THE *Strengths* CHALLENGE REPORT 2015

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VIA INSTITUTE ON CHARACTER

THE *Strengths* CHALLENGE:

CAN AN ELEVEN-MINUTE STRENGTHS HABIT HELP EMPLOYEES FLOURISH?

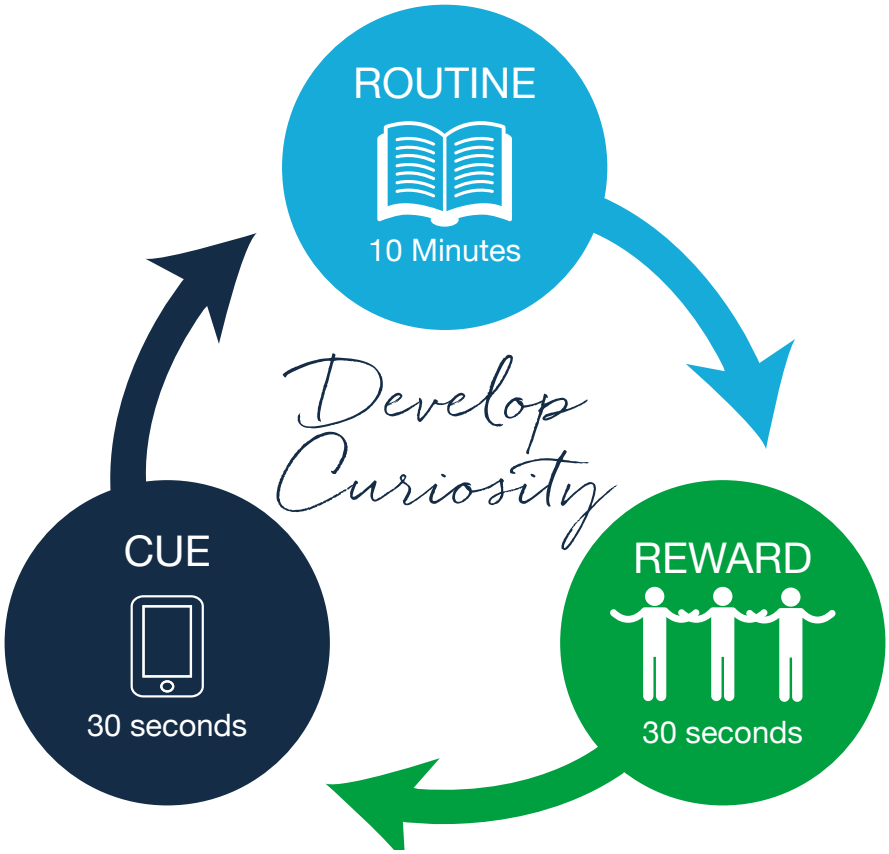
In February 2015, we discovered that there was a strengths revolution underway in American workplaces. Fed up with the lack of opportunities to do what they do best each day at work, bosses who undermine their confidence and jobs that drain their energy, employees had quietly started finding ways to discover their strengths and put them to work. In an independent poll[1] of just over 1,000 American employees representative of the US workforce we found:

- While in 2001 only 2 out of every 10 people[2] said they had the opportunity to do what they do best each day at work, this number had increased to 5 out of every 10 people.
- 56% of employees can now name their top five strengths, compared to estimates a decade ago that reported only one-third of employees[3] could do this.
- 64% of employees now believe building on their strengths will make them more successful at work, compared to 63% in 2006[4] who believed they'd grow most in their areas of weaknesses.

Even when they had neither organizational nor supervisor support for focusing on their strengths, 49% of employees were now able to name their strengths and 26% were finding the opportunity to do what they do best each day at work.[5]

Why were they bothering? Echoing more than a decade of academic research[5] the employees who were regularly developing their strengths at work reported feeling more engaged and energized in their jobs because they believed that they were making a difference and that their work was appreciated. Most importantly, 70% of these employees described themselves as flourishing at work over the last six months.

Based on these benefits we became intrigued about how we could make it easier and more effective for people to put their strengths to work. While much has been learnt about the benefits of developing people's strengths, there is a surprising lack of tested interventions to guide people's approaches beyond completing a strengths survey and trying to use their strengths in "new ways". One of the challenges we encountered for many employees trying to follow this advice, is that despite agreeing that developing their strengths would probably be beneficial they were "too busy" to fit it in.



Appreciating the demanding workloads many employees are juggling, we started experimenting with busy-proof ways they could develop their strengths each day. In workshops and coaching sessions we began to introduce the idea of a daily 11-minute strengths habit that harnessed the natural neurological habit loop researchers have discovered[6] of cue, routine and reward.

Anecdotal feedback suggested many people found this intervention helpful, so in August 2015 we decided to test it on a larger scale by inviting employees around the world to join us in a free one-week Strengths Challenge. Registering through the website **www.strengthschallenge.com** participants provided baseline data about their knowledge and use of strengths, performance and wellbeing before being guided step-by-step through the completion of the VIA Survey to register their top five strengths and then the creation of a cue, a routine and a reward to design their daily strengths habit. Online strengths coaches and free training resources were also provided to assist them if needed. Then from the 21st to the 26th of August participants were encouraged to practice their habit each day and at the end of the week to answer the same questions about their knowledge and use of strengths, performance and wellbeing to see what impact, if any, the intervention may have had.

More than 2,000 people across 70 different countries joined the Strengths Challenge. This report details what we learnt from a global snapshot of their knowledge and use of strengths to the impact of the intervention itself. Let us be clear at the outset this information is not intended to be an empirically validated statement on strengths or the intervention tested. It is based on a self-selected sample that is not representative of the global workforce, although we found the baseline results of strengths knowledge and use to be comparable to the independent US data we collected in the same year. There are no control groups against which the intervention can be compared meaning the benefits we're seeing could simply be a placebo effect.

Instead it is our hope in sharing this report that it will inspire and inform more rigorous academic research and analysis around these ideas. For example some of the insights that have intrigued us included:

- The emerging patterns of strengths knowledge and use in different geographies, industries and company sizes. Why might New Zealand employees be leading the world when it comes to strengths development? What's happening in Science, IT and the Telecommunications industries that is causing them to perform so poorly? What can large companies learn from small organizations about helping people set weekly goals around developing their strengths?
- The impact strengths knowledge and use has on people's feelings of engagement and energy at work and their beliefs that what they are doing makes a difference, that they are respected and appreciated and their likelihood to describe themselves as flourishing over the last six months. Why does an organization's support make this more likely? How can managers improve person-task fit? Why should employees think about setting weekly goals around their strengths?
- How did a daily 11-minute strength habit improve outcomes for roughly a third of our participants? Why did having a meeting with their supervisor improve their outcomes? How did participating in this intervention positively impact people's perceptions of their organization?

