

# » Secrets of a Happy Workforce

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**T**he 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 making employee wellbeing a central organisational concern and promoting a happy workforce are huge. Happier people are more successful generally; getting more from their jobs and giving more in return. More contented employees are more productive, focusing on average 80% of their available time on their tasks. Those who are least happy tend to only be fully engaged two out of five working days a week.

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.

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Following this trend it is no coincidence that the British Government is committed to measuring national happiness and seeking to improve it.


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, surveying 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 40-60% for most hereditary traits. Therefore happiness is malleable. In an organisational context, money or material wealth are given considerable 'air-time'. 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 like a bolt-on. In reality, there needs to be a holistic view, supported from the top.

There is no one key factor that brings happiness at work, but rather a recipe that includes a number of ingredients. We have known for quite some time that within organisations there needs to be a focus on elements such as climate, philosophy and ethos. Another aspect centres on social relationships and how supportive management is. Managers need the skills to manage their teams well and to allow employees autonomy over their workloads so that job satisfaction increases alongside productivity. This relies on trust which depends on behaviour, not policies. Where employees feel supported in achieving their career and work aspirations with appropriate training, development and support, they are more likely to feel engaged and committed to the company and happier.

Many organisations are now recognising the need to be proactive and take deliberate steps towards encouraging wellness at work. The UK Department for Work and Pensions has published case studies on companies of all sizes across industry sectors as models of good practice. Ensuring good management practices and developing a conducive organisational environment are the foundations for a happy workforce. Wellness combined with engagement drives sustained employee performance. Looking after the wellbeing of employees is not a luxury; it is a bottom line imperative that should be taken very seriously. 

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