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Conflict of Employee–Employer Interest:
Introducing an Optimal Work Happiness Framework

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Author Note

This paper was prepared for course MLSC 610, Section 001 Sp12, taught by Professor Schneider.

Abstract

This qualitative study seeks to explore the pursuit and achievement of work happiness¹ for employees. Conflicting interests between organizations (i.e., employers) and employees provide insights into the difficulties employees face in their quest for work happiness. Assumptions are visited concerning constraints on achieving work happiness due to organizational hierarchy. A framework, postulated by the author, lacks quantitative measurement, yet offers an encompassing, simple-enough model for further investigation. The optimal work happiness model hypothesizes that individuals in the workplace desire to feel valued, to believe others value their contributions, to find work meaningful, and to enjoy the work they do. Moreover, when employers genuinely believe workers contribute value to the organization, they may communicate this appreciation to them, thus causing employees to derive increased work happiness. Respectively, each individual must assess the value of his or her own employment identity and determine whether or not work is meaningful and enjoyable for himself or herself. Future quantitative research is needed to best reinforce the constructs of this qualitative study.

¹ The term work happiness, as opposed to the term worker happiness, often appears throughout this study as the phrasing better represents the duality of the work and worker as variables in achieving work happiness.

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Do organizations impede a worker’s potential for achieving happiness?

The interests of organizations will always stand in somewhat of a conflict with those of the individual worker. An organization (i.e., specifically referring to an employer) seeks goals such as achieving financial profitability, and in some cases, committing to corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Kreng & Huang, 2011; Madison, Ward, & Royalty, 2012). Though certain goals of an organization may reflect altruism towards stakeholders, or even employees, organizational interests may remain rooted in a profit motive. As Kolstad observed, “Upon closer scrutiny, it becomes apparent that CSR is in many cases simply viewed as an instrument to increase profitability, rather than a fundamental goal in itself” (2007, p. 137).

It stands to reason, if employers seek profitability and survival above all else, that conflict with the interests of employees appears inevitable. When individual workers doubt organizational commitment to employees, diminishing trust in employers by employees may result in decreasing productivity, higher turnover, and employee absenteeism (Cascio as cited in Lawler & O’Toole, 2006, p. 255; Thomas, Zolin, & Hartman, 2009, p. 290). Moreover, an employer’s perceived lack of commitment to the interests of the employee may lead to an employee’s lack of commitment and unhappiness with the work itself. According to Ventegodt and Merrick, “It is difficult to feel happy when you do not really feel committed to your work” (2009, p. 5). Ultimately, when the goals of an organization and its employees appear at odds, worker happiness stands to lack organizational priority, affecting individual employees as they strive to pursue and achieve happiness in their work lives.

However, defining happiness remains complicated. Researchers may not agree as to what an accurate definition of happiness entails. Different theories for how to achieve happiness historically have included hedonism, spiritual and religious virtuous-living, materialism, and more recently, adjusting life conditions to complement biological set point (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Gilbert, 2007; Haidt, 2006; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). Since at least the time of Democritus, humans have grappled with the concept of happiness (Nistor, 2011). Yet, for all the years humans have studied happiness, the field appears nascent. The alleged newness of the field appears for at least two reasons. First, as science increasingly proves happiness a matter of genetics, which gene or genes share responsibility remains largely undiscovered (Nes, 2010, p. 370). Second, the field of happiness has traditionally suffered an underdevelopment of research focus. One researcher termed it “the great gap between the two research directions [e.g., positive and negative psychological research directions] in psychology” (Nistor, 2011, p. 58). Currently, while researchers debate the definition of happiness, and while more positive psychological and genetic research becomes increasingly available, a correct way to pursue and achieve happiness may remain anyone’s guess. And more specifically, a correct way for employees to pursue and achieve happiness in their work lives remains an undefined endeavor.

