

Secrets of Happiness at Work



It is no secret that happy employees are more productive, more loyal and far more willing to go that extra mile for their employer. But what factors influence a person's happiness with their job? Research conducted by Team Management Systems (TMS) has found that "happiness at work" is a result of three major factors: engagement of work preferences, an adaptive approach to risk, and alignment of organisational and personal work values. Dr Dick McCann reveals more.

What draws someone to choose one job over another? Why do some people feel great loyalty to an organisation, often going beyond their self interest by putting in extra effort? What is it about work that generates high levels of personal satisfaction and happiness?

Money and workplace environmental factors provide partial answers to these questions, but these are not always under the control of the employee. Those factors where the individual is "in control" are more likely to lead to significant improvements in employee well-being, contentment and productivity. Happy employees increase staff retention rates, thereby reducing the need for recruitment. As anyone running a business knows, the cost of replacing an excellent employee far outweighs the cost of increasing their workplace satisfaction.

Happiness at work seems to be a function of three major factors: engagement of work preferences, an adaptive approach to risk, and alignment of organisational and personal work values.

UNDERSTANDING WORK PREFERENCES

Work preferences are dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of relationships, thoughts, feelings and actions. Work preferences determine the conditions we set up to allow our mental and psychic processes to flow freely. They guide our behaviour, but if we have to work outside them at various times, then we can usually cope. Preferences are just another name for what we like doing. Often, our preferences at work are different from our preferences outside of work.

Preferences are usually transparent and are often the first thing we notice in others. Some people prefer to think things through on

their own, whereas others need to talk out loud to clarify their ideas. Preferences are readily visible to others and are usually the basis of first impressions.

When we are working to our preferences, we set up conditions where our psychic energy can flow freely. If we are more extroverted, we like work where there are lots of interactions with others, both inside and outside the organisation. If we are more introverted, then we like conditions where we can work on our own with few interruptions and a minimal requirement for meetings. Under these conditions, our energy can flow freely with minimal resistance. Just as electrical energy generates heat when it meets resistance, our psychic energy generates tension and stress when it has to flow through areas that are not to our preference.

In order to understand and measure work preferences, we need a general model of the nature of work. By way of example, I will use the Types of Work Wheel, which I developed some years ago with my colleague Charles Margerison. This model (see Figure 1) defines eight key work functions that make the difference between good and poor performance in a variety of jobs.

Figure 1. Margerison-McCann Types of Work Wheel



Advising
Innovating

Gathering and reporting information.
Creating and experimenting with ideas.

Promoting	Exploring and presenting opportunities.
Developing	Assessing and developing the applicability of new approaches.
Organising	Establishing and implementing ways of making things work.
Producing	Concluding and delivering outputs.
Inspecting	Controlling and auditing the working of systems.
Maintaining	Upholding and safeguarding standards and processes.

The centre of the wheel defines “Linking”, which is a process of co-ordinating and integrating the work of others. Linking needs to be applied to all work tasks, regardless of their content. For example, those who have Inspecting as a critical function within the team must do it in a linking way to avoid being labelled an “interrogator”. Those who have “Organising” as a critical function must do it in a linking way to avoid being seen as “too pushy”.

GETTING THE RIGHT FIT

Engagement of work preferences simply means matching our work preferences to the critical demands (work functions) of the job we have to do. Where the match is high, our energy flows freely, we are more likely to enjoy our job, stress is lower and we feel happier at work. So the first step in the happiness formula is to assess the engagement level of our work preferences with the tasks assigned to us.

Figure 2 is an example of work preference engagement using the Types of Work Wheel. The subject is Mary Johnson, who currently works as a HR manager. The diagram was constructed from her responses to two questionnaires.

Figure 2. Work Preference Engagement for Mary Johnson



The “Developing” work function has a green flag, indicating that this aspect of Mary’s work is something she is likely to enjoy. There are three red flags in the “Promoting”, “Organising” and “Maintaining” areas, and these are the areas that Mary might reflect upon when considering changes to her job. The arrow pointing upwards in “Promoting” indicates that Mary would enjoy more of this activity in her work. The arrow pointing downwards for “Organising” and

“Maintaining” indicates that Mary would like less of this in the job she is currently undertaking. The amber flags indicate moderate matches.

There are a number of possible strategies to consider when looking at ways to improve the engagement of work preferences. Possible strategies for Mary include:

- Redesigning her job in consultation with her supervisor;
- Developing her work preferences to better suit the job;
- Delegating those parts of the job that don’t match her preferences; or
- Finding a job that is more in line with her work preferences.

The ultimate aim is for Mary to increase her happiness at work and with that, her well-being and job satisfaction, which can then lead to less stress, improved performance and personal productivity.

