

“Work it, work it non-stop” – Event industry employees’ unconscious application of the *Five Ways to Wellbeing*

Event
employees’
Five Ways to
Wellbeing

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores mental wellbeing in the events industry. We argue that mental wellbeing is often difficult to achieve in the stressful and deadline-driven events industry, and that better awareness and understanding of specific actions for employees to flourish at work is needed.

Design/methodology/approach – We used in-depth semi-structured interviews with event professionals in the UK to investigate their individual coping strategies. To contextualise, we used the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* framework as an analytical tool.

Findings – Our findings reveal that event professionals currently unconsciously engage in a variety of actions to maintain and enhance their mental wellbeing outside of work, but not at work. Out of the *Five Ways to Wellbeing*, specific actions to Connect, Be Active and *Take Notice* were most important to event professionals. The remaining two ways, Keep Learning and Give, were also identified in the data, although they were less prominent.

Practical implications – We present recommendations for event professionals to more consciously engage with the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* and for employers to develop mental wellbeing initiatives that allow their employees to flourish.

Originality/value – In event studies, the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* have thus far only been applied to event attendees, volunteers and the local community. Our paper highlights how event employees can also benefit from engaging in some of the actions set out in the framework to enhance their mental wellbeing at work.

Keywords *Five ways to wellbeing*, Events industry, Coping, Flourishing, Stress, Mental wellbeing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The events industry is a demanding and deadline-driven sector. High workloads, long hours, frequent evening and weekend work, and lack of work-life and work-family balance often result in stress, burnout and ill health (Odio *et al.*, 2013; Stadler *et al.*, 2021, 2022). Effective

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We would like to acknowledge the employees that took part in the semi-structured interviews and are working hard and managing their mental wellbeing in a stressful and deadline-driven environment. Thank you all.



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wellbeing policies and practices are seldom put in place; employees must cope with stress and manage the impacts on their mental wellbeing by themselves (Stadler *et al.*, 2022). Odio *et al.* (2013) were among the first to address the issue of stress for mega-event employees, and identified a range of stressors and individual coping strategies. Others have noted specific workplace challenges faced by the events industry and the impact on employee stress levels (see for example, Dashper, 2015; Doppler *et al.*, 2020; Stadler *et al.*, 2021, 2022). In this paper, we argue that merely training the event workforce to cope with stress is not enough; a more holistic understanding coupled with a focus on the benefits of attending to mental wellbeing is needed, of which reducing stress is just one key element.

Wellbeing has been understood and interpreted in multiple ways, leading to a general lack of consensus within the research community about its definition and terminology (Leiter and Cooper, 2017). For example, health and wellbeing, whilst often used interchangeably, are different – the latter is a broader concept that can be summarised as “how we are doing” (Litchfield, 2021, p. 11). Aked *et al.* (2008, pp. 1–2) conceptualise wellbeing in this way:

[It] comprises two main elements: feeling good and functioning well. Feelings of happiness, contentment, enjoyment, curiosity and engagement are characteristic of someone who has a positive experience of their life. Equally important for wellbeing is our functioning in the world. Experiencing positive relationships, having some control over one’s life and having a sense of purpose are all important attributes of wellbeing.

This aligns with the definition of mental wellbeing, which is often referred to as subjective wellbeing. Mental wellbeing is comprised of two components, both of which are evidenced in Aked *et al.*’s statement above: hedonic wellbeing (for example, feelings of happiness and engagement with life) and eudaimonic wellbeing (positive psychological functioning which includes having some control over things that happen in one’s life and having a sense of purpose) (Davidson and Cotter, 1991; de Cates *et al.*, 2015). The lack of consensus about the definition of wellbeing has unsurprisingly resulted in a range of frameworks for its measurement. Some use a single construct, such as life satisfaction, positive affect, or happiness (Forgeard *et al.*, 2011; Yu *et al.*, 2022). Others combine multiple constructs, and in an event studies context Seligman’s (2011) PERMA model is the most widely used of these more comprehensive theoretical frameworks as it incorporates five vital elements of wellbeing (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment) (Yu *et al.*, 2022). However, the model, while comprehensive, does not allow for the identification of strategies that contribute to the achievement of each of the elements of wellbeing. Yu *et al.* (2022) note that research measuring mental wellbeing in an events context has increased markedly over the last five years, with the focus being event attendees and occasionally host residents but not those who work in the events industry.

