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## **Subjective and Occupational Well-Being in a Sample of Mexican Workers**

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### Abstract.

This article examines the well-being of workers, observing that subjective and occupational well-being are interrelated but independent dimensions and analyzing their interaction with their modulating factors. Specifically, the relationships between well-being and personal value structures are examined, hypothesizing that congruence between personal and socially predominant values improves the well-being of workers. The influence of various occupational and personal factors is also analyzed. We studied 209 workers of a multinational company in Mexico using different standardized questionnaires. The results demonstrate that subjective and occupational well-being are related but independent variables influenced by differentiated variables. Specifically, the occupational well-being of workers is influenced by the nature of their work, whereas subjective well-being is affected by their social values and level of education. We present a model for the interaction of these variables and their consequences with the intention of the worker to stay with or leave the company. We discuss some practical issues raised by the study and make recommendations for future.

Keywords: well-being; values; collectivism; turnover; intention to leave; responsibility.

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### **Introduction**

The well-being of employees is a major research concern in the organizational field (Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). Knowledge of its causes and the consequences for the organizations with which it is associated are considered priority issues. Researchers have often only considered variables linked to the work position. However, well-being has an important cultural component, and the dominant values of the culture in question affect the subjective perception of employees. Diener et al. (1995) concluded that not only organizational elements but also cultural elements (e.g., individualism or cultural heterogeneity) should be considered in the study of well-being.

Historically, there have been two theoretical trends with respect to its antecedent variables (Heady, Veenhoven & Wearing, 1991; Brief, Butcher, George & Link, 1993): one focuses on identifying the external factors that affect a person's well-being, using a bottom-up approach; and the other, developed more recently, uses a top-down approach and aims to identify the internal factors that determine how a person perceives their circumstances, regardless of their objective situation, and how these factors affect their evaluation of their personal happiness or well-being.

This top-down approach has been adopted in some studies on the relationship between well-being and personal values (e.g., Oishi, Diener, Suh & Lucas, 1999; Lu, 2006; Tan, Tambyah & Kau, 2006). According to Sagiv & Schwartz (2000), the interaction between these variables manifests in two different ways: first, people may adapt their behavior in order to achieve well-

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being, according to their profile of priority values; second, when personal values are successfully developed, their well-being increases according to the degree to which their priority values are fulfilled.

Based on the assumption that values are important in the perception of well-being, the objectives of the present study were to examine the influence of congruence between personal and cultural values on the perception of well-being (both subjective and occupational) and to explore their influence on other organizational aspects. A Mexican sample was selected for the study because of the predominance of collectivist values in this population (Hofstede, 1980; Marin & Triandis, 1985).

### Well-being and values

Among the various possible approaches to the study of values, the model developed by Schwartz (1992) has been widely and successfully used. It considers 10 universal motivational types grouped into individualist or collective dimensions according to the structure proposed by Triandis (1995). The individualist dimension emphasizes the independence of individuals, reinforcing their autonomy and personal motives, whereas the second emphasizes the group and its rules, harmony, and functioning. The model also incorporates a third mixed dimension influenced by the other two dimensions.

Schwartz's model has been extensively applied to demonstrate how values affect different organizational aspects in areas such as social climate, leadership, conflict, enterprising behavior or commitment (Posner & Schmidt, 1993; Meyer, Irving & Allen, 1998; Kozan & Ergin, 1999; Dastmalchian, Lee & Ng., 2000; Maierhofer, Kabanoff & Griffin, 2002; Diaz & Rodriguez, 2003).

