

Futuremakers: Brain and Mental Health

Episode 5: Workplace wellbeing

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Welcome to this season of Futuremakers: Brain and Mental Health. I'm Professor Belinda Lennox, I'm a psychiatrist and a researcher here in Oxford, and this season you'll be joining me as we demystify the science behind the most complex object in the known universe, our brains, and look at the wide-reaching impacts of mental illness on individuals and society. I'll be introducing you to some of Oxford's best academic minds, working to solve the greatest challenges in brain and mental health, and I'll also be speaking to guests from beyond the university to bring their perspectives and lived experience and get a sense of the impact of what we're doing. Join us as we discover how Oxford is shaping the future of brain and mental health research.

Welcome to another episode of Futuremakers. This is the second of two conversations that we're having about mental health in the workplace, and I'm really delighted to be joined by Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve, who is the Director of the Wellbeing Research Centre and fellow at Harris Manchester College in Oxford, and Professor of Economics and Behavioural Science at the Saïd Business School. Welcome, Jan, and so this is a wide-ranging topic and it's, you know of high priority to a lot of people listening, I should think, because well-being in the workplace as in our discussion with Sir John Kirwan, is of prime importance for individuals' well-being, but also for business performances.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

Thank you.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Maybe do you want to start by highlighting some of your recent research around the importance of the area?

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

Thank you first and foremost for inviting me to be on a podcast and to raise the profile of workplace well-being a mental health because it couldn't be more important. I think the first point to make is obviously the fact that we spend so much time at work. Probably about, what is it on average, about 8 hours a day, five days a week. And so, it goes without saying that that feeds into our general life satisfaction. So, the way we feel at work very much feeds into, it's not like we leave our well-being at the door as we walk out, or our general well-being at the door as we walk into the office. And so, there's a strong connection between job satisfaction and life satisfaction, if you will.

Empirically, the other reason why work is so important, and maybe it's a good place to start, is work is an important part of our identity, builds networks and builds a routine throughout the week which we do need from time to time, and also as a source of lifelong learning. And so, we find that people without work and those looking for it are about one point less happy, but on a scale from 0 to 10. So, the average Brit has about a 7 out of 10 in terms of life satisfaction, or just below that to be more precise. And if we split the population to those that have work and those that do not, but

would like to, we see there's a whole point difference in their life satisfaction, which is actually quite a lot, very few things have that much impact on people's general well-being as say, being made redundant.

Losing your work has because precisely the reasons I mentioned, but precisely because of the reasons I mentioned, you lose identity, you lose social ties routine throughout the week, et cetera. So work is incredibly important for well-being generally and those people that work, we should do the very best possible to make them, build an environment around workers, that makes them thrive and flourish.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Hmm. Yeah, of course. So work is really important for your well-being, but I'm assuming that, well, maybe I'm just looking at it from a negative point of view working in the NHS that the workplace can also harm your well-being quite significantly. There was a recent report by the Nuffield Trust showing that the second most common reason for leaving health and social care is burnout and stress and lack of well-being.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

And we pick, we pick some of that up in our our big crowd source data sets. So especially here, the NHS and even locally the Oxfordshire NHS Trust, we find that stress levels have been going up, job satisfaction and workplace happiness has come down, and the only thing that's sort of above average still is a sense of purpose at work, and people, if you know just how much effort and how important the work is that nurses and the medical teams are doing, you kind of realise just how much purpose there is in their work.

But it's one of these rare instances in the data where, out of well-being items, the well-being outcomes of happiness, satisfaction, sense of purpose, and the absence of negative stress, normally they tend to go hand in hand and the NHS is one of those cases where you see people still sort of relying on a bank of doing good for the rest of the world and a high sense of purpose despite all the other indicators of well-being coming down gradually, so a lot needs to be done on that, and especially in those circumstances to improve workers wellbeing.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

So I know you've done a lot of detailed work recently exploring the sort of measures of workplace well-being and the sort of drivers behind it. Do you want to describe that to us?

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

Yes, I'd be pleased to. So first of all, conceptually we make a strong distinction between outcome measures and driver measures. So, the inputs and the outputs, the output of workplace well-being is how you feel. If it was general well-being, how you feel about life, in the case of work, how you feel about your job or how you experience work. And we typically look at more effective measures, which are how you experience work. Are you experiencing positive emotions or negative emotions at work or how you think about work, which is more evaluative?

