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Applying the PERMA model in employee wellbeing

Abstract

The aim of this study is to define the essence of wellbeing in employee management, and present the functionality of the PERMA model in positive psychology. The first part of the study describes the multidimensionality of the concept of wellbeing and the difficulties in defining it. An important element of the conducted analysis is the presentation of the positive effects of the implementation of wellbeing in organisations, including elements of wellbeing dimensions and activities affecting wellbeing, while the most important part of the article is the diagnosis of the applicability of the PERMA model in the study of employee wellbeing and positive education. Different elements of the model are described and the latest solutions with regards to its improvement are presented. An analysis of the literature showed that a model with four additional dimensions – physical health, mindset, work environment and economic security – may be the most useful for analysing employee wellbeing. The next part of this publication is devoted to the use of the PERMA model in the classification of interventions, where we show that the model not only enables diagnosis of the weaknesses of wellbeing, but even facilitates the assigning of specific interventions. These solutions make it possible to build wellbeing that positively impacts employee behaviour, with the authors indicating discrepancies in the activities undertaken by organisations and the needs of employees with regards to wellbeing. The findings suggest that employees expect activities related to the development of their mental dimension and economic security, not necessarily related to physical health, which are most commonly implemented by organisations.

Keywords: dimensions of wellbeing, effects of wellbeing, dimensions of the PERMA model, positive psychology, positive education, wellbeing activities

Introduction to wellbeing

The concept of wellbeing (well-being) has become a permanent feature in human resource management (HRM), as well as the subject of many analyses, comments and concepts, and has been given a special status in the proper implementation of HR tasks, such as performance management, motivating or building commitment. Wellbeing can manifest itself in three different aspects: evaluative wellbeing, hedonic wellbeing and eudemonic wellbeing (David & Ali, 2021; Esteban-Gonzalo et al., 2020; Steptoe et al., 2015). Evaluative wellbeing is associated with a general sense of life satisfaction based on evaluating and benchmarking one's own situation with that of others or with a situation from the past (Angel & Gregory, 2021; Deaton & Stone, 2014). Hedonic wellbeing is considered in terms of positive and negative experiences in everyday life related to happiness, anger, stress and pain (Deaton & Stone, 2014; Disabato et al., 2016; Henderson & Knight, 2012; Ilska & Kołodziej-Zaleska, 2018; Zuo et al., 2017). Eudemonic wellbeing refers to the realisation of life purpose, meaning of existence, self-realisation and sense of fulfilment (Dolan & Metcalfe, 2012; Fancourt & Steptoe, 2020; Luna et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2014; Steptoe et al., 2015). Research into wellbeing has gained in importance since the late 1990s and is moving in two directions – subjective wellbeing (SWB) and psychological wellbeing (PWB). The issue of these two types of wellbeing is described in detail by Keyes et al. (2002), indicating that subjective wellbeing reflects the hedonic aspect, and psychological wellbeing reflects the eudemonic aspect. Diener (1984) used three components to measured

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subjective well-being: frequent positive affect, infrequent negative affect and cognitive evaluations of life satisfaction. In his research he concluded that people make evaluations of their life, and assessment occurs by comparison of their current situation with their aspirations. This evaluation consists of, among other things, living conditions, social relationships and the possibilities to function in a healthy way (Tov & Diener, 2013). Psychological wellbeing, on the other hand, was defined by Ryff (1989) in his investigations by six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth.

One of the frequently cited definitions of wellbeing is the definition of health proposed in the Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO), which states that "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or disability" (WHO, 2014, p. 18). Simons and Baldwin (2021) reviewed the definition of wellbeing, undertaking a critical approach to the meaning of the term. They conclude that the proper definition of wellbeing should include all three of its aspects: evaluative, hedonic and eudemonic. When researching the literature, one can see a growing interest in the science of managing the concept and research on wellbeing, and issue that was previously explored by doctors, psychologists and sociologists. Employee behaviour researchers and their determinants noticed over a decade ago that a well-functioning organism, such as a company, needs physically and mentally "healthy" employees.

The aim of this study is to integrate the wellbeing concept in employee management, along with determining the usefulness of the PERMA model for measuring and proposing activities to ensure wellbeing. An important element of the paper is also the construction of the concept of using the PERMA model in positive education closely related to wellbeing, with another aim of the study being to present recommendations containing the proposed direction of changes in the field of building wellbeing programmes.

