

# **Happiness and Productivity in the Workplace**

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*In a survey of 850 students at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, students were asked four questions: What is happiness, what makes you happy, what makes you happy in the work place, and does happiness impact job performance? The responses, while remaining fairly consistent with current trends, provided some insight into one sector of the general public's perceptions of what the ideal life would be and how this ideal would impact job performance.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In a survey of 850 students at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, students were asked four questions: What is happiness, what makes you happy, what makes you happy in the work place, and does happiness impact job performance? The responses, while remaining fairly consistent with current trends, provided some insight into one sector of the general public's perceptions of what the ideal life would be and how this ideal would impact job performance.

The majority of respondents concluded that a happy employee would be a more productive employee than an unhappy employee. Most respondents indicated that if employees had no worries, they would focus their attention on their jobs rather than on other aspects of their lives such as having enough money.

Many of the respondents indicated their belief that respect, compensation, and an idyllic personal life would benefit employers without questioning whether an individual is capable of being happy 24 hours a day.

## **Happiness Survey**

Between 2003 and 2011, more than 850 students enrolled in a Principles of Management course at Cal Poly Pomona were asked four questions relating to happiness:

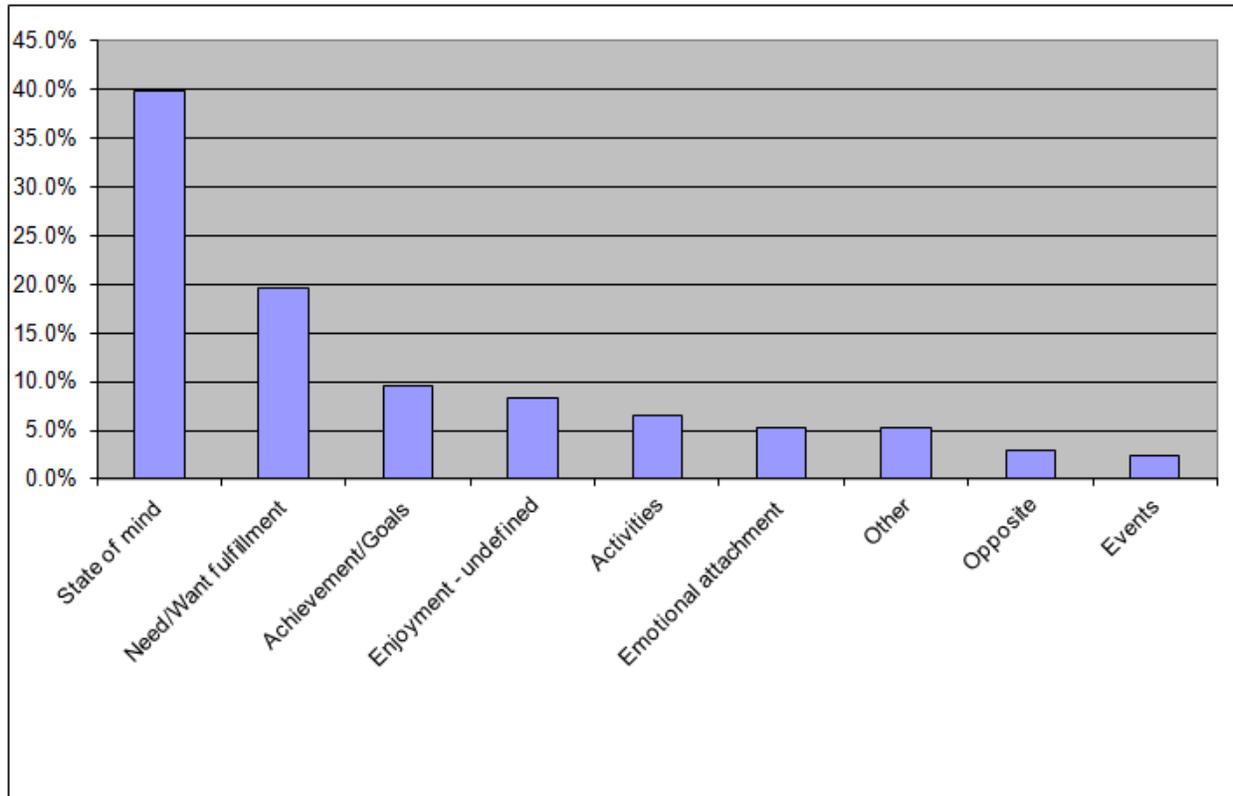
1. How do you define happiness?
2. What makes you happy?
3. What does the "Pursuit of Happiness" mean?
4. Is a happy employee a more productive employee?

