

The value of happiness in the workplace



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To write this essay, I mixed the main findings of the text and included some additional references with my own opinion. I believe that the text wants us to reflect on this question: does work allow happiness?

In our contemporary society, and especially for someone like me who is starting my professional career, I think it is a relevant question, a controversial topic very interesting to discuss, that has become a real debate nowadays.

About Happiness

Happiness is “ a state of fully satisfied consciousness”. It’s a state of mind that depends on how it is interpreted. Happiness may also be defined as the experience of frequent positive affect, infrequent negative affect and an overall sense of satisfaction with life as a whole (Myers & Diener, 1995).

In recent years, there has been a craze to measure happiness due to feelings of individuals who don’t feel happier despite of an increase in wealth and of the increasing importance given to quality of life, hence the concept of sustainable development for example.

Happiness is not just being happy: as Aristotle wrote, “ A swallow does not a make a spring, nor one single day” (« une hirondelle ne fait pas le printemps, ni non plus un seul jour »).

This phrase became proverbial, meaning that happiness is not the affair of a moment; it must really last over time if it is true. The ambition of the great schools of antique philosophy is to allow men to reach happy lives: the

search for lasting happiness is the purpose of this part of philosophy called ethics.

Aristotle as well as the Epicureans and the Stoics agree on this point: only a just and upright life can give us access to true happiness, that is to say durable, long-lasting happiness. For the Epicureans, if pleasure is essential to happiness, some desires bring more disorders than festivities: they must be set aside, and we should content ourselves with natural and necessary desires, because they are source of pleasure and easy to satisfy. For the Stoics, happiness cannot be sustainable if it depends on external circumstances: “ I have to discipline my will to learn to only depend on me, because my happiness cannot be left with the whims of the fortune”.

2. About Work

Due to its etymology (“ tripalium” meaning in Latin “ torture trestel”), the concept of work is already inconsistent, contradictory with the idea of happiness.

While in antiquity and in a society of orders work was contrary to social prestige, employment is nowadays a discriminating element. Indeed, we see appearing in the society a social category of “ working poors” and many “ precarious jobs”.

From then on, become central constituent element of both lifestyle and standard of living, work appears today not as a “ Garden of Eden” but more as a source of conflicts, concerns, and gloom.

In fact, happiness and work do not seem to be compatible.

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3. Work and Happiness

Happiness depends on work

According to the relative index of happiness, work is one of the most important factors that influence happiness. You cannot separate one from the other. This notion of work rises through the tasks we execute, of course, but also in the relationships we have with colleagues, in the recognition that we obtain from our employer, in our level of empowerment and in the valuation bound to the fact of learning and discovering.

In addition, in a French study published in 2003 “work to be happy?” («travailler pour être heureux? »), it seems that a quarter of the French respondents emphasize that work constitutes in itself an essential part of happiness.

If a quarter of the French states that individual happiness directly depends on work, it reveals not only the importance of work as a major source of definition of the conceptions of happiness, but also the wide variety of professional situations.

This can be understood as far as work is thought by men as a source, multifaceted, essential, of happiness. In this sense, without work, unemployed men cannot get to know happiness. Indeed, the activity is today privileged and highly valued in the economic and social life. France, which has a relatively high unemployment rate compared to its European neighbors such as Germany, regularly puts in place specific economic policies aimed directly at reducing the unemployment rate. In our society,

the professional activity is valued because it provides legitimate resources (wealth, social status, salary, etc.)

In addition, we can only emphasize the omnipotence of work. The occupation appears in this perspective as a necessary condition for happiness because it allows for a whole range of human needs.

Happiness can be compatible to work to the extent that a productive activity can also be a creative activity, a fruitful activity, especially source of satisfaction of multiple needs.

Abraham Maslow has shown in his pyramid theory of needs that men must satisfy first their physiological needs, then their safety needs (i. e. earn money to meet their basic needs, that is to say, food, housing ...) before considering other needs more extensive as sense of belonging, esteem from others, self-esteem etc.. But it is precisely through the professional activity that men will be able to meet their first needs, indispensable to happiness.

For the majority of workers, working is a condition of their happiness and their job is an irreplaceable source of income and social inclusion. Indeed, for some employees, the firm is not only a workplace, but a real social institution, where they can really “ socialize” with others.

