Envisioning a design approach towards increasing well-being at work

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Organizational attention to increasing employee well-being (EWB) is a relatively recent phenomenon, which can be linked to the penetration of information technology, its connection to organizational performance, and millennials facing a lack of optimism about the future. Recent research in the field of management has indicated that design principles like human centeredness and holistic thinking should be applied to create better employee experiences. However, how the positive impact of design on EWB can be achieved, is underspecified in literature. In this conceptual paper, we explore complementarities and potential synergies of design principles and practices with the conditions for EWB, leading to a principle-practice-ingredient (PPI) portfolio. This portfolio can help designers of employee experiences succeed in increasing EWB through the process they apply. For instance when applying envisioning and inspiring activities that address virtue and personal significance to develop workplace tools (such as an app for teamwork around a specific task).

Keywords: Employee well-being, positive and strategic design

Introduction and background

Employee well-being (EWB) can be defined as the overall quality of an employee’s experience and functioning at work (Warr, 1987). It has become a major topic of research across several scientific disciplines in recent years (Bartels, 2015). The concept has also been receiving growing attention in business (Heath, 2017). This growing attention is supported by changes in the nature and context of work due to the rise of information technology (Guest, 2017), by its connection to organizational performance (Christian, Garza & Slaughter, 2011), and by millennials facing a lack of optimism about the future (Elliott, 2016). As an example of this growing attention, Facebook surveys its workforce twice a year, asking what their employees value most (Goler, Gale, Harrington & Grant, 2018).

Firms spend money on happiness coaches, team-building exercises, gameplays, funsultants, and Chief Happiness Officers (yes, you’ll find one of those at Google). (Spicer & Cederström, 2015).

Yet, many workplace well-being programs seem to have limited effect, as reflected in the low engagement scores measuring the effects of these programs (Morgan, 2017). The limited effects are mainly linked to organizations that apply short-term fixes instead of redesigning the employee experience. The employee experience was defined by Morgan (2017) as a holistic concept; a combination of organizational culture, the technological, and physical environment. These short-term fixes, or static reactions in need for control, seem
to be a recent phenomenon in a world that has become more ‘fluid’. This ‘fluidity’ in terms of more open, complex, dynamic, networked problems will only increase because we live in a nexus between technological revolutions, and momentous social and cultural changes. (Dorst, 2015). Dorst explained that it is crucial to understand the underlying structures of the specific situation.

As part of the initial stage of a PhD project, a preliminary study was conducted by the authors at an international airline company to better understand the reasons for the limited effect of well-being programs. The airline company operates in a highly competitive, regulated and complex business. The preliminary study included in-depth interviews, observations during training- and management sessions, a survey shared with participants in a masterclass (n = 65), and an analysis of recent engagement studies done by Ipsos (Employee Monitor 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017; n = 10564). One of the main conclusions from this study is that HR managers do not know how to actually increase EWB (what to do and where to start with and "how to get the most value for bucks"). Employees experienced substantial benefits from being involved in design processes, such as more freedom to think and act, and a better understanding of the impact of their work related to the company’s purpose. The assumed positive impact of design on EWB is further explored in this paper.

Dorset (2015) explained that leading innovators have increasingly been turning to design for help. According to Liedtka (2018), design helps innovators to get around human biases or attachments to specific behavior norms that block innovation. She argues that employee engagement is both a condition for, as well as an outcome of successful innovation, as organizations are built upon people’s perspectives and emotions and the experiences of the innovators are shaped by design. A design process or a design outcome can support pursuing well-being (Desmet & Pohlmeyer, 2013). Pohlmeyer (2017) explained that design for well-being can play a pivotal role in facilitating activities and enabling experiences. For instance, Parker (2014), explained that the design of the employee’s work experience can be a powerful vehicle to positively impact EWB. Recent research has indicated that design principles like human centeredness and holistic thinking should be applied to employee experiences (Gruber, De Leon, George & Thompson, 2015). However, how the positive impact of design on EWB can exactly be achieved, seems to be underspecified in the literature. The question arises which design principles and practices should be used to increase EWB? The following research question is addressed with a conceptual approach:

