

Work may hold the key to your happiness

By | **Sonja Lyubomirsky** | Resource contributor

As an experimental social psychologist who has been studying human happiness for 18 years, I am often asked, "What makes people happy?" Until recently, my answer typically reflected the common wisdom in my field: relationships.

It is an oft-repeated "fact" among psychological researchers that one's interpersonal connections – the strength of one's friendships, familial bonds, and intimate ties – show the highest correlations with happiness.

Many of us, therefore, believe we'd be happier if we didn't have to work, and had more time to develop our connections with friends and family. But the numbers tell a different story.

When two colleagues and I set out to conduct a meta-analysis (a "study of studies") of 225 investigations of well-being, I fully expected to discover that social relationships were both causes and byproducts of a happy disposition. Imagine my surprise when I observed something quite different. One factor towered over social life in its connection with happiness. That factor was work.

The picture gets more complicated than that, of course. It's not work per se that makes people happy, the research reveals. It's rewarding and successful work. Fulfilling jobs, a productive worklife and a comfortable salary contribute to one's happiness in myriad ways. The cross-sectional evidence, for example, demonstrates that people who have jobs characterized by autonomy, meaning and variety – and who show superior performance, creativity and productivity – are significantly happier than those who don't. Supervisors are happier than those lower on the totem pole, and leaders who receive high ratings from their customers are happier than those with poor ratings.

The income that a job provides is also associated with happiness, though perhaps not as highly as many of us would expect. Most surveys report correlations between income and happiness in the range of .13 to .24 (i.e., small but statistically significant), but those correlations are higher for people whose financial situation is dire, uncertain or fails to meet their basic needs. In other words, money has more of an impact when we have less of it.

That our well-being is rooted in our work can also be demonstrated by negative examples in the research – e.g., by what happens when an individual loses his or her job. For example, a 15-year investigation of 24,000 German residents revealed that those who became unemployed sometime during the study witnessed their well-being plummet and never quite recover.

So it would seem that work affords us even more than income and promise of prosperity. It may offer a sense of identity, structure to our days, and significant and meaningful life goals to pursue. It may supply us with close colleagues, friends and even marriage partners – the very relationships that do indeed provide a critical piece of the puzzle that happiness poses.

The story doesn't end there, however. Studies reveal that the causal arrow between happiness and work can run both ways. Not only do productivity and creativity at the office make people happy, but happier people have been found to be more productive and creative. They are better citizens in the organization, and are less likely to suffer burnout.

The most persuasive data regarding the effects of happiness on desirable work outcomes (as opposed to vice versa) come from longitudinal studies, or studies conducted on the same participants over a long period of time. For example, people who rate themselves as happy at age 18 achieve greater financial independence, higher occupational attainment and greater work autonomy by age 26. Furthermore, the happier a person is, the more likely he will secure a job offer, retain his job, and become re-employed if he ever loses it. Finally, one intriguing study revealed that those who show more positive emotions on the job receive more favorable evaluations from their supervisors three and a half years later.

The same point applies to income. Not only does greater wealth make people happy, but happy people appear more likely to accrue greater wealth in life. For example, research has demonstrated that the happier a person is at one period in her life, the higher income she will earn at a later period. In one of my favorite investigations, researchers showed that those who were happy as college freshmen had higher salaries 16 years later, when in their mid-30s.

But before we find yet another reason to be envious of very happy people (not only do they get to feel good, but they get to have good jobs as well!), consider what the research on happiness and work suggests. It suggests that, when it comes to work, we can create our own so-called "upward spirals." The more successful we are at our jobs and the better work environment we have, the happier we will be. This increased happiness will foster greater success and an improved work environment, which will further enhance happiness, and so on and so on.

So no matter what type of work you do, know that it can provide a great deal of happiness and satisfaction – if you make it so. It's up to you to change how you perceive your work. Do you think of it as a job? As an important career? Or do you think of it as a true calling? Then you can decide how enthusiastically, creatively and productively you engage in it. Δ

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