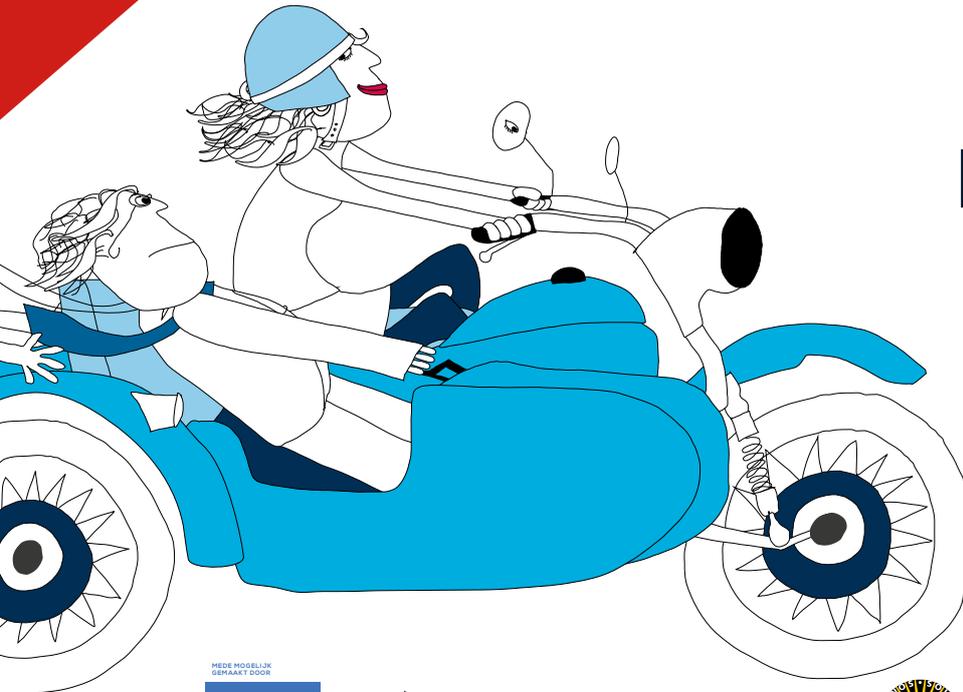


Summary

A research project about Dutch companies' commitment to the wellbeing of their employees

Agape: people driving the company



Anne van der Put
Harry Hummels
Thomas Martens

MEDE MOGELIJK
GEMAAKT DOOR

GOLDSCHMIDING
FOUNDATION
MENS • WERK • ECONOMIE



Maastricht University



Utrecht University



This publication is published under the following creative commons conditions:

You are free to copy, distribute and transmit this work.

When doing so you:

- must attribute the work in the manner specified by the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work)
- may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

With the understanding that:

Waiver: Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.

Public Domain: Where the work or any of its elements is in the public domain under applicable law, that status is in no way affected by the license.

Colophon

Reference to the full publication: Anne van der Put, Harry Hummels en Thomas Martens (2021). Agape: people driving the company. Maastricht University / Utrecht University, 28 February 2021.

Illustrations: Marjorie Specht, Ontwerpkantoor Vonk Specht. Graphic design: Coers & Roest | grafische producties BV

Other Rights

In no way are any of the following rights affected by the license:

- Your fair dealing or fair use rights, or other applicable copyright exceptions and limitations;
- The author's moral rights;
- Rights other persons may have either in the work itself or in how the work is used, such as publicity or privacy rights.

Notice

For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is with a link to [this](#) web page.

Introduction

Agape: people driving the company is a research project about Dutch companies' commitment to the wellbeing of their employees. This is the essence of 'agape'. In the workforce, employees are essential to operational processes, but they are also valued colleagues, involved parents, good friends. In short: they are themselves. People find meaning in their work. They can put their talents to use, develop themselves professionally, work together for positive results while simultaneously benefiting from the regularity of work that gives structure to their lives. Receiving an income for their services is important for supporting themselves and maintaining their lifestyles. Work can, however, sometimes lead to stress. Especially in corona times, work is not only a positive factor but can be a burden too. In this context, certain questions arise:

- Are managers concerned with their employees' wellbeing?
- How is the situation at home?
- Can employees plan their work independently?
- In what ways does informal communication take form?
- Can employees develop themselves professionally in their work and future careers?
- How is teamwork getting on – now that meeting up in person is limited or impossible?
- Are colleagues considerate of each other?
- Are employees nervous about job security?

