

# Wellbeing in Labor Market: A False Illusion

Capuzzo Fiorella Maria Bernadette

Ufficio per il Difensore Regionale ed Altre Authority Regionali, Regional Council of Lombardy, Italy

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**Abstract** Wellbeing at work is a basic goal of active labor market policies to reach a better productivity all over the world. The legislative decree n. 150/2009 has introduced in Italy a system of annual verification of the level of health and well-being of workers and employees in organizations of all sizes, of the evaluation system adopted and of the judgment expressed by the boss. It aims to know employees' opinions about the standard of health, wellness, relationship, evaluation system and management. This paper focuses on the perception concerning wellbeing at work in a public administration. According to the law a questionnaire with 82 items about self-confidence, health stress, discrimination, evaluation system and boss appraisal was distributed and employees should fill it up in an anonymous way. The search involved about 300 employees in a length of 2 years and it was considered a great opportunity to encourage a positive mood, to reinforce the institutional vision and mission of the public administration and to contrast corruption. The results were interesting as less than half of employees returned the filled form and all tested groups but the managers expressed a totally negative estimation. The author tries to investigate the reason why wellness is a false illusion in the Regional Council of Lombardy and to underline a possible solution.

**Keywords** Wellbeing, Labor Market, Transparency, Discrimination, Meritocracy, Corruption

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## 1. Introduction

The term well-being is generally used to describe an incredible number of different aspects of human conditions starting from social, economic, psychological, philosophical and medical ones. In economics the term is often used for quantitative measures intended to assess the quality of life, even if it has a wide range of contexts including healthcare, politics and employment and it should not be confused with the concept of standard of living, which is based primarily on income [1]. On the other hand people are now recognizing that progress should

be about increasing human happiness and wellbeing, not just only growing the economy.

According to this postulate research into happiness and wellbeing is becoming more and more widespread and sophisticated all over the world [2]. In 2011 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution [3] which recognized happiness as a fundamental human goal and called for a more inclusive, equitable and balanced approach to economic growth that promotes happiness and well-being for everyone.

If wellbeing plays a central role in creating flourishing societies, focusing on wellbeing at work can be considered a good opportunity to benefits societies by helping working individuals to feel happy, competent and satisfied in their roles. Moreover the evidence shows that people who achieve good standards of wellbeing at work are more creative, more loyal, more productive and provide a better customer satisfaction. But enhancing wellbeing at work implies a holistic approach focused on helping employees to strengthen their personal resources, take pride in their roles within the organizational system, improve their abilities both as individuals and in collaboration with their colleagues and finally have a positive experience of work.

As the public sector is now undergoing major changes, the question is what kind of actions and responsibilities could be taken on by the national, regional and local authorities in terms of organizational changes to reach the wellbeing of their workforce. In this regard the role of the management should be developed to change and restructuring the workplace.

Wellbeing is widely cited in public policy pronouncements, but rarely operationalized for a functional use. As a matter of fact there are a lot of examples of good practice by private companies (big and small companies and even not for profit ones) attempting to foster wellbeing at work, but very few public organizations are performing well in this area.

The importance of measuring wellbeing with an objective index has been deeply questioned and a lot of tools, instruments and approaches (e.g. questionnaire, databases and statistic) have been used to measure it. Of course the type of measurement may depend on the type of wellbeing (i.e. objective, subjective, and composite) and

the level of consideration [4]. If wellbeing is measured objectively, its index can be applied to everybody in the workforce and the levels of wellbeing can be compared. A policy value of experienced wellbeing measures may be in discovering how clearly quantifiable factors (i.e. income) relate to aggregate level emotional state such as job satisfaction, self-esteem and job fulfilment. But the real question is, if wellbeing is included in policy, how do organizations move from policy to practice? Two critical policy considerations address the incorporation of wellbeing for workers in public policy issues: the question of how wellbeing will be used and what kind of actions should be taken to reduce threats to wellbeing and increase the promotion of it.

In line with this trend the Italian government reformed the public administration and new standards were introduced, such as efficiency, effectiveness, evaluation, quality, transparency and fight against corruption. Consequently, wellness of the workforce has begun a basic theme in Italy which has been approached from extensive surveys and has been often correlated to other subjects as safety, productively and performance improving.