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However, the structure of these values is neither universal nor similar across all cultures because culture and values are differentially related, despite being independent phenomena (Hofstede, 1998). Hofstede establishes a series of cultural areas that group together countries or regions according to their prevailing values (Hofstede, 1980). The Schwartz value model has been used by several researchers to study the dominant values in different countries and cultures (Ros & Schwartz, 1995; Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995; Schwartz, Lehmann, Melech, Burgess & Harris, 2001; Spini, 2003; Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004, Bretones, Cappello & Garcia, 2009), concluding that societies differ in their predominant values. For instance, collectivist values were found to predominate in Mexico and individualist values in the USA, Canada, and Australia. These cultural differences affect the perception of well-being, whose definition is inextricably linked to the cultural values of the society in question according to Crompton (2001). One shortcoming of current research into well-being is that it excludes the study of cultural values in favor of a search for universal laws.

Nevertheless, various trans-cultural studies have revealed significant differences in the reported well-being of people from diverse cultures (Diener & Suh, 1999; Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Oishi, Dzokoto & Ahadi, 2002; Suh, 2002; Rice & Steele, 2004), mainly between countries with individualistic and collectivistic cultures. People who live in individualistic cultures (United States, Germany, Australia or Denmark) have extreme values of subjective well-being (Diener & Suh, 1999). Thus, they attribute their actions to themselves, thereby amplifying the effects of events, whether positive or negative. In contrast, populations in collectivistic countries (China, Korea, Ghana, Japan or Mexico) have shown higher scores for subjective well-being. Their

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prioritization of the group implies a more secure social structure that may increase the number of people experiencing happiness and reducing the frequency of depression and loneliness.

Well-being is a multidimensional construct comprised of different types of well-being (occupational, material, marital etc.), and each is independently evaluated in the same person. It is therefore necessary to study the relationship between value structures and these specific types of well-being. We consider that subjective well-being and occupational well-being are related, although each is affected by different factors, i.e., occupational variables and personal variables, respectively. In the case of personal values, we postulated that subjective well-being would depend on the congruence between the priority value profile of the individual and the cultural values of his/her social environment. The related study hypothesis (H1) was that the degree of congruence between cultural and personal values produces an increase in subjective well-being.

#### Well-being and occupational variables

Various occupational variables have been associated with well-being, including business meetings, (Rogelberg, Leach, Warr & Burnfield, 2006), job satisfaction (Sparks, Corcoran, Nabors & Hovanitz, 2005), social support (Daniels & Guppy, 1997), stress (Edwards, 1998; Potter, Smith, Strobel & Zautra, 2002; Siu, Spector, Cooper & Lu, 2005), and working conditions (Grebner, Semmer & Elfering, 2005; Van Veldhoven, Taris, de Jonge & Broersen, 2005). However, little attention has been paid to the level of employee responsibility. Indirectly, some authors found a positive relationship between occupational well-being and: successful accomplishment of goals in the workplace (Harris, Daniels & Briner, 2003), control over occupational tasks (Grebner, Semer & Elfering, 2005), the leadership of supervisors, psychological well-being of workers (Arnold,

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Turner, Barling, Kelloway & McKee, 2007) and employee autonomy (Baard, Deci & Ryan, 2004) However, Jonge et al. found no significant relationship between well-being and level of autonomy (Jonge, Dormann, Janssen, Dollard, Landeweerd & Nijhuis, 2001).

Since, in general, individuals with a higher post of responsibility have greater control over their occupational goals and objectives, we hypothesized that the position of the individual in the hierarchy affects the level of subjective and occupational well-being, proposing the following specific sub-hypotheses: there is a positive relationship between greater work responsibility and greater subjective well-being (H2a); and there is a positive relationship between greater work responsibility and greater occupational well-being (H2b).

Organizations can increase or decrease the well-being of their employees, affecting their physical, psychological, and emotional health (Elizur & Shy, 1990; Warr, 1994; Brief & Weiss, 2002; Harter, Schmidt & Keyes, 2003; Van Veldhoven, Taris, de Jorge & Broersen, 2005) and having an impact on organizational outcomes, such as staff turnover and absenteeism rates (Wright & Cropanzano, 2004; Parks & Steelman, 2008). The loss of staff can have major negative consequences for an organization in direct and indirect costs, estimated at between one and one-and-half times the salary of the leaving employee (Jones, Katak, Futrell & Johnson, 1996). It also affects social and communication structures of the organization, which can take time to be restored and can, in some cases, lead to further staff losses (Levin & Kleiner, 1992). However, few models have been proposed that relate well-being to staff resignations, despite the fact that the discrepancy between the individual's circumstances and his/her values affect both the employees and the

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organization (Finegan 2000), not only jeopardizing the well-being of employees but also possibly producing a lesser degree of commitment to the organization and a greater inclination to leave it.

