

The 6 Elements That Drive Human Performance

A Framework for Reducing Organizational Friction

Executive Summary

Organizations today face a critical challenge: how to do better with less. In an era of layoffs, leaner teams, accelerated goals, and mounting pressure, working smarter not harder isn't just about maximizing efficiency and automation. It's about identifying and addressing the root causes of friction that drain performance, engagement, and results.

This white paper introduces the **6 Elements Framework**: a research-backed approach to understanding what drives human performance. Based on extensive research and validated through real-world application, these six elements reveal why some people thrive while others struggle, and the impact of personal friction on organizational success.

The 6 Elements are:

- Mindset - How you see yourself and the world
- Purpose - Connection to something bigger than yourself
- Relationships - The people who matter most and your daily interactions with them
- Career - Your work today and your trajectory moving forward
- Health - Physical and mental fitness
- Environment - Your surroundings and how you engage with them

These elements are the core to overall human potential and performance. However, each individual's blend of elements is as unique to them as their DNA sequence. As well, that blend evolves as individuals and their environments change over time.

When these elements are fulfilled and aligned to an individual's unique needs, individuals perform at their best. When gaps exist, personal friction emerges that then translates into operational friction. These friction points cost organizations in productivity, engagement, innovation, safety, and retention.

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Introduction: The Hidden Causes of Friction

Every organization experiences friction. It shows up as:

Operational Friction:

- Energy wasted overcoming obstacles
- Redundant work and communication
- Changes not being adopted
- Teams failing to collaborate effectively
- Safety incidents and near-misses
- Rising attrition and healthcare costs
- Decreased productivity and increased errors
- Confusion over shifting priorities and goals

Personal Friction:

- Time lost to confusion, frustration, and lack of direction
- Depleted energy from challenges at home
- Inability to be present due to job insecurity worries
- Interpersonal conflict that drains teams

Ultimately, the organizational costs associated with these friction points include decreased profitability due to rising costs, attrition (of both employees and customers), and diminished brand reputation.

While these friction points aren't new, traditional solutions treat these as separate, isolated problems that result in focused interventions. Most organizations address symptoms. Healthcare costs are up → launch a wellness program. Engagement is low → run an engagement survey and action planning cycle. Attrition is high → implement another manager training initiative. But without understanding the deeper "why" beneath the surface, these interventions become expensive band-aids to fix a chronic condition.

Our research reveals something different: these friction points are more interdependent than we think. Ultimately, they share root causes tied to gaps in the six fundamental elements that drive human performance.

When engagement surveys show low scores on "opportunities for advancement," the typical response is to create new training programs. But effectively assessing the 6 elements might reveal that the real issue is:

- Values misalignment between work and individual (Purpose + Career)

- Burnout and fear of learning something new preventing people from taking on more (Health + Mindset)
- Poor manager relationships blocking development conversations (Relationships + Career)

This whitepaper provides an overview of the 6 human elements that are the root cause of operational friction, connecting the dots to how gaps in them impact performance and results - and what steps leaders can take to reduce friction and increase flow.

The 6 Elements Framework: An Overview

Why These 6 Elements?

These elements emerged from decades of research across psychology, organizational behavior, public health, and human motivation and performance. They represent the fundamental domains that, when fulfilled, enable people to:

- Bring their best selves to work
- Navigate change and uncertainty with resilience
- Collaborate effectively with others
- Find meaning and motivation in their contributions
- Sustain high performance over time

How They Work Together

While we'll explore each element individually, it's critical to understand they don't operate in isolation. They're interconnected and human performance isn't one dimensional. It's dynamic and holistic. After all, we're not just workers. Our personal lives impact our professional lives and vice versa:

- A person's mindset shapes how they interpret challenges in their career
- The quality of relationships at work impacts health outcomes
- A sense of purpose influences career satisfaction
- Work and home environments affects stress levels and health

When one element is out of alignment, it creates ripple effects across the others. This is why piecemeal solutions often fail. They address one aspect or warning sign, while ignoring how it connects to the rest or what's at the root.

Element 1: Mindset

Definition

Mindset is how you see yourself and the world in good, bad, and neutral times. This element calibrates your levels of hope, continuous learning, resilience, and empowerment - regardless of what's going on around you.

Why It Matters

As leadership expert [Jevon Wooden](#) shares: "The first step...is awareness. If you're unaware of what you're saying within your mind, you're unaware of your triggers, your blind spots, and everything else."

Mindset isn't just positive thinking. It's the lens through which we interpret every experience:

- How we respond to setbacks and failures
- Whether we see challenges as threats or opportunities
- Our willingness to take risks and innovate
- How we handle uncertainty and change
- Our ability to learn and grow

Research on growth mindset¹ and psychological flexibility² suggests that people with adaptive mindsets are more likely to:

- Recover faster from setbacks
- Persist longer on difficult tasks
- Embrace challenges rather than avoid them
- View failure as learning rather than defeat
- Collaborate more effectively

How Mindset Creates or Reduces Operational Friction

When mindsets are maladaptive or limited:

- Fear-based thinking leads to risk aversion and basic compliance
- Fixed mindsets cause people to avoid challenges, hide mistakes, and resist feedback
- Scarcity mindsets drives competition over collaboration
- Catastrophizing drains energy and prevents problem-solving

¹ Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Random House.