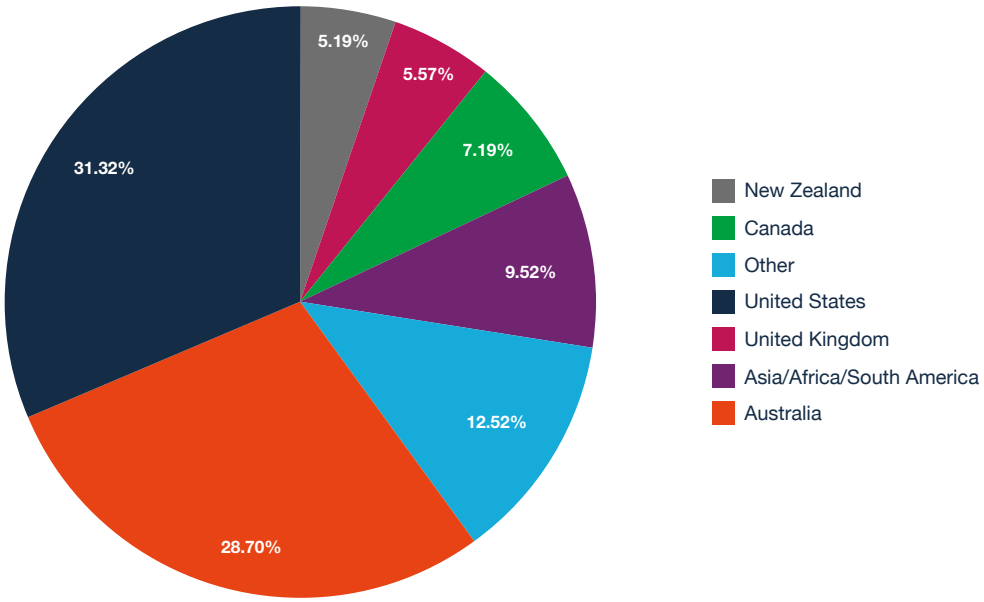
We are continuing to collect data three months and six months after the intervention to see what else we can learn and will share this data as it is available. We are also running the Strengths Challenge again in 2016 to see what else we can learn. For more visit **www.strengthschallenge.com**.

OUR Sample

Of a total 2100 participants who took part in the Strengths Challenge by completing the initial questionnaire, 2061 had sufficient demographic data to be used as the active sample*. This sample was predominantly comprised of women (81%) with varied ages, though approximately 60% of the sample was 35-55 years old. The vast majority of participants were from Australia and North America (total 68%), with only approximately 10% of participants coming from Asia, South America, and Africa combined. Most participants were from predominantly white, wealthy, Western, English speaking countries. When asked about their highest educational qualifications, the overwhelming majority had completed postgraduate university level studies (78%), with only a small number completing high school only (11%), or not at all (2%). It should be noted explicitly that this is not a representative sample, globally or locally, and the questionnaire took the form of a poll rather than a standardized and validated scale.

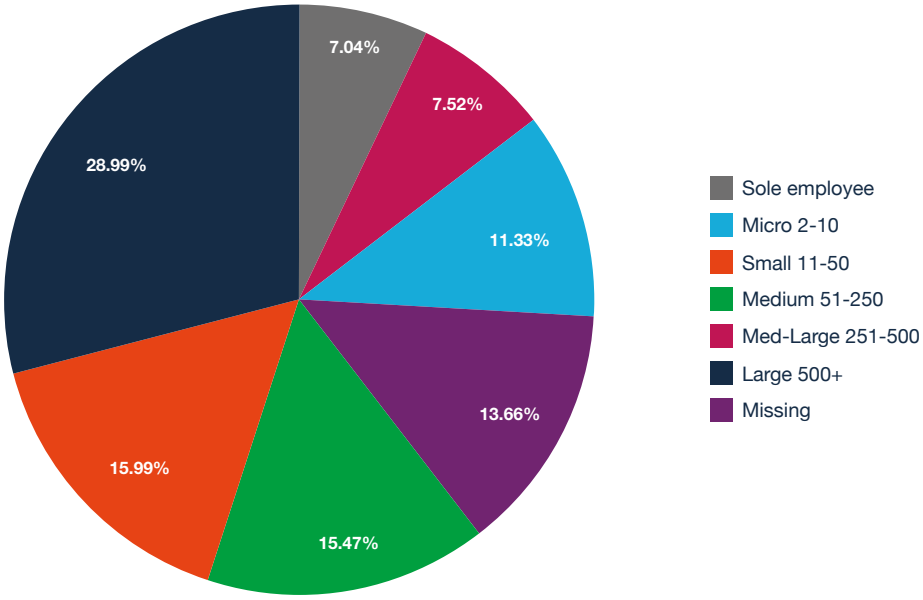
Most of the participants were in full time employment (67%), while some worked part time (12%) and others were self-employed (14%). Participants worked at companies of various sizes, with a good spread between small, medium, and large businesses, though there was a skew towards large businesses (with >500 employees, 30%). This sample came from a range of industries, with some skew towards being in Education (29%) or Health and Wellbeing (17%).

Participant Location

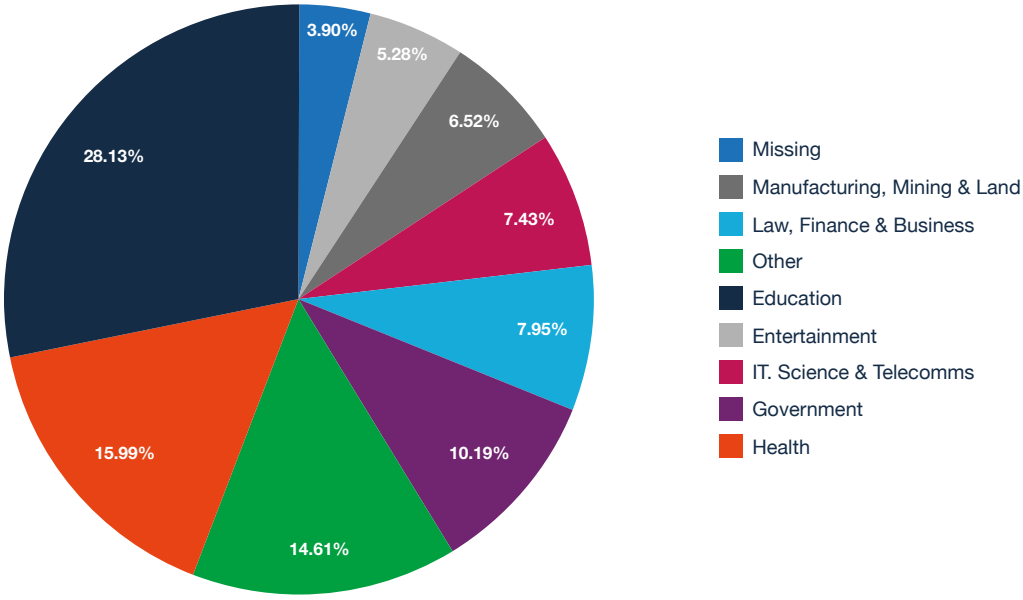


*Selection criteria: Participants must have answered the Before Questions, and have at least 1 of Country, Industry, and Company Size.

