

Putting the wellbeing of employees into the 'S' of your ESG strategy

The wellbeing of your people drives the wellbeing of your business.

By Henrietta Jowitt
Advisor to MindForward Alliance

MindForward
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City Mental Health
Alliance



Abstract

Employers, their stakeholders and regulators are placing greater focus on the link between employee mental health and wellbeing, and business profitability and sustainability. Employee mental health and wellbeing is therefore becoming a strategic business priority and a core part of responsible business. But it is not clear how it fits into an Environment, Social and Corporate Governance (ESG) strategy. This paper addresses that question. In doing so, we hope to provide businesses, their stakeholders and regulators with a clear direction.

Our hypothesis is that mental health and wellbeing of employees should form the measurable foundation of the 'S' within ESG. We believe this needs to underpin the success of business strategy which then enables other layers of 'S' activity and initiatives to be developed. We see wellbeing and building wellbeing capital, as an overarching output or result, from a range of important inputs, not as a subset of health and safety inputs, where many businesses currently place it.

To support our hypothesis, this paper explores the key component parts of wellbeing, and their associated operational initiatives.

Our ambition is to provide an evidence-based approach for businesses to build and measure wellbeing capital. This in turn can become a critical part of the non-financial assessment of a sustainable and resilient business, informing ESG reporting.

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Part 1: Introduction

Employee wellbeing, specifically mental wellbeing is increasingly being recognised as a robust forward indicator of the risk profile and future success of business. More businesses are placing wellbeing on the board agenda and greater attention is now being placed on how wellbeing can be recognised as a critical part of a businesses' ESG strategy.

Is it on your board agenda? And where does it fit in your business strategy?

Purpose of this paper

The purpose of this paper is to examine how to put the wellbeing of employees firmly into the 'S' of the business ESG strategy and specifically, their mental health and wellbeing.

ESG: a strategic framework

ESG describes a strategic framework to shape, plan, organise and then report on your business. Its purpose is to deliver a profitable, fair and sustainable future. That sustainable future is impacted by what you choose to do, with whom, and how you choose to do it.

The culture and purpose of your organisation has a direct and clear impact on the resilience and success of your organisation and its people. This has a corresponding direct impact on both the environment and communities in which you operate. These aspects of business strategy and action now need to be a core part of ensuring your governance drives and supports a resilient, fair, transparent, profitable and legally compliant business.

Key aspects of ESG will shape the future success of business

ESG is a powerful strategic concept. It is finally making its way out of the back office, through risk and compliance and is arriving in the board room where it belongs. But there is still work to be done to decide what to include and importantly, how to measure impact and progress.

There is recognition that the key aspects of ESG will shape the future success of business. It will impact the risk profile and cost of capital, the ability to innovate and the desirability of the products and services delivered to customers. It is also aligned to employee performance enabling future growth, the ability to attract and retain the best talent and is an influencer of society more broadly. Key aspects of ESG are fast becoming key indicators for investors of the overall sustainability, resilience, and future profitability of a business, along with the more traditional financial measures of the P&L and balance sheet. ESG outcomes are essentially becoming a licence to operate.

The pandemic has also accelerated this strategic imperative and brought into sharp focus how small the world that we all share is; how unfairly health and wellbeing related impacts fall on society and how our fragile ecosystems are at the mercy of humankind. We are in the process of destroying our life support system and future generations' wellbeing and survival.

But the pandemic also demonstrated that with collective effort, empathy, innovation and investment, great businesses can help solve some of the biggest issues and challenges we face.

This has been reinforced by the COP26 meetings and outputs, which saw some of the responsibility for the 'E' of ESG and the NetZero transition pass from Governments and NGOs to the business and investment community, where the innovation and skills, capital and collaboration needed to drive change sit more naturally. This is good news, because when business wants to get something done, it has the resources and skills to focus and execute.

Which brings us to the focus needed from business on the 'S' of ESG and in particular how to build the 'S' foundation effectively. To do that well, we need to start by understanding the impact the health and wellbeing of employees has on the overall performance of a business.