² Kashdan, T. B., & Rottenberg, J. (2010). Psychological flexibility as a fundamental aspect of health. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30(7), 865–878

This can create the following operational friction:

- Teams operating from fear are less innovative and take fewer calculated risks
- Fixed mindset cultures resist change and struggle with adaptation
- Reactive rather than responsive decision-making leads to poor outcomes
- Those stuck in a cycle of hopelessness rather than hopefulness tend to have lower rates of performance and reduced organizational commitment³

Friction Reduced: When individuals develop adaptive mindsets:

- They give themselves grace to fail forward and learn
- They're willing to try new approaches and pivot when needed
- They ask for help rather than struggling in silence
- They stay flexible amid uncertainty

As [Jevon](#) noted: "If you set a goal that stretches you, you can't really expect to hit it on the first shot. That's irrational thinking. But it's emotional thinking. We want to perform at a high level. So, we really have to be able to give ourselves that grace to say, 'If this does not go well, what can I do? What's next?'"

The Mindset Gap in Action: A Case Study of the Hidden Drag on Execution

A mid-level operations team responsible for process optimization consistently missed quarterly improvement targets despite stable staffing and clear priorities. While individual capability was strong, post-project reviews showed teams avoided proposing bold solutions after early setbacks. Instead, they defaulted to low-risk, incremental changes that required multiple approval layers. Over two quarters, cycle times increased by 18%, decision latency rose by 22%, and manager escalation requests doubled. The root cause wasn't skill or effort; it was fear of failure from trying something that didn't ultimately work out.

3 Leadership Strategies to Reduce Mindset Friction

Focus on what's controllable⁴

Research on psychological empowerment shows that individuals who focus on what they can influence (rather than external constraints) demonstrate higher persistence, faster recovery from setbacks, and stronger performance under pressure.

³ Luthans, F. (2002). Positive organizational behavior: Developing and managing psychological strengths. *Academy of Management Executive*, 16(1), 57–72.

⁴ Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman.

Reframe failure as learning, not loss.⁵

Growth mindset research consistently finds that teams who treat failure as “data” and opportunities for learning surface issues earlier, iterate faster, and outperform peers on innovation and adaptability metrics.

Create awareness before accountability.⁶

Studies on psychological flexibility show that pausing to notice internal narratives before responding reduces reactive decision-making and improves judgment quality (especially in high-stakes or uncertain environments).

Element 2: Purpose

Definition

Purpose is the feeling of contributing to something meaningful, whether that be through work, hobbies, or personal roles. This element helps individuals align their daily actions to personal values, alongside professional goals and missions.

Why It Matters

As a learning designer and professional coach, [Marc Stoecker](#) explained: "People want more than just clocking in on a nine-to-five job. They want to be able to connect to work that moves them and motivates them and feels like they're contributing something bigger than themselves."

Purpose isn't about finding your one true calling. It's about creating meaning, a sense of direction in how you operate, and goals tied to what you do. A powerful example is of a hospital janitor who saw his role as saving patients' lives. He understood that keeping the hospital clean and rooms disinfected prevented infections that could kill patients. He even moved paintings between rooms on the long-term care ward, thinking patients in comas might benefit from different scenery.⁷ Purpose isn't something that's assigned to a role; it's what an individual ascribes to their role. Anyone can create meaning in

⁵ Cannon, M. D., & Edmondson, A. C. (2005). Failing to learn and learning to fail (intelligently): How great organizations put failure to work to innovate and improve. *Long Range Planning*, 38(3), 299–319.

⁶ Bond, F. W., & Bunce, D. (2003). The role of acceptance and job control in mental health, job satisfaction, and work performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88(6), 1057–1067

⁷ Salovey, P. (Host). (2022, February 27). *Crafting your job into a calling* (No. 25) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Yale Talk: Conversations with President Peter Salovey*. Yale University.

their role in alignment with their own values and contributions.

While purpose, engagement, and belonging are related, they are distinct. Purpose explains *why* an individual and their work matters, while engagement and belonging reflect *how* people feel once that meaning is clear and shared. A sense of purpose enhances the strength and durability of engagement and belonging, even when things are hard. People with a fulfilled sense of purpose may experience:

- Alignment of tasks and roles with personal values
- Recognition and sense of contribution for things beyond themselves
- Feeling like they matter
- Ability to connect the dots between their daily tasks and broader impact

People with a strong sense of purpose live and work differently: longitudinal research indicates that those with a strong sense of purpose have significantly better physical health, healthier behaviors, and markedly lower risks of depression, sleep problems, and premature mortality.⁸ At work, employees who have a clear “why” for their work trend towards higher engagement, resilience, and commitment, with lower burnout rates and absences.⁹ Research on mattering adds that when people feel both valued and able to add value, they become more adaptable, more connected, and more protected against burnout, depression, and even health risks over their lifespan.¹⁰ When employees feel like they matter at work, they consistently have stronger retention, job satisfaction, and higher rates of promotion¹¹.

