

## Workplace satisfaction

# Workplace satisfaction: chasing happiness is a tough job

26 March 2018 - 05:57 Amanda Visser



Office optimism: Employees who have healthy support structures are able to build positive relationships, develop resilience and stamina and experience positive emotions. Picture: 123RF/ WARRENGOLDSWAIN

SA is ranked 105th out of 156 countries in the UN World Happiness report, dropping four spots since 2017. The countries with the happiest people, despite their highest tax rates, are Finland, followed by Norway and Denmark.

To determine the happiest country, criteria including social support, law enforcement, political trust, healthcare and education are measured. The UN introduced Happiness Day in 2013 to recognise the importance of happiness in the lives of people. While several happiness indices have been developed, there is no official happiness index for workplaces.

Kerstin Jatho, an organisational behaviour specialist and positive psychology practitioner at 4Seeds, believes this is because all sectors of society would have to agree on common measurement parameters, which has not yet happened.

"Happiness in the workplace is about building a workplace that is healthy in physical, cognitive, emotional and psychological levels. Where people cultivate compassion towards one another, they build positive relationships," she says.

When employees have healthy support structures they are able to develop resilience and stamina, volunteer to assist others and experience more positive emotions than negative ones. When people are encouraged to utilise their strengths, they can bring all of themselves to work, she says.

Academics André Spicer and Carl Cederström wrote in a Harvard Business Review article that happiness as a way to boost productivity seems to have gained "increased traction" in corporate circles.

They are, however, not convinced that encouraging happiness at work is always a good idea. Spicer, a professor of organisational behaviour at Cass Business School in London, and Cederström, associate professor at Stockholm University, say there is no real measure of happiness. "Measuring happiness is about as easy as taking the temperature of the soul or determining the exact colour of love," they write.

Jatho says although "happy workplaces" are scarce, managers are willing to admit the effect of unhappiness of their employees. She refers to research about the cost of absenteeism, losing talent, or poor performance and the link to an "unhappy workforce".

Some of the research found that positive organisational behaviour increases work performance 4%-15% and Gallup research showed that happiness reduces staff turnover 31%-50%. It also reduces work-related accidents by 61%.

The professors refer to "a stream of research" which show contradictory results about the relationship between happiness and productivity. One study on British supermarkets suggests the more miserable employees are, the better the profits.

Although there are studies that point in an opposite direction, they conclude that the correlation between happiness and productivity in the workplace is at best "weak".

The factors that may cause unhappiness are plentiful. It all starts with the "profit focus", where people feel making money is far more important than their wellbeing. Employees feel they do not have a purpose, are not getting support or feedback from their supervisors, or there are procedures and policies perceived as unfair.

Jatho says there is a difference between unhappiness and being disengaged at work. Disengagement refers to a psychological state where employees choose not to bring all of themselves to work.

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*Kerstin Jatho*

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"A disengaged person has low energy levels and performs tasks in a robotic, passive and detached manner," she says. This is known as "brain shedding". The body is present but the brain is absent.

Unhappiness can be defined as an imbalance of the physical, emotional and psychological functioning of a person. An unhappy employee can lack meaning, purpose, positive relationships and engagement.

"Unhappiness results in a person not utilising their strengths and thus not optimising their fullest potential, something that is highly necessary if one wants to be fully engaged in life," Jatho says.

Spicer says happiness can be exhausting. "People have been pointing out that the demand to be happy brings with it a heavy burden, a responsibility that can never be perfectly fulfilled. Essentially, when happiness becomes a duty, it can make people feel worse if they fail to accomplish it."

People are very aware of the pain, discomfort and cost of unhappiness on their lives. However, many suppress it in the hope it will go away, says Jatho. "Unhappiness often leads to health issues such as high blood pressure, addiction and mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety disorders.

"Being mindful that happiness is not, and never should be, an end goal but a continuous ever evolving journey can help people deal with their happiness on a daily basis, rather than saving it for a rainy day."

To raise the level of happiness means acquiring and practising life skills that build resilience and enable you to bounce back faster from challenges, she says.

Spicer and Cederström believe there is a strong case for rethinking expectations that work should always make us happy. "It can be exhausting, make us overreact, drain our personal life of meaning, increase our vulnerability, make us more gullible and even lonely," they warn.

"Pretending otherwise can make it worse."

Finding happiness in the workplace is not a "quick-fix approach", says Jatho. It requires time, dedication and patience, like any change process does.