Method

An Optimal Work Happiness Model

In an effort to identify what matters most for employees interested in pursuing and achieving happiness in their work lives, I offer the following work happiness model (see Figure 1). The model revolves around four main principles—each individual in the workplace desires

(a) to believe others value and appreciate his or her contributions, (b) to believe in and genuinely value his or her own employment identity, (c) to find work meaningful, and (d) to enjoy work.

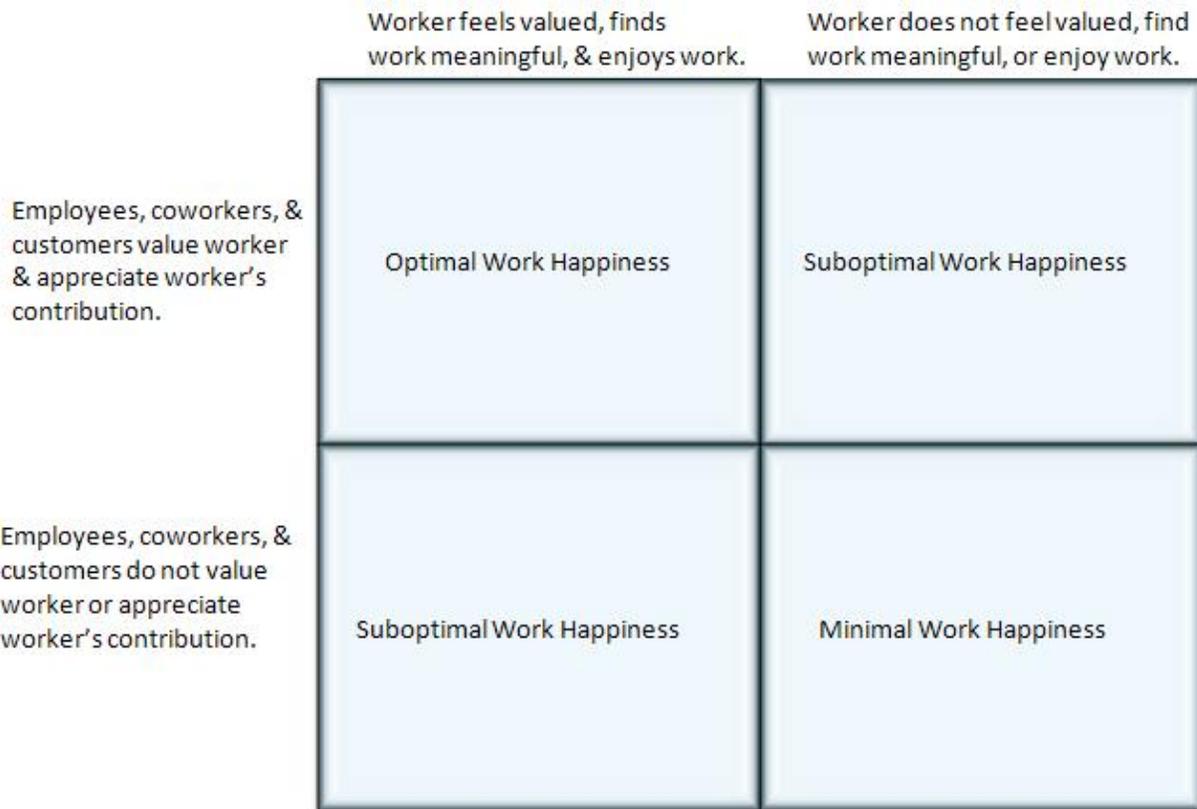


Figure 1. Optimal Work Happiness Model by Paul M. Conlon (2012)

Each quadrant within the work happiness model represents a different work happiness outcome based upon the particular combination of axes variables. The first of the four principles represented by the work happiness model entails employers (and possibly coworkers, customers, or even confidants exogenous to the work environment) valuing the employee and his or her employment contributions. An employer can value and appreciate employees in at least four ways. First, employers can recognize the present contributions of employees. According to Brun and Dugas, “Recognition is engaged in on a regular or ad hoc basis, and expressed formally or informally, individually or collectively, privately or publicly, and monetarily or non-monetarily” (2008, p. 727). Second, employers can invest in initiatives for employee promotion.