How Purpose Creates or Reduces Operational Friction

When purpose is lacking, it can create the following personal friction:

- Lack of meaning leads to disengagement and “quiet quitting”
- Misaligned values create internal conflict and dissatisfaction

⁸ Alimujiang, A., Wiensch, A., Boss, J., Fleischer, N. L., Mondul, A. M., McLean, K., Mukherjee, B., & Pearce, C. L. (2019). Association between life purpose and mortality among US adults older than 50 years. *JAMA Network Open*, 2(5), e194270.

⁹ Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz, B. (1997). Jobs, careers, and callings: People’s relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31(1), 21–33.

¹⁰ Prilleltensky I., Prilleltensky O. (2021). *How People Matter: Why it Affects Health, Happiness, Love, Work, and Society*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Reece, A., Yaden, D. B., Kellerman, G. R., Robichaux, A., Goldstein, R., & Schwartz, B. (2020). Mattering is an indicator of organizational health and employee success. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 15(2), 228–248.

- Disconnection from impact makes work feel pointless and draining
- Unclear "why" removes motivation during challenging times

This creates operational friction in the forms of:

- Disengaged employees miss opportunities for innovation
- High turnover as people seek meaning elsewhere
- Resistance to organizational changes that don't connect to a clear purpose
- Reduced discretionary effort causing people to do the minimum required

When people have a strong sense of purpose:

- They go above and beyond without being asked
- They find creative solutions to problems
- They weather setbacks with greater resilience
- They become change ambassadors who positively influence others

The Purpose Gap in Action: The Costs When Work Loses Its “Why”

A customer support team with stable staffing and competitive pay began seeing early warning signs of attrition: voluntary turnover rose from 12% to 21% year-over-year, absenteeism increased by 17%, and internal engagement scores declined despite no change in workload or leadership. Interviews revealed that employees couldn't connect their daily work (handling tickets, resolving issues, and responding to escalations) to any broader impact beyond closing cases. While the team felt connected and reasonably engaged day to day, the absence of purpose eroded resilience over time, leading to burnout, reduced discretionary effort, and increased replacement costs due to lack of meaning rather than other forms of dissatisfaction.

3 Leadership Strategies to Reduce Purpose Friction

Connect Daily Work to Larger Impact: When leaders explicitly link individual tasks, even routine ones, to organizational outcomes and broader societal impact (e.g. sharing the story of a teacher who utilized the custom swag your team designed and printed to create a community with their students), it helps employees reframe work as meaningful which can boost engagement, persistence, and performance¹².

Recognize Contribution, Beyond Results: While outcomes represent the tangible value that employees add to the business, contribution is more than that. To help employees feel like they matter, share specifics of how they are valued and add value to their team, to customers, and to the organization. What strengths, expertise, and skills

¹² Grant, A. (2013). *Give and take: A revolutionary approach to success*. Viking.

do they display? How have they helped colleagues? Where did their input create an opportunity or highlight something to address?

Align the “Why” to Personal Values: Change is emotional. While change communication focuses on business rationale and impacts, ultimately change adoption requires personal choice. When speaking to the rationale behind a change, provide context and clarity about what it means for employees. How might this change create more security, growth, agency, sense of belonging, etc. for employees? How might not changing limit these things?

Element 3: Relationships

Definition

Relationships include the people who matter most to you and those you interact with daily: at work, at home, and in your community. This element calibrates how much you prioritize and engage in quality interactions with your professional and personal network.

Why It Matters

As leadership coach, [Lisa Sansom](#) emphasizes: "We work with other people. The whole reason organizations put us into teams is so we can do more, do it better, and do it together. Our world is complex. We simply cannot do big, hard things alone."

Relationships are the hidden infrastructure of thriving organizations:

- They enable collaboration and knowledge sharing
- They build trust that accelerates decision-making
- They provide support during stress and change
- They accelerate buy-in and performance through emotional contagion

Research highlights that relationships, both at work and at home, create the core operating system for human performance. The longest longitudinal study of human happiness and health found that having a close relationship at age 50 is the strongest predictor of health and life satisfaction at 80, even stronger than cholesterol levels, income, or smoking status.¹³ Furthermore, close friendships change how we see

¹³ Waldinger, R. J., & Schulz, M. S. (2023). *The good life: Lessons from the world's longest scientific study of happiness*. Simon & Schuster.

challenges, making them seem easier to navigate¹⁴. And emotions (positive or negative) ripple through three degrees of connection - whether that be friendships or leadership layers.¹⁵ Supportive relationships and close friendships at work are one of the strongest predictors of employee engagement and performance,¹⁶ whereas; a lack of close supportive relationships outside of work can increase stress load while decreasing energetic capacity.

