

# Learning about Employee Happiness

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Why are some people at work happier or unhappier than others? And how can we better find answers to that question?

This paper sets out six issues that deserve attention in those respects. Happiness is very significant to each of us personally, and there is a strong moral case as well as scientific need for psychologists to learn more about its operation in organizations. In terms of consequences, there is now considerable evidence that variations in happiness have a causal impact on a range of day-to-day activities, for example high or low job performance, staff turnover, absenteeism, citizenship behaviour, and perhaps creativity. It is increasingly clear that to enhance organizational effectiveness, we need to consider the experience of employees as well as operational and technological questions.

Research perspectives in this area have in recent years become stabilized around conventional themes. For example, many investigators have settled for narrow indicators of job satisfaction, and models of job content have usually excluded important variables. Possible non-linear associations between job characteristics and employee experiences have been largely ignored, as have mental processes that give rise to differences between people.

It would be helpful if investigators and practitioners could develop their thinking in the ways outlined here. Their focus may be on positive states, such as cheerfulness, contentment, enthusiasm, joy, pleasure or satisfaction; alternatively, the perspective might be more negative, on anxiety, depression, dissatisfaction, stress, strain or tension; or broader constructs such as affect or well-being might be examined. In all cases, the target of consideration is a form of happiness or unhappiness.

## 1. Happiness requires multi-dimensional study

Rather than envisaging a single indicator, it is essential to think in terms of multiple aspects. A principal axis for examination runs from feeling bad to feeling good, and two others are distinguished in terms of degree of activation as well as pleasure. Those extend from negative feelings of anxiety to experiences

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of happiness as tranquil contentment, and from states of depression to happiness as energized pleasure. Each one can be measured separately.

Although themselves intercorrelated, these different axes of experience are differently related to several variables of interest. For example, high job demands are more closely associated with unhappiness of the anxious sort than with depressed unhappiness; people in more senior jobs relative to junior employees exhibit more happiness in terms of less depression, but they are less happy in terms of raised anxiety; and women tend to be less happy than men in terms of anxiety and depression, but to be either equally or more happy in their job satisfaction. Differences in links with behaviour are also expected; for example, activated pleasure may more strongly predict initiative-taking than does happiness of a low-arousal kind.

It is also essential to look separately at different levels of scope. “Context-free” happiness has a general reference, whereas that which is “domain-specific” (e.g., job satisfaction) covers only domain-related feelings (e.g., in a job). At a third level, “facet-specific” happiness is about particular aspects of a domain, such as your pay or your boss. Many articles appear to be based on the assumption that causes and consequences are the same at each level of scope. They are not, and must be distinguished from each other.

In examining the notion of happiness, it is sometimes important to explore aspects quite distinct from those introduced so far. Some philosophers have emphasized that happiness can arise from actions that are somehow more fitting or appropriate than others, whether or not those are accompanied by feelings of pleasure. This second form of happiness (let's call it “self-validation”) invokes reference standards of some kind, perhaps some realization of personal potential, rather than merely the satisfaction of desires. Happiness as self-validation has almost never been considered by work and organizational psychologists, although it is increasingly addressed by other branches of the discipline.

## 2. A broad view of environmental sources is needed

Job-related accounts have overwhelmingly focussed on elements of demand, control and social support, but happiness depends on a much wider range of environmental features. If you talk to people about their jobs, it becomes clear that traditional models of job design leave aside many of their concerns.

Any categorization is in part arbitrary, and we have to balance conceptual richness against practical convenience. One useful framework of job environments contains the following 12 characteristics. (Their numbers are here preceded by “E” to indicate their environmental reference.)

E1. Opportunity for personal control, covering variables conventionally

labelled as discretion, decision latitude, participation, and so on.

E2. Opportunity for skill use and acquisition, a setting's potential for applying and developing expertise and knowledge.

E3. Externally-generated goals, ranging across job demands, underload and overload, task identity, role conflict, required emotional labour, and work-home conflict.

E4. Variety in job content and location, rather than an unchanging input from the environment.

E5. Environmental clarity, which takes in role clarity, task feedback, and low future ambiguity.

E6. Contact with others, in terms of both quantity (amount of contact, irrespective of its personal value) and quality (illustrated negatively and positively as aggression or social support).

E7. Availability of money, the opportunity to receive income at a certain level.

E8. Physical security. This has different forms in different roles; in job settings, it concerns working conditions, degree of hazard, and similar themes.

E9. Valued social position, in terms of the significance of a task or role.

