

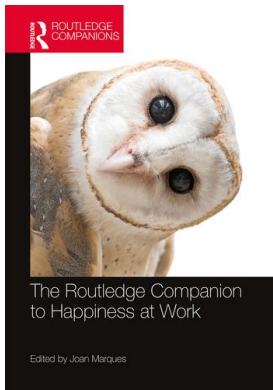
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Using Signature Strengths to Increase Happiness at Work

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USING SIGNATURE STRENGTHS TO INCREASE HAPPINESS AT WORK

Nicola S. Schutte and John M. Malouff

Introduction

Identification and promotion of psychological strengths are integral to the positive psychology approach (Seligman et al., 2005). A broad definition of psychological strengths is that they consist of beneficial talent, knowledge, and skills integrated with an individual's sense of self (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Some strengths, termed character strengths, may relate to universal traits that studies have found in most cultures (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). Signature strengths are the character strengths most prominent in an individual (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The use and development of signature strengths in the workplace may promote flourishing and happiness.

Conceptualizations of Happiness

Happiness can comprise various positive experiences. Many of these experiences can be described as hedonic and eudemonic happiness. The hedonic experience of happiness includes experiencing pleasure in the form of high positive affect, low negative affect, and high life satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The eudemonic experience of happiness consists of well-being that arises from perceiving meaning and purpose in life and fulfillment of one's potential (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Hedonic happiness is sometimes termed subjective well-being, while eudemonic happiness is sometimes termed psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

There tends to be overlap between hedonic and eudemonic happiness, but each of the two types of happiness also has some distinct advantages (Disabato et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2001). For example, in an international sample of 7,617 participants from 109 countries, Disabato et al. (2016) found evidence that a latent general happiness factor underlies various indices of hedonic and eudemonic happiness, but that an explanation drawing on two underlying separate hedonic and eudemonic factors better represented the structure of participants' happiness. In this large sample of participants, both types of happiness had significant associations with various aspects of well-being, with the magnitude of some associations between the two types of happiness with some constructs, such as gratitude, relatively similar, and the magnitude of associations with other constructs different (Disabato et al., 2016). For example, across participants the association between hedonic happiness and loneliness was $-.69$, and the association between eudemonic happiness and loneliness was $-.63$, indicating that higher levels of both types of happiness were associated with less loneliness, but that the links between hedonic happiness and loneliness were stronger. Across participants the association

between eudemonic happiness and grit, which consists of goal orientation and perseverance, was .54, while the association between hedonic happiness and grit was .39, indicating that higher levels of both types of happiness were associated with grit, but that the links between eudemonic happiness and grit were stronger.

Various circumstances and approaches may increase happiness. For example, Passmore & Howell (2014) found that exposure to nature can increase aspects of both hedonic happiness and eudaimonic happiness. Fredrickson and colleagues (e.g., Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018) have shown that interventions based on practices such as loving, kindness, and meditation can increase positive affect, an aspect of hedonic well-being, and that increases in positive affect in turn lead to a broadening of life perspective and building of resources. Friedman et al. (2019) found that elderly participants in an 8-week program designed to increase engagement and to deal with challenges in a variety of areas of life showed significant increases in eudemonic well-being.

Character Strengths

An important approach to increasing happiness in general, and happiness at work in particular, may be through use of signature strengths. Peterson and Seligman (2004) identified 24 character strengths and grouped them into six categories: Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence. The strengths that group into a category are related, but each has specific utility.

The category of Wisdom and Knowledge contains strengths related to acquiring and using information. A strength in this category is *creativity*, which facilitates the generation of original ideas and products and bolsters individuals' adaptation. Another strength in this category is *curiosity*, which prompts exploration and an openness to experience. *Good judgement* falls into this category. Judgement consists of critical thinking and deliberation. *Love of learning* also falls into this category, and love of learning leads to outcomes such as mastering new skills. A final strength in this category is having *perspective*, which includes evaluating events in a broad context and providing good advice to others.

The category of Courage describes characteristics that help individuals overcome challenges and reach their goals. A strength in this category is *honesty*, which is defined by being genuine and expressing what one believes. The strength of *bravery* involves facing threats, difficulties, or challenges. The strength of *perseverance* consists of finishing tasks and adhering to the pursuit of goals. The strength of *zest* involves engaging energetically with life.