**RQ1: What are the potential design principles, strategic design practices and positive design ingredients that increase EWB?**

The main purpose of this paper is to advance the current understanding of how design can be integrated and leveraged for improving employee experiences. Or, as identified in management literature (i.e., Knight, Patterson & Dawson, 2017), to create an employee experience in which employees can thrive. In this paper, we draw from the literature covering management, psychology and design perspectives on well-being at work, design principles, practices, and positive design ingredients in order to explore solution directions for increasing EWB. We advance an argument that applying a design approach helps to succeed in increasing EWB. We first synthesize conditions for increasing EWB, as part of the first phase of the PhD-project in order to define an initial set of propositions. In this paper we subsequently link these conditions to design practices (i.e. empathizing, connecting, leveraging sensorial aspects, prototyping, inspiring, and applying a ‘gestalt’ view), underlying design principles (i.e. human and meaning centered, design co-creative and inclusive) and positive design ingredients (i.e. design for personal significance, design for human flourishing). Through this conceptual approach, we organize design principles, design practices and positive design ingredients for increasing EWB into a principle-practice-ingredient portfolio (PPI). This PPI portfolio shows how design practices can be applied to the field of EWB to keep supporting contemporary (employee) innovation activities in a designerly way. Moreover, these design practices can be used as guidelines in combination with experience goals based upon positive design ingredients. Through these guidelines, this paper contributes to the design literature by extending the field of application of strategic design, and by providing initial insights into how the positive design approach can be applied within organizations, for the purpose of increasing EWB. In the following sections the literature review and PPI portfolio are discussed, followed by elaborating on the applications of these guidelines in the final section.

**Increasing well-being at work**

EWB was described in the introduction of this paper as the overall quality of an employees’ experience and functioning at work. This holistic definition is an integrated perspective of the literature domains of healthcare,
sociology, psychology and philosophy (Warr, 1987). The definition moves beyond well-being as a primary affective state (the hedonic view, also known as subjective well-being [SWB]), towards a multi-dimensional phenomenon (the eudemonic view) (Taris & Schaufeli, 2015). The concept has been defined and operationalized heterogeneously in academic literature (Bartels, 2015; Taris & Schaufeli, 2015), varying from affective judgment to a broader phenomenon involving other, non-affective, aspects as well. The broad, holistic perspective, allowing for contextualization (Warr, 1987), is used in this study to define EWB. This definition includes the dimensions affective well-being (organizational commitment), aspiration (personal growth), autonomy and competence (mastery), and integrated functioning as a secondary dimension. Personality factors seem to determine well-being to some degree (Hallberg, Johansson & Schaufeli, 2007; Taris, Van Beek & Schaufeli, 2014). For example, individuals who pursue goals to fulfill intrinsic values (goal self-concordance) experience higher levels of EWB (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Since personality factors are generally considered to be difficult to influence, they are left out.

**EWB interventions**

Improving EWB is seen as a complex task according to management literature. Drawing conclusions about the kind of Human Resources (HR) practices that affect EWB has been difficult (Grant, Christianson & Price, 2007; Guest, 2017). Focusing on EWB brings multiple challenges, as there may be trade-offs between different types of well-being. Synergistically increasing multiple dimensions of EWB instead of creating conflicting outcomes is one of these challenges (Legge 1995; Ramsay, Scholarios & Harley, 2000). For instance, high levels of job challenge and opportunities for growth may coincide with high levels of stress (Cohen & Colligan, 1997).

Few studies on well-being interventions have been conducted (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005). These studies describe only a few examples of synergistically increasing multiple dimensions of EWB, such as involving employees in the design of safety practices, leading to an increase in social, physical, and psychological well-being (Grant, Christianson & Price, 2007). Most of these studies focus on positive psychology approaches (Boiler et al., 2013; Wright & Cropanzo, 2004). Positive psychology was defined as ‘a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving in individuals, families, and communities’ (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.13). The positive psychology approach often takes a one-size fits all approach, even though personalization based on people’s need could work better (Boiler et al., 2013).

