
Psychological Well-being of Parliament staff: What Do We Know and What Can Parliaments Do?

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Abstract: Workplace culture has been widely discussed in the reviews of Australian and New Zealand Parliaments. One of the main highlights of the reviews is to prioritise policies that improve workplace culture, including the psychological well-being of staff. Using the job demands-resources (JD-R) model, this article discusses how the annual employee engagement survey in the New Zealand Parliament provides insights into factors affecting employees' psychological well-being. Future initiatives by the New Zealand Parliament, along with insights from the New South Wales Parliament, offer an understanding of well-being initiatives in different Parliaments and highlight gaps in knowledge that future research can address.

INTRODUCTION

Parliaments across Australia and New Zealand have conducted reviews in recent years about parliamentary workplace culture. The reviews in the Australian Commonwealth Parliament by Jenkins¹, New South Wales Parliament by Broderick² and New Zealand Parliament by Francis³ centred around workplace issues such as bullying and harassment. These reviews have emphasised prioritising policies to improve workplace culture, including policies to address bullying and harassment, and to promote the psychological wellbeing of staff in Parliament.

To understand factors associated with employees' psychological wellbeing, it is important to be guided by established research. In this paper, I will discuss employee wellbeing from the job demand-resources model (JD-R), which has been well-researched over the past 20 years.⁴ The

¹ Kate Jenkins, *Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces*. Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021.

² Elizabeth Broderick, *Independent Review into bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct at the Parliament of NSW*. Sydney: NSW Parliament, 2022.

³ Debbie Francis, *External Independent Review Bullying and Harassment in the New Zealand Parliamentary Workplace*. Wellington: NZ Parliament, 2019.

⁴ Wilmar B. Schaufeli, and Arnold B. Bakker. 'Job demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: A multi-sample study'. *Journal of Organizational Behavior: The International Journal of Industrial, Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Behavior* 25(3) 2004, pp. 293-315; Tino Lesener, Burkhard Gusy, and Christine Wolter, 'The job demands-resources model: A meta-analytic review of longitudinal studies.'. *Work &*

JD-R model posits that job demands can lead to psychological strain, while job resources mitigate psychological strain.⁵

The JD-R suggests that job demands such as bullying and harassment can lead to poor wellbeing.⁶ Other job demands that can contribute to poor psychological wellbeing at work include role ambiguity, role conflict, stressful events, workload and pressure.⁷ Conversely, autonomy, manager and co-worker support, feedback, and task significance are job resources that facilitate the path to wellbeing at work. Although studies on the factors related to wellbeing have been conducted across different types of workplaces, there are few studies on the factors affecting the wellbeing of MPs,⁸ and much less is known about factors that affect the wellbeing of staff working in Parliament.

The main aim of this paper is to discuss how employees' perceptions of job demands and resources can be tracked through the annual employee engagement survey administered by the New Zealand Parliament. This paper will also describe future initiatives by the New Zealand Parliament to measure engagement, along with insights on wellbeing initiatives undertaken by the New South Wales (NSW) Parliament.

THE NEW ZEALAND PARLIAMENT

To understand the factors that may contribute to or hinder the psychological wellbeing of staff in the New Zealand Parliament, it is important to view wellbeing in the context of Parliament as a workplace. Staff employed within Parliamentary agencies in New Zealand are part of the legislative branch of government.⁹ While funding for the Parliamentary agencies in New Zealand comes from the government, they are independent agencies. The Parliamentary

Stress, 33(1) 2019, pp. 76-103; Arnold B Bakker, Evangelia Demerouti, and Ana Sanz-Vergel, 'Job Demands-Resources Theory: Ten Years Later'. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 10(1) 2023, pp. 25-53.

⁵ Arnold B Bakker, and Evangelia Demerouti, 'The Job Demands-resources Model: State of the Art'. *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 22(3) 2007, pp. 309-328.

