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Unpacking Work Gratitude: Grateful Appraisals Uniquely Predict Employee Outcomes

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Gratitude has well-documented positive effects on well-being, including in work contexts. However, limited research has explored how distinct dimensions of work-specific gratitude uniquely influence employee outcomes. This study addresses this gap by investigating whether the three subscales of the Work Gratitude Scale (WGS) predict employee outcomes beyond personality traits, while highlighting the differential importance of each subscale. A sample of 300 full-time employees from the US completed measures of conscientiousness, emotional stability, work gratitude, well-being, distress, and work performance. Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that, after controlling for conscientiousness and emotional stability, only one dimension of gratitude – grateful appraisals – significantly predicted well-being, distress, and performance. These findings offer valuable theoretical insights and practical guidance for researchers and practitioners examining the role of gratitude in the workplace.

Key words: work gratitude, well-being, performance

Introduction

The term gratitude is commonly used in everyday language, and while gratitude is a well-researched topic, researchers have only recently started to investigate the relationship between gratitude and positive human functioning in organisational settings. Gratitude is often viewed as a general human trait or a character strength (McCullough et al., 2002; Portocarrero, 2020; Watkins et al., 2003), which implies that it is stable with little fluctuation over time. Youssef-Morgan et al. (2022, p. 3) define work gratitude as the "intentional choice to engage in positive appraisals and feelings of thankfulness and appreciation toward the characteristics, situations,

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and people currently present in one's work context". Positive appraisals help to recognise and interpret positive aspects of one's work environment, which suggests that gratitude is an emotional outcome of a cognitive process. This definition suggests that gratitude is beyond a general disposition towards people and life, but rather it is situational and context-specific implying that levels of gratitude can change (Youssef-Morgan et al., 2022). Therefore, measuring gratitude as a malleable state is particularly beneficial for organisations considering that employee gratitude could be enhanced through interventions (Komase et al., 2021).

A meta-analysis examining the link between gratitude and mental well-being found that they are moderately to strongly correlated (Portocarrero et al., 2020) and organisational scholars showed that the positive effects of gratitude extend to work settings (Zhao et al., 2023). Gratitude in the workplace is important for several reasons as it promotes well-being, enhances interpersonal relationships, and encourages citizenship behaviours to name a few (Locklear et al., 2023; Loi & Ng, 2021). It is also known to be a coping mechanism for managing demanding and stressful situations, while having a positive impact on both physical and mental health (Skrzelinska & Ferreira, 2022).

Despite the growing interest in workplace gratitude and the idea that situational factors are likely to influence gratitude, there are still a limited number of work-related gratitude scales. There is a need for work-specific gratitude measures because someone's general tendency to show gratitude does not necessarily transfer to gratitude at work, and for this reason the Gratitude at Work Scale (GAWS; Cain et al., 2019) was developed, which assesses gratitude as a dispositional trait. While a reliable and valid trait measure of work-related gratitude is valuable, gratitude's ability to fluctuate depending on situational circumstances makes a valid state measure desirable.

The recently developed Work Gratitude Scale (WGS; Youssef-Morgan et al., 2022) addressed this research gap by measuring gratitude as a malleable state. The WGS was developed by adapting items of existing trait gratitude measures by changing item wording to reflect a state of 'here and now' measure and by making the item wording work specific. This is an approach that is often used with measures in the Positive Psychology domain (Luthans et al., 2013). This resulted in a 10-item measure consisting of three subscales that include different conceptualisations of gratitude. Youssef-Morgan et al. (2022) suggest that workplace gratitude is composed of three dimensions, namely grateful appraisals, gratitude towards others, and intentional attitude of gratitude. 'Grateful appraisals' refer to positive cognitive appraisals of work situations and characteristics. 'Gratitude towards others' assesses one's appreciation of other individuals at work. 'Intentional attitude of gratitude' refers to purposeful and mindful perception of positive aspects at work (Youssef-Morgan et al., 2022). This makes the WGS a multidimensional measure that synthesises different aspects of gratitude found in the literature.