Experiencing positive emotions (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002), and task significance and variety are positive influencers of EWB (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Multiple positive interventions at once may be more effective than engaging in only one activity (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Yet, much well-being-related research focuses on studying the effectiveness of single interventions at a time.

Three main short-comings in literature were identified:

- Well-being can be understood and measured in many different ways and relates to a wide range of concepts. It should not be limited to affect (SWB) only;
- Synergistically increasing multiple dimensions of EWB is a challenge, with only limited evidence of approaches that have succeeded in this;
- Very few EWB intervention studies have been conducted, mostly in the field of positive psychology, using a one-size fits all approach, only studying a single intervention at a time.

**Towards a principle-practice-ingredient portfolio**

We identified seven conditions for increasing well-being at work. These conditions were derived based on an in-depth literature review that included human resource management, psychology and organization research streams. The conditions for increasing EWB at work are codified in Table 1. In this table, illustrative references are included, highlighting the cross-disciplinary agreement over time. These conditions can be summarized as ensuring interventions are tailored to individual needs (Condition No. 1), address a sense of mastery and competence (Condition No. 2), address a sense of self-determination (Condition No. 3), address organizational commitment and support (Condition No. 4), address the job’s meaningfulness (Condition No. 5), address the need to explore and assert (Condition No. 6), and include the broader context of EWB (Condition No. 7). The conditions for increasing EWB as shown in Table 1 are illustrative rather than exhaustive and will be further explained in the next sections.

*Table 1 Conditions to increase EWB and illustrative references*
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<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Conditions to increase EWB</th>
<th>Illustrative references</th>
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</table>
| 1  | Importance of tailoring interventions to individual needs | “In addition to demonstrating that happiness-boosting interventions can work for at least some people, this [...] provides further support for our proposition that the fit of the activity to the person makes a difference” (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005, p. 124)  
“It goes without saying that a user-centred approach is pivotal to positive design, because the user will be the only expert truly able to assess her own subjective well-being” (Desmet & Pohlmeyer, 2013, p. 14) |
| 2  | Importance of having a sense of mastery and competence | “How happy workers feel; how motivated they are by an intrinsic interest in the work; how positively they view [...] their work, and themselves—all these combine either to push them to higher levels of achievement or to drag them down” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011)  
“First of all, [...] healthier people possess a stable sense of identity – they have a good sense of who they are” (Kets de Vries, 2001, p. 104)  
“Furthermore, organizational leadership has to create the conditions to foster a sense of competence, signifying that organizational participants have a feeling of personal growth and development” (Kets de Vries, 2001, p. 108)  
“[...] think of in terms of five main components of mental health in Western societies. Those may be labelled as [...] competence [...]” (Warr, 1994, p. 84)  
“[...] we have identified the needs for competence [...] – that appear to be essential for facilitating [...] personal well-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68) |
| 3  | Importance of having a sense of self-determination | “The combination of employing and expressing a person’s preferred self yields behaviors that bring alive the relation of self to role” (Kahn, 1990, p. 700)  
“Closely tied to this need for exploration is self-assertion, the ability to choose what one likes to do” (Kets de Vries, 2001, p. 106).  
“[...] think of in terms of five main components of mental health in Western societies. Those may be labelled as [...] autonomy [...]” (Warr, 1994, p. 84)  
“[...] we have identified the needs for autonomy [...] – that appear to be essential for facilitating [...] personal well-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68)  
“Happiness mostly results from an individual’s ability to make choices” (Gavin & Mason, 2004, p. 388) |
| 4  | Importance of organizational commitment and support | “By supporting people and their daily progress in meaningful work, managers improve not only the inner work lives of their employees but also the organization’s long-term performance, which enhances inner work life even more” (Amabile & Kramer, 2011)  
“[...] positive relations and working climate*returns once again to the perception of well-being as a positive quality of interpersonal relationships, regardless of the rules and position held” (Biggio & Cortese, 2013, p. 9, 10).  
“People vary their personal engagements according to [...] the guarantees, or the safety, they perceive in situations” (Kahn, 1990, p. 703)  
“Clearly, work characteristics influence psychological work adjustment factors that ultimately affect employee health and well-being” (Wilson, DeJoy, Vandenberg, Richardson & McGrath, 2004, p. 582)  
“A healthy organization is one characterized by intentional, systematic, and collaborative efforts to maximize employee well-being and productivity by
providing [...] a supportive social–organizational environment [...]” (Wilson, Deloy, Vandenberg, Richardson & McGrath, 2004, p. 567)