Enjoying one’s work (if employed) is an important contributor to better mental wellbeing (Steger *et al.*, 2006). Mental wellbeing in the workplace is determined by how people feel about their work, which is influenced by what they do at work, and this depends both on the environment within the workplace (e.g. fair pay, job security, manager behaviour, safe conditions) and what personal resources (e.g. resilience, health, optimism) they possess (New Economics Foundation, 2014). Interventions to enhance mental wellbeing in the workplace are becoming more common but vary in approach and effectiveness (Leiter and Cooper, 2017). There is no one-size-fits-all programme; any initiative must consider the individual company context, environment, work processes and practices, and individual employees’ needs (Czabała and Charzyńska, 2014). Until recently, many workplace wellbeing (or “wellness”) programmes have focused on preventive measures to reduce the disease burden on organisations from physical illness and absence from work, tending to overlook employees’ mental wellbeing – although this is rapidly changing (Litchfield *et al.*, 2016; Litchfield, 2021).

Research has concentrated on evaluating a range of formal workplace wellbeing interventions, measuring improvements post-participation, and identifying effective practices (Graveling *et al.*, 2008). Little attention has been paid to the informal mechanisms used by employees themselves to maintain or enhance their own mental wellbeing and flourish in a fast-paced, stressful working environment.

This paper aims to address these gaps in our understanding through an in-depth exploration of mental wellbeing in the UK events industry. As our point of departure, we do not seek to measure employees' mental wellbeing, or the effectiveness of workplace wellbeing interventions. Rather, we ask, "What strategies do event industry employees use to cope with work-related stress and maintain or enhance their mental wellbeing?" To that end, we apply the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* model (Aked *et al.*, 2008) as our analytic frame, as it has been widely popularised across a variety of contexts (such as schools, public health programmes, workplaces) in countries such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand. We find that employees (generally unknowingly) utilise many of the *Five Ways to Wellbeing outside* of work to deal with workplace stress. But we argue that employers can do more to encourage and support these actions *within* the workplace, in order to reap the full benefit for individual employees as well as the organisation as a whole.

The *Five Ways to Wellbeing* at work

The *Five Ways to Wellbeing* framework was created in 2008 by the New Economics Foundation in the UK, in response to a perceived need to enhance people's wellbeing for the benefit of both individuals and society more broadly. It provides five categories (or "Ways") of meaningful, evidence-based self-directed actions to help people flourish (Aked *et al.*, 2008). Flourishing is described by positive psychologists as a state of wellbeing where individuals experience optimal functioning, a sense of meaning and purpose, and active engagement (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Hone *et al.*, 2015). Importantly, the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* model suggests a variety of actions to suit different people's needs, enabling it to cater to "the interests of a diverse population and engag[e] with as many people as possible" (Aked *et al.*, 2008, p. 4). The *Five Ways* are: *Connect, Be Active, Keep Learning, Give* and *Take Notice*. Table 1 presents the rationale for each, along with both generic actions and ideas for actions that can be done at work.

While the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* framework was not specifically designed with a focus on employees' mental wellbeing, it can nevertheless be used by organisations to underpin wellbeing policies and workplace health initiatives (Aked *et al.*, 2008; Litchfield *et al.*, 2016). Aked *et al.* (2008, p. 11) note that "work can be good for us because it promotes social ties and it can provide an arena for meaningful engagement in tasks, from which we derive feelings of self-worth and satisfaction". However, they conclude that individual actions in the workplace will only be effective if a collaborative and cooperative culture between employer and employee has first been established and fostered. While they therefore include specific actions taking "colleagues" into account (see Table 1 for examples), Aked *et al.* (2008) do not provide organisational level actions.

Some studies have applied the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* to the workplace, and to workplace wellbeing initiatives in particular, but fail to address the importance of employees' mental wellbeing. Keeman *et al.* (2017), for instance, investigated the use of an online intervention tool (the Wellbeing Game) in an organisational setting in New Zealand and found that after playing the game, employees showed lower levels of stress and higher wellbeing, particularly through enhanced social connections at work. They conclude that wellbeing initiatives in organisations are most effective when they strengthen social relationships, particularly through activities that increase the quantity and quality of workplace relationships. The same intervention tool was used by Tonkin *et al.* (2018) in their study of employee