The category of Humanity consists of strengths that build and maintain positive interactions and relationships. *Kindness* is a strength in this category. *Love* (loving and being loved and valuing close relationships) is a further strength in this category. The strength of *social intelligence* consists of awareness of others' goals and feelings.

The category of Justice describes strengths that facilitate community well-being. A strength in this category is *fairness*, which involves being just and not letting feelings determine decisions about others. The strength of *teamwork* is defined by social responsibility and loyalty. The strength of *leadership* facilitates organizing and encouraging group endeavors.

The category of Temperance consists of characteristics that allow individuals to achieve balance and avoid temptation. A strength in this category is *forgiveness*, which involves accepting others' shortcomings and giving others a second chance. *Humility* consists of modesty and of letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves. *Prudence* is defined by caution and not taking overly great risks. *Self-regulation* consists of managing one's impulses and emotions.

The category of Transcendence describes strengths that provide individuals with a sense of meaning and purpose and connect them with the world. A strength in this category is *gratitude*, consisting of experiencing and expressing thanks. The strength of *appreciation of beauty and excellence* prompts awe and wonder. *Hope* consists of optimism and an orientation towards the future. The

strength of *humor* is defined by playfulness and lightheartedness that also encourages these experiences in others. *Spirituality* can be manifested through faith and encourages a sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Signature Strengths

Even though each of the character strengths identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004) may be somewhat relevant for all people, some strengths are more important and dominant than others for an individual. The three to seven strengths most prominent in an individual are termed *signature strengths* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). When individuals use these signature strengths, they experience excitement and vigor, and long-term use results in flourishing and well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

In support of the proposition that use of signature strength has benefits for well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), studies have found associations between use of signature strengths and indicators of happiness. For example, Proctor, Maltby, and Linley (2011) found that greater general use of strengths was associated with more positive affect, greater life satisfaction, higher self-esteem, greater self-efficacy, and better health quality of life. Linley et al. (2010) found that greater use of signature strengths was associated with greater well-being, as well as with more attainment of goals.

Avey et al. (2010) found that among workers the strengths that are part of Wisdom were significantly associated with low general stress and high performance on an “unusual uses” creativity test. Gander et al. (2012) found many significant associations between character strengths and work-related variables, including commitment and work satisfaction. Harzer and Ruch (2015) found significant negative associations between most types of character strengths and (1) poor coping methods, and (2) high work-related stress. In 274 Austrian physicians, Huber et al. (2019) found significant associations between many character strengths and high work engagement and low work burnout. In 85 Israeli recent college graduates, Littman-Ovadia & Steger (2010) found a significant association between use of character strengths at work and job satisfaction. In a study of 191 business executives, Sosik, Gentry, and Chun (2012) found significant associations between character strengths of integrity, bravery, perspective, and social intelligence and ratings by supervisors of the executives’ work performance.

Identification of Signature Strengths

The Values in Action (VIA) Inventory of Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) is commonly used to identify individuals’ signature strengths. The VIA inventory provides a measure of each of the 24 strengths, with each strength represented by ten items. Respondents use a five-point scale to rate how well items such as “I like to think of new ways to do things” and “I know how to handle myself in different social situations” describe them. The three to seven strengths on which an individual has the highest score relative to her or his score on other strengths are considered to be her or his signature strengths.

Relevant to understanding the results of the VIA Survey is that scores are ipsative when used to identify signature strengths. Being ipsative means that the scores on different strengths have meaning only with regard to each other (see Baron, 1996) for the individual. Hence, a person may be very high compared to others on many characteristics that are not identified as prominent for the individual. For example, fairness may not be identified as a signature strength for an individual who scores higher on a number of other characteristics, but the individual may score substantially higher on fairness than most other individuals.

In a large sample of respondents, Peterson & Seligman (2004) found internal consistencies of over .70 as well as four month test-retest reliability of over .70 for all 24 scales on the VIA inventory.