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Part 2: The pandemic shifted business responsibility for wellbeing of employees

The Impact of the pandemic on wellbeing and business performance

The pandemic shifted the relative weight of understanding and responsibility of wellbeing from the individual to the business, where responsibility is now shared. In surveys on wellbeing, over 60% of the impact on individuals, is driven from their place of work. Managers and leaders have realised that the mental wellbeing of their staff and indeed themselves, has a direct and visible impact on productivity and performance. It became clear very early on, that the wellbeing of colleagues was a critical driver of their ability to operate effectively in the crisis.

For many, the office or shop door and factory gate became their own front door. Keeping everyone well in the broadest sense has been one of the biggest challenges for leaders during the pandemic. As many grappled with entirely new ways of working in very challenging circumstances, wellbeing became a number one priority for CEOs. It also began to remove the historic stigma associated with mental wellbeing, because everyone has mental health and mental wellbeing has a direct impact on employee and business performance.

Fear and stress changed business forever

A crisis tests personal resilience and our ability to cope and problem solve under extreme pressure. Some people thrive, some do not. But the pandemic gave many the opportunity to assess what is important in life. And business leaders, many at home by themselves could see, feel, and understand the impact all of this was having on their colleagues and their ability to operate effectively and to perform.

Everyone was operating in an environment of fast change and fear. Whether it was working from home, home schooling or caring for family members, some of whom were sick or sadly died. And then there were those on furlough or those who were isolated and alone. Anxiety and stress levels soared and whilst baking and Joe Wicks became popular, for many it was a relentless and exhausting experience.

This culminated in a collective anxiety that could no longer be ignored, viewed only as individual problems or ascribed to factors that were external to the workplace. The combined impact of all these stressors was reflected in a spike in employee burnout (McKinsey Health Institute, 2022) which became a widespread concern across companies. Keeping everyone safe and well was critical.

There were many actions taken by companies to combat burnout and high stress levels, ranging from new mental health resources and benefits, wellbeing days off, to changes in work practices and flexibility.

It became clear that leaders and businesses that focussed on the mental wellbeing of their colleagues, and supported them effectively as a business, were much more successful in navigating the negative impacts of the pandemic than those that did not focus on mental wellbeing.

An unequal impact

The impact on colleagues was even more evident when considering the health and mental wellbeing of those from diverse communities. The pandemic highlighted health inequity as both a reality and a major issue, having a disproportionately negative impact on those in racial and ethnic minority groups, and those in lower social-economic groups.

The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the US reported (survey in 2020 and 2021) significant increases in mental health concerns amongst Black and Hispanic communities for example.

Industries that had essential workers who were vital for business and societal continuity, realised for the first time that they were critical and yet underserved as an employee group. These employees tended to be lower compensated and often from socio-economic groups that were impacted more harshly by the pandemic, in part because many operated in those vital frontline jobs.

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Additionally, women across many countries also reported having more wellbeing-related issues driven by personal finance issues and greater work stress than men (You Gov, 2021). Indeed, in most cultures, it was the women that picked up the bulk of extra caring and schooling responsibilities thrust upon families as a result of the lockdowns. Many at the expense of their paid work. This exacerbated the impact on wellbeing of females in the workforce.

Understanding the wellbeing impacts of business profitability and sustainability

Enlightened leaders now recognise the hard facts that mental wellbeing and health must be a core part of a responsible business. Because without it, performance and the bottom line of the business is impacted.

In addition, investors, especially asset managers, are also beginning to recognise that positive staff wellbeing is one of the key forward indicators of business performance. They are looking for action on wellbeing as they assess risk, look to predict future cashflows in businesses and the cost of capital along with the traditional P&L and balance sheet.

As a result, investor demands and regulatory requirements of non-financial reporting are growing and there is an increasingly strong expectation that companies should identify and report on key ESG metrics, of which the 'S' is a vital measure. Boards will need to take responsibility for ensuring they can both articulate and measure the 'S' of their business.

Part 3: Is wellbeing on your board agenda?

Where should wellbeing sit on the Board agenda?

Many businesses put wellbeing in with their Health and Safety (H&S) agenda. This is not unreasonable. It has grown out of risk, compliance and reputation.

