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Are You Happy at Work? Job Satisfaction and Work-Life Balance in the US and Europe

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A summary of the key ideas

- My research group has been studying job satisfaction and stress across nations. We find that satisfaction is U-shaped in age; women enjoy their jobs more than men; job security is of central importance; relative income matters; and much else.
- The good news is that people in the industrialized nations enjoy their jobs.
- The less-good news is that in the US there has been a steady decline in job satisfaction since the 1970s. Stress in Britain has risen sharply.
- Denmark and Ireland come top of world job-satisfaction league tables.
- The citizens of the United States have the most severe problem with work-life balance. Problems are also evident in some of the other industrialized countries.
- We know quite a lot about how to design satisfying workplaces. Who controls the pace of work is crucial.

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by

Andrew Oswald, Professor of Economics, University of Warwick

First, how much do people like their jobs?_

USA

49% of workers say they are “completely or very satisfied”
Only a few percent say “dissatisfied”

Denmark

62% say “completely or very satisfied”

Japan

30%

Hungary

23%

Job satisfaction is U-shaped over the life cycle

(ie. as you get older your enjoyment of work initially dips down, bottoms out around age 30 or so, and then steadily rises after that)

Figure 1: Job Satisfaction over the Life Cycle in Great Britain



What are the Characteristics Associated with High Levels of Job Satisfaction?

Being a woman
Having a lot of job security
Being in a small workplace
High relative income

Self-employed
Low commuting time
Supervisor
Public sector employee

Having a university degree (though not recently in Britain, interestingly)

What about so-called Work Life Balance?

The International Work-Life Balance League Table.

“I would like to be able to spend much more time with my family”

US 46%, France 41, Philippines 40, Portugal 39, Israel (Jews) 37, Great Britain 36, Slovenia 34, East Germany 34, Czech Republic 33, Sweden 32, Russia 31, Poland 30, Norway 27, Denmark 26, Hungary 26, West Germany 26, Canada 26, Cyprus 26, New Zealand 26, Israel (Arabs) 25, Switzerland 23, Italy 21, Netherlands 18, Bulgaria 14, Japan 9, Spain 8, Bangladesh 5.

The United States unfortunately comes at the head of this ranking (46% of people want ‘much more time’ at home). In fact, 85% of American workers say they want some more time with their family.

If one looks a little more deeply at the data, a number of interesting things emerge.

First, ‘over work’ by this criterion (ie. wanting more time with your family) peaks in a person’s early 40s. Middle-age apparently brings the problem to a head. Second, highly qualified people suffer it most. Those with advanced qualifications are the ones who want to see their families more. Third, the feeling is most acute among men rather than women.

Although it seems strange to an economist, there is evidence here that the USA has a problem. Despite BMWs and speedboats, 85% of Americans want more time with their family, and 46% say they want much more. And yet they could have it if they tried. They are rich.

This is a puzzle.

What has Been Happening Over Time to Job Satisfaction in the USA?

(Looking at data for workers over 30 years of age)