The answers to these questions provide insight into how concerned employers are for the wellbeing of their employees and how committed they are to positively contribute to that wellbeing.

The full report explains the meaning of agape in relation to work, followed by a description of the characteristics of the respondents and the measurement of agape. The report then continues to provide an overview of the results of the survey – both before and during the pandemic. The report draws conclusions about businesses' needs for additional insight and instruments to promote and implement agape in the future. Throughout the report we describe differences between members of the board of directors – or senior managers – and works council representatives. The report's appendix includes a methodological explanation.

Research participants

The research was conducted in 3,473 Dutch companies. These are all commercial businesses in the Netherlands with at least 100 employees. Of these businesses, 589 participated in the research, which is 16.7 percent of the population. For each business, the general director and the chairperson of the works council received a written invitation to participate. In total, we received 737 (partially) completed questionnaires. This a response rate of 10.5 percent. The participating

businesses can be divided into 4 categories based on how many employees they have:

Business size	number of employees	Share in number of participants
Medium	100-249	53 %
Medium large	250-499	21 %
Large	500-999	11 %
Extra-large	1000+	15 %

Table 1 Division of response group based on business size

The response of works council representatives weighed in at 278, while 337 of the respondents were members or representatives of the board of directors – 195 of which were HR-managers. Of all respondents, 35 percent were women and 65 percent were men.

Agape and wellbeing of employees

Work offers employees the opportunity to apply themselves in a meaningful way within an organized framework. The purpose and meaning of work are manifested in at least five levels:

- Giving meaning to individual needs and the chance for continued personal development
- Quality and organization of work
- The workplace as a place for social encounters and interaction
- Collaboration to jointly produce products and services
- Involvement in work-related decision-making

The survey aimed to gain insight into ways Dutch businesses have created a context for employees to experience wellbeing.

When we mention agape and the focus on employee wellbeing, we do not mean that businesses are responsible for each and every individual's personal sense of wellbeing. The latter is dependent on a several factors, many of which do not fall under the organisation's responsibility. But board members and managers have an active role in developing policy and their business's behavior and activities, providing them with opportunities to demonstrate commitment to their employees' flourishing. Agape is an articulation by the business – and its governing bodies – of an environment in which employees' needs can be met. In other words, it expresses the ways in which employees are able to experience wellbeing in their tasks, work relationships, the results of their work and work-related decision-making. Agape is about the development of an organization and of workplaces that enable employees to thrive individually and in relation to colleagues and management.

The research questions

The questions in the survey intend to shed light on businesses' focus on employee development in and through their work, the content, quality and results of their work, their social relationships, and the communication between employer and works council. The research focuses on the respondents' views both before the outbreak of COVID-19 and during the pandemic at the time they filled in the survey between September and November 2020. At that time COVID-19 was continuing to spread rapidly. Many businesses followed government advice to allow employees to work from home as much as possible. There was no complete lockdown at that time.

The survey questions focused on different aspects. Respondents answered questions about the nature and scope of the organization (for example, regarding family ownership or number of hierarchical levels within the business) and their personal characteristics (gender, age, number of years employed by this business). The survey also zoomed in on the composition of the staff, the business's attention to their employees' worries, circumstances, and needs, the results of work, how employees are dealt with during the corona pandemic, and businesses' needs for agape-related information and instruments.

Attention score

This research charts agape as management's commitment to their employees' wellbeing, and as people being the driving force behind companies, based on a composite set of indicators. To reach a clear picture, we've developed the '*attention for employees score*', in short: *the attention score*. The score is the result of combining the following dimensions that relate to the employees' work.