Five ways	Generic actions	Actions at work
<i>Connect</i> —Building strong relationships and being there for others, talking and listening, and feeling a sense of belonging, can support daily life	Talk to someone and really listen; reconnect with an old friend; play with your kids; join a team or club	Talk or phone instead of emailing; organise a lunch with colleagues; find new ways to collaborate; plan a social event at work
<i>Be Active</i> —Regular physical activity can increase productivity and perceptions of self-efficacy and mastery, and decrease negative thoughts, anxiety and depression	Join a sports team; take a yoga, Pilates or Tai Chi class; do some gardening	Move or stand more at work; go for a gentle stroll at lunchtime; have walking meetings; use the stairs instead of the lift; try some stretches
<i>Keep Learning</i> —Being curious and continuing to learn throughout life can enhance self-esteem and confidence, positively stimulate the brain, and lead to more positive effects on wellbeing, life satisfaction and optimism	Take a course; learn an instrument or language; visit a public art space; join a book club; listen to a podcast or read a journal article	Add to your work knowledge; organise lunchtime workshops; set a goal and work towards achieving it; take on a new task or help someone; get to know your colleagues more
<i>Give</i> —Helping others, sharing and giving behaviours, and volunteering are linked to an increased sense of self-worth and happiness and an enhanced sense of purpose in life. Giving something to self (self-care) is also important	Compliment someone; get involved with a charity; express gratitude—thank someone; do the dishes for someone; perform a random act of kindness for a friend, neighbour or a complete stranger	Help a colleague with their work; share your ideas or feedback; make someone a cup of tea; perform a random act of kindness for a colleague
<i>Take Notice</i> —Being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present (mindfulness) can lead to better positive mental states and enhance resilience, as well as creativity, accuracy, and productivity	Look up at the night sky; notice signs of the season changing; practise gratitude; try mindfulness meditation; sit quietly in a garden or park; listen to your favourite music	Keep a beautiful object near your desk; take a break from digital devices; do one thing (a single task) at a time

Source(s): Adapted from [Mental Health Foundation \(2018\)](#)

Table 1.
Five Ways to Wellbeing
at work

wellbeing and resilience. Following the intervention, participants reported small increases in both resilience and aspects of workplace wellbeing. The authors recommend that,

organisational leaders should create a culture that supports the wellbeing and resilience of their employees in order to build a collective capacity for organisational resilience—where employees adapt, bounce back, and thrive in the face of challenges (Tonkin *et al.*, 2018, p. 121)

Evidence thus suggests that organisational use of the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* can be linked to employees thriving and flourishing at work. While the absence of stress does not in and of itself equal better mental wellbeing, some empirical evidence suggests that organisations that invest in the promotion of wellbeing may also contribute to a reduction in employees' stress levels, partly because flourishing helps buffer negative effects of stress (Keyes and Grzywacz, 2005; Hone *et al.*, 2015).

The *Five Ways to Wellbeing* in an events context

Recent critical event studies research shows the range of benefits the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* can bring about for different groups of people. The emphasis has been on using the framework

to understand the contribution of events to attendees'/participants', volunteers' and local community wellbeing, but the employee perspective has been overlooked to date. Nevertheless, we provide an overview of this recent work here to contextualise the current study.

Coren *et al.* (2022) investigated motivations of volunteers at a folk festival and used the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* model to frame the results. *Keep Learning*, *Connect* and *Give* were found to be particularly motivating for volunteers and participants, while *Be Active* and *Take Notice* were evident in the data but less prominent. The authors acknowledge that this is in line with the nature of volunteer work and therefore as expected.

Haake *et al.* (2022) looked at motives for participating and volunteering at parkrun events, and survey findings echoed those of Coren *et al.* (2022) – parkrun volunteers were mainly motivated by wanting to *Give* back to the community. Increased physical *Activity*, *Connection* with others, and *Learning* new skills were also found to be important motivators. *Take Notice* was not investigated in the study. Haake *et al.* (2022, p. 18) conclude that, “over half [of the study participants] reported improvements due to volunteering at parkrun to mental health, and a quarter to physical health. The data shows that volunteering at parkrun without participating as a runner or walker can [also] deliver some of the components of the *Five Ways to Wellbeing*”.

Walters and Wright (2022) explored the wellbeing benefits for older women taking part in a non-competitive leisure marching sports event. *Be Active*, *Connect* and *Keep Learning* were most prominent in the qualitative data, with the authors concluding that many of the women were consciously aware of the social, physical and mental benefits of taking part in the event and of its contribution to active ageing. It is noteworthy that not only were there immediate wellbeing outcomes connected to the *Five Ways*, but also longer term benefits in terms of feeling less isolated and disconnected when getting older.