According to Sharabi, Arian, and Simonovich, “As far as a worker is concerned, a promotion is not only an expression of gratitude and reward for effort, but also a chance for self-fulfillment and career advancement, satisfying an individual's need for achievement and success” (2012, p. 128). Third, employers can incentivize employee retention through offering competitive wages and benefits. However, while competitive wages should logically contribute to worker retention, employee compensation may place an enormous strain on employers. For example, during the current recession, employers face increasing difficulty in financing health care and retirement plan options for employees (Vandermillen, 2009, p. 11). Fourth, employers can attempt to create and enforce healthy work environments free of abuse or harassment. For instance, according to Brenner, ageism, racism, and sexism have “a deleterious effect on productivity in the work place” (2010, p. 27). However, in regards to employer efforts for worker retention, lifetime employment has appeared increasingly unrealistic for decades, and not just in the United States. For instance, according to Levine,

Career change and uncertainty has been the experience of the vast majority of gainfully employed Japanese. . . . Perhaps the typical worker in Japan does not change jobs as many times across a working life as does his or her American counterpart, but relatively few will remain with the same employer from first to last career payday. (as cited in Plath, 1983, p. 31)

The second principle of the optimal work happiness model suggests that work happiness requires employees to genuinely value their employment roles. Just as it remains important for workers to receive appreciation from and be valued by employers (or even coworkers and customers), individuals in the workplace need to value their own employment identities.

According to Ventegodt and Merrick, employees should consider themselves valuable (2009, p.

5). Valuing employment identity does not necessarily imply a worker valuing his or her professional contribution, but rather, valuing the professional identity of who does the contributing. Not every employee buys into the notion that his or her own professional position possesses value. And not every employee will want to. However, as the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in a draft for a sermon,

If you discover that you are called to be a street sweeper, sweep streets like Michael Angelo painted pictures, like Beethoven composed music, and like Shakespeare wrote poetry. Sweep streets so well that all the host[s] of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, “[H]ere lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well.” (King, n.d., p. 5)

King’s message hinted at the disproportionate amount of significance societies assign to various work roles. Moreover, King’s message suggested a frame of mind for workers to positively perceive anew their sense of self-value as an employee, arguably, in an effort to achieve a happier life. In theory, if all employees absorbed a similar message, and willingly reframed their self-perceptions to increase the value they ascribe to their professional identities, all employees should experience increased work happiness. In practice, however, some workers, even if they believe increasing the value they assign to their professional identity would make them happier, likely will refuse to comply. However I hypothesize non-compliance stems not from a worker’s lack of desire to self-value employment identity, but from a worker’s desire to seek another job fit where opportunity exists to experience two other necessary prerequisites for work happiness: meaningful and enjoyable work.

The third principle of the optimal work happiness model, meaningful work, represents a prerequisite for experiencing significant work happiness. Meaningful work may manifest

through the importance a worker assigns to his or her professional contributions or even through the sense of purpose an employee derives from a work experience itself. An employee's sense of purpose in a work experience may transcend actual job requirements, thereby increasing a worker's happiness. For example, though a street sweeper may or may not derive meaning from the contribution made to the cleanliness of the street, indirectly, the worker may derive an internal fulfillment that his or her employment role meaningfully contributes to some other purpose. Therefore, as the degree of meaningful work remains in the judgment of a particular employee alone, any assumption that a particular employment role (e.g., an astronaut, a custodian, etc.) arbitrarily correlates to a certain degree of meaningful work and level of happiness likely will prove specious. Nonetheless, the importance and purpose employees derive from work-related tasks do not necessarily have to occur in a specific form or fashion for a worker to find work meaningful. In effect, not all happy employees will both perceive their particular task-related contributions as important and simultaneously derive a sense of purpose from their work roles.