One of the difficulties of staff turnover studies is the enrolment of people who have already left the organization. As a result, various authors have considered “intention to leave” as the best predictor of turnover (Tett & Meyer, 1993; Vandenburg, Self & Seo, 1994). We hypothesized that: employees with the greatest intention to leave show the lowest levels of subjective well-being (H3a), and that employees with the greatest intention to leave show the lowest levels of occupational well-being (H3b).

#### Well-being and personal factors

It is essential to consider other individual factors in the study of well-being, but no study has separately investigated the strength of any of these variables in isolation to explain the phenomenon. One personal variable that has been examined is gender. In their review, Haring, Stock & Okun (1984) found a weak non-significant tendency for men to have higher well-being scores than women. With respect to age, Stock, Okun, Haring & Witter (1983) reviewed 119 studies and found a positive correlation between subjective well-being and age, although less than 1% of the variance was explained by this factor, and the significance of this correlation disappeared when potentially confounding variables were considered. Diener & Suh (1998) carried out a longitudinal study in 12 western European countries and found that older people tended to show higher levels of well-being. This trend became more evident when other variables such as income, occupation, level of education, marital status, and nationality were controlled for. Even in countries



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where well-being and age were negatively correlated, this correlation was no longer negative when economic and social factors were considered (Inglehart & Rabier, 1986; George, Okun & Landerman, 1985; Herzog & Rodgers, 1981).

With regard to marital status, some authors have shown that married people show a greater degree of well-being than single, widowed, or divorced individuals (Mastekaasa, 1993; Glenn & Weaver, 1981; Campbell, Convers & Rodgers, 1976). In contrast, the level of education has not proven significant when other factors such as income or employment status have been controlled for (Toseland & Rasch, 1980; Palmore, 1979). We therefore consider that these socio-demographic factors influence but do not have a high predictive value for the level of subjective and occupational well-being.

Figure 1 depicts a conceptual model of the inter-relationships among the study variables.

**Insert Figure 1 here**

## **Method**

### Participants

A sample of 209 Mexican workers from an international North American soft drinks manufacturer was selected; the characteristics of the study population are given in Table 1. The mean age of participants in the study was 33.2 yrs, ranging from 18 to 63 yrs.

**Insert table 1 here**

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### Measures.

Psychological Well-Being Scale, EBP (Sanchez-Canovas, 1998). This questionnaire measures subjective (40 items) and occupational (10 items) well-being on a scale of 1 to 5. The questionnaire has excellent psychometric characteristics in terms of reliability and convergent validity ( $\alpha=.93$ ) with the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin & Crossland, 1989), with which it shows a significant and close correlation ( $r_{xy}=.90$ ). A Spanish version of the questionnaire was used. Some of the questions included in the EBP are shown in English in Annex 1.

Schwartz Value Survey, SVS (Schwartz, 1992). The questionnaire is comprised of 60 values presented in two lists, one of 30 terminal values and another of 30 instrumental values on a scale of -1 to 7. These items are distributed among 10 motivational types: Power, Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, and Self-direction (in the individualistic dimension); Universalism and Security (in the mixed dimension); and Benevolence, Tradition and Conformity (in the collectivistic dimension). We used the Spanish version (Ros & Grad, 1991) for our study. The SVS has acceptable psychometric scores and convergent validity with other Values tests, with correlation values ranging between .40 and .65 (Schwartz & Blisky, 1990; Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995; Feather, 1997; Spini & Doise, 1998). Spini (2003) also confirmed the unidimensionality of the test.