Methods

Data collection

Mental wellbeing remains a sensitive topic within the events industry (Stadler *et al.*, 2021), thus it was important to adopt a methodological approach that created a safe space for participants to share their experiences. To that end, we chose to use in-depth semi-structured interviews with understanding, trusted interviewers familiar with the subject. We drew a convenience sample of UK event professionals from a database developed by Stress Matters, our well-established and highly regarded partner organisation. Stress Matters provide a wide range of professional services for creative businesses to develop wellbeing policies and initiatives relevant to their organisation through diagnostic tools, workshops, seminars, and on-going support (Stress Matters, 2022). All participants had worked with Stress Matters before and had established a relationship of trust with them. This existing rapport enabled a degree of openness in discussing such a personal topic that would have been difficult for us to achieve with limited time and resources.

Interview participants were selected to represent different sectors within the UK industry, including event agencies, venues, marketing professionals and the conference sector. We sought to canvas a variety of job roles, seniority, and length of industry experience; our participants ranged from business owners to executives, and producers to event coordinators, with 9 months–37 years' experience. Participants were contacted directly by the team at Stress Matters and only fully anonymised information was provided to us. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Hertfordshire Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee (protocol number: BUS/SF/UH/04921).

Interviews were conducted as the UK was coming out of its third COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, and public health measures meant they had to be carried out online. While face-to-face interviews may have rendered slightly different discussions, the existing relationship of trust between interviewers and participants helped with developing rapport which is

considered a challenge in online interviews (O'Connor and Madge, 2017). The interviewers and participants alike were well versed in the use of such technology by this time. Probing questions were asked to explore event industry employees' stress triggers, reflections on what they had learned about themselves over time, their individual coping strategies, and their perception of mental wellbeing within their workplace and the events industry more broadly (Table 2). These questions were developed with Stress Matters, based on existing literature and Stress Matters' practical experience in this field. As interviews were conducted by the Stress Matters team, we acknowledge that their follow-up questions were potentially different to what we as the researchers may have asked. However, interviews were recorded and after reviewing the verbatim transcripts against the recordings we were confident that the follow-up questions elicited the nuanced information we sought. We monitored the transcripts during data collection and after 12 interviews, data saturation (the point at which no new information was being captured) was reached (Guest et al., 2006). Interviews lasted an average duration of 50 min.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis is a flexible, iterative method for analysing and representing rich and nuanced qualitative data such as that gathered through interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In this research, both deductive and inductive approaches were taken to identify themes. In the first phase of analysis, we individually coded the data and identified themes (Braun et al., 2020), using the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* as our starting point. Each of us read through the interview transcripts, and deductively coded words and phrases according to which of the *Five Ways* we felt they best resonated with. The second phase of analysis was inductive:

Professional background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you tell us who you are, what you do and how long you've been in the industry, please?
Personal experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How were the last six months for you? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Any personal highlights? Challenges? – Highs and lows? • What have you learned about yourself in the last six months? • What have you learned about other people that you've worked with and been around? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Anything that surprised/shocked you?
Mental wellbeing in the workplace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does mental wellbeing mean to you? • How do you manage your mental wellbeing? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What are your coping strategies when it comes to dealing with stress? – How else are you looking after yourself (mentally, physically, etc.)? • Who do you talk to about your mental wellbeing? • Is it something that comes up in the workplace? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How open are you and your colleagues about mental wellbeing? – Do you have any wellbeing policies or initiatives in your workplace? What do they entail? How are they implemented?
Mental wellbeing in the events industry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your perception of mental wellbeing in the events industry as a whole? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Any specific experiences you want to share with us? – What kind of support is available should you need it? • Is there anything that could be improved with regards to mental wellbeing in the events industry? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Any recommendations/suggestions for the next 3–5 years?
Plans for the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your plans for the next 6 months/the next year? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What are you most looking forward to? • Anything else you want to share with us?

Table 2.
Interview questions

we sought to identify overarching themes across, and subthemes within, each of the *Five Ways*. Throughout the process of analysis, we worked both individually and collaboratively, coming together to discuss areas of commonality and difference in our interpretations, and reaching a consensus. This investigator triangulation helped to ensure credibility, dependability and confirmability of our findings (Denzin, 1970; Decrop, 2004).

Findings and discussion

Our findings show that across all *Five Ways* our interviewees are (often unintentionally) engaging in actions and activities in the five categories *within* the workplace but more frequently (and arguably more effectively) *outside* the workplace. Each of the *Five Ways* and their subthemes will now be unpacked in turn, using illustrative quotes from the interviews to support our claims. *Connect*, *Be active* and *Take notice* were the most prominent ways to wellbeing in our study and will be presented first, followed by *Keep Learning* and *Give*.