Achieving increased wellbeing or a desired level of wellbeing of the workforce is inherent in the responsibility of the employers to provide a safe and healthy workplace; on the other hand the employee is responsible for following appropriate rules and practices established by the employer to achieve a safe and healthy workplace. But there are other components of wellbeing, such as self-fulfilment, engagement, career, productivity, income, job control and autonomy.

Clearly the wellbeing of the workforce extends beyond the workplace to social, economic and political contexts. As people spend most of their day and a significant part of their life at work, employment does not only impact on material living standards but it is also a powerful determinant of quality of life. Interactions with colleagues, support from managers, work content, autonomy in decision-making, earnings and job security as well, contribute to well-being at work. Workers who don't receive adequate support to cope with difficult work demands suffer from job burn-out, develop musculoskeletal disorders, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases. The list is long and really worrying as job stress is recognized as the second more widespread health problem in Europe. Job stress can be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or need of the worker [4] [5].

The conditions that usually lead to stress are the design of tasks, such as heavy workload, infrequent rest breaks, long work hours and shift work; on the other hand frenetic or routine tasks do not utilize properly workers' skills and provide little sense of control. Even management style can play a negative role, such as the lack of participation by workers in decision-making, the lack of family-friendly

policies, or simply poor communication in the organization. Finally also interpersonal relationship, environmental conditions (unpleasant or dangerous physical conditions such as crowding, noise, air pollution, or ergonomic problems), work role and career concerns like job insecurity and lack of opportunity for growth, advancement, or promotion; rapid changes for which workers are unprepared, can have an adverse effect [6].

Despite repeated attempts at reform, corruption is common in Italy's public organizations. Unfortunately clientelism, favoritism and nepotism still influence the public organization system. In the Regional Council of Lombardy the favoritism-based system affects negatively the working environment and increases job stress. In this context wellbeing at workplace is nothing more than a pure illusion.

Unfortunately available studies on the real possibility to reach wellbeing at work in public administrations are very limited. The results of this study are important in focusing on a critical problem which is known but rarely examined. Due to the above mentioned reasons it is extremely necessary and important to explore further this topic.

## 2. Methodology

In Italy the economic scenario is characterized by a sort of destablishment caused by raising taxes, inadequate social measures, unemployment, aging population, corruption and migrants' invasion although in the last years the Italian government has outlined a lot of policies aimed to reform Italian labor market.

On 26<sup>th</sup> October 2012 the Council of Ministers of Spain published an agreement to create the Commission to reform the public administrations (CORA) with a mandate to produce proposals to make public administrations more austere, useful, and effective [7]. From that moment on modernization of the public sector became a reform objective for the majority of OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries and each public innovation was aimed to address public policy challenges and to create a public value [8]. In line with this international trend was enacted a general strategy to reform the Italian public administration, so that the Government approved the Legislative Decree n. 150, "Implementation of the Law of March 4, 2009, n. 15, on optimization of productivity of the public work and efficiency and transparency of public administrations" in order to improve more transparency, faster and more reliable responses, less absenteeism, better quality of services and more efficient administrations. The main means for obtaining these goals is the recognition of the merits and shortcomings of executives in the public sectors and of all government employees. The reform was based on the principles of meritocracy and rewards, performance evaluation, quality of services, managerial responsibility and disciplinary

sanctions, transparency and integrity. More specifically the reform interested five different areas: merit (a reinforced selection mechanism for economic and career incentives encouraging commitment and deterring cases of malpractice); assessment (that means customer satisfaction, transparency and merit rewarding); management economic sanctions in case of failure to comply with their obligation); discipline and integrity to prevent bribery and other distortions of administrative actions through a national anticorruption strategy involving all public administrations.

Since the law came into force, a lot of analyses have been carried out in each public sector for the streamlining of the public work and the efficiency and transparency of the public organizations. Several specific analysis have been carried out in public sectors with two common aspects: a periodic data collection with the same questionnaire in order to compare and evaluate according to a benchmark criterion and an action research approach in order to strive for a sustainable change and improve public services.