“The results of this study support Laschinger’s research that workplace climates and engagement were positively associated, suggesting that organizational leaders, managers, and practitioners by improving workplace climate in their respective organizations could increase employee engagement and increase the likelihood of positive individual-level affective outcomes [...]” (Shuck & Reio, 2014, p. 54)

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<th>5</th>
<th>Importance of meaningfulness of one’s job</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Whether the goals are lofty or modest, as long as they are meaningful to the worker and it is clear how his or her efforts contribute to them, progress toward them can galvanize inner work life” (Amabile &amp; Kramer, 2011)</td>
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<td>“[...] work engagement is more strongly related to job characteristics that are associated with the perception of meaningfulness of the work itself [...]” (Christian, et al., 2011, p. 122)</td>
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<td>“[...] an individual experiences positive affect to the extent that [...] he cares about (experienced meaningfulness)” (Hackman &amp; Oldham, 1976, p. 255, 256)</td>
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<td>“[...] people were personally engaging in situations characterized by more psychological meaningfulness than those in which they were disengaging (Kahn, 1990, p. 704)”</td>
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<td>“When a workplace is designed and managed to create meaning for its workers they tend to be more healthy and happy” (Gavin &amp; Mason, 2004, p. 381)</td>
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<th>6</th>
<th>Need for exploration and assertion</th>
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<td>“[...] everyday progress—even a small win—can make all the difference in how they feel and perform” (Amabile &amp; Kramer, 2011)</td>
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<td>“Playful exploration and manipulation of the environment in response to exploratory-assertive motivation produces a sense of autonomy, initiative, and industry” (Kets de Vries, 2011, p. 106)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“[...] think of in terms of five main components of mental health in Western societies. Those may be labelled as [...] aspiration [...]” (Warr, 1994, p. 84)</td>
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<td>“[...] those record the degree to which a person seeks out challenging goals in his or her job, a process which can be viewed as a central aspect of job-related aspiration” (Warr, 1994, p. 86)</td>
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<td>“Optimal psychological functioning requires not only that one achieve the prior characteristics, but also that one continue to develop one’s potential, to grow and expand as a person” (Ryff, 1989, p. 1071)</td>
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<th>7</th>
<th>Importance of a broader (multi-dimensional) perspective of EWB context</th>
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<tr>
<td>“[...] the individual and situational perspectives on the relation between individual well-being and performance are interconnected” (Taris &amp; Schaufeli, 2005, p. 24)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“The final aspect of mental health, integrated functioning, concerns the person as a whole and the relationships between other components” (Warr, 1994, p. 86)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Happiness is a holistic ideal” (Gavin &amp; Mason, 2004, p. 388)</td>
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Building on the understanding of conditions for employee engagement, the following sections introduce an illustrative PPI portfolio for establishing well-being at work by addressing the research question:

**RQ1:** What are the potential design principles, strategic design practices and positive design ingredients that increase EWB?
We follow a similar approach to Karpen, Gemser and Calabretta (2017) by synthesizing the conditions for well-being at work and subsequently linking them to design principles (Beverland, Wilner & Micheli, 2015; Buchanan, 1992; Karpen, Gemser & Calabretta, 2017; Luchs, 2015; Swan & Luchs, 2011), strategic design practices (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Calabretta, Gemser & Karpen, 2016) and positive design ingredients (Desmet & Pohlmeyer, 2013). The illustrative PPI portfolio in Table 2 lists those practices and ingredients relevant for increasing EWB. The portfolio consists of seven illustrative constellations of conditions for increasing EWB, design practices, combined with the tools and methods of positive design. Each constellation builds on foundational conditions for increasing EWB that are well established in the literature (e.g. Christian, et al., 2011; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005; Ryff, 1989), as shown in Table 1. The examples are used to outline a preliminary employee experience view of design practices and to lay the foundation for an evolving research stream in strategic design. In the following sections, design principles, strategic design practices and positive design ingredients will be subsequently discussed, in relation to the seven constellations.