H&S was designed in the 1970s and 1980s to prevent accidents and has had a huge impact in industries such as construction and manufacturing as well as agriculture, which are now much safer places to work – but that is different to the overall wellbeing of your employees, which is about building resilience, culture and performance not preventing accidents.

So, wellbeing is conceptually in the wrong place. Placing wellbeing in the H&S agenda does not recognise what the key component parts are that make up employees' feelings of wellbeing and in turn lead to improved performance.

Wellbeing of colleagues is an output, not an input. H&S is a set of inputs. The tasks and activities associated with H&S are important but are a small subset of other levers and activities that need to be in place to deliver wellbeing overall for employees.

Wellbeing amongst colleagues is an overarching measurable output. It is comprised of a number of important input component parts and business levers and there is strong data and evidence to support this with a good correlation between overall employee wellbeing and future business performance (Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre).

Our view therefore is that wellbeing is the core foundation of 'S' within a business ESG strategy.

Defining the 'S' of ESG, informs this position

The 'S' to date has typically been a mix of social impact activities, such as human rights and modern slavery in the supply chain and social responsibility initiatives, such as diversity, equity & inclusion (DEI) goals and pay equity (pay gap) reporting.

The balance of that work on 'S' to date has in many cases been focused on **social impact** and making the world, or certainly your local communities, a better place to live and be part of.

Initiatives around social justice, fairness, inclusion and giving back have enabled staff to become an important part of the fabric of their business and local communities, providing fulfillment, meaning and purpose, profile and skills development for them and vital support for those they benefit. This has built social capital for the individual staff members and for the firms involved and has had a social impact.

Placing wellbeing in the H&S agenda does not recognise what the key component parts are that make up employees' feelings of wellbeing and in turn lead to improved performance.

It is an important part of the reputation of the business, the value of the employee brand and the fabric of communities. However, it is difficult to measure the direct impact on the bottom line, other than cost. In part because not doing it could well cost businesses more in relation to reputation, growth and overall sustainability.

Social responsibility - looking after your colleagues and business partners - is slightly different and has often had less focus. But interestingly, making where you work a better place (social responsibility) versus the world a better place (social impact), has a much more tangible impact on the key levers of business resilience, profitability and the long-term success of a business. Which in turn drives the ability of firms to support their local communities or indeed other communities and activities in multiple ways (social impact).

Social responsibility within a business and its supply chains and partnerships is therefore a **'wellbeing capital'** and performance play. Developing social responsibility enables a business to build and measure social capital and to then invest that capital for growth and for social impact.

Our hypothesis

Our hypothesis is that there are multiple component parts to building wellbeing capital.