The “intention to leave” variable was measured by including the question “I shall look for a new position next year”, recording responses on a Likert scale from 1 to 7. Sociodemographic (sex, age, level of education, marital status, and children) and occupational (level of responsibility, length of time with their company, and length of time in their post) data were also collected.

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The study was carried out in April 2008. SPSS© version 15.0 software was used for the statistical analysis. Reliability analyses of the tests used in our research yielded high alpha scores for both the EBP ( $\alpha=.92$ ) and SVS ( $\alpha=.92$ ).

## **Results**

One study objective was to determine the influence of different variables on subjective and occupational well-being. Mean scores were higher for subjective than occupational well-being (3.92 vs. 3.50, respectively).

Although scores for subjective and occupational well-being were positively correlated, intercorrelation analysis of the other study variables (Table 2) showed differentiated relationships with each of them. Subjective well-being was significantly correlated with: dominance at the extremes of collective/individualistic values, educational level, and intention to leave, whereas occupational well-being was significantly correlated with responsibility within the organization, age, parenthood, intention to leave, time in the post, and length of service. Intercorrelations (Kendall  $\tau$ ) among variables are presented in Table 2.

**Insert Table 2 here**

Although a correlation was found between the types of well-being, ANOVA analysis revealed a greater influence of subjective well-being on occupational well-being ( $F(27)=3.14$   $p=.00$ ) than vice-versa ( $F(57)=1.42$   $p=.05$ ).

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We postulated that similitude between the structure of personal values and the social values of the wider culture would generate high levels of subjective well-being. Our specific interest was to test whether the predominance of collectivist values among the workers (congruent with the collectivist values of Mexican society) influences levels of subjective and occupational well-being. We determined whether the collective dimension was dominant for an individual by first transforming the questionnaire scores into z scores. Individuals were considered to have collectivist or individualistic values if they fulfilled two conditions: z score  $> 0$ ; and the score for one value was greater than for the other.

Transformed scores showed a significant positive correlation between the degree of collectivist or individualistic values and subjective well-being (Table 2), although no correlation was found with occupational well-being. In other words, congruence between social and personal values generates the psychological well-being of individuals but not their perception of well-being at work.

The linear regression analysis in Table 3 demonstrates this relationship between values and subjective well-being, especially in the case of individualistic values, but no relationship was observed between values and occupational well-being. The data only partially support our first study hypothesis.

**Insert Table 3 here**

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Tables 4 and 5 show the results of multiple regression analyses controlling for the other sociodemographical and occupational variables studied.

**Insert Tables 4 and 5 here**

According to these findings, perception of well-being was influenced by gender and educational level but not by the work-related variables. Among the latter, the level of responsibility in the organization affected occupational but not subjective well-being. So, only hypothesis 2b was confirmed.

Finally, both subjective and occupational well-being were negatively and significantly related to the intention to leave the organization but, in the multivariate analysis, only subjective well-being had an impact on this attitude supporting hypothesis 3a (see Table 6).

**Insert Table 6 here**

**Discussion**

One main finding of this study is that subjective and occupational well-being are differentially affected by personal and occupational variables. Therefore, although both subjective and occupational well-being are highly significantly correlated, they cannot be considered to be a unidimensional construct. In fact, the effect is not bi-directional, in that the influence of subjective well-being on occupational well-being is significantly greater than the other way round. We can

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therefore conclude that occupational well-being does not affect subjective well-being but that subjective well-being has an influence on occupational well-being.

Besides this multidimensional character of well-being and the direction of influence, we also found that each dimension of well-being is differentially related to other personal and occupational factors.