Definition, dimensions and benefits of employee wellbeing

The wellbeing of employees is defined inconsistently and refers to the general definition of wellbeing. It is difficult to find a concise definition of this term in the literature dealing with this issue, but it is worth pointing out that employee wellbeing is considered in two categories of physical and mental health (Bayhan Karapinar et al., 2019; Ernst Kossek et al., 2012; Gorgenyi-Hegyes et al., 2021; Pradhan & Hati, 2019; Rasool et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2020). They consist of a psychological dimension, an emotional dimension (affects), a social dimension, and Gorgenyi-Hegyes et al. (2021) add a fourth dimension, referred to as spiritual. The psychological dimension of employees' wellbeing includes, among others, self-acceptance of
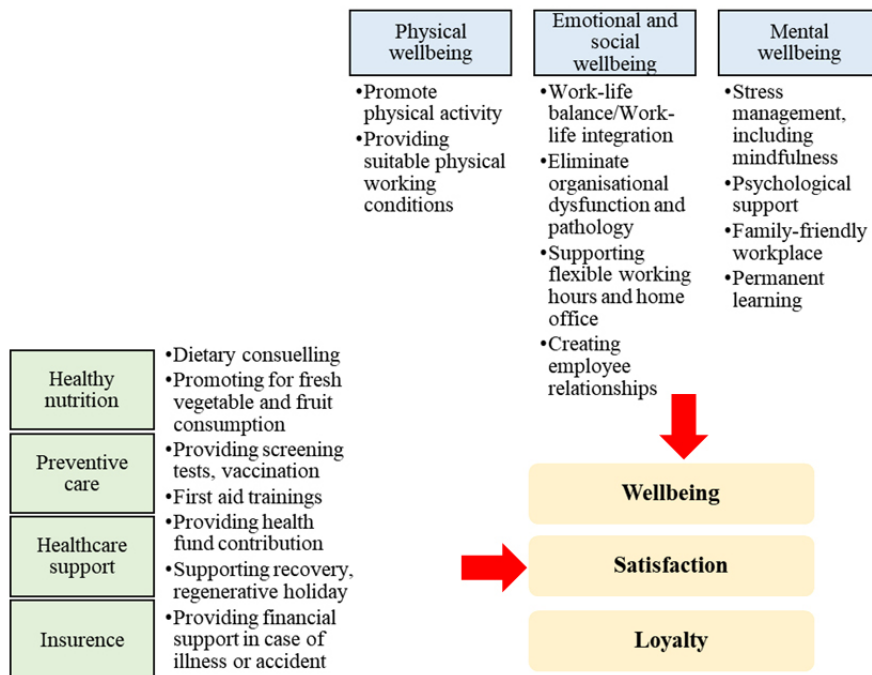
their weaknesses, having goals in one's private life that translate into goals in one's professional life, striving to achieve perfection (master) in activities, positive relationships, high autonomy, and personal development (Pradhan & Hati, 2019). The emotional and social dimensions include promoting balance (co-existence) between professional and personal life (work-life balance, work-life integration), appreciation and recognition, supporting flexible working hours and lack of pathologies in the workplace, such as discrimination, harassment, and mobbing (Gorgenyi-Hegyes et al., 2021). The least space in the literature on organisations is devoted to the separately analysed social dimension (Walia & Nishtha, 2018), although its value should be appreciated due to the fact that the quality of short-term interactions and long-term relationships affects the creation of a work environment based on respect and trust, which allows the employee to grow and flourish. The social dimension includes satisfaction with contacts as well as satisfaction with mutual relations with leaders. The last dimension, that is the spiritual dimension, is based on the feeling of personal job satisfaction. Also worth noting is that the dimensions presented above closely follow the model proposed by Tom Rath and Jim Harter from Gallup, Inc., who distinguished five dimensions: career wellbeing, social wellbeing. financial wellbeing, physical wellbeing, community wellbeing (Rath & Harter, 2010).

Figure 1 presents selected activities affecting the wellbeing of employees. The presented dimensions are always related to the organisation's strategy in the field of human resources management, and the process of their introduction should be preceded by a thorough assessment of needs and implementation possibilities. The activities on the left side of the figure are those most often carried out by organisations, and aim to build employee wellbeing, satisfaction and loyalty (Gorgenyi-Hegyes et al., 2021). Figure 1 also shows that only a combination of long-term programmes and operational activities develop the wellbeing of employees.