To describe the essence of the phenomenon is useful to understand the meaning stakeholders ascribe to it, so questionnaire were used to understand how administrative staff experienced this sensation about wellbeing at work. Qualitative research approach was chosen because it is the systematic inquiry into social phenomena in natural settings and it helps to understand how organizations function and how interactions shape relationships.

As organizational wellbeing was one of the most current discussion topics, public administrations in Italy focused on this issue following the legislative directives. As a matter of fact the legislative decree n. 150/2009 has introduced a system of annual verification of the level of health and well-being of the workforce in organizations, of the evaluation system adopted and of management's judgment. The research was aimed to know employees' opinions about the standard of health, wellness, relationship, evaluation system and management in order to encourage a positive mood, to reinforce the institutional vision and mission of the administration and to contrast corruption.

The questionnaire and the data set were published on the web site of the National Anti Corruption Authority [9]. The national survey involved 239 public administrations such as central and local administrations, universities, research centers and health services with about 23.000 questionnaires returned by the public workers during the years 2013 and 2014. As shown below the legend of the questionnaire according to ANAC indications was based on three connected themes:

- a Wellness in the organization;
- b Grade of agreement with the evaluation system;
- c Evaluation of the leadership.

The data refer to a form composed of 9 different dimensions (listened from A to I) grouped for the theme "Wellness in the organization"; 3 different dimensions

(listened from L to N) for the "Grade of agreement with the evaluation system" and 2 different dimensions (listened from O to P) for the "Evaluation of the leadership". For each dimension there is a set of questions with a score from 1 (complete disagreement with the statement) to 6 (complete agreement with the statement). Some questions may have a statement with a negative polarity; in this case the answers scores have been reversed in order to be positive for the analysis of the dataset. The dataset provides the average score for each dimension and question; the average score of 3.5 divides between the negative (disagree – below 3.5) and the positive answers (agree – up to 3.5).

### Legend ANAC Questionnaire

#### a) Wellness in the organization: 9 items

- A Safeness and health in the workplace and correlated stress
- B Discriminations
- C Fairness of my workplace
- D Career and professional growth
- E My job
- F My colleagues
- G The context of my work
- H Sense of community (commitment)
- I The public image of my workplace

#### b) Grade agreement with the evaluation system: 3 items

- L My work organization
- M My performance
- N Organization system

#### c) Evaluation of the leadership: 2 items

- O Leadership and empowerment
- P Leadership and fairness

The aim of the survey is to analyze the effect of the dimensions all together, in order to find dependency relations among the 14 dimensions (from A to P) and determine the endpoint questions. All the 14 dimensions of the questionnaire are interlinked on the three connected themes (Wellness in the organization; Grade of agreement with the evaluation system and Evaluation of the leadership).

The total questions are 82, but each question can be considered as an observed variable. The N dimension (Organization system) seems to be totally independent. The I dimension (The public image of my workplace) may depend on H (Sense of community) and N (Organization system) dimensions. Moreover the O dimension (Leadership and empowerment) depends directly on B (Discriminations) and D (Career and professional growth) dimensions, but it is independent by L (My work organization) and N (Organization system) dimensions. The M dimension (My performance) depends on C (Fairness of my workplace) and E (My job) dimensions and it is completely independent by A (Safeness and health of

the workplace and correlated stress) and F (My colleagues) dimensions. The O dimension (Leadership and empowerment) depends on D (Career and professional growth) and B dimensions (Discriminations), but it is completely independent by L (My work organization) and N (Organization system) dimensions.

There is also a strictly relationship among the following dimensions: I (The public image of my workplace), M (My performance) and O (Leadership and empowerment). As the dimensions B-D-O focus on the kind of relationship between persons and organization, the meritocracy criterion for career and professional growth shows very low levels of wellness, but at the same time has a strictly connection to high levels of wellness regarding the more individual and private aspects of discrimination. That's the reason why the meritocracy question seems a further aspect of discrimination because of distortions and competition among workers who do not have equally opportunities for advancement.

