

Productive Wellbeing - how improved productivity supports employee wellbeing.

Ian Glen, May 2026

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Two competing trends dominate UK business today. The first, is the UK's poor productivity levels, which have struggled to exceed 1% growth p.a. since the 2009 financial crisis, and sees the UK trailing the US, Germany and France by up to 20% (UK Parliament, 2025). The second is increased stress and burnout among employees. 2024/25 saw UK days off for stress, depression and anxiety caused or made worse by work, running at 22.1m - a doubling compared to a decade ago (Health and Safety Executive, 2025). High or increased workload is cited by 42% of workers as a key driver of stress (Mental Health UK, 2026).

At first glance, this appears to be an impossible circle to square. However, this article draws on the Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R) (Demerouti et al, 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) to argue that improving productivity may actually be the key to reducing employee strain.

The Jobs Demands-Resources Model

First published by Arnold Bakker and Eva Demerouti in 2001, JD-R argues that job characteristics are either a job demand or a job resource. Job demands cause sustained physical or psychological effort and are associated with strain on the individual, including exhaustion and job-related anxiety. These can also be amplified by personal traits, such as perfectionist tendencies. The demands are offset by job resources, which can be put in place by the employer (e.g. systems, additional personnel) or can be developed within the individual - personal resources. Job resources do two important things. Firstly, they predict motivation, and secondly, they mitigate the impact of job demands on strain. Importantly, increasing motivation and reducing strain are associated with improved job performance.

So, if we consider productivity through a lens of demand reduction and resource enhancement, we can move away from the do more with less model and focus on creating a more productive environment, staffed by a more resourceful team. The result: increased productivity AND reduced strain and burnout.

Demand Reduction - the art of not doing

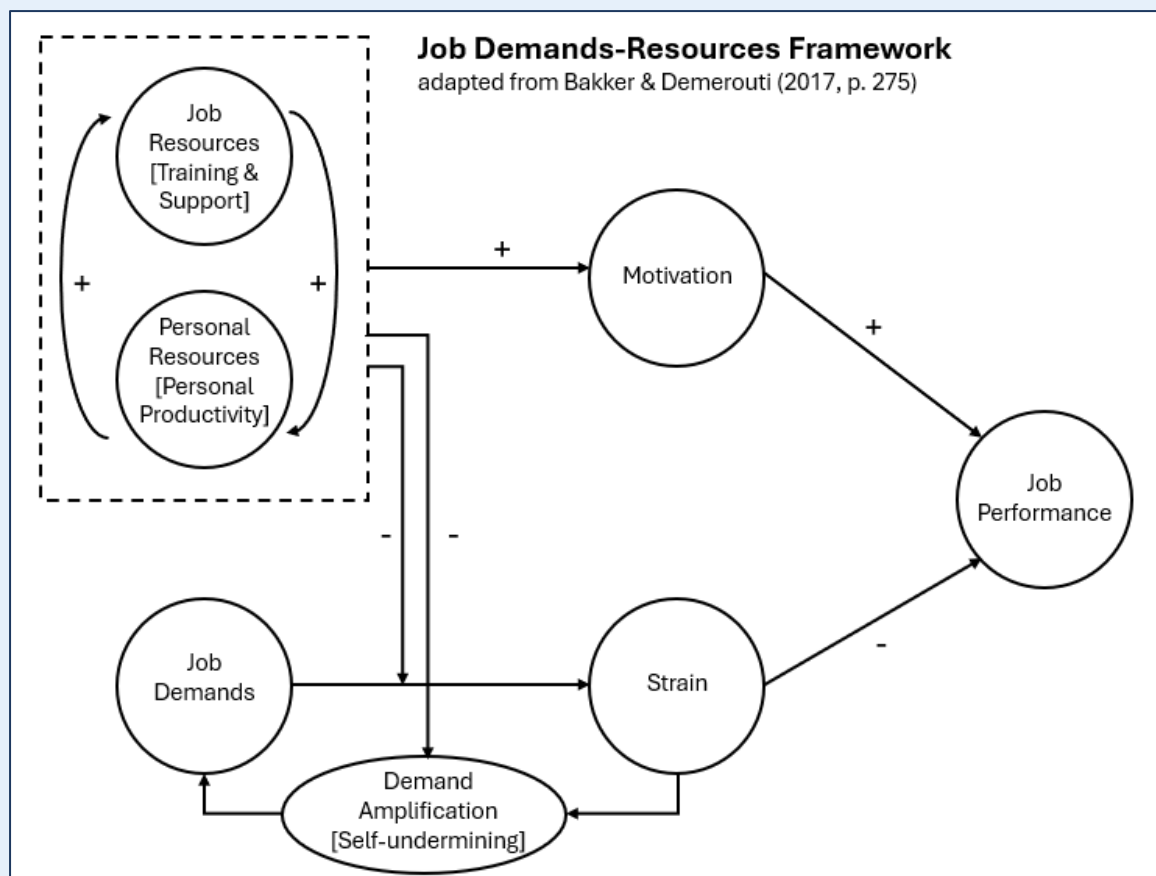
Let's start at the organisational level, where wellbeing interventions are at their most effective (Jain et al, 2022). Improved productivity undoubtedly creates increased job demands. However, organisations can mitigate against this by

assessing where else they can reduce job demands, without impacting productivity. Central to this is ensuring a clear set of business objectives that form the golden thread of what you are looking to achieve. Lack of clarity increases the cognitive demands within your team. It also allows a critical element in demand reduction – prioritisation.

