



If You Want Success, Pursue Happiness

Arthur C. Brooks | October 13, 2022

Many people chase achievement, assuming it will lead to well-being. They should reverse that order of operations.

Without going too far out on a limb, I believe almost everyone would like two things from their jobs and careers: success and happiness. They want to do relatively well financially, receive fair recognition for their accomplishments, enjoy their work as much as one can, and become happier as a person as a result. These are reasonable goals, but they can be a lot to ask—so many people, especially ambitious, hard-working people, simplify them in a logical way: They first seek success and then assume that success will lead to happiness.

But this reasoning is flawed. Chasing success has costs that can end up lowering happiness, as many a desiccated, lonely workaholic can tell you.

This is not to say that you have to choose between success and happiness. You can obtain both. But you have to reverse the order of operations: Instead of trying first to get success and hoping it leads to happiness, start by working on your happiness, which will enhance your success.

Success and happiness are generally positively correlated, as many workforce studies have shown. For example, companies in Fortune magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For" list saw an average 14 percent stock-price increase every year from 1998 to 2005, compared with 6 percent for the overall market. And as Gallup data have shown, among business units with employee-engagement levels (that is, employees who reported feeling heard, respected, and intellectually stimulated, and who had a best friend at work) in the 99th percentile, 73 percent perform above the company average, and 78 percent perform above the industry average.

From this correlation, many assume causation—from success to happiness. During my years as an executive, I found that people strongly believe that pay increases—especially big ones—will have a large and long-lasting effect on their job satisfaction. The data tell us a different story, however: Large wage increases have only a small and transitory effect on well-being. Researchers in 2017 tracked the pay and job satisfaction (measured on a 0–10 scale) of nearly 35,000 German workers over several years. The study found that the anticipation of a 100 percent pay bump increases job satisfaction by about a quarter of one digit in the year before the raise. The raise increases that satisfaction bump by another fifth of a digit. By the fourth year, the increase has fallen to less than a fifth in total.

In other words, say your job satisfaction is a six out of 10—not bad, but could be better. If your boss doubles your pay, it will get you to about 6.5, and then it will fall back to about 6.2. Maybe this isn't the best strategy to help you love your job.

And that doesn't even take into account the cost that increased job success can have on overall life satisfaction. In 2016, psychologists measured career success by asking 990 college educated full-time professionals to compare their career achievements to others'. They found that people generally enjoyed the money and status that relative success produced. However, success did not lead to total contentment: It indirectly chipped away at life satisfaction, likely via time constraints, stress, and impoverished social relationships.

Much stronger and more positive results emerge, however, when researchers reverse the order, looking not at success's effects on happiness, but happiness's effect on success. Scholars in 2005 surveyed hundreds of studies—including experiments to establish causality—and concluded that happiness leads to success in many realms of life, including marriage, friendship, health, income, and work performance.

One explanation might be that happiness makes us more attractive, so we are rewarded by others. Alternatively, happiness might make us more productive. Novel experimental research suggests both are true. For example, scholars in 2021 studied Chinese livestream web broadcasters, for whom voluntary viewer tips are the primary source of income. They found that when they showed more positive emotion, their tips immediately increased, suggesting that people who appear happy are rewarded in the market. Another experiment involved British test subjects engaging in a time-limited arithmetic task and math test. The researchers found that subjects who were shown a clip of a comedy movie beforehand were about 12 percent more productive on the task and test than those who weren't, and that the funnier they found the clip, the more productive they were.

Whether you are an employee or employer, it is a better investment to increase happiness at work and in life, rather than simply trying to increase measures of success.

The first thing to remember is that happiness requires balance. No matter how much you enjoy your work, overwork will become an obstruction to well-being. Researchers in 2020 studying 414 Iranian bank employees found that workaholic behavior (such as perfectionism and work addiction) strongly predicted workplace incivility (such as hostility, privacy invasion, exclusionary behavior, and gossiping). Workaholic behaviors also degraded the quality of family life (as measured in disagreement with statements such as "My involvement in work provides me with a sense of success; this, in turn, helps me to be a better person in my family").

You should guard against workaholism in yourself and help your friends and family who suffer from it. But just as important, employers should not encourage overwork—which will likely require effort and attention on their part, as research shows that executives generally underestimate employees' struggles with well-being.

Once work quantity is under control, happiness at work requires a sense of meaning and purpose. I have written in this column that the two key aspects of meaningful work are earned success and service to others. Earned success implies a sense of accomplishment and recognition for a job well done, while service to others requires knowledge of the real people who benefit from your work. Lots of research shows the importance of these work aspects. For example, Gallup has revealed that people who serve their communities and receive

recognition for it self-report significantly less stress and worry in their lives than those who do not (either because they don't serve their communities or do not receive recognition).

Meanwhile, the most meaningful jobs tend to be those that are the most service-oriented. According to 2016 research by the Pew Research Center, proportionally, more workers in nonprofit and government sectors—i.e., work that is generally service-oriented—said their jobs give them a sense of identity than did private-sector workers. It's harder to find the link to service in some professions than others, but it can usually be done. Years ago, I was working with a team of academic researchers creating policies for improved bank regulation. One scholar who was particularly passionate about the project told me he always remembered that his work mattered, because poor people need access to reasonably priced credit, and that requires less bureaucratic red tape.

Even if you struggle to see who benefits, because the people you touch with your work are very far away or your work touches them indirectly, try looking a little closer—maybe even in the next cubicle. You can always enjoy the effects of service by helping your colleagues, and there is clear evidence that supporting co-workers can help ease negative emotions at work.

Ultimately, although success and happiness are linked, the alchemy is mostly one-way—and not in the way that most people think. Working on your success to get happier is inefficient at best, and may blow up in your face and lead you to unhappiness. But working on your happiness gives you the best chance at getting both.

Even if all of this makes sense to you, you may still find yourself falling into old habits of seeking happiness via worldly success at work. Don't feel too bad—I do it too, even as a specialist in this field. Whenever I notice my hours creeping up to workaholic levels and my dreams of happiness revolving around some accomplishment, I like to reread a short story published in 1922 by Franz Kafka called “A Hunger Artist.” It features a man who starves himself in a cage for a living as a traveling carnival act. He is obsessed with his work and, as a perfectionist, seeks what he calls “flawless fasting.” The hunger artist is proud of his success, although he is always gloomy, and, Kafka writes, “if a good-natured man who felt sorry for him ever wanted to explain to him that his sadness probably came from his fasting ... the hunger artist responded with an outburst of rage.”

Over time, the hunger artist's act falls out of public favor. In desperation to resuscitate his flagging career, he tries fasting longer than he ever has before. Instead, he is utterly ignored, and sits alone in his cage. In the end, the hunger artist starves himself to death. In a twist of absurdism—we might even call it Kafkaesque—the protagonist admits just before expiring that the only reason he had engaged in his art was because he could not find any food to his liking.

I'm not that bad, of course, but I have a bit of a hunger artist in me, and you might too. Here's my advice: You won't find happiness by forgoing happiness. Don't starve yourself. Your odds of success will increase if you eat.

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