E10. Supportive supervision, the extent to which one's concerns are taken into consideration.

E11. Career outlook, a matter either of job security or of the opportunity to gain promotion or shift to other roles.

E12. Equity, as justice both within one's organization and in that organization's relations with society.

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A “good” job scores well across those 12 features. Note that other settings can also be viewed in these terms; environmental sources of happiness or unhappiness are broadly the same in any domain. For example, unemployment may be “good” or “bad” in these respects; and “good” forms of unemployment might be psychologically better than a “bad” job.

As implied by the several elements introduced throughout the list, we might be interested in sub-categories within each of the 12 environmental features. To what extent and through what mechanisms does each one influence happiness or unhappiness of different kinds?

### **3. Associations with job features can be non-linear**

There is evidence, and a strong logical argument, that some of these desirable job features become undesirable at high levels. That inverted-U pattern is most noticeable in respect of environmental demands (E3 above), which are troublesome at both very low and very high levels. In general, some levelling-off is expected; happiness does not continue to increase at the same

rate with more and more of a job feature.

One possibility is to view the impact of job features on happiness as analogous to the effect of vitamins on physical condition. Vitamins are important for health up to but not beyond a certain level. A deficiency of vitamins gives rise to physiological impairment, but after a moderate level of intake there is no benefit from additional quantities, and some of them instead cause harm. That may also be the case for environmental features and their impact on happiness.

Stabilization of impact after moderate quantities has frequently been examined in respect of income (E7 above). A standard increment in income, with a major impact on people in poverty, yields a smaller benefit to the happiness of wealthy individuals. Within a broad “vitamin” analogy, we might expect slightly different non-linear patterns for different aspects of happiness identified above. Possibilities of this kind deserve more consideration than they have received.

#### 4. A person's own judgments are crucial

Another issue arises from the fact that employment researchers have so far paid most attention to happiness sources in the environment, preferring not to study processes within people. This focus on the environment is helpful: by addressing aspects of job content or organizational practice we might improve employees' experiences by modifying their work settings. However, person-centred approaches are also essential; happiness derives strongly from individuals themselves.

Influential mental processes can be explored in terms of the judgments made when appraising a situation. The framework below brings together 10 themes (labelled with “J” for “judgment”) that have been examined primarily in non-organizational research.

**J1. Comparisons with other people:** *“How does my situation compare with that of another individual or of the average person?”* It is regularly found that “downward” social comparisons (judgments made relative to people who are worse-off in the relevant respect) enhance a person's own happiness; that general pattern will presumably also be found among employees.

**J2. Comparisons with other situations** can be of two kinds:

**J2A. Expected situations:** *“How does my situation compare with the situation I expected?”* Non-employment studies have confirmed that positive or negative events that are unexpected have a greater impact on happiness or unhappiness than those that were expected; similar processes are likely in organizations.

**J2B. Counterfactual situations:** *“How might the situation have developed in*

*other ways?"* As with J1 (social comparisons), downward and upward mental comparisons with other possible events have corresponding effects on a person's happiness.

**J3. Comparisons with other times** may be retrospective or prospective:

J3A. Previous trend: *"Up to now, has the situation deteriorated, improved, or remained unchanged?"* For example, progress towards a goal is pleasing, but movement away (or even remaining static) can be unpleasant. The happiness consequences of a current situation may thus depend on the perceived direction and pace of movement.

J3B. Likely future trend: *"From now on, is the situation likely to deteriorate, improve, or stay the same?"* This kind of judgment is influential through, for instance, perceptions of the probability of success or of the possibility of improvement or deterioration.

**J4. Assessments of personal salience** are of widespread importance in happiness or unhappiness. Three levels need to be examined in organizations as well as elsewhere:

J4A. Rated importance of role membership: *"Do I want to be in this role?"* This kind of appraisal (for example, in terms of an individual's "employment commitment") has been shown in separate lines of research to bear upon unemployed people's unhappiness, the happiness of non-working women, and that of employed individuals in general.

J4B. Rated importance of a role characteristic: *"Do I value this feature?"* Evidence in several different areas has indicated that happiness is more strongly correlated with a particular environmental feature if that feature is viewed as more personally significant. Significance ratings vary between job characteristics, occasions, and individuals, and deserve to be incorporated in research analyses.

Differences in J4B judgments are also relevant to comparisons between groups or between individuals with different dispositional characteristics. For example, a substantial difference in the average rated importance of a job feature between men and women or between high- and low-scorers on extraversion is likely to be accompanied by a difference in the strength of association between that feature and happiness for the two groups.

