


# EMPLOYEE RESILIENCE

An evidence review

**Evidence summary**  
March 2021

A solid green vertical bar is positioned on the left side of the page, extending from the top to the bottom.

The CIPD is the professional body for HR and people development. The registered charity champions better work and working lives and has been setting the benchmark for excellence in people and organisation development for more than 100 years. It has more than 150,000 members across the world, provides thought leadership through independent research on the world of work, and offers professional training and accreditation for those working in HR and learning and development.

## Discussion report

# Employee resilience: an evidence review

## Contents

Overview	2
Introduction	2
Research questions	3
What is resilience?	3
Measures	4
How important is resilience?	4
What contributes to resilience?	5
The crucial role of people managers	5
Can we train resilience?	6
Notes	6

## Acknowledgements

This report was written by Jonny Gifford and Jake Young of the CIPD, based on a rapid evidence assessment conducted by Eric Barends, Emilia Wietrak, Iulia Cioca and Denise Rousseau of the Center for Evidence-Based Management. We thank Rachel Suff, Holly Ivins, Joe Wells and Rebecca Bourley for their feedback and support on this research.

### Publication information

Please cite this report as: Gifford, J. and Young, J. (2021) *Employee resilience: an evidence review*. Summary report. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

## 1 Overview

Resilience helps employees adapt, cope, gain resources, and respond positively to stressors in the workplace. This evidence review, based on a rapid evidence assessment (REA), finds several key factors that protect or reinforce resilience. Strong predictors include:

- individuals' psychological states and traits, including self-efficacy or confidence, positive affect or emotions, and our sense of coherence
- our relationships, including supportive co-workers and managers and a high-quality leader-member exchange
- in addition, learning and development interventions can enhance employee resilience if they are designed and delivered in the right way.

It is important to understand resilience as partly a semi-permanent psychological *trait* and partly a variable psychological *state*. Some people will naturally be more resilient than others, but the onus must not simply be put on employees to 'buck up' and 'be' resilient. People managers and colleagues play critical roles in influencing how resilient employees are.

For more detail on the research findings, see the scientific summary at [cipd.co.uk/evidence-resilience](https://cipd.co.uk/evidence-resilience)

## 2 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent containment measures have had a significant impact on the economy, businesses and working lives. As organisations have made changes to how they operate, staff have had to navigate new ways of working and adapt to changing personal lives. We know that in times of recession, work pressure can easily increase as the drive to do more with less becomes even more intense; and people's concerns about job security can add to this. Indeed, our *COVID Working Lives* research from summer 2020 indicated a sharp rise from January in employees feeling the risk of losing their job was high, particularly those who had been furloughed.

In such challenging times, the ability of employees to cope with adversity and display resilience is paramount. It is widely believed that employees who are 'resilient' are better able to cope with stress, organisational change and adverse organisational events. As a result, it is assumed that those employees are not only likely to deliver better performance, but will also be more committed, satisfied and healthier. This evidence review summarises the best available evidence on why employee resilience is important (what outcomes it leads to) and what managers and employers can do to support it. It is based on a thorough search and systematic appraisal of the literature (using the rapid evidence assessment method), so is a trustworthy view of the body of research.

To read about our methods and see more detail on the body of research, see the accompanying scientific summary, available at [cipd.co.uk/evidence-resilience](https://cipd.co.uk/evidence-resilience).

### 3 Research questions

Our main research question is: what is known in the scientific literature about the relationship between employee resilience and work-related outcomes? Within this, we explore:

- 1 What is employee resilience?
- 2 How can employee resilience be measured?
- 3 Does employee resilience affect work-related outcomes?
- 4 What are the antecedents (predictors) of employee resilience?
- 5 What is known about the effect of interventions aimed at enhancing employees' resilience?

### 4 What is resilience?

Psychological resilience is a firmly established topic with a large body of research. Our search yielded 12 relevant meta-analyses,<sup>1</sup> six of which were high quality, being based on controlled studies. In addition, we identified 21 longitudinal studies.<sup>2</sup>

In psychology, resilience is described in one of two ways:

- 1 *'the ability of an individual to rebound or recover from adversity'*<sup>3</sup>
- 2 *'the ability to maintain psychological and physical health despite exposure to a traumatic event'*.<sup>4</sup>

Employee resilience is a well-established focus in its own right. Although resilience has mainly been developed to look at major events and strains in our personal lives – for example, recovering from the loss of loved ones, or physical or psychological trauma – the construct transposes well to our day-to-day working lives. In a work context, it can be seen as *'the capacity to thrive, rather than just survive, in high stress environments'*.<sup>5</sup>

The nature of resilience can be seen in two ways. Some studies treat it as a relatively stable personal attribute or trait, whereas others see it as a more variable psychological state that is affected by context and behaviours. The reality is that, similar to many other psychological constructs, resilience is likely to be a mixture of trait and state. Some people will naturally have greater reservoirs of resilience to draw upon than others, but that is clearly not the end of the story – the contexts we operate in, the people around us and our own learning and development will all affect how resilient we are.