### 3. Results

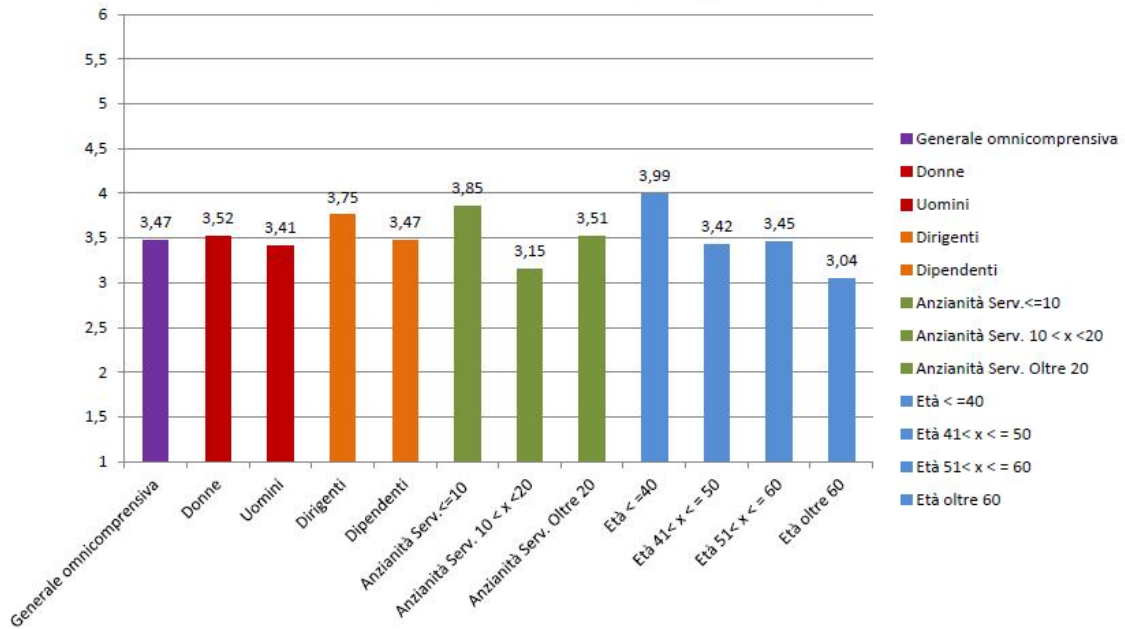
The ANAC questionnaire was used also in the Regional Council of Lombardy [10] to know the opinion of the employees on every item that determined the quality of life and the relationship in the workplace. The 82 questions were in fact about self-confidence, health, stress, discrimination, evaluation system and boss appraisal and employees were expected to fill in the questionnaire in an anonymous form, place it in an envelope and drop it in a special locked box.

In 2014 [11] were distributed 305 questionnaires but only 136 were filled in and delivered; the rate of the employees that replied to the questionnaire was almost 45%. The chart below shows the demographic characteristics of the workforce of the Regional council of

Lombardy and regards the average rating of "Wellness in the organization" analyzed by gender, age and working service. The bar graph represents in the x-axis the different categories of employees in the Regional Council of Lombardy and the average of subjective wellbeing in the y-axis. Within the picture the red color is used for women and men, the orange color for management and administrative staff, the green color is used to show the different length of service and the blue color to point out the different ages. Search brought up as clearly demonstrated by the shape of the graph that women expressed a more positive opinion about well-being than men (whose average was less than sufficient); managers passed a better judgment than employees but the general estimation was lower than sufficient; newly hired employees expressed a better view than the longest serving ones. As a matter of fact the average evaluation expressed by the employees with a length of service between 10 and 20 years was utterly negative.

This is usually due to the fact that men suffer more from lack of career opportunities; employees with a lower seniority are usually younger, happy to be in employment and still optimistic. People with longer employment are more intolerant, because they have already experienced the organizational wrongdoing and are still far away from retirement. Better opinions get executives about their attention to their staff, their ability to take into consideration the proposals of the employees and to recognize the good work carried out. Not so positive results get executives for their ability to handle problems and conflicts. In any case, the judgments are clearly more positive for employees with less seniority and service. Finally a very negative score gets the esteem of the boss. But, as executors expressed a better judgment of their own superior the average rate is not so bad.