While the WGS has shown to have good psychometric properties and exhibits concurrent validity with other gratitude measures and convergent validity with Core Self-evaluations and Psychological Capital (Youssef-Morgan et al., 2022), more research examining the validity of this scale in a work context is warranted. Interestingly, some multidimensional measures show that subscales of those measures differentially relate to relevant outcomes. For example, the subscales of the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (Baer et al., 2006) show different contributions towards

health outcomes: The Nonreactivity subscale accounts for most of the variance observed in well-being, while the Acting with Awareness subscale explains most of the variance in distress (Roemer et al., 2021). Another example would be the Psychological Capital Questionnaire that consists of the subscales of self-efficacy, resilience, hope, and optimism (Luthans et al., 2007). When using the four subscales to predict relevant work outcomes, it was found that only self-efficacy and optimism predict vigour at work, while optimism is the sole predictor of absorption at work (Görgens-Ekermans & Herbert, 2013). Furthermore, a study using the Short Gratitude, Resentment, and Appreciation Test, which has three subscales ('Sense of abundance', 'Appreciation of others', and 'Simple appreciation'), has shown that the subscales are not equally important in predicting momentary emotional experiences. It was found that a sense of abundance positively correlates with momentary positive affect and negatively with negative affect. The other gratitude subscales did not show significant associations with momentary positive and negative affect (Simons et al., 2020).

While work gratitude as whole should be associated with higher well-being, lower distress, and enhanced performance, the different dimensions of work gratitude might differ in terms of strength of contribution to these outcomes. The 'Grateful appraisals' dimension refers to positive, cognitive appraisals of work. Positive cognitive appraisals may increase someone's awareness of job resources and fuel work engagement, which should be particularly important for job performance (Bakker, 2011). The 'Gratitude towards others' dimension is concerned with the social appreciation of others at work. Having supportive colleagues provides social resources to deal with stress and expressing gratitude towards them enhances positive affect (Yoshimura & Berzins, 2017), which should be particularly strongly related to enhanced well-being and lower levels of distress. The dimension 'intentional gratitude at work' refers to the purposeful enjoyment of one's work. It reflects proactive behaviour that likely fosters positive affect and buffers strain, which should also relate to higher well-being and lower distress. If that is the case, it could have important implications for the targeted use of simple gratitude interventions in the workplace.

The present study has two main objectives. Firstly, it aims to further examine the validity of WGS by analysing whether it relates to important employee outcomes, such as well-being, distress, and work performance. This will be done by examining whether the WGS subscales predict variance in those outcomes beyond already established predictors, such as conscientiousness and emotional stability (Zell & Lesick, 2022). Secondly, this study aims to examine whether the three subscales of the WGS differentially contribute to these employee outcomes, which would not only provide further validity evidence, but it could have important practical implications for organisations and practitioners on where to focus their attention. As this analysis is of exploratory nature no hypotheses are stated.

Method

Participants

A sample of *n* = 300 full-time working employees were recruited from the US as research participants in this study. Hundred and forty-eight (49.30%) were female, 151 (50.30%) were male and one (0.30%) preferred to not indicate their gender. The sample's mean age was 37.79 years (*SD* = 10.80) and the mean tenure in their current job was 6.71 years (*SD* = 6.58). Twenty-three percent of participants indicated a high school degree as their highest level of education, 6.3% indicated

they had undertaken vocational training, almost half (48.7%) had completed an undergraduate degree, 19.7% had obtained a postgraduate degree and 2.3 percent obtained some other form of education or training. A power analysis for linear multiple regressions based on an anticipated medium-sized effect, an alpha error of 0.05, power of 0.95, and nine predictors using G*Power indicated a minimum sample size of 166. The anticipated medium-sized effect was based on a meta-analysis that found a moderate link between gratitude and well-being (Portocarrero et al., 2020). The sample size therefore meets power requirements for the analyses.

Procedure

Prior to the study commencement ethics approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the first author's institution. Participants were recruited through Prolific and received a small financial compensation upon survey completion. An anonymous Qualtrics survey was advertised to eligible Prolific participants, who had to be at least 18 years old, fluent in English, residing in the US and employed full-time.

