



Why autonomy is important for wellbeing in the workplace.

Yalini Carlsson-Ruban

April 27th 2023

The recent pandemic has placed a spotlight on the importance of mental health and wellbeing in the workplace. It has given us all the opportunity to re-evaluate our approach to work and consider how we can make positive changes. As hybrid and different ways of working has become more common, we have had to find new ways to support and bring everyone together so feel connected and engaged with their work.

Employers have also recognised the importance of flexibility in work arrangements and the need to provide employees with autonomy around their work. Overall, the pandemic has brought mental health and wellbeing to the forefront of workplace discussions.

A key factor in wellbeing is creating more *autonomy* for employees and teams.

Creating more autonomy in the workplace may cause concern that there is too much choice and control is relinquished. However, not providing this autonomy may be even more damaging.

The positive impact of allowing autonomy in the workplace is significant.

Allowing autonomy in the workplace can lead to increased job satisfaction, motivation, and engagement, which in turn leads to better *quality of work, outcomes, and productivity*.

Autonomy in the workplace has been found to enable *innovation and creativity* by providing greater control over work. Taking ownership of projects develops responsibility for outcomes, which invests us in our work and motivates us to find new and better ways to accomplish tasks. Autonomy also empowers us to take risks and experiment with new ideas, which can boost creativity and innovation. In contrast, a lack of autonomy can lead to a culture of conformity and stifled creativity, limiting the potential for new ideas and innovation.

We are also less likely to experience high levels of burnout when we have a large amount of "job control" - the ability to choose what tasks to do, when to do them, and how much time to spend on them. Promoting autonomy in the workplace leads to higher rates of *employee retention* and lower rates of *absenteeism*, resulting in better business outcomes.



Gallup researchers Ben Wigert and Sangeeta Agrawal found that employees are 43% less likely to experience high levels of burnout when they have high “job control,” that is, a choice in what tasks to do, when to do them and how much time to spend on them.

High "job control" can actually reduce an employee's risk of dying. University researchers Erik Gonzalez-Mulé and Bethany S. Cockburn found that having high “job control” can actually reduce an employee’s risk of dying.

-



Autonomy can also lead to a more *positive work culture*. When we feel trusted and empowered, we are more likely to have a positive attitude towards work and our organisation. This can create a supportive and collaborative work environment where we are encouraged to share ideas and work together towards common goals.

We can encourage feedback from teams to identify areas where autonomy can be promoted and to understand how we perceive autonomy. This can help us to create a more supportive and productive work environment that is tailored to our needs and enable us to perform at our best.

Developing autonomy involves purposefully identifying and providing *training* and *development* opportunities. This approach can help develop skills needed to make informed decisions and take ownership of work and perform our jobs effectively.



It is important to note that autonomy should not be confused with lack of accountability. We still need to set clear expectations and provide support and guidance to ensure that we are meeting goals and objectives. By finding a balance between autonomy and accountability, employers can create a work environment that fosters both productivity and well-being.

Overall, developing autonomy in the workplace is a win-win situation for both employers and employees. By creating freedom to make decisions and take ownership of work, we can create a more engaged and motivated workforce, while also improving mental health and well-being.

Finally, it is important to recognise that developing autonomy in the workplace is an ongoing process.

We all need to be willing to adapt and change approaches over time as the needs of people and organisations evolve. By doing so, we can create a work environment that is both supportive and impactful of both well-being and productivity.