The following is a brief summary of their responses.

*Question 1: How do you define happiness?*

It would seem that happiness is something everyone wants, but cannot precisely define. The answers to this survey question have a wide range of variation. It was difficult to classify the definitions in a clear-cut fashion, since many were vague or provided several ideas. Some took the route of defining happiness in terms of what it is *not*, such as "the absence of sadness." Others were more explicit about how the emotion can be recognized or what causes it. The responses were separated into several general categories, as depicted in the following graph:

**FIGURE 1**  
**STUDENT DEFINITION OF HAPPINESS**



State of Mind – This was the largest category and is similar to Need/Want fulfillment (see below). The difference is that this group focused on the feeling associated with happiness, rather than the source of that emotion. Most of the respondents mentioned a feeling of contentment, satisfaction, or peace of mind unrelated to a specific cause. This feeling is usually indicated to be the result of an absence of problems, or a spirit of harmony with one's life or surroundings.

Need/Want Fulfillment – This group was more specific, indicating that happiness is brought about by one's needs and desires being fulfilled. The assumption here, apparently, is that a need or desire creates unhappiness, which turns into happiness by default whenever the need or desire has been satisfied. These needs and wants could be physical, emotional, material, or otherwise. The responses generally do not distinguish as to how those needs are satisfied, whether by personal efforts, someone else, or by chance. Also, there is no middle ground, only two possible states – happy or unhappy.

Achievement/Goals – This category delves further in that the need for achievement goes beyond basic necessities, and that one's own efforts are the key indicator of happiness. These respondents seem to

recognize a source of happiness that comes from clearly defined goals and in the struggle to successfully achieve these goals they go beyond merely satisfying basic needs and wants, and involve efforts toward material belongings as well as self-actualization.

Enjoyment - A few defined happiness as just a general good feeling such as "whatever makes me smile." These people can recognize the emotion of happiness but have obviously not thought too deeply about exactly where it evolves.

Activities – This classification centers on what a person does that makes him or her happy. In this case, it is clear that happiness is associated with certain enjoyable activities such as sports, entertainment, hobbies, etc.

Emotional attachment – Another group was especially oriented toward the feeling of love, as the result of having friends and family. These students felt that a large part of happiness is being closely connected to the lives of others.

Events – A similar category to Activities, but this one associates happiness with specific events, such as getting married, having a baby, graduation, concerts, and so on. Presumably these are people who derive good feelings from memories and being part of momentous occasions.

Opposite – A small number of respondents simply defined happiness as the opposite of sadness or something similar. The problem here again is the assumption that there are only two possible emotions, with happiness being simply the default condition in the absence of any other.

Other – Every other answer given was included here. Some were just vague. Others were unique and unrelated to the other categories, such as "high level of serotonin".

The following were a few other definitions of happiness: Happiness is defined in the dictionary as enjoying, showing, or marked by pleasure, satisfaction, or joy ("Happiness," n.d., line 2). Realistically, happiness cannot be accurately defined with a universal meaning because people perceive "happiness" differently. For example, some people consider confidence as the key to accomplish happiness, while the others believe that happiness is a state of mind, of feeling content. Of course, there are countless other approaches people may find acceptable to attain happiness.

According to students in the Principles of Management course, the meaning of happiness seems to involve these criteria: fulfillment, satisfaction, independence, contentment, success, love, and confidence. One definition of the meaning of happiness is provided by a student, SW, and represents 70% of the answers given overall:

"Happiness is being satisfied with all aspects of your life. It includes economical, physical, emotional, and other elements. One does not have to be rich to be happy, but financial stability is a key. It would be very difficult to be happy if you constantly have to worry about where your next meal is coming from. Likewise, the other aspects of your life need not to be perfect, but rather satisfactory."

