Well-Being Washing: Illusory Employee Care in an Organisation

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Abstract

Aim: The article explores the issue of well-being washing, identifying its indicators and impact on employees and organizations, while outlining the key components of effective organizational well--being strategies.

Methodology: The study presents findings from a Focus Group Interview (FGI) conducted with eight employees from large Polish organizations across various industries. The qualitative data were analysed to evaluate well-being practices in their companies and determine whether they exhibited characteristics of well-being washing.

Results: The research reveals that well-being washing practices are prevalent in most examined organizations. While the respondents identified various well-being initiatives, these were often superficial, lacking alignment with business strategies and a holistic approach. The practices were typically ad-hoc and did not address employees' genuine needs.

Implications and recommendations: The study highlights the negative implications of well-being washing for employees and organizations. It underlines the importance of developing authentic, well--aligned well-being strategies. Future research should explore effective interventions to counteract well-being washing and promote meaningful well-being initiatives.

Originality/value: This research addresses the underexplored concept of well-being washing, revealing its prevalence and adverse effects. By critically analysing the existing practices, it contributes to understanding the gap between declared and actual well-being efforts in organizations, emphasising the importance of authenticity in employee care initiatives.

Keywords: workplace well-being, well-being washing, human resources, intervention, mental health

1. Introduction

Contemporary organisations operate in a dynamic world characterised by constant changes, an overload of information, uncertainty, and a multitude of challenges that employees face, along with an exceptionally fast pace of operations. Within the organisational context, these ongoing fluctuations significantly impact employees, affecting both their professional effectiveness and well-being at work. In particular after the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the world underwent rapid transformations and the necessity for swift adaptation to an unpredictable reality, issues concerning employee well--being have become a focal point of interest for many companies. Attention has shifted towards aspects related to the psycho-physical condition of employees and how the quality of workplace experience influences it. The topic of employees' mental health has become especially relevant more than ever and strongly influences the reality of organisations. According to data from ZUS (Social Insurance Institution in Poland) in 2022, mental and behavioural disorders ranked fifth among the most common causes of absenteeism in the workplace (ZUS, 2023). Data concerning Poland align with global figures. In the European Union, 46% of working respondents experienced emotional problems such as depression or excessive anxiety in the last twelve months, with 54% of those dealing with mental health issues not receiving assistance from a specialist (Flash Eurobarometer 530, 2023). In other studies, 47% of the surveyed employees noted that their poor mental health negatively affected their professional performance. The employees indicated that factors such as heightened stress, time pressure, workload overload, low pay, and excessive control from supervisors can cause or exacerbate their mental health problems in the workplace (Richardson & Antonello, 2023). Similarly, the results of a review of studies on the impact of mental health disorders on productivity (de Oliveira et al., 2023) showed a significant association between depression, mood disorders, and decreased employee productivity, in particular emphasising a clear link between mood disorders and absenteeism and presenteeism. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022) estimates that each year there is a loss of 12 billion working days attributed to declining mental health among employees, and recommends that employers provide mental health awareness training for both managers and staff and offer customised interventions to support individuals.

Another important factor contributing to strengthening the role of employee well-being in organisations is the increasing presence of Generation Z in the workforce, for whom workplace well-being issues are extremely significant. As indicated by some research (Deloitte, 2023), Generation Z employees have high expectations of employers regarding actions towards sustainable development, environmental protection, and organisational culture based on inclusivity and equal treatment. For members of Generation Z, it is crucial that the companies they work for offer specific actions and programmes that address their well-being, stress management, psychological support, and psychoeducation. Their voice on this matter can have a positive impact on overall workplace culture and collaboration, and the benefits of such an approach can be felt by colleagues from different generational groups. Understanding and promoting employee well-being thus becomes a key element for the future of work.