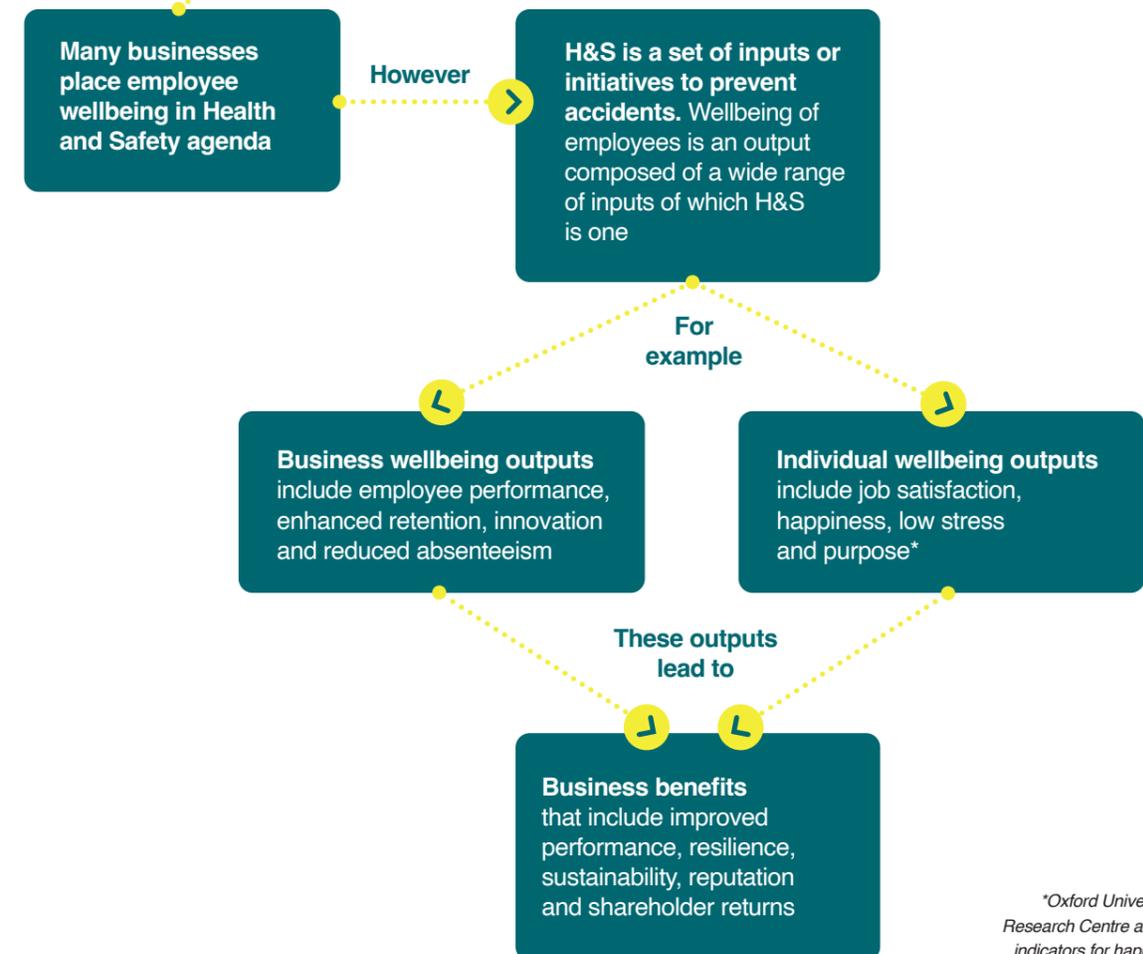
It needs to form the measurable foundation of the 'S' within ESG, because without it, social capital does not accumulate. Without social capital, businesses tend not to thrive. The intersectionality between wellbeing, underrepresented communities, and essential workers further supports this hypothesis.

Having a solid and measurable foundation, that drives performance and enables other layers of 'S' activity and initiatives to be built on it, would ensure that business leaders could see this underpinning the success of their business strategy, not something that is extra. And if you build capital, internal wellbeing capital, you can then deploy it as social capital for growing your business, innovating, attracting and keeping great talent (especially the up-and-coming generations of employees), and then supporting your local communities and social impact investing.

Developing social responsibility enables a business to build and measure social capital and to then invest that capital for growth and for social impact.

Challenging the notion that mental health and wellbeing should sit within the Health and Safety agenda.

Environmental Your impact on the world	Social Your contribution to your communities	Governance How you conduct yourself
Climate change	Working conditions including slavery and child labour	Executive Pay
Greenhouse gas	Impact on local communities	Bribery and corruption
Natural resource depletion	Conflict regions	Political lobbying and donations
Waste and pollution	Health and safety	Board diversity and structure
Deforestation	Employee relations and diversity	Tax strategy
Hazardous materials	Product miss-selling	Data breaches
Biodiversity	Data production	



*Oxford University Wellbeing Research Centre and Indeed: key indicators for happiness at work.

Part 4: Operationalising wellbeing as a foundation of the S

What are the key component parts and levers of wellbeing?

To advance the discussion on wellbeing as the foundation of 'S' within ESG, businesses need to understand:

- How do the key component parts/levers of wellbeing roll up into forming the foundation of the 'S' of ESG? And;
- How do the component parts/levers become a critical part of the non-financial assessment of a sustainable and resilient business?

At an academic level there are several models for the wellbeing of individuals and two that have also studied places of work. The below table provides an overview of a number of wellbeing models (not exhaustive).