There are some extreme cases in which 2 out of 10 people explained something other than those criteria to fulfill their meanings of happiness. As an example, MW stated that he preferred a simple satisfaction method such as hanging out in front of a television on a Sunday: "Through my eyes, happiness would be a cool Sunday afternoon sitting on the couch with a cold drink in hand watching football for a couple of hours. I would not care about anything except for the game on television." Not everyone desires the same kind of happiness because some may be easily satisfied with the simplest things, and some may find happiness in a more complicated way. Why do people prefer happiness through more complicated ways? They strive to reach higher in life, and prefer to have challenges along the way because nothing seems to meet their standards for satisfaction. Happiness then results from achieving those challenges. Some people find overcoming obstacles and challenges more satisfying than following written rules or routines. Again, if satisfaction results from a solution, happiness occurs.

Happiness is often related to money and satisfaction, although material things can only bring momentary happiness. Such cases can be described as "liquid static". Happiness occurs differently in terms of different periods of people's lives. For instance, a 5-year old can be happy if given a piece of

candy, but a 35-year old is unlikely to find happiness through that same piece of candy. In order to lighten the smile of a 35-year old, a luxury car would most likely do the job in terms of material things. Although material things satisfy happiness, they do not last forever when wants are constantly changing with trends and time. Time causes instability and uncertainty in the definition of happiness, which always distinguishes between short- and long-term happiness. Long-term happiness is not as easy to achieve since the process takes time and feelings to develop. Companionship is a perfect example of a long-term relationship because effort, time, and emotion make a significant contribution to that relationship. Effort is how much time a person puts into a relationship; time is how long it takes to develop; and emotion amounts to a long-term relationship with a dash of passion. Most students find relationships of family/friends/companions as the definition of happiness, along with other important criteria such as wealth, confidence, and comforts to enhance their happiness. When everything is successfully achieved and placed, they would consider themselves as “happy”.

Now the happiness to people has been defined briefly, let us take a look at what happiness is in a religion. Happiness in the Islam religion focuses on the inner peace of a person, and that is how it is formed: “Happiness is a feeling that resides in the heart. It is characterized by peace of mind, tranquility, a sense of well-being, and a relaxed disposition. It comes as a result of proper behavior, both inward and outward, and is inspired by strong faith.” (“Happiness in Islam”, 2010, para. 2).

It is believed that wealth and material things are not the only tools to bring someone happiness, even though they are the causes of some temporary happiness. Of course, money solves many financial problems which cause countless headaches, but it will not bring inner peace to develop stability emotionally. In the Islam religion, wealth is not the main cause of happiness:

“From an Islamic viewpoint, happiness is not restricted to material prosperity, though material reasons make up some of the elements of happiness. The material aspect is merely a means, but not the end in itself. Thus, the focus in attaining happiness is on nonmaterial, more abstract concerns, like the positive effects of good behavior.” (Ullah, “Concepts of Happiness in Islam”, n.d., para 2).

Whether the definition of happiness comes from religious point of view or people, it sends the same message that money cannot bring long-term happiness; and everybody views happiness in their own way. On the Abramyan webpage, happiness is defined as “peace of mind”, which interestingly relies on education, environment, and an individual’s mentality (Abramyan, 2013).

In life, many people desire to be worry-free in regards to money or education, and to work instead toward a long vacation in a deserted paradise. They will define those relaxing moments as happiness since they are away in a peaceful place rather than staying in a hectic environment, where worries are involved.

Happiness can be achieved from someone else’s happiness, especially loved ones. For example, our parents sacrifice so much to attain better educations, shelter, luxuries, and time in order for their children just to grow up happily. In most parents’ definition of happiness, they wish for their children to smile externally and internally, knowing that it brings a peace of mind to them. In the survey of business students, one student, BQ, responds that, “sometimes when a person does something for someone else [it] will give happiness.” Happiness to her is simply succeeding in finding happiness from her loved ones in giving and receiving.

It is uncanny how happiness can be found, such as working overtime to earn extra money to afford luxuries for our loved ones. Happiness is not formed with just one incident; instead it builds up with each incident to make someone happy. An example from the Self creation is a perfect example of how each layer has its purpose, and then it comes out as a whole to form happiness: “Your core motivation to be happy is surrounded by layers of other desires. Like an onion, you must first peel away the layers to reach the core.” (“Getting Happy”, n.d. para 5). Let's look at an example.

