

Searching for job satisfaction

Who is happiest? **VIRGINIA MATTHEWS** investigates the sometimes elusive concept of job satisfaction

Happiness at work is a simple matter of being well-paid, driving a nice car and enjoying the kind of career prestige that makes other people go green with envy. Jobs in modelling, international football, television or the City for example. Right? Wrong.

Far from coming down to money and status, says the recent "Happiness Index" from the vocational body City & Guilds, real job satisfaction comes from three quite different things; using your brain, deploying your creative skills and, perhaps most important of all, being in charge of your own destiny.

Finding happiness

Although there is far more glamour in being a sharp-suited lawyer, or a Whitehall mandarin than there is in being a plumber or car mechanic, the C & G research finds that superficial glamour and prestige actually have little to do with genuine happiness.

C & G's survey of more than 1,200 people in various professional and vocational roles concludes that hairdressers, beauticians and chefs or cooks are the happiest people in Britain, while estate agents, civil servants and architects – who often earn far more and enjoy the cachet of being among the "professional" classes – are actually the least contented with their lot.

Of the top 10 "happiest" jobs in the survey, only one is classed as professional, rather than vocational: being a member of the clergy – where helping others is in itself a vocation.

Says C & G Director General, Chris Humphries: "Nowadays true job satisfaction and happiness is about

fulfilling your full potential, tapping into your own creativity and feeling that you can make a difference. More people than ever are swapping their desk-bound jobs for a vocation that enables them to be hands-on, use their brains and be in charge of their own destiny." When combined with the opportunity to help others, he adds, the mix of intellectual and practical skills that distinguishes a vocational career becomes even more satisfying.

Pay disparity

Does the pleasure of being "hands-on" really make up for the traditional pay disparity between "professional" and "vocational" workers though?

Thankfully, says Humphries, the pay gap between white and blue collar workers is no longer so marked: "Our survey shows that while 52 per cent of white collar workers think they are adequately rewarded for their efforts,

'True job satisfaction and happiness is about fulfilling your potential'

51 per cent of trades people say the same; demonstrating that it is finally possible to have a job you love and be well paid for it."

How to achieve, identify and measure happiness at work is a subject of perennial interest to both employers and staff. It has spawned literally thousands of books, academic papers and research documents as well as a million more TV dramas, plays and newspaper articles.

For employers, job satisfaction may prevent their most valuable assets from walking out of the door, while for employees, the long-hours culture and the real possibility that retirement

Top ten 'must haves' for job satisfaction:

- Controlling own destiny
- Opportunity to use hands/brain
- Creative involvement
- Helping others/making contribution to society
- Good work environment/colleagues
- Fair rate of pay for work
- Respect
- Career development opportunities
- Recognition
- Decent work/life balance

Ten less important factors:

- Money
- Status
- Fancy job description
- Minions
- Prestige company car
- Size of desk
- Prestige office block
- Reserved car parking position
- Quality of canteen food
- Expense-account trips

may soon be set at 70 makes it imperative that we at least enjoy what we do all day.

Yet the fact is that the likelihood of your first job being the job of your dreams is remote. Many of us will have at least three career changes between first job and retirement and true job satisfaction may elude us during an entire lifetime at work.

Aside from the importance of controlling our own destiny – as evidenced by the growing number of both young and older workers choosing to pursue precarious self-employment, rather than more

predictable “wage-slavery” – there are other common themes in job satisfaction research.

The first is respect – the feeling that your skills are appreciated by colleagues, managers and the outside world in general – and the second is good career progression. Third comes involvement in decision-making at work and fourth, the kind of work/life balance that would have been unknown 50 years ago, but which is now seen as top of the “wish-list” by many young workers. Fair pay, though not necessarily top rates of pay, is also a factor.

The most common reason that departing staff give for their headlong rush to the sign marked “exit” is the feeling that their career has come to a standstill with their current employer; that they are in a “dead-end job”.

According to Simon Wilde, director of the HR firm Capita People and Development: “Poor people-management practices cost UK employers millions of pounds each year and many people leaving their jobs cite the lack of opportunity for career development as the prime reason.”

“Career management helps identify peoples’ potential, guides them when there is change in the organisation – including a period of downsizing – and may even help them achieve a better work/life balance. Motivated employees are happier and work more productively.”

‘A good work/life balance is now seen as top of the wish-list by many young workers’

So career management and long-term career planning are essential for employee job satisfaction and essential too if employers are to retain their top people and a competitive edge over their rivals. Career management involves ensuring that staff receive regular training in their field and may encompass personal development courses that appear to have no direct impact on work.

By paying for a top-performing salesperson to learn ballroom dancing or flower arranging – just because they have taken a fancy to it – a smart employer builds on the loyalty of that



Liverpool Hope University

employee and reduces the risk that she or he will jump ship. The feeling that you are learning something new – making yourself more employable, not more vulnerable to the axe – can only increase your happiness at work rating.

Yet more research – this time from the latest British Social Attitudes survey – reveals that what makes us unhappy at work includes the following: feelings of insecurity, stress, inadequate income, exhaustion and “the feeling that my work is not useful to society.” While the first four are perhaps self-evident, it is the fifth that is more intriguing.

Wanting to do good and help people is a career ambition that has traditionally been limited to social workers and beauty queens, yet the notion that our job should have “meaning” aside from paying the

mortgage is now spreading to all parts of society.

If the hairdressers and plumbers in the City & Guilds study gain immense satisfaction from feeling that they are helping people, then so too do healthcare professionals, according to 2003 research from the NHS which suggested that 73 per cent of its workforce – it polled a massive 200,000 people – were happy in their jobs.

The graduate website www.prospects.ac.uk reaches a similar conclusion about some of the brightest job-seekers in the UK. It reports that many of today’s university and college leavers rate “putting something back” higher than money or status and will only consider a career in the public or voluntary sector – where helping people is often at the top of the agenda.