

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> LONDON BUSINESS SCHOOL		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 17 – Business and Management studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Alive at work!		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> Since 2008		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Dan Cable	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Professor of Organisational Behaviour	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> From 01/08/200
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> Since 2014		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Companies around the world from HSBC to the Dutch recruitment giant Randstad have applied the results of Cable's research to <b>boost the wellbeing and productivity</b> of their staff. The Indian call centre firm Wipro, for example, says the research helped it to <b>reduce staff turnover</b> by a third.</p> <p>Cable has produced a popular book that summarises the insights which has sold almost <b>40,000 copies</b>. And he has been invited to <b>address and advise senior staff</b> at firms including BMW, Facebook and Ericsson.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>The research focuses on ways to <b>improve staff wellbeing and performance</b> by encouraging and enabling them to express their unique values and selves in the workplace. It has identified several steps that organisations can follow to become <b>more productive</b>, for example by reducing staff turnover. These small, low-cost interventions can have <b>very large outcomes</b> because they <b>change the nature of the relationship between employer and employees</b>.</p> <p>One study looked at why employees tend to be <b>more satisfied</b> at work when they believe the employing company shares their values. There is lots of evidence that this so-called "value congruence" effect is strong and influences, for example, workers' desire to stay with the organisation. The research [3.1] asked a different question: why do shared values have this effect? Through surveys of 997 employees at four water treatment agencies in the US, it <b>generated data</b> to show the value congruence effect was down to <b>building trust</b> between the worker and the organisation and its members.</p> <p>Another project examined what happens when people exaggerate their skills and experiences at job interviews – the "fake it 'til you make it" strategy. Surveys of <b>2,673</b> people from <b>107</b> countries tracked their attitudes and <b>how they performed</b> in the workplace [3.2]. The results showed that applicants who were more honest about the type of person they are, including faults, (called self-verification striving) had <b>happier and more productive</b> experiences at work. Those who try to be someone they are not find it harder because they frequently lack the ability required and become less committed.</p> <p>A related study looked at ways to improve the experience of employees joining a new organisation by finding ways for them to <b>express their best selves</b>, instead of just expecting them to fit in. In a laboratory study with students and a field experiment with 600 new-starters at an Indian call centre company, the research showed that encouraging people to talk about their strengths, what they could offer the company, and to recall a time when they thought they had</p>		

fulfilled their potential at work, **boosted** their self-esteem, their workplace performance and willingness to stay [3.3]. The effects of this socialization exercise were also written up in a publication aimed more directly at the business community [3.4].

A final project studied the **positive impacts** of workers being able to write their own job titles [3.5]. It surveyed 31 staff at the Make-A-Wish foundation in the US, who were encouraged to invent light-hearted descriptions to supplement their formal titles. (Examples included “goddess of greeting” and “duchess of data”.) Surprisingly, this small change made a **significant difference** by reducing staff emotional exhaustion. A follow-up trial in a health care system showed the same effect: staff given the opportunity to write their own job titles reported **less emotional exhaustion** five weeks later.

A popular-business book **further explored insights** from the research. Called *Alive at Work: The Neuroscience of Helping Your People Love What They Do*, the book argues that the reason for all the unhappiness is biological: organizations, in an effort to routinize work and establish clear-cut performance metrics, are suppressing what neuroscientists call our Seeking Systems, the part of our brain that craves exploration and learning.

### 3. References to the research

[3.1] Edwards J & **Cable DM** The value of value congruence. *Journal of Applied Psychology* **94** (3) 654 – 677 (2009). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0014891>

[3.2] **Cable DM** & Kay V Striving for self-verification during organisational entry. *Academy of Management Journal* **55** (2) 360–380 (2012). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2010.0397>

[3.3] **Cable DM**, Gino F & Staats BR Breaking them in or eliciting their best? Reframing socialisation around newcomers’ authentic self-expression. *Administrative Science Quarterly* **58** (1) February 8 (2013). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839213477098>

[3.4] **Cable DM**, Gino F & Staats BR Reinventing employee onboarding. *MIT Sloan Management Review* **54** (3) (2013) <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/reinventing-employee-onboarding/>

[3.5] Grant A, Berg J & **Cable DM** Job titles as identity badges: how self-reflective titles can reduce emotional exhaustion. *Academy of Management Journal* **57** (4) 1201–1225 (2014). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2012.0338>

[3.6] **Cable DM** *Alive at Work: The Neuroscience of Helping Your People Love What They Do* (2018) Harvard Business Review Press. ISBN:9781633694255

### 4. Details of the impact

The route to impact has largely been through the dissemination of Cable’s ideas and findings to a broader audience through the book *Alive at Work: The Neuroscience of Helping Your People Love What They Do* [3.6]. As a consequence, the results and insights generated by the research [3.1] [3.2] [3.3] [3.4] [3.5] have been **used by companies** around the world to **raise staff morale and productivity**.

Selling nearly **40,000** copies across the world, the book’s success has provided a platform for Cable to speak directly to companies. From 2018-2019 he accepted invitations to address **senior staff at 18 different firms**, including Facebook, MetLife, Ericsson, BMW, Estee Lauder and Louis Vuitton.

Significant numbers of **senior business leaders** have read the book themselves and changed their practice as a result – at the banking group HSBC for example. The UK frozen food

company COOK organised an event for 120 team leaders based around principles from the book. James Rutter, the company's chief creative officer, who read the book and organised the event, says: "It has had a **real impact** on us at COOK." The research, he adds, has: "really helped shape how we've gone about seeking to enrich and deepen our culture over the past 12 months". [5.1]

Another example of the research having impact was the Indian call centre company Wipro. A field project there [3.3] showed that giving new starters an hour dedicated to asking them to talk about their strengths and to explore times when they had been most successful at work had a **surprisingly large** effect. Most strikingly, it reduced staff turnover by a third, compared to employees who received the company's standard orientation, which instead focused on corporate values and behaviours. Wipro managers were **so impressed** (the company employs 30 new people each day and turnover is a significant cost) that they scaled up the results of the field trial and, following consultation with Cable, **introduced the practice** into the call centre organization in 2013.

Another **strong example** of impact is the Netherlands-based recruitment consultants Randstad. It has incorporated Cable's findings into leadership training for **1,000 senior staff** and integrated the "best self" idea [3.3] into its Customer Delight programme across **14 countries**. The company says: "The **impact** of the best self is such an **energizing moment**. It **lights up the eyes** and creates a completely different energy for the rest of the training". [5.2] The company adds: "The work of Dan Cable has been helping **Randstad transform** and will continue to be **very valuable** to Randstad in the future." [5.2]

The research has also generated **much interest** in the media – both popular and business publications. Dozens of articles have appeared from *Psychology Today* to *Forbes*. [5.3] Four pieces Cable published on the website of the *Harvard Business Review* have together reached 1 million page views. A piece on humble leadership alone has more than 700,000. "**That's amazing**," says Kevin Evers of the *HBR*. [5.4]

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[5.1] James Rutter, COOK – Beneficiary Letter

[5.2] Jos Schut, CHRO, Randstad – Beneficiary Letter

[5.3] Media Coverage: Links to publications

[5.4] Kevin Evers, HBR – 1 million page views