Company Size By Employees



Participant Industry

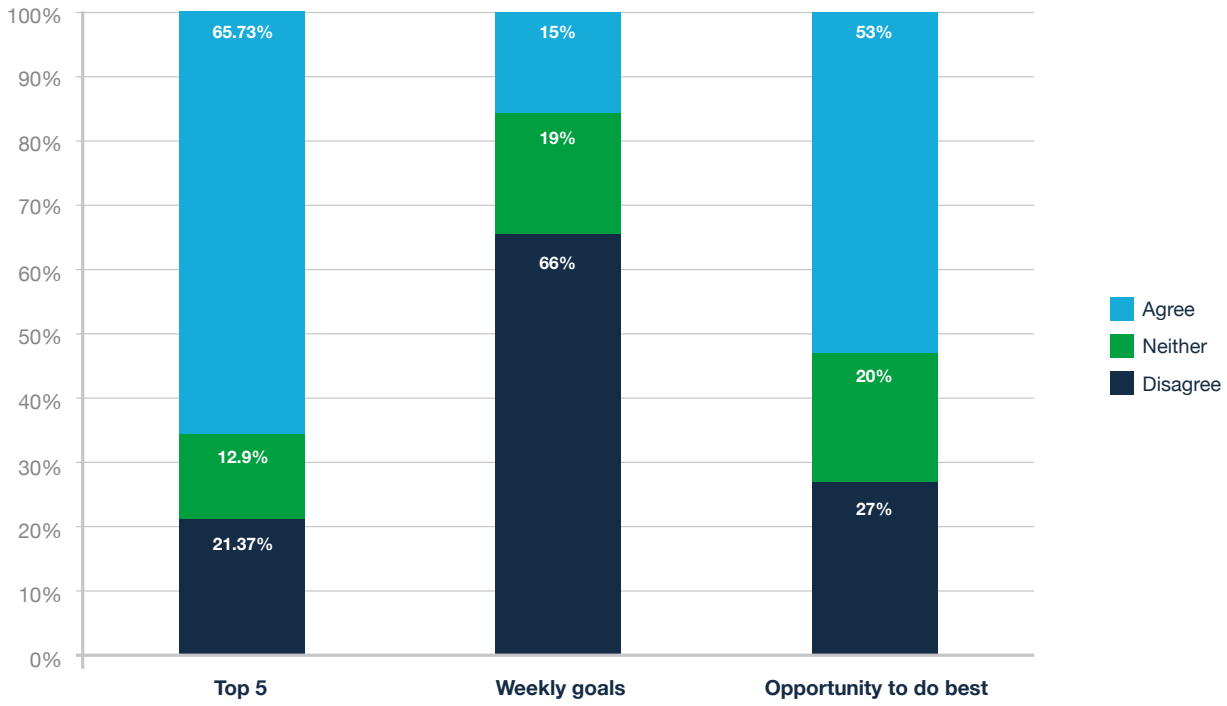


A GLOBAL STRENGTHS *Snapshot*

Employees

When we asked participants about their pre-existing knowledge and practice of strengths skills, results were mixed. Most people could name their strengths at the beginning of the study (66%), though only a very small number of participants set goals each week based on their strengths (15%). About half of the participants could name their co-workers strengths, half couldn't. A little over a quarter of participants reported they did not have the opportunity to do what they did best at work (27%). Only 8% of participants Strongly Agreed that they did have this opportunity, indicating that there is great room for improvement here.

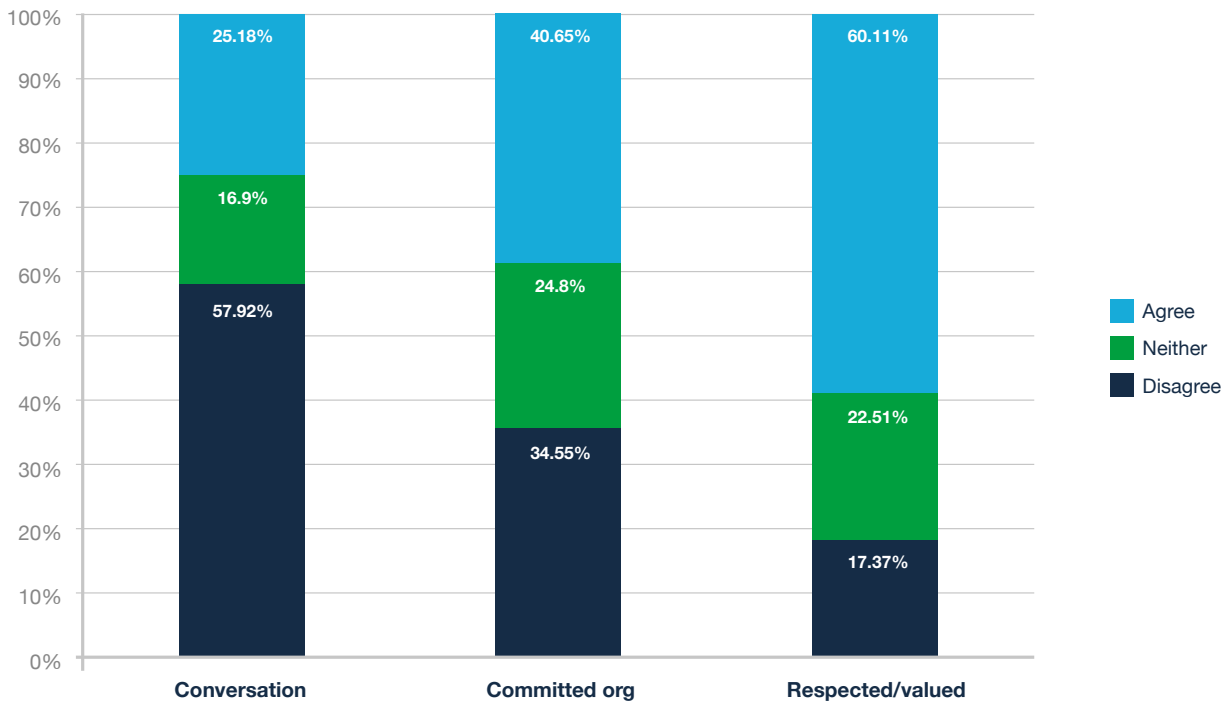
Employee Strengths & Skills



Managers & Organizations

We also looked at how managers and organizations were supporting the development of their employees' strengths, finding that while employers were doing well, they certainly had room to improve. The majority of participants' supervisors hadn't had a meaningful discussion about their strengths in the last three months (75%), though over half the participants felt they were respected and valued for their strengths at work (60%). About one in three noted that their organization as a whole was not committed to building the strengths of its employees, compared to 40% who said that their organization was committed. Organizations wanting to stand out from the crowd should take note of this, and encourage supervisors to engage with their employees' strengths systematically, which would also indicate organizational commitment.