Measures

The measures used in this study are described below. Items were summed to yield a total score, and the internal consistency of all scales was calculated using Cronbach's alpha and McDonald's omega.

Work Gratitude

The Work Gratitude Scale (Youssef-Morgan et al., 2022) was used to measure work-related gratitude. It is a 10-item scale with statements rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Work gratitude comprises three subscales, namely grateful appraisals, gratitude towards others, and intentional attitude of gratitude. Sample items are "Right now, I have so much at work to be thankful for" (Grateful appraisals), "Currently, I couldn't have gotten where I am today at work without the help of many people" (Gratitude towards others), and "Right now, I think it's important to enjoy the simple things that pertain to my work" (intentional attitude of gratitude). All subscales showed excellent internal consistency (α = .92-.94, ω = .92-94) in the present study. Higher scores on this measure indicate a higher level of work-related gratitude.

Conscientiousness and Emotional Sstability

Two personality traits, specifically conscientiousness and emotional stability, were measured using the respective subscales of the Big Five markers (Goldberg, 1992). This is measured with 10 items for each subscale on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Sample items are "I am exacting in my work" (Conscientiousness) and "I am relaxed most of the time" (Emotional stability). Both scales showed good internal consistency (α = .88, ω=.88 conscientiousness and α = .93, ω = .93 emotional stability).

Well-Being

Well-being was measured with the Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (Stewart-Brown et al., 2009). This 7-item scale measures well-being on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = none of the time, 5 = all of the time). A sample item is "I've been dealing with problems well". The scale showed excellent internal consistency in the present study (α = .94, ω = .94). As per the author's recommendations, scale scores were converted into metric scores for the analysis.

Distress

Distress was assessed using the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). Distress is measured with 21 items on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = almost never, 4 = almost always). A sample item is "I felt that I had nothing to look forward to". The scale showed excellent internal consistency in the present study (α = .96, ω = .96).

Work Performance

Work performance was measured using the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (Koopmans et al., 2014). Work performance comprises three subscales measured with 18 items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = seldom, 5 = always). A sample item is "I managed to plan my work so that I finished it on time". In the present study the scale showed good internal consistency (α = .90, ω = .89).

Analysis

First, data were screened for missing values and submissions that were completed too fast. Typically, when respondents work through a survey too quickly, they are not reading the statement carefully but rather selecting answers at random, which will affect the accuracy of the data. There were no missing values to report. The survey completion time was captured in seconds, with a median response time of 576 seconds. Participants that completed the survey 50% faster than the median time (<288 seconds) (Greszki et al., 2014) were removed (n = 14) from the dataset, which resulted in a final sample size of 286. Next, data was checked to determine if it met the assumptions for regression analyses. Normality and homoscedasticity were examined using P-P plots and scatterplots of standardised predicted values against standardised residual values, which indicated that the normality and homoscedasticity assumption were met. Next, potential multicollinearity was examined using VIF values, which were all below the conservative value of 5 (Garson, 2012).

Correlations were computed to determine relationships between the constructs. Hierarchical regressions were calculated to examine whether gratitude has incremental validity beyond personality with respect to well-being, distress, and job performance. Three separate regressions were utilised for each outcome variable. In the first step we entered demographic variables as controls. In a second step we entered the conscientiousness and emotional stability, and in the last step we entered grateful appraisals, gratitude towards others, and intentional attitude of gratitude in the regression equation.

Results

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to determine relationships between the constructs. Grateful appraisals, gratitude to others, and intentional attitude towards gratitude are significantly moderately to strongly correlated to well-being (r = .43 to .56, p < .01), distress (r = -.29 to -.43, p < .01) and work performance (r = .31 to .46, p <. 01). It should be noted that grateful appraisals have correlations with the highest magnitude for all three outcomes. Both conscientiousness as well as emotional stability have moderate to strong correlations with well-being (r = .49 and .67, p < .01), distress (r = -.40 and -.68, p < .01), and work performance (r = .54 and .52, p < .01). These results are displayed in Table 1.