**Design principles**

Businesses increasingly use design as a way to innovate in today’s digital environment (Calabretta & Kleinmann, 2017). As Kolko (2015) states, “There is a shift underway in large organizations, one that puts design much closer to the center of the universe”. This study adopts the definition of design from Buchanan (2001, p.9): “the human power of conceiving, planning, and making products that serve human beings in the accomplishments of their individual and collective purposes”.

Improving EWB can be considered a strategic challenge, as redesigning the employee experience involves several stakeholders, implies a long-term approach and a certain degree of risk, and requires a variety of resources (Gruber et al., 2015). As a result, strategic design was used as a starting point for reviewing design literature, since this is the research domain where this kind of challenge is dealt with (Calabretta, Gemser & Karpen, 2016). Strategic design connects design principles to practices that can be applied for strategic purposes and can be defined as “[...] the use of design principles and practices to guide strategy development and implementation toward innovative outcomes that benefit people and organizations alike” (Calabretta, Gemser & Karpen, 2016). The design principles as coded by Karpen, Gemser and Calabretta (2017), served as the starting part for this review. The principles that were considered relevant in the context of this study and could be directly linked to the conditions for increasing EWB can be found in Table 2.
Table 2. The principle-practice-ingredient portfolio for increasing well-being at work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constellation</th>
<th>Design principles</th>
<th>Guidelines in the form of strategic design practices</th>
<th>Positive design ingredients</th>
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<tr>
<td>First constellation: individual needs</td>
<td>Design is human-and meaning-centered in nature</td>
<td>Empathize: the ability to deeply listen and create a dialogue to reach hidden needs</td>
<td>Design for personal significance <em>(personal engagement)</em></td>
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<td>Second constellation: sense of mastery and competence</td>
<td>Design is human-and meaning-centered in nature</td>
<td>Empathize: applying a ‘people-first’ approach, addressing individual competences and capabilities</td>
<td>Design for virtue <em>(identity affirmation, self-esteem)</em>; Design for personal significance <em>(identity affirmation)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Third constellation: sense of self-determination</td>
<td>Design is co-creative and inclusive in nature</td>
<td>Collaborate: connecting with others to influence the results</td>
<td>Design for personal significance <em>(control/autonomy)</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fourth constellation: organizational commitment and support</td>
<td>Design is co-creative and inclusive in nature</td>
<td>Collaborate: being involved in creating solutions</td>
<td>Design for personal significance <em>(interpersonal connectedness)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth constellation: meaningfulness of one’s job</td>
<td>Design is transformative and betterment-oriented in nature</td>
<td>Envision: helping organizations incorporate a future oriented, long-term perspective into their objectives</td>
<td>Design for virtue <em>(being a morally good person, identity affirmation, self-esteem)</em>; Design for personal significance <em>(perceived impact, significance of work)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth constellation: exploration and assertion</td>
<td>Design is emergent and experimental in nature</td>
<td>Prototype: visualizing and materializing processes and outcomes to make intangible insights, ideas and concepts tangible, sharable and understandable</td>
<td>Design for personal significance <em>(pursuing personal goals)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh constellation: broader context</td>
<td>Design is holistic and contextual in nature</td>
<td>Simplify, structure (applying a ‘gestalt-view’): selecting, connecting, and leveraging the relevant resources and knowledge to manage the complexity of the project, therewith taking the full context into account</td>
<td>Design for human flourishing <em>(individuals who live their fullest potential)</em></td>
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</table>

Firstly, design being human- and meaning-centeredness in nature can be of relevance for improving employees’ experience. Several sources describe the importance of context and tailoring interventions to individual circumstances needs in order to increase EWB (i.e., Knight, Patterson & Dawson, 2017; Lyubomirsky, 2001). If there is a lack of fit between the individual needs and demands and those of the environment, work-related stress can be an outcome (Cooper & Cartwright, 2013). According to Buchanan (2015), the true value of design is its ability to focus the attention of organizations on all of the people served by the organization.