The fourth principle of the optimal work happiness model, enjoying work, resembles the principle of finding work meaningful. Similar to the notion different employees may find work meaningful for different reasons, so too do workers experience enjoyment in a subjective manner. What may constitute enjoyable work for one employee may not constitute enjoyable work for the next. A reasonable criticism of the concept that workers should enjoy the work they do may feature reservations concerning work-related stress or anxiety. However, according to Lowe, "Job anxiety is far from universal" (2000, p. 62). Enjoying work appears possible through at least three main factors. First, current research seems to suggest employers should encourage worker creativity (Pai, Lee, & Jung, 2010, p. 165). Worker creativity encompasses the practice of

job-crafting (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008, p. 72). Job-crafting, through the freedom bestowed upon a worker by an employer, provides an employee with an opportunity to engage in job enrichment. Job enrichment allows employees to “gain more on-job responsibility, achievement, development chances, self-sufficiency and appropriate management of the tasks they perform” (Rashid & Rashid, 2011, p. 107). Job enrichment, more than offering avenues for employees to enjoy the work they engage in, may also prevent employee turnover. According to Docherty, Forslin, Shani, and Kira, without a flexible organization “employees become consumed since they cannot use their potential and resources at work” (as cited in Docherty, Forslin, & Shani, 2002, p. 8). A second main factor contributing to enjoying work consists of employee challenge. Where possible, employees should seek opportunities to challenge themselves, not only to avoid boredom, but to develop into even stronger employees. Diener and Biswas-Diener argued an optimal challenge matched to one’s ability level enables an individual to achieve an exciting experience: the state of “flow” (2008, pp. 83–84; see also Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The third factor contributing to worker enjoyment consists of the presence of a positive, healthy work environment for the employee. Though the creation and enforcement of a healthy work environment remains a responsibility of the employer, the presence of a healthy work environment serves to enhance an employee’s ability to enjoy work (Brenner, 2010).

Discussion

Model Limitations

While the optimal work happiness model provides a framework to identify the presence of work happiness, it, in fairness, possesses at least five weaknesses. First, and perhaps most glaringly, the model lacks a quantitative scale to score work happiness (e.g., 0 to 100, etc.).

Moreover, the model lacks a quantitative study to reinforce scale value. Second, without a quantitative component, the model does not include in-between values, only absolute values. For example, the model assumes workers either enjoy work or they do not enjoy work; the model, in its current state, does not allow for a range of values to which an employee might moderately rate the enjoyment of the work they do (e.g., Participant X enjoys the work, rating it six out of ten, etc.). Third, the model oversimplifies the number of variables that contribute to worker happiness. However, in defense of the model, the limited factors included within the model arguably encompass the most important variables in determining work happiness. Fourth, the model aggregates multiple variables into each axis. This aggregation results in an oversimplification that generalizes work happiness in an unfair light. For example, some employees may find the work they do meaningful, but not feel valued by others or enjoy the work they do. Such a situation raises the question for future research: How best should data partially matching to multiple variables be recorded in a future quantitative study? A more accurate model must require tweaking so that these variables properly segregate in an effort to input data with precision. Ultimately, the data representing work happiness should integrate variables in a manner that suggests an individual's score on an overall work happiness scale. For instance, the worker who enjoys his or her work, finds work meaningful, and feels valued by the employment organization and customers should score extremely high on the work happiness scale. A similar employee who enjoys work, finds work meaningful, but does not feel as valued by the employment organization and/or customers should score lower on the work happiness scale. Fifth, the model does not take into consideration workers who may also serve as their own employers. Entrepreneurs, for instance, may value their work contributions from both the perspective of the employer and the employee. Self-employers may not necessarily qualify as

organizations or exhibit organizational behaviors. According to Harper and Lawson, employment opportunities do not necessarily entail “a bureaucratically organized career” (2003, p. 61).