Managers & Organizations Support For Employees Strengths

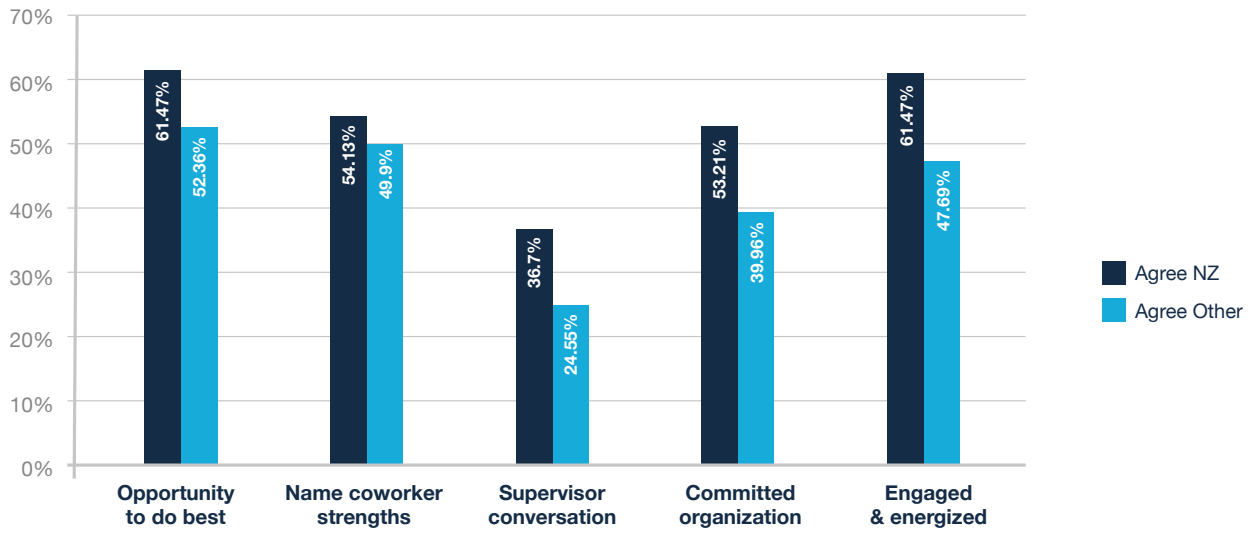


Geographical Observations

When we looked at where our participants came from, we found some differences in strengths work depending on participant country. A lower proportion of participants from the UK could name their strengths (57%, compared to avg. of 66%), indicating that the initial step of strengths-identification could be more powerful there. Canadian participants were the least likely to set weekly strengths-based goals and expectations (73% Disagreed), and the least likely to be able to name the strengths of their co-workers, also suggesting that putting strengths into practice could be improved by those in Canada the most, compared to the other countries.

New Zealanders appeared to be a special group within our sample, leading the rest of the pack in relative characteristics. NZ participants were the most likely to say that they had the opportunity to do what they did best at work (61%). They were also most likely to be able to name strengths of their co-workers (54%). This group was most likely to have had a discussion about their strengths with their supervisor (37%), and also most likely to agree their organization was committed to building strengths (53%). All of these strengths-based leads (within employee and employers) seems to have led to an increase in wellbeing, as NZ participants were the most likely to say they were engaged and energized at work (61%, compared to avg. 48%). Given that NZ only made up 5% of our sample, and overall our worldwide sample was mostly made up of Western Countries (AUS and US combined constituted 60% of sample), conclusions based upon location should be cautious.

Employees Strengths By Location

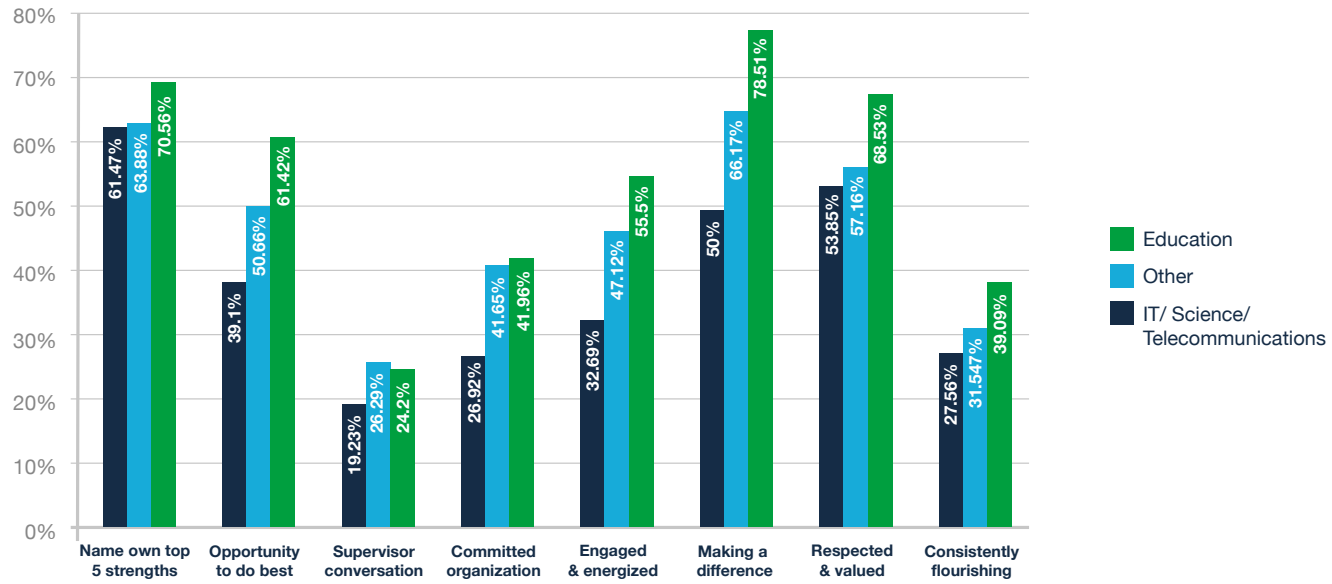


Industry Observations

We also wanted to look at how industries differed, so we compared people depending on what sector they worked in. In general, there was quite a range of response patterns. For example, while those in the Manufacturing, Mining, and Land industries were the star performers at being able to name the strengths of their colleagues (59%, compared to an average of 50%), they didn't top any other category. Similarly, those in the Government sector were most likely to have had a meaningful discussion with their supervisor about their strengths in the last three months (33%), yet they did not lead any other area.

Though perhaps not as pronounced as the NZ example above, a 'best and worst' performer pattern did emerge to a degree. The IT, Science, and Telecommunications industries performed poorly compared to the rest of the pack. They had the least opportunity to do what they did best at work (39%), were the least likely to have had a strengths conversation with a manager (19%), and felt the least like their organization was committed to strengths (27%). This led to the least energized workforce (33%), least flourishing (28%), and the least fulfilled – only 50% felt they made a difference at work. Education, on the other hand, excelled in several areas. They were the best at naming their strengths (71%), had the best opportunities to excel at work (61%), and came out on top in wellbeing. Education industry workers were the most energized (56%), felt respected and valued (69%), most flourishing (39%), and the most fulfilled in making a difference at work (79%).