Figure 2 shows that including employee wellbeing in HR processes results in many positive behaviours. Pradhan and Hati (2019), conducting a meticulous analysis of the literature, showed that the use of appropriate tools and solutions in the field of wellbeing supports the process of employee performance management, which translates into making "extra miles" at work. Behaviours that affect productivity increase employee engagement and reduce employee absenteeism as a result of a high level of physical fitness and the impact on employee happiness. The next group of benefits includes reduced employee turnover resulting from, among others, greater productivity caused by better wellbeing and higher wages dependent on higher work performance. An important effect of wellbeing is the stimulation of personal capital and the creation of social relationships that result in increased creativity and the desire to possess social and knowledge resources (satisfying needs).
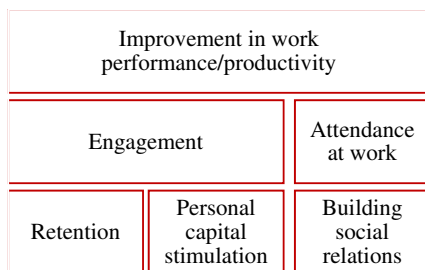
Figure 1
Dimensions and activities affecting employee wellbeing

Figure 2
Employee wellbeing benefits

The PERMA model in measuring employee wellbeing

The model of employee wellbeing reflects its multidimensionality and can be described by a set of factors creating wellbeing with methods of measuring individual dimensions. One of the most widespread and developed wellbeing models is the PERMA model (Positive emotion – P, Engagement – E, Positive Relationships – R, Meaning – M, Accomplishments – A), which was defined by Martin Seligman (2011), disseminating and promoting the direction of positive

psychology in which wellbeing is located. The subject of this article is not the study of the concept of positive psychology, but its operationalisation. However, it should be mentioned that there is also a critical approach to the positive psychology promotion, which can be found in the studies of Gable and Haidt (2005), Kwiatek and Wilczewska (2015), Linley et al. (2006), Mercer and MacIntyre (2014), Tucholska and Gulla (2007), Wong (2011). As mentioned earlier, the PERMA model is the most frequently used model in wellbeing research, and its basic approach and subsequent developments are presented in Table 1.

Based on the work of Seligman (2011) **positive emotions** provide a feeling of hedonic happiness, they are associated with fun, enjoyment and pleasure, and they lead to induced engagement. They are also a balance for the emergence of stressful situations and allow us to overcome everyday adversity. The term **engagement** is used to describe a state of increased energy, dedication, and increased intrinsic interest, which translates into overcoming difficulties, feeling that work matters in life and is a source of inspiration and pride, increased creative efforts and striving to achieve something (Pezirkianidis et al., 2019). A person feels a strong internal need for contact with other people, hence their wellbeing is also influenced by building relationships with other people (**positive relations**). Consequently, this affects the emergence of a sense of belonging in the workplace, and interaction with co-workers shapes employee experiences

Table 1

PERMA model with modifications

PERMA – BASELINE MODEL (wellbeing measurement tool: PERMA-Profiler with 23 items)			
Positive emotion (P)			
Engagement (E)			
Positive relationships (R)			
Meaning (M)			
Accomplishments (A)			
PERMA+ (wellbeing measurement tool: PERMA-Profiler+Health Omnibus Survey HOS)	PERMA+H (wellbeing measurement tool: PERMAH Workplace Survey)	PERMA+V (concept only)	PERMA+4 (wellbeing measurement tool: Positive Functioning at Work PF-W)
(+) Optimism, Physical Activity, Nutrition and Sleep	Health (H)	Vitality (V)	Physical Health, Mindset, Work Environment, Economic Security

Source: authors' elaboration based on *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and wellbeing* (pp. 21–22), M. E. Seligman, 2011, Simon & Schuster; „Measuring PERMA+ in South Australia, the state of wellbeing: A comparison with national and international norms", M. Iasiello, J. Bartholomaes, A. Jarden, & G. Kelly, 2017, *Journal of Positive Psychology and Wellbeing, 1*(2), pp. 54–55; „A multi-dimensional PERMA-H positive education model, general satisfaction of school life, and character strengths use in Hong Kong Senior Primary School Students: Confirmatory factor analysis and path analysis using the APASO-II", M. K. Lai, C. Leung, S. Y. C. Kwok, A. N. N. Hui, H. H. M. Lo, J. T. Y. Leung, & C. H. L. Tam (2018), *Frontiers in Psychology, 9*, pp. 2–3 (https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01090); „PERMA+4: A framework for work-related wellbeing, performance and positive organizational psychology 2.0", S. I. Donaldson, L. E. van Zyl, & S. I. Donaldson, 2022, *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, pp. 4–7 (https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.817244).