⁶ Samuel Farley, Daniella Mokhtar, Kara Ng, and Karen Niven, 'What influences the relationship between workplace bullying and employee well-being? A systematic review of moderators'. *Work & Stress* 37(3) 2023, pp. 345-372.

⁷ Bakker, Demerouti, and Sanz-Vergel, 'Job Demands-Resources Theory', pp. 25-53.

⁸ Matthew Flinders and others, 'Governing under Pressure? The Mental Wellbeing of Politicians'. *Parliamentary Affairs* 73(2) 2020, pp. 253-273.

⁹ David Wilson, *Parliamentary Practice in New Zealand*. Wellington: New Zealand, 2023.

agencies are accountable to the Speaker of the House for the purposes of the Public Finance Act 1989.

The day-to-day operation of the New Zealand Parliament is mainly supported by the Office of the Clerk and Parliamentary Service. The Office of the Clerk offers procedural advice and supports the House and its committees. Parliamentary Service provides services to members (based both within and outside the parliamentary precinct).

Within the Parliamentary Service, corporate and member support staff employment terms are different from each other. Member support staff are employed on fixed-term event-based employment agreements where the terms of their agreements are closely connected to a specific member of Parliament (MP). They are employed under triangular employment agreements, with the Parliamentary Service as their legal employer and the MP as their day-to-day manager. This contrasts with corporate staff who are more likely to be on permanent employment agreements and the MP is not involved as their day-to-day manager.

In line with Fletcher et. al.'s¹⁰ view to contextualise the demands and resources, understanding the work context of Parliament and the different employment terms within Parliament can help to identify which risk and protective factors are more related to psychological wellbeing for Parliament staff. Risk factors those that can lead to psychological strain while protective factors can mitigate psychological strain.

VIEWING WELLBEING THROUGH THE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT SURVEY

In the New Zealand Parliament, the Human Resources team administers the annual employee engagement survey. The Health and Safety team leads the work in identifying and managing psychosocial risks. The responses to the annual employee engagement survey provide some insights into staff wellbeing. The survey has 13 categories and 61 questions, covering topics such as leadership, the organisation's process, people's experience, and psychological safety.

While all questions have their purpose, the engagement survey is not designed to measure employees' wellbeing. The survey questions are not necessarily organised into categories that reflects job demands and resources. Therefore, I will reorganise the engagement survey questions, and some questions may be omitted as they are less related to factors that may contribute to or deplete wellbeing such as organisational value-based questions (e.g., 'We keep up to date with best practice relevant to our organisation').

¹⁰ Luke Fletcher, Catherine Bailey, Kerstin Alfes, and Adrian Madden, 'Mind the context gap: A critical review of engagement within the public sector and an agenda for future research'. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management* 31(1) 2020, pp. 6-46.

Each question in the engagement survey was considered and organised into categories that reflect job resources, job demands, or the underlying mechanisms of job resources/demands. Underlying mechanisms explain how job demands/resources are connected to wellbeing.

Some value-based questions that do not clearly present as job demands, resources, or underlying mechanisms, were not included in this exercise. Once the questions were broadly organised into three categories, the questions were classified into factors. See Appendix 1 for the full list arranged by factor. The following section highlights some of these outcomes.

WHAT CAN THE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT SURVEY TELL US ABOUT WELLBEING?

The engagement survey includes job resources questions related to leadership behaviour, opportunities for development, role clarity, social support, autonomy, participation in decision making, authenticity at work, reward, feedback, and physical work environment setup. Among these factors, leadership behaviour has eight questions, while the rest of the factors have one to three related questions. This suggests an underlying assumption that leadership is the main job resource that can contribute to employees' wellbeing. However, this focus overlooks other important job resources that also impact wellbeing. Additionally, it does not fully consider the context and complexity of leadership behaviours and their effects on wellbeing.¹¹

In terms of underlying mechanisms, the survey contains questions related to the psychological safety of the team and individual, authenticity at work, meaningful work, and work-life balance. Psychological safety has the most related questions (eight). Supportive leadership behaviours, supportive organisational practices, and the quality of relationships at work are some of the factors that may contribute to individual and team psychological safety, which in turn leads to positive outcomes such as greater engagement.¹² Without further analysis, it is unclear which job resources are associated to underlying mechanisms, particularly psychological safety, in the New Zealand Parliament.