A meta-analysis found that the scales used to assess each of the strengths have good internal consistency, with weighted alphas from 23 separate studies ranging from .75 to .86 for the scales (Bruna, Brabete, & Izquierdo, 2018) and evidence of validity through associations with constructs such as life satisfaction (Bruna et al., 2018). In an analysis of responses of half a million participants, McGrath (2014) found that the items on the VIA inventory grouped into the six categories of Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence proposed by Peterson and Seligman (2004), as well as an additional category of Future Orientation. In a further analysis of responses of over a million participants, McGrath (2015) found that the strengths assessed by the VIA inventory have a latent structure comprised of the categories of Caring, Inquisitiveness, and Self-Control.

Identifying Signature Strengths Examples

The authors of this chapter have both completed the Values in Action (VIA) inventory. The inventory identified perseverance, self-regulation, creativity, judgement, love, fairness, and honesty as signature strengths for author NS. Author JM's signature strengths were humor, creativity, love, fairness, love of learning, judgment, and curiosity. The VIA inventory can be accessed online through the VIA Institute on Character.

Signature Strengths at Work

Use of signature strengths has benefits in the workplace (Peterson & Park, 2006). For instance, use of strengths of gratitude, hope, zest, and curiosity has been found to be associated with greater work satisfaction for individuals in a variety of occupations, ranging from laborers to Chief Executive Officers (Peterson & Park, 2006). Strengths such as hope can help sustain employees in times of organizational or financial uncertainty, while strengths such as love, social intelligence, and leadership are important in facilitating the group endeavors important to organizations (Peterson & Park, 2006).

Littman-Ovadia, Lavy, and Boiman-Meshita (2017) examined the relationship between use of signature strengths and numerous work outcomes. They found that greater use of signature strengths was associated with more positive affect, greater perception of the meaningfulness of work, more engagement with work, greater work satisfaction, better organizational citizenship behavior, and better work performance.

Merritt, Huber, and Bartkoski (2019) found that greater use of signature strengths at work was associated with greater positive affect, more job satisfaction, and less perceived work-related stress. Daily opportunities to use signature strengths are related to daily job satisfaction and daily job strain. That is, on days on which they were able to use signature strengths, employees experienced more job satisfaction and lower job stress.

Dubreuil, Forest, and Courcy (2014) found a significant association between use of character strengths at work and self-rated work performance. They also found that the association was completely mediated by three variables they called harmonious passion, subjective vitality, and concentration.

Increasing the Use of Signature Strengths

A number of studies have examined the impact of interventions encouraging greater use of signature strengths. Identification, development, and practice, the elements Seligman et al. (2005) suggested as important in increasing strengths use, tend to form the core of these interventions. The typical format of signature strength intervention programs consists of participants completing

a measure of character strengths and, based on their scores on the measure, receiving information regarding their signature strengths. Participants are then asked to use these strengths in their daily lives. Some of these studies have focused on encouraging greater use of signature strengths in general, while other studies have focused on greater use of signature strengths in specific settings, such as at work.

In a meta-analysis, Schutte and Malouff (2019) consolidated results of studies examining the outcomes of signature character-strength interventions compared to control conditions. 14 articles reported 29 effect sizes for several types of outcomes. The participants in these studies included students and members of the general community. Across the studies investigating the impact of interventions on level of signature strengths, the interventions led to an increase in use of signature character strengths, suggesting that such interventions do impact strengths as intended. In regard to increasing happiness, across studies, signature strength interventions had a significant impact on increasing positive affect and increasing life satisfaction. Of note is that across studies, signature strength interventions also significantly decreased depression.

A study by Seligman et al. (2005) suggested that using signature strengths in new ways may be especially beneficial. Seligman et al. compared happiness outcomes for participants in three conditions: 1) a signature strengths intervention in which participants' signature strengths were identified and they were asked to use their signature strengths *in new ways*, 2) a signature strengths intervention in which participants' signature strengths were identified and they were asked to use their signature strengths *more often*, and 3) a control condition in which participants were asked to write about their early memories. Comparing outcomes for the three groups at one month, three months and six months after the intervention, Seligman and colleagues found that using signature strengths in new ways was more effective in increasing happiness and decreasing depression than just identification of signature strengths coupled with use of the strengths in ways individuals had used them previously.