Connect

This social, relationship-focused theme is the most prominent of the *Five Ways* engaged in by the interviewees, albeit unconsciously for most. Two subthemes were evident: first is connection that occurs *within* the workplace with one's colleagues. This is commonly spoken about as a form of informal support to deal with the stress and pressure of working in the events industry, from those who understand – but who may not necessarily work for the same company:

I think like most people, we've just been through a real roller coaster of emotions, we have set up a really strong support group with people that we know and primarily through people that we know through work, that actually we realised that we've all been in a similar position. So we just had daily chats. And on days when I'm having a bad day, they're not and they pull you out of it. And on the other days, they're having bad days. [interview 3]

There is a support network. So, yes there's plenty of outlets. The HR director in the UK for example, I've known her for 20 years. And, you know I can speak to her anytime. We know each other personally, and I know I can talk to her in confidence, and I would get a bit like a mini counselling session from her and get that and get a nice ... it would make me feel warm and fuzzy inside. [interview 6]

As discussed earlier, Keeman *et al.* (2017) found that relationships with colleagues are the most significant determinant of mental wellbeing for employees, and that engaging in activities in the other four categories may not be as beneficial for wellbeing if employers fail to recognise the importance of fostering good relationships in the workplace. As such, the social element of wellbeing is paramount but often overlooked (De Simone, 2014) and our findings support these arguments.

The second subtheme is connection that occurs *outside* the workplace, usually with family or friends, who may not understand the events industry but who nevertheless provide a sympathetic ear or act as a sounding board to help employees deal with work stress:

I have quite open relationships with friends of mine. But, you know, we don't catch up over a glass of wine [and say] "So how's your mental health today", it's ... a lot more of it is around cathartic discussion around things you might be going through with our families or you know, one of my closest friends and I ... we've got daughters very similar in age. So we'll get together and have a rant about what the girls are up to, you know, so I think there's a lot of discussion, which isn't to say we don't sit down and signpost it as a discussion about our mental health, but we'll talk about our frustrations or the fact that we're losing sleep over stuff or you know. I think it all just comes out in discussion. [interview 4]

I have a network of friends and we often just end up laughing about [challenges at work] which is great, lots of similar age people around here, all feeling the same as me and my husband. We are always laughing about it, which is great to have that kind of network around you. So I would say, I'm one of the lucky ones. [interview 11]

However, as one interviewee noted, the connection must be authentic and trustworthy to be effective. Talking about stress, coping and mental health issues still carries a stigma within the events industry (Stadler *et al.*, 2022), and it is important that whoever they talk to will be able to provide what they need:

I discuss it quite often, but with close friends and ones I choose to, so you know it's not something that I want to tell everyone, it's . . . it's people that I know will support me in the way that I need supporting. [interview 9]

As alluded to above, social connection is a fundamental human need, and having good relationships with colleagues at work is a significant factor in employee motivation and engagement (Diener and Seligman, 2002; Stoyanova and Iliev, 2017). It is therefore vital that the events industry, with its long hours and demanding schedules, takes this need into account and develops healthy support networks for employees *in* the workplace.

Be active

The second most important of the *Five Ways* is being active, and again we see two subthemes: physical movement and more gentle movement. The majority of interviewees deal with the pressure of working in the events industry by incorporating some form of physical activity (exercise) into their week. Indeed, some say it keeps them “interviews 2, 4, 6 and 9” and that it is obvious to themselves and others if they cannot exercise for a few days:

My big thing is that if I don't go to the gym once every three days, I turn into an absolute arse. I get fidgety, I get short tempered. And it's kind of like the Hulk . . . I just need . . . three days is my limit . . . ! So exercise for me is so so important. So important. [interview 2]

For most, this physical exercise is a solo pursuit such as running, cycling, swimming, or other forms of exercise before or after work, but for some there is also an element of connection with others – although not in the same sense as above, in that there are no work-related conversations, and the nature of the friendship is different:

I work out daily. And that might be running, strength work, going to classes. And they are all cathartic for me in different ways. So the classes I go to, I have friends that generally . . . we don't necessarily talk about our mental health, we just chat about general random stuff normally. When you're boxing the hell out of somebody, or doing a boot camp or something. But it's just friendship, isn't it really, in a completely different environment. And then three or four times a week, I'll take myself off for a run of varying lengths. Running is absolutely my form of meditation. [interview 4]