How Relationships Create or Reduce Operational Friction

Poor relationships and/or lack of relationships can create the following friction points.

Personal friction points:

- Interpersonal conflict drains energy and focus
- Lack of support leads to isolation and overwhelm
- Toxic relationships trigger stress responses that affect health
- Poor communication causes misunderstandings and wasted effort

Resulting in operational friction points:

- Knowledge is kept in silos, forcing people to reinvent solutions
- Negative emotions and venting spreads, impacting trust in strategy
- Conflict escalates rather than getting resolved quickly
- Turnover increases as "people leave managers, not companies"
- Lack of support at home reduces capacity for decision making and sustained performance over time

When relationships are strong, friction is reduced:

- Information flows freely, reducing duplication
- People give each other benefit of the doubt
- Difficult conversations happen with relationships intact
- Innovation happens as diverse perspectives combine
- People have the brain capacity to function and perform at a high capacity

¹⁴ Schnall, S., Harber, K. D., Stefanucci, J. K., & Proffitt, D. R. (2008). Social support and the perception of geographical slant. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 44*(5), 1246–1255

¹⁵ Christakis, N. A., & Fowler, J. H. (2007). The spread of obesity in a large social network over 32 years. *New England Journal of Medicine, 357*(4), 370–379.

¹⁶ Harter, J., Schmidt, F. L., Agrawal, S., Plowman, S. K., & Blue, A. (2022). *The relationship between engagement at work and organizational outcomes (2022 Q12® meta-analysis, 11th edition)*. Gallup.

Reducing friction doesn't require significant resources. Often, it only requires leaders to connect with the person beyond the metrics. As [Lisa](#) shared: "When leaders take a guess at somebody's emotional experience and get it wrong, it doesn't matter. The employee is happy that you tried, that you're trying to pick up on something in them, and that they're feeling seen."

The Relationship Gap in Action: When Isolation Becomes a Safety Incident

A skilled manufacturing technician recently moved to an overnight shift after a divorce. Being new to this shift and staffing capacity being leaner in these hours, he had not yet established peer relationships. On the date of his former wedding anniversary, the tech was distracted and sluggish. During a routine maintenance task, he was deep in thought and accidentally skipped a required lockout verification step, resulting in a minor injury and an immediate line shutdown. The incident halted production for six hours and triggered medical and compliance costs, totaling approximately \$180,000. Post-incident reviews found no gaps in training or procedures. The contributing factor was the technician's sustained isolation and lack of support, thus increasing his stress and emotional load, while reducing his focus.

3 Leadership Strategies to Reduce Relationship Friction

Be Present in Interactions: The foundation of strong relationships is simply being present. If you are going to have a meeting with somebody, be there. Remove all devices and distractions, if possible. The mere act of a phone being present on a desk, even if it's upside down and turned off, can change the quality of connection and conversation.¹⁷

Model What You Want to Spread: Since emotions spread through three degrees of separation, be mindful of how you are showing up emotionally. What you display impacts not only your direct reports, but two further layers connected to them. Model the relationships and emotions you'd like to see in others. That doesn't mean inauthenticity. In fact, vulnerability can sometimes go a long way.

Connect at the Human Level: The manager-employee relationship is critical. While managers understandably spend most time during check-ins on project/task updates, relationships are built when the person feels cared for, validated, and understood. Get to know the person outside of work, proactively check in to see how they are doing outside of schedule 1:1s, and let them know you are thinking about them.

¹⁷ Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2013). Can you connect with me now? How the presence of mobile communication technology influences face-to-face conversation quality. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 30(3), 237–246.

Element 4: Career

Definition

Career is the work you do, the professional accomplishments you achieve, and how well your roles align with your current goals and future growth plans. This element assesses how much your work provides alignment (tools, recognition, growth) with your current and future professional goals.

Why It Matters

Of all 6 elements, this one likely requires the least explanation of its relevancy to operational results. After all, the function of a career is to provide a win-win opportunity for the individual and the organization that employs them through exchange of value. However, how we define, assess, and reward careers today is often limited to performance metrics and financial compensation. The career element is broader than those factors and encompasses two critical dimensions:

1. Fulfillment in current role - Do I find my day-to-day work satisfying?
2. Fulfillment in career path - Does my trajectory align with where I want to go?

For some individuals, both of these items are equally important. For others, one might take precedence. Also, these are dynamic and fluid constructs. While a young professional might be focused on their career path, someone close to retirement may orient their career element entirely towards fulfillment in their current role.