Thus, individuals with a predominance of individualistic values showed higher levels of subjective (but not occupational) well-being. The data only partially support our first study hypothesis, since values only affected occupational well-being, and this relationship was especially marked in the case of individualistic values, despite the predominance of collectivist values in Mexican society. Other researchers have reported the predominant role of individualistic value profiles in subjective well-being (Sagiv and Schwartz, 2000), since the successful attainment of success of individual goals increases their level of subjective well-being. Some authors have indicated that more extreme levels of well-being are found in individualistic cultures, with central scores being more frequent in collectivist cultures (Diener and Suh, 1999).

The present results indicate the importance of values in shaping the well-being construct, which is more influenced by personal variables than by cultural values.

The finding of no relationship between collectivist values and occupational well-being may be attributable to the transnational nature of the company and its origin in the United States, characterized by strong individualist orientation tendencies. We can therefore conclude that the relationship between well-being and values is conditioned by the specific setting of their production.

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This differentiation of the influence of the specific setting on well-being means that organizational factors especially affect occupational well-being but not subjective well-being. In particular, the position of responsibility of individuals is exclusively associated with occupational well-being. Hence, only hypothesis 2b was confirmed, since the level of responsibility in the organization affected occupational well-being but not other types of personal well-being. Furthermore, this association is unambiguous, since occupational factors affect well-being but not vice-versa, as also reported by Doest & Jonge (2006). Nevertheless, this explanation alone is too simplistic, because personal factors (being a parent or married) showed a positive correlation with occupational well-being. This relationship may be explained by a greater identification (commitment) of the person with the company and a reduction in the intention to leave with greater family responsibilities. This is consistent with our finding of a significant negative correlation between these two variables and with the association between well-being and the three-dimensional model of commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

With respect to the negative relationship between well-being and the intention of an individual to leave the organization, some authors have previously found that staff turnover, as measured by intention to leave, has a stronger association with individual emotional factors than with other attitudinal factors such as job satisfaction (Cotê & Morgan, 2002). We would add that subjective well-being plays an important role in the worker's decision-making process when deciding to remain with or leave the company.

Multivariate analysis showed that subjective well-being and gender were the variables offering highest predictive power for the intention to leave, supporting hypothesis 3a, while

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occupational well-being had little influence on this attitude, contrary to hypothesis 3b. Furthermore, subjective well-being was related to gender, which influenced the development of subjective well-being and the intention to leave the organization. Nevertheless, these results should be interpreted with caution because of the gender imbalance in our study population. A focus on the gender issue in this type of study would be valuable to elucidate the role of gender in the development of subjective well-being processes.

In summary, subjective well-being and occupational well-being are related but independent processes modulated by different antecedent variables. This finding is relevant in the determination of policies and implies that those responsible for human resources must clearly define their objectives, since an improvement in one type of well-being does not automatically lead to an improvement in the other.

These data are especially significant for establishing human resource management policy, because management decisions may affect the well-being associated with job performance but not the subjective well-being of workers in terms of their all-round personal development. Human resource managers should therefore carefully analyze the consequences of management practices, taking into account not only their impact on employees' well-being at work and in the organization but also on employees' personal development.

Specifically, occupational well-being is affected by both work-related variables and personal factors. Consequently, policies aimed at the well-being of workers should not be limited to improving the working environment (through human resources development policies). They should



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also include precise selection and assessment processes to identify suitable employees or those who can take full advantage of the future possibilities that the organization may offer them.

Finally, we recommend extending this type of study to other populations to determine whether the association between certain personal and occupational variables and well-being is specific to some cultures or can be applied in a more general manner. This type of research is especially important to accommodate cultural differences among countries at a time of increasing social and cultural globalization.