THE RISK FACTOR

The way people approach risk will also affect their happiness and contentment. Risk is related to the different emphasis people place on either “seeing the opportunities” or “seeing the obstacles”. Those who move towards “opportunities” are more likely to be risk-accepting, whereas those who move away from them tend to be risk-averse. Conversely, risk-averse people tend to move towards “obstacles”, whereas risk-accepting people tend to move away from them.

Risk-accepting people tend to embrace positive emotions: they have higher levels of optimism, deploy significant amounts of energy towards the attainment of their goals, focus more on the future than the past, and look for ways around obstacles whenever they arise. Risk-averse people tend to exhibit more negative emotions: they are more pessimistic, tend to treat obstacles as stumbling blocks, focus more on the present or the past, and enjoy the process of “fault-finding”.

Literature abounds in studies on positive emotion as a dispositional characteristic. Many studies have shown, for example, that an optimistic outlook on life leads to less incidences of post-partum depression and distress, and greater subjective well-being and life satisfaction. It has also been positively correlated with goal setting and achievement, and negatively with goal abandonment and resignation to fate. Positive people can change the dynamics of any group. It is hard to be negative and down in the dumps when those around you are brimming with enthusiasm and looking hopefully to the future. Happiness is a function of a positive approach to life.

Does this mean that we should all try to focus only on the opportunities, ignore the obstacles and take all the risks we can, in order to be happy? Obviously, the answer is no.

POLLYANNAISM, MURPHY’S LAW AND EYOREISM

In the Eleanor Porter’s classic book, *Pollyanna*, we can see how a positive attitude affects those with a negative view of life. Pollyanna helps Aunt Polly, Mrs Snow and Mr Pendleton see the world in a new light and

MOTIVATION

the book is a tonic for anyone who feels at all depressed. Pollyanna's behaviour is often described as a naïve form of optimism. She believes that things will always turn out for the best and that no matter what happens, there is always something to be glad about. There are never any obstacles, only opportunities! Pollyanna would cope with any misfortune by playing the "Glad" game. She teaches her game to several characters in the book who tend to see obstacles. It lifts their spirits enormously and has a major effect on their lives, as it has on hers.

Pollyanna's attitude to life has led to the coining of a psychological term, called *Pollyannaism*. Pollyanna accepts anything that happens to her by reflecting that things could always have been worse. This noble view of the world is not always an asset at work. The reality of the business world is often summarised, tongue in cheek, by Murphy's Law: "If anything can go wrong, it will." Therefore, it is important not to sit back and accept fate in a positive way, as Pollyanna does. It is essential to identify all the obstacles that might occur and have an alternative plan of action to implement, should things go wrong. Looking for the problems and pitfalls, and planning to avoid them can help prevent Murphy's Law from happening. Those with *Pollyannaism* characteristics can cause major problems at work. Their enthusiasm and belief in a positive outcome can sometimes lead to decisions that are regretted later – which then leads to wide-spread unhappiness.

Risk-averse people tend to focus their energy on "seeing obstacles". When working on a project, for example, they are more likely to put a lot of effort into looking at all the things that might go wrong. When faced with potential opportunities, they may well ignore them, presenting cogent arguments to support their view that the risks are too great. An approach like this is correlated to pessimism, a mood state that affects all of us to varying degrees. However, too much pessimism can lead to apathy and inaction. An icon representing this characteristic is the donkey Eeyore, from A. A. Milne's classic book, *Winnie the Pooh*.

Eeyore is universally recognised as being gloomy about life and anticipates the worst in most situations. He constantly expects things to go wrong. However, if we were all like Eeyore and saw difficulties in everything we did, then maybe we wouldn't get out of bed in the morning! A focus on seeing the obstacles is very important in the business world as it can prevent serious mistakes from being made. But excessive negativity, or *Eeyoreism*, is something to be avoided at all costs.

FINDING HAPPINESS BETWEEN POLLYANNAISM AND EYOREISM

An adaptive approach to risk means putting as much energy as you can in to seeing and seeking opportunities, by setting goals and moving towards them, by looking for ways around obstacles and focusing on the future. However, one eye must also be kept on the obstacles by developing the skills of "potential obstacle analysis", where three things are constantly reviewed:

- What could possibly go wrong?
- What assumptions have I made?
- What might I do to minimise the risk?

Happiness means getting the balance right between *Pollyannaism* and *Eeyoreism*, and this is often situation-specific.

ALIGNING VALUES

If an individual's personal values show little or no overlap with the organisational values, then this can also create unhappiness and considerable stress. Where alignment of values is high, people are more likely to find their work meaningful. A good overlap between organisational values and personal values can therefore improve motivation, job satisfaction and even performance. In many organisations, focusing on this aspect of work allocation can reduce downtime significantly as it gives employees a reason to look forward to work and a commitment to perform well.