This article examines the issue of workplace well-being, with particular emphasis on the phenomenon of so-called "well-being washing", describing its symptoms and implications for employees and organisations. It also outlines the fundamental elements that should be included in every effective and holistic organisational well-being strategy.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Well-Being in the Workplace

Workplace well-being (also referred to as professional or employee well-being) is a comprehensive concept that encompasses various aspects of professional life. From the quality and safety of the physical work environment to the feelings and attitudes of employees towards their work, and extending to their mental, physical, emotional, social, and economic health. It is a state in which employees are not only satisfied with their jobs and work productively, but also experience overall health, fulfillment, and coherence (Adams, 2019). According to Fisher (2014), measures of workplace well-being should encompass three main components: subjective well-being (job satisfaction and feelings of self-worth and capabilities, positive and negative emotions), eudaimonic well-being (e.g. engagement, meaning, growth, intrinsic motivation, calling), and social well-being (e.g. relationship quality, satisfaction with colleagues, high-quality relationships with leaders, social support).

The issue of well-being has become popular in the development of positive psychology in Poland and worldwide, particularly with the emergence of the term 'positive organisational psychology' in the literature. The development of positive psychology, initiated in the late 1990s by Seligman (2011), contributed to a deeper understanding of concepts such as the good life, happiness, life satisfaction, and well-being. There has been a shift in research focus from psychopathological factors to the exploration of resources within the individual and their immediate environment. Workplace well-being is now perceived as a more complex and multidimensional construct, encompassing not only the physical health of employees but also their mental, emotional, and social well-being. This results from the intricate interaction of many factors, which can be divided into three main categories: individual factors (employee personality and psychological resilience, work-life balance), organisational factors (management practices, organisational culture, working conditions), and social factors (fair remuneration, employee rights, social norms and support). Understanding these determinants is crucial for creating work environments conducive to the well-being of employees.

Workplace well-being entails meeting the key needs of employees and providing them with a sense of security and satisfaction in their work. The significance of occupational well-being also stems from the fact that work constitutes a significant aspect of most employees' lives, and investing in employee well-being translates into better work outcomes and overall organisational effectiveness. Research indicates that organisations that invest in employee well-being often achieve higher productivity rates (Harter et al., 2002). Employees who feel motivated and appreciated are more inclined to make extra efforts, resulting in better work outcomes. Employee well-being can also have a significant impact on an organisation's ability to generate innovation and creative solutions, and organisations that create a climate conducive to employee well-being may gain a competitive advantage in the market, as innovations are often a key element of success in a dynamically changing business environment (Amabile et al., 2005). It is also worth stressing that higher rates of employee turnover, absenteeism, and presenteeism in an organisation are strongly correlated with lower employee well-being (Wright, & Bonett, 2007). Employee well-being brings benefits to both employees and employers. For employees, the benefits mainly include a sense of job satisfaction, occupational safety, a sense of self-worth and opportunities for development and self-fulfillment, belonging to a group or organisation, reduced stress levels and its negative health consequences. For organisations, the benefits of employee well-being include, among others, reduced costs associated with employee turnover, sick leave, and excessive control, facilitated the implementation of changes and innovations, as well as improved interpersonal relationships, resulting in greater employee engagement in achieving organisational goals (Guest, 2017).

2.2. Effective Measures to Enhance Employee Well-Being within an Organisation versus Well-Being Washing

Organisations undertake a variety of initiatives aimed at improving employee well-being. Such initiatives are typically directed towards three different objectives: primary initiatives that reduce or eliminate sources of psychosocial risk (e.g. work design and ergonomics); secondary initiatives that support employees' ability to cope with stress and increase well-being; and tertiary interventions that involve psychological or medical interventions addressing the negative outcomes of psychosocial risks, such as burnout, etc. (Molek-Winiarska & Mikołajczyk, 2022). Well-being initiatives can be implemented at organisational or individual level (Dewe & Cooper, 2020). The former are frequently long-term endeavours connected to the company's human resources strategy aimed at enhancing organisational structures and working environments. The latter focuses directly on enhancing employee well-being and increasing resilience to workplace pressures. Individual-level initiatives are much more frequently implemented in comparison to organisational-level initiatives at most companies because they are generally less costly and time-consuming. Examples of such initiatives may include mindfulness training, stress management sessions, resilience-building activities, time management workshops, and so on.