A complementary approach to encouraging use of signature strengths is to encourage use of strengths that an individual does not typically use. For example, Rust, Diessner, and Reade (2009) asked a group of students to select one strength from among the five character strengths which they used the least, as well as one signature strength, and asked them to focus on these strengths for 12 weeks. Participants focusing on using a prominent signature strength, as well as a strength they had not much used previously, showed an increase in life satisfaction compared to students in a control condition, and their increase in life satisfaction was similar to that of students who were assigned to a condition in which they were asked to focus on two signature strengths.

Increasing the Use of Signature Strengths in Work Settings

Several studies have investigated the impact of signature strength interventions on employees (Forest et al., 2012; Harzer, & Ruch, 2016; Pang & Ruch, 2019; Meyers & van Woerkom, 2017). The employees in these studies came from different types of organizations and work conditions. The intervention programs focused on identification and use of signature strengths, with some of the interventions modifying the parameters of the original program described by Seligman et al. (2005), and in some cases including additional program elements.

Forest et al. (2012) recruited 222 part-time employees, who completed the Values in Action Inventory and identified their signature strengths. Participants in the experimental condition were asked to describe how they might feel when using their signature strengths at work, and to describe how they might use their signature strengths in new ways at work in the coming two weeks. Part-time employees in a comparison control group did not participate in the intervention. Compared to the control condition, those in the experimental using-strengths condition reported greater use of their strengths two months later. This increase mediated increases in passion for work and well-being among employees in the signature-strengths condition.

Using Signature Strengths at Work Examples

The authors of this chapter have both used their signature strengths in new ways at work, following the finding of Seligman et al. (2005) that using signature strengths in new ways is especially beneficial. One of the strengths identified through the Values in Action (VIA) Inventory for author NS is creativity. NS had the opportunity to collaborate on projects with international colleagues. When generating project ideas, NS had generally considered needs in an area from the perspective of her own knowledge base and experience. In trying to apply her signature strength of creativity in a new way, NS decided to generate project ideas for future discussion with colleagues from the perspective and knowledge base of potential collaborators in combination with her own knowledge base. NS felt energized during this different approach to using creativity, which led to new ideas.

One of the strengths identified through the VIA inventory for author JM is humor. Upon seeing this assessment result, he acted in ways to use his humor in new ways at work. He added more humor to his syndicated newspaper column, *Mind Matters*, to his comments on Facebook, and in his messages to students. For instance, he tried to write columns with more potential for humor. He wrote a column about why many individuals watch mukbangs, which are online videos of others eating. He started the column with, “Some people think that a passing comet signals the end of humanity... I point the finger at the popularity of mukbangs.” As with any single case example, it is hard to evaluate what effects, if any, his push to add humor had on others. The only obvious external outcome was that some individuals expressed amusement at his comments. Internal effects were easier to assess. Increasing efforts to amuse others was fun for him and having fun at work helped increase his job satisfaction.

Harzer and Ruch (2016) recruited 152 employees from different occupations, with the most frequent occupations being managers and teachers, to participate in a study examining the impact of use of signature strengths on life satisfaction and engagement with work. The researchers randomly assigned employees to either a signature strengths intervention condition or a control condition. After identifying their signature strengths through the Values in Action inventory, participants in the signature strengths condition were asked to use their top four signature strengths in new and different ways at work for four weeks. Participants in the control condition were asked to think about tasks at which they excelled in different areas of life.

Both the life satisfaction and engagement with work of employees in the signature strengths condition increased from before the intervention to directly after the training period, to three months after the training period and to six months after the training period (Harzer & Ruch, 2016). The life satisfaction and engagement with work of employees in the control condition did not increase over time and there were significant differences at the post measurement times between the employees in the strengths intervention condition and employees in the control condition.

Meyers and van Woerkom (2017) recruited employees from a variety of work sectors, with the most common being business services, government, and healthcare. A character-strengths training program consisted of strengths identification, development, and practice, the elements suggested as important by Seligman et al. (2005) in signature strengths training. The 67 participants in the strengths-training condition identified their three most dominant strengths. They then participated in a half-day training program, which encouraged them to develop and use these strengths in their work. Participants were also asked to choose a partner who would assist them in using and developing their individual strengths. The 63 participants in a wait-list control condition completed measures at the same time intervals, pre and one month post, as participants in the strengths training group. The researchers found that positive affect and psychological capital, consisting of self-efficacy, hope, and

resilience, increased more for the employees in the strengths training condition than those in the wait-list condition.