So that would then be, how satisfied are you with your job, which you take a step back and you're ranked on what you like, what you're doing well, or a sense of purpose is also an evaluative measure. And so, we think about these kind of measures as the ultimate outcome, the key performance indicator for wellbeing. But those are not to be confused with what drives it. What explains why, or how you feel the way you do, which would be whether you're being paid fairly or

not, whether you've got a supportive line manager or not, whether you've got the flexibility to strike a good work life balance, whether you've got a sense of belonging and trust your colleagues, et cetera.

So, we also pulse all of those items, and in the big crowdsourcing survey that I'm sure we'll get to talk about, we do about ten of these driver items, but it's important I think, and I cannot repeat this enough, to conceptually distinguish between inputs and outputs, because if you do that and then everything downstream in terms of the analysis starts making a lot more sense and the pieces of the puzzle come together. If, however, as I see often happen, people sort of mix and match different types of items, so we'll put job satisfaction next to work life balance, to supportive manager. Then in the end, you end up with some kind of index or school that that confuses inputs and outputs, and then when an HR manager needs to think about, well, where should I invest then? Then they don't have much guidance to go on if it's just an index or a dashboard with all kinds of things going up and down.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Yeah, because I suppose there's less direct material for any kind of manager to get hold of levers that they can actually influence or change themselves. Actually, if things are out of their control then you know, so what, kind of thing.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

True, but also if you make that conceptual distinction, then it allows you to run driver analysis or in academic speak simply a regression with something on the left-hand side of the equation, which would in this case be the KPI or outcome measure of job, say, job satisfaction. And then you can look to see, what is the relative importance of being paid fairly, supportive managers, sense of belonging, work life balance, in driving job satisfaction.

And once you do those kind of analysis, that allows you or enables you to get a sense for what is the relative importance and where should I invest my typically limited resources because if you do it the old-fashioned way and just have a dashboard or everything sort of mixed together then you would, say you're a big company or the University of Oxford, and you want to spend a million on trying to improve well-being, where do you start?

And in a typical dashboard approach, you wouldn't have any empirical clue or evidence base. You would probably spend your million equally spread across say, 10 qualitative elements of work. But the reality might be that some things are more important for your work than others, and if you are unable to run a regression or that driver analysis following that conceptual split, you'll never know where to put your money and some things are more important. Now we find that actually to be the case, so if I were to ask our audience out of, sort of, 10 quality of dimensions of work from fair pay, to a sense of belonging, to work life balance, to learning on the job, etc. Which ones do you think is most important to you then? Typically, people will say flexibility and being paid fairly. But when you actually run the analysis to see what is most strongly correlated with actual job satisfaction, it turns out that pay is important, but it falls in the middle of the pack, and the thing that stands out is sense of belonging.

Having positive social relations on the job is a lot more important than people think it is, but we can only pick up on these kind of things by actually looking at what is their job satisfaction and then seeing how that is predicted by a number of drivers. And so, for example, if you just do a traditional index or dashboard approach, you wouldn't have picked up that investing in a sense of belonging,

improving workplace culture, making sure the space for people to connect as humans between them, and to treat them right, could actually be a bigger impact on your workplace well-being than adding more money on a specific other driver that you thought was more most important, but couldn't actually gauge.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

That's so interesting. Again, I'm thinking back to the health service, just because that's the area I know and there's been a big push on well-being particularly for junior doctors and what it means in practice is that you might get a few bean bags in a rest area and a microwave or something, whereas actually their sense of belonging, inclusion, respect at work, you know, may be more difficult to implement and measure perhaps, but far more important for their retention, really, and happiness at work.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

Yes, yes. I couldn't agree more and well, I agree with you. Belonging is a bit of a difficult concept. But when we when we unpacked it a little bit and actually, we did ask a lot of people, so what does it mean to you, belonging, and we sort of came up with the thing that stood out was we wanted to be treated like human beings. Yeah. We want to have, like, friends at work is a good example. Knowing what you represent within the organisation, how you impact others in the organisation, turn out to be a way of getting a sense of belonging, whether you feel a sense of belonging, and social elements and social events. And so that's really important to people. And that's also why they stay.