Values are fundamental concepts or beliefs which people use to guide their behaviour in the workplace. Values will drive our decision-making and cause us to summon up energy to preserve what we believe in. They go beyond specific situations and determine how we view people, behaviour and events. Often, major sources of conflict and disillusionment are due to mismatched values. Whereas we are often willing to work on tasks that we dislike, we are much less likely to compromise when our values are under threat.

Values are difficult to observe in others, as they are inner concepts often buried in the human psyche and not readily accessible by the conscious mind. When these values are violated, then the conscious mind takes over and appropriate behaviour occurs to preserve and defend this attack.

I use the Window on Work Values (see Figure 3) to measure both personal and organisational values, as it is possible to calculate the degree of values alignment using such a model.

Figure 3. Window on Work Values



I developed this model from discussions and interviews with participants on management development workshops over many years. An important factor was one that focused on either the self or the group. This eventually became the west-east axis of the Window on Work Values. The other higher-order factor suggested was the cluster of values that related to an organisational environment where the focus was on “constraints”, versus a cluster of values that allowed more organisational freedom. This eventually became the north-south axis of the model, where the focus was on the organisational environment that people value. The core northern value type is “Compliance” and the core southern value type is “Empowerment”.

A happy employee is a productive employee and one that will remain in an organisation longer than an unhappy one.

The main “self-focus” value type was identified as “Individualism”. People high on “Individualism” will invest energy in being seen as capable, intelligent and highly competent. They will value self-sufficiency and also the rewards that go with being successful. The work behaviours of those high on “Individualism” will also depend on the organisational environment they value. People who believe that “Organisational Constraints” (such as rules, regulations and procedures) are necessary for effective work will hold the “Authority” value type as well, whereas those who desire “Organisational Freedom” will more likely hold the value type of “Independence”.

The key “group-focus” value type is that of “Collectivism”. “Collectivism” emphasises the placing of group goals over personal ones. Those who value this highly will want to put others first, support the underdog and work with loyal people who value harmony. Issues such as truth, integrity and fairness feature high on their list. The generation of group opinions and adherence to them are far more important than personal gain. People who value “Collectivism” highly will use the power of the group to bring individual recalcitrants into line with group thinking.

Work behaviours of people who value “Collectivism” will depend – to a large extent – on their desired working environment. Those who value “Organisational Constraint” will also hold the value type of “Conformity”. Those who believe in “Organisational Freedom” are more likely to value “Equality”.

Most organisations have some sort of values statement that expresses the “wishes” of senior management. In practice, the behaviours exhibited by managers throughout many organisations do not always align with the espoused values. The Window on Work Values enables a quick assessment to be made of employees’ values perceptions throughout an organisation. This information can be compared across business units and against the corporate values

statement. The results can often convince senior management to better “walk the talk”.

For many people, there is an “organisational values disconnect”. Once identified though, both the individual and the organisation can do something to change the situation. It is possible, for example, to generate values alignment data similar to that shown in Figure 2, but based on the Window on Work Values. If there are too many red flags, then employees may need to consider their options. They could, for example:

- Learn to accept the way people in their organisation behave and adapt their approach to fit in;
- Develop pacing skills to generate rapport with others, in order to change other people’s perspectives;
- Develop a set of shared values for their working group that align with their own values, even if these are different from those in the rest of the organization;
- Move to another part of the organisation where there is a better alignment; or
- Look for a career move to an organisation where the values alignment is substantially increased.

Values, by their definition, are legitimate and worthy to those holding them. If the organisation doesn’t support an individual’s values, then happiness and contentment at work will be affected, and this will impact the bottom line.

So the formula for increased workplace happiness requires attention to three areas: (1) work preference engagement ensures that employees actually enjoy the nature of the work they are undertaking; (2) an adaptive approach to risk ensures that opportunities are embraced positively without discounting potential obstacles; and (3) alignment of personal values with organisational values ensures that employees will find personal meaning in the work they are undertaking.

Remember: A happy employee is a productive employee and one that will remain in an organisation longer than an unhappy one. 🗣️



About the author:

With a background in science, engineering, finance and organisational behaviour, Dr Dick McCann has consulted widely for organisations such as BP, Hewlett Packard and HSBC. He is co-author of *Team Management: Practical New Approaches* (with Charles Margerison); author of *How to Influence Others at Work*, the *TMS E-Book Series* and *The Workplace Wizard: The Definitive Guide to Working with Others*; and coauthor of *Aesop’s Management Fables* and *The Half-Empty Chalice* (with Jan Stewart). Involved in TMS operations worldwide for over 20 years, Dr McCann is now Managing Director of TMS Australia, a Director of TMS Development International and Director of Team Management Systems Inc.