I want a car.  
Why do you want that?

So I can get to work.  
Why do you want that?  
So I can earn enough money for a house.  
Why do you want that?  
So I can have a place I call my own.  
Why do you want that?  
So I can feel free to do with it what I will.  
Why do you want that?  
Because when I feel free, I feel happy.

The ways happiness is achieved are somehow all related to each other because one thing leads to another, and a happy result occurs.

How do you achieve happiness in life? This is a question that people have been asking for years. The key elements of happiness in life are as follows: realizing enduring happiness does not come from making it; take control of your time; act happy; seek work and leisure that engages your skills; join the movement; get rest; give priority to close relationships; focus beyond the self; count your blessings; and take care of the soul.

Adapting to change when you seek happiness does not guarantee happiness. According to one student, EP, when you become rich one day and you have all the money in the world you can still be unhappy: "...materialistic things do not lead to happiness, they only give the impression that one is happy, that is until that person gets tired of that material." When you have all your favorite belongings in the world but you are missing an element outside of what you can buy, you become unhappy. The bottom line is that people desire what they cannot have, and then eventually consider themselves as not able to find unhappiness. Happiness may be achieved by being an optimist, who thinks life is a God-given gift and that everything happens for a good reason. Within those reasons, there is a lesson being taught on how to become a happier person as time progresses.

Time is of the essence to most people. When you master your schedule and time, you feel a sense of completeness resulting in happiness. We often underestimate the importance of time; therefore, we miss a lot of events due to being late or forgetting completely about the event. Once an individual has everything on track he or she will feel very comfortable.

Our mood everyday influences our lives. If a person is unhappy he will show it on his face. This is the state of mind you will be in when you are unhappy. If a person is happy all the time, he will show it also but, in a more cheerful manner. How do you achieve the happy look? Talk with a smile on your face and be cheerful, optimistic, and outgoing. What you see is what you get, so follow through on your happy, positive emotions. Seek work and leisure that engages your skills. When you are in a happy zone you are said to be in the "flow" of things. The most expensive forms of leisure do not provide enough flow as basketball, gardening, or tennis, which give you a better flow.

Exercise is a very important part of life. Not only does exercise condition your body, but it also conditions your mind. Exercise also fights depression and anxiety. A healthy mind resides in a healthy body. Get plenty of rest each night. It is imperative that a person gets 7-9 hours of sleep each night to fully recover the body's energy. If a person does not achieve this goal, he or she will be fatigued and agitated. Even small doses of rest such as meditation or prayer replenish the mind, body, and soul.

Close relationships are almost always overlooked. When you say no to an occasion with your spouse, mate, siblings, or parents it will hurt you in the long run. Mishandling of relationships can and will turn into breakups or unevenness of relationships. Do not only think about yourself. Lend a hand to a neighbor at times. You will feel better for helping someone out and you will do well much more. Your good deeds will make you a much better person.

Keep a journal of all the good deeds and blessings you have received each day. This will help you understand how good your life is and how fortunate you are every day. The journal could be about your friends, family, classmates, senses, etc. This is to reflect on the positive aspects of your life. (Myers, 1993). Lastly, take care of the soul. In study after study, religious people are found to be more in touch

with themselves and their souls. They cope better when they are in pain. Faith provides a support group, a second family, and a way out of personal crises (<http://www.davidmyers.org/happiness/research.html>).

*Question 2: What makes you happy?*

**TABLE 1  
COMMON STUDENT RESPONSES TO “WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY”**

Accomplishments	Places (beach, mountains, amusement park, Las Vegas)
Family	Having fun
Wealth/Money	Children
Love	Solitude/peace/relaxation
Rest/sleep	Vacation/travel
Family	Job
Food	Outdoors/nature
Entertainment	Reading/writing
Friends	Video games
Hobby	Smile/laughter
Music	Free will/independence
Health	Shopping
Education/school/good grades	Performing (singing, dancing)
A peaceful place	Freedom from worry or conflict
Car/driving	Possessions
Boyfriend/girlfriend/spouse	Elevators/escalators
Reward/recognition	Computers
A nice day/good weather	Surprises/gifts
Friendly people	Rain
Helping others	Team/group
God/church	Meeting people
Pets	Socializing/party
Sports/exercise	

There is not too much to be said about this list except that there is some commonality, perhaps because of the narrow age range and shared experience of college students.