J4C. Rated attractiveness of core tasks in the role: *"Do I like the things I have to do?"* This kind of judgment is almost completely ignored in the job design literature, although it is central to vocational counselling and everyday life. Over and above specific environmental features illustrated within the second issue above, people differ in their liked and disliked task activities, with major implications for their happiness in particular settings.

**J5. Assessments of situation-related self-efficacy:** *"Was/is my performance effective in this situation?"* Happiness experiences can depend on judging that

one has or has not coped well in the situation, and that one is or is not likely to be effective in the future. This process has almost never been investigated in organizations.

**J6. Assessment of novelty or familiarity:** *“Is the situation unusual or is it routine?”* Affective responses to a novel situation tend to be greater than when that situation is familiar. People adapt to continuing inputs from the environment, negative as well as positive, such that environmental influences can be short-lived or become less strong over time. Once again, these processes have rarely been studied in organizations.

The general point here is that judgments of these kinds need to be explored in work and organizational research, as well as in respect of happiness elsewhere. Relevant information can easily be obtained from employees when investigating job characteristics. The influence of environmental characteristics, apart from at extreme levels, is strongly dependent on how they are interpreted in the terms suggested above.

## 5. People have their own baseline of happiness

It has long been established that people are consistent in their behaviours and mental processes across time and settings. Traditional investigations have concentrated on personality traits, cognitive ability and similar attributes, but it is also clear that consistent differences between individuals are present in respect of happiness or unhappiness. Furthermore, those baselines may be largely inherited, and people might return to their own baseline soon after environmental disruption (negative or positive) to their happiness.

Such within-person stability is of course troublesome if we wish to modify happiness by altering aspects of the environment. Will changes in, say, job content make any lasting difference to people's happiness? Or what about self-help exercises to enhance one's own happiness? Can they have an extended impact, or will people soon return to baseline? Questions of that kind clearly deserve the attention of work and organizational psychologists.

We also need better understanding of differences linked to demographic or cultural characteristics. For example, women in some recent research tend to report greater overall job satisfaction than do men, despite the fact that they have on average lower pay and other benefits. Older employees also report more job satisfaction than younger ones, and temporary workers are not as unhappy as some have expected. In respect of cultural patterns, differences between Euro-American and east-Asian conceptions of happiness have recently emerged in non-employment research; are those differences important in jobs, and where might South America fall within this comparison?

## 6. Unhappiness is essential to happiness

Much thinking by psychologists derives from the assumption that happiness is always to be desired and unhappiness is to be avoided. Removal of unhappiness thus becomes the goal. Yet in many settings people can only experience happiness in relation to its converse; one is dependent on the other.

Working towards personal goals can require substantial effort and often prevents a person from enjoying other activities. Associated with that, negative episodes in many personal projects involve failure, boredom, discouragement, or pain. Of course, a person's experiences depend importantly on each state's relative intensity and relative extensiveness, but most people have to struggle through difficult work activities of some kind to meet their needs and to sustain happiness. This has two major implications for understanding happiness at work.

First, we need to obtain a much better understanding of the sources and nature of ambivalence. Within a short period people can be both happy and unhappy, perhaps at different times and in different ways, and to understand experiences at work we must learn more about the ways in which positive and negative feelings co-exist and combine with each other. What forms of ambivalence occur in work settings, how do they arise, and how are they handled? What are the causal relationships between a person's happiness and his or her unhappiness? Our focus has been almost entirely on what is in effect a person's average experience, with little attention being paid to variations around that within-person average.

Second, it is unrealistic to divorce experiences of happiness from task-oriented activities in a role. Psychologists have almost always examined (for instance) job satisfaction separately from job performance, but each of those can derive from a compromise with the other. We regulate our engagement in effortful job activities in part by responding to feelings and expected feelings. Working less hard in a difficult job can thus sometimes reduce job-created unhappiness, and striving to perform well can in some cases lead onto negative feelings linked to overload or failure. We need to learn more about this trade-off between effort and affect, its causes, and its consequences. Rather than restricting attention to either happiness or performance on its own, the two should be studied simultaneously.

### A Summary Reference

Much excellent research has been published in the area, and this has been reviewed in *Work, Happiness, and Unhappiness* by Peter Warr (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2007). Many hundred investigations are covered in that book, and

themes of the kind outlined here are developed in more detail. Sample chapters are available within the book's page at [www.erlbaum.com](http://www.erlbaum.com).