



Strengths focused human resources delivers measurable business returns, both in terms of hard results such as increased revenues and reduced costs as well as 'lead' indicators of future success such as customer engagement, improved morale, discretionary effort and personal wellbeing. Outlined below are the results of major published

studies, expert opinion and illustrative companies using this approach, all of which highlight the importance of strengths focused HR and positive organisational behaviour.

Compelling Research

There are an increasing number of published studies showing that strengths focused human resources delivers a host of advantages to organisations, including:

Improved confidence, focus and engagement

A recent meta analysis indicated a strong link between confidence and work-related performance. A study of 212 students provides evidence that strengths-based development programmes can significantly improve confidence.

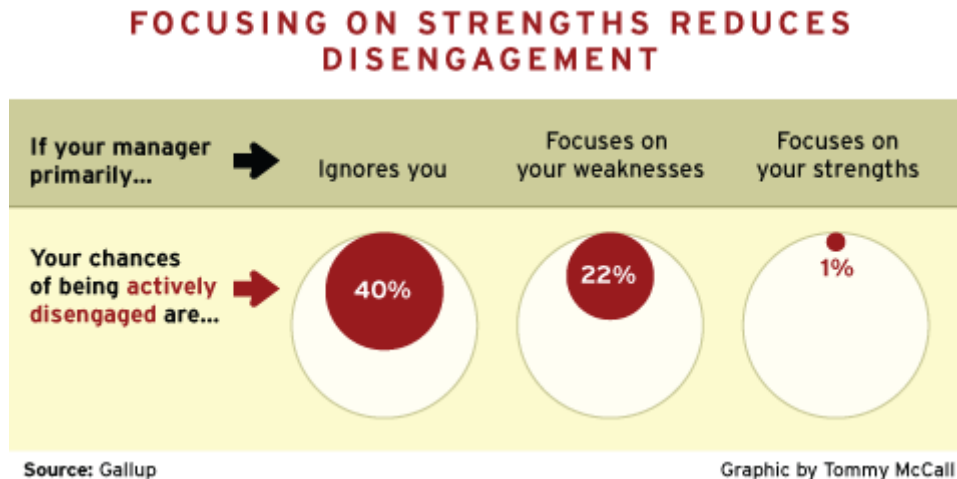
Sources: Strajovic and Luthans, 1998a; Clifton, 1997; Rath, 2002

In research looking at the effectiveness of strengths interventions in the healthcare sector over a 3 year period, employee engagement in the 9 hospitals using strengths-based people management approaches grew significantly in comparison to the control group of 151 hospitals.

Source: Black, 2001

A Gallup survey in 2004, examining what happens when your manager ignores you, focuses on your strengths, or focuses on your weaknesses, found that if your

manager focuses on your strengths, your chances of being actively disengaged go down to one in one hundred, see graph, below.



Finally, there have been several studies in the education and work contexts showing that students and subordinates perform better when their teachers or superiors have high, but realistic expectations of them and demonstrate this in their words and actions. This is called the self-fulfilling prophecy or Pygmalion Effect.

Sources: Rosenthal, 1994; Eden, 1990; White and Locke, 2000)

Higher productivity, better financial results and reduced turnover

Research suggests gratitude, positive emotion, and engagement improve productivity, reduce turnover, and boost profits. Other research shows measurable increases in happiness and bonding after people share success stories.

In a recent analysis of over 10 000 work units and over 300 000 employees in 51 companies, it was found that work units scoring above the median on the question “I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day” have 38% higher probability of success on productivity measures and 44% higher probability of success on customer loyalty and employee retention.

Source: Harter and Schmidt in 2002

A 2005 Corporate Leadership Council study involving data from over 90 000 employees in 135 organisations found that focusing on personality and performance strengths had one of the strongest impacts on employee performance of all line

manager actions. They found that this focus reinforces performing-enhancing behaviour, increasing employee engagement and promoting stronger identification with their work. Unsurprisingly, the factor that has the most negative impact on employee performance was focusing on employee weaknesses.

David L. Cooperrider, a professor of organizational behavior at Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management, has found that when group members discuss the organisation's larger purpose and their contributions, the morale lift has measurable results. Cooperrider says it led garage workers at Roadway Express to come up with \$1 million in cost savings.

Inspiring, transformational leadership

Studies have found that leaders who exhibit more positive emotion and behaviour are more likely to be rated as demonstrating transformational leadership behaviours including inspiring others and demonstrating more consideration and empathy for followers.

Leaders' expressions of position emotions have been found to arouse positive emotions in others; followers tend to emulate their leaders' positive energy and enthusiasm. Similarly, leaders' displays of negative emotion can cause followers to feel and display negative emotions, undermining morale and motivation.

Source: Barsade and Gibson, 2007

High quality problem-solving

Studies show a clear link between positive emotions and environments and faster processing of information, reduced premature diagnosis (less likely to jump to conclusions), greater ability for complex bargaining, improved creativity, and being more open to information.

Positive emotion has also found to contribute significantly to forward-looking thinking, self control and the ability to stay with a task, even if it is regarded as uninteresting or unpleasant.

Other research finds that people perform significantly better in problem-solving when positive comments and encounters outnumber negative ones 3 to 1, since bad emotions are so durable and damaging.

Source: Isen, 2000; Isen and Reeve, 2005; Losada, 1999

Stronger teamwork and supportive behaviour

In a research project undertaken at Toyota North American Parts Centre California involving over 400 employees on 54 work teams, a strengths-based team intervention with the objective of building effective work teams contributed a 6-9% increase in productivity per employee over a 1-year period.

This was achieved against a backdrop of productivity improvements of less than 1% over the previous 3 years.

Researchers have also found that employees who experience positive moods at work are more likely to be helpful and supportive towards their colleagues. They are not only willing to put in extra effort to get their own job done to a higher standard, but are also more likely to help others out, going beyond the requirements of their job description.

Source: Connelly, 2002; Barsade and Gibson, 2007

Improved health, lower illness and absenteeism

Studies show that people who are more optimistic and find positive meaning in adverse events live longer, overcome problems in less time, are half as likely to become depressed and have more successful relationships/marriages.

Personal resilience, or the ability to bounce-back from setbacks and cope with day-to-day hassles/stressors, has also been found to contribute significantly to psychological well-being and health.

Source: Fredrickson; 2003; Gottman, 1994; Jit-Ho, 2007

Expert Opinion

"The effective executive makes strengths productive. (S)he knows that one cannot build on weaknesses. To achieve results, one has to use all the available strengths – the strengths of associates, the strengths of the superior, and one's own strengths. These strengths are the true opportunities."

Peter Drucker, Management Guru and Author, 1967

"Companies where the focus is on amplifying the positive attributes ... rather than combating negatives ... perform better financially and otherwise"

Bronwyn Fryer - Editor Harvard Business Review, 2004

"Years of research prove that individuals and teams playing to their strengths significantly outperform those who don't in almost every business metric".

Marcus Buckingham, Management Guru and Author, 2009

HR needs to connect the inside and the outside, and change the image the company portrays. We want to be the employer of choice of employees our customer's would choose. This has implications for the movement of building on strengths. No one disagrees more that strengths matter, but HR professionals should learn to build on strengths that strengthen others.

Dave Ulrich, HR Lecturer, Author and Thought Leader

Companies using Strengths based Human Resources



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