*Question 3: What does the "Pursuit of Happiness" mean?*

Very few students had a clear idea of what this meant. Most interpreted the phrase literally as the process of attaining happiness, which makes them happy. Some related it to equal opportunity or the American Dream. No one pointed out the fact that this phrase comes, not from the Bill of Rights, but the document that founded our nation - the Declaration of Independence:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. --That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...” (1776, para. 2).

The original draft referred to the "Pursuit of Property", but that was later changed (Davis, 2009, para. 4). The Constitution was written to guarantee that these rights could not be taken away from its citizens except by due process of law.

It was difficult to categorize the responses, but separated them into two groups –those that seemed to have some relation to a government-guaranteed or God-given right, and those that did not. About 10% of the total fell into the first category.

*Question 4: Is a happy employee a more productive employee?*

Most of the answers generally favored happy employees as being more productive. Less than 10% did not agree that happy workers were necessarily better workers. Common reasons given to justify higher productivity were higher motivation, more energy and greater enthusiasm. Obviously, an unhappy or disgruntled employee can be a problem, but most students felt that the happier they were, in terms of being treated well, paid well, and enjoying the work and environment, the harder they would work. This implies a happiness scale that is continuous and a relationship that is linear. On the other hand, if we look at the responses to question 2, on what makes them happy, the students mention mostly items that exist outside of the workplace: friends, family, hobbies, love, etc. Only a few of them, such as need fulfillment, wealth, and accomplishment, can be linked to the workplace. It would seem that most people would be happiest away from work. It seems logical that if only the work-related factors apply then more productive effort will lead to greater happiness, but is the converse true? Does greater happiness lead to greater effort? One could hypothesize a causal relationship between the level of happiness (if it can be measured) and the level of productivity and the test for evidence of causality. It is possible that the causality goes the other way – happiness is a by-product of hard work.

What exactly does it take to instill satisfaction in employees? When students in a Principles of Management course at Cal Poly Pomona interviewed managers at various companies in search of the answer to this very same question, the replies generally fell into two categories: monetary and environmental satisfaction. Surprisingly, 70% of the responses indicated that the work environment is a much more significant indicator of employee happiness than a larger paycheck. For those that based the happiness of employees on monetary factors, many of the criteria revolved around not only the amount of money earned but also the frequency with which raises were offered or granted. Many of the replies also suggested that benefit packages (dental, medical, etc.) were a major factor in employees' happiness. Also, the hours that employees worked, both in quantity and level of reasonability, factored into the level of satisfaction. For instance, those that had the idealistic "9-5" day were much happier than those who were given graveyard shifts.

"Whatever your personal reasons for working, the bottom line, however, is that almost everyone works for money. Whatever you call it: compensation, salary, bonuses, benefits or remuneration, money pays the bills. Money provides housing, gives children clothing and food, sends teens to college, and allows leisure activities, and eventually, retirement. To underplay the importance of money and benefits as motivation for people who work is a mistake." (Heathfield, 2006).

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study has shown that happiness is an emotion that is difficult for people to precisely define, even though everyone seems to have some idea of what it means to them. It was easier for students to give examples of what makes them feel happy than it was to describe the feeling itself. Most of the respondents referred to happiness as a qualitative variable rather than a quantitative one – as a condition that is either on or off rather than one that is measurable. Hardly anyone described it as a relative state, as in "more happy" or "not happy enough". On the other hand, when answering question 4, most inferred that there were degrees of happiness, just as there are different levels of productivity.

The obvious problem in studying the effect of happiness on productivity (or any other variable) is how to measure it. Another question is how to define the scope of what we are measuring. Is happiness a short-term phenomenon, as indicated by responses such as "whatever makes me smile", or a long-term and more life-encompassing one as revealed in answers like "accomplishing career goals"? In studying

whether happy employees are better workers we must also distinguish between factors that management has some control over and those they do not. There is a difference between an employee who is "happy" with his job, in terms of pay, recognition, empowerment, etc. and one that derives happiness from friends, family, sports, and so on. Also, we cannot assume that just because a person works harder or is more motivated that they will be more productive. It would seem that education, experience, and available technology would be much more important factors.

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