

Heigh-Ho, Heigh-Ho *It's happily to work I go*

By Karlyn H. Bowman



With more businesses operating 24/7, Americans, we're told, are working more than ever before—not just at the office, but at home, on vacation, and even in their cars. The popular goal a few years ago of integrating work and home life has given way to fears that fax machines, computers and cell phones are erasing the traditional boundaries between work and home life, adding to much-chronicled worker stress and dissatisfaction. These stories command the headlines today just as stories of dead-end “McJobs,” anxious employees, white collar blues, and disposable workers did a few years ago. There's some truth in stereotypes, of course, but this review of attitudinal data on work suggests that American workers are broadly satisfied with their jobs.¹

A cursory glance at two of the longest trends on satisfaction with work suggests very little change in people's positive views of their jobs. In 1973, Roper Starch Worldwide (then known as the Roper Organization) asked people, “Everything considered—the satisfaction you get from the work you do, what it pays, etc.—how satisfied are you with the field of work you chose to go into?” Eighty-five percent said they were satisfied, 14% dissatisfied. The results were identical in the organization's April 1999 survey. Results from National Opinion Research Center surveys in the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s also show little change in high overall work satisfaction.²

More telling, perhaps, are the results to two questions asked 20 years apart. In 1977, 64% told University of Michigan Survey Research Center interviewers that they would “decide without hesitation” to take the job they now had “if [they] had to decide all over again.” Twenty-eight percent said they would have second thoughts, and 9% said they would not take the same job again. When Louis Harris and Associates repeated the question in a 1997 survey for the Families and Work Institute, 69% said they would take the same job again without hesitation, 26% were ambivalent, and only 6% were ready to bolt.

If overall satisfaction is high, then, what aspects of work produce the much-discussed worker dissatisfaction? Here again, the picture provided by the surveys contradicts the headlines. The data on page 13 show that large majorities of workers are proud to be working for their firms and committed to their companies. Substantial numbers of workers say that their opinions seem to count at work. Nearly all workers say they know what is expected of them on the job. Most workers say their supervisors recognize when they do a good job, and

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that employers try to accommodate them when they have family or personal business to take care of, such as medical appointments or meetings with their children's teachers.

Most surprising, perhaps, workers say they are fairly compensated. Nearly 70% in a Gallup survey said that from their "most objective viewpoint," that was the case. A review of questions on worker loyalty finds large majorities saying they are loyal to their companies, and smaller, but robust, majorities feeling that their employers are loyal to them. Only when Americans are asked about "most employers'" loyalty, something they are unlikely to have much information about, are their views more pessimistic.

Workers' greatest satisfaction on the job comes from relations with co-workers, the physical safety of workplaces, and employer flexibility. Benefits, chances for promotion, retirement plans, money earned, and stress rank lower, although more than 60% report being satisfied with them.

In April 1997, Roper Starch asked employed people what qualities were necessary in a good boss, and about their impressions of their own bosses. Sixty percent or more rated their bosses as "very good" or "good" on each of the 15 qualities explored.

In questions asked by Roper Starch in 1985, 1992, and 1995, roughly a quarter of workers said they would be interested in having the boss's job, but slightly more than six in ten said they would prefer to keep the job they have now. A quarter in a Gallup question asked in 1997 said they would fire their current boss if given the opportunity.

Wading through the thicket of hard data about what's actually happening to work and leisure time in America is beyond the scope of this brief review. But a quick examination of polls suggests there may be less to the time crunch than news stories suggest. Two-thirds in an April 2000 survey conducted by Peter Hart Research for Shell Oil said that they were satisfied with "the amount of leisure and free time that you get to yourself." Those results were down from 1963, when 76% told Gallup interviewers they were satisfied with this aspect of their lives. Forty-five percent said they had more leisure time than their parents had at the same age, 25% about the same amount, and 27% less.

In her 1999 book *Working at Play: A History of Vacations in the United States*, Cindy Aron argues that in a country steeped in the Puritan work ethic the very idea of leisure was, until recently, an uncomfortable one. Although there is little evidence of a decline in the work ethic today, surveys suggest Americans are developing a higher regard for their leisure.

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Asked by Gallup in 1955 which they generally enjoyed more, the hours spent on the job or the hours not spent on the job, 43% chose the former, 44% the latter. In 1999, when Gallup repeated the question, just 16% said they enjoyed the hours on the job more, and a whopping 77% said they enjoyed the hours off the job. Twenty-five years ago, 48% told Roper Starch interviewers that they agreed more with the statement "work is the important thing, and the purpose of leisure time is to recharge people's batteries so they can do a better job," while 36% chose "leisure time is the important thing, and the purpose of work is to make it possible to have leisure time to enjoy life and pursue one's interests." Today, a third place the greater value on work, and 40% opt for leisure.

While most workers in the US are satisfied with their jobs, some are clearly more satisfied than others. Not surprisingly, families with two parents in the workforce and single parents find the balance between home and work life a difficult one, particularly when children are young. Seventy-three percent of mothers in Gallup's 1963 survey were satisfied with their leisure time; in the April Shell survey, just 48% were. Long commutes may affect some workers' satisfaction, but most Americans don't travel extended distances to work. Changing expectations can also affect happiness on the job. Forty-seven percent of teens in a 1977 ORC survey said having a steady job was one of the top factors they would consider in choosing a career. In 1999, just 21% gave that response. In our dynamic economy, older workers who expected lifetime job tenure may be more dissatisfied than young ones who have no such expectation. These factors and others may cause negative job evaluations, but they shouldn't obscure the larger picture of widespread worker satisfaction. ●

Endnotes

¹For more on worker satisfaction, see data compiled by author on pp. 12-17.

²The proportion in the Roper Starch Worldwide work satisfaction question who say that they are "extremely" satisfied with their work has declined unevenly, from 38% in 1973 to 27% in 1999, as more people have moved into the "fairly well" satisfied category. NORC's question shows a small drop from the late 1970s to the late 1980s in the proportion saying they are "very" satisfied with their work, but no change after that.