Taking into account the research findings on the effectiveness of individual-level initiatives, it can be observed that, for example, organising stress reduction workshops, providing meditation apps to employees, or implementing 'fruit days' will not bring about significant change if the workplace itself, organisational culture, operating practices, and management style remain consistently counterproductive. Fleming (2023) analysed data from 46,336 employees in 233 organisations in the United Kingdom to find out whether employees who participated in workplace interventions for mental well-being experienced higher well-being. The researcher considered a range of individual-level interventions for mental well-being, including mindfulness training, psychological resilience and stress management, mood-enhancing apps, and volunteering. The analysis found no difference between participants and non-participants in such activities. The interventions did not translate into positive changes in increasing individual-level mental well-being, and also with no changes in improving the subjective perception of the work environment. Furthermore, the effects of the interventions did not differ depending on demographic group or organisation. The only positive effect was noted in the case of volunteering, which proved beneficial to the employee by increasing their sense of 'doing good'. Overall, the results indicated that individual-level interventions do not provide additional or appropriate resources in response to occupational demands.

Among the numerous, ambitious, and significant initiatives organizations undertake to improve employee well-being, the phenomenon known worldwide as 'well-being washing' is gaining traction (Cholteeva, 2022). It is defined analogously to the term 'greenwashing', which involves false, unsubstantiated, or blatantly misleading statements or claims about sustainable development, a product or service, as well as a company's business operations. Well-being washing relies on the same practices but in the context of purportedly caring for the well-being and mental-physical health of employees. An organisation declares that employee well-being and welfare are a priority, but in reality it only undertakes insufficient or superficial actions, often for marketing or PR purposes, instead of genuinely caring for employee well-being and implementing solutions at the level of organisational culture. Well-being washing involves masking real issues, superficially caring for employee well-being, and creating a form of smokescreen that changes nothing. According to a study conducted by Claro Wellbeing (2023), one in three companies engaged in well-being washing, whilst 71% of the surveyed organisations participated in initiatives to increase awareness of mental health, but only one-third of such efforts were deemed effective by employees. Three out of five employees believed that their employer does not care about their mental well-being. Additionally, over half of employees felt pressure to conceal their mental health issues at work. Research conducted by the Institution of

Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH, 2024) also showed that 51% of workers in the United Kingdom believed that their employer was guilty of well-being washing, offering quick fixes such as free fruit, gym memberships and yoga classes, while imposing unmanageable workloads, long hours, and burnout on employees. Well-being washing does not necessarily have to result from intentionally harmful practices, and its reasons can also be attributed to a misunderstanding of the phenomenon or insufficient knowledge about it.

To draw attention to and raise awareness among companies about actions that could dangerously approach well-being washing, Hintsa has described its main symptoms (see Rosendahl, 2021). The first sign may be **superficiality in action** – attempting to provide well-being through small, sometimes trivial actions without a holistic approach to the true source of employee comfort. Fruit Wednesdays, yoga classes, standing desks, purchasing activity monitoring watches, all of these amenities are solutions that improve work and life comfort, but unfortunately, they do not address the root cause of problems, which – if not changed – lead to increasing frustration. The mentioned solutions will contribute little to employee well-being if the standard is working 50-60 hours per week. The same applies to **one-off actions that lack follow-up**, where well-being efforts take the form of a one-day celebration, such as a "Health Day", and become symbolic gestures. Instead, it is worth considering continuous, regular actions that integrate well-being into daily routines, thereby eliminating the risk of the problem losing significance after the event ends. Equally illusory is investing in solutions that employees do not have time to use. Another sign of well-being washing is **emphasising the individual responsibility of the employee for their sense of well-being at work** while simultaneously trivialising organisational and leadership commitment. An example could be arranging employee coaching sessions without considering supervisors as potential sources of work-related issues. Similarly symptomatic can be the **lack of coherence between the organisation's communicated values and the actual implementation of actions**. Initiatives related to work-life balance are introduced in companies, yet the measure of engagement is the number of overtime hours, and bonuses are awarded for extra hours worked. It is essential for organisational success indicators not to contradict declared values regarding employee well-being. Employees have diverse needs and expectations related to well-being. The demand for various actions changes with age, professional and personal situation, and family status. **Ignoring this diversity and applying a one-size-fits-all approach** can lead to a lack of engagement and effectiveness in promoting well-being at work. Sometimes companies focus on one group of employees or fail to consider the needs of specific groups of employees when designing their solutions. This is particularly evident in initiatives tailored only to the time constraints of young employees while overlooking older generations or parents raising young children. **Insufficient integration of well-being with the organisation's business strategy**, lack of a well-being strategy, and failure to systematically measure the effectiveness of well-being initiatives are also indicative of well-being washing practices.