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine how the three dimensions of work gratitude predict employee

Table 1 *Descriptive statistics and correlations of the study variables*

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Grateful appraisals	14.55	4.66	(.95)							
2. Gratitude others	20.24	5.66	.70**	(.94)						
3. Intentional gratitude	14.51	4.58	.75**	.70**	(.96)					
4. Conscientiousness	38.21	6.84	.32**	.19**	.28**	(.90)				
5. Emotional stability	32.01	9.22	.40**	.27**	.28**	.53**	(.82)			
6. Well-being	22.62	5.55	.56**	.43**	.45*	.49**	.67**	(.87)		
7. Distress	35.85	13.68	-.43**	-.30**	-.29**	-.40**	-.68**	-.65**	(.88)	
8. Work performance	66.96	11.22	.46**	.31**	.34**	.54**	.52**	.58**	-.38**	(.83)

Note. Cronbach's alpha shown in the parentheses.
**$p < .01$

Table 2 *Hierarchical regressions predicting well-being using demographics, personality, and work gratitude*

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Age	-.01	.04	-.01	-.02	.03	-.04	-.01	.03	-.02
Sex	-2.23	.64	-.20**	-.21	.51	-.02	-.45	.47	-.04
Tenure	.13	.06	.15*	.03	.05	.04	.01	.04	.02
Education	.09	.30	.02	.03	.22	.01	.01	.21	.00
Conscientiousness				.14	.04	.17**	.10	.04	.12*
Emotional stability				.34	.03	.57**	.27	.03	.45**
Grateful appraisals							.32	.08	.27**
Gratitude others							.03	.06	.03
Intentional gratitude							.08	.08	.07
R^2	.06			.47			.57		
F	4.69**			40.14**			39.79**		

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

outcomes. After controlling for demographics in the first step $R^2 = .06$, $F(4, 276) = 4.69$, $p < .01$, conscientiousness and emotional stability were introduced in the second regression step and explained a significant proportion of variance in well-being $R^2 = .47$, $\Delta R^2 = .41$, $F(6, 274) = 40.14$, $p < .01$. Conscientiousness ($\beta = .17$, $p < .01$) and emotional stability ($\beta = .57$, $p < .01$) emerged as significant predictors of well-being. In the third regression step the three dimensions of work gratitude were added to the model, which explained additional variance $R^2 = .57$, $\Delta R^2 = .10$, $F(9, 271) = 39.79$. While grateful appraisals were a significant predictor of well-being ($\beta = .27$, $p < .01$), gratitude towards others and intentional attitude of gratitude (both $p > .05$) were not (Table 2).

The next regression model aimed at predicting distress. After controlling for demographics $R^2 = .07$, $F(4, 276) = 5.15$, $p < .01$, personality explained a significant proportion of variance in distress $R^2 = .47$, $\Delta R^2 = .40$, $F(6, 274) = 39.69$, with emotional stability ($\beta = -.64$, $p < .01$) emerging as a significant predictor. In the last regression step gratitude explained additional variance $R^2 = .50$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(9, 271) = 29.95$ and of the three gratitude dimensions only grateful appraisals

Table 3 *Hierarchical regression predicting distress using demographics, personality, and work gratitude*

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Age	-.15	.09	-.12	-.09	.07	-.07	-.12	.07	-.09
Sex	5.33	1.59	.20**	.03	1.27	.00	.40	1.25	.02
Tenure	-.20	.15	-.10	.02	.11	.01	.04	.11	.02
Education	-.27	.73	-.02	.05	.56	.00	.01	.55	.00
Conscientiousness				-.12	.11	-.06	-.07	.10	-.04
Emotional stability				-.95	.08	-.64**	-.84	.08	-.56**
Grateful appraisals							-.65	.22	-.22**
Gratitude others							-.08	.16	-.03
Intentional gratitude							.20	.21	.07
R^2	.07			.47			.50		
F	5.15**			39.69**			29.95**		

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Table 4 *Hierarchical regressions predicting work performance using demographics, personality and work gratitude*