Employees Strengths By Industry



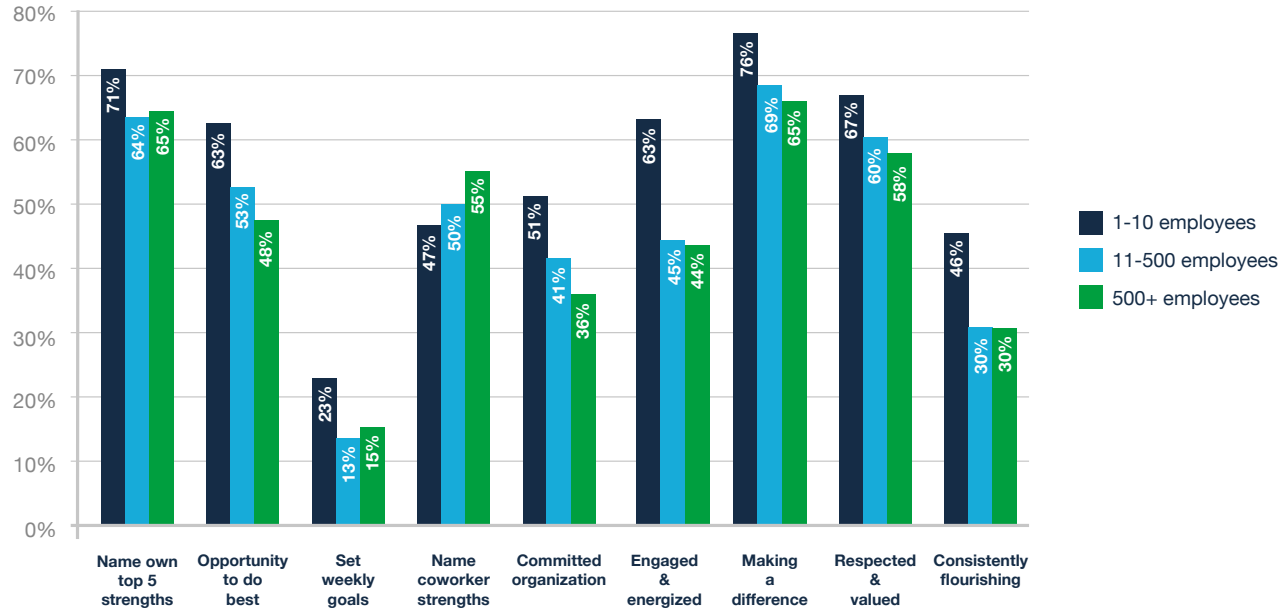
Company Observations

We were interested in whether the size of one's company affected how strengths were engaged and what wellbeing was like for people in small and large companies. The largest differences were between sole employees (often entrepreneurs or contractors) or micro companies (2-10 employees) and large companies of more than 500 employees. Large companies struggled in several areas: least likely to have the opportunity to do what they did best (48%), least likely to set weekly strength goals (71% Disagreed), least energized and engaged (44%), least likely to feel they made a difference (44%). At the same time, employees in large companies were the best at being able to name strengths of co-workers (55%), and the most likely to have had a strengths-based conversation with their supervisor (28%).

Sole employees were the best at naming their top strengths (78%, compared to avg. 66%), and set weekly strength goals (25%). This effect carried for the most part in micro-companies as well, and resulted in higher wellbeing including feeling more engaged and energized at work (71%), making a difference (77%), feeling respected and valued (70%). Sole employees really stood out as most likely to feel like they were flourishing, with over half reporting they felt consistently flourishing in the last 3 months (52%).

Some of these differences are inherent; sole employees may not have a supervisor, and in many cases individually constitute their 'organization'. An individual who is 'their own boss' may have more flexibility in finding opportunities to do what they do best, and more scope/responsibility for personal development in strengths (knowledge and habits). Organizations would do well not to dismiss these results though, as there many ways to incorporate aspects of smaller companies within very large organizations to increase strengths engagement and employee wellbeing.

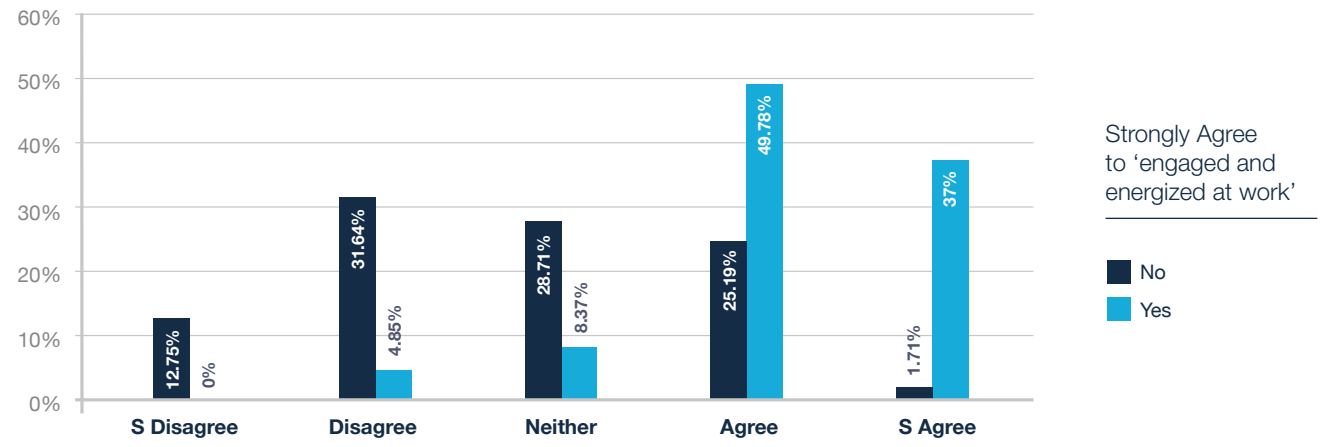
Employees Strengths By Company Size



PUTTING PEOPLE'S *Strengths* TO WORK

Of our total sample, 38% of participants agreed that they felt engaged and energized in their work, while 11% strongly agreed with this statement. Those who indicated that they were engaged and energized at work were also much more likely to report being consistently flourishing over the last three months (graph/chart below). This suggests a relationship between consistent flourishing in general, and feeling engaged and energized at work, meaning that benefits to one affect the other.

Flourishing Over The Last 3 Months, By Engagement & Energy

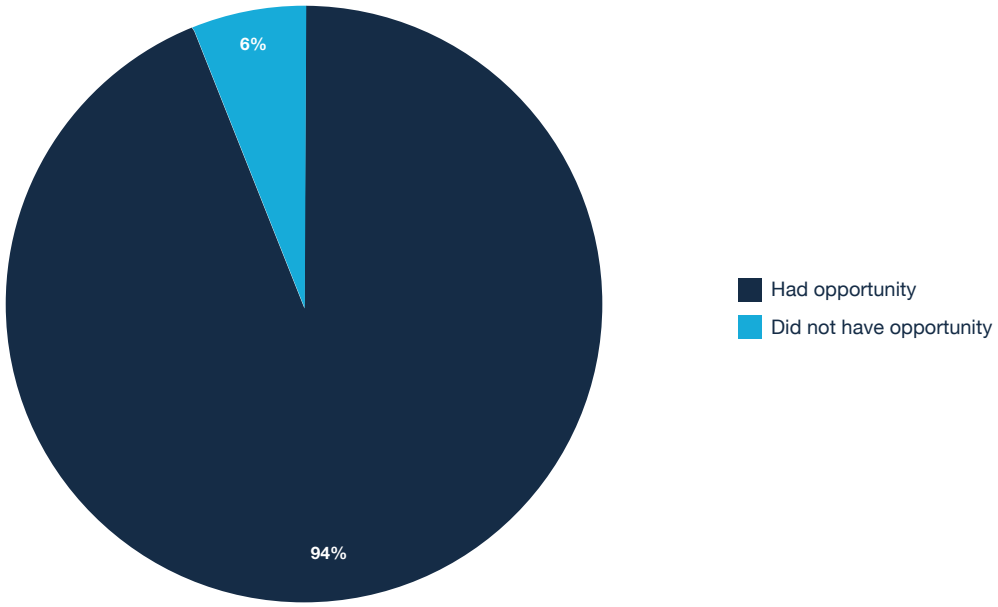


Given the focus in most organizations on improving employee engagement and wellbeing we wanted to understand what impact, if any, developing people's strengths might have on these outcomes.

