



The role of Zest in the workplace

A short literature review

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Introduction

The human condition has traditionally been conceptualised from a pathogenic perspective defined by the absence of ill-health or ill-being (Ejlertsson, Heijbel, Brorsson, and Andersson, 2020). Yet, in contrast, a positive focus has evolved through the seminal, empirical research by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000). The outcome of this research has led to positive psychology emerging as a distinct discipline, with subsequent application to life and work contexts.

In the business context positive psychology has been operationalised through two distinct fields. Firstly, positive organisational scholarship (POS) is defined as “an umbrella concept used to emphasize what elevates and what is inspiring to individuals and organizations by defining the possibilities for positive deviance rather than just improving on the challenging, broken, and needlessly difficult“, which focuses on areas such as subjective wellbeing, human energy, and work engagement (Luthans, 2002, p.59). Secondly, positive organisational behaviour (POB) with a focus on human performance through positive psychological states, with a definition being “the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace” (Luthans, 2002, p. 59).

Within POS, human energy including zest, has emerged as a domain of interest as flourishing people and organisations are especially relevant to the modern business environment because employees are looking for a quality working life (QWL), inclusive of discrete dimensions such as job satisfaction, meaning and purpose, in preference to purely financial based dimensions (Peterson, Park, Hall, and Seligman, 2009). Indeed, many countries have published numerous reports and national strategies on the matter as QWL represents a significant individual, organisational, and societal issue for various communities (Waddell and Burton 2006; Denvir et al., 2007). In contrast, a downside has been reported in the literature, due to ‘energy depletion’ leading to ill-being and burnout (Leiter and Malasch, 1997). This suggests that human energy levels need to be balanced through activation and recovery to

maintain optimal performance, as evidenced by Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989).

Despite the research completed to date in several areas pertaining to zest, there have been calls for further research from an organisational perspective (Cameron and Spreitzer, 2020; Peterson, Park, Hall, and Seligman, 2009); suggesting the literature is underdeveloped. Accordingly, the purpose of this short literature review is to:

- a. review a select literature relating to zest in the workplace,
- b. outline the role of zest in the workplace, and
- c. establish the positive and negative consequences of zest in the workplace.

In summary, this section has introduced zest within positive psychology and its relevance to the workplace setting. Also outlined were the objectives of this paper. The next section outlines the literature review method.

Method

The literature review investigated current constructs relating to zest in the workplace. To ensure relevance a search of PsycInfo, Google Scholar, and positive psychology journals was undertaken using key words zest, human energy, vitality, vigour and organisation or workplace. This led to a refined list of existing academic papers, journal articles, and books being identified. Consequently, the literature utilised for the analysis was a selective group of documents rather than an exhaustive list, as such, it is recognised that further literature may exist about this topic.

Results

Zest as a character strength

Character strengths have been defined as a “personality trait that contributes to individual fulfilment” (Money, Hilenbrand, and da Camera, 2009, p.27). These are central to the positive focus on the human condition through the identification and validation of six virtues¹ and 24-

¹ The six virtues are Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, Transcendence

character strengths which, it is argued, promote human flourishing, well-being, and overall satisfaction with life (Peterson and Seligman., 2004).

Zest has been discussed through various lenses as a character strength from Eastern (e.g., Chinese healing, Qi) and Western (e.g., Freud’s 1923, psychodynamic model) perspectives; and therefore, has evolved through theory and practice. It is, however, apparent that several terms have been discussed and used interchangeably in the literature concerning zest. This is inclusive of emotional and relational energy (Baker, 2019), vitality (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) and vigour (Shirom, 2011) which could be due to: (a) the lack of definition and research into zest specifically, or (b) zest is multidimensional, as evidenced by energy being referred to in spiritual, physical, emotional, and psychological terms; hence, proxy representative constructs have emerged. Commonly used terms and definitions relating to zest are outlined in table 1.

Table 1 – Common definitions relating to Zest.

Source	Term	Definition
VIA Institute, (n.d)	Zest	“means approaching a situation, or life in general, with excitement and energy, not approaching tasks or activities halfway or half-heartedly”
New Merriam Webster Dictionary, (n.d)	Vigour	“active strength or energy of body or mind”
Quinn and Dutton, (2005)	Energy	“a type of positive affective arousal, which people can experience as emotion — short responses to specific events — or mood — longer-lasting affective states that need not be a response to a specific event.”
Collins (2004)	Emotional energy	“a feeling of confidence, elation, strength, enthusiasm, and initiative in taking action”,
Peterson and Seligman (2004)	Vitality [zest, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]	“Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or half-heartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated”

Despite a lack of clarity and agreement in the literature, such definitions reflect a trait whereby individuals experience a positive affective state associated with high levels of activation. Thayer (2001) argues that energy creation (and maintenance) is a complex interrelated biological and psychological process requiring both systems to work in unison. This supports the earlier work of Thayer (1996) who reports that energy levels and moods can be thought of

being on a bipolar continuum. At one end is the calm-energy and the other tense-tiredness with calm-energy, or vitality considered to be the ideal state for human functioning.