Finally, there was no question identified in the engagement survey that is related to job demands or wellbeing outcomes. As this is preliminary work to identify questions in the engagement survey that can contribute to employees' wellbeing, a factor analysis or structural equation modelling should be conducted to confirm if the questions are as categorised in

¹¹ Marc Van Veldhoven and others, 'Challenging the Universality of Job Resources: Why, When, and for Whom Are They Beneficial?'. *Applied Psychology* 69(1) 2020, pp. 5–29.

¹² Alexander Newman, Ross Donohue, and Nathan Eva, 'Psychological Safety: A Systematic Review of the Literature'. *Human Resource Management Review* 27(3) 2017, pp. 521–35.

Appendix 1. Further analysis can also provide understanding on how job resources are associated to psychological safety. The implications of this exercise will be discussed in the section below.

IMPLICATIONS

The annual engagement survey consists of questions that will elicit information on employees' well-being. As the engagement survey is collected and discussed annually, this provides an opportunity for each team to discuss the results of the survey with a focus on changes over time and the resources that can contribute to their wellbeing.

While the survey has provided some information on job resources that can contribute to employee wellbeing, it is notable that job demands and questions that measure wellbeing are not found in the engagement survey. Job demands such as workload, time pressure, interpersonal contact/conflict, physical work environment demands (such as noise), and shift work for some business units, can contribute to psychological strain¹³. Wellbeing outcomes such as job satisfaction and general wellbeing are also not part of the survey questions.

The Human Resources team is in the process of planning a quarterly survey with a goal of being able to respond sooner to issues and check their progress. The Health and Safety team is contributing to this process by identifying risk factors that can be included in the survey. This may be an opportunity to consider including job demands and wellbeing questions that can provide more relevant information about wellbeing.

The NSW Parliament's '*Public Sector People Matter Employee Survey (PMES)*' could be a useful reference when designing questions about wellbeing and job demands. Similar to the New Zealand Parliament, the NSW Parliament tracks wellbeing through the PMES and some teams regularly respond to surveys to keep track of workload and general wellbeing.¹⁴ The PMES includes questions about wellbeing (e.g. In general, my sense of wellbeing is...) and a range of job demands such as physical harm, discrimination and harassments.

Tracking employee wellbeing can also be a way to identify if wellbeing initiatives achieve their aims. One notable practice of the NSW Parliament is the establishment of the Executive Sponsor of Mental Health and Wellbeing role. The aim of the role is to create a culture in the NSW Parliament that supports good mental health and wellbeing among staff. One of the initiatives overseen by the Executive Sponsor of Mental Health and Wellbeing is the '*Mental Health First Aid Network*'. This initiative has seen 16 people being trained as Mental Health

¹³ Bakker and Demerouti, 'The Job Demands-resources Model: State of the Art', pp. 309–28.

¹⁴ Matthew Dobson, Executive Sponsor of Mental Health and Wellbeing, 'Personal Communication', 6 September 2024.

First Aid Officers (MHFAOs) to recognise signs of mental ill health and provide first aid in the NSW Parliament.

As parliaments across Australia and New Zealand implement wellbeing initiatives, it is imperative to know how wellbeing initiatives affect employee wellbeing. A regular survey with a focus on wellbeing may be able to track the progress of wellbeing initiatives over time; essentially answering the question, 'do the initiatives improve wellbeing?'. Furthermore, research to assess other contextual factors that can influence wellbeing outcomes of Parliament staff in different departments can provide information on how to improve the wellbeing initiatives.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

As Parliament remains a complex workplace, psychological wellbeing should continue to be a priority. To better understand how the engagement survey is related to wellbeing, some of the questions in the engagement survey have been reorganised based on the JD-R model. Leaders can approach the engagement survey's discussion from a wellbeing perspective, helping their team to increase their perceived resources. Increasing resources and reducing demands can contribute to psychological wellbeing. Further research can also provide information on how to improve wellbeing initiatives for different departments in the Parliament.