Dubreuil et al. (2016) used a pre-post research design to test the effects of an intervention focused on increasing use of character strengths in the workplace. The results showed a significant increase in strengths use and in life satisfaction. There was no significant change in self-rated work performance.

Niemiec (2014) and Pang & Ruch (2019) proposed a synergetic effect between mindfulness and character strengths. Mindfulness consists of a focus on the present in a state of non-judgmental awareness (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kohls, Sauer, & Walach, 2009). The synergy between mindfulness and character strengths may result from certain character strengths, such as love of learning, providing a platform for learning of mindfulness, and mindfulness training may enhance certain character strengths, such as curiosity and self-regulation (Pang & Ruch, 2019). Building on the idea of synergy between mindfulness and character strengths, Niemiec (2014) described an intervention termed mindfulness-based strengths practice. Central to mindfulness-based strengths practice is the application of character strengths in different ways through integration with mindfulness.

Pang and Ruch (2019) compared the impact of mindfulness-based strengths practice on employees, as proposed by Niemiec (2014), to the impact of a purely mindfulness-based intervention, mindfulness-based stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), and the impact of being in a wait-list control condition. The researchers randomly assigned 63 employees in various occupations to one of these three conditions. Participants in the mindfulness-based strengths practice and the mindfulness-based stress reduction conditions participated in weekly two-hour workshops for eight weeks and were assigned practices to complete outside these workshops. Employees in both the mindfulness-based strengths practice and the mindfulness-based stress reduction conditions showed increases in well-being, assessed as positive mood, vitality and interest, and job satisfaction over time when compared to employees in the wait-list condition. Thus, mindfulness-based strengths practice (Niemiec, 2014) as well as mindfulness-based stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) may increase happiness in the workplace.

Can Signature Character Strengths Help Guide Individuals in Career Exploration?

It seems logical that signature strengths might help a person choose a career. For instance, an individual who has high strengths involving justice might both enjoy working as a judge and do well in the role. Littman-Ovadia, Lazar-Butbul, and Benjamin (2014) investigated the usefulness of using signature strengths-based career counselling. The researchers provided unemployed job seekers with signature strengths-based counselling and compared their later employment status to that of a group of unemployed job seekers receiving traditional career counselling. Three months after the two types of career counseling ended, those who had received signature strengths-based career counselling had a significantly higher rate of employment (80.6%) than those who had received traditional career counselling (60%).

Future Directions

Future studies of signature strength building programs for workers might investigate the benefits of signature strength training components that could maximize the impact of training. For example, studies could systematically investigate the impact of employees' practicing using fewer or more signature strengths at work. Studies could also examine the effects of signature strength training on others who interact with the trained employees. For example, signature strength training of employees might result in increases in satisfaction among colleagues or among the customers interacting with employees.

Signature strength training has been shown to be beneficial when delivered in various modalities, such as in face to face training (Proctor et al., 2011) and online training (Proyer et al., 2015; Seligman et al., 2005). Future programs could investigate the comparative effects of different

delivery modalities and features of programs, such as the length of programs and the degree of interaction between participants and those delivering the programs. Such research could identify whether certain characteristics of employees interact with the effectiveness of program features. Researchers might continue to explore whether the effects of signature strength training are increased if it is combined with other intervention approaches, such as mindfulness training (see Pang and Ruch, 2019) or emotional-intelligence training (Schutte, Malouff, & Thorsteinsson, 2013).

Finally, future research might investigate the benefits of signature strength training in comparison to other positive psychology interventions for employees. For example, Kaplan et al. (2014) compared the benefits of a gratitude intervention to a social connectedness intervention for employees. Both interventions resulted in a significant reduction in workplace absence, but only the gratitude intervention resulted in increased positive affect. Future studies comparing various outcomes associated with signature strength training in comparison with other types of training would assist in identifying purpose suited interventions.

Conclusion

Use of signature strengths in the workplace can lead to increases in happiness. Research findings indicate that it is possible to increase use of signature strengths in the workplace and this increase in use of strengths results in increases in workplace well-being. Future signature strengths promotion programs might investigate the benefits of specific aspects of programs for different types of workplaces and employees, and examine the usefulness of incorporating additional elements, such as emotional intelligence training, into signature strengths development programs.

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