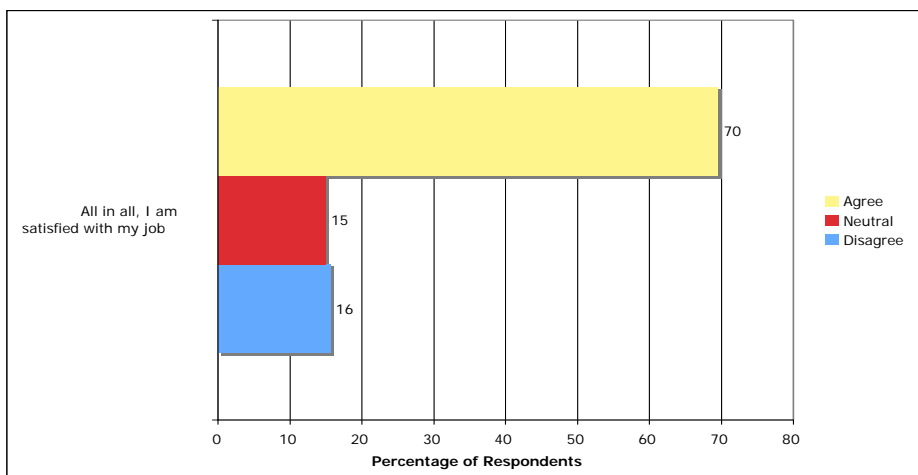


Figure 10: Percentage of managers reporting overall job satisfaction.

Seventy percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with a statement indicating overall satisfaction with the job. Psychological well-being and job satisfaction are typically highly correlated, though studies have shown that it is possible to like one's job, while simultaneously feeling under stress⁷. Again, conditions of work overload that accompany a dramatically growing economy might account for such a pattern.

⁶ Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number, and so may not total 100.

⁷ In our study, the correlation between GHQ-12 scores and job satisfaction was -0.42. Whilst statistically significant, this is not particularly high.

Positive Outlook and Psychological health

In order to see whether having a positive outlook was important for psychological health, we analysed the data using multiple regression. This is a statistical technique that examines the degree to which a number of independent variables (in this case - *Hope, Optimism, Confidence and Resilience*) predict scores on a dependent variable (in this case - *Psychological Well-being*). The results are summarized in Figure 4 below⁸.