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**Annex 1. Some questions from the *Escala Bienestar Psicologico* (Psychological Wellbeing**

**Scale, translated into English)**

I feel good about myself (SWB)

I like to have fun (SWB)

I feel optimistic (SWB)

I believe I am in good health (SWB)

I believe that good things will happen to me (SWB)

I believe that I am generally in a good mood (SWB)

My work is creative, varied and stimulating (OWB)

My work is interesting (OWB)

I enjoy my work (OWB)

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of sample

	<i>N</i>	%		<i>N</i>	%
Age (yrs)			Responsibility		
< 20	4	1.9	Blue collar	156	74.6
21-30	85	40.7	Directors	53	25.4
31-40	74	35.4			
41-50	37	17.7	Time in post (yrs)		
51-60	9	4.3	< 2	53	25.4
			2-5	58	27.8
Educational level			6-10	48	23.0
Primary school	26	12.4	≥11	50	23.9
Secondary school	61	29.2			
College degree	84	40.2	Time in company (yrs)		
University degree	35	16.7	< 2	30	14.4
Postgraduate degree	3	1.4	2-5	34	16.3
			6-10	49	23.4
Sex			≥ 11	96	45.9
Female	22	10.5			
Male	187	89.5			

**Table 2. Intercorrelation matrix of the study variables**

Variable	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Subjective well being	.30 <sup>‡</sup>	.18 <sup>‡</sup>	.07	-.20 <sup>‡</sup>	.01	.01	.18 <sup>‡</sup>	.01	-.01
2. Occupational well being		.09	.12*	-.18 <sup>‡</sup>	.15 <sup>‡</sup>	.16 <sup>‡</sup>	-.07	.18 <sup>‡</sup>	.17 <sup>‡</sup>
3. Collectivism/Individualist			-.01	.01	-.08	-.04	.20 <sup>‡</sup>	-.03	-.04
4. Responsibility				.02	.17 <sup>‡</sup>	.05	.31 <sup>‡</sup>	.13*	.22 <sup>‡</sup>
5. Intention to leave					-.18 <sup>‡</sup>	-.24 <sup>‡</sup>	.13*	-.21 <sup>‡</sup>	-.17 <sup>‡</sup>
6. Age						.42 <sup>‡</sup>	-.06	.48 <sup>‡</sup>	.59 <sup>‡</sup>
7. Children							-.21 <sup>‡</sup>	.41 <sup>‡</sup>	.45 <sup>‡</sup>
8. Educational level								-.23 <sup>‡</sup>	-.11
9. Time in post									.70 <sup>‡</sup>
10. Time in company									

\*  $p < .05$

<sup>‡</sup>  $p < .01$

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Table 3: Linear regression estimates for Subjective and Occupational Well-Being

<u>Independent variables</u>	<u>(SWB)</u>	<u>OWB</u>
Individualism	.16***	.09
Collectivism	.81	.01
Mixed	.02	.06
Constant	3.88	3.49
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.57***	.25

\*\*\* p< .001

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Table 4: Multiple regression estimates for Subjective Well-Being

Sociodemographic	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Gender (1 = male)	-.35	.11	-.22**
Age	-.01	.04	-.02
Educational level	.10	.04	.20*
Work-related			
Responsibility	.02	.04	.05
Time in post	.06	.05	.14
Time in company	-.05	.05	-.12

\*p<.05

\*\*p< .01

\*\*\* p< .001

Table 5: Multiple regression estimates for Occupational Well-Being

Sociodemographic	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Gender (1 = male)	-.03	.13	-.02
Age	.02	.05	.03
Educational level	-.09	.05	-.15
Work-related			
Responsibility	.10	.05	.18*
Time in post	.09	.05	.17
Time in company	.00	.06	-.00

\*p<.05

\*\*p< .01

\*\*\* p< .001



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Table 6: Multiple regression estimates for Intention to Leave

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>β</i>
Subjective Well-Being	-.99	.29	-.28**
Occupational Well-being	-.03	.24	-.01
Sociodemographic			
Gender (1 = male)	-.78	.39	-.14*
Age	-.14	.16	-.08
Educational level	.14	.15	.08
Work-related			
Responsibility	.10	.14	.06
Time in post	-.03	.16	-.02
Time in company	-.26	.17	-.17

\*p<.05

\*\*p< .01

\*\*\* p< .001

$R^2=.13***$

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Figure 1. Model of the impact of congruence of values on well being and intention to leave

