

BUSTING FIVE MYTHS ABOUT INDIVIDUAL WORKPLACE PERFORMANCE

By Chris Tamdjidi Published on 25.10.2023 17 Min.

- Paradoxically, focusing on employee wellbeing and care is a powerful way to improve the performance of your business.
- However, businesses often fail to recognise this truth, due to five prevailing myths about performance. We'll aim to bust these five myths in this article.

Many businesses are once again focusing narrowly on profit and efficiency. As we highlighted in our previous blog post, the increased focus on workplace wellbeing and care during the pandemic has been sadly short lived. Once again, we're seeing a shift towards a performance culture, at the expense of care for employees, as bosses force their employees back into the office. For many workers, working from home, or being offered free yoga lessons at work, or bosses asking them "How are you doing?" now seem like a weird, distant memory (much like the pandemic itself). Indeed, a Gartner survey suggested "Senior executives report profitability is investors' top focus in 2023", entailing an increased emphasis on efficiency, cost management, and profitability.¹

Focusing on these metrics is important for any business. **But we call instead for Care-formance**; the integration of care and wellbeing into performance culture. Paradoxically, **focusing on employee wellbeing is a powerful way to improve the performance of your business**. To do this, leaders and managers need to change their mindsets. These have typically been characterised by a narrow focus on growth, performance, efficiency, and so on. Not only is this mindset outdated, it's also simply wrong. Our data shows performance improves in teams when their employees feel more psychologically safe and when they feel cared for.²

The overt focus on performance suggests that how leaders believe businesses should work is incorrect. It isn't rooted in the reality of how humans, teams, or knowledge work functions. And so, in this blog, we'll identify and bust five myths about workplace performance, which are either entirely or mainly not true for modern collaborative knowledge work. Here we go:

1. A business succeeds because it's composed of high-performing individuals.
2. Chronic stress is an unavoidable but ignorable aspect of modern working life.
3. Employees should be multitaskers – being effective and responsive at all times.
4. Employees must leave their emotions at the door to be professional.
5. Money is the best motivator, with remuneration guaranteeing higher performance.

MYTH 1: A BUSINESS SUCCEEDS BECAUSE IT'S COMPOSED OF HIGH-PERFORMING INDIVIDUALS

While this first myth seems logical, there are two problems with it. Modern knowledge work is collaborative. Increasingly, teams play a more important role than individuals on business performance. Knowledge work involves solving complex problems. This requires diverse skillsets and perspectives, and getting anything done requires shared responsibility. This means **high-performing teams are more important than high-performing individuals**.³ And certainly, through Awaris's work with 100+ businesses in the last decade, we've found this statement to be overwhelmingly true.

Indeed, an emphasis on high-performing individuals can lead to problems. These include: 'siloe'd thinking', a lack of collaboration, messiah complexes (individuals thinking they're more important than they are), and weaker overall team performance. While both individuals and teams are important, we've seen time and time again that dysfunctional teams or processes hinder businesses performance more than any one individual can.

The measurement of performance only at the individual level is therefore problematic. Some aspects of work completion and project progress are measurable. But many aspects of true knowledge work are hard to measure. Indeed, the act of measurement can create disincentives which hinder real innovation and collaboration. And thus, business performance.

A review looking at productivity research in knowledge work came to the following conclusions:

"In reviewing the research our emphatic conclusion is that Knowledge Work is so varied and its outputs so intangible that it is not possible to come up with a single universal measure for Knowledge Worker Productivity. We also concluded that traditional measures of output per unit of production like 'calls per agent per hour' or 'units per week' or 'cost per

unit' are inappropriate for Knowledge Based businesses. In fact, they drive the wrong behaviours and have a potential to destroy the value of organisations.” – Center for Evidence Based Management.

So, we'd reformulate this myth as follows: **a business succeeds because it is composed of high performing teams.**

MYTH 2: CHRONIC STRESS IS AN UNAVOIDABLE BUT IGNORABLE ASPECT OF MODERN WORKING LIFE.

Most of us know that we need a certain level of activation to perform. The Yerkes-Dodson law from over a century ago postulated that our performance in many tasks is linked to our stress levels. However, since then, lots of other research has shown that too much stress (acute stress), and especially long-term stress (chronic stress), negatively impacts performance and wellbeing.⁴ However, the same study also showed that managers can reverse this impact by actively promoting wellbeing. Unfortunately, this hasn't been properly taken on board by modern businesses.

Instead, many remember that:

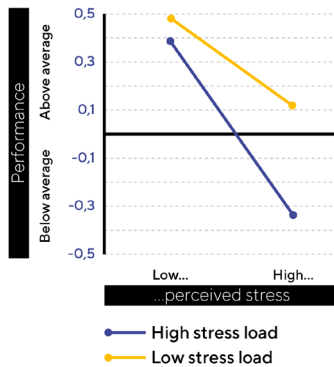
- High and acute stress hinders performance.
- Chronic stress impacts health.

They forget that:

- Chronic stress negatively impacts performance.
- A continual stress load inevitably leads to chronic stress.

Indeed, our own in-house surveys show a strong connection between elevated perceived stress (using the PSS-4, a reliable instrument to measure perceived stress) and low performance (see chart below).