As a matter of fact, with the current economy, for some it is a real “ luck” to have a job to be able to live (housing, food...), and this work can make them happy!

In addition, a personal development, a self-fulfillment is done by working with the satisfaction obtained after the effort. To illustrate this, we can cite <https://assignbuster.com/the-value-of-happiness-in-the-workplace/>

people who do a thankless job, but who follow an ideal, and whom it makes happy! For example Mother Theresa worked in the garbage dumps to look after the rejected, unloved, and neglected people and was happy to help them even if the environment was dreadful.

I think that happiness at work is different for everyone, for some people, happiness will reside in the social side provided by the activity, for others it will be being able to travel, for other it will be obtaining a big pay etc...

In addition, many people will say that if you like what we do, you obtain better results.

Having happy employees can be the key to business success.

During my internship, I have noticed that employees who seemed happy were more team-players, were more concentrated, more proactive and wasted less time and resources. Indeed, if we take the example of a salesman, if he looks happy and satisfied, he will transmit his enthusiasm, he will probably encourage more easily customers to buy, his sales will increase, his performance and efficiency will participate to a productivity increase and the company will benefit directly from it! Basically, having happy, satisfied and loyal employees will bring happy, satisfied and loyal customers! And happy, satisfied and loyal customers will bring higher profits! The motivation to reach our objectives increases with professional fulfillment. It also stimulates and encourages creativity and innovation.

I think if that if we are really happy, we are then 100% invested in what we undertake, and we can even go beyond what is expected of us. Then starts a

virtuous circle because the company, happy with the employee's results, will give him or her more autonomy and responsibility, which will increase the worker's satisfaction.

In addition, I think that in general, when we're happy, when we see life in pink, we look at the future in a more positive way, and obstacles appear less insurmountable.

According to the hierarchy particularly, if a worker is successful, he will be easily granted better positions, more responsibilities and higher salaries which will participate to increase his happiness.

Achieve contentment and satisfaction of its employees is a real challenge for a company. But it is really beneficial because it helps decrease employee turnover and absenteeism due to illness or overwork, through better energy management and health. Negative stress is transformed into positive stress.

I recently read that a real link was established between being happy at work and health.

We can cite the example of management in the company Google. In my opinion, the company has implemented many policies to achieve well-being and satisfaction of its employees. For example, employees can enjoy many benefits such as free haircuts, sports facilities (gyms, swimming pools...), laundry services, medical personnel on the workplace, recreation rooms (billiards, babyfoots, video games...), enjoy massages and so on... I think that's part of why Google is placed number 1 of the 100 best companies to work for in 2012 by the magazine " Fortune".

I think it is important to emphasize the important place of labor relationships for happiness. Empathy has a prominent place.

At work, there are four types of relationships with colleagues:

- Friends outside of work, who become friends in the normal way
- Friends at work, whom we only see at work, for example, during breaks or lunch time
- The friendly relations at work, people with whom we don't have a break or lunch with
- Labor relations only, that is to say those which we avoid

But in closer relationships, two types of behavior are favored; on the one hand cooperation and on the other hand, jokes and gossip. It was found that these two ways of acting promote job satisfaction, help to reduce the impact of stress on health, and decrease the psychosomatic effects.

We know now that health is a driving force in self-realization, in self-fulfillment, in the pursuit of happiness. Thus, good working relationships facilitate the achievement of personal happiness. It is for this reason that the employer must ensure that the working environment is positive. This is for example why numerous team building activities were developed these recent years. In my view, the recognition by colleagues and superiors of the accomplished work is essential.

An even more important relationship is the one between an employee and his supervisor. In order for the employee to be satisfied in his work and thus

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allow opening a door to his general happiness in life, the immediate supervisor must show a lot of consideration and well-being. He must also be careful not to be too prescriptive but suggestive, not imposing a way to do things but imposing goals for examples. The supervisor should give feedback, recognize successes, offer new challenges and especially show justice and fairness. I also believe that a good manager is a supportive manager. To be happy at work, it is important for employees to work in an environment that is not hostile but dynamic and fair. In other words, we could say that even if the hierarchy must remain, hierarchical barriers must fall.

Moreover, we can highlight that various intellectual traditions held thinking work, not only as a place of possible alienation (Marxist tradition), but also in a more modern way, as a place for membership, belonging, and identity creation.