Another study, and a prominent contribution by Ryan and Deci (2000) examined the needs of individuals finding that autonomy, relatedness, and competence dimensions were influential in individuals' vitality, energy, and subjective wellbeing. This is due to the intrinsic energy being higher because all social, psychological, and physical needs have been met. Drawing on self-determination theory recent research by van Scheppingen et al., (2015) developed a model to examine the relationship between vitality, employee, and organisational performance. Moderate positive correlations were found between vitality and autonomy ($\beta=.23$, $p<0.05$) and competence ($\beta=.19$, $p<0.05$). Further, findings of the regression analysis also reported positive associations between "lifestyle factor, basic psychological needs for self-determination and organisational cultural factors" (p.50). In concluding the authors highlight that these, and the other results from the study indicate the multifactorial nature of vitality and that organisational culture is significant in supporting the psychological needs of employees.

Perhaps the most significant contribution reported in the literature has been the work of Peterson and Seligman (2004) who, through an extensive review of the literature, confirm the zest character trait as being significant in how humans experience life satisfaction with several terms used to describe it such as vitality, enthusiasm, and vigour. This work has subsequently been expanded on through the VIA Strengths Framework (Park and Peterson, 2009).

In summary, this section has outlined the construct of zest indicating that it is significant to achieving subjective well-being inclusive of high levels of energy. It is apparent that emotional states are common to several definitions reported in the literature. Yet, there have been several constructs used to describe zest, and therefore more research is required.

The next section discusses more specifically the role of zest, principally emotional and psychological states, in the workplace and three prominent areas - job satisfaction, employee engagement and wellbeing.

Zest in the workplace

Broadly, the notion of zest in the workplace appears to be discussed through the lens of 'human energy' from both individual and organisational perspectives. Cameron and Spreitzer, (2020) report six theories relating to zest in POS. These being: (1) conservation of resources, (2) attention restoration theory, (3) ego-depletion theory, (4) energetic activation, (5) interaction ritual chain, and (6) self-determination theory (pp.138-148). Both self-determination theory and conservation of resources are referred to further in this section because they have been discussed more broadly regarding worker wellbeing, work engagement, and job satisfaction.

According to Peterson, Park, Hall, and Seligman (2009) a person's energy can be viewed as a critical individual resource in the work setting. As such, it can be argued that for organisations to flourish the zest or energy that employees bring to their work is a key factor; and significantly the ability of individuals, to not only sustain, but can gain energy in the work context is equally important (Ejlertsson, Heijbel, Brorsson, and Andersson, 2020). This is because several commentators have reported positive associations between energy (including vigour and zest) prosocial social behaviours, satisfaction, and organisational commitment (Van Winerden and Van der Stoep, 2018; Peterson, Park, Hall, and Seligman, 2009).

Recent research by Ejlertsson, Heijbel, Brorsson, and Andersson (2020) proposes that work can be regenerative because work is a source of internal energy, which coupled with positive emotions enable individuals to manage negative situations (p.1). Recognising energy is a complex concept the study investigated a health-promoting work environment that replenishes an individual's resources. A cross-sectional survey was administered to workers in a Swedish healthcare organisation with 501 valid responses (84%) received. Several findings were reported, including that a positive energy-building experience can be achieved characterised by positive traits such as meaningful work and autonomy; and that both work and home-based recovery was of great importance for energy level optimisation. As such, the study provides new insight which can be explored further to create and enhance zest in the workplace.

Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction has been reported as being positively correlated with employee engagement and wellbeing (Zwetsloot and van Scheppingen, 2007).

Indeed, a widely held view is that “happy employees are more productive” (Fisher 2003, p. 753). A more recent study of employee wellbeing (physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual) perspectives in Australian businesses by McCarthy, Almeida and Ahrens (2011) found that of the 230 participating organisations, job satisfaction (45 percent) was the highest reported benefit. Hence, job satisfaction is significant and highly relevant to the discussion of zest and character strengths in the workplace.