In an increasingly busy and demanding environment, there is a tendency for organisations to chase down every opportunity and strive to be better in every area. This sense of organisational perfectionism is both unachievable and highly demanding on those attempting to deliver it. Instead, focus on prioritisation. What are the 20% of activities that are accounting for 80% of the productivity? How can you focus on those to make them even better?

Equally important is what can you NOT do? What are the parts of the business that you are sticking with that draw on resources with little return on investment? What are the tasks that you are requiring that are unnecessary or outdated? Ask yourself what would happen (or not happen) if we simply did not do that?

Demand reduction is about what NOT to do, removing work that is laborious, ill-directed or ineffective. In doing so, we both reduce strain, supporting more positive wellbeing outcomes, as well as focus resource on where our most effective return on investment sits.



Personal Productivity – the key resource

Of course, even with the most effective mitigation, job demands always exist. As Bakker and Demerouti suggest, “employees who have many job resources available can cope better with job demands” (2017, p.274). Many resources are provided by the organisation, such as training and performance but others can be considered personal resources, those elements within an individual that help them perform effectively, broadly what Bandura (1982) labels self-efficacy.

When considering developing personal resources that both support wellbeing and improve organisational output, then personal productivity is central. Helping employees improve their personal productivity by developing key skills such as effective time management, meeting management, meaningful delegation and working with autonomy are clear win-wins. From an organisational point of view, the productivity benefits are clear and measurable. From an individual perspective, an employee who is effective at managing their output spends less time on each task, suffers less from the anxiety of rumination and looming deadlines, and receives positive mental feedback from completing tasks and achieving goals. At the simplest level, it can also just give them more personal time to recuperate and enjoy their own activities.

Personal Demand Reduction

However, improving personal productivity is more than some time management training. For many the challenges of personal productivity sit deeper within the psyche than simply being more organised. Effective interventions to develop personal productivity must recognise that many people amplify their job demands through levels of anxiety and perfectionism, that in turn result in procrastination and a sense of overwhelm.

For interventions to enhance personal productivity, we need to recognise and help address the underlying behaviours. At an organisational level, are we creating the right environment of supported autonomy and psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019) to allow good decision making and to not extend feelings of failure-avoiding perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Harari et al, 2018)? At a management level, do we train and develop our managers to identify and support overwhelmed colleagues? And at the individual level, how do we develop self-awareness that allows our people to identify the early signs of overwhelm or recognise unhelpful perfectionist behaviours?

This is not resilience training, supporting coping under too much pressure. Instead, it is productivity focused development, targeted at providing the personal resources to meet job demands with efficacy.

Summary

Improved productivity is often associated with getting more from less – cracking the whip harder. Its demands can come at the expense of employee wellbeing. However, by taking a JD-R perspective, we can see improvements in productivity and employee wellbeing as compatible bedfellows, with a positive symbiotic relationship.

When organisations focus on job demands through a lens of what do we NOT need to do, they can simplify their work and improve output in the most important areas. In doing so, they also support their employees with clear direction and better prioritisation, reducing cognitive load and time wasted on non-productive work.

In turn, we can support employees by providing them with the personal resources necessary to improve their personal productivity and address demand amplification. That can reduce anxiety and overwhelm and increase personal time. At the same time, it is of clear organisational benefit.

By stepping back and using JD-R as a framework through which to view both wellbeing and productivity, we force ourselves to make systems changes that enable the previously illusory goal of increased productivity alongside enhanced employee wellbeing to become a reality.

About Ian

After 25 years as MD / CEO of a business employing more than 200 people, Ian wanted to understand better what made organisations and their people tick. Having completed the Professional Certificate in Executive Coaching at Henley Business School, he has studied for a MSc in Organisational Psychology at Birkbeck College, University of London.

His consultancy work helps businesses and organisations to “work better”, drawing on years of leadership experience combined with evidence-based practice. He specialises in helping individuals and organisations improve productivity in ways that also support wellbeing and reduce burnout.

When he’s not helping other businesses, Ian continues to play an active role as a Board member of his former organisation, in addition to holding several non-executive roles across the voluntary sector.

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