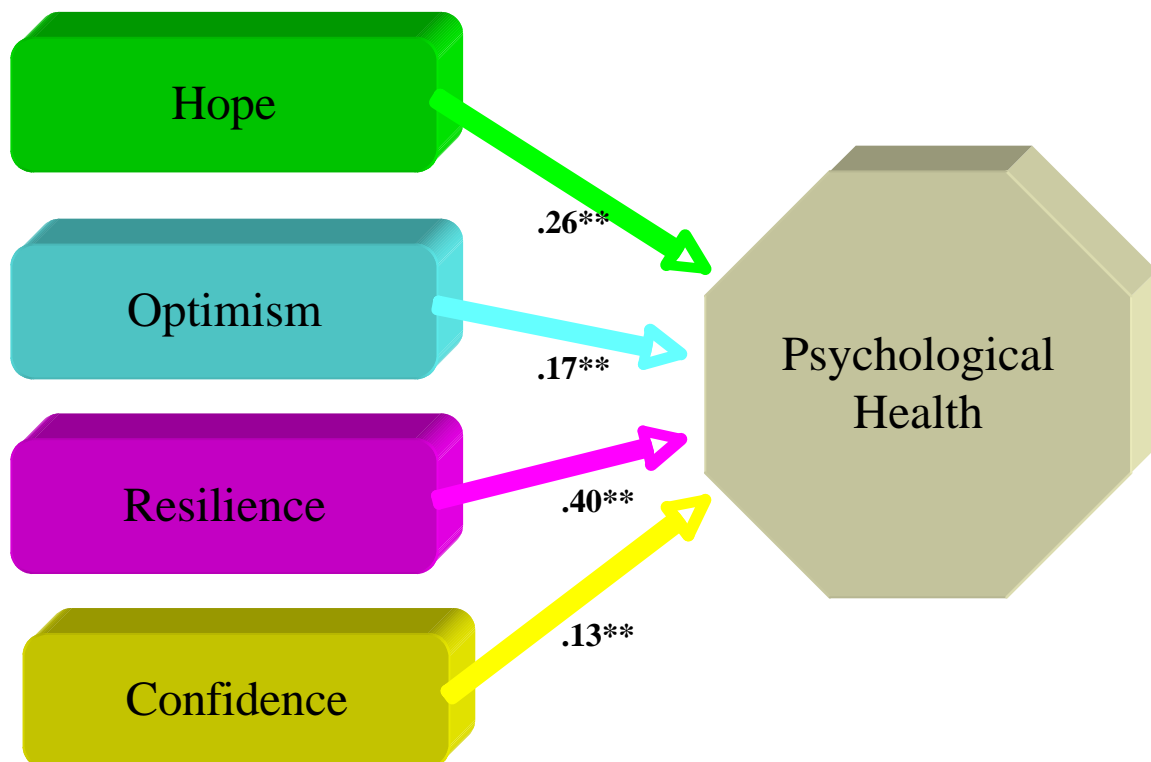


Figure 4. Relationship between positive psychological outlook and well-being.

The results show that the four positive outlook variables are strongly associated with managers' psychological health scores⁹. As might be predicted, the strongest predictor of *psychological well-being* was *resilience*, followed by *hope*.

⁸ Figures are standardized regression weights. ** $p < .001$, * $p < .01$.

⁹ Adjusted $R^2 = .553$; $F(4,555) = 173.729$, $p < .001$.

Positive Outlook and Job Satisfaction

Next, we looked at the relationship between positive outlook and satisfaction with the job. The picture for *job satisfaction* is slightly different than for psychological well-being, with *hope*, *optimism* and *resilience* each having about the same degree of impact on satisfaction¹⁰. *Confidence* in one's ability to perform well in the job does not seem to be a source of job satisfaction in this instance.

These results support the conclusion that feeling hopeful and optimistic is an important precursor to a person's capacity to derive enjoyment from their job.