So, retention rates are very much dependent on this. I'll give you a classic example in the field, Gallup, the extraordinary global pollster and survey expert, they have something called the Gallup Q12 Engagement Survey, which many, many thousands and thousands of organisation units have applied, and there's one item in the Q 2 which is, do you have a friend at work? And I remember vividly the CEO of Gallup telling me, guess which one of the Q12 items is most predictive of people staying? And it was having a friend at work.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

The most predictive? That's extraordinary.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

The most important of job satisfaction and retention was actually the social item, and I bet that if you'd ask people to rank order what they think is most important, that would have been pay or something else or flexibility. But really, it's the social elements that, to bring us job satisfaction, obviously it's not the only thing, but it's a lot more important than people expect it to be, and I've now found it across multiple data sets every time and over again, you see these sort of social elements, sense of belonging, positive social relationships. I mean, in HR, there's an old saying, people don't quit their jobs, they leave their bosses. And so, the social relationships, the quality of them, and especially with line managers, it's absolutely critical for job satisfaction and people staying and staying put.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Yeah. So, retention is obviously a really important aspect, but from a business point of view, I suppose productivity and actually doing whatever business they do better than competitors is equally, or you know maybe even more important, what's the link between well-being and productivity?

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

Oh boy, there's a lot of work that I can speak about, and so there's two big studies. One is at the individual level. So, employee well-being and their individual productivity and performance and I'll probably I should dig into that now and then we can level it up to the organisation and see where there's an actual business case for investing in workplace well-being, and how that relates to business performance.

So let's start at the individual level. I'm really proud really, so we had a paper published in Management Science, which is frankly at the top journal and in business studies and it was published about three months ago. But it took us about 7 years to really get to the bottom of this and get it out there with Management Science and it's in collaboration with British Telecom and it's really digging into in a way never seen before into that question. An old question of, is a happy worker a more productive worker?

And while it's very intuitive to most people and it makes a lot of sense, and a lot of people already act upon it, luckily, but it's very difficult to prove. Because if I'm feeling happy, I might be a better worker or more performing, but my happiness could have derived from being successful at work in the first place, or having a good day at work, one way or another, could feed back into my well-being. So how do you disentangle this chicken and egg problem, or causality or reverse causality issue, or endogeneity issue, as the economists would call it.

And the way we've done it is, at BT, there's about 12 major call centres around spread around UK from the north to the south all the way down the country. And we pulsed these call centre employees every week on Thursday at 4:00 or 5:00 PM, if I'm not mistaken to say, how happy are you feeling this week? We did this for a whole long period. All of the call centre workers. And so, we had a good sense for how they felt from one week to another. So that's great. We were then able to relink that to all of their performance data and it's almost scary to the extent to which there's granular performance data about these individuals, it is number of seconds per call, how many calls they do, customer satisfaction coming back all at the individual level, weekly sales at the individual level. Etc etc etc.

So that was, I think, in and of itself an extraordinary data set for the first time, combining weekly measures of how one feels with weekly measures of detailed measures of performance. But that wasn't good enough as of yet to claim causality, because we found a strong correlation there. But that was still correlation, the way we got at causality is a bit of a long story. Stick with me. We use the different weather patterns around each one of the call centres, and so the weather in Britain is typically not great, but there's still a lot of variation between it from the south to the north. And we looked at these weather patterns around each call centre as people would come in that week, and that still wasn't sufficient, as sort of, as a shock on people's well-being, and then see how those variations due to weather would influence their productivity.

We had to interact that with the exposure they had to the weather inside the call centres. As it turned out, some call centres were full glass and others were no glass windows at all. And so, what we did is we interacted essentially the weather that day with the exposure to the weather by call centre. To see how that influenced people's well-being and yes, lo and behold, how the weather is today and the exposure your exposure you have to it influences your mood. And we picked up that now, which is .1 and .2, that changed and had an impact on your productivity. And it wasn't because of clients because the clients were calling in from around the UK, not locally.

And so that's how we were for the first time, I think able to nail a causal estimate in a field setting at a scale never seen before. And it's really exciting and I'll just, the headline result was essentially when workers were feeling the equivalent of 1 point better from one week to another on a scale from 0 to 10, that meant that they would be selling more. Their weekly sales would be 12% up that week. So that's all about 23 items a week and they would then now be about 26 items a week on average, so it's really quite something.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

So you can see these changes within individuals basically that the sun is shining, they feel happier and they're more productive.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

Yeah. Now it's, the study really is about trying to see if you feel better, how does that relate to then being more performing on your job, whether like, we really, a lot of people in the media are like, oh, so it means that you have to move people to the South because there's more sun.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Yeah, yeah.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

It's really that we sort of leveraged or used the natural experiment of the weather differences in the exposure to it. One thing I want to dig into a little bit which is the general effect, the average treatment effect if you will was about 12% on people's productivity, but there was quite a lot of variation and how well-being mattered by type of work they were doing, so we classify their work as sort of three types and the first one was really just order taking. And the honest truth is, if it was the most, most simple, most basic of tasks order taking when customers called in, well, how you felt that day didn't have much impact, in fact no impact on, your performance in order taking.