To ensure the effectiveness of well-being initiatives in a company and avoid well-being washing, it is essential to maintain a strategic perspective of the organisation and reconcile the imperative of efficiency with improving employee well-being. Companies should focus on organisational inter-ventions, changes in work schedules, management practices, and human resources, conducting reviews of outcomes and job roles. Emphasis should be placed on the greater benefits derived from organisational changes rather than individual ones. This is a longer, more challenging, and slower path, but one that yields good results. The goal is to work on a culture of well-being and develop an awareness of the prevailing work style while simultaneously utilising tools, including new technologies, as supportive and reinforcing factors for the main flow of work. Therefore, a key aspect is balancing investment in the individual development of employees with shaping the awareness of leaders and organisational structures. Creating a balance between individual responsibility and organisational solutions is essential for effective actions promoting employee well-being.

3. Methodology

The study employed qualitative methodology. When considering the theoretical foundations outlined earlier, it was imperative to acknowledge, identify, and highlight significant efforts undertaken by Polish organisations to uphold and improve the well-being of their employees. The research method was a Focus Group Interview (FGI), the research approach used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue leading to multi-faceted explanations. Utilising focus groups serves as an effective method for obtaining comprehensive insights into the subject of interest (Gawlik, 2018; Bloor et al., 2001). The group dynamic fosters active participation, while interactions among participants can enhance their memory and encourage the sharing of thoughts that might otherwise have remained undisclosed. This renders focus groups as a beneficial approach for observing and acquiring insights into the 'sense-making' processes among members within organisations. The FGI is focused around a specific research topic, during which group processes occur: participants influence each other's statements, collectively discuss the topic provided by the moderator, share their experiences, mutually monitor their statements, and jointly draw conclusions. The discussion follows a previously developed interview script.

The study was conducted in November 2023 with eight employees working in various positions in large organisations in Poland (employing more than 250 people), representing diverse industries. Individuals in mid-adulthood were invited for interviews (with an average age of 43 years) and with fairly long work experience (an average work experience of 15 years). Detailed information about the interview participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Detailed characteristics of the respondents

Focus Group Participant	Gender	Industry	Position	Work Experience (years)	Age
R 1	Woman	Education	HR Business Partner	14	43
R 2	Man	Services	Graphic Designer	11	37
R 3	Man	Marketing	Digital Marketing Specialist	15	41
R 4	Man	Finance	Financial Analyst	13	39
R 5	Woman	Retail	Sales Coordinator	18	45
R 6	Man	Information Technology	Web Developer	12	39
R 7	Woman	Healthcare	Physiotherapist	25	56
R 8	Woman	Media	Journalist	15	44

Source: own elaboration based on research findings.

The study focused on discussing and evaluating the usefulness, from the perspective of the employees, of well-being practices implemented in their organisations. The aim was also to diagnose the occurrence of symptoms of well-being washing in the discussed practices. Focus Group Interviews (FGI) were analysed based on the research questions provided below:

1. What sort of well-being activities are carried out in the participants' companies?
2. To what extent were the employees' needs considered when designing well-being initiatives?
3. How do employees rate the usefulness of these practices?
4. Do symptoms of well-being washing occur in the discussed practices, and if so, to what extent?

The collected data underwent analysis utilising thematic analysis, which is suitable as it aligns with the study's objectives. Following Braun and Clarke's (2012) approach to coding, involving three steps – identification, definition, and description – was integral to this study, ensuring the consistent interpretation of the themes generated.

4.   Results

Analysing the results of the conducted study, it can be confidently stated that concern for employees' well-being has recently become a significant issue in the organisations represented by the respondents. Practically every company organises various initiatives aimed at enhancing the well-being of their employees, however the majority of these actions are individual-level interventions. The respondents most frequently mentioned activities related to promoting physical activity and a healthy lifestyle: tai chi, yoga, massages, webinars on healthy eating, practices for good sleep, meetings with a physiotherapist under the theme of 'healthy spine', access to apps and devices monitoring physical activity. The other indicated initiatives focused on supporting mental health: meditation workshops, stress reduction training, individual therapy sessions and consultations with a psychologist, psychiatric support, mindfulness and relaxation sessions, webinars dedicated to resilience. The last group of mentioned initiatives was oriented toward the social dimension of well-being at work: training in social and interpersonal skills, time management training, and informal team-building meetings.