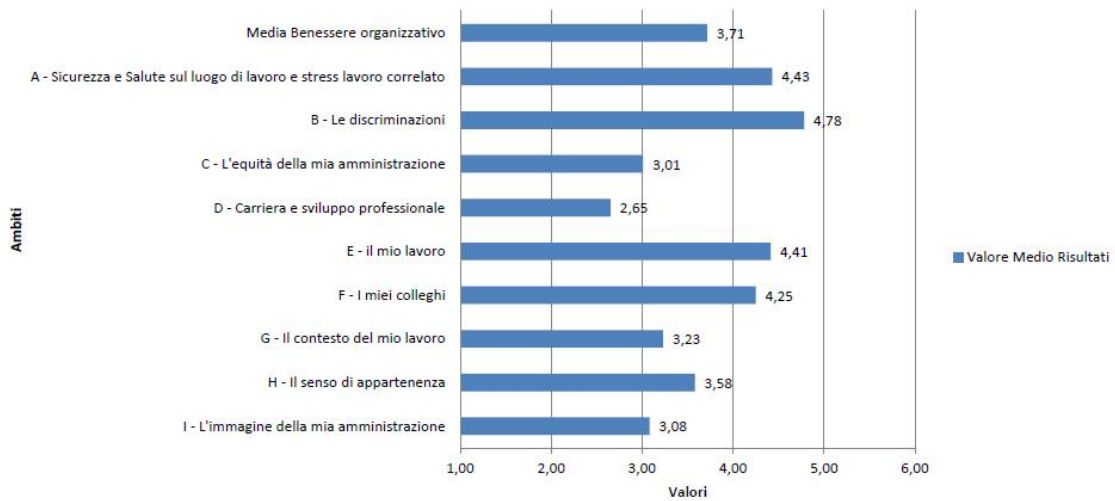
### Livello medio di benessere per tipologia di dipendenti



Consiglio regionale della Lombardia  
Indagine sul benessere organizzativo 2014

Chart 1. Average rating of “Wellness in the organization” (2014)

### Benessere Organizzativo: i risultati per ambito



Consiglio regionale della Lombardia  
Indagine sul benessere organizzativo 2014

Chart 2. Different items connected to “Wellness in the organization” (2014)

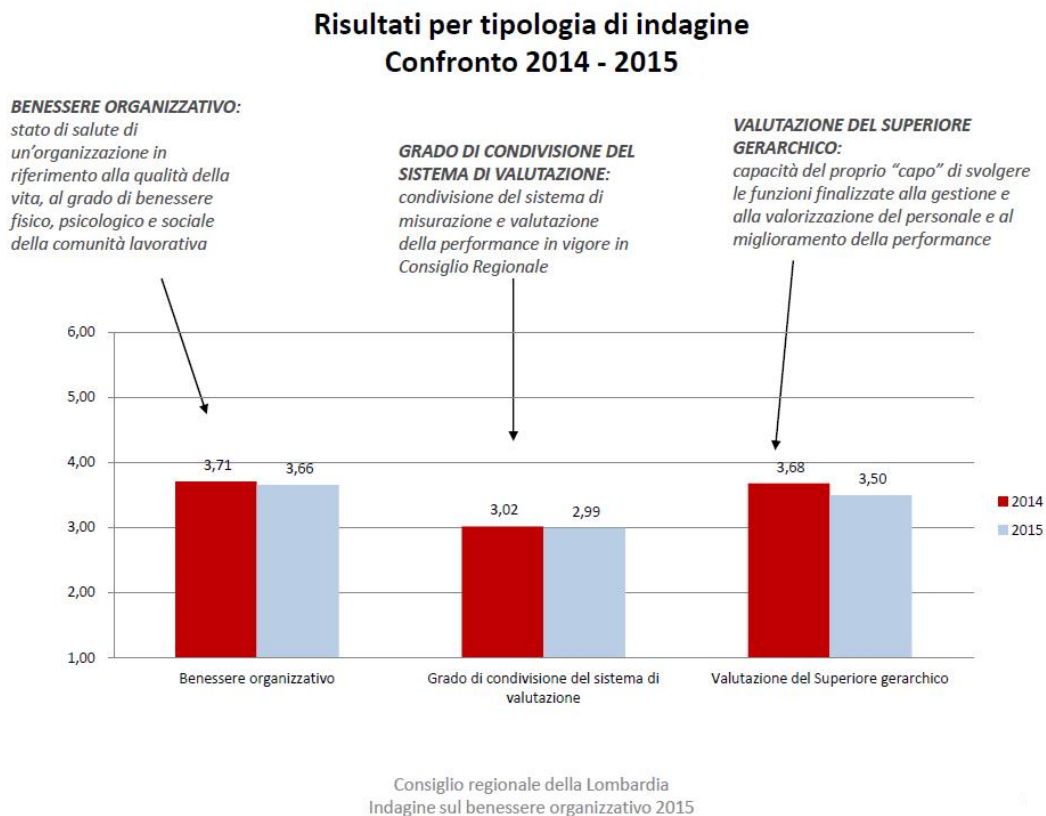
The chart 2 represents the items connected to the “Wellness in the Organization” and therefore shows that the most critical area is related to “Career and professional development” (D) followed by “Fairness of my workplace” (C) and “Discriminations” (B). On the other hand positive thinking and perception involve mainly “Safeness and health in the workplace and correlated stress” (A) and interpersonal relationships such as “My colleagues” (F) followed by “My job” (E) and “The context of my work” (G). As far as “Commitment” (H) and “The public image of my workplace” (I) regard the negative results are due to the several political scandals.