However, when the tasks were more complex and required social and emotional intelligence such as retaining a disgruntled customer or selling a more complex package of products, then we saw that the effect of how you felt, that was a lot more than 12%. So, it often was just the average across all types of tasks and so there's an important message here I think, which is that for all jobs and most jobs are obviously relying on your social and emotional skills, how you feel really heightens your social, emotional intelligence, which makes you relate to other people a lot better and do a lot better. And whatever kind of job you're doing, and given that the future of work is very much moving in the direction of, all the work that we can't give over to machines or AI is probably the ones that are mostly relying on social and emotional intelligence, and workplace well-being will become increasingly important.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Did you find that actually the environment that people were working in had an impact as well? You're saying that some people had offices with a lot of natural daylight? Some people with no windows at all, did that have an influence?

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

It's interesting because it's not something that we set out to study, but because we have to leverage these variations in the architecture or and the weather and turn the exposure to the weather, we sort of got into it. I think it seems to matter a lot, but it can cut both ways. So, if the weather is bad

outside and it's raining and miserable and grey outside, then having a lot of exposure to it was not helpful. If the weather is nice outside and then exposure to it was helpful for well-being.

So, it's a bit of a mixed bag, it's hard, the paper, we don't we don't come out with a statement on the impact of sort of natural light, although I think there is now some evidence but not by us around the fact that seeing green and natural light is, needless to say, an important element of a good workplace.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Yeah. Yeah. I was thinking more broadly perhaps whether there's anything about, you know, workplaces, you know, there's a lot of focus now about, you know, beautiful architecture or whether open plan working or where, you know, the just the setting that people work, whether actually that has a significant impact. I don't know whether there's anything?

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

So, there's the architecture and the access to natural light, I'm more interested in the architecture of social connections. So, what is the best sort of office set up to allow you to work privately when you have to concentrate on specific tasks that don't require connecting with others. And then you also want paces and spaces to that are really nudging people towards connecting with each other and brainstorming, exchanging ideas. And connecting on a human level to generate that sense of belonging. I haven't thought much about it, but I'm sure that you could look at sort of like platforms in office buildings that are conducive for people connecting and generating a sense of belonging and others that aren't.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Hello, I hope you're enjoying this episode of Future Makers, Brain and mental health. If you'd like to learn more about our work here in Oxford, head to ox.ac.uk/brain or let us know what you think on social media using the hashtag Oxford brain.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

I want to dig into something else.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Yes, please.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

We've now just been speaking about the individual level. So yeah, even if I've told you just now that in the BT study, we've been able to nail causally that improving feeling better by a point on a scale from 0 to 10 let these calls centre employees to be 12% more productive, that still doesn't prove a business case. Because while we should all invest in the workers wellbeing for the obvious reasons, it might still be very costly for BT to invest in somehow improving the tele-sales workers a point on a scale from 0 to 10, cause it's not that easy to improve people by as much.

And so, it maybe cost them more than 12% gain in productivity. So, for the very difficult, reticent, sort of chief financial officers and chief execs that we are still dealing with because a lot of people are talking the talk, but not necessarily walking the walk on workplace well-being, we still had to show a business case. And so, I'm very keen to speak a bit more about what is now essentially the

world's largest study and employee well-being, and that has allowed us and enabled us to do and prove the business case.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Amazing. Yeah. Well, exactly. So, what do you know about cost effective interventions that businesses can implement?

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

Hmm, well, but before getting into the interventions, it's what we've been able to show is that when you link average workplace well-being at companies, and in a comparable way with all other major companies, we found most recently, and it got a lot of media attention that that links up with their financial performance. And so, whatever the companies do, whatever interventions they do to improve workplace well-being, it seems to pay off so whatever it costs, whatever they do, there is a strong positive correlation between a higher level of workplace being in your organisation and financial performance, whether it's measured through return on assets, gross profitability or Tobin's Q, which is the fancy finance word for essentially firm value or book value.

And so that's really exciting. And so, I think we've, in that work we've now actually kind of shown the business case that there is a strong case for investing workplace well-being because those companies that do and are successful in raising workplace well-being do better. And the reasons are to do with individual productivity. So, if people feel on average better one week to another they'll perform better. But it's also become a more attractive employer attracting talent and we mentioned it earlier on in our chat, people also are retained for longer, so retention stays longer and anybody working in human resources knows that retaining your talent longer is a real money saver, cost saver in the mid to long run.