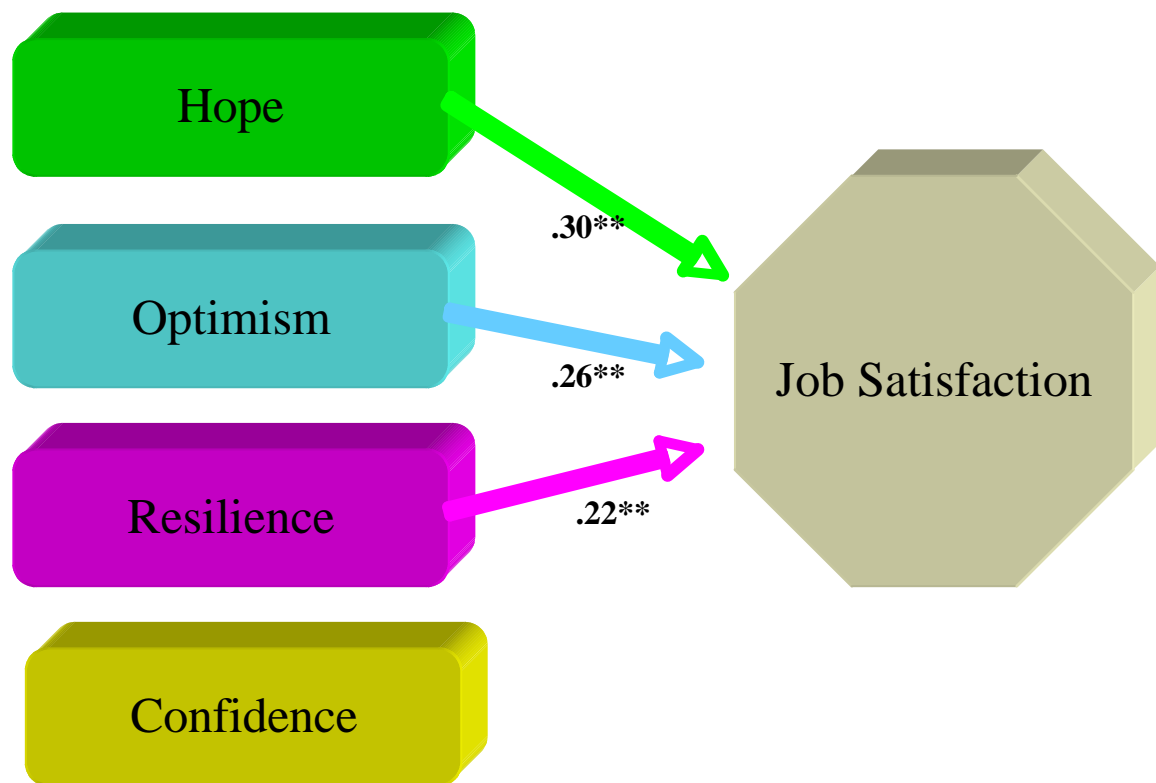


Figure 5: Relationship between positive outlook and job satisfaction.

¹⁰ Adjusted $R^2 = .391$; $F(4,555) = 90.813$, $p < .001$.

Positive Outlook and Intention to Quit

We were also interested in whether positive outlook might have an impact on retention. Retention is a major issue in West Australian workplaces at present, as demand for skilled employees and managers is extremely high. Intention-to-quit scores have been found in the past to be significant predictors of actual quit behaviour, and so we asked managers whether they were contemplating leaving their current job.

As with psychological well-being, all four predictors were associated (though inversely) with quit intentions¹¹, with *hope* emerging as the strongest predictor.

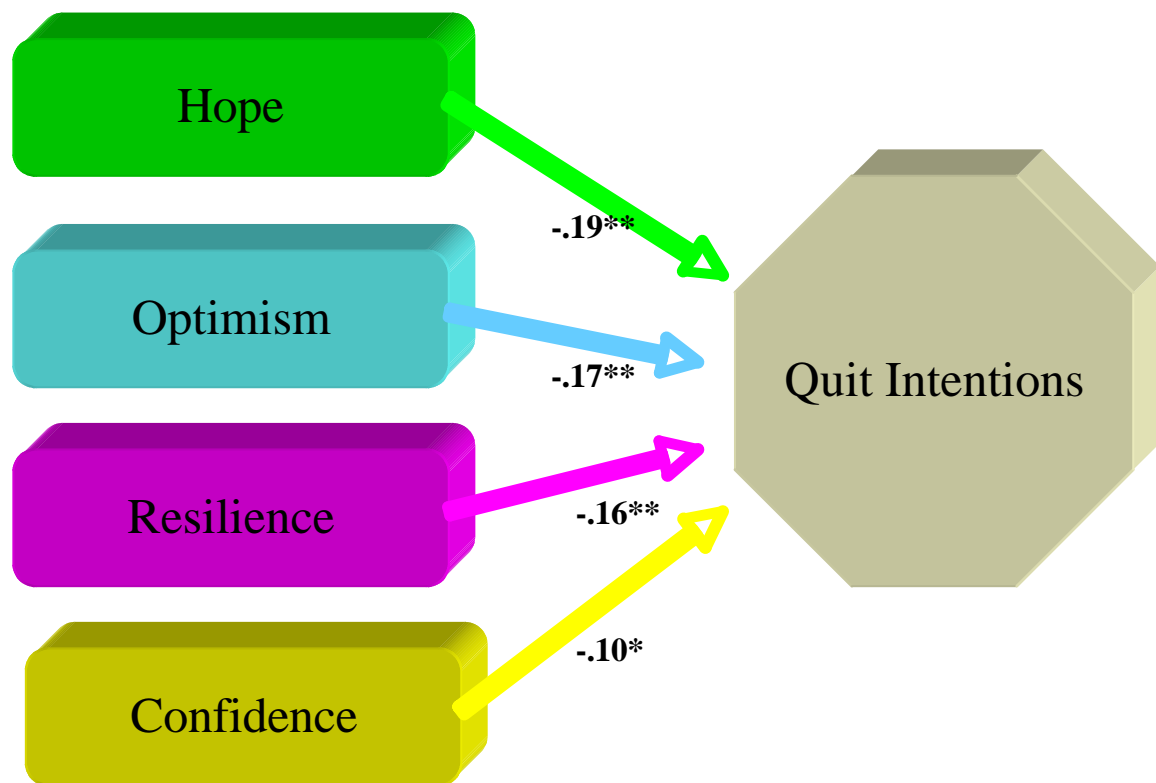


Figure 6: Relationship between positive outlook and quit intentions.