While organizations focus on career enhancement through pathing, advancement, and professional development, often the focus stops there. The tendency can also be to solve career dissatisfaction or misalignment with additional monetary compensation or promotions. While that may motivate some individuals, it doesn't motivate others. As well, it contains an unsustainable cycle of increasing expectations, particularly as organizations become flatter, and compensation is capped. Fulfillment of the career element is more than the financial and status-based rewards. When individuals speak to a lack of advancement or job satisfaction, there are often a myriad of factors under the surface:

- Ability to leverage strengths daily
- Recognition and acknowledgment of expertise

- Clarity on expectations and success metrics
- Adequate tools and systems to perform the job well
- Opportunities to learn and grow
- Alignment with future goals

Research consistently identifies strong organizational impacts when these items are present:

- 23% higher job satisfaction in employees who regularly utilize their top strengths¹⁸
- 21% boost in productivity with role clarity and success metrics¹⁹
- 12% greater discretionary effort connected to stretch projects and skill development²⁰

How the Career Element Creates or Reduces Operational Friction

When career misalignment or frustration occurs, it creates personal friction:

- Lack of clarity on role expectations causes confusion and wasted effort
- Values misalignment creates internal conflict and dissatisfaction
- Unused strengths lead to boredom and feeling underutilized
- No growth path results in stagnation and search for external opportunities
- Unfair compensation triggers insecurity and resentment

Which results in operational friction including:

- Turnover that increases costs while disrupting team dynamics and institutional knowledge
- Role-fit misalignment increasing time spent on performance management
- Disengaged employees who don't solve problems proactively
- Internal competition over individual metrics that undermines collaboration
- Lack of succession planning
- Inability to attract top talent due to reputation issues

When the career element is fulfilled, reduced friction is observed:

¹⁸ Müller, L., & Ruch, W. (2020). Character strengths: Person–environment fit and relationships with job and life satisfaction. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, Article 1582.

¹⁹ Čulibrk, J., Delić, M., Mitrović, S., & Čulibrk, D. (2018). Job satisfaction, organizational commitment and job involvement: The mediating role of job involvement. *Frontiers in Psychology, 9*, Article 132

²⁰ Avey, J. B., Reichard, R. J., Luthans, F., & Mhatre, K. H. (2011). Meta-analysis of the impact of positive psychological capital on employee attitudes, behaviors, and performance. *Human Resource Development Quarterly, 22*(2), 127–152

- Ownership of outcomes rather than just tasks
- Continuous learning through new skillsets and project contributions
- Enhanced subject matter expertise due to increased tenure
- Knowledge sharing, mentoring, and leadership pipeline
- Lengthened employee tenure, resulting in deeper institutional knowledge and expertise
- Advocacy and ambassadorship through job referrals

The Career Gap in Action: When Strengths are Underutilized

A SAAS technology company aimed to launch a new feature set. One of their senior product managers with two years of strong performance had prior experience from a former company that aligned with this feature set. Despite proactively offering to lead or support the initiative, a peer with greater tenure but less relevant expertise was selected. Over the next six months, her discretionary effort declined as her strengths went underutilized, resulting in limited input into the project. Due to the inability to leverage the relationships and knowledge that she had, the feature launched one quarter later than it would have with her involvement. Her frustration caused her to quietly look for another role, and she ultimately exited to the surprise of her functional leader, resulting in a 12-week vacancy. Her departure cost the business approximately \$300,000 in recruitment and ramp costs, alongside the lost performance and domain expertise that slowed down go to market initiatives.

3 Leadership Strategies to Reduce Career Friction

Uncover Hidden Strengths: Employees often have capabilities that are invisible, underutilized, or still emerging - especially when they don't directly apply to role scope. During coaching conversations and de-briefs/reviews, ask questions like the following to surface and activate hidden strengths: "What strengths or skills do you wish you could use more often?" "What experience or skills outside of your daily job do you wish you could apply here?" Answers to these questions can help align talent to business needs and unlock discretionary effort.

Reframe Advancement Beyond Titles: Career fulfillment doesn't require a promotional chase. Shifting conversations from "What title do you want next?" to "What skills and relationships do you want to build?" reduces friction and opens more paths to growth. Leaders can ask questions like "What skills would you be excited to learn or use more often?", "Who would you like to collaborate with or learn from?", and "What would a fulfilling role look like for you day to day?"

Regularly Calibrate Expectations: When leaders schedule brief check-ins to align on “what good looks like,” clarify priorities, and ask questions like: “What’s working? What’s unclear? What feels misaligned?” They enable their employees to spend mental energy on contribution rather than mindreading. Regular feedback that’s treated as a calibration, not subjective judgment, is one of the simplest ways to reduce career friction. It keeps expectations visible, negotiable, and shared, thereby reducing surprises that may hinder growth.

Element 5: Health

Definition

When organizations focus on wellness or well-being, often Health is the primary focal point. We define Health as how fit and healthy you feel in mind and body. This element calibrates how essential healthy habits are for you so that you can operate with clarity, energy, and emotional stability throughout the day.

Why It Matters

Health isn't just about avoiding illnesses. It's about having the energy, resilience, and mental clarity to perform at your best:

- Physical health impacts energy levels, immune function, and ability to handle stress, thus directly impacting absenteeism and safety²¹
- Mental health affects focus, decision-making, creativity, and emotional regulation²²
- Sleep quality influences memory, learning, and mood²³
- Nutrition determines cellular function and disease prevention, and healthy diets even link to 20%+ gains in productivity through sustained energy and reduced fatigue²⁴

²¹ Taylor, I., & McClean, S. (2024). The efficacy of physical activity to improve the mental wellbeing of workers in high stress occupations: A systematic review. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 71, Article 102592.