Table 1: Models of wellbeing

Oxford University Wellbeing Research Centre and Indeed Key indicators for wellbeing/happiness at work	Ryff's (1989) core dimensions of psychological wellbeing	Jahoda's (1958) definition of positive mental health	Berkeley Interdisciplinary Centre for Healthy Workplaces, the healthy workplace model
Job satisfaction	Self-acceptance	Attitude toward own self	Positive emotions
Happiness	Purpose in life	Growth	Belonging
Stress	Autonomy	Development and self-actualisation	Meaning or purpose
Purpose*	Environmental mastery	Integration	Autonomy
	Positive relationships with others	Autonomy	Competence or mastery
	Personal growth	Perception of reality	Engagement or achievement
		Environmental mastery	Personal growth
			Safety

*It has been debated whether purpose is a wellbeing input/lever or an output variable. Data from Oxford University Wellbeing Research Centre supports that purpose is an output, along with job satisfaction, happiness and stress. Together these four areas are key indicators for wellbeing/happiness at work.

There are key similarities between these four models. However, at a practical level, when running a business and trying to build and measure wellbeing amongst colleagues, the individual models are too high level and conceptual to be used.

Fortunately, a number of organisations have already worked on operationalising these models into component parts or levers that can be used more easily to build wellbeing plans in a business or workplace.

Table 2: Example levers that can foster wellbeing

Indeed & Oxford University Wellbeing Research Centre happiness/wellbeing drivers for their business index	Betterspace have tested the Oxford University Hospitals six clinically proven wellness criteria for their business	NHS has a 5 ways of wellbeing criteria	Berkeley Interdisciplinary Centre for Healthy Workplaces, drivers for need satisfaction
Belonging	Sleep	Learn	Comfort
Energy	Exercise	Active	Connection
Appreciation	Meaningful activity	Take notice/be present	Predictability
Achievement	Social connections	Connect	Flexibility
Compensation	Helping others	Give	Security
Support	Stress management		Equity
Learning			Privacy
Inclusion			
Flexibility			
Trust			
Management			

For the remainder of this paper we will focus on the levers developed by Indeed and Oxford University; Betterspace and Oxford University Hospitals; and Berkeley Interdisciplinary Centre. Although the NHS 5 Ways to Wellbeing are useful, since Oxford University Hospitals is part of the NHS and specialists in mental health, we have taken their wellbeing criteria as the benchmark.

The Indeed and Oxford list covers all the key levers of building and measuring Table 3 happiness and wellbeing in a business, the output from which can be correlated to a better individual and business performance. The Betterspace/Oxford University Hospitals list gives you practical topic areas for the individuals within your business to focus your plans around that help to deliver key parts of the first longer list. The Berkeley drivers add some interesting dimensions as well. In particular predictability, comfort and privacy.

Between these thoughtful and data supported levers - the outputs from which roll up into the overall wellbeing of your people - the key wellbeing criteria or levers, for individuals within a business are well captured.

Some are hard factual data, and some are softer 'feelings' data, but all can be measured, and initiatives can be developed to improve them. This will in turn drive higher wellbeing amongst colleagues, building that wellbeing and social capital, with the commensurate improvement in performance of the business over time.

All component parts need to be considered as part of the overall foundation of the 'S' framework that can be managed and measured, to build social capital in the business. The relative importance and impact of each lever will vary by the individual business, the sector in which they operate, and the geography and associated cultural nuances, but the key overarching output is wellbeing amongst colleagues.

In table 3 we have tried to aggregate the 3 sets of levers for business to reduce duplication. It is not a perfect fit, but it goes some way to consolidating the thinking. Some levers appear more than once, as they fit in slightly different places. We have also added a 4th column, with operational examples (not exhaustive) for businesses to think about against the wellbeing levers, so that you can see where perhaps current initiatives might already be underway and fit in and where you may have gaps.

All component parts need to be considered as part of the overall foundation of the 'S' framework that can be managed and measured to build wellbeing capital in the business.