The state view of resilience is more helpful in some respects, as it leads us to focus on the practical question of how work habits, actions and interventions – from coping mechanisms to training programmes – help people respond to setbacks or pressure. That is, it generates insight into what managers, colleagues and workers themselves can do to foster employee resilience.

## 5 Measures

Näswall's<sup>6</sup> measure of employee resilience assesses individuals' capacity to '*cope, adapt and thrive in response to changing work circumstances*'. It treats resilience as something that can be developed and influenced by employers' action, rather than as a permanent trait. This nine-item measure asks individuals to consider how often ('never' to 'always') the following are true:

- 1 I effectively collaborate with others to handle unexpected challenges at work.
- 2 I successfully manage a high workload for long periods of time.
- 3 I resolve crises competently at work.
- 4 I learn from mistakes at work and improve the way I do my job.
- 5 I re-evaluate my performance and continually improve the way I do my work.
- 6 I effectively respond to feedback at work, even criticism.
- 7 I seek assistance at work when I need specific resources.
- 8 I approach managers when I need their support.
- 9 I use change at work as an opportunity for growth.

The scale is free to use under certain conditions.<sup>7</sup>

## 6 How important is resilience?

Resilience is a strong driver of both positive and negative mental health indicators, including the clinically recognised disorders of anxiety and depression, and non-clinical constructs such as subjective wellbeing, life satisfaction, positive affect (that is, positive emotions) and burnout (similar to depression). In addition, resilience has been found to predict the development of depressive symptoms among cancer survivors, post-traumatic symptoms among HIV patients and the level of disability among people with a chronic illness.

An important model in the psychology of work is the 'job demands-resources', or JD-R, model, in which the demands of our work need to be matched by the personal 'resources', loosely speaking, that we have. In this sense, resources include colleague and supervisor support, autonomy and team cohesion.

Resilience helps employees protect and recoup their personal resources at work, which in turn protects them from problems like psychological distress, emotional exhaustion and burnout. In decreasing order, the outcomes that resilience is most strongly related to are:<sup>8</sup>

- 1 wellbeing
- 2 psychological stress
- 3 proactive work behaviour
- 4 creative behaviour
- 5 commitment to change
- 6 performance – either in-role 'task' performance, or extra-role 'contextual' performance/'organisational citizenship behaviour' (OCB)
- 7 work engagement
- 8 organisational commitment
- 9 burnout, emotional exhaustion
- 10 job satisfaction.

There is also some evidence that resilience protects us from certain 'ills'. Specifically, it lessens the negative impact of exposure to work-related stressors such as workplace bullying, work pressure, role ambiguity, work conflict, customer incivility and job insecurity.

## 7 What contributes to resilience?

There are a wide range factors that predict resilience. Interestingly, ‘protective’ factors that *support* resilience have a bigger impact than negative factors that *undermine* it; so enhancing the protective factors is likely to be more effective than reducing the risk factors. Finally, demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status, job tenure, experience and level of education were found to have a very small or no effect. That is to say, resilience is a fundamental human consideration that affects us all, regardless of what life stage we are at or what job or career we have.

The factors that predict resilience most strongly are as follows – each of these constructs has reliable measures that employers can use in surveys:<sup>9</sup>

- **Self-efficacy**, a type of confidence that can be seen as a task-specific version of self-esteem:<sup>10</sup> self-efficacy in itself can be developed through good management – such as goal-setting, professional development and coaching – or through seeing others succeed, verbal persuasion or managing one’s emotions.
- **Positive affect and optimism:** positive affect refers to moods such as joy, cheerfulness, enthusiasm and alertness, while optimism refers to the belief that one will generally experience good outcomes. Employees who possess both of these are more likely to behave in ways that mitigate the effects of adverse events, or even prevent them in the first place.
- **Sense of coherence:** the belief that what happens in one’s life is comprehensible (rational, predictable, understandable), manageable (the availability of adequate and sufficient resources) and meaningful. Employees with a strong sense of coherence perceive that they can mobilise additional resources, such as time, budget and good relationships with colleagues and supervisors, which may help them to cope with unexpected, adverse events.
- **Social support:** that is, help or advice from managers or co-workers – this is a strong predictor for psychological resilience. Support from colleagues is especially powerful.
- **Leader-member exchange (LMX):** positive interpersonal relations between managers and reports decrease work-related stress and provide psychological resources for coping. This is especially important during adverse situations when subordinates look towards their supervisor for reassurance, directions and support.