that ensure their physical and mental health (Kun et al., 2016). **Meaning** generates motivation and gives life value, and consequently affects the sense of fulfil-ment. Giving meaning to life leads to the avoidance of pointless efforts, and thus reduces negative emotions, the emergence of stress, and depression. **Accomplish-ments** reflecting the fulfilment of daily ambitions, or the achievement of a set goal, allow for an increase in the level of wellbeing through psychological flourish-ing, which can be supported by the use of strategies of sharing personal achievements with others (Pezir-kianidis et al., 2019).

Seligman (2018), referring to Goodman's study, indicates that the correlation coefficient between the elements of PERMA model is 0.61, which is a moderate correlation. He concludes that the PERMA model contains elements of wellbeing, as people who possess one of these elements tend to possess the other elements of wellbeing. It should also be added that Seligman (2018) himself states that the list of elements that create wellbeing goes far beyond the PERMA model, which can be the basis for building an excellent model of wellbeing.

Table 1 also includes extensions of the PERMA model corresponding to Seligman's postulate of model enrichment. Considering factors strongly correlated with resilience and psychological wellbeing (PWB), the PERMA+ (PERMA plus) model includes opti-mism, physical activity, nutrition and sleep (Iasiello et al., 2017). The PERMA+H (PERMA-H) model is a more holistic view of the concept of wellbeing, as it considers the dimensions of positive physical and mental health (Morgan & Simmons, 2021). Another element qualified to the PERMA model is Vitality,

which consequently led to the creation of a model called PERMA+V (PERMA-V), covering the fullness of internal energy associated with improving the body's efficiency and lifestyle, including contact with nature (Petersen et al., 2021).

Donaldson et al. (2022) found that the PERMA mod-el should be additionally equipped with four blocks closely related to the working environment, wellbeing in the workplace and affecting work performance. These include Physical Health, Mindset, Work Environ-ment, and Economic Security, which led to defining the PERMA+4 model presented in Figure 3.
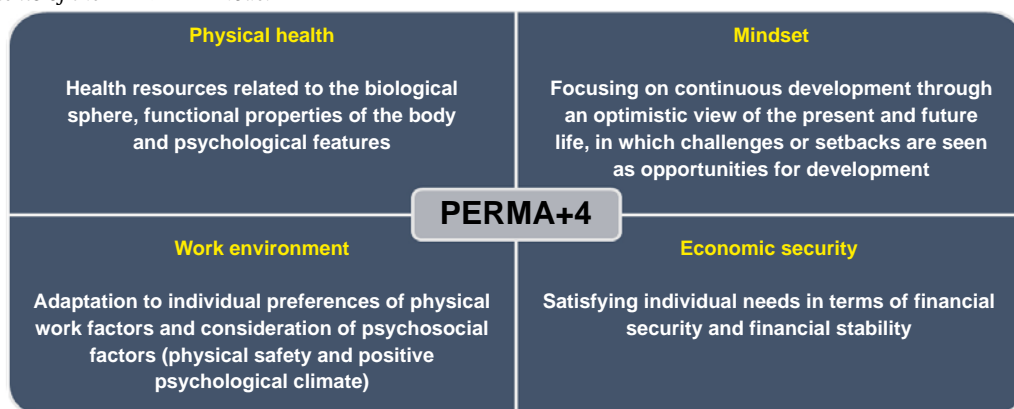
Detailed information on each of the additional ele-ments included in the PERMA+4 model can be found in the paper by Donaldson et al. (2022), in which the authors ensure that each element is directly related to wellbeing, is independent and is not a function of another element.