Opportunity To Do What You Do Best

The strongest relationship by far was having the opportunity to do what they did best at work each day – to use their strengths. 94% of those who strongly agreed they felt engaged and energized also agreed or strongly agreed that they had this opportunity at work.

Of Energised/Engaged Group, Having The Opportunity To Do What They Do Best



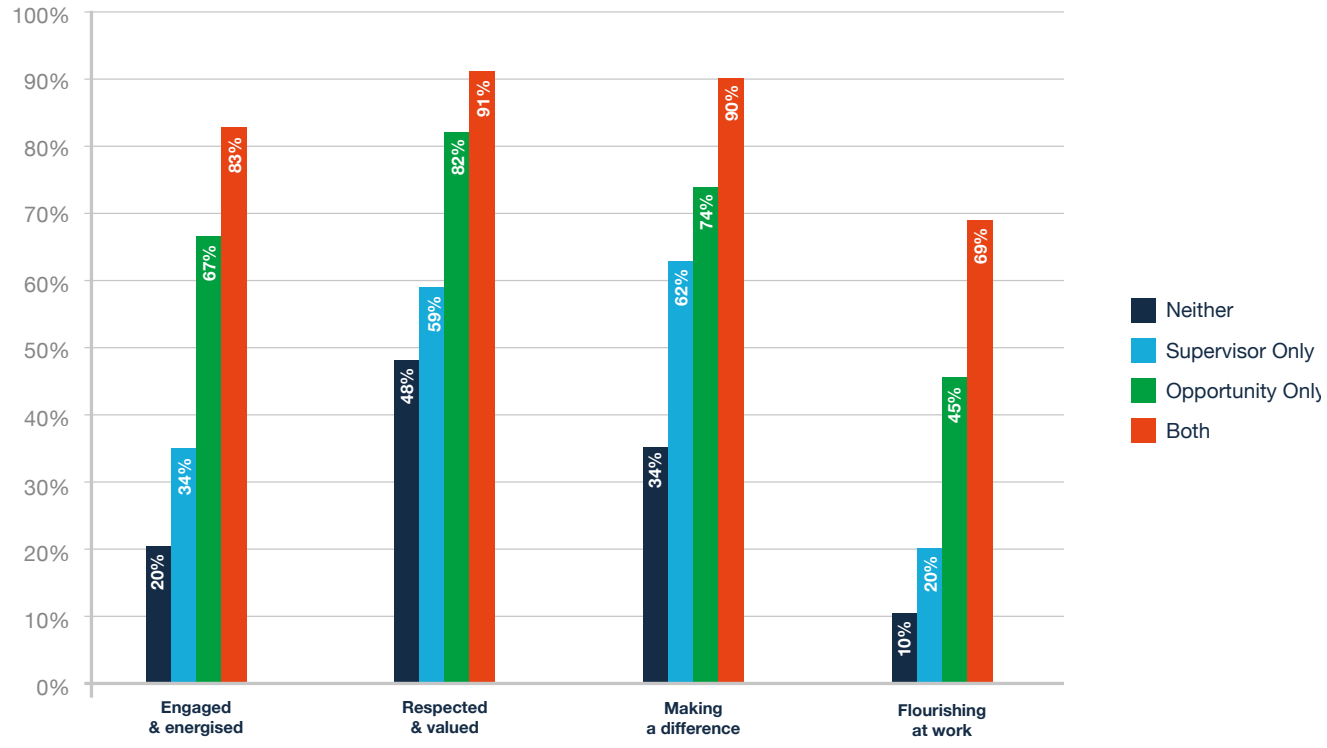
Supervisor Support

A pattern emerged across all the wellbeing measures: feeling engaged and energized, respected and valued, making a difference, and flourishing at work. We put all the different factors into a model looking at what had the greatest impact. 'Having the opportunity to do what they did best each day at work' consistently had the strongest effect on wellbeing, yet only about 50% of participants felt they had this opportunity. This question is really constructed from two perspectives:

- Does your supervisor help give you these opportunities, reviewing your strengths and matching you to tasks you'll excel at?
- Are you personally able to see opportunities to utilize your strengths at work autonomously?

These questions speak to well-tested theories of person-task fit, as well as more intuitive ideas like taking the initiative, working independently, and trusting them to do their job. It is within the power of both the employer and employee to collaboratively increase this felt opportunity to do their best. We looked at those with a) Neither the opportunity to do best nor supervisor conversation, those with b) & c) Only one or the other, and d) those with Both, then calculated the proportion of each who agreed to wellbeing statements. The chart below shows how consistent this combined effect was across all four wellbeing measures; employees who had Both had between 2-7 times the proportion of those agreeing to wellbeing statements than those with Neither. This supports our US findings and other academic research7, 8 on the important role managers play in helping people to develop their strengths.

Impact Of Strengths Use & Supervisor Conversations On Wellbeing



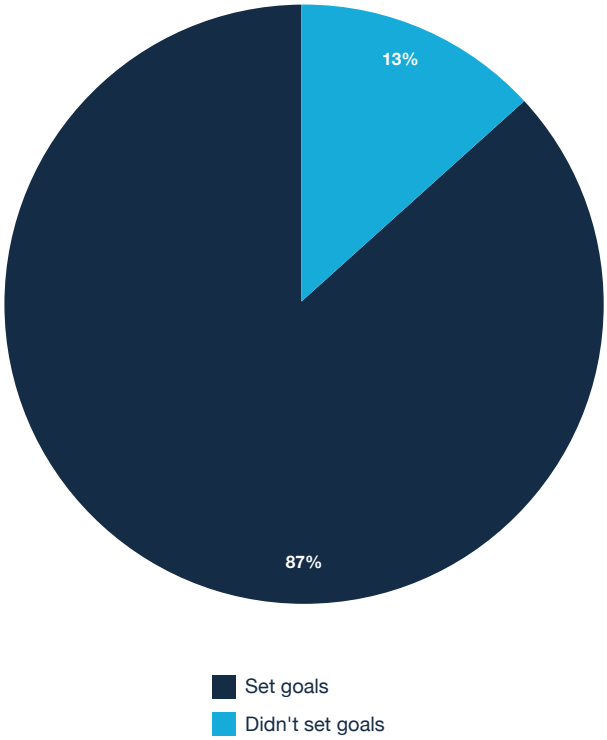
Organizations Matter

Organizational support was also important, as those who strongly agreed that their organization was committed to building the strengths of its people made up 38% of those engaged and energized, compared to 6% of those who weren't.

