The happiness and wellbeing of employees is a critical business issue that impacts directly on the bottom line. However, achieving corporate buy-in, winning over critics and fostering a happy workforce remain considerable organisational challenges. Companies have a duty of care to maintain a happy workforce, legislated through the Health and Safety Act of 1974. This requires companies to ensure, as far as is reasonably possible, the health and safety, both mental and physical, of their employees. However, beyond legislation the benefits of having a happy, healthy and engaged workforce is a bottom line imperative that should be taken very seriously. Inevitably there are challenges to fostering a happy workforce. As Abraham Lincoln noted: “Most people are as happy as they let themselves be.” He recognised the individual propensity to a certain level of happiness. However, some psychologists argue that happiness is not hardwired. The inclination towards happiness is only about 25% determined as opposed to 46-60% for most hereditary traits. Therefore happiness is malleable. In an organisational context, money or material wealth are given considerable ‘airtime’. It is interesting to note that recent research has shown that lottery winners are happy in the short term but after a while, their happiness levels revert back to a norm.

In fact, research suggests that happiness levels have remained virtually the same in industrialised countries since the Second World War, even though incomes have risen considerably. Despite growth in GDP and economic prosperity, general levels of happiness have tended to remain pretty stable. Recent research from New Zealand has indicated that the work environment, company culture and workplace morale are the most important factors for office-goers, while salary is one of the least significant of all, highlighting that factors other than money must be given consideration in supporting wellbeing. One key challenge for organisations is to recognise the importance of the interconnected nature of employee and organisational health. This is a message promoted by bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). While most business leaders know instinctively that a happy, healthy and engaged workforce is a productive one, many still approach wellness or material wealth are given considerable ‘airtime’. It is interesting to note that recent research has shown that lottery winners are happy in the short term but after a while, their happiness levels revert back to a norm.

The British Government is committed to measuring national happiness and seeking to improve it. There is widespread recognition that happiness is crucial to both national and organisational success. In May 2011, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) launched its ‘Better Life Index’, a measure of happiness in member countries which goes beyond the cold hard numbers of GDP. It includes metrics for community education, governance, health, life satisfaction, safety and work-life balance, with the aim of providing an overall index of progress to help deliver better policies for better lives. Metrics are being developed by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) to gauge national wellbeing with a focus on quality of life, environmental and sustainability issues as well as the economic performance of the country. In both a national and organisational context, measuring employee attitudes and opinions can be a valuable litmus test of individual and organisational wellbeing.

Inevitably there are challenges to fostering a happy workforce. As Abraham Lincoln noted: “Most people are as happy as they let themselves be.” He recognised the individual propensity to a certain level of happiness. However, some psychologists argue that happiness is not hardwired. The inclination towards happiness is only about 25% determined as opposed to 46-60% for most hereditary traits. Therefore happiness is malleable. In an organisational context, money or material wealth are given considerable ‘airtime’. It is interesting to note that recent research has shown that lottery winners are happy in the short term but after a while, their happiness levels revert back to a norm.

For further information contact the author at noeleen.doherty@wttc.net