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Age	.07	.08	.07	.06	.06	.06	.09	.06	.09
Sex	-1.53	1.34	-.07	1.53	1.12	.07	1.13	1.08	.05
Tenure	.03	.12	.02	-.17	.10	-.10	-.19	.10	-.11*
Education	-.27	.62	-.03	-.27	.49	-.03	-.32	.47	-.03
Conscientiousness				.61	.09	.38**	.56	.09	.34**
Emotional stability				.43	.07	.35**	.30	.07	.25**
Grateful appraisals							.69	.19	.29**
Gratitude others							.09	.14	.05
Intentional gratitude							-.16	.18	-.07
R^2	.01			.38			.44		
F	0.80			27.65**			23.64**		

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

significantly negatively predicted distress (β = -.22, $p < .01$) (Table 3).

The final regression model aimed at predicting work performance. After controlling for demographics R^2 = .01, $F(4, 276)$ = 0.80, p = .53, personality explained a significant proportion of variance in work performance R^2 = .38, ΔR^2 = .37, $F(6, 274)$ = 27.65, with conscientiousness (β = .38, $p < .01$) and emotional stability (β = .35, $p < .01$) emerging as significant predictors. Work gratitude was added to the regression model in the last step and explained additional variance R^2 = .44, ΔR^2 = .06, $F(9, 271)$ = 23.64. Again, out of the three gratitude dimensions, only grateful appraisals significantly predicted work performance (β = .29, $p < .01$) (Table 4). These results show that grateful appraisals in particular are a valuable predictor of well-being, distress, and job performance, which highlights that not all gratitude dimensions are equally important. Furthermore, grateful appraisals explain variance in these outcomes beyond conscientiousness and extraversion.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to determine the varying influence of the subscales of gratitude on employee outcomes. This was of exploratory nature, and it was done by analysing the contributions of grateful appraisals, gratitude towards others, and intentional attitude for gratitude, as measured through the WGS, to employee well-being, distress, and job performance, while controlling for the influence of personality (namely conscientiousness and emotional stability). Results from the hierarchical regression models show that gratitude explains variance in employee outcomes beyond personality, however only grateful appraisals emerged as a significant predictor of employee outcomes. This shows that the WGS has incremental predictive power beyond personality traits, but it also highlights that only one subscale is significantly associated with relevant outcomes, while the other two subscales were not significant predictors. Our findings suggest that the active, cognitive process of appraising one's work in a positive light – the cognitive component of gratitude – is the primary mechanism driving its benefits on well-being, distress, and performance.

These results align with similar findings in previous research. General gratitude scales have shown incremental validity above and beyond personality traits (Lin, 2017), and this finding was replicated with a work-specific measure of state gratitude. Furthermore, the WGS subscales show positive associations with work performance and well-being and negative associations with distress, which aligns with findings of Cain et al.'s (2019) trait measure of work gratitude. These findings provide additional validity evidence for the WGS on top of the concurrent and convergent validity evidence provided by Youssef-Morgan et al. (2022).

Interestingly, we also found that not all subscales of the WGS are equally important with regards to prediction of outcomes. This is a finding that has also been observed with other multidimensional scales, where different subscales have differential contributions towards relevant outcome measures (Görgens-Ekermans & Herbert, 2013; Roemer et al., 2021; Simons et al., 2020). In the present study only Grateful Appraisals emerged as a significant predictor of well-being, distress, and work performance. Notably, Simons et al. (2020) had a similar finding using the SGRAT, where only Sense of Abundance was a significant predictor of positive and negative affect, but Appreciation of Others and Simple Appreciation had no significant contribution. Similarly, subscales from both the WGS and GRAT, Grateful Appraisals as well as Sense of Abundance incorporate a cognitive element in their conceptualisation, which seems to be a key element with regards to enhancing well-being. A possible explanation could be that these cognitive aspects allow individuals to consider and frame their circumstances positively, which in turn enhances positive affect and buffers negative feelings. This further relates to the notion of heliotropism, which suggests that humans are drawn towards the positive and a grateful individual would typically focus on the positive.