In 2015 [12] the number of the distributed questionnaire due to 10 retired persons was 295 and the average of the employees that replied to the questionnaire was 34.24%.

The grade agreement with the organization was the result of very different assessments: an almost positive opinion regarding the individual performance (goal setting and evaluation) and a very negative judgment about the organization (transparency, information and goal sharing) and the evaluation system. The most critical aspects were about the role of managers and the lack of information

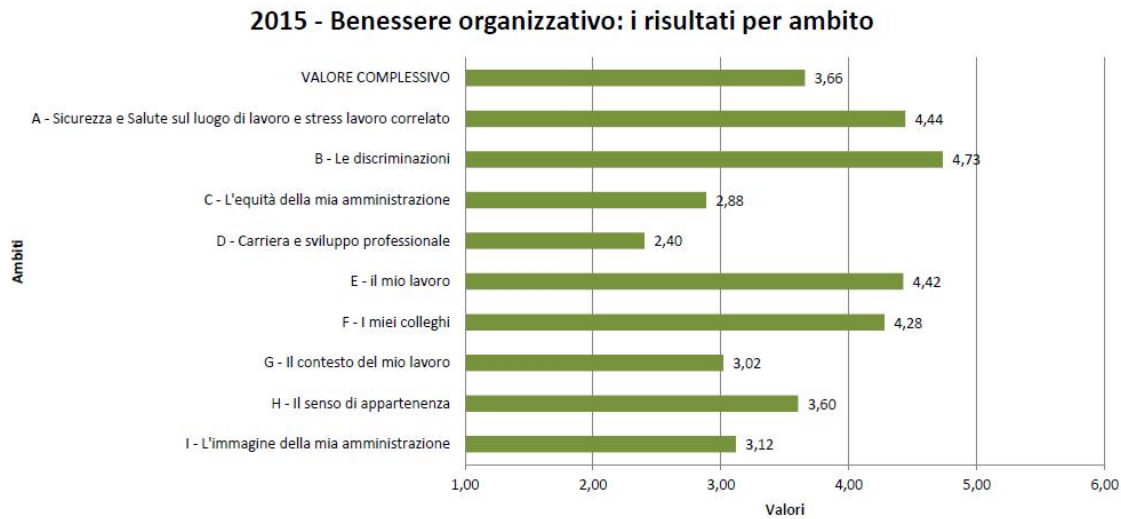
about the strategic plans, the ability of the administration to assess merit and commitment and the support provided to improve employees’ performance. Much more positive opinions got managers about their attention to their staff, their ability to take into consideration the employees’ proposals and to recognize a well done job. A different score between sufficiency and insufficiency got executives for their ability to handle effectively problems and conflicts. Anyway the judgments were clearly more positive for employees with less seniority and years’ service and a very negative score got the esteem of the boss.

The following bar graph clearly shows the comparison between the research data collected in 2014 and in 2015. In particular it regards the 3 different areas: “Wellness in the organization”, “Grade agreement with the evaluation system” and “Evaluation of the leadership”. The shape of the graph demonstrates that questionnaire results are really worse in 2015 than in 2014. The diagram depicts clearly that the most critical evaluation was referred to “Career and professional development” followed by the “Fairness of my workplace”.



