

EAWOP WorkLab 2022: Improving psychological well-being through organizational interventions

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About the author

Lima graduated from the Vrije Universiteit van Amsterdam in Sociology and is currently working as a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam Universitair Medische Centra (UMC), University of Amsterdam, Department of Public and Occupational Health. Her PhD research aims to develop and evaluate a multicomponent intervention to prevent psychological distress in healthcare workers by providing them with a tailored risk communication of early signs and risk factors of psychological distress.

Abstract

This report describes the content and process of the 2022 edition of the WorkLab of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP) held in Mallorca, Spain, which focused on 'Improving psychological well-being through organizational interventions'. As such, it covers two topics: a) an overall description of the workshop, including speakers, process, and participants; and b) the topics covered, such as the development and evaluation of organizational-level interventions.

Keywords: EAWOP WorkLab, psychological well-being, organizational interventions

Introduction

In November 2022, the topic of the EAWOP practitioner skills WorkLab was *Improving psychological well-being through organizational interventions*. The event took place in Mallorca, Spain. The three-day workshop was attended by practitioners and researchers from various European countries, educational backgrounds and disciplines. The workshop featured two speakers, Prof. Dr. Karina Nielsen and Sharon De Mascia. Karina Nielsen's research interests centre around changing organizations via participatory organizational interventions, employee well-being and leadership. Sharon De Mascia is an occupational psychologist practitioner and an expert in well-being, leadership and change/project management.

The workshop consisted of plenary sessions in which theories on the development and evaluation of organizational-level interventions were first covered by the two speakers. After every plenary session, the participants applied and discussed the theories in their own case studies. Three main topics were addressed during the three-day workshop:

1) What are organizational-level interventions? 2) How to develop organizational-level interventions? and 3) How to evaluate organizational-level interventions?

Concept of organizational-level Interventions

Organizational-level interventions are important because many risk factors that contribute to poor psychological well-being are work-related, such as high work demands, high emotional demands and little autonomy (van der Molen et al., 2020). Therefore, practitioners and researchers interested in improving worker psychological well-being need sufficient knowledge of the development and evaluation of interventions at the broader organizational-level, as well as the individual and group levels.

Organizational-level interventions focus on improving the psychosocial risk factors, health, and well-being of employees and often focus on changing how work is designed, organised and managed (Nielsen et al., 2018). Four focus areas are important to organizational-level interventions; these are: tasks, work-context (workload and working time), role clarity and social relationships (Semmer, 2003).

Karina recognizes that the key element in organizational-level interventions is *participation*. During the plenary session, Karina discussed various models to develop organizational-level interventions such as, for instance, the Visual Mapping Model, however, she also pointed out that every model had their own strengths and limitations. Therefore, she suggested that using a framework approach incorporating several models may be more useful because it provides a more comprehensive and flexible approach to intervention development than a single model. Additionally, a framework has the advantage of incorporating various factors that may influence the effectiveness of the intervention, including the organizational context.

Development of the organizational-level intervention

A framework that can be used to develop organizational-level interventions is the Individual, Group, Leader and Organization (IGLO) framework. This framework takes all the levels of the organization into account during intervention development. As such, the IGLO model takes a systemic view of the organization and accounts for the fact that employee health and well-being are contingent on factors at different

levels within the organization (Nielsen et al., 2018). Moreover, Karina proposed that developing interventions based on this framework should be guided by three key principles: collective participation, management support and organizational fit. First, it is important that employees are involved in the development of the intervention as this not only provides valuable input for the content of the intervention but also ensures psychological ownership. Second, it is important that senior management supports the intervention: this ensures that the intervention is actively promoted (i.e., is put on the agenda) and supported with the necessary resources. Finally, the intervention needs to fit with the broader organizational context. In other words, it needs to align with organizational objectives and address actual problems within the organization.

In terms of developing and implementing the intervention, Karina put forward an intervention implementation model consisting of various phases, moving from initiation (e.g., creating a steering group, communicating, building capacity and readiness for change) to tailoring the intervention to the local context based on feedback from various organizational stakeholders, to action planning, implementation and evaluation. Importantly, this process is ongoing and heavily relies on employee participation and involvement during all the different phases (Nielsen & Noblet, 2018).