²² Díaz-Franco, A., & Álvarez-González, E. (2023). Executive functions and public health: A narrative review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(22), Article 7094.

²³ Hyndych, A., El-Abassi, R., & Mader, E. C., Jr. (2025). The role of sleep and the effects of sleep loss on cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes. *Cureus*, 17(5), Article e84232.

²⁴ Kurniawan, A., & Sari, D. P. (2024). *The relationship of a healthy diet with the level of productivity among office workers* [Preprint]. ResearchGate.

- Movement enhances cognitive function and stress management²⁵

When individuals have the proper level of nourishment, restoration, and movement aligned with their unique needs, a sense of vitality emerges. When employees have high levels of vitality, they demonstrate 21% higher engagement, 17% lower absenteeism, and are more likely to sustain resilience and productivity in demanding environments.²⁶

How the Health Element Creates or Reduces Operational Friction

Gaps in physical and mental fitness show up in both personal and organizational impacts.

At the personal level, gaps in health can create the following friction points:

- Low energy reduces capacity to handle normal workload
- Chronic stress impairs decision-making and triggers reactive behaviors
- Poor sleep affects memory, emotional regulation, and learning
- Inflammation caused by diet and stress creates brain fog
- Physical pain distracts from focus and engagement

These can lead to operational friction points:

- Rising healthcare costs strain organizational budgets
- Absenteeism and sick days disrupt team operations
- Presenteeism (being at work but not fully functional) reduces productivity
- Safety incidents increase when people are fatigued or mentally compromised
- Turnover rises as people burn out and seek better work-life balance

When health is not only prioritized but fulfilled, friction points are reduced because:

- People have consistent energy throughout the day
- Stress is handled more effectively
- Capacity is increased for executive functioning to make better decisions and engage in creative problem solving
- Sick time and illness are reduced

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/389085258_The_relationship_of_a_healthy_diet_with_the_level_of_productivity_among_office_workers

²⁵ Grycuk, K., Kaliszewska-Czeremuga, M., & Jankowiak, A. (2024). Moving to improve mental health - The role of exercise in cognitive functioning. *Frontiers in Psychology, 15*, Article 1321372

²⁶ Donaldson, S. I., van Zyl, L. E., Donaldson, S. I., & van Zyl, L. E. (2022). PERMA+4: A framework for work-related wellbeing, performance and positive organizational psychology 2.0. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, Article 817244.

- Burnout is less prevalent during times of change and uncertainty

The Health Element Gap in Action

A high-performing project team in a fast-paced services organization began missing delivery timelines during a sustained period of growth, despite stable headcounts and clear priorities. Employees reported long hours, inconsistent sleep, and elevated stress, but continued showing up. The team's commitment to the work and company masked the physical and mental depletion, taking its toll on the team and the work. Over two quarters, costly decision errors triggered multiple downstream delays, increasing rework rates by 14%, while decreasing customer satisfaction scores by 10%. As long hours continued, absenteeism increased by 19%, further delaying work and taxing an already stretched team.

3 Leadership Strategies to Reduce Health Friction

Make Check-ins Mobile: Invite employees to take 1:1s with you as walk-and-talks (in person or phone-based) to integrate movement into the workday, rather than asking employees to identify times where they can take a break. Moving while talking can improve cognitive function, reduce stress, and support sustained energy without adding time to the schedule.

Normalize Recovery, Not Only Output: Leaders can explicitly model, build in, and reinforce healthy rhythms as part of a team's operating system in order to create sustainable, high-performance work. Some mechanisms that leaders can use are instituting and protecting focus time, setting "off limits" hours for after-hours messaging, and recognizing/rewarding sustainable pacing that drives results.

Create Health Calibration Checkpoints in Regular Conversations:

Incorporate simple, non-invasive questions into existing check-ins (e.g., "What's draining your energy right now?" "Where are you feeling most clear and focused?") to surface early health friction before it shows up as errors, absenteeism, or turnover.

Element 6: Environment

Definition

The Environment element focuses on your surroundings and how you engage with them. This element calibrates how well your home and work environment meet your

basic needs to help you feel secure, and how your physical and organizational surroundings enable you to be at your best in a way that aligns with your unique needs.

