

How Happiness Happens

The results of a new survey on satisfaction—at home and at work—may surprise you

Most parents will tell you they just want their kids to grow up to be happy (even if they're nudging them toward the Ivy League). But how does an adult achieve a high level of contentment while living a frenetic and distraction-packed life? The two of us have just reviewed results from our new survey designed to elicit insights into

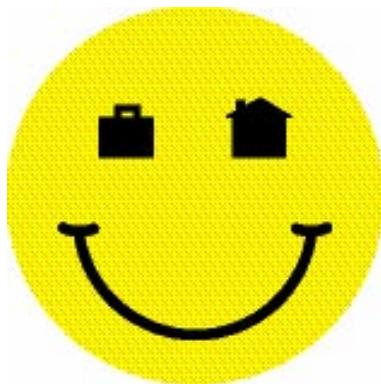
short-term satisfaction (happiness) and long-term benefit (meaning)—both at work and away from it. Our respondents weren't randomly chosen. They're well-educated (more than 60% have graduate degrees) managers, entrepreneurs, and professionals (split almost evenly between the sexes), numbering over 3,000.

Our findings were in many cases unexpected but clear-cut. There is an incredibly high correlation between people's happiness and meaning at work and at home. In other words, those who experience happiness and meaning at work tend also to experience them outside of work. Those who are miserable on the job are usually miserable at home.

The implication is unmistakable. Since work and home are very different environments, our experience of happiness and meaning in life appears to have more to do with who we are than where we are. Rather than blaming our jobs, our managers, and our customers—or our friends, family members, and communities—for our negative worklife experience, we might be better served by looking in the mirror.

One commonly expressed excuse for not getting more happiness and meaning out of life is: "I'm working too many hours." But our results show that the number of hours worked had no significant correlation with happiness or meaning experienced at work or at home. So much for that excuse.

Part of our survey asked respondents to rate their overall satisfaction level at work. Again, our findings paint a clear picture. The amount of time respon-



dents spent solely on stimulating activities (high short-term satisfaction but low long-term benefit) had no bearing on their satisfaction at work. The same was true of more purposeful activities (low short-term satisfaction but high long-term benefit). Overall satisfaction at work increased only if both the amount of happiness and meaning experienced by employees simultaneously increased. This indicates that professionals don't gain satisfaction at work either by being "martyrs" or by "just having fun." Companies may want to reduce communications designed to encourage employees to make sacrifices for the larger cause. They may also want to cut out "fun" morale-building events that lack a meaningful purpose.

We had (mistakenly) guessed that those who spent more time outside of work in activities that produced more short-term satisfaction might score higher on overall satisfaction. After all, we assumed, people don't go home to find meaning; they want to relax. We were wrong. The correlations between

happiness, meaning, and overall satisfaction at work and home were very similar. Those who were more satisfied with life outside of work were the respondents who reported spending more time on activities that produced both happiness and meaning.

These links between how we spend our time and how we feel may seem confusing, but specific patterns arose—some commonsensical, some not. Here are a few quick takeaways from our initial research:

- Reduce TV watching. It's stimulating but doesn't increase overall satisfaction with life—at work or home.
- Cut back on surfing the Web for non-professional reasons. It's negatively correlated with the experience of both happiness and meaning.
- Do as few chores as you can (whatever that word means to you).
- Spend time exercising and with people you love (respondents who did this had more satisfaction with life at work and at home).
- Feeling challenged is linked to greater satisfaction, so challenge yourself.

What can companies do differently? They might stop asking, "What can the company do to increase employees' experience of happiness and meaning at work?" which encourages dependency. Instead, managers can encourage employees to ask themselves, "What can I do to increase my experience of happiness and meaning at work?" This strategy may produce a higher return in employee commitment—and do so at a lower cost. **| BW |**

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