Dimensions

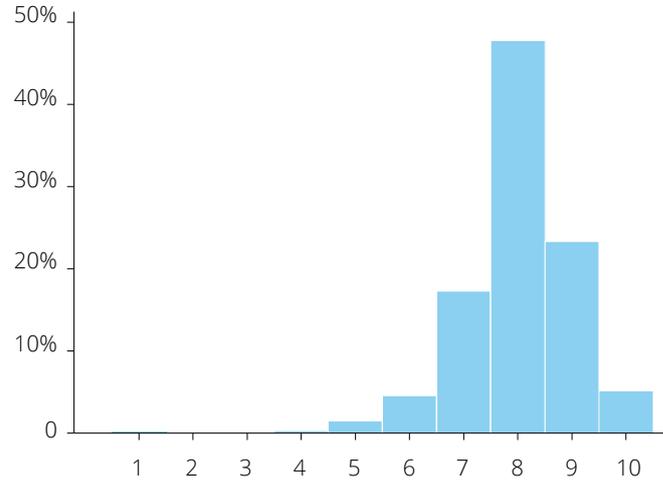
- Employees can educate and develop themselves as they wish
- Employees are considerate of each other
- Employees' needs and wishes take centre stage
- The content of the work is challenging
- Contact between employees is encouraged
- The business offers its employees job security
- Employees can decide how to organize their own work

If we look at the total respondents' group, the average attention score is 8.0. This shows that works councils and boards are of the opinion that businesses are committed to their employees' wellbeing.

One core aspect of agape is missing in the attention score: the extent to which the management board listens to employees' opinions on developments in the business. This dimension is reflected in the relationship between board of directors and the works council. This relationship is discussed separately a number of times during the study.

Agape further explained

Examining the factors that influence senior management's and works council members' perception of their attention for employee wellbeing, staff composition stands out. The more businesses employ young and highly educated staff, and the more employees have permanent contracts, the more we see agape increase. We see the strongest effects in *organizational culture*. The extent to which a business feels responsibility for the wellbeing of its employees and whether this is reflected in the culture of health within the business are important predictors for how respondents rate agape. Another result that stands out is the importance of a good relationship between the works council and the management board. The better the relationship, the stronger the chance that the organization is truly concerned about its' employees' personal growth and development, contact between employees, substantive challenges or the extent of job-related autonomy.



Attention score divided over participating businesses

Agape in practice

Agape can manifest itself in a variety of areas, such as the possibility for remote working, flexible hours, permanent education that matches the employees' needs, and workplace health promotion. During the pandemic, businesses did not

differ in allowing their employees to work remotely and during flexible hours. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, 42.7 percent of the businesses with high agape scores offered remote working, as opposed to 30.6 percent with a low score. Flexible hours were offered by 77.5 percent of the high-scoring businesses, as opposed to 64.6 percent of those who scored low. We also see meaningful differences with respect to permanent education opportunities and worksite health promotion. Almost all agape-minded businesses (96.6 percent) offer their employees opportunities for education that match their personal needs. This was 81.0 percent for businesses with a low score. High-scoring businesses are also more interested in worksite health promotion: 73.4 percent as opposed to 62.3 percent in low-scoring organizations. Our research reveals that businesses who score high on agape often do so because it is in line with the values of the business. They appear to be less focused on agape's contribution to profit or on reducing costs, for example related to sick leave or turnover. Respondents also report that determining employees' needs remains a challenge.

We find that agape is significantly linked to a number of organizational outcomes, such as sickness absence, active involvement and satisfaction of employees, efforts to recruit staff, turnover rates, employee productivity and the organization's financial situation. The higher businesses score on

agape, the stronger the positive outcomes in these dimensions. Board members think more often than works council members that agape has a positive effect on employee productivity. Works council members see a positive link between agape and employee satisfaction more often than members of the board of directors do.

Agape and the pandemic

Are businesses paying *more* attention to employee wellbeing since the corona crisis started? Respondents score 6.1 on this question. This means that, on average, businesses focus a bit more on the wellbeing of their employees than before the pandemic. Board members score on average 6.3, slightly higher than works council members at 5.9. To gain insight into the relationship between attention for agape before and during the pandemic, we conducted a latent profile analysis. The businesses fall into three groups:

1. The contented group

The group with the least attention for agape consists of about 7 percent of the participating businesses. The group scores on average 5.8 on agape before the outbreak of COVID-19. This score did not increase much during the outbreak, with 4.1 on a scale from 1 to 10. They are generally satisfied with themselves; they do not plan to give more attention to agape in the future.