## 8 The crucial role of people managers

From these insights, it’s clear that people managers – and thus senior managers, HR professionals and anyone else who supports and develops them – have a vital role in helping their staff to be resilient. Most obviously, they should build good interpersonal relations with their staff, including giving them advice and help when needed. But there is much more they can do in addition. If managers set goals that are motivating (that is, stretching but achievable),<sup>11</sup> celebrate successes in the team and coach their people to be ambitious, foster supportive work environments, and communicate and manage work and resources in such a way that people know what to expect, they can expect their people to become more resilient.

Managers will not help if they expect employees to toughen up and simply be more resilient. Although resilience is in part a semi-permanent trait – that is, an aspect of people’s deep-rooted psychology – it is also a changeable state that is greatly affected by

circumstances and social dynamics. Managers thus have a good deal of responsibility for their employees' resilience and this does not include giving them 'tough love' or making them feel insecure to keep them on their toes. To the manager who tells an employee they simply need to be more resilient, a fair response would be that their behaviour affects the employee's resilience.

Moreover, there are clear implications for people functions and senior management. The challenge should not only be seen as a responsibility for people managers to be more caring or capable. Sometimes the notion of a 'permafrost' of reluctant middle managers is evoked – this would certainly not be helpful. Through their decisions, communication and role-modelling, senior managers determine the targets, resource allocation and management structures that shape how demanding and supportive work environments are. Through these mechanisms and their leadership, they also shape the organisational climate – that is, employees' *shared understanding* of policies, practices and normal behaviour on aspects of work life. Finally, senior management must give HR and L&D professionals the backing they need to effectively equip people managers with the right capabilities.

## 9 Can we train resilience?

Learning and development interventions have been shown to develop resilience, if they are based on good-quality content and delivered appropriately. Based on the available evidence, the best bets for effective L&D programmes for resilience are:

- 1 They should be based on experiential learning that draws on the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy to develop self-awareness, critical reflection, relaxation and mindfulness.
- 2 They should combine with related practices, such as goal-setting, coaching and small group discussions.
- 3 Learning programmes should be relatively intensive, with longer sessions and more sessions over not too long a period – for example, 8 to 12 sessions over 4 or 5 weeks.

Again, senior management plays an important role here. There are clear resource implications of such extensive development programmes, so having genuine senior management buy-in will make a real difference to how an organisation can develop resilience.

## 10 Notes

- 1 For more information on systematic reviews, meta-analyses and longitudinal studies, see the CIPD report *In Search of the Best Available Evidence*; and [CEBMA's Guideline for Rapid Evidence Assessments in Management and Organizations](#).
- 2 See note 1.
- 3 Leipold, B. and Greve, W. (2009) Resilience. *European Psychologist*. Vol 14. pp40–50.
- 4 Bonanno, G.A. (2004) Loss, trauma, and human resilience: have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events? *American Psychologist*. Vol 59, No 1. p20.
- 5 Cleary, M., Kornhaber, R., Thapa, D.K., West, S. and Visentin, D. (2018) The effectiveness of interventions to improve resilience among health professionals: a systematic review. *Nurse Education Today*. Vol 71. pp247–63.



- 6 Näswall, K., Kuntz, J., Hodliffe, M., Malinen, S. (2019) Employee Resilience: Development and Validation of a Measure. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*. Vol.34, No.5, pp.353–67. doi: 10.1108/JMP-02-2018-0102.
- 7 For information on conditions of using the resilience measures, see Näswall, K., Kuntz, J. and Malinen, S. (2015) *Employee Resilience Scale (EmpRes) measurement properties*. Resilient Organisations Research Report 2015/04. Christchurch, NZ: Resilient Organisations Research Programme, University of Canterbury, NZ. Available at [www.resorgs.org.nz/publications/employee-resilience-scale/](http://www.resorgs.org.nz/publications/employee-resilience-scale/)
- 8 For more detail on these outcomes – in particular task and contextual performance, work engagement and commitment – see [cipd.co.uk/evidence-engagement](http://cipd.co.uk/evidence-engagement)
- 9 See the accompanying scientific summary for measures, available at [cipd.co.uk/evidence-resilience](http://cipd.co.uk/evidence-resilience)
- 10 Brockner, J. (1988) *Self-esteem at work*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- 11 Gifford, J. (2016) *Could do better? Assessing what works in performance management*. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Available at: [cipd.co.uk/coulddobetter](http://cipd.co.uk/coulddobetter)



# CIPD

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development  
151 The Broadway London SW19 1JQ United Kingdom  
**T** +44 (0)20 8612 6200 **F** +44 (0)20 8612 6201  
**E** [cipd@cipd.co.uk](mailto:cipd@cipd.co.uk) **W** [cipd.co.uk](http://cipd.co.uk)

Incorporated by Royal Charter  
Registered as a charity in England and Wales (1079797)  
Scotland (SC045154) and Ireland (20100827)

Issued: March 2021 Reference: 8116 © CIPD 2021