Following this presentation, Sharon de Mascia provided an example of an international organization implementing a well-being intervention using the IGLO framework. The company set well-being targets for all managers, appointed regional managers as well-being champions and evaluated well-being in an ongoing process. Sharon also pointed out that for interventions to be successful, one needs to take into account the maturity level of the organization – some organizations are simply more mature when it comes to considering well-being than others. She highlighted that interventions are more likely to be accepted and integrated into the workplace culture if the organization is mature (e.g., has been established for several years). In organizations with a low level of maturity (e.g., a newly formed company) it may be necessary to first establish a culture of well-being before introducing the intervention. The intervention Sharon described was evaluated as being successful given that it showed improvements in employee well-being. She also noted that companies were more willing to strategically implement evidence-based methodologies once there was evidence of change.

Another important concept Sharon addressed in the development of the intervention was *cognitive mapping*. By creating a cognitive map, the mental models of the various

groups and individual employees are taken into account, thus enhancing the chances that the intervention aligns with the needs and concerns of the target group (Stadler et al., 2013). Cognitive mapping provides a way to identify and target the underlying cognitive processes and mental models that contribute to employee well-being, leading to more effective and targeted interventions (Stadler et al., 2013). For example, in one company a mindfulness workshop for finance employees was renamed as a *concentration* workshop thus framing the content in a more cognitively acceptable manner for the employees than the previous title that included the word *mindfulness*. Thus, the name and connotation of the intervention was aligned with the mental model of the target-group, facilitating its acceptance.

Evaluation of organizational-level interventions

The last topic addressed was the evaluation of organizational-level interventions. Most of the time, interventions are evaluated by measuring the effects of the intervention on the target group and by comparing these to a similar group that has not received the intervention. However, in organizational-level interventions broader concepts need to be considered showing an impact on the organization (e.g., increased recruitment rates). There are various methods used to evaluate organizational-level interventions, such as process evaluation (like the recruitment process) where the researchers can investigate what works, for whom, and in which circumstances.

There is also a method called Context, Mechanism and Outcome (CMO). Context refers to the setting in which the intervention is implemented (e.g., social, cultural, economic and political factors) that may influence the intervention's success. This model proposes that the specific context in which the interventions take place is likely to strongly influence their effectiveness (Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017). Several factors may facilitate or hinder an intervention's effectiveness (Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017). For example, interventions aimed at the prevention of psychological distress may be more effective in a supportive organizational culture that values employee well-being.

In the CMO model, Mechanism refers to the underlying processes through which the intervention produces its effects. This includes the specific components of the intervention and how they interact with the contextual factors to influence and reinforce change (Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017). For instance, an intervention aimed at the prevention of psychological distress may include components such as ergonomic

improvements (e.g., workplace layout), which work together to improve employee health and well-being.

Finally, Outcome refers to the overall impact of the intervention on the target population, such as the intended or unintended consequences of the intervention. This includes both short-term and long-term outcomes, as well as both positive and negative outcomes (Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017). Karina emphasised that it is important to consider this component because it helps to determine whether the intervention was successful and whether it should be continued or modified.

Main take-away message and overall experience

Overall, the workshop aimed to provide professionals with knowledge and tools to enhance psychological well-being through organizational-level interventions and promote successful outcomes in the workplace. Improving psychological well-being in the workplace requires organizational interventions that focus on changing how work is organised and designed (e.g., work context, role clarity, and social relationships). The workshop highlighted the use of a framework approach for organizational-level interventions. Additionally, the maturity level of the organization and cognitive mapping were identified as important considerations in implementing successful interventions. Finally, to assess the effectiveness of organizational-level interventions, one should take the Context, Mechanisms and Outcomes into account.

In addition to the content, the workshop provided a nice opportunity to connect with participants from diverse backgrounds and countries. Engaging in discussions and exchanging ideas with participants who shared their own perspectives was educational and valuable. We also had the opportunity to explore the island of Mallorca, engaging in social activities such as cultural excursions, enjoyable dinners, and refreshing drinks. It was a successful blend of learning and creating connections. The collective enthusiasm of the participants at the event made the experience not only educational but also enjoyable.

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