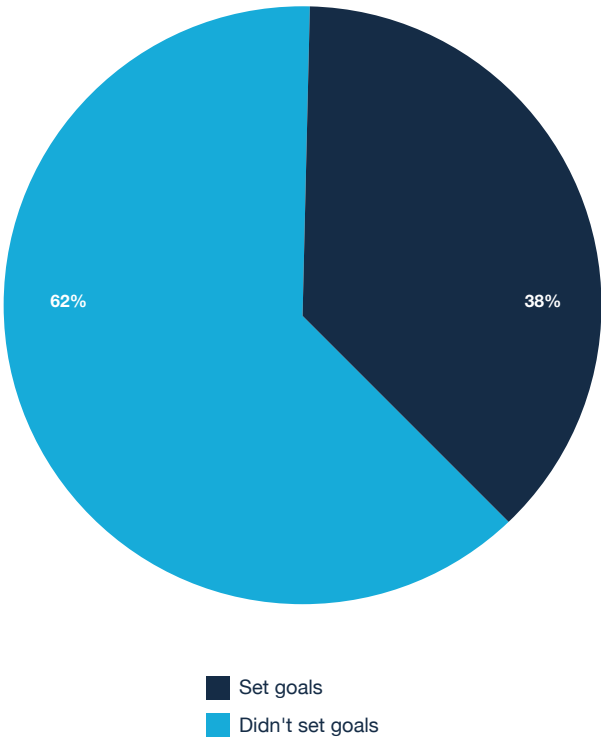
Weekly Strength Goals

Though most people did not set weekly strength goals, 38% of those who strongly agreed they felt engaged and energized did, compared to only 13% of those who were not engaged and energized. Though we can't infer causation here, the results that those who set weekly goals were 3 times as likely to be strongly engaged and energized at work suggests an effect here. This is an encouraging finding, given there is so much room for improvement in getting people to create strength habits through weekly goals, and leads us well into our intervention study.

For Those NOT Engaged/Energised, Who Set Weekly Strength Goals?



For Those Who ARE Engaged/Energised, Who Set Weekly Strength Goals?



BECOMING MORE STRENGTH *Focused*

We asked participants who completed the intervention to complete a follow-up questionnaire, so that we could see how they improved. This intervention involved first naming their Top 5 (signature) strengths according to the VIA Strengths Survey, then designing a strength habit lasting approximately 11 minutes. This habit consisted of a:

- 30 second 'Cue' which triggered the habit (e.g. arriving at work)
- 10 minute 'Routine' (e.g. Reading a new interesting article, for Curiosity Strength)
- 30 second 'Reward' (e.g. Getting a morning coffee).

We challenged participants to create this habit and use it each day for a week. This process was supported by suggested Cues, Routines, and Rewards, as well as the well-trafficked Challenge Forums moderated by the researchers. Participants were reminded of the habit they created for the Strength Challenge and encouraged to complete it via email. Participants could change their habits online when they wanted.

Of the 2101 initial sample participants, 269 completed the 11-minute habit exercise and did the follow-up questionnaire (12% response rate). When demographic proportions were compared, the follow-up sample were statistically similar enough to the initial sample to allow comparison (in terms of gender, age, industry breakdown, etc.).

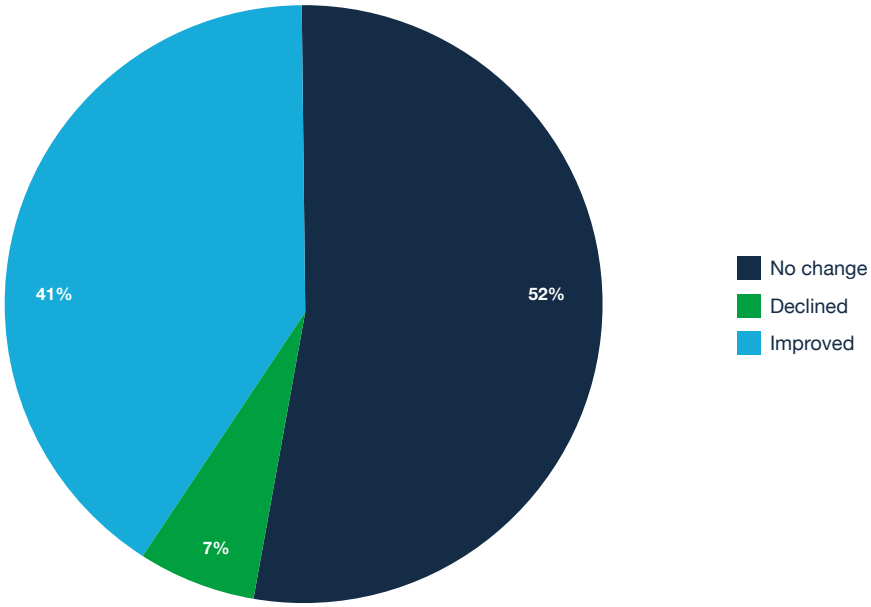
Participant's Strengths

Our sample had similar top strengths to the VIA general population statistics (after sampling thousands of participants): Honesty, Judgement, Kindness, Fairness all featured in the most commonly cited top strengths. The second most commonly cited strength was Love of Learning, though perhaps this was because such a high proportion of our sample came from the Education industry. Self-Regulation was the least cited top strength – perhaps this was why only 12% of our initial sample followed through with the intervention and follow-up questionnaire!

Development Of Strengths Skills

When reviewing Strength Skills and whether the intervention improved these, there was general improvement in all areas, though some more than others. 41% improved their ability to name their own strengths (49% no change), and a majority 60% were better at setting weekly strength-based goals (33% no change. 41% improved their feeling of having the opportunity to do what they did best each day, with only 7% reporting that this declined. This was the critical area suggested above to have one of the largest effects on wellbeing.

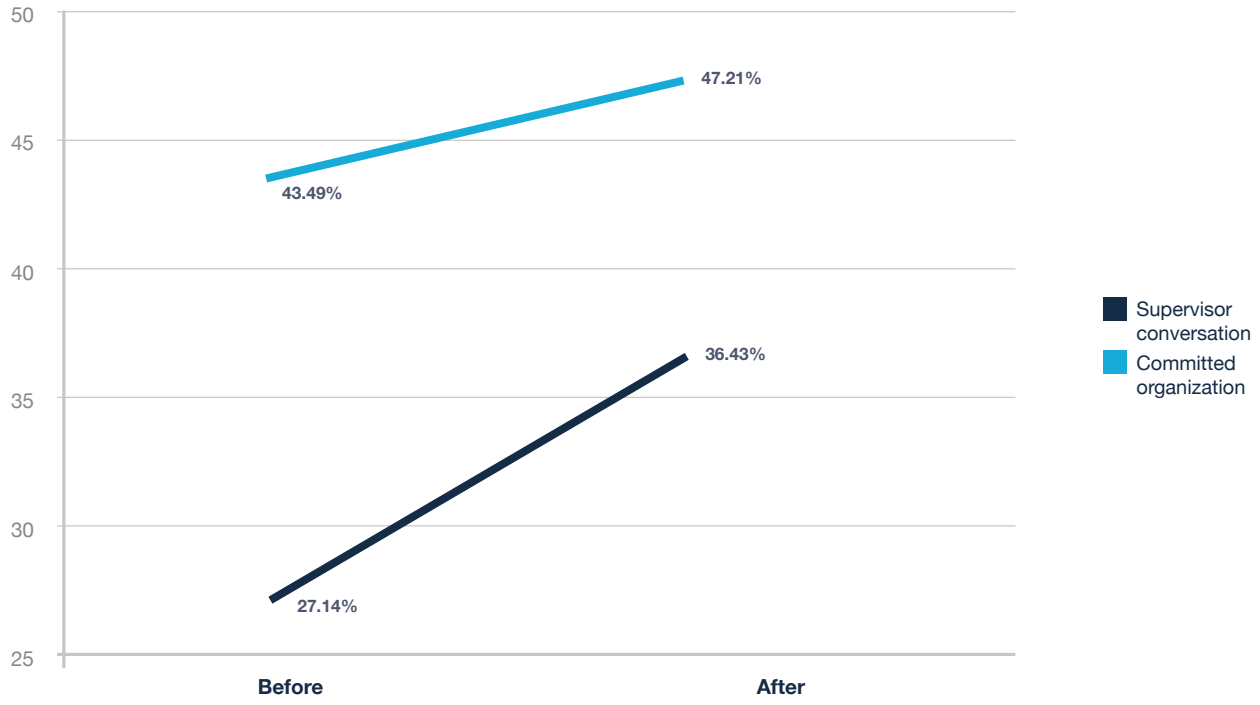
Had Opportunity To Do What They Do Best At Work