¹¹ Adjusted $R^2 = .214$; $F(4,555) = 39.080$, $p < .001$.

What predicts a positive psychological outlook?

We looked at four possible features of the managed work environment that might give rise to managers having a positive psychological outlook.

1. **Work engagement** is the degree to which people are energised, absorbed and find personal meaning in the job that they do.
2. **Supportive context** is a measure of the degree to which people feel that they are working in an environment where they feel safe and supported, and can express themselves without risk.
3. **Organisation fit** refers to the extent to which people identify with and feel a strong sense of belonging to the organization they work for.
4. **Organisational justice** reflects the degree to which people feel that they are treated fairly by the organization in promotion and rewards decision-making - in terms of the outcomes that result (*distributive justice*), how procedures are administered (*procedural justice*) and whether individuals involved in such decisions treat them with fairness and respect (*interactional justice*).

Fostering Hope

The strongest predictor of managerial *hope* was the extent to which people were operating in a work role that they found engaging. To a lesser extent, operating in a supportive climate and feeling a part of the organization were also important in fostering perceptions of hope.

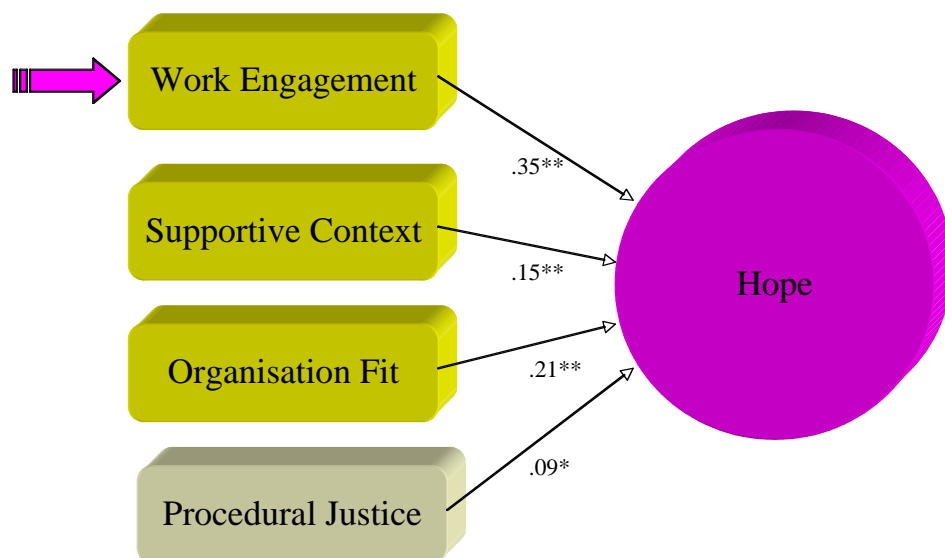


Figure 7: Features of the managed work environment linked to hope

Encouraging Optimism

Optimism appears more directly related to how secure and supported someone feels at work. People are more likely to see a bright future where they believe that the work environment provides for job security, respect for individual views and where there exist positive interpersonal relationships. This includes feeling that one is being treated fairly and respectfully by those responsible for administering reward systems, such as pay and promotion.