Somewhat fewer initiatives described by the respondents were implemented at the organisational level. Among those focused on caring for employees' psychophysical health, the most frequently mentioned ones were: implementing medical care products, providing psychological support hotlines for employees, maintaining flexible working hours and appropriate schedules, creating space for physical activity, and providing financial support for employees' sports teams, subsidizing meals and drinks for employees, and financing opportunities for participation in cultural events. However As a manifestation of caring for the social dimension of well-being at the organisational level, the most frequently mentioned initiatives were: initiating voluntary activities among employees, financing team-building trips, improving communication processes, implementing coaching and mentoring programmes, planning career paths, and creating a work environment supporting development and lifelong learning. In one instance, the existence of a "good mood team" within the organisation was pointed out – a team of volunteers from different departments of the company who aim to introduce various initiatives that enhance the work experience and sense of satisfaction. The vast majority of mentions were short-term initiatives, carried out once or lasting less than 1 month. There were significantly fewer long-term initiatives (lasting longer than 1 month).

According to the interview participants, these well-being initiatives typically followed some form of recognising and analysing employees' needs, assessed through the utilisation of surveys among employees (standard job satisfaction surveys, pulse checks, engagement surveys). One of the respondents highlighted that: "(…) the company monitors absenteeism, calculates its costs, and incorporates this indicator into the planning of well-being initiatives" (R4). Nonetheless, one of the study participants firmly stated that they do not feel that their needs were taken into account before proposing specific initiatives to them: "For us, it's like the HR department comes up with something, and then there's a sort of roundup and forcing employees to, for example, attend meditation workshops, nobody asks anyone beforehand if they have a need to participate in them" (R2). The majority of employees considered well-being practices implemented at the organisational level to be the most useful: the opportunity for flexible working hours, provision of medical care, financing meals, and creating a work environment supporting the development and lifelong learning. One of the individuals clearly emphasised the lack of usefulness, in their opinion, of one-off activities: "Why do I need those yoga workshops and massages, I would prefer to receive a higher salary, and I already know best how to allocate money to improve my well-being"(R8). Another person pointed out the low quality of the offered opportunities: "There are various programmes dedicated to health, but I have to say that I don't use them. This is due to the poor quality of these proposals. I prefer to do something like this myself, with a colleague, with my husband, with children after work than doing it at work" (R1). One of the respondents indicated the issue of evenly engaging all employees in well-being initiatives as a condition for their effectiveness: "Well-being in an organisation is possible only when it stems from a genuine need to take care of the employee, when it is something that only part of the organisation can implement, and the other, more burdened with tasks, the one that stands on the realisation of the main goals, cannot afford it, then it's just marketing" (R7).

Several interviewed individuals stressed that the companies employing them strive to create well--being programmes based on the actual needs of employees and leaders, reaching to the root of problems, going beyond one-time actions and shallow solutions: "We have such a holistic program, which is based on 4 pillars – body, mind, heart, and soul" (R4); "we care about a feedback culture so that everyone can receive feedback on how their work is perceived" (R3); "in my company, we try to promote respect for personal time, but the second thing is that we build and strive to build a culture based on task accomplishment" (R4).

Although many of the well-being initiatives described by the interview participants can be considered holistic, comprehensive, and addressing the root causes of problems, an equal number exhibit symptoms of well-being washing. Table 2 presents the diagnosed symptoms of well-being washing supported by quotes from selected respondents' statements.