Secondly, the principle of collaborating, - explained as design being co-creative and inclusive in nature, or as designers that create innovative outcomes through co-creation with relevant stakeholders (Sanders & Stappers, 2008) - can be expected to have a positive impact on people’s well-being. A reason for this is that
stakeholders are in this case involved in creating their own solution, and have the opportunity to influence the results that they are going to work with.

Thirdly, design as being transformative and betterment oriented in nature, can help to have a positive impact on society and enhance people’s lives (Buchanan, 2015). This desire can be related back to designers’ personality characteristics, such as empathy and optimism (Brown, 2008), and is ingrained in designers’ way of working through co-creating the world with the people that will be affected by the design. Enhancing people’s lives. This principle seems relevant to EWB since meaningfulness of one’s job is described as one of its’ main antecedents.

A fourth principle that is relevant in the context of this study is design being emergent and experimental in nature, which seems to fit with the recommendation to perform interventions to increase EWB to learn from them and put them into action (Hassenzahl et al., 2013). While psychology is crucial to understand well-being, designers’ skills might be useful to put this understanding into action (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005). Design being explicative and experiential in nature seems to fit with the needs for exploration and assertion, which is about having the ability to play and work (Kets de Vries, 2001). This motivational need is associated with experiencing a sense of competence, of personal growth and development (Warr, 1987).

Finally, the principle of design being holistic and contextual in nature fits with EWB, as there is emphasis on recognizing and understanding the systems an individual is part of, in order to be able to improve it (Ojasalo, Koskelo & Nousiainen, 2015; Swan & Luchs, 2011). Based upon this first analysis of the two worlds coming together, it seems like there is a natural fit between the principles underlying design and increasing EWB, as visualized in Table 2.

**Strategic design practices**

In order to advance the current understanding of how design can be integrated and leveraged for improving employee experiences, we explored the design practices that can be directly linked to the design principles explained in Table 2 and the paragraph above. Design practices are routinized ways of working based on design principles (Karpen, Gemser & Calabretta, 2017) – e.g. envisioning in a human-centeredness manner, using a collaborative approach. There seem to be quite a few practices that can easily be linked to the challenge of increasing EWB when exploring the parallels with design principles and strategic design practices. At first sight, these practices, as described by Calabretta, Gemser and Karpen (2016), naturally seem to fit with the intended outcome, with similar arguments as design principles, and are visualized in Table 2. For sake of the similar argumentation, we will share examples for a subset of strategic design practices.

It seems for instance that the strategic design practice that fits the need to explore and assert (Condition No. 6), can be naturally linked to prototyping. Prototyping refers to designers’ practice of visualizing and materializing their processes and outcomes to make intangible insights, ideas and concepts tangible, sharable and understandable to different stakeholders (Brown, 2008; Karpen, Gemser & Calabretta, 2017; Luchs, 2015). Another example is that one can clearly see the parallel between empathizing and the effect this can have on people, when addressing individual needs (Condition No. 1) or a sense of mastery and competence (Condition No. 2). Empathizing enables designers to apply their ability to deeply listen and create a dialogue to reach hidden needs (Michlewski, 2008). Designers can take a ‘people-first’ approach through which they can imagine solutions that are inherently desirable and meet explicit or latent needs, by generating solutions that are meaningful for users (Brown, 2008, Buchanan, 2015). Envisioning (related to Condition No. 5) refers to designers helping organizations incorporate a future oriented, long-term perspective into their objectives. Simplifying, which can be linked to the need for understanding the broader context (Condition No. 7), can also be explained as structuring or applying a ‘Gestalt’ view (“the whole is something else than the sum of its parts”, Koffka, 1935, p.176). This view refers to selecting, connecting, and leveraging the relevant resources and knowledge to manage the complexity of the project, therewith taking the full context into account.