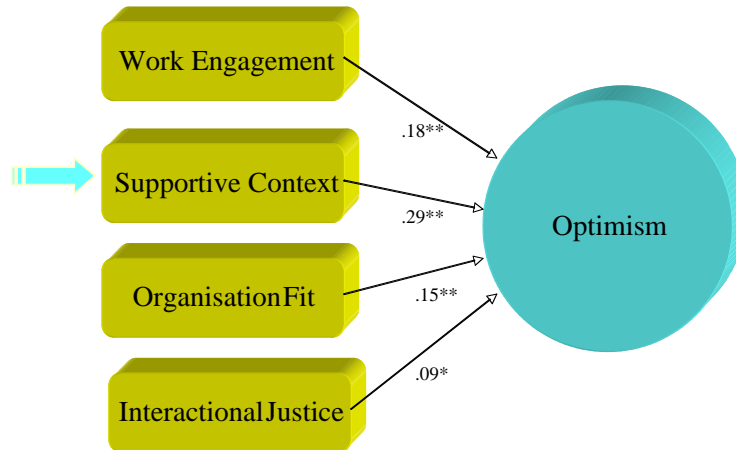


Figure 8: Features of the managed work environment linked to optimism

Developing Resilience

Like optimism, *resilience* appears to be improved to the extent that someone feels that they are working in a psychologically safe and supportive environment, and that they truly ‘fit’ within the organization. Fair treatment by those responsible for administering pay and promotion is similarly a contributing factor.

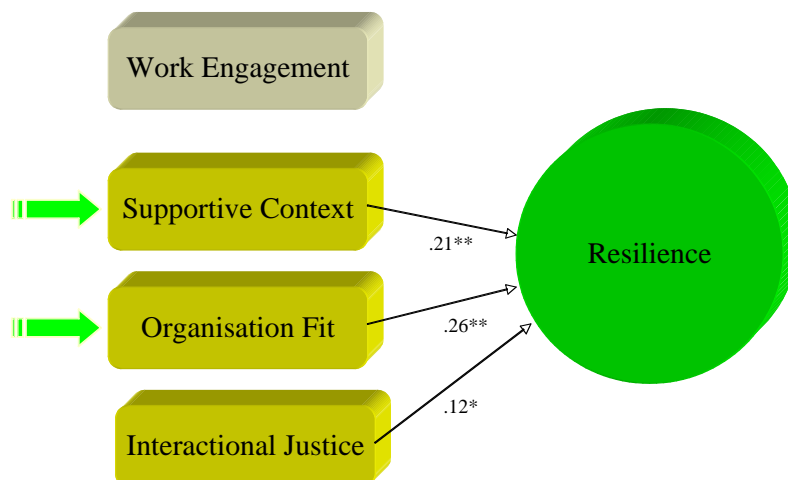


Figure 9: Features of the managed work environment linked to resilience

Building Confidence

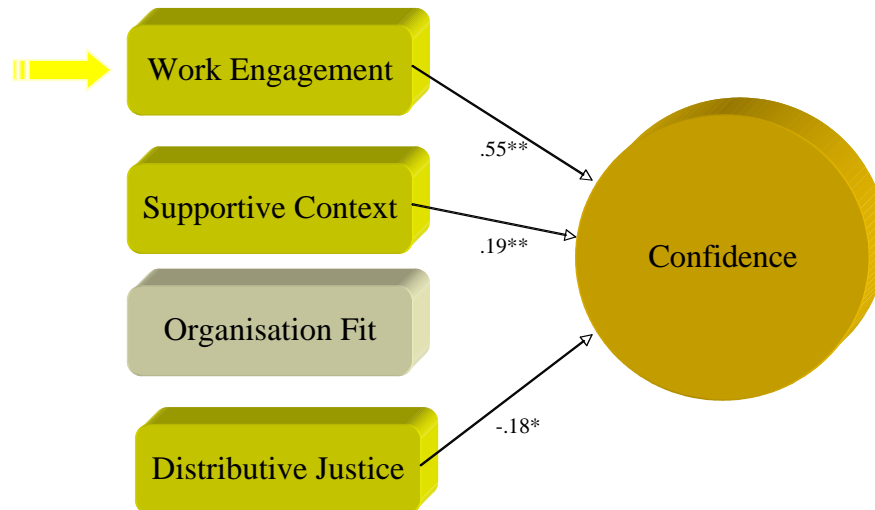


Figure 10: Features of the managed work environment linked to confidence

The overwhelming influence on people's levels of confidence was the extent to which work roles are perceived as energising, absorbing and meaningful.