So, there's a lot of reasons why one should invest now. We got a lot of attention, in not just our business case material, but also the investor case that we then made because the same underlying data which we crowdsourced through the platform called Indeed, which is the world's largest job search platform, and we now have about 17 million people, I kid you not, who've responded to our survey essentially reviewing their employers and how they feel. And these workplaces, mostly the US but also UK, Canada and other markets where we've been able to tie this to the stock market performance of companies as well to see whether a portfolio just based on how people feel in companies might be predictive of how these companies have performed the subsequent year and whether they outperform classic indices such as S&P 500 or the New York Stock Exchange or the NASDAQ average.

And lo and behold, they do. So, we started this in 2019. And 2020 and the 2019-2020 data investing based just on what the best places to work for would have you outperform the stock market in 2021, and using the 2021 data you would have outperformed the stock market in 2022, and using the 2022 data you would have outperformed so far in 2023. And so that's really exciting. So, I think we've got both the C suites and the companies, but also the investors and the rating agencies all sort of coming along saying wait a second, these intangible subjective well-being data seem to have very strong objective consequences, including for the bottom line. And so, I think there's increasing interest in it and my hope is that it will lead to positive interventions.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Yeah, absolutely. So does it? I suppose that's the next question. Does it therefore point to the finance directors and to the chief executives to saying actually, we really need to improve our

productivity and our Stock Exchange value? And these are the evidence-based ways in which we can do that?

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

Yes, I do think there's now a real interest in this. The problem I see is that organisations individually don't have necessarily a good sense of what actually works, and up until recently they sort of went through the web for more wellness type interventions such as yoga and other types of sessions, or giving you access to an app of some kind, providing mindfulness classes or what have you, but really I think they've now realised that those things are interesting and don't hurt, they're always welcome, but they need to think more structurally.

It's the corporate culture generating more of a sense of belonging, improving people's pay, flexibility working from home, and finding the right hybrid mode that works for their organisation and their people. It's so workplace well-being sits, sits well beyond just HR, and sits across from the CEO who is, sits at the top of a certain corporate culture, to the CFO who needs to make sure people are paid properly to the CHRO who needs to work on the other types of practises so it's a lot more serious and more structured.

The problem, however, is they don't quite know where to start because they'll all have some ideas, they will have seen a friend, or a colleague do something that seemed to have worked, but there's no sort of menu of interventions out there, not yet. We're working on it, but not as of yet a full blown menu of interventions that they can pick from and then adapt from their own sort of data to see where should we invest most, which interventions have worked the best, but so it's been essentially up to us to, I think or we've seen that need in the field that and amongst the big organisations and we're going to try and supply and do something about it.

And so, we've literally over the past six months have put together a team and we've been serving all the literature, all the academic literature that has evaluated and assessed workplace interventions that have improved workplace well-being or drivers of workplace well-being. And we've ordered all of that evidence and function of the strength of the evidence and the impact it had, and together with a whole group of corporates who are backing us in this effort, and that collective is called the World Wellbeing Movement. And it includes the likes of Unilever and HSBC and BT and Indeed and S&P Global. They've all given us a bit of money to put resources together to build out a number of things, including many of interventions that could then become a public good.

So we're working really hard on building out a tool that will be made available for people to be inspired and know that these kinds of interventions, the ones that are most likely to move the needle on workplace well-being or workplace well-being drivers. And if they then match it to their own data to see where there's the highest needs for interventions, at least we'll move towards more of an evidence-based approach to improving workplace wellbeing, versus the very gut based approach that is currently the case.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Yeah, but I completely hear what you're saying. It's not an add-on. It's not something to give to a well-being officer to think about the lunchtime activities. This is core to the fabric of an organisation and the culture of the place isn't it. I'm also wondering whether it's a bit like sort of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs that if you don't have people on secure job contracts and people that are paid a minimum living wage, then actually thinking about, you know, other aspects is a little bit, you know, superfluous.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

Exactly. Or offering yoga classes outside office hours, dragging people into the place they don't like for even longer? It's not something that is all that conducive to workplace well-being.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Yeah, OK. I suppose I really want to ask you about the world Happiness Report, because, I mean, you get such a lot of press and a lot of interest every year with people you know, ranking the Scandinavian countries as being much better than than the UK to live in, for instance. Does it say anything about workplace? And well-being and workplace culture perhaps as being part of the reasons why some of these places are better places?