Research on individual dimensions of wellbeing included in the PERMA model is carried out using the PERMA-Profiler questionnaire developed by Butler and Kern (2016). The authors started with a bank contain-ing over 700 items, which after rejecting some repeti-tive items and following discussion by positive psy-chology experts, was later limited to 109 questions. Apart from the main, 11-point Likert scale, other scales were also tested, giving a total of 199 items, which were answered by over 3,700 respondents. As a result of the complex research, it was found that 15 items exhibited psychometric properties. The final version of the PERMA-Profiler contains 23 questions with an 11-point scale. The creators of the tool themselves admit that it is not perfect and finding the perfect tool to measure wellbeing could take a lifetime. The

Figure 3
Components of the PERMA+4 model

Physical health	Mindset
Health resources related to the biological sphere, functional properties of the body and psychological features	Focusing on continuous development through an optimistic view of the present and future life, in which challenges or setbacks are seen as opportunities for development

PERMA+4

Work environment	Economic security
Adaptation to individual preferences of physical work factors and consideration of psychosocial factors (physical safety and positive psychological climate)	Satisfying individual needs in terms of financial security and financial stability

Source: authors' elaboration based on S. I. Donaldson, L. E. van Zyl & S. I. Donaldson, 2022, *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, pp. 4–7 (https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.817244).

PERMA-Profiler has shown acceptable psychometric properties in a large, diverse, international research sample (Butler & Kern, 2016).

Classification of positive psychological interventions with the PERMA model

A term grounded in positive psychology is flourishing, which includes the concept of optimal wellbeing as a multidimensional and holistic concept encompassing both hedonistic (positive emotions) and eudaimonic (self-worth, development and a sense of being a highly influential and meaningful individual) aspects (Norrish et al., 2013). Only an approach based on a combination of hedonistic and eudaimonistic aspects can ensure positive psychological (mental) health. Therefore, organisational interventions should use the concept of flourishing. Tetrick and Winslow (2015) classified interventions in organisations according to three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. The primary level aims to eliminate stressors and is preventive. The secondary level refers to employees at high risk of illness or injury, with the intention to identify illness or injury at an early stage before full symptoms appear. The tertiary level of intervention refers to those who have suffered an illness or injury, and the role of the intervention is to slow or stop the illness and injury, and quickly return to work (Keeman et al., 2017). Table 2 summarises the most frequently used interventions in these three areas.

Table 2
Selected organisational interventions according to their three levels

Primary level of interventions	Secondary level of interventions	Tertiary level of interventions
• Reduction of risks arising from working conditions • Flexible working hours • Work-life balance training • Access to training on self-care • Access to psychological support • Support for employees working online • Training in mental and physical health care • Building relationships between employees • Recognising employees for their positive behaviour • Encouraging employees to share ideas on stress reduction • Providing redundancy alternatives (job-sharing, additional holidays) • Transferring funds from realised projects to maintain retention	• Reduction of working time for workers at risk of illness or injury • Offering voluntary and free health testing • Reducing workload • Support for reducing family workload (childcare, elderly care) • Offering additional time off • Providing free therapies • Providing training to allow employee rotation • Rewarding employees for reporting and identifying potential health risks • Involving workers in workplace safety and security teams • Mindfulness training	• Assistance for employees with a work-life conflict • Providing additional financial resources to mitigate the effects of work stoppage • Providing additional health insurance • Offering paid leave • Sharing positive stories about people who find themselves in a similar situation • Providing professional psychological support • Involving the employee in the decision to return to work • Providing clinical trials • Organising support groups

Source: authors' elaboration based on „Workplace interventions in response to COVID-19: an occupational health psychology perspective", C.-H. Chang, R. Shao, M. Wang, & N. M. Baker, 2021, *Occupational Health Science*, *5*(1–2), pp. 1–23 (https://doi.org/10.1007/s41542-021-00080-x).

Table 3
Interventions and techniques building wellbeing in individual components of the PERMA+H model

Component of the PERMA+H model	• Types of intervention	• Techniques
Positive emotions (P)	• Taking care of enjoyment, pleasure and satisfaction in the learning process • Building awareness that the learning process consists of both pleasant and negative experiences	• Expressing gratitude and accepting mistakes • Building relationships to obtain feedback • Emphasizing the positive aspects of the learning process
Engagement (E)	• Stimulating intrinsic motivation • Highlighting strengths and using individual strong points	• Setting educational goals • Searching for projects and tasks in line with the learners' strengths • Creation of individual development plans
Positive relations (R)	• Sharing and reliving experiences • Conducting discussions with learning partners	• Conducting constructive conversations with learners • Celebrating achievements • Use of mentoring
Meaning (M)	• Defining the goal of development, including enhancing competences • Opportunity to use the acquired competences for the benefit of the local community	• Freedom to choose the competences to be acquired and developed • Identify opportunities to influence the lives and work of others • Arousing interest in exercises and tasks (searching for elements of novelty, shaping new and useful competences)
Accomplishments (A)	• Building and helping to achieve perseverance in the learning process • Using praise and encouragement in the development process (feedback)	• Setting and visualising the achievement of specific and realistic goals • Implementation of a system of rewards for learning progress • Permanent feedback
Health (H)	• Learning related to the exploration of the natural environment through physical activity • Supporting the learning process with the use of relaxation and problem-solving techniques	• Promoting a culture of health • Mindfulness trainings