Indeed, if work is often seen as a painful constraint, it is nevertheless a way by which men overcome nature and conquer their freedom and humanity. This is what Hegel shows “ by teaching me to delay the satisfaction of my desires, working requires me to discipline myself” (« en m’apprenant à retarder le moment de la satisfaction de mes désirs, le travail m’oblige à me discipliner »).

Through the effort, men gradually master themselves: they free themselves from the nature (their instincts) by transforming the nature out of them. Work is thus needed in a second sense: without it, men cannot realize their humanity.

Work should not be considered in the horizon of survival: by their work, men cultivate and humanize nature (Marx) and educate themselves.

This is the meaning of Hegel's dialectic of the master and the slave, the master, that is to say, the one who enjoys the work of others without doing anything with his ten fingers, is finally the true slave, and the slave who learned to discipline himself and to patiently acquire knowledge becomes master of himself and of the nature. While it was an undergone constraint and the mark of slavery, work becomes the driving element of our liberation as it allows the realization of ourselves. Thus, work can be seen as a liberating or emancipating activity.

But work also has a more specific educating value: work is a source of education according to Kant. Indeed, as Rousseau stated, work involves effort, perseverance, consistency, qualities that are opposed to our natural tendency to inertia.

Working is educational as it teaches us to go against our natural tendency to passivity and ease. In a way working is doing violence to our nature: work also teaches us to master ourselves.

If work takes such a central place in our lives, it nonetheless also shapes our own representations of happiness. Thus, we must also understand the sense in which 75% of French respondents in the survey “ work and happiness” think work is not in itself a part of happiness.

Happiness doesn't depend on work

If professional activity is not necessarily an integral part of individual happiness, it is because happiness can come from other sources. Also, if some ethics believe work can make people happy, some other ethics believe non-work constitutes a way to be happy.

In other words, it is primarily the type of profession that will determine whether a person is happy or not. Sweetened and idealized images of the self-made man or of the businessman travelling have to face those darker images of the warehouseman or of the unpacker employee subjected to difficult schedules. Thus, some individuals place their work in the center of their happiness, but others emphasize the concepts of “ health”, “ family”, “ friends”.

Within the sociological study “ Happiness and Work” (« Bonheur et Travail ») directed by Christian Baudelot and which resulted in the book “ Work to be happy” (« Travailler pour être heureux »), it has been shown that the reference to work is uneven from one social group to another. In fact, 43% of workers, but only 27% of business leaders, executives and self-employed mentioned it. It is therefore a visible paradox: the apparently less valued professions (such as blue-collar workers), believe work is a superior source of happiness than more socially desirable occupations such as managers and higher intellectual professions (who believe work is a less important source of happiness).

A film like “ Human Resources” from Laurent Cantet in 1999 (« Ressources humaines »), which describes the arrival of a young adult into the Human Resources Direction service of his father’s company, shows the dichotomy of

the business and social world and highlights the different relationships to work.

For the father, work is the backbone of a lifetime; for the son, work is a means by which it seeks its own identity. Moreover we can distinguish the “white collars”, whose profession is a way to conduct a good life out of the company (family, friends, outings, travels, leisure...), and the “blue collars”, like the father of the young hero, who, once returned from the factory in the evening, continues for his pleasure to work on parts.

In this logic, we can assume that for many workers, happiness depends on other things deemed more important than work.

We can also note that work is sometimes thought, certainly in a more marginal way, as antithetical to happiness. This is particularly the case when the activity in question is suffered, undergone because of it is hard, arduous, precarious or not remunerative enough.

It can also be translated more concretely by the introduction and implementation of alternative lifestyles, refusing work, as described in the movie directed by Pierre Carles in 2003 “Attention danger work” (« Attention danger travail »).

It is important to highlight that many workers emphasize a certain job insecurity due to structural changes and to the desire of companies to maximize flexibility.

Also, the first professions to be exposed to the major recent developments of capitalism (the end of massive industrialization and the development of the

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tertiary sector), have been either deleted or replaced (we can think for example of minors or steel workers in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais).

Nowadays, these trends, continued and emphasized by growing financialization of economies and increased power to shareholders, thus bring some professionals in specific sectors of the industry in situations where the sense of fragility and precariousness outweighs safety.

