

# ARTICLE HAPPINESS: THE NEXT BIG JOB SEARCH METRIC?

By Stephen Fischer, Career Counselor, EPFL Career Center

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According to *Forbes* magazine, the “happiness business” is now here to stay, with nearly 8,000 researchers linked to the leading research institute on its importance in Rotterdam alone.<sup>1</sup> In *The Guardian*, Kristine Wong writes that happiness may be “the new business metric” by which firms attempt to understand productivity, since there seems to be very close ties between poor job satisfaction, loss of productivity and stress-related illness for those employees who are deeply unhappy at work.

“All businesses should care about happiness,” said Mark Williamson, founder and director of the London-based Action for Happiness Project. “The happiness of a company’s people is vital to their business success.” Companies with happier staff outperform their competitors, he says, and happier employees miss less work, are more committed and productive, and are also more creative and contribute more to successful teamwork.<sup>2</sup> You should also care about happiness as you

begin your job search—your own: focus on finding the best environment where you will feel motivated and valued, since for most of us, work is central to how we spend our time, and therefore plays an essential role in our well-being. A few weeks ago, two recent PhD graduates in chemistry with similar profiles each came to the Career Center to prepare for upcoming job interviews. One had applied to a multinational tobacco company for a post in its research center and the other for an R&D position with a major agricultural chemicals company.

The first was enthusiastic about the “good science” possible in state-of-the-art facilities, with top-notch colleagues and a seemingly limitless budget on offer. In addition, he felt

**YOU SHOULD ALSO CARE ABOUT HAPPINESS AS YOU BEGIN YOUR JOB SEARCH**

that even as a non-smoker, doing research on improving health by seeking viable alternatives to burning tobacco via a new line of e-cigarettes,

more than satisfied his conscience. The company asked if he had any ethical qualms about working for a tobacco company, and he could clearly say, “no.” On the contrary, he wanted to contribute to such laudatory efforts. While I might have made different choices in his situation, I certainly admired him for having gone into this issue with a clear heart and mind.

The second graduate, however, was not particularly at ease with her choice of potential employer, because it was directly linked to the “agri-biz” production of food, whereas her own choice was to buy only organic,

### ASK YOURSELF IF YOU WOULD BE PROUD TO TELL YOUR FRIENDS YOU WORKED THERE, AND IF NOT, WHY APPLY?

locally grown products. She worried about the negative environmental impacts from the use of pesticides and defoliants on water systems, which she had studied extensively. As for the company’s stated mission of “providing food security,” she believed there were a wide range of viable non-chemical alternatives.

Would it be possible to change the way the industry operates from the inside? We agreed that it was unrealistic to imagine having any real influence in the first few years, and meanwhile, she would probably be unhappy. Maybe it would be better to promote organic farming instead, she mused, to work for an agency like the International Fund for Agricultural Development, or to still seek an R&D position, but with a smaller entity where she might impact company policy. My advice was for her to reflect seriously on the conflict between her personal values and those of this industry, and to cancel that job interview with the agrochemical giant.

Of the hundreds of young professionals we saw in the past year at the Career Center, what made these two stand out was their focus on their beliefs and standards while applying for jobs, not just matching qualifications to responsibilities or “shopping for a brand.”

This extends beyond whether you can have flexi-time, or earn a high salary; ethics, work culture and management styles should all be considered. To get a glimpse of a company’s culture, read reviews or visit the company if you can, but otherwise connect with current or former employees via LinkedIn for an insider’s view. Ask yourself if you would be proud to tell your friends you worked there, and if not, why apply?

In a blogpost on [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com) careers section, Steve Shaward wrote, “...if you live a life that is in harmony with your values (and work’s a huge part of that), you’re more likely to experience higher levels of happiness, purpose and satisfaction.”<sup>3</sup>

Surprisingly many people are either unsure of what their core values are, or feel they are irrelevant to their job search, focusing instead on lifestyle issues such as reputation of the company, job title, location and remuneration.

Shaward notes that people who are completely absorbed by what they are doing tend to be more satisfied than those who are not, which

**HERE’S A LITTLE SONG I WROTE,  
YOU MIGHT WANT TO SING IT NOTE FOR  
NOTE,  
DON’T WORRY, BE HAPPY**

**IN EVERY LIFE WE HAVE SOME TROUBLE,  
WHEN YOU WORRY YOU MAKE IT DOUBLE  
DON’T WORRY, BE HAPPY**

**Bob Marley  
(but made famous by Bobby McFerrin)**

implies that you should carefully choose not just the company but also the role which fits you best. Equally important is the image you project to the recruiter. The key skills you emphasize on your CV, how you express your motivation in your letter, and how you present your priorities during the interview all need to be consistent with your personal values.

Values are not the same from one person to another, of course, nor should they be ranked (eco-sensibility is not a priori better than being ambitious), he explains. If you believe that everyone should consider the needs of others at the same level as their own, for example, you may want to focus on companies with proven CSR engagement. If you wish to work for Big Pharma, but you are unwilling to experiment on animals, focus on jobs in other types of R&D units.

Failing to prioritize a match between your beliefs and the operating principles of your future employer can lead to obtaining a job where you will become increasingly disenchanted and eventually have to seek a new opportunity.

You may be doomed to repeat the experience, however, if you haven't taken the time to identify exactly what defines your self to yourself (and by extension, to your close friends and family), and acting upon this.

Global long-term studies confirm the links between job dissatisfaction and serious illness, yet highlight the fact that literally millions of people stay in jobs they hate, usually for the benefits. In Switzerland, 34% of workers report experiencing chronic or periodic stress at work, which is one of the main causes of "bore-out" and "burn-out," and at the root of numerous health issues.<sup>4</sup> As a group of Lancaster University researchers put it, "Even a modest decrease in job satisfaction can lead to burn-out of considerable clinical importance."<sup>5</sup>

Employees with low job satisfaction will lack motivation, have increased anxiety and feelings of lower self-worth, which tend to decrease their engagement and thus put them at risk of being fired. This can take the form of broken sleep patterns creating fatigue, faulty reasoning, and numerous psycho-social negative impacts. Stress-induced illnesses also lead to chronic absences and long-term claims on health insurance, too: a double loss for the company.<sup>6</sup> Worse, individuals who "survive" in a bad situation rather than "thrive" in a positive one

may accept this as their status quo, stagnate or even risk becoming unemployable, due to a serious deficit of self-esteem and confidence. They are also apt to carry this negativity into their non-work relationships, potentially creating a vicious cycle.

It may be a case of "chicken-and-egg," but clearly you are more likely to be dissatisfied in a place where you do not feel aligned with the company's priorities. If you are a perfect fit in terms of qualifications for a job you know you will hate, or with a company you do not respect, my advice is to keep looking. Why invest time and energy in a negative? With more than 45'500 companies listed in global stock exchanges alone<sup>7</sup> there will be many other options and a better, if not perfect, match elsewhere.

Promoting well-being in the workplace is a demanding challenge for both employers and governments, but in the end, also the responsibility of each of us. You should focus throughout your career in prospering as a person, not just as a "salaryman" to use the Japanese phrase. Seek the best possible environment to contribute your talent, your energy and your time while growing professionally and feeling secure, valued and worthwhile. We all have a vested interest in buying shares in the "happiness business!"

*"Recently, a critical mass of research has provided what might be the most basic and irrefutable argument in favor of happiness: happiness and good health go hand-in-hand. Indeed, scientific studies have been finding that happiness can make our hearts healthier, our immune systems stronger, and our lives longer."*

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<sup>1-7</sup>References available on [www.forum-epfl.ch](http://www.forum-epfl.ch)