Source: authors' elaboration based on „An applied framework for positive education", J. M. Norrish, P. Williams, M. O'Connor, & J. Robinson, 2013, *International Journal of Wellbeing, 3*(2), pp. 152–155; Flourishing interventions: A practical guide to student development, L. E. van Zyl, & M. Stander, 2014. In M. Coetzee (Eds.), *Psycho-social Career Meta-capacities* (p. 268), Springer (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-00645-1_14); „Emotion regulation in adolescent wellbeing and Positive Education", L. Morrish, N. Rickard, T. C. Chin & D. A. Vella-Brodrick, 2018, *Journal of Happiness Studies, 19*(5), pp. 1547–1555 (https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-017-9881-y).

In addition to the functionality of the indicated PERMA model, it also allows for building a typology of interventions used in employee leadership practice. A variant of the model that has been used in this classification is the PERMA+H model, which was applied in the research by Duan et al. (2020), Lai et al. (2018), Morgan and Simmons (2021). The classification of the interventions and their activities with the techniques used are in Table 3.

The activities undertaken in the process of positive psychology, together with the techniques that ensure their implementation, must be used together. Their inseparable nature is intended to lead to employee wellbeing and thus support high engagement, retention and performance. As pointed out by Lai et al. (2018) positive psychology can flourish only by providing ecologies training (Learn), modifying training programmes (Teach), inducing activity and interaction (Embed) and applying positive psychology interventions to personal and work life (Live).

Conclusions and recommendations

The conducted analyses of the concept of employee wellbeing led to the conclusion that this concept should be interpreted multidimensionally. Most often, however, they include activities related to the physical dimension in their programmes, which is confirmed by research conducted by the Activity team (Activity, n.d.), where over 75% of initiatives concerned this dimension, and the smallest amount concerned financial security and mental health. In the results of global research presented by AON (AON, n.d.) we can also find information that the largest number of wellbeing programmes used in organisations, as much as 70%, concerns the physical dimension. There is a discrepancy between the organisation's offer and the needs and priorities defined by employees, and further results of the AON Global Survey show that the five most important activities creating wellbeing include: work-life balance (65%), mental health (46%), working

environment/culture (44%), physical health (35%) and burnout (34%). This means that the emotional, social and mental dimensions dominate in this comparison, rather than the physical one. At the same time, it shows the direction which organisations should follow when building wellbeing strategies.

Before an organisation decides to take any action, it should measure wellbeing. The PERMA model is a helpful and constantly developed measurement tool. This determines its usefulness in the study and identification of wellbeing dimensions, thanks to which benefits such as: increased work efficiency, maintaining or improving the level of commitment or building the right organisational climate while maintaining a high level of employee retention can be obtained. The analysis of the models developing the PERMA model showed that the PERMA+4 model, which takes economic security into account, is of interest when examining the wellbeing of employees. AON research on wellbeing shows that this is the greatest challenge for organisations, since as many as 76% of the surveyed organisations do not have any plans to help employees overnight. In addition, 83% do not have plans related to savings that can be used by employees in case of an emergency. On the other hand, the lack of financial security for employees in the form of e.g. cash benefits or special budgets to help employees in the event of a sudden illness will become one of the basic reasons for considering leaving an organisation.

The extended PERMA model, PERMA+H, is not only useful in the research of employee wellbeing, but its use in the classification of positive psychology interventions is more and more often observed. There are a growing number of studies confirming that the wellbeing of people who increase their competences has a fundamental impact on the course and success of the learning process, with the knowledge, skills and attitudes of the teacher (trainer) playing a fundamental role. The basis should be the training of all those involved in the process of developing competences in the field of positive education, starting from theoretical considerations to how to measure wellbeing and techniques that can be used in the individual components of the PERMA+H model. Research using this model shows that a special place in shaping wellbeing should be occupied by identifying strengths that allow you to make informed learning and career choices. Investing in positive psychology programmes and incorporating wellbeing training and courses into human resource development are a response to stressful situations, illness and psychological injury for employees.

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