Showing gratitude towards others as well as intentional and mindful acknowledgement of positive aspects appear not to be as important. There are several possible explanations for these findings. Intent does not necessarily translate into behaviour (Jekauc et al., 2025), which means that one's intentions to show gratitude might not result in actions of gratitude as captured by the items of the WGS. Additionally, the item wording of intentions is rather unspecific, and research indicates that more specific intentions more often translate into behaviour (De Vet et al., 2011), and thus

not having any positive impact on well-being and performance. A possible explanation for the non-significant effect of gratitude towards others is that merely being grateful without expressing it towards others might not result in a strong enough emotional response. This is supported by empirical evidence, which shows that writing a gratitude letter to benefactors had a greater impact on well-being than writing a list of people to be grateful for (Regan et al., 2023). Assessing whether people show their gratitude towards others rather than feeling gratitude towards others might have therefore produced different results.

Theoretical Implications

These findings have important theoretical implications. Considering that the subscales of the WGS seem to differ in importance when it comes to predicting employee outcomes, researchers might want to consider focussing on subscales and not total scale scores as this could mask nuances in the data and potentially dilute effects. These findings might also inform further research to focus on what specific mechanisms of gratitude are responsible for positive effects, as this can enhance our understanding of how gratitude works, which could further have implications for the design of interventions.

The results suggest that grateful appraisals are central in shaping employee outcomes. This aligns with Lazarus' cognitive appraisal theory (1991), which states that a person's interpretations of a situation precede an emotional response. A positive perception of one's work environment might lead to a stronger positive emotional response towards one's work. These positive appraisals may then activate processes described in Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory (2001), whereby positive emotions broaden employees' perspectives and contribute to accumulation of personal resources that support well-being and performance.

Practical Implications

Furthermore, these findings highlight the value of gratitude to employee mental health and performance. In a time where organisations are striving for employee well-being and driving for greater performance, understanding that gratitude explains variance in both gives practitioners and leaders opportunity to gain competitive advantage. By focusing on grateful appraisals, leaders may be able to enhance employee outcomes. Further to this, practitioners could create onboarding and training programs that focus on developing grateful appraisals. Specifically, training should introduce techniques that help employees identify and positively appraise aspects of their work. For example, a three-week long intervention study conducted with healthcare workers asked them to list three good things that occurred and what role they played in these. This showed positive impact on positive affect compared to controls (Gold et al., 2023). Such an intervention can also help participants to reframe situations, for example even stressful work events where one played a role in moving a project forward can be interpreted as progress and therefore as good.

Limitations

This study has a few limitations. Limitations include the cross-sectional nature of the study, whereby data was collected at one point in time. Based on this, causality cannot be determined, and results cannot be generalised. Future research should consider implementing longitudinal studies to determine the long-term implications of gratitude

and how it relates to performance, distress, and well-being over time. This would also be useful to establish whether the WGS is a true state measure that is able to detect within-person fluctuations, which may be particularly valuable for intervention studies.

Furthermore, due to cross-sectional data collection, method variance due to common method bias could have impacted our analyses. This could have inflated relationships between constructs in our study. Future research could address the problem through temporal separation of administered measures (Podsakoff et al., 2024).

In our study we only controlled for conscientiousness and emotional stability as these traits are consistently associated with employee outcomes. However, larger samples could include the entire Big Five to further disentangle gratitude from personality traits. This would test the robustness of these effects under a more complex model.

Lastly, participants were recruited from the USA, the findings are limited to this population and may not be generalised to others. Research indicates that there may be cross-cultural differences with regards to perceptions and expression of gratitude (Floyd et al., 2018; Morgan et al., 2022). It would therefore be valuable to examine the validity of the WGS and possible differential relations of gratitude dimensions with samples from other countries.

Conclusion

This study examined the unique contributions of different dimensions of work gratitude to employee outcomes. Grateful appraisals emerged as the only dimension consistently associated with well-being, distress, and performance. These findings suggest that positive cognitive appraisals of one's work environment play a central role in shaping a positive work life, with benefits for both employees and organisations.

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