Intriguingly, the degree to which rewards were perceived to be fair was negatively associated with confidence. Anecdotal evidence suggests that one interpretation of this counter-intuitive finding may be that people are being promoted rapidly and beyond their comfort zone in the current climate of rapid economic growth in Western Australia.

Three Action Steps

Our initial research into the causes and consequences of positive outlook has highlighted the potential significance of positive elements of a person's work experience for the creation of healthy, sustainable and productive work organisations. The connection between positive outlook and mental well-being is a particularly powerful finding. Equally striking is the evidence that suggests that positive outlook is affected by features of the work environment and therefore is potentially within managerial control.

What practical lessons can managers learn from this study? Though this is just a starting point for an on-going program of research, we believe that it is already possible to derive some promising suggestions as to how to gain the obvious benefits that derive from a 'positive' workforce. Three action steps are outlined below.

1. Build engaging work roles

It is clear from the survey findings that people who are engaged by the tasks and responsibilities they have been given will tend to express a more positive outlook. The practical significance of this is that engaging work roles can be created- they are a consequence of conscious choices made regarding how systems of work are set. In particular, we know that work roles that are designed with employee empowerment and motivation as a primary objective will generate increased employee engagement¹². Work role characteristics such as autonomy and feedback and empowering leader behaviours are known to have a positive impact on engagement, especially when combined with other forms of organisational support¹³.

2. Enhance connectedness

People feel more positive when they perceive that they are a good fit with the organisation, its mission and values, and when they feel that the job that they do is a good match for their competencies. Positive outlook is also enhanced when people have strong social links to the organisation, such as might be created through team-based work and strong communication networks.

3. Foster a positive interpersonal climate

Resilience, hope, optimism and confidence are all affected by the social context in which people work. The existence of a positive and supportive interpersonal climate will assist people in being able to see ways to overcome difficulties and achieve their goals. Managers and leaders can do much to facilitate the development of positive interpersonal norms (eg for problem solving, communication and conflict resolution) in work units.

Like most research, this work raises as many questions as it answers. However, it does make an important contribution in assuring managers and leaders that their endeavours to build hope, optimism, confidence and resilience are worth the effort. The positive benefits to both the individual and the organisation appear clear and support the contribution and role of effective management and leadership in Western Australian organisations.

¹² Cordery, J.L. & Parker, S.K. (2007). Work organization. In P.Boxall, J. Purcell, & P. Wright (Eds.), Oxford Handbook of Human Resource Management. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹³ See for example Demerouti, E., Bakker, A.B., Nachreiner, F., & Schaufeli, W.B. (2001). The job demands-resources model of burnout. Journal of Applied Psychology, 75, 107-116; Salanova, M., Agut, S., & Peiro, J.M. (2005). Linking organizational resources and work engagement to employee performance and customer loyalty: The mediation of service culture. Journal of Applied Psychology, 90, 1217-1227.

Appendix A

The principal measures used in our survey are described below.

Positive Outlook

Hope was measured using a scale comprising 5 questions taken from the state-based hope measure developed by Snyder et. al (1996)¹⁴. Respondents are asked to think of their present work circumstances, and indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with various statements. Sample items include “If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it” and “At this time I am meeting the goals that I have set for myself”. In the present study, the scale was found to have good internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.85).

Optimism was measured using the 12-item Life Orientation Test (Revised form), developed by Shifren & Hooker (1995)¹⁵. Respondents are asked to think of their present work circumstances, and indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with various statements that reflect state optimism. Sample items include “If something can go wrong for me it will” and “Right now, I’m optimistic about my future”. In the present study, the scale was found to have good internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.82).

Resilience was measured using 6 questions from the scale developed by Jenson (2003)¹⁶. Respondents are asked to think of their recent job experience, and indicate the degree to which various statements apply to them. Sample items include “I would describe myself as being tough in the face of adversity” and “I quickly get over disappointments”. In the present study, the scale was found to have good internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.81).

Confidence was assessed using a 3-item scale developed specifically for this study. The items were “I can effectively solve problems that arise in my job”, “During work, I feel confident that I am effective in getting things done”, and “In my opinion, I am good at my job”. In the present study, the scale was found to have acceptable internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.74).