Impact For Managers & Organizations

There was general improvement in the participants' likelihood in having a meeting with their supervisor, with 39% marking an improvement over the course of the intervention. There was some improvement in ratings of organizational commitment to fostering strengths (32%). We believe this is reflective of the invitation to organizations and managers to use the Strengths Challenge for their teams.

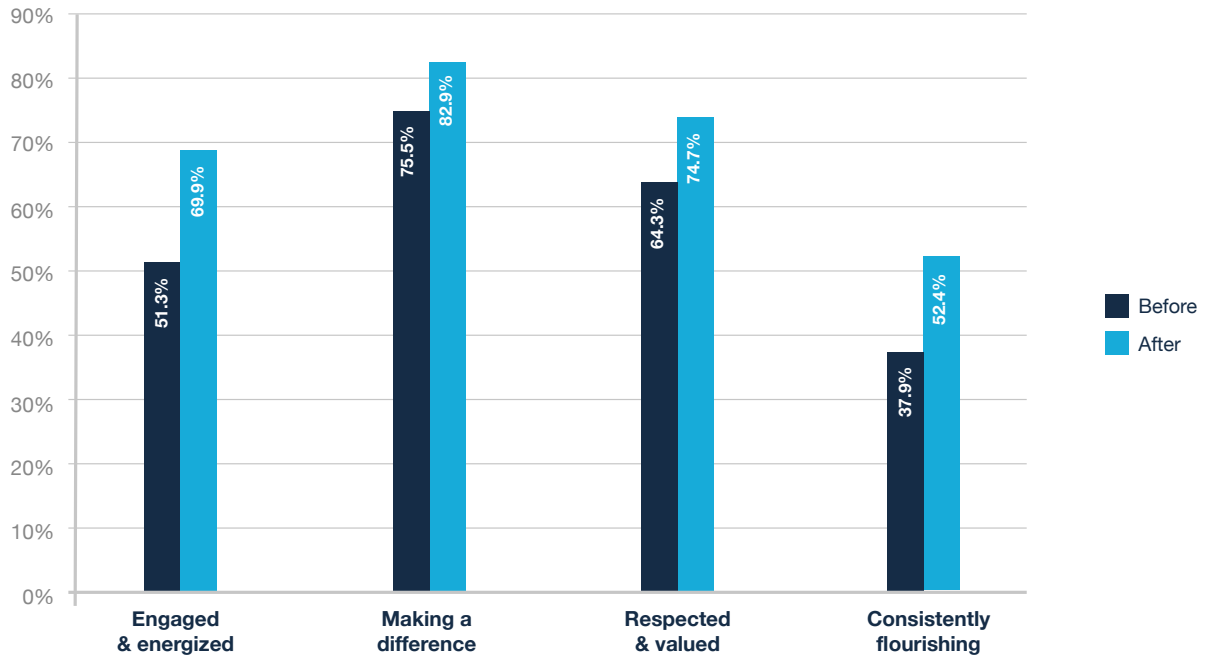
Impact Of Managers & Organizations On Wellbeing



Impact On Wellbeing

Across the board, roughly a third of participants improved in their reporting of wellbeing measures, including feeling engaged and energized (37%), making a difference (30%), respected and valued (32%), and flourishing (38%). Simply looking at breakdowns of what percentage Strongly Agreed or Agreed to the wellbeing statements before and after the intervention, we can see consistent increases in every area in the graph below.

Wellbeing At Work Before & After



The intervention that we used here was an individualized one, and for the most part, positive results reflected that. Though there was not much impact on how the individuals viewed their organization, this is perhaps expected, due to the individualized nature of the experiment. What was a pleasant surprise though was the increase in conversations with supervisors. This potentially indicates how employees who are strengths-educated and focused will initiate conversations by themselves with their managers, to then gain the benefits in wellbeing mentioned earlier. Benefits to wellbeing were across the board, as mentioned, perhaps in large part due to the increase in opportunity to do what they did best at work, the factor we identified as most impactful in our sample. Overall, this intervention was beneficial and not very intrusive, improving both strength-skills and wellbeing. With the trends indicated here, positive psychology researchers may further investigate the findings using more standardized measures and representative samples.

ABOUT THE *Authors*

Michelle McQuaid

Michelle McQuaid is a best-selling author, workplace wellbeing teacher and playful change activator. With more than a decade of senior leadership experience in large organizations around the world, she's passionate about translating cutting-edge research from positive psychology and neuroscience, into practical strategies for health, happiness, and business success.

An honorary fellow at Melbourne University's Graduate School of Education, she blogs for Psychology Today, Huffington Post and Live Happy and her work has been featured in Forbes, the Harvard Business Review, the Wall Street Journal, Boss Magazine, The Age and more.

She holds a Masters in Applied Positive Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania and is currently completing her PhD in Appreciative Inquiry under the supervision of David Cooperrider. To learn more about Michelle visit **www.michellemcquaid.com**.

Josh Muller

Josh Muller is an early career psychologist, data scientist, and positive psychology researcher. He is passionate about wellbeing and the science of positive mental, splitting his time between research work and counselling clients using an array of techniques including Acceptance Commitment Therapy.

For several years he has worked in population health research at the Royal Children's Hospital for the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, as well as completing smaller scale contract data analysis. He is hoping to publish his personal research reviewing the psychometric properties of short wellbeing scales soon. He holds a Master of Counselling Psychology from Monash University.

The VIA Institute

The VIA Institute on Character is a non-profit organization that empowers people worldwide with knowledge of their unique character strengths. Our mission is to advance the science and the practice of character. We aim to fill the world with greater virtue—i.e. more wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. One very important way we do this is by offering our VIA survey free of charge across the globe – and since our inception in 2001, more than 3 million people in 193 countries and 35 languages have taken it. For more visit **www.viacharacter.org**.

Live Happy

Live Happy is a new lifestyle publication unlike any other on newsstands today. Weaving the science of positive psychology through inspiring content, relatable stories, and sage advice, we help readers discover their personal journey of happiness.
For more visit **www.livehappy.com**.

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