How work is organised, structured, and undertaken influences overall work-life satisfaction (Truss et al. 2013b). Early seminal work by Hackman and Oldham (1976) found five core characteristics of jobs are “skill variety, autonomy, feedback, task significance, and task identity” (Truss et al. 2013a, p. 135). These variables influence psychological states leading to greater motivation, job satisfaction, and personal growth that are recognised as being essential to quality working life (Srivastava and Kanpur, 2014).

As such, the promotion of meaningful work is especially important because it often links with a broader life purpose, where work is viewed as a calling, which influences personal energy due to psychological empowerment (Van Wingerden and Van der Stoep, 2018). This was supported by research into zest in the workplace by Peterson, Park, Hall, and Seligman (2009) who investigated dispositional influence on work satisfaction with the expectation that work as a calling would result in several mutual benefits. Of the 9,803 adult sample group, a significant finding was that rewarding work, viewed as a calling, was positively associated with a more enjoyable life, including high levels of satisfaction. More recently Van Wingerden and Van der Stoep (2018) examined the relationship between meaningful work, strengths use, work engagement and performance. The model was tested in a health technology setting with 459 participants. Structural equation model analyses found positive relationships between meaningful work and work engagement ($\beta=.57$, $p<0.001$) and strengths use ($\beta=.74$, $p<0.001$). This confirms that meaningful work is a motivational antecedent of work engagement.

Work engagement

Energy or zest has also been reported to have a positive association with work engagement (Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli, 2003). This is evident in the prominent contribution from Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, and Bakker (2002, p.4) who state that “work engagement is a distinct concept defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by **Vigor**, Dedication and Absorption” (*Emphasis added*). Several studies have found that these dimensions are positively correlated, as validated through the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale studies. Although Shirom (2011) suggests that vigour may be a distinct construct to that of work engagement it clear that it relates to positive energy; and can, therefore, be considered as an antecedent of work engagement (Quinn, Spreitzer, and Lam, 2012).

None the less, positive reported business outcomes from engaged employee inclusive of physical, emotional, and cognitive energy have been found to relate to increased business efficiency, increased productivity and lower staff turnover (Harter et al., 2013), fewer safety incidents (Harter et al., 2013) and improved wellbeing (Bryson, Forth and Stokes, 2014). This suggests that an employee, once engaged through meaningful work that is aligned with an organisations purpose through clear ‘line of sight’ (Boswell, Bingham, and Colvin, 2006) is more likely to experience ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013), and indicate higher levels of physical, emotional and cognitive energy, thereby promoting a self-sustaining intrinsic motivation cycle. In contrast, higher engaged individuals may expend significant amounts of energy where work becomes the sole focus of life, leading to negative consequences at work and outside.

Occupational burnout and stress

In contrast to the positive focus on energy and engagement there has been several negative consequences reported in literature due to a changing business environment. This has led to declining levels of physical and psychological health and wellbeing, with an outcome being the inability of employees to cope with the demands of work. Such depletion of energy has been reported as burnout and stress (Leiter and Maslach, 1997). Such consequences are having a considerable and compounding effect at the individual, organisational and societal

levels costing the Australian economy around \$543 million in workers' compensation per annum (Safe Work Australia, n.d.). Yet, an often-overlooked component of work design is the promotion of recovery. One organisational intervention that supports this is the job-demand resources (JDR) model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007) that seeks to optimise a balance between personal 'inputs and outputs'. JDR considers that the individual's resources such as job autonomy, supervisor support and goal clarity create motivation, but once the demands of the role exceed the individual's ability to cope, performance is reduced due to physical and psychological health impairment. A recent study by Conway et al., (2016) further support application JDR with human resource practices, used as resources, were found to negatively affect two elements of employee wellbeing - employee burnout or emotional exhaustion. This confirms the necessity to balance emotional 'inputs-outputs' because of the effect on motivation, and is, therefore, a key antecedent of employee energy activation.

Conclusion

This short literature review has been able to confirm that zest as energy is a significant critical workplace resource. There is established and reported evidence that wellbeing, job satisfaction and employee and work engagement are positively associated, with energy being a key dimension. However, there are several areas that require further investigation such as (a) what are the interdependencies between emotional energy and other noted forms and do they have a synergistic influence on motivation (b) can emotional energy be used as a better predictor of job satisfaction in contrast to employee engagement indicators, and (c) how can emotional energy regulation be incorporated within work design at strategic and operational levels to optimise employee wellbeing and productivity through 'input and output' balance.

Furthermore, more research is required to support definitional clarity and evolve POS and POB research, including human energy such as zest, vitality, and vigour theory and practice. Also of note, the research by Ejlertsson, Heijbel, Brorsson, and Andersson presents a significant advancement which should be examined further for theory refinement and generalisability to other settings.

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