Outcomes

We assessed respondents’ *psychological well-being* using the 12-item version of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12). The GHQ is one of the main self-report devices used to measure minor psychiatric illness in the general community¹⁷, and is frequently used as an indicator of work stress. The questionnaire lists 12 common symptoms of strain, depression, anxiety and non-coping, and asks respondent to indicate the degree to which they have experienced each symptom over recent weeks. Respondents receive a score from 0 to 12, based on the number of ‘symptomatic’ responses.

¹⁴ Snyder, C.R, Sympson, S.C., Ybasco, F.C., Borders, T.F., Babyak, M.A., & Higgins, R.L. (1996). Development and validation of the State Hope Scale. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70, 321-335.

¹⁵ Shifren, K. & Hooker, K. (1995). Stability and change in optimism: A study among spouse caregivers. *Experimental Aging Research*, 21, 59-76.

¹⁶ Jenson, S.M. (2003). Entrepreneurs as leaders: Impact of psychological capital and perceptions of authenticity on venture performance. *Unpublished PhD dissertation in Business*, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

¹⁷ Donath, S. (2001). The validity of the 12-item General Health Questionnaire in Australia: A comparison between three scoring methods. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 35, 231-235.

Intention to quit was measured using a three-item scale, developed by Mitchell et. al. (2001)¹⁸. Respondents are asked to indicate their extent of agreement with statements that include “I occasionally think about leaving this organization” and “In the next few months I intend to leave this organization”. In the present study, the scale was found to have acceptable internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.77).

Job satisfaction was measured using a 3-item measure developed by Lee et al. (2004)¹⁹. Items include “All in all, I am satisfied with my job” and “In general, I don’t like my job” (reverse scored). ”. In the present study, the scale was found to have good internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.88).

Work context

Work engagement was measured using a 16-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale²⁰. This well-validated measure assesses the degree to which people feel that they are energized and absorbed by the work roles they are required to perform. Items include “I find the work I do full of meaning and purpose” and “At work, I feel full of energy”. In the present study, the scale was found to have exceptional internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.91).

Supportive context was measured using a 4-item scale adapted from the measure of psychological safety developed by Edmondson (1999)²¹. Items include “There is a supportive environment at work” and “I’m not afraid to be myself at work”. In the present study, the scale was found to have acceptable internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.65).

To measure *organization fit*, we used the 6-item measure of job embeddedness²². Sample items include “I feel I am a good match for this organization” and “If I stay with this organization, I will be able to achieve most of my goals”. In the present study, the scale was found to have good internal reliability (Coefficient alpha = 0.79).

Finally, *distributive, procedural and interactional justice* perceptions were measured using scales developed by Colquitt (2001)²³. The questions ask about how a person’s rewards (ie pay & promotion) have been determined, and sample items include “The rewards I have received reflected the effort I have put into my work” (distributive), “I have been treated with dignity” (interactional), and “Those procedures are free of bias” (procedural). In the present study, the scales were found to have excellent internal reliability (Coefficient alphas = 0.88, 0.94 & 0.96).

¹⁸ Mitchell, T.R., Holtom, B.C., Lee, T.W., Sablinski, C.J., & Erez, M. (2001). Why people stay: Using job embeddedness to predict voluntary turnover. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44, 1102-1121.

¹⁹ Lee, T.W., Mitchell, T.R., Sablinski, C.J, Burton, J.P., & Holtom, B.C. (2004). The effects of job embeddedness on organizational citizenship, job performance, volitional absences, and voluntary turnover. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47, 711-722.

²⁰ Schaufeli, W.B. & Bakker, A.B. (2004). Job demands, job resources and their relationship with burnout and engagement: A multi-sample study. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 25, 293-315.

²¹ Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44, 350-383.

²² Holtom, B.C., Tidd, S.T., & Mitchell, T.R. (2006). Less is more: Validation of a short form of the job embeddedness measure and theoretical extensions. Paper presented at the August 2006 meeting of the Academy of Management, Atlanta.

²³ Colquitt, J.A. (2001). On the dimensionality of organizational justice: A construct validation of a measure. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86, 386-400.