**Positive design ingredients**

Positive design is used as an umbrella term for all forms of design, design research and design intention in which the effects of design on the well-being of individuals and communities are explicitly addressed and intended (Desmet & Pohlmeyer, 2013; Pohlmeyer, 2013). These effects can be achieved by evoking valuable experiences through design processes and design outcomes. Positive design processes and outcomes can enable well-being by directing one’s intentions towards desirable goals, and by inspiring and empowering
human engagement activities that are meaningful for the individual and the community (Desmet & Pohlmeyer, 2013). The process of designing for well-being is different from a traditional design process since it focuses on opportunities instead of problems (Desmet & Pohlmeyer, 2013). Design should be seen as medium that can address different components of well-being in multiple ways (Pohlmeyer, 2013). The Positive Design Framework (PDF), developed by Desmet & Pohlmeyer (2013), presents three universal ingredients that stimulate well-being: ‘design for virtue’, ‘design for personal significance’, and ‘design for pleasure’. Design for personal significance for instance, can encourage people to live in accordance with their personal values, and commit to ideally self-concordant goals, in order to foster feelings of purpose (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). This ingredient of personal significance can be linked to the need for addressing individual needs (Condition No. 1).

The PDF framework was applied by Lu and Roto (2015) to set experience goals for meaningful work tool design, leading to a PDF for work tools. This PDF for work tools aims to guide designers of work tools to define meaningful experience goals at the starting point of their design. Design appears to have a pronounced potential to contribute to well-being in an indirect, facilitating manner: as enablement, or as support, as highlighted in the Design Well-being Matrix. This matrix illustrates the diversity of possibilities to design for EWB by connecting design roles to well-being components. In order to establish (enduring) success, positive design can only have an impact if the user is actively involved. A profound comprehension of the user context and translation to daily interactions is needed (Desmet & Pohlmeyer, 2013; Pohlmeyer, 2017). Following these conditions, the focus of this paper is on positive design’s role as enablement and support. The portfolio that is developed is intended to be used in an active work-setting. Enablement is the result of an activity, and support can for instance take place in the form of a game. The positive design ingredients that are expected to be naturally connected to the different constellations - with similar arguments - are visualized in Table 2. In this table, we follow the approach of Lu and Roto (2015) to set employee experience goals in order to create an environment in which employees can thrive.

Results, conclusion and discussion

As discussed in the introduction, how the positive impact of design on EWB can be achieved, is underspecified in literature. In this paper, we provide a principle-practice-ingredient (PPI) portfolio from which six guidelines, in the form of design practices, for improving the employee experience can be distilled. The primary EWB dimensions (i.e., organizational commitment, personal growth, autonomy, and mastery) can for instance be linked to the design practices; empathizing, collaborating, prototyping and leveraging sensorial aspects, which seem most relevant to apply to increase well-being at work. Combining these guidelines with experience goals based upon positive design ingredients (Lu & Roto, 2015) (i.e. empathize with personal engagement or identity affirmation) can guide the early phases of a design process, to spark inspiration and empower concept generation. As described by Liedtka (2018), the role of design in workplace innovation provides a social technology. It not only contributes better outcomes for employees in the form of their experiences, it also provides significant value by nature. Adopting a design approach for improving employee experiences that puts people first sheds new light on contemporary processes and ways of working. Structurally listening to the voice of employees for instance, as part of design user research, brings along a ripple-effect in the form of a change in culture and mindset. Focusing on employee experiences instead of employee products breaks down physical, digital and service walls, as it touches many parts of a business.

From this portfolio we can conclude that the role of design in addressing employee innovation challenges is of great potential. Barrett, Davidson, Prabhu & Vargo, 2015 also pointed out that design practices are becoming progressively more essential. We demonstrated the natural fit between the intended outcomes, conditions for increasing EWB, and applying a design process. Design practices therefore seem to have the ability to address employee experience challenges, offering designers a structured method to analyze and transform the complexity of EWB’s holistic concept.