Outsourcing and relocation waves to conquer new markets and produce at a cheaper labor cost, have recently crystallized in France this deep fear of workers for their personal future. To sum up, we can say that because of the severe downturn of today's economy, a big majority of employees are apprehensive about the security of their positions and this leads to higher levels of self-doubt and conflict into the workplace.

Considering in this perspective that a precarious profession couldn't be constitutive of happiness in the long term, we can understand that so few French respondents said they were happy with their work because their work is no longer their predominant value.

The working time reduction, the emergence of a leisure society, and the omnipresence of consumption lead the professional activity to become an incidental or accessory occupation.

At the same time, authors like Dominique Meda with his book "Work, an endangered value" (« Le travail, une valeur en voie de disparition ») or André Gorz with his book "Work metamorphoses, search for meaning" («

Métamorphoses du travail, quête du sens ») show that the modern work is not necessarily at the heart of concerns.

On one hand, for Dominique Meda, work in contemporary Western societies requires individuals to make permanent choices and tradeoffs between professional life and family life. On another hand, for André Gorz, any activity that aims to minimize its working time cannot at same time boast or glorify work as a source of personal fulfillment.

In short, it is therefore clear with these two authors that technical and technological progress tends to make work become a mere moment, often restrictive and constraining, of life.

In addition, professions where hardness and physical or mental efforts to produce are numerous can logically less contribute to happiness, compared to other more fulfilling professions. Also, those jobs where wages and salaries are very low cannot actively contribute to happiness.

Moreover, it would be interesting to know whether the professions traditionally favored, envied and valued are actually those where happiness is possible, at work, and out of work.

It is interesting to note that managers, for example, is the profession where people say they are most exposed to a significant nervous tension, rather than workers, for example. We can cite as an example that the year 2012 saw the greatest number of “ burn-outs”. In addition, new researches show that such stress at work is as dangerous for the health and the well-being of an individual as smoking.

Similarly, because the professions with high responsibilities are absorbing and time consuming, the life out-work is sometimes disturbed which questions and threatens the general equilibrium of life. Managers are more likely than workers to report that their occupation prevents them from practicing other activities. They are in fact subject to a dilemma: to invest in their profession to climb the social ladder and eventually “earn more”, or focus on areas outside work to find a personal harmony.

Suffering at work (psychological pressure, for example) is thus not only the prerogative of professions usually less valued like blue-collar workers. In addition, examples of recurring depression and suicides at work (for example in France Télécom in 2008) are in any case symptomatic of a doubt about the ability of work to make us happy. In the past few years, large companies such as IBM have created within their organizations positions of “Well-being Director” or “Happiness Director”. As a matter of fact, the question of happiness at work is today no longer immediately obvious; it is not a certainty anymore for more and more workers, employees or entrepreneurs.

In the same range of ideas, we can highlight that Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have in their book “The new spirit of capitalism” (« Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme ») also shown how capitalism has managed to integrate all the external ideological reviews and has incorporated them in its ways of doing.

The liberation of the personal creativities, the expression of everyone’s happiness in the company can, in fact, become a daily burden. If the modern

managerial discourse laid the mysteries of employees' happiness, the practice of happy work has become a reality often illusory.

4. Conclusion

I believe we can say that the 25% of French people who responded positively to the question of whether their work constitute in itself a part of happiness can be considered “ privileged.”

On the one hand, work has become a major source of self-fulfillment as a condition to meet our needs, but it retains the possibility to submit, use, coerce, through human traditional subjugation for specific tasks, such as through managerial techniques aiming at excessive responsibility: to ensure not only the competence, the knowledge, but also the know-how and the skills.

On the other hand, work was subjected in all its aspects, dimensions and possibilities to profound and deep changes that have made it more difficult to achieve happiness. In a way, the work reinventing itself in the contemporary period, it is all traditional conceptions of happiness that could be challenged.

It is ultimately through a rational individual arbitration between working time and leisure time, made possible by a harmonious relationship with one's business, which could be found the source of a possible fulfillment through work.

Some retired or inactive people, seek to continue working rather than stop. In fact, they highlight the importance work takes in our society. It allows standing in life, worthy, dignified and proud of our human condition.

Therefore, maybe should we question the economic policies of employment nowadays in France because they don't sufficiently take into account the importance of work as a source of personal fulfillment and not just as a source of income?