# Psychological well-being of Parliament staff: What do we know and what can we do?

The importance of prioritising psychological wellbeing among staff in Parliament is highlighted by the issues raised by reviews in both the Australian and New Zealand Parliaments.

Factors that can contribute to poor psychological wellbeing at work include role ambiguity, role conflict, stressful events, workload and pressure (Bakker et al., 2023). Conversely, autonomy, manager and co-worker support, feedback, and task significance facilitate the path to wellbeing at work. Although studies on the factors related to wellbeing have been conducted across different types of workplaces, there are few studies on the factors affecting the wellbeing of MPs (Flinders et al., 2020), and much less is known about factors that affect the wellbeing of staff working in Parliament.

## The New Zealand Parliament

To understand the factors that may contribute to or hinder the psychological wellbeing of staff in the New Zealand Parliament, it is important to view wellbeing in the context of Parliament as a workplace. Staff employed within the offices of Parliament in New Zealand are part of the public sector, which supports the legislative branch of government (Public Service Commission, n.d.). While funding for the offices of Parliament in New Zealand comes from the government, they are accountable to the Speaker of the House and is not under Ministerial direction or influence as with other public service departments.

The day-to-day operation of the New Zealand Parliament is mainly supported by the Office of the Clerk and Parliamentary Service. The Office of the Clerk offers procedural advice and supports the House and its committees. Parliamentary Service provides services to members (based both within and outside the parliamentary precinct).

Within the Parliamentary Service, corporate and member support staff employment terms are different from each other. Member support staff are employed on fixed-term event-based employment agreements. Their legal employer is Parliamentary Service, but the member of Parliament (MP) they work with is their ‘boss’ in practice (Francis, 2019). This contrasts with corporate staff who are more likely to be on permanent employment agreements and their employment relationship does not include the MPs.

In line with Fletcher et al.'s (2020) view to contextualised the demands and resources, understanding the work context of Parliament and the different employment terms within Parliament can help to identify which risk and protective factors are more related to psychological wellbeing for Parliament staff. The risk factors are factors that can lead to psychological strain while protective factors are factors that can mitigate psychological strain.

## Purpose of this paper

The main aim of this paper is to discuss how employees’ perception of protective and risk factors can be tracked through the annual employee engagement survey administered by the New Zealand Parliament. This paper will also describe future initiatives by the New Zealand Parliament to measure engagement along with insights on wellbeing initiatives undertaken by the New South Wales (NSW) Parliament.

To understand factors associated with employee wellbeing, it is important to be guided by established research. In this paper, I will discuss employee wellbeing from the job demand-resources model (JD-R), which has been well-researched over the past 20 years (Bakker et al., 2023). It posits that job demands can lead to psychological strain, while job resources mitigate psychological strain (Bakker & Demerouti (2007).

## Viewing wellbeing through the employee engagement survey

In the New Zealand Parliament, the Human Resources team administers the annual employee engagement survey. The Health and Safety team leads the work in identifying and managing psychosocial risks. The responses to the annual employee engagement survey provide some insights into staff wellbeing. The survey has 13 categories and 61 questions, covering topics such as leadership, the organisation’s process, people’s experience, and psychological safety.

While all questions have their purpose, the engagement survey is not designed to measure employees’ wellbeing. The survey questions are not necessarily organised into categories that reflects job demands and resources. Therefore, I will reorganise the engagement survey questions and some questions may be omitted as they are less related to wellbeing factors.

Each question in the engagement survey was considered and organised into categories that reflect job resources, job demands, or the underlying mechanisms of job resources/demands. Underlying mechanisms explain how job demands/resources are connected to wellbeing (Bakker et al., 2023).

Some value-based questions that do not clearly present as job demands, resources, or underlying mechanisms, were not included in this exercise. Once the questions were broadly categorised into three categories, the questions were classified into factors. The outcome of this is presented in Appendix 1. The following section highlights some of these outcomes.

### What can the employee engagement survey tell us about wellbeing?

The engagement survey includes job resources questions related to leadership behaviour, opportunities for development, role clarity, social support, autonomy, participation in decision making, authenticity at work, reward, feedback, and physical work environment setup. Among these factors, leadership behaviour has eight questions, while the rest of the factors have one to three related questions.

