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Seven things employees want most to be happy at work

Experts say job satisfaction begins with respect and appreciation, not salary and perks.

By Marilyn Gardner | *Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

Ask bosses what makes employees happy at work, and many are likely to think in terms of tangible rewards: a good salary, a pleasant office, generous benefits.

Those play a role in job satisfaction, of course. But increasingly, workplace specialists are discovering that for many workers, the "happiness factor" depends heavily on intangibles, such as respect, trust, and fairness.

"Study after study has shown that it is the small things that make workers feel committed to an organization," says Barbara Glanz, an author specializing in workplace issues. "One study shows the top three things workers want are interesting work, full appreciation for the work they do, and a feeling of being in on things."

The percentage of people who say they like their jobs and find them satisfying is higher in the United States than in Europe, says Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a professor of psychology at Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, Calif., who writes and lectures on happiness.

He and others note that workplace happiness depends on two components – the individual and the institution.

"You can be, generally speaking, happy in your work but not happy in a specific company," says Sally Haver, senior vice president of The Ayers Group/Career Partners International in New York, "due to a variety of factors such as a bad boss, a bad corporate culture, or a colleague who makes your life miserable." At the same time, she adds, "Some people are unhappy 'situationally' and some are just systemically unhappy, no matter where they are or what they're doing."

Career specialists emphasize that happiness is highly individual. "People have very different definitions of what brings them happiness and satisfaction on the job," says Lynne Sarikas, director of the MBA Career Center at Northeastern University in Boston.

Even so, certain priorities remain constant in terms of what employees say makes them happy. Here are seven intangibles workers want most, according to experts:

1. APPRECIATION

Praise heads the list for many workers in the search for happiness.

"If the office is gorgeous, the pay is good, and the work is interesting, of course that helps," says Michal Ann Strahilevitz, a marketing professor at Golden Gate University in San Francisco. "However, there is one huge factor that does not cost an employer money: praise. So many supervisors go out of their way to let employees know what they have done wrong, but don't bother to congratulate and praise them for success. Praise does not cost anything to give, but its benefits on employee morale are priceless."

2. RESPECT

This attitude costs nothing and yet yields big dividends.

"The most important factor in keeping employees happy is treating them with fairness and respect," says Pamela Skillings, a career coach in Jackson Heights, N.Y. "People want to be paid what they're worth, treated like adults, and rewarded for their good work."

Those rewards can be simple and spontaneous. "A sincere thank you or short note often means a great deal when it is recognizing an accomplishment or specific effort," says Ms. Sarikas. She finds that job dissatisfaction escalates when employees are not treated with respect or feel that their work is not appreciated.

Andrea Kay, a career consultant in Cincinnati, finds that respecting employees' ideas and time, as well as their ability to make decisions and be creative, makes them want to stay. "My clients who are miserable are in companies with policies that focus solely on profits at the expense of people," she says.

3. TRUST

Going hand in hand with respect is trust. "You have to trust the people you work for, and enjoy the people you work with," says Julie Clarkson, assistant professor of business at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa.

In a nationwide survey of 500 employees about what matters most in their relationship with a manager, 90 percent of workers rank honesty, fairness, and trust as their top three needs, says Terry Bacon, author of "What People Want."

4. INDIVIDUAL GROWTH

What people also want is an opportunity to grow and learn on the job. "No matter how we make a living, each of us is nurtured by our own professional and personal growth," says Michael Neece, cofounder of Pongo.com, which provides résumé-writing services. "Employees want to understand how their efforts contribute to the business and want to feel that they are making a difference to their team, their department, and the company."

That is particularly true for Generation Y.

"Eighteen- to 30-year-olds are characterized by the desire to receive training, take on new challenges, expand their capabilities, and as a result, advance to new, more highly compensated roles," says Jenny Floren, founder of Experience Inc., in Boston, a provider of career services for college alumni. The focus for them is less about compensation and more about advancement, improved capabilities, and recognition of achievement marked by a new position.

"Offering Gen-Y employees a raise while keeping all other factors the same will not have the same impact as giving them new challenges," Ms. Floren says. "In many cases a raise alone could backfire and cause the Gen-Y employee to seek job satisfaction elsewhere."

For every generation, fair compensation remains important, of course. Clarkson calls pay a fairness issue that can make workers feel satisfied if it is fair and dissatisfied if it does not seem fair. But she finds that pay alone does not tend to make employees feel happy.

"The presence of money is a condition of work, and its absence is a demotivator," says Alan Weiss, an executive coach in East Greenwich, R.I. "But if you give more money to an unhappy employee, you merely have a wealthier, unhappy employee."

5. A GOOD BOSS

Bosses also play key roles in determining a worker's happiness factor. More than half of employees responding to an annual job-satisfaction survey by Yahoo! HotJobs admit that they don't leave companies, they leave bosses.

"Having a fair, sympathetic manager who makes employees feel valued is a crucial element to an employee's job satisfaction," says Tom Musbach, managing editor of Yahoo! HotJobs.

By contrast, if bosses aren't honest with workers, don't listen to them, and don't care about them, employees either leave or become disengaged in their work, says Terri Levine, president of Comprehensive Coaching U in North Wales, Pa.

Career specialists note that employee happiness is serious business – an essential consideration for managers who want to keep top talent.

In a recent survey by Robert Half International, 1,000 Gen-Yers ranked "working with a manager I can respect and learn from" as the most important aspect of their work environment.

6. COMPATIBLE CO-WORKERS

Working with people they enjoy was a close second.

"You need to feel good about the people you work with and the people you work for," Sarikas says. "You don't have to be best friends and probably shouldn't be, but you need to be able to respect them for their knowledge and experience as well as for their ethics. You want people who can challenge you but also listen to your ideas, people you can laugh with, people who share a vision for the work you do together."

Similarly, employees need to find an organization where the corporate culture fits their personality and work style. For some, that includes work-life balance.

"People don't leave their personal lives at the door when they come to work," says Lyn Freundlich, director of human resources at Third Sector New England, a nonprofit management service in Boston. "They need as much flexibility as possible. When the connection between family and work is recognized, we get more out of employees and they're happier."

7. A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Above all, career counselors emphasize the importance of doing something you love and having a sense of purpose.

"Most people find happiness at work when they feel connected to the core purpose of the organization," Clarkson says. "When we are able to find work that uses our capabilities and allows us to address important values in our life's purpose, it is the best way to find happiness at work."

Whatever an individual's personal recipe for happiness on the job, Jeff Garten, author of the forthcoming book "Career Contentment," urges people to take the long view.

"Career contentment is different from job satisfaction," he says. "It is a deeper state of mind about one's direction, fulfillment, calling, engagement. Job satisfaction comes and goes with each job, but career contentment is a lifelong quest and mind-set."

When John Izzo, president of The Izzo Group, workplace consultants in Vancouver, Canada, asked 250 people to reflect on their long careers, he heard a recurring theme about what gave them the deepest satisfaction and contentment.

"Many told me, 'The corner office and status, now that I look back, really had no meaning. But the feeling of making a difference did,'" he says.

Mr. Izzo adds, "It was what they gave back that made the greatest happiness for them."