Our definition of environment encapsulates the following components both at work and at home:

- Physical space - workspace, temperature, noise and distractions, ergonomics, physical safety
- Psychological space - trust, culture, ability to show up authentically, psychological safety
- Sense of security - financial security, food security, job stability

Why It Matters

While a person's potential is ultimately internalized, environmental, situational, and systemic factors impact that ability for that potential to be transformed into performance. The environment you work and live in can either amplify or diminish your ability to bring out your best:

- An environment that doesn't meet an individual's needs can create disruption or dysfunction that can impair performance toxic
- A physically uncomfortable space creates distraction and reduces attention
- Thoughts of returning to an unpredictable or unsafe environment increases anxiety and reduces focus
- Environments that are psychologically safe and physically comfortable enable innovation and deep work

While all of these environmental factors are important, even improving one can have significant impacts at work. Research suggests that optimizing even one of these components can boost productivity by 10%+, reduce error rates by 20%,²⁷ and reduce stress while increasing brainpower. As environmental preferences and needs vary from person to person, simply providing individuals the opportunity to personalize their spaces can enhance feelings of ownership that lifts engagement and organizational commitment by more than 20%.²⁸

²⁷ Srivastava, C., Murnane, E. L., Billington, S. L., & Samuelson, H. W. (2024). Impact of workplace design on perceived work performance and well-being: Home versus office. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 95, Article 102274.

²⁸ Chen, K.-J., & Lin, C.-P. (2024). Exploring the influence of workplace environment on job performance: A socio-cognitive perspective. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence*, 35(15-16), 1816–1832.

Ultimately, it's important to remember that what works for one person's environmental needs might not be the same for another person. Even something as routine as temperature can have extremely subjective variance from person to person depending on their physical needs. For instance, an employee on blood thinners may need a warmer environment to feel comfortable in; whereas an employee going through menopause may need to constantly regulate the temperature. Research in person-environment fit indicates that stress increases when there's a mismatch between what employees need and what their work environment supplies.²⁹

How the Environment Element Creates or Reduces Operational Friction

When home and/or work environments don't meet individuals' needs, the following personal friction occurs:

- Lack of psychological safety causes people to hide mistakes and avoid risks
- Physical discomfort (noise, poor ergonomics, inadequate tools) creates distraction
- Financial insecurity triggers fear-based behaviors and reduces creativity
- Uncertainty about job stability drains mental energy
- Poor fit between personal needs and environmental reality causes stress

This leads to operational friction including:

- Ideas don't surface in cultures without psychological safety
- Critical errors or issues can be hidden out of fear resulting in increased safety incidents
- Poor ergonomics can lead to repetitive strain injuries, absenteeism, and workers' compensation claims
- Excess background noise creates distractions requiring repetition of messages and decreased task focus, wasting time daily
- Salary or job uncertainty during restructuring triggers passive job searching and higher turnover

When environments are attuned to people's needs:

- They feel safe to speak up, challenge ideas, and innovate
- They have what they need to do their jobs effectively
- They can flexibly adapt their environment to meet needs for creative or deep work

²⁹ Andela, M., & van der Doef, M. (2019). A comprehensive assessment of the person-environment fit dimensions and their relationships with work-related outcomes. *Journal of Career Development, 46*(5), 567–582.

- They are more focused on tasks at hand rather than being preoccupied with concerns
- They perform at higher levels sustainably

Environment in Action: When Space Design Disrupts Focus and Flow

A senior engineer who had been highly productive working remotely was required to return to the office four days a week under a new RTO mandate. The office used a hoteling, open-plan design with no dedicated desks, limited quiet zones, and inconsistent access to natural light. Each morning, the engineer arrived early to secure a low-noise seat near a window to support concentration and energy, which often took them 20 minutes or more to find a desired spot. The stress of not having a dedicated spot and being unable to personalize their space created stress that delayed task initiation and disrupted their ability to create deep focus. Over several months, this translated into slower feature development, increased context switching, and a measurable decline in output velocity.

3 Leadership Strategies to Reduce Environment Friction

Identify Environmental Needs: Engage in conversation with employees to find out what type of environment allows them to do their best work. Ask questions, or even enable whitespace exercises to dream up an ideal environment. Identify patterns and look for opportunities to make small changes and calibrate environmental impact.

Create Micro-Flexibility and Customization: Designate quiet areas, focus spaces, or even creative spaces so that employees don't need to spend energy securing a workable environment for them. Where possible, allow employees to personalize seating, lighting, technology, noise, decorations, or even schedules. One mechanism to do this is to provide portable hoteling kits.

Make Psychological Safety the Norm: Normalize psychological safety by modeling it and creating conditions that make it easier for others to model. This can include taking ownership for mistakes, vulnerably sharing what you don't know and need the team's help to figure out, creating space for all team members (especially quieter ones) to share their input, and/or validating and sharing appreciation when employees surface concerns or mission critical issues.

The Interconnected Nature of the 6 Elements

While each of these elements has been explored independently, one theme emerges repeatedly in the research: these elements don't operate in isolation. At all times, we are each a blend of these elements. They combine together to impact how we show up for

ourselves and others, and that blend changes as we change, our work changes, and our home environments change.

When Mindset and Career Combine: A growth mindset enables people to see setbacks as learning opportunities rather than failures. This creates resilience which helps them persist even through career challenges. An individual with a growth mindset is more likely to take on stretch assignments, new responsibilities, or even new roles without previous experience - and to continue to work through early stumbling blocks or challenges.