In terms of underlying mechanisms, the survey contains questions related to the psychological safety of the team and individual, authenticity at work, meaningful work, and work-life balance. Psychological safety has the most related questions (eight). Supportive leadership behaviours, supportive organisational practices, and the quality of relationships at work are some of the factors that may contribute to individual and team psychological safety, which in turn leads to positive outcomes such as greater engagement (Newman et al., 2017). Without further analysis, it is unclear which job resources are associated to underlying mechanisms, particularly psychological safety, in the New Zealand Parliament.

Finally, there was no question identified in the engagement survey that is related to job demands or wellbeing outcomes. As this is preliminary work to identify questions in the engagement survey that can contribute to employees’ wellbeing, a factor analysis or structural equation modelling should be conducted to confirm if the questions are as categorised in Appendix 1. Further analysis can also provide understanding on how job resources are associated to psychological safety. The implications of this exercise will be discussed in the section below.

# Implications

The annual engagement survey consists of questions that will elicit information on employees’ well-being. As the engagement survey is collected and discussed annually, this provides an opportunity for each team to discuss the results of the survey with a focus on changes over time and the resources that can contribute to their wellbeing.

While the survey has provided some information on job resources that can contribute to employee wellbeing, it is notable that job demands and questions that measure wellbeing are not found in the engagement survey. Job demands such as workload, time pressure, interpersonal contact/conflict, physical work environment demands (such as noise), and shift work for some business units, can contribute to psychological strains (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Wellbeing outcomes such as job satisfaction and general wellbeing are also not part of the survey questions.

The Human Resources team is in the process of planning a quarterly survey with a goal of being able to respond sooner to issues and check their progress. The Health and Safety team is contributing to this process by identifying risk factors that can be included in the survey. This may be an opportunity to consider including some job demands and wellbeing questions for the engagement survey that can provide better information about wellbeing.

The NSW Parliament’s “*Public Sector People Matter Employee Survey (PMES)*” could be a useful reference when designing questions about wellbeing and job demands. Similar to the New Zealand Parliament, the NSW Parliament tracks wellbeing through the PMES and some teams do regular surveys to keep track of workload and general wellbeing (Matthew Dobson, Executive Sponsor of Mental Health and Wellbeing, personal communication, 6 September 2024). The PMES includes questions about wellbeing (e.g. In general, my sense of wellbeing is…) and a range of job demands such as physical harm, discrimination and harassments.

Tracking employee wellbeing can also be a way to identify if wellbeing initiatives achieve their aims. One notable practice of the NSW Parliament is the establishment of the Executive Sponsor of Mental Health and Wellbeing role. The aim of the role is to create a culture in the NSW Parliament that supports good mental health and wellbeing among staff (Matthew Dobson, Executive Sponsor of Mental Health and Wellbeing, personal communication, 6 September 2024). One of the initiatives overseen by the Executive Sponsor of Mental Health and Wellbeing is the *’Mental Health First Aid Network’*. This initiative has seen 16 people being trained as Mental Health First Aid Officers (MHFAOs) to recognise signs of mental ill health and provide first aid in the NSW Parliament.

As parliaments across Australia and New Zealand implement wellbeing initiatives, it is imperative to know how wellbeing initiatives affect employee wellbeing. A regular survey with a focus on wellbeing may be able to track the progress of wellbeing initiatives over time; essentially answering the question, ‘do the initiatives improve wellbeing?’. Furthermore, research to assess other contextual factors that can influence wellbeing outcomes of Parliament staff in different departments can provide information on how to improve the wellbeing initiatives (Biron & Karanika-Murray, 2014).

# Conclusion

As Parliament remains a complex workplace, psychological wellbeing should continue to be a priority. To better understand how the engagement survey is related to wellbeing, some of the questions in the engagement survey have been reorganised based on the JD-R model. Leaders can approach the engagement survey’s discussion from a wellbeing perspective, helping the team to increase their perceived resources. Increasing resources and reducing demands can contribute to psychological wellbeing. Further research can also provide information on how to improve wellbeing initiatives for different departments in the Parliament.