If the levers in table 3 are the key drivers of Wellbeing and form the foundation of 'S', which research and data sets are increasingly indicating that they are, then the groundwork for some of the levers and measurements are likely already in place. They will need adapting and, the gaps in current business plans need to be filled. It is also clear that this needs to be a business wide strategy, not assigned to a department as a set of unrelated initiatives. Businesses can then pull the levers together to roll up into a wellbeing indicator for their business which will collectively build the foundation of 'S' within ESG. They can then meaningfully report on the 'S' to their employees, stakeholders and investors.

The critical thing to remember, is that the impact on wellbeing is driven by a consolidated and consistent application of a range of levers across the business. It is not fixed by packages of employee services such as yoga or free coffee, but by the purpose, culture and behaviour of the organisation and its leaders and managers in making it a great place to work where employees are listened to and feel safe, valued and trusted.

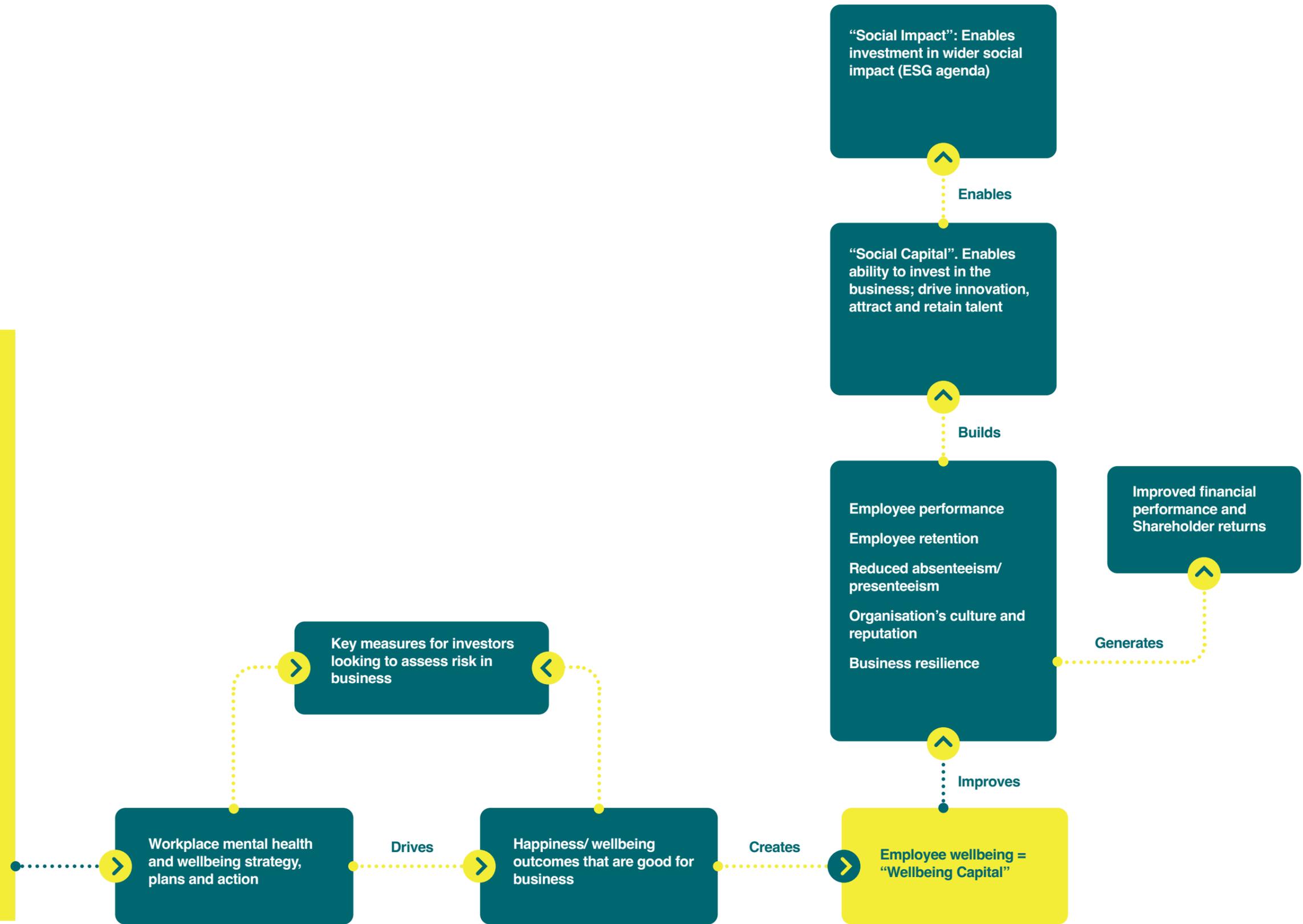
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Table 3: Aggregated wellbeing levers and example operational capabilities and initiatives