High stress is linked to lower performance



Source: Awaris Data of 460 participants of the Resilience Screening collected in 2023

So, we'd reformulate this myth as: **sustainable high performance requires balancing performance and recovery, and as a result, lowering stress levels. Focusing on wellbeing to improve performance, or careformance, in other words.**

MYTH 3: EMPLOYEES SHOULD BE MULTI-TASKERS – BEING EFFECTIVE AND RESPONSIVE AT ALL TIMES

Some people proudly like to boast of their skills of multitasking. I'm sure we've all heard someone in the office even define themselves simply a "multitasker". In some ways, this shouldn't surprise us. Most modern workers have multiple priorities and goals to work on at the same time. So, when someone celebrates multitasking, they believe this means they're simply doing their job well.

But alas, this isn't true. When working on something which requires cognitive engagement, deep thinking, or collaboration, **it's been proven that we can only do one thing at a time well.**⁵ This is simply how our brains work. When we do multiple things 'seemingly' at the same time, we're actually frequently task switching. You can't draft an email, have a conversation with a colleague, and sip your coffee, at the same time. Well you can, but you'll do all these things poorly.

Studies show task switching comes at an extremely high cognitive and collaborative cost. One looked at the time taken to procure an item in a manufacturing company, depending on how many items were being procured in parallel. The outcome was emphatic. As the number of items procured rose, there was almost a tripling of the time to procure them.

In our own work with thousands of people we have assessed attentional control and their ability to work well. We have seen both in relation to working with e-mails and getting deep work done that working with focus reduces stress and improves productivity. We also question whether we really need to be as responsive as we think we do, and how much of our task switching is of our own making. Both conclusions challenge this myth. We can sequence our responsiveness and not always be 'on call'. A lot of task switching is caused by internal distractions – such as temporarily interrupting your work to check e-mails or respond to the floods of messages – while others are enforced upon employees by their business.

So, we'd reformulate this myth as: **single tasking, conscious management of attention, and deep focus are much more effective than multitasking. To do this, we'd recommend organising meeting-free days, supporting blocks of time where workers aren't expected to respond to emails, and consciously reflecting on the relevant response times for communication.**

MYTH 4: EMPLOYEES MUST LEAVE THEIR EMOTIONS AT THE DOOR TO BE PROFESSIONAL

Many of us feel that to be professional, we must suppress our emotions. That emotions can harm our thinking. And so, most of us go to work playing this strange 'character' of ourselves. One whose mood never appears to dip, who never gets frustrated at some of the pointless processes and meetings, and who never shares anything about who they truly are. However, modern neuroscience has shown that emotions are far more powerful than our logical, cognitive minds. And that emotions deeply sway our thinking, especially when we're unaware of them.⁶ In addition, ignoring or suppressing emotions means that people have to do a lot of emotional labour while not feeling complete or fully human at work. Shock: we aren't robots. A poor emotional workplace climate is a primary cause of stress. **And as we argue with Careformance, high stress inhibits performance.**

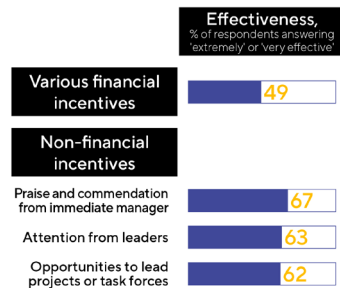
The relevance of working with emotions becomes clear in teamwork. Druskat and Wolff argue that “To be most effective, the team needs to create emotionally-intelligent norms, the attitudes and behaviours that eventually become habits – that support behaviours for building trust, group identity, and group efficacy.”⁷ And we at Awaris have seen this more times than we can count. Emotionally-intelligent teams are better able to address and process emotions and as a result often score higher on psychological safety and innovation. Trust, a sense of identity, and a feeling of efficacy arise in environments where emotions are well handled. We believe teams, leaders, and organisations stand to benefit by building their emotional intelligence. This is clearly named in numerous leadership development approaches, but often doesn’t seep into the lived reality of workplaces. (Although at Awaris, building emotional intelligence is the cornerstone of many of the programmes we offer).

So, we’d reformulate this myth as: **emotional awareness, individually and as a team, leads to better engagement, less errors, and improved performance. The simple act of checking in with each other at beginning of meetings is predictive of cohesiveness and better engagement in teams.**

MYTH 5: MONEY IS THE BEST MOTIVATOR, WITH REMUNERATION GUARANTEEING HIGHER PERFORMANCE

In our work with businesses, as soon as we pose this myth, many people openly disagree with us. They say things like “Surely pay is a massive incentive”, or “If it wasn’t why would businesses pay bonuses?” A global survey by consultancy McKinsey – who famously pay their employees handsomely – showed that most leaders clearly believed empowerment and social connection were better motivators than financial rewards (see chart). Despite this, most organisations relied more on financial rewards than these non-financial ones to promote performance.⁸ This closely coheres with what we see when we begin working with organisations.

Non-financial incentives were more effective motivators than financial incentives



Source: June 2009 McKinsey global survey of 1,047 executives, managers, and employees from a range of sectors

The reality of incentive systems is different from what modern workers actually want. The younger generations emphasise purpose and wellbeing more than other motivators, suggesting many companies are stuck with outdated ways of incentivising people. Many continue to measure and incentivise with financial KPIs to an almost comical level of accuracy, but don't strengthen the social fabric of an organisation. Or invest in wellbeing. Wellbeing investments for example might be just 1% to 2% of salary costs, even though the return on wellbeing investments far exceeds the impact of higher salaries on retention and engagement.² Another example of Careformance in action.

So, we'd rephrase this myth to: **Growth, connection, meaning, and care are more powerful motivators than money. So before blindly offering a raise to an unhappy employee, you could maybe ask what they need from a care perspective first.**

In our next blog post, we'll look at how leaders and teams can develop a true culture of careformance.

Sources

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