**Chart 3.** Comparison between the research data collected in 2014 and in 2015

On the other hand the outcome connected in particular with the item “Wellness in the organization” is more or less the same as in 2014 as shown in the following chart.



*Il valore complessivo del benessere organizzativo è stato calcolato come media dei valori di ciascun ambito*

Consiglio regionale della Lombardia  
Indagine sul benessere organizzativo 2015

**Chart 4.** Different items connected to “Wellness in the organization” (2015)

#### 4. Discussion

The legislative decree n. 150/2009 has introduced in Italy a system of annual verification of the level of health and well-being of workers and employees in organizations of all sizes, of the evaluation system adopted and of the judgment expressed by the boss.

The aim of this paper is to investigate organizational wellbeing in the Regional Council of Lombardy, focusing above all on administrative staff's point of view. The hypothesis based on the well-being analysis led in the Regional Council of Lombardy in 2014 and in 2015 shows how the level of perceived corruption can strongly influence the representation of organizational well-being.

These aspects should be taken into account in the predisposition of tools for evaluation of organizational well-being in Italian public administrations, in order to find new legislative disposals to reduce corruption and to provide useful recommendations for improving organizational well-being in complex organizations.

The big enigma is that in such a privileged workplace that some years ago was considered a kind of Eldorado of the public administrations, all tested groups – but the managers – expressed a negative estimation. A much more negative opinion was expressed by men in comparison with women and by employees who had a longer years' service. In the Regional Council of Lombardy employees are not free from illness and anxiety, they do not feel good about coming to work, they're stressed and suffering and are not going to enjoy their work anymore. Employees feel that

fraud and corruption in the workplace definitely occurs, they often see signs of nepotism, favoritisms and unequal application of rules. In a few words employees feel no loyalty toward the institution and the institution feels no loyalty towards its employees.

The relationship between workforce and political corruption needs to be further investigated to provide the motivation for the development of policies and practices to support adequate programs that enhance wellbeing at work. There is also a need for a strategy for conducting research to fill the gaps in the evidence base for what works and does not work in achieving and maintaining wellbeing. These efforts will depend on clarifying the factors that contribute to wellbeing as well as on identifying interventions to enhance wellbeing. Many of the challenges related to conceptualizing and operationalizing wellbeing may appear impossible, such as reducing the intrusion of politics in public sector works, in the organization of work, in the distribution of opportunity and income based on competence. The potential conflict caused when guidance for promoting worker's wellbeing is perceived as interfering with employers' rights to manage their workplace is part of the game. An important focus of the research is how to address these impossible challenges linked to reaching and promoting wellbeing at work.

Building a coherent business strategy for wellness interventions is a fundamental starting point that means analysis of the costs of “ill-health” in terms of dealing with sickness, absence and reduced performance and productivity. Prevention, promotion and intervention are

necessary to facilitate well-being. In fact prevention helps to remove and reduce risks (e.g. work design); promotion helps to improve the managers' and organization's ability to recognize and deal with problems and the individual's response; and finally intervention helps employees to cope with and recover from problems through counseling as provided by employee assistance programs. They may serve as a part of a feedback loop on existing conditions or policies to define success, failure or the need for modification of them. As worker wellbeing is a multi factorial concept, it may be important to understand which aspect of wellbeing is affected by specific conditions.

In any case the most important thing is to take steps to eliminate corruption, favoritism and nepotism with a particular focus on relationship between managers and staff; in such a way it could be possible to improve not only job satisfaction but also life satisfaction. In addition to being included in public policies, wellbeing assessments may be used to affect or drive public policy to reinforce measure against corruption.

## 5. Conclusions

According to the law the ANAC questionnaire should help to know the opinion of the employees on every level that determines the quality of life and the relationship in the workplace; to know the degree sharing of evaluation system and performance appraisal; to learn the perception that every employee has about the *modus operandi* of the boss. At the same time this type of investigation should encourage a positive and proactive mood, strengthen the institutional sense of belonging and help to prevent corruption.