Do “key” employees “unlock” optimal work happiness? Organizations, for-profit or otherwise, may view workers as expendable and replaceable pieces. In a free-market economic environment such as the United States, at-will employment prevails, where workers choose the most enticing employment prospects, and employers choose the most attractive prospective employees. Yet, even in a free market economy, unhappy workers may not choose to leave current jobs for greener grass. Furthermore, currently unemployed workers may return to unfulfilling jobs held previously because of the risk associated with attempting a new opportunity which might feature comparable satisfaction. According to Cuelenaere and Prins, “Without a good benefit as a financial back up, people are under more pressure to return to work, at whatever salary and whatever health cost” (as cited in Bloch & Prins, 2001, p. 282). In effect, unhappy workers may choose not to leave their jobs because they need pay, though they want happiness.

However, not all employers view every employee as expendable, which creates an avenue for higher-ranking workers to increase in work happiness. According to Lowe, “Some segments of the workforce—senior managers and the ‘knowledge workers’ in the information technology, financial services, and energy industries—see abundant opportunities on the horizon” (2000, p. 62). In effect, high ranking individuals, leveraging their value to the organization, might align organizational opportunities with the pursuit of achieving work happiness. Yet, it remains unlikely an organization will consider the majority of its workers as key employees. Key employees usually enjoy the highest salaries and benefits, possess the most

decision-making authority within an organization, and receive the most organizational priority for retention (Aime, Johnson, Ridge, & Hill, 2010). Key employees, unlike lower rung employees, might steer the organization towards opportunities to receive more personal credit for organizational success or utilize tactics to avoid responsibility for organizational failure (Simester & Zhang, 2010). Moreover, some organizational leaders possess the power to steer the organization against others' better judgment towards their own pet projects. According to Simester and Zhang, managers “may unreasonably believe that they can prevent failure through hard work. Biases in managers' beliefs can explain why managers make inefficient decisions, including their reluctance to kill bad products” (2010, pp. 1161–1162). While project initiatives may suffer failure, key employees may find work more meaningful and enjoyable due to them, and in so doing, increase in work happiness, where lower ranking employees lack opportunity.

Though lower ranking workers often do not possess significant input in organizational decision-making and may lack the opportunity to align organizational objectives with work happiness, they have at least three reasons for optimism. First, possessing low organizational rank might carry more employee power than ever before. According to Yang, a recent worldwide work restructuring initiative has created flatter organizational hierarchies, thereby decreasing the power of managers (2009, p. 592). Yang reasoned, “Economic globalization increasingly compels organizations to restructure—outsourcing noncore functions and eliminating middle layers” (2009, p. 592). Second, there may exist the opportunity for lower ranking employees to ascend through the organizational ranks. Third, for some lower ranking workers, the constraints placed upon them by employers may not affect achieving work happiness as much as they might for other lower ranking workers. While a rational assumption may initially appear that subordinate employment roles detract from achieving optimal work happiness, some individuals

may thrive in them. For example, according to Nozick, “Persons on the way up organizational ladders spend much time taking orders without coming to feel inferior” (as cited in Ezorsky, 1987, p. 9). In theory, lower ranking employees may value their employment roles, and engage in meaningful, enjoyable work as much as their higher ranking superiors.

Conclusion

The optimal work happiness model suggests four guiding principles for a worker to pursue and achieve work happiness. Only some of these factors appear under the control of the employee: Employees choose to self-value their identities; employees decide if they believe others value and appreciate their contributions; employees assess their experiences of work enjoyment; and employees determine if work includes a sense of purpose, meaning, or importance. One factor, which appears relevant for work happiness, remains outside the control of the employee: An employer, independent of the employee, chooses whether to value and appreciate both the employee and the employee’s contribution. While a worker may feel less than able to influence any of these principles in a given current situation, the model assists a worker in imagining a more ideal fit for a future work environment. However, studies that measure the correlation between this optimal work happiness model and real-world participants are needed to reinforce the concepts of this research. Additionally, the model urges exploration of how suboptimal work happiness experiences affect employees’ attitudes towards achieving future optimal work happiness.

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