One interviewee understands their productivity is impacted by their ability to be active. They took a risk and “pushed back” on client demands to prioritise exercise, explicitly linking it to a better outcome for both parties:

If I don't exercise, I suffer. You think you're saving time by not doing exercise, but actually, you're half as productive. So I've learned that some things are non-negotiable . . . I got asked to do a meeting the other day, every morning at 8a.m. And I said no, as I said, I can't swim. And if I can't swim, I'll actually do a worse job for you. [interview 9]

The second subtheme is gentle movement. In contrast to the activities mentioned above that are all “active” sporting or physical pursuits, it is also important to note that for some interviewees being active meant getting out into the garden. It is physically “being in” and moving about a peaceful environment that is important for their mental wellbeing:

I absolutely adore gardening. So again . . . I'll take myself to pop around the garden, do a bit of digging, or deadheading or . . . makes me sound about 70. But, but it's just . . . I'm on my own, it's peaceful. And that tends to be where I go to look after myself. [interview 4]

I love gardening and so even if I go and stand in the garden and pick the snails off of the flowers because it's been raining for three weeks or just getting mud under my fingernails. It just makes me breathe. We are lucky enough to have a garden and I love doing that. [interview 11]

Engaging in exercise produces not only physical benefits but also mental benefits such as improved mood, increased productivity, and reduced anxiety and depression (see for example, [Wiese et al., 2018](#); [Buecker et al., 2021](#)). Unlike *Connection* perhaps, being active is a conscious decision for most interviewees, as they recognise the link between activity, stress reduction and positive mental wellbeing: when the demands of work interrupted our interviewees' ability to be active, it impacted on their mental wellbeing. However, our participants provided no examples of being active *at* work. More flexibility around work hours or remote work opportunities is certainly necessary to allow employees to engage in physical exercise, as well as to build some gentle exercise into their workday – flexibility that can enhance their work-life balance ([Ehnert, 2009](#)) but is currently lacking in the events industry ([Stadler et al., 2022](#)).

Take notice

This category of *Five Ways to Wellbeing* refers to notions of mindfulness, being in the present, and appreciating the world around you. Some interviewees engage in these practices *outside* the workplace to help them deal with stress, pressure and negative incidents *within* the workplace:

I'm quite happy to sit and read a book, and quite happy to spend hours doing a jigsaw which I know is not most people's cup of tea. But for me, it takes me away from the screen, it takes me away from worrying about something else. I'm not looking at a screen, I'm just towering over a table doing jigsaws. [interview 3]

I do gratitude [journaling] every day, which I find kind of really rewarding. It just helps you to sort of see the good in each day rather than . . . we're all wired to sort of focus in on things that go wrong, and it's good to remind yourself and also just remind myself how lucky I am with stuff you've got rather than focusing on the one thing that went wrong in the day, which we often do. [interview 9]

For others, deliberately remembering to take notice of their own feelings and stress levels allows them to recognise when/why their mental wellbeing is suffering. This means they can take appropriate action to look after themselves:

I don't consciously have hobbies or anything like that. But I have tried harder to make more time for me and to do things that I'm enjoying, whether that is reading a book or going for a walk on the river. Something like that. [interview 5]

I tend to default to massage and relaxation rooms and spas and that kind of thing. (. . .) just trying to be conscious to where your parameters are, I think, as a person, and where your boundaries sit, and then just looking after those. [interview 8]

Reflecting on one's experiences helps us understand what matters most, and this type of *Take Notice* can improve mental wellbeing and resilience ([Brown and Ryan, 2003](#)). [Phillips et al. \(2015\)](#), however, noted that the *Take Notice* way to wellbeing tends to be the most difficult to achieve. For some of the participants in our study, deliberately taking notice of their thoughts and feelings was an important strategy in identifying high levels of stress, and they had a suite of tools for dealing with this when it happened. While employees are theoretically able to take notice and be mindful *in* the workplace, similar to *being active*, our interviewees most often did these activities *outside* the workplace, or in/around the home.