¹⁵ Caroline Biron and Maria Karanika-Murray, 'Process Evaluation for Organizational Stress and Well-Being Interventions: Implications for Theory, Method, and Practice'. *International Journal of Stress Management* 21(1) 2014, p. 85-111.

APPENDIX 1

Table 1. Categorising employee engagement survey based on the JD-R model

Original category	Question	Factors
Job resource		
Operational Processes	I have the autonomy to make decisions about matters I am responsible for	Autonomy
Performance Development	Parliamentary Service has a culture of empowerment that enables me to work to my potential	Autonomy
Performance Development	I have regular and effective feedback, performance and development conversations with my direct manager/people leader	Feedback
Diversity and Inclusion	Our senior leaders are committed to building an inclusive culture founded on respect, fairness and equity	Leadership behaviour
Internal Communication	My direct manager/people leader shares information with me that enables me to do my job effectively	Leadership behaviour
Leadership	The actions of my direct manager/people leader are consistent with our Parliamentary Service values	Leadership behaviour
Leadership	My direct manager/people leader treats team members fairly and with respect	Leadership behaviour
Leadership	My direct manager/people leader handles stressful or challenging situations well	Leadership behaviour
Leadership	My direct manager/people leader's decisions are fair and communicated effectively	Leadership behaviour
Leadership	The Executive Leadership Team (ELT) communicates effectively	Leadership behaviour
Leadership	Our leaders explain why workplace changes are made	Leadership behaviour
Performance Development	My direct manager/people leader actively encourages my career development	Opportunities for development
Performance Development	Parliamentary Service provides valuable learning and development opportunities for me	Opportunities for development
Strategy	Parliamentary Service is good at looking at future demands and opportunities	Opportunities for development
Internal Communication	There is effective communication and consultation before changes are made that affect me	Participation in decision

Organisation Performance	I am regularly asked for feedback on how to improve the way we work at Parliamentary Service	Participation in decision
Operational Processes	We have the right technology to support the needs of Parliamentary Service	Physical work environment
Organisation Culture	My team has a culture of celebrating success	Rewards
Customer Focus	I am clear about my role in delivering great services	Role clarity
Organisation Specific	I have a deep understanding of the Parliamentary environment	Role clarity
Performance Development	My annual goals and objectives are aligned with the priorities of Parliamentary Service	Role clarity
Operational Processes	I feel well supported by other teams I work with	Social support
People Experience	I feel included and supported by the people I work with	Social support
Job resource/underlying mechanism		
Diversity and Inclusion	I am encouraged to be myself at work	Authenticity at work
Diversity and Inclusion	My personal values and cultural beliefs are respected at Parliamentary Service	Authenticity at work
Underlying mechanism		
Customer Focus	I see how my work contributes to positive outcomes for customers or people I provide services to	Meaningful work
Customer Focus	Parliamentary Service has a positive impact on those we work with	Meaningful work
Performance Development	I feel the work I do is valued at Parliamentary Service	Meaningful work
Organisation Culture	I feel confident to speak up even when it may be unpopular	Psychological safety
Organisation Performance	My team adapts well to change	Psychological safety
People Experience	Parliamentary Service values the differing perspectives, skills and experiences of employees	Psychological safety
Psychological Safety	I know that if I make a mistake, it will be treated as a learning opportunity	Psychological safety
Psychological	I am encouraged to innovate and show initiative	Psychological safety

Safety		
Psychological Safety	I know that if I ask for help or feedback, I won't be judged negatively for it	Psychological safety
Operational Processes	My team regularly reviews processes to identify possible improvements	Team psychological safety
Operational Processes	My team looks for ways to increase efficiency and effectiveness where we can	Team psychological safety
People Experience	I feel I am able to balance my work and private life	Work-life balance