2. The prudent group

This group paid a good amount of attention to agape before the pandemic, with a score of 7.8. On the question of whether they paid more attention to agape since the outbreak, they score on average 5.6. This group, which consists of 32 percent of the respondents, are cautious about future investments in agape. A possible explanation for this could be that the financial situation of around half of this group has worsened during the pandemic.

3. The attentive group

The largest group, consisting of 61 percent of the respondents, scores high on attention for agape before the outbreak of the virus (8.4). They claim to pay even more attention to agape than before the crisis, with an average score of 6.7. The group is characterized by a high attention score and an above average motivation to spend more attention to agape during the pandemic.

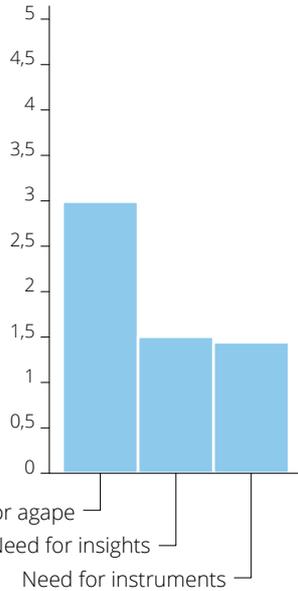
Unsurprisingly, a large chunk of senior management (71.3 percent) characterizes their own organization as attentive, as opposed to half of the works council members (50.2 percent). Works council representatives define their business correspondingly more often as contented (12 percent) or prudent (37.8 percent). Members of the board of directors (59.2 percent) are also more positive about daily interactions

between managers and employees than are works council members (33.5 percent), and about the regularity of communication (96.9 percent as opposed to 87.7 percent of works council members) during the pandemic. Lastly, we see that members of the management board experience that employees' satisfaction, active involvement and voicing their opinions about their work has stayed the same or improved during the pandemic. In this respect they are more positive than works council representatives.

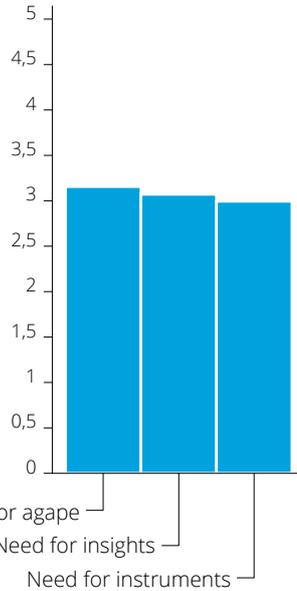
Agape in the future

Do respondents think that their business will give *more* attention to agape in the future? Do they think that their business will offer *more* opportunities for education, *more* flexibility and autonomy, *more* chances for mutual contact, *more* challenging work? We asked them explicitly if their businesses will be more concerned about the wellbeing of their employees. From all respondents, 43.4 percent agreed (entirely) with the statement that they want to pay more attention to agape in the future. Importantly, members of the board (47 percent) want to pay more attention to agape in the future, as opposed to 36.8 percent of works council members. Businesses also appear to want some support in this respect. The results show that 51.7 percent of the businesses want to stay up to date on the latest developments, while 50.7 percent is interested in better instruments.