Keep learning

Learning in the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* framework refers to trying something new, being curious, developing skills or taking on a new responsibility at work. In our analysis of interview material, this theme is less supported, and very few interviewees mentioned learning in this more traditional sense. However, two did speak of attending formal training courses or workshops about mental wellbeing in the events industry, to learn how to recognise and support employees, colleagues or even themselves dealing with issues:

Keep your finger on the pulse of latest advice and the latest training sessions . . . everyone's done quite a few [workshops] centred around a mental health awareness training course and there's all sorts of other courses I've done that are specifically related to events. I think they have been quite useful skills to own really. [interview 7]

The first time I really had an insight into [mental wellbeing] was when I was [involved with the XXX association] . . . I was really sceptical about it . . . I thought it's a bit iffy, a bit wet, I didn't like this idea of yoga and meditation – come on, I want to talk about business blah blah blah. But to be honest, it was amazing. It was packed in those halls. And it was really good . . . what was amazing is, afterwards when [attendees] came up afterwards to talk to the speakers and like literally on the bridge of tears and said, "I really need some help". And at that point I was like, oh shit, we have a phenomenal problem in this industry that needs to be addressed. [interview 1]

Two other interviewees *Keep Learning* outside of work by taking up new hobbies that engage their creative minds. However, it is important to note that both were furloughed during the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, and that this was their coping mechanism at the time:

I made peace last year with not working . . . and then I didn't worry about it and it's just turned my mind to doing things I wanted to do, doing other projects, other hobbies, learning, and I felt really good for my mental wellbeing and got to try new things. It's good to be creative and slow down a bit because I think my pace of life is probably . . . it was too hectic before, which you kind of think is all right in theory. [interview 9]

In addition to stimulating the brain, learning has also been shown to have benefits for self-esteem, confidence and mental wellbeing (Aked *et al.*, 2008; Kirkwood *et al.*, 2008; Huppert *et al.*, 2005). In a dynamic industry where innovation is the norm, it may reasonably be expected that trying something new, or engaging in formal or informal professional development sessions would have been mentioned by our interviewees. We acknowledge that this may be a result of the study focus on mental wellbeing, and the types of questions that were asked. Again though, we did see evidence of learning occurring both *within* and *outside* of the workplace. Learning in the workplace can also be achieved through setting a goal and working towards achieving it, taking on a new task or helping someone (Mental Health Foundation, 2018). Arguably, these are practices employees might engage in but not consciously think of as contributing to their mental wellbeing – and indeed, may even be considered stressors for some.

Give

This last theme is least evident in our study, however some interviewees do engage in acts of kindness both *at* work and *outside* of work:

I work with quite a lot of freelance on various different jobs at the moment and one of them . . . I had a chat with her last night and you know she's struggling and doesn't matter that she's not necessarily a permanent member of the team. It's okay, well let's talk about it, let's see how we can sort it out and how we can help and how we can make you feel a bit more comfortable. [interview 5]

I'm okay, as long as I keep busy as long as I've got something to do. I'm an NHS [the UK National Health Service] volunteer. And so we do lots of things because as long as I'm busy, I'm fine. I just don't like not being busy. [interview 3]

Giving involves acts of kindness towards someone else, and it helps to create a sense of purpose and higher self-worth (Huppert *et al.*, 2005; Lee, 2019). Clearly there are two different forms of giving in these two interview extracts. The first speaks of taking the time and emotional energy to support a colleague who is having difficulty. The second speaks of giving time to volunteer in the health service outside of work in response to a need to stay busy to deal with a stressful work environment. In an industry where irregular hours are the norm, it may be difficult to commit to regular volunteer work.

Conclusion

Using the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* as our analytic framework allowed us to reveal the intricacies of individual coping strategies that maintain positive mental wellbeing. We found evidence of a wide range of unconscious actions applied to enhance and maintain mental wellbeing outside of work, but generally not while at work. Specific actions to *Connect*, *Be Active* and *Take Notice* were most important to event professionals, while *Keep Learning* and *Give* were less prominent in the data. We conclude with a set of theoretical and practical implications emanating from this study, as well as limitations and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical implications

The *Five Ways to Wellbeing* framework has previously been applied to studies of event attendees, volunteers and the local community. This paper has offered unique insights into the benefits event employees reap through engaging in the *Five Ways*, albeit unconsciously in many cases. The paper highlights the complexities of maintaining mental wellbeing within the fast paced, deadline driven, and stressful events industry. Mental wellbeing in the events industry will remain difficult to achieve unless there is greater recognition of the need to support and empower employees in their quest to maintain mental wellbeing.