Public administrations that really want to improve efficiency, effectiveness and quality of services, must appropriately enhance the central role of the workers in their own organization. Anyway ensuring well-being at work is not a luxury but an essential element in organizational life and should play a central role in each organization as it is the employer's responsibility to ensure that the workplace is not a cause of stress and ill-health [13].

Unfortunately the Regional Council of Lombardy suffers from the persistence of corruption of politicians; the so called Clean Hands campaign (started in 1992) promised to eradicate corruption from Italian political life but nothing has really changed. Last April Piercamillo Davigo, a supreme court judge, who belonged to the pool of Milan prosecutors that led the Clean Hands corruption investigation that swept away an entire political class, in an interview in a daily [14] said that political corruption is now worse than it was in 1992 "The politicians haven't stopped stealing, they've stopped being ashamed of it." he said. "Now they just claim a right to do what they used to do secretly."

Clientelism occurs when politicians use public resource and particularly public offices as a mean of rewarding political supporters, providing individual benefits like jobs or interventions on behalf of a high profile career. As nepotism represents the best chance to find a job or to get a career advancement, public administrations need full transparency about government processes, rules, and decisions, but also financial, administrative, political and social accountability and integrity.

As a matter of fact in heavily favoritism oriented organizations the human resource management practices cannot work independently, so that career development is often a chance for people who do not have the right competence. Moreover, working under an incompetent person is a real stressing situation. Such management behavior is common everywhere in any organization but the problem is more widespread in public administrations and it causes a kind of circle of influence because those persons who are treated in a special way and considered closed to the top management can influence the management's decision and other people's behavior. Obviously, such preferences lead to conflict and affect the performance of the organization.

There are very few available studies on the relationship between corruption and wellbeing at work in public administrations, in fact data related to this topic are in short supply and are fragmented at both national and local levels. For this reason, it is extremely necessary and important to investigate this topic.

Building a coherent business strategy for wellness interventions is a fundamental starting point that means analysis of the costs of "ill-health" in terms of dealing with sickness, absence and reduced performance and productivity. The ANAC questionnaire should help to know how well the organization is doing and to understand what action should be taken to reach the wellness goal. Taking the evidence into account, the following conclusions about how best to foster wellbeing at work could be suggested. It may be possible to maximize overall organizational wellbeing using a fixed salary budget by paying staff fairly and ensuring good level of job-fit and skill-use as well as creating opportunities for staff to develop new skills. In terms of environmental clarity, sharing information and communicating well is shown to be positively associated with wellbeing as having clear goals is also related to job satisfaction and morale. Positive manager behavior towards staff is essential. As the workplace has a significant impact on people's health and wellbeing, poor management can lead to work-related ill health and high levels of sickness absence.

The results of the research revealed that corruption, favoritism and nepotism have a significant negative effect on job satisfaction, organizational commitment and human resource management practice and help to let people consider that wellness in the Regional Council of Lombardy is a real non-sense.

As individuals within smaller organizations tend to experience higher levels of wellbeing at work than those working for larger organizations, it should be easy to reach such a goal in the Regional Council of Lombardy. Due to the results of this research it is urgent to reduce corruption, favoritism and nepotism. In order to better assess the actual situation and to plan further activities the question is how the collection and evaluation of data connected with employees' wellness can be achieved since this appears to be very difficult in public administrations.

On the basis of the results of the survey carried out in the regional Council of Lombardy a set of recommendations could be applied to improve the organizational well-being. As the workplace well-being and performance are complementary and the presence of positive perceptions and feelings are associated with individual role and empowerment, the management should ensure the design of job roles as well as communication and objective setting in the organization and promote individual well-being. However, the time has come for a holistic approach in which all stakeholders work together for the common goal of a happy, and finally healthy and motivated workforce.

In organizations with intense preferential treatments that replace the principles of merit, skills, ability, competence and level of education in the recruitment or promotion of employees, the human resources cause a weak commitment, lack of confidence, decrease in job satisfaction and performance.

In conclusion a new sustainable model is necessary to achieve wellness in public administrations, because a bad system can't produce a healthy workplace. Further studies in similar complex organizations are recommended to stimulate debate around this theme in order to avoid that wellness in labor market could be considered only a false illusion.

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