As mentioned in the introduction, contemporary workplace well-being programs seem to have limited effect. In addition to organizations applying short-term fixes, another reason could be the lack of organizational knowledge on how to increase EWB in their daily practice. According to McKinsey “there is not a lot of good, independently validated science around what works” ('Wellness at work', 2017). Next to a missing academic discourse on how design can enable a thriving employee experience, the limited interventions that have been done in this field lack empirical evidence. Or, as Micheli, Wilner, Hussain Bhatti, Mura, and Beverland (2018) explained, empirical evidence of the impact of design is still lacking. Thus, applying the proposed guidelines in real-life settings, and measuring the impact of doing this, provide an interesting research outlook.
Next stages in the PhD-project are to prototype and apply design interventions, and validate the impact of these interventions in order to develop initial guidelines to increase EWB. We are currently experimenting with prototyping interventions in a workplace tool design project. One of the challenges in this project is to gain a better understanding of applying positive and strategic design methodologies in practice. How can these methodologies be made relevant for increasing EWB in a meaningful way? We have done a small pre-test on how applying the practices could work when designing the workplace tools. In the first creative sessions with future users, the collaborating practice was leading the process. The aim of these sessions was to envision how teamwork could be stimulated in the workplace tools of the future, by generating ideas. The collaborating approach that was used to build further on each other’s ideas, was positively evaluated amongst participants. A design researcher that was leading the session reflects;

Employees that participated in the session really appreciated to work like this. I noticed, and they also said it, that they liked having their say and sharing their feelings.

In order to further specify the design practices guidelines for this specific research context, it seems that building upon the learnings of Participatory Design is a potential interesting approach. Participatory design assumes that workers are in the best position to determine how to improve their work and their work life and views computer-based applications not in isolation, but rather in the context of a workplace (Schuler & Namioka, 1993). Participatory design is described in the literature as beneficial for redesigning work methods regarding well-being (Vink, Imada & Zink, 2008). It demands active participation and people who are affected by the design should have an opportunity to influence it. The user is seen as partner (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). One of its characteristics is that the quality can be improved with strong and effective participation of the people involved, as is the purpose of the workplace tools design project. Therefore, trying to integrate the participatory design learnings in search for the right design practices to increase EWB is recommended for future research.

When exploring the specific design practices in detail one could argue that the need for integrated functioning, for human flourishing, and the need for tailoring to individual needs, seem to be conflicting. Design for human flourishing intends to encompass the entire life of people and communities. The need for tailoring experiences to individual needs however, could also apply in specific situations. Positive design research, that addresses design for human flourishing, has been inspired by positive psychology (Desmet & Pohlmeyer, 2013), a stream in literature that is not accepted by the research community unequivocally. In fact, one of the biggest critiques on positive psychology is the ‘one size fits all’ approach, even though personalization based on people’s need could work better (Bolier et al., 2013). Positive psychology is defined as “a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving in individuals, families, and communities” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.13). Thus, exploring the use and effect of simultaneously applying the proposed design practices that are related to these needs, is one of the recommendations for future research.

Another potential critique on the principle-practice portfolio is that a few antecedents of work-related well-being were left out of scope. We intentionally excluded externally generated goals, availability of money, and physical security, as we did not find a clear link between these antecedents and design practices.

In line with Dorst’s (2015) finding that innovators have increasingly been turning to design for help, the field of Human Resource (HR) management acknowledges the need for a shift in mindset (Cappelli & Tavis, 2018). The traditional HR practice is changing, and employees are more and more brought into the design process for co-creation and iteration to meet people’s needs, instead of predominantly relying on ‘experts’ to build HR programs. Bersin (2016) explained this shift as changing the approach from instructional to experience design. As an example Bersin mentioned a telecommunications company using design thinking to come up with a solution for the high staff turnover in its retail stores. Based upon our research findings, designers could complement (HR) managers in developing employee experience strategies for well-being, using their practices to analyse and transform the complexity of EWB’s holistic context.

References