Wellbeing and Happiness (Indeed and Oxford)	Clinically proven areas that improve patients' wellbeing (Betterspace and Oxford University Hospital clinicians)	Drivers for need satisfaction (Berkeley Interdisciplinary center for healthy workplaces)	Example operational capabilities and initiatives for a business wellbeing plan (business best practice)
Belonging	Social connections	Connections and Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pay equity reporting - Gender and diversity representation goals and plans - Inclusion - Fairness and equal opportunities - Diverse role models in the organisation - Voluntary events - Mentoring - Employee-led and management-backed Business Resource Groups - The placement of visible imagery depicting diverse role models throughout offices
Energy	Sleep and Exercise	Comfort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunities - Services - Permission to flex - Activity challenges and trackers - Digital sleep programs - Physical H&S - Right to disconnect from email outside of work hours (and social norm to disconnect from email, driven from the top down) - Health of buildings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Air quality • Temperature • Hvac • Ambiance, light & green • Facilities and space • Use of biophilic design (bringing nature indoors); • Use of neutral décor which does not overwhelm the senses; • Creation of quiet zones, and other micro-environments to suit the needs of a diverse work-force.
Appreciation	Helping others		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good management - Employee recognition programs - Opportunities to give back and support others - Buddy systems
Achievement	Meaningful activity		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding where your work fits - Good management and comms - Performance management alignment - Recognition & reward

Compensation		Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fair and transparent pay - Pay equity reporting - Published plans to drive change - Pay for performance and alignment to values-based behaviors
Support			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Thoughtful programs for colleagues/families - Mental Health First Aiders (or equivalent) - Employee Assistance Programs - Volunteering days - Mental health first responders - Training for all people managers on how to support the mental health of their team
Learning			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunities and encouragement to develop, learn and progress - Lunch and learn - Lateral career opportunities
Inclusion	Social connections	Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Thoughtful and effective D&I initiatives - Leaders advocate for team members - Leaders treat team members fairly - Initiatives to reduce stigma - The removal of gendered wording from job adverts, - The anonymisation of resumes.
Flexibility		Flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good management and process to enable flexibility e.g., work from home policies - Choice within flex-work frameworks - Outputs not presenteeism
Trust		Privacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Built over time, social capital, by delivering on these key elements of wellbeing - Respect for the individual - Good management and process - Business culture/safety - Do no harm
Management		Predictability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being supportive and authentic - Good training, coaching, mentoring programs - Mental health and wellbeing a strategic priority, with assigned tasks - Senior leaders publicly acknowledge issues and listen to employee needs - Treatment of others integral part of assessing performance - Toxic behaviour flagged and addressed - Leaders aware of the impact their behaviour has on others

The mental health and wellbeing of employees should form the measurable foundation of the 'S' within ESG and build the wellbeing capital of an organisation.



Part 5: Summary and future directions

In Summary

Our hypothesis was that there are multiple component parts or levers, to building wellbeing capital. It needs to form the measurable foundation of the 'S' within ESG, because without it, social capital does not accumulate. Without social capital, businesses tend not to thrive and social impact investing is undermined. Our conclusions from this paper are as follows:

- We believe that this hypothesis holds up and increasing data and evidence, including robust correlation analysis between financial performance and wellbeing, supports it.
- The wellbeing of your people is the overarching objective and output for building the foundation of 'S' and the sum of these component parts or levers in the charts, will deliver it.
- Getting employee wellbeing support right and measuring it builds the wellbeing and social capital and resilience of an organisation for the future.
- With that social capital comes the ability to invest in your business, attract and retain talent, drive innovation and growth and to then invest in social impact outside the traditional confines of your business.
- Strong wellbeing capability and social capital can then be used as a key measure for investors looking to assess risk in that business and to price that risk going forward when looking to invest.
- Putting wellbeing on your board agenda as the critical foundation for building 'S' within ESG makes sound business performance and financial sense.
- Embedding the 'S' of ESG into your overall business strategy, has a direct and clear impact on the resilience and success of your organisation and its people, both now and in the future.
- This is an overarching strategic business wide imperative, not a department driven set of initiatives

Future directions

This paper is the first in a series of papers that will explore how best to put the wellbeing of employees into the 'S' of your business ESG strategy.

This first paper has outlined our hypothesis on why wellbeing should form the foundation of the 'S' within ESG and why putting it into H&S will not drive the change that is needed and is conceptually wrong. We also sought to provide insight into how existing measures of wellbeing can be used to inform businesses wellbeing plans.

Our next steps will be to expand on this position to provide more detailed operational initiatives for a business to develop their wellbeing levers and plans and highlight best practice.

We will also continue to explore the measurement of S. We will work and partner with others on measurement as much work is already underway on this and duplication will be unhelpful. How businesses measure their wellbeing capital to draw the link between employee wellbeing and business performance is a vital part of this wellbeing jigsaw puzzle. This will increasingly be needed for reporting to investors and financial regulators.

We will continue to focus on wellbeing in business and will develop further work and thinking as this critical topic evolves over time globally.

Our next steps will be to expand on this position to provide more detailed operational initiatives for a business to develop their wellbeing levers and highlight best practice.



Report Author

Henrietta Jowitt,
Advisor to MindForward Alliance

Henrietta is a senior business leader with more than three decades' commercial experience driving growth and transformation for organisations. She has worked across ESG for over 20 years, embedding it into risk management, business strategy and new products in business and financial services organisations.

She is an advisor to MindForward Alliance, a not-for-profit that is business led, focussed on the mental health and wellbeing of employees globally.

Henrietta holds several non-executive director roles as an iNED for Franklin Templeton Fund Management, a Trustee for arts organisation Opera North and an advisor to the Principle of Green Templeton College, Oxford University, where she is an Associate Fellow. She has an MA from Oxford University where she read Natural Sciences.

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Many other conversations and much advice from business professionals and mental health experts who understand that employee wellbeing is vital for business performance and success.

About MindForward Alliance

[MindForward Alliance](#) is a global membership organisation which works with businesses to drive improvements in the way they support the mental health and wellbeing of their employees. We convene business leaders and HR practitioners at the intersection of business, mental health and wellbeing to collaborate and share knowledge. We believe that when organisations pool their resources, share openly and work collaboratively towards a common goal, better, more sustainable mental health outcomes will be achieved for more people, sooner.

We are made up of MindForward Alliance and seven country chapters. MindForward Alliance is our global chapter. Our network of country chapters provide in country support tailored to the local business context.

Our local country chapters include [City Mental Health Alliance \(CMHA\) UK](#), [CMHA Hong Kong](#), [CMHA Singapore](#), [CMHA India](#), [Corporate Mental Health Alliance Australia and New Zealand](#) and [MindAlliance Portugal](#). Together we are working to transform workplace mental health. Our vision is that every business will protect, support and create positive mental health for their employees so that their people and business can thrive. Wherever your business is on its workplace mental health and wellbeing journey we would like to work with you.

- 1. Join our global Alliance** – [join](#) other leading businesses to become a member of our business community to achieve sustainable and measurable change within your organisation
- 2. Partner with us to drive transformational change** – work with us on initiatives that add to the evidence base on workplace mental health and wellbeing. Together we can have a critical impact on society and dramatically improve a substantial number of peoples' lives
- 3. Measure and benchmark your approach** – take our [Global Thriving at Work Assessment](#) to measure and benchmark your global approach to workplace mental health and wellbeing. Demonstrate your commitment and action to supporting employee mental health and wellbeing, for example in ESG reporting.

Get in touch to have an initial conversation about how we can work together: contact@mindforwardalliance.com

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Transforming workplace
mental health