Our Health and Environment Affects Everything Else: Our physical health and mental health determines our energy levels, commitment levels, and focus levels for all activities, relationships, and even decision making. When our environments impact our health due to decreased nutrition, increased survival mechanisms, lack of sleep, or constant disruption, it takes a toll on our health and other aspects of our work and life.

Ultimately, just as interventions to “fix” an outcome or symptom miss the root causes, it’s important to design strategies and solutions that take all elements into consideration and don’t merely close gaps of a single element. If a wellness initiative aimed towards physical movement and sleep doesn’t address the environment that requires someone to be at their desk for 12 hours a day, it won’t succeed. Likewise, mindset techniques that ignore relationship dynamics at home and work can miss critical context.

Conclusion: From Friction to Flow

The challenges organizations face today, doing better with less, navigating constant change, retaining talent, driving innovation, all share a common thread: they require employees to consistently and sustainably perform at their best when it’s harder than ever to do that.

Employees perform at their best when their 6 elements are aligned to their needs holistically: when they have an adaptive mindset, clear sense of purpose, strong relationships, fulfilling career, good health, and supportive environment.

The organizations that thrive in the coming years won't be those with the biggest budgets or most elaborate programs. They'll be the ones that understand human performance holistically, diagnose root causes systematically, and empower people to help themselves effectively.

Research already supports this. Companies that intentionally focus on these elements in an increasingly competitive market are winning - beyond awards for great places to

work. Since 2021, companies that have focused on enhancing employee purpose, job satisfaction, happiness, and stress reduction have outperformed the stock market. They've had higher earnings to asset ratios and stronger market valuations, highlighting that closing the gap in these elements is a leading predictor of financial success.³⁰

Thus, focusing on, prioritizing, and assessing these elements is not a nice to have HR initiative. It's a corporate imperative in increasingly competitive markets.

From Framework to Action: Reducing Friction Systematically With Shiftwell's One Size Fits One Approach

Understanding the 6 Elements is just the beginning. Assessing, activating, and closing the gaps of these elements is what creates operational momentum. Unlike traditional engagement surveys that focus on how people currently feel, the Shiftwell solution includes a proprietary assessment to identify each employee's unique elemental blend and reveal the following:

- Where gaps exist between what people need and what's fulfilled
- Patterns across the organization that signal systemic friction points
- Individual profiles that enable personalized support
- Root causes beneath surface-level symptoms

Our solution moves beyond insights to action. While we provide team and organizational insights to leaders to create larger scale change, ultimately we recognize that reducing operational friction requires participation from the whole operation. We put the data and empowerment directly back into the hands of those who can most impact employee performance and potential: the employees themselves. Instead of providing a boiler plate report, we generate customized insights that are unique to each person's comprehensive results, creating a tailored report per assessment taker.

We also go beyond the insights to create sustainable and scalable action, utilizing AI partnership to reduce the obstacles that prevent behavioral change. Our trained AI coach, Clara, serves as an on demand partner in each employee's pocket - partnering to create real-time, personalized action plans based on current needs. Clara then supports

³⁰ De Neve, J.-E., Bellet, C., & Ward, G. (2024). *Workplace wellbeing and firm performance* (Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre Working Paper No. 2304). <https://wellbeing.hmc.ox.ac.uk/papers/2304-workplace-wellbeing-and-firm-performance/>

each employee to set new habits through goals and action steps, tracking progress to create accountability.

Ultimately, the Shiftwell solution:

- Partners with each employee to help them help themselves to more consistently be at their best
- Provides HR and leadership with the insights they need to reduce organizational friction, while freeing them up to do the work only they can do
- Provides everyone in your organization with the resources that provide the investment and support (without adding more headcount) to help them be at their best in work and in life.

Take Action Today

Visit shiftwell.ai to learn more about how we help organizations systematically reduce friction and unlock potential at scale.

Book a demo:

See Clara in action and discover how we can customize our approach for your organization. Schedule a conversation at info@shiftwell.ai

Connect with our founders:

- **Jordana Cole** (Co-Founder & Chief Product & Research Officer) on [LinkedIn](#)
- **Elena Agaragimova** (Co-Founder & CEO) on [LinkedIn](#)
- **Jon Conradt** (Co-Founder & CTO) on [LinkedIn](#)

The journey to better performance and less friction starts with a single step. Make yours today.

About Shiftwell - Shiftwell helps organizations activate human potential at scale by combining research, people expertise, and AI. We provide assessment, insights, and tools that enable your entire ecosystem to close the gaps in what they need to be at their best every day. Unlike traditional approaches that burden HR teams and managers with "fixing" people's problems, we put insights and tools directly into each person's hands through Clara, their personal AI partner. This approach reduces both operational friction (less burden on teams) and personal friction (people get support when they need it). Our clients are forward-thinking organizations that invest in their people, have a vision for getting ahead of the curve, and are committed to creating environments where everyone can thrive.

Learn more at shiftwell.ai

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