Table 2. Overview of well-being washing symptoms in initiatives described by the respondents

Symptom well-being washing	Extracts from participants' statements
Superficiality and one-off actions	"They conducted stress management workshops for us, but it didn't help at all because it was a one-time thing, and we have jobs under constant pressure" (R7).
	"We had a meeting with a psychotherapist last year as part of the Depression Awareness campaign. They talked about what to pay attention to, and so on, but it was only once, and nothing else happened regarding that matter" (R3).
Solutions that employees don't have time to benefit from	"Often, when there are webinars for health, I can't afford to participate, and it's very unfair and frustrating because I don't have time with my workload, and expectations towards me are so high. I would have to sacrifice extra time for it, which I simply don't have" (R5).
	"There's this relaxation area with foosball tables, hammocks, and plants, but my boss doesn't approve if I find time to be there" (R6).
Emphasising the individual responsibility of the employee for their well--being	"It would be beneficial if my supervisor were more actively involved in creating working conditions conducive to well-being, rather than constantly dumping new tasks on me and then being surprised that I stay after hours" (R3).
Lack of coherence between the communicated organisational values and the actual implementation of actions	"In my company, work-life balance is emphasised, and my manager strongly insists that the leisure time I'm entitled to is utilised. He doesn't approve of working on weekends, but at the same time, he sets very high expectations for me, and if a client asks for help on the weekend, I still have to act" (R5).
	"My company prides itself on supporting the mental health of employees. HR informs about it, but besides consultations with a psychologist, the company doesn't offer anything else in this regard. You're left on your own with the problem" (R7).
Ignoring diversity and applying a uniform approach	"(…) what's the point of (the company) being part of the Two Hours for Family programme when I live alone?" (R8).
	"I would like to have the option of flexible working hours because mornings with young children vary, and sometimes I get very stressed that I won't make it in time and will be late for work again" (R1).
Lack of a well-being strategy or integration with the business strategy	"(…) well-being also requires a review of business processes, identifying where there is waste. It should be integrated, truly permeating throughout the entire organisation, and only then it's not just an empty slogan and phrase, but something employees can benefit from" (R2).
	"We don't have any strategic approach to well-being. We do a lot of extra things that are cool for us as a team, don't affect regular work, and make everyone feel like they're being treated to something nice once in a while" (R4).
Lack of systematic measurement of the effectiveness of well-being initiatives	"To be honest, we haven't conducted detailed analyses to say how much we've saved, for example, on recruitment by investing in all these well-being initiatives. I think it's worth considering. However, it's clear to the naked eye that it brings results" (R1).
	"(…) it seems to me that we're not conducting any hard analyses that would clearly show us which direction to go in" (R5).

Source: own elaboration based on research findings.

These symptoms of well-being washing are most often associated with the fact that well-being efforts take the form of a one-day celebration, during which the word well-being is declined in all cases, while nothing happens in this area for the rest of the year. Organisations often lack courage to openly discuss what is not working at various levels, and largely focus on building awareness, promoting a healthy lifestyle, or initiatives that provide a moment of respite, but are rarely prepared to manage difficult situations in the lives of employees or teams, such as prolonged illness and absence, burnout-related dismissals, or returning to work after psychiatric treatment. Some organisations already have established action plans, but many remain silent and take no initiative in such situations.

5.   Discussion and Conclusions

The results of the conducted study, focusing on a group interview with employees representing various companies from different industries in Poland, suggest the presence of symptoms of well-being washing in practices used by almost all organisations represented in the study. Although respondents pointed out many diverse initiatives aimed at enhancing employee well-being implemented in their employing companies, the vast majority of these were not holistic, comprehensive, or aligned with the business strategy of the respective company. Instead, they were rather superficial and one-off initiatives. There is alarmingly insufficient involvement of employees in the stage of recognizing and analysing their needs regarding the preparation of well-being actions in the organisation. The participants emphasised the fact that often in their companies there is a lack of initial situation analysis, review of existing solutions, and effective communication of a well-being strategy. They also noted the minimal measurement of effectiveness and return on investment. All of this leads to the actions proposed by employers often being perceived by employees as superficial care for their well-being, rather than genuinely addressing their needs, and more as an orientation towards building a good employer brand.

