

Companies are going to have to demonstrate, and communicate, their loyalty to employees — and not only to those they find exceptionally valuable. Workers draw conclusions about the company's values by observing how it treats others. And companies must find ways to let employees know they are valued as individuals and their views are sought and respected, in order to create a sense of participation and ownership. When the time comes for

them, sacrifices must be shared equitably. Forcing some to bear a disproportionate share of the burden creates a fundamental mistrust that erodes loyalty.

All in all, loyalty among employees has become an increasingly valuable asset — and one that in the present environment, is hard to achieve. Companies will have to make major efforts if they are to gain the necessary commitment, but the results will be worthwhile.

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THE AMERICAN WORKER: HOW WE FEEL ABOUT OUR JOBS

By Laura Kalb and Larry Hugick

Overall job satisfaction levels have actually been quite stable over the past three decades: More than three-fourths of those employed in 1949, 1963, 1973 said they were satisfied with their job. Today, four in five employed adults are either very satisfied or mostly satisfied (General Social Survey, 1990). In a recent Gallup survey for the Ricoh Corporation, most office workers claimed they had it as good or better than their peers — half believing they are as happy as other people working in their profession, and four in ten thinking they are happier.

Most Americans, however, do not regard their work situation as ideal, and don't feel they have chosen a profession that suits them perfectly. Many fell into their current work situation almost by chance. Only two in five working adults say they made a conscious choice and followed a definite plan when getting started in their present career or job (National Career Development Association, 1989). The most recent Gallup Poll on work issues found that, while 89% expressed some level of satisfaction with their work, only 28% were completely satisfied. Furthermore, half say that if they were just starting out and could choose their life's work over again, they would choose a different line of work (Accountants on Call, 1988).

Job satisfaction varies by age. Older workers tend to be more committed to working and more established in their careers and are, then, more satisfied. Nearly twice as many workers over the age of 50 as under 30 report being completely satisfied with their present job (Gallup Poll, 1989). In a recent Time/CNN survey of 18 to 29 year olds only about half (47%) claimed to be completely or very satisfied. But greater job discontent among younger workers is nothing new. Throughout recent history surveys have found the lowest levels of job satisfaction among the youngest segment of the working population.

The steady increase in the number of women joining the workforce has been the most significant employment trend of the past two decades, yet it is striking how similar women workers' attitudes are to those of their male colleagues. Equivalent proportions of men and women report complete satisfaction with their job, even though women generally earn less than men who work in similar occupations.

Looking beyond overall job satisfaction, large majorities of American workers are generally satisfied with the company they work for, the kind of work they do, and their boss or supervisor. More report being completely satisfied with their work (41%) and their boss (40%) than with their company (30%). Once again, older workers are more content with their working situation. Fully half say they are completely satisfied with their choice of work. Slightly fewer claim an equally high level of satisfaction with their direct supervisor (46%), and their current employer (42%) (Gallup Poll, 1989).

Sources of Satisfaction

What is it that makes work rewarding? Why do seven in ten tell us that they would continue to work, even if they could obtain enough money to live comfortably without having to work? Almost everyone has a sense of pride in the work he or she does — regardless of what that work is. More than four in five manual laborers and people who only work part-time say they have a great deal of pride in their work. Fully half say that the most important thing in a job is that the work be important and give a feeling of accomplishment. High salaries and chances for advancement are the top priority only half as often (General Social Survey, 1990). Money surely isn't unimportant. But the extent to which doing worthwhile work is given a priority over salary considerations suggests that, unless pay is unreasonably low, the perceived importance of one's work and the sense of accomplishment it brings are key. A majority get some sense of personal identity from working, fewer think of their job as just a living.

Workers also positively view the people and companies for whom they are currently working. According to the 1990 Accountants on Call survey, half believe that their employer treats its staff fairly and honestly almost all the time. Employers also get glowing reviews in the areas of listening to employee concerns and problems, running things efficiently, encouraging workers to make suggestions and decisions, and recognizing and praising a job well done. A majority say their skills are being well utilized (NCDA, 1989). Once again, women hold views similar to men's — even though lower paying support positions are filled predominantly by women.

Specific aspects of the job that most satisfy today's workers are the opportunity for contact with other people, the chance to do work that makes a contribution, the flexibility of the work schedule, the amount of job security, and proximity to home. Nearly nine in ten say they are mostly or completely pleased with these features of their current position (Gallup Poll, 1989). While workers tend to be satisfied in many regards, many still wish for more. And those who feel they have an opportunity to get promoted and the chance to use their own initiative tend to be most satisfied with both their current job and career (Gallup Poll, 1989).

Problem Areas

There are, however, some looming problems. About one-quarter of working adults are dissatisfied with their salary level, their opportunities for promotion, their benefits package, and the amount of on-the-job pressure. How much stress one feels at work impacts strongly on job satisfaction. And work-related stress affects more than just job satisfaction. Between one-fifth and one-quarter say that occupational pressure has interfered with their ability to do their job and with relationships outside of work, and has even affected their physical health (NCDA, 1989). Furthermore, fully one-third have experienced substantial conflict between the demands of their work and their personal life. Only one-quarter see no conflict.

Baby Boomers and Baby Busters

Working adults over age 50 are happier, feel less pressure and more appreciated. Those under 50 really break into two distinct groups, with quite different experiences. Most between 30 and 49 belong to the massive baby boom generation. This generation has consistently taxed society's resources from the public schools and the higher education system, on to the housing and job markets. Baby boomers are crowding each other for good jobs and promotions in the workplace. Many have had to settle for jobs they see as below their capabilities. They will surely pressure Social Security and health care when they reach retirement age.

The so-called "baby bust" generation — those under 30 — hasn't experienced this crowding. Its disadvantages are mostly those that have always plagued young workers — inexperience, lack of credentials, and unhappiness with entry level positions. Though baby boomers and baby busters are both significantly less satisfied with their jobs and their careers than older workers, feel more pressure at work, are less satisfied with their chances for promotion, and more likely to feel their skills are under-utilized, the reasons behind such feelings seem very different.

The relative dissatisfaction of the "boomers" seems to be persisting. In the past, job satisfaction increased as people moved from their twenties into their thirties. In 1973, for instance, nearly half of workers between the ages of 30 and 40 claimed to be very satisfied with their job, equaling the level of job satisfaction of older workers. Now that the baby boomers are in the middle of the age distribution, the dividing line separating more contented workers from less contented workers has shifted upward. Job satisfaction among 30 to 49 year olds today is no higher than among the 18-29 group, and well below that of the over-50 cohort. When today's youngest workers reach their peak earning years, will they retain the historically higher job satisfaction that has eluded today's baby boomers? Or will they be negatively affected by the crowding imposed by boomers who hold middle level positions longer and settle permanently for positions that in the past would have been opened to the next generation? If the latter occurs, overall levels of job satisfaction are likely to drop significantly in the years ahead.

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