This study also makes a theoretical contribution to broader discussions around hedonic and eudamonic wellbeing (Davidson and Cotter, 1991; de Cates *et al.*, 2015), and to discussions of different approaches and practices related to wellbeing and flourishing in the workplace. In identifying how event industry employees currently cope with work-related stress, this study highlights a number of strategies that contribute to the achievement of mental wellbeing. As such, it extends the ongoing discussion around mental wellbeing in an events context (Yu *et al.*, 2022) by focusing on employees rather than event attendees and host residents. While we did not seek to measure employees' mental wellbeing, we anticipate the evidence presented in this study will contribute to opening new avenues for research in this area. For example, a better understanding of event industry employees' coping strategies within a stressful work environment may help explain how engaged they are and what meaning and purpose they derive from their work. Similarly, our research shows how important relationships and social support are for employees' mental wellbeing, which should in a next step be investigated using one of the existing psychological wellbeing measurement frameworks identified by Forgeard *et al.* (2011) or Seligman (2011).

Practical implications

On a practical level, it is vital that event professionals at all levels ensure that communication is open and honest, that a culture of trust and friendship exists within the workplace in order that the de-stigmatisation of mental wellbeing takes place (top-down and bottom-up approach). This paper is the first to offer practical recommendations for event professionals

to move from an unconsciousness to a conscious engagement with the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* to improve their mental wellbeing.

As previously noted, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to improving mental wellbeing in the workplace, and both the individual company context and employee needs must be taken into account. Mental wellbeing is a highly personalised lifelong journey, so employees should have the opportunity to choose how they engage with the *Five Ways to Wellbeing*. We recommend that events industry employers first introduce their staff to the framework and champion some generic activities to create awareness and destigmatise stress and mental wellbeing. Information sheets are available through the [Mental Health Foundation \(2018\)](#) – these provide a brief overview of the *Five Ways* plus examples of what individuals can do. Employers could focus on one of the *Five Ways* each month, have their teams explore what they currently do/could do in terms of the *Five Ways*, and set individual or team goals. Participants in our study frequently mentioned their networks and relationships with colleagues as very important to their mental wellbeing, and a team-centred approach may therefore be appropriate in the first instance.

Fostering a culture of trust and friendship within the workplace is important for employees to *Connect* and can be enhanced through organising a lunch with colleagues or planning a low-key social event at work. For some participants in our study, *Being Active* through physical exercise was crucial to their mental wellbeing, but only done outside of work. At work, being active could be fostered through discounts or a salary sacrifice scheme for a gym membership, or buying a bike so they can cycle to work. Those who prefer gentler activities could be encouraged to go for a stroll at lunchtime, have walking meetings, try some stretches, or start a small garden at work. In the busy events industry environment, *Take Notice* may be difficult to achieve in the workplace, but one small step could be to take a break from digital devices. Employers could also provide a quiet space at work with some books or jigsaw puzzles, as these were activities our participants mentioned as beneficial for their mental wellbeing. Providing a space for employees to engage in these practices may encourage them to take some time out and ultimately flourish at work.

For the two less prominent of the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* in our study, *Give* and *Keep Learning*, employees can become more consciously aware of activities that will enhance their mental wellbeing and help them connect with others at work. As evidenced in our findings, event employees help and support their colleagues with work-related tasks, but other ways to *Give* could also be more consciously implemented, such as making someone a cup of tea or performing a random act of kindness for a colleague (e.g. “Secret Santa” or “Birthday Fairy”). For line managers/employers, developing a culture of publicly thanking employees for hard work also fosters a *Give* mentality among the team. Participants in our study *Keep Learning* through attending a class or workshop, taking on a new task at work or helping someone. A buddy system, where more experienced team members are paired with new or younger colleagues to share skills, insights and experience, is another example of both a *Give* as well as a *Keep Learning* activity.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

One potential limitation of this study is that data was collected in 2020 as the UK came out of its third COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, a time of much uncertainty across the events industry. A follow-up study taking the current post-pandemic environment into account, would therefore be of interest. A further limitation is the UK-based nature of the study, therefore we suggest expanding the research into other geographic, political and socio-economic contexts, as there may be differences in both levels of stress/wellbeing and employees’ coping mechanisms. Our findings have shown the diverse range of actions taken

by employees to maintain good mental wellbeing across the *Five Ways to Wellbeing*. In addition to the suggestions for future research on a theoretical level identified above, we recommend that future longitudinal studies in this area could explore how the use/importance of the *Five Ways to Wellbeing* may change with age, experience, gender, cultural background, or sector/role within the events industry. Exploring how different company contexts, cultures and practices contribute to the success (or failure) of approaches to improving employee mental wellbeing would also be a valuable avenue for extending both the theoretical and practical reach of this work.

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