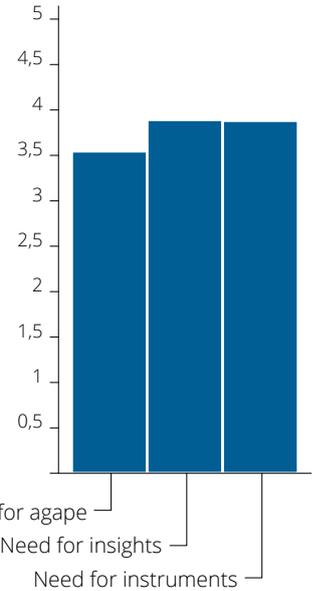
Do-it-yourself



Do-it-in-partnership



Do-it-with-outside-help



Average scores for the separate groups

Using a latent profile analysis, we combined a business's attention score with its future attention for agape and its interest in insight and instruments. The analysis illustrates groups that we indicate as:

1. Do-it-yourself (DIY): 8% of the businesses
2. Do-it-in-partnership (DIIP): 40% of the businesses
3. Do-it-with-outside-support (DIWOS): 52% of the businesses

DIY businesses score 8.1 on agape, want to modestly increase attention, but have little need for extra insight (1.5) or instruments (1.4) – on a scale of 1 to 5. DIIP organizations score on average 8.0 on agape and also envision themselves modestly increasing this attention in the future (3.2). Unlike the DIY group, they do value extra insight and instruments, but want to be involved in the envisioned change rather than receiving a lot of help. On average they score 3.1 on the need for insight and 3.0 on the need for instruments – both on a scale from 1 to 5. The largest group (52 percent) consists of businesses that want to change, but need support from outside (DIWOS). They too score high on agape (8.1), but want to increase their attention in the future. On average they score 3.5 on a scale from 1 to 5 expressing a clear interest in scaling their attention to agape. For both the need for insight and for instruments, they scored an average of 3.9 on a scale from 1 to 5.

Conclusion

This research into agape – the commitment that businesses and their management teams have to their employees' wellbeing – leads to the following conclusions:

1. The majority of businesses are attentive to their employees' wellbeing.
2. Businesses apply this attention by encouraging remote working and mutual collaboration, allowing flexible work, strengthening communication and job security, and showing concern for the needs of employees, to name a few examples.
3. Attention for employee wellbeing has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Businesses who paid attention to employee wellbeing before the corona virus outbreak increased this attention during the pandemic. This effect increased more when the agape score was higher before the pandemic.
5. Agape increases when businesses employ more young people, more highly educated people, and the more staff with permanent contracts work for them.
6. The score on agape is strongly correlated to the organizational culture. When the management board feels responsible for their employees' wellbeing, anchors this responsibility in a culture of health, and has a good relationship with the works council, a better context

is created for agape and employee flourishing than in businesses that score lower on these aspects.

7. Businesses with a strong commitment to wellbeing score higher on employee involvement. Their sick leave and turnover are lower, while their financial positions are stronger, and productivity is higher.
8. Businesses claim to be concerned about wellbeing in the future – a majority aims to increase their agape-related efforts. Especially the larger businesses seem to be ahead of the game. Board members appear to see more need for concrete action than works council representatives.
9. More than half of the businesses claim to want extra insight into agape and instruments to better be able to prioritize employee wellbeing.

These conclusions support the idea that businesses will continue to act people-oriented, even after the crisis has passed. During the crisis they have prioritized employee wellbeing, and aim to continue to do so in a post-pandemic world.

About the authors

Prof. Dr. Harry Hummels has a chair in Ethics, Organisations, and Society at Maastricht University and one in Social Entrepreneurship at Utrecht University School of Economics. For nearly twenty years Harry held several senior management positions in the financial sector, including ING Bank, SNS REAAL and ACTIAM. At present, he also sits on various boards and advisory committees. He researches and publishes on Agape, Social Entrepreneurship, Impact Investing, Responsible Investing, Corporate Responsibility, Business and Organizational Ethics and Philosophy of Work, while also having published two cookbooks.

Thomas Martens MSc is manager at the Utrecht University Future of work Hub. He has led large scale data collections such as the European Sustainable Workforce survey. He was the recipient of an ERC Proof of Concept grant in which he and his team developed and brought to market a sustainable employership test to help organisations understand how to improve their HR policies.

Anne van der Put MSc is PhD student in the department of Sociology at Utrecht University. Her interests are in the field of healthy lifestyle, vitality, and well-being of employees. Her research focuses on the role of the social work environment (colleagues and managers) in promoting the healthy lifestyle, well-being and vitality of employees. In doing this, she uses state-of-the-art quantitative methods.