# Appendix 1

## Table 1: Categorising employee engagement survey based on the JD-R model

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| **Original category** | **Question** | **Factors** | **Job demands/resource/underlying mechanism** |
| Operational Processes | I have the autonomy to make decisions about matters I am responsible for | Autonomy | Job resource |
| Performance Development | Parliamentary Service has a culture of empowerment that enables me to work to my potential | Autonomy | Job resource |
| Performance Development | I have regular and effective feedback, performance and development conversations with my direct manager/people leader | Feedback | Job resource |
| Diversity and Inclusion | Our senior leaders are committed to building an inclusive culture founded on respect, fairness and equity | Leadership behaviour | Job resource |
| Internal Communication | My direct manager/people leader shares information with me that enables me to do my job effectively | Leadership behaviour | Job resource |
| Leadership | The actions of my direct manager/people leader are consistent with our Parliamentary Service values | Leadership behaviour | Job resource |
| Leadership | My direct manager/people leader treats team members fairly and with respect | Leadership behaviour | Job resource |
| Leadership | My direct manager/people leader handles stressful or challenging situations well | Leadership behaviour | Job resource |
| Leadership | My direct manager/people leader's decisions are fair and communicated effectively | Leadership behaviour | Job resource |
| Leadership | The Executive Leadership Team (ELT) communicates effectively | Leadership behaviour | Job resource |
| Leadership | Our leaders explain why workplace changes are made | Leadership behaviour | Job resource |
| Performance Development | My direct manager/people leader actively encourages my career development | Opportunities for development | Job resource |
| Performance Development | Parliamentary Service provides valuable learning and development opportunities for me | Opportunities for development | Job resource |
| Strategy | Parliamentary Service is good at looking at future demands and opportunities | Opportunities for development | Job resource |
| Internal Communication | There is effective communication and consultation before changes are made that affect me | Participation in decision | Job resource |
| Organisation Performance | I am regularly asked for feedback on how to improve the way we work at Parliamentary Service | Participation in decision | Job resource |
| Operational Processes | We have the right technology to support the needs of Parliamentary Service | Physical work environment | Job resource |
| Organisation Culture | My team has a culture of celebrating success | Rewards | Job resource |
| Customer Focus | I am clear about my role in delivering great services | Role clarity | Job resource |
| Organisation Specific | I have a deep understanding of the Parliamentary environment | Role clarity | Job resource |
| Performance Development | My annual goals and objectives are aligned with the priorities of Parliamentary Service | Role clarity | Job resource |
| Operational Processes | I feel well supported by other teams I work with | Social support | Job resource |
| People Experience | I feel included and supported by the people I work with | Social support | Job resource |
| Diversity and Inclusion | I am encouraged to be myself at work | Authenticity at work | Job resource/underlying mechanism |
| Diversity and Inclusion | My personal values and cultural beliefs are respected at Parliamentary Service | Authenticity at work | Job resource/underlying mechanism |
| Customer Focus | I see how my work contributes to positive outcomes for customers or people I provide services to | Meaningful work | Underlying mechanism |
| Customer Focus | Parliamentary Service has a positive impact on those we work with | Meaningful work | Underlying mechanism |
| Performance Development | I feel the work I do is valued at Parliamentary Service | Meaningful work | Underlying mechanism |
| Organisation Culture | I feel confident to speak up even when it may be unpopular | Psychological safety | Underlying mechanism |
| Organisation Performance | My team adapts well to change | Psychological safety | Underlying mechanism |
| People Experience | Parliamentary Service values the differing perspectives, skills and experiences of employees | Psychological safety | Underlying mechanism |
| Psychological Safety | I know that if I make a mistake, it will be treated as a learning opportunity | Psychological safety | Underlying mechanism |
| Psychological Safety | I am encouraged to innovate and show initiative | Psychological safety | Underlying mechanism |
| Psychological Safety | I know that if I ask for help or feedback, I won't be judged negatively for it | Psychological safety | Underlying mechanism |
| Operational Processes | My team regularly reviews processes to identify possible improvements | Team psychological safety | Underlying mechanism |
| Operational Processes | My team looks for ways to increase efficiency and effectiveness where we can | Team psychological safety | Underlying mechanism |
| People Experience | I feel I am able to balance my work and private life | Work-life balance | Underlying mechanism |

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