When a company genuinely cares about the well-being of its employees, it should primarily examine its managerial and leadership practices, work organisation, company culture, and communication processes. If employees feel burnt out, overworked, stressed, undervalued, or disengaged, then a massage at work, fruits in the office, or time management training certainly will not help them. In such cases it is important to look for the root causes and focus on prevention rather than treating the symptoms, otherwise well-being initiatives may be perceived by employees as "cheap corporate PR". The path to genuine well-being in the workplace runs through a healthy organisational culture, of which leaders are the main architects. It is also worthwhile for companies, before proposing another tai chi session or meeting with a dietitian to employees, to consider how clearly defined the goals and strategy related to well-being are, which translate into specific actions. Are the actions planned based on the results obtained from monitoring employees' well-being and focused on reducing workplace stressors at their source? Are solutions directed towards employees (such as training, webinars, apps, health days, relaxation spaces, etc.) complemented by specific procedures and actions aimed at managing workload or work style? To what extent are well-being initiatives actively supported by the management and leadership of the company? Moreover, to what extent employees and leaders are aware of the existence of well-being programs and how much they benefit from them, as well as what are the reasons for not participating in these initiatives? Effective well-being in an organisation is a long-term process, not a short-term action or a one-day campaign. Organisations make a mistake by focusing on short-term initiatives, addressing urgent needs that arise ad hoc, instead of building lasting structures, and long-term strategies, and reinforcing those aspects of organisational culture that support employee well-being over the next few years.

There is a need for further analysis to thoroughly understand the phenomenon of well-being washing and its impact on employees and organisations. It should be noted that the focus group does not generate quantitative information that could be extrapolated to the population, therefore the obtained results can only be related to the described research group. Nevertheless, they can serve as a kind of barometer for well-being initiatives implemented in large organisations in Poland.

The popularity of well-being in organisations in Poland is increasing, as evidenced by the number of projects launched and the budgets allocated for this purpose (ManpowerGroup, 2024). This raises higher expectations among managers, as well as end-users, who increasingly ask questions about the sense and effectiveness of the solutions implemented by the company. Despite the growing awareness of the importance of well-being, many companies make mistakes during its implementation, often stopping at one-off superficial initiatives that do not arise from the needs of employees and lack connection with the organisation's development strategy. At times, reactive actions and too small a scale of activities are also a problem, which leads to the perception of the initiatives undertaken as well-being washing.

A comprehensive approach to employee well-being can be achieved when the pursuit of well-being is anchored at three levels: in awareness (the beliefs of employees working in the company), in behaviour and action (especially managerial behaviour with managerial competencies), and in documents, resources, and competencies. This includes various elements such as strategies, policies, training programmes, and organisational culture, which together create a coherent and balanced approach to managing employee well-being in the organisation. It is crucial to treat the mental health of employees as a strategic priority, actively involve the management in well-being initiatives, align such programmes with the organisation's strategic goals, engage in leader development, counteract toxic behaviour, and promote sustainable work practices. Creating a balanced, friendly work environment not only reduces staff turnover, but also serves as a key factor in attracting new talent. Optimising employee well-being thus becomes an integral part of strategic planning for businesses striving for long-term success.

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Well-being washing – iluzoryczna troska o pracowników w organizacji

Streszczenie

Cel: Artykuł ma na celu przybliżenie zjawiska *well-being washing*, opisanie jego objawów i skutków dla pracowników i organizacji oraz wskazanie kluczowych elementów skutecznej, holistycznej strategii dobrostanu.

Metodyka: Przedstawiono wyniki zogniskowanego wywiadu grupowego (FGI) z 8 pracownikami dużych firm różnych branż w Polsce. Uczestnicy oceniali praktyki well-beingowe w swoich organizacjach, diagnozując także symptomy *well-being washing*.

Wyniki: Badanie wykazało powszechność powierzchownych, niespójnych z celami biznesowymi działań w zakresie dobrostanu. Większość inicjatyw miała charakter jednorazowy i nie stanowiła części spójnej strategii.

Implikacje i rekomendacje: Wyniki ukazują negatywne skutki *well-being washing* i wskazują na konieczność tworzenia autentycznych, kompleksowych strategii dobrostanu. Przyszłe badania powinny identyfikować skuteczne interwencje wspierające rzeczywiste zaangażowanie organizacji w ten obszar.

Oryginalność/wartość: Artykuł podejmuje rzadko omawiany temat *well-being washing*, ujawniając jego skalę i konsekwencje. Dzięki analizie praktyk organizacyjnych podkreśla znaczenie autentyczności i zgodności działań well-beingowych z rzeczywistymi potrzebami pracowników.

Słowa kluczowe: dobrostan w miejscu pracy, *well-being washing*, zasoby ludzkie, interwencja, zdrowie psychiczne