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

Interesting. That's a really good question. So as one of the editors of the World Happiness Report, we've we've been producing this now for 11 years in a row, it always comes out on March 20th, which is International Day of Happiness. So, it fits well. The focus has really been on populations and it's not again, just to also repeat to an issue we've talked about right at the beginning. It's not an index. It's literally just the raw numbers of self-reported life evaluations or life satisfaction coming back from the from populations, and those are surveyed through the Gallup World Poll.

So, thanks again to our friends at Gallup for enabling the report and providing the data we had in the past, we've had two chapters that dug into workplace well-being trying to get a sense for what is the importance of work around the world and one of the things we found is that, needless to say that work is incredibly important for everyone around the world. So, whether you're in Europe or the US or Asia or Latin America, having a job versus not having a job was a huge difference. It's actually slightly bigger for the for, for men than for women, which are, which I've always found interesting. But it's an interesting and complex object. We also found average levels of for those people lucky enough to have a job, the average levels of job satisfaction, and by type of industry, and how does that differ between regions around the world? So we found that in sort of in Australia and New Zealand and North America, farmers were, actually people work in agriculture, actually were happier than average in those contexts, but that was not the case in, say, Asia or Africa.

And so, the things that once you start thinking about actually kind of make a lot of sense, but it was nice in the World Happiness Report contexts to put these very macro numbers out there in terms of the importance of work depending on which context and which region you're living in, the importance of specific industries and how that might differ between some regional world regions versus others.

So, to your question or what explains differences in in population of well-being and the reason why the Scandinavians do so well? We typically talk about social capital, the welfare state, social trust. Workplace has never been much of, it's not a specific item that we use that we normally use to explain variation between countries, but it's sort of, the other items feed through. So, the fact that in Scandinavia there's a great welfare state and a lot of social trust will likely, although I don't have evidence for this, but will likely feed through into the workplace with higher levels of trust and belonging to begin with, because in those contexts there's also less work hours being worked. There's better work life balance to begin with.

And so yeah, there's a number of elements that will probably that help explain the variation between the Scandinavians that tend to do so well on life evaluations versus other country. And that what makes those populations happier will also be partially due not just to societal, but also

workplace elements that are similar in nature to the ones that you find in society at large, the welfare state.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

There's lots of interesting differences. I remember visiting colleagues in Norway and I was surprised to hear that basically, if you don't take your annual leave, you're basically marched out of the building and forced to go on holiday, which I quite like the idea of that. But also, you know, the discussion at the moment about working an 11 month year, for instance, or working the four-day week, but in Scandinavia, actually, you know, that's pretty normal.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

Yeah. And interestingly, their productivity levels on the hourly basis are a lot higher than ours. So they work less. I think it's in the US and UK at about 1500 hours work a year or something like that. And in Scandinavia it may be more like 1200. And so, if you then look at sort of GDP, which is my favourite measure, but if you split it by the number of hours worked, you'd find that they are a hell of a lot more productive on an hourly or daily basis.

And so there's something about reducing pressures and improving well-being, which in turn releases that productivity level. So for example, going back to the BT study. One way society can help call centre employees be happier, one point on a scale from zero to 10, may not be due to BT, but it could be moving to a four-day week, for example, would move their average well-being of a BT call centre from say six to seven. Yeah, BT would gain as a result from that.

And so, while we'd be working a day less, which would hit overall output, it wouldn't be the equivalent of a whole day out of five. It wouldn't be what is it, 20% less. It might be a lot less. It might be because the relief, the better work life, balance improvements and well-being might release greater productivity, so we might in some cases you might even see full compensation for the working and the less might become fully by being more productive in the days you do work. So it's interesting.

So they've gotten that balance better I think, and to your example of being, really take having to take up your holidays otherwise you know you're being frowned upon. It's the exact opposite in the United States, and that is a real, real problem. And that culture is devastating for well-being and work life balance, and you can kind of tell in our data.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

Jan, thank you for a fascinating discussion about the world of workplace well-being, and I really look forward to seeing what you come up with next.

Professor Jan-Emmanuel De Neve:

Thank you. I do too.

Professor Belinda Lennox:

I hope you enjoyed this episode of Futuremakers, Brain and Mental Health. You can find more episodes of future makers wherever you get your podcasts and more on Oxford's research at ox.ac.uk/brain. Thanks for listening.