1970s: 56% of Americans were extremely satisfied at work

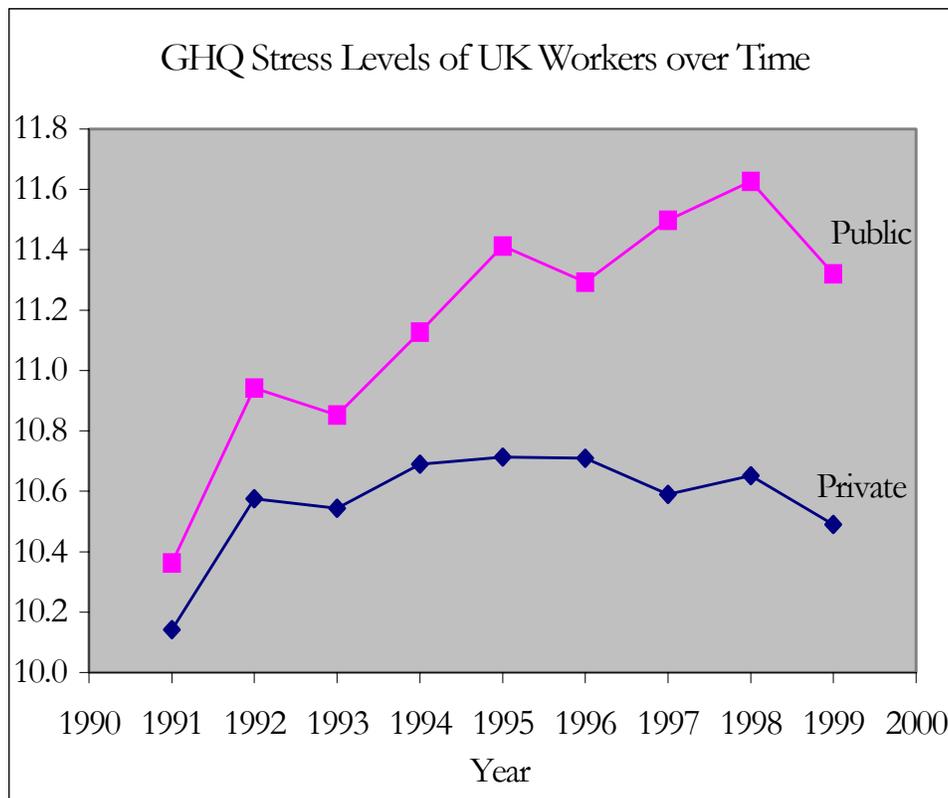
1980s: 52% were extremely satisfied

1990s: 47% were extremely satisfied

Figure 2

Stress Levels of UK Workers over the 1990s
Public and Private Sector Employees

GHQ is a summary of answers to a set of standardized mental stress questions like how well you have been sleeping?, have you been losing confidence in yourself?, etc



Designing Happy Workplaces: What are Good and Bad for Job Satisfaction Levels?

The gender of the boss makes no statistical difference to your job satisfaction

Computers at work also make no difference

But who controls the pace of work is crucial
When customers do: *good for job satisfaction*
Colleagues do: *is OK*
Production norms: *bad*
Boss does: *very bad*

Equal opportunities at work: *good*

Tight deadlines/high-speed work: *bad*

Working at home: *good*

Small freedoms: *very good*
(ie. can move desk, change lighting, etc)

Dealing with people: *very good*

APPENDIX

What does a job satisfaction equation actually look like?

Some Job Satisfaction Equations for Europe

Eurobarometer Survey 44.2, late 1990s.

(The variables down the left-hand side show the influences upon people's reported job satisfaction. If a number is positive, like 0.2222, then that means it is positive for job satisfaction. If the number in brackets is bigger than two, roughly speaking, then it is statistically significant.)

	All	Males	Females
Denmark	.2222 (2.18)	.0822 (0.61)	.4120 (2.59)
W. Germany	-.4455 (4.44)	-.5943 (4.53)	-.2497 (1.57)
Greece	-1.4826 (14.11)	-1.3867 (10.31)	-1.6524 (9.60)
Italy	-.9281 (9.27)	-.9027 (7.01)	-.9252 (5.70)
Spain	-.9104 (9.12)	-.8321 (6.57)	-1.0486 (6.31)
France	-.7028 (7.12)	-.6282 (4.75)	-.7341 (4.82)
Ireland	.3744 (3.59)	.4715 (3.49)	.3004 (1.78)
Luxembourg	-.4251 (3.55)	-.3369 (2.21)	-.5296 (2.71)
Netherlands	-.0340 (0.34)	-.2700 (2.13)	.3608 (2.25)
Portugal	-.7932 (7.84)	-.5971 (4.45)	-1.0087 (6.40)
GB	-.3054 (2.96)	-.3796 (2.78)	-.1763 (1.09)
E. Germany	-.1073 (1.05)	-.0401 (0.29)	-.1854 (1.18)
Finland	-.2436 (2.41)	-.3880 (2.88)	-.0698 (0.44)
Sweden	-.0443 (0.44)	.0488 (0.36)	-.1599 (1.01)
Austria	-.0124 (0.12)	-.0106 (0.08)	.0137 (0.08)
Age	-.0224 (2.41)	-.0162 (1.32)	-.0379 (2.57)
Age ²	.0002 (2.04)	.0001 (0.81)	.0004 (2.49)
Male	-.0198 (0.50)	n/a	n/a
Self-employed	.3506 (5.04)	.3968 (4.17)	.3485 (3.15)
16-19 years schooling	.0029 (0.06)	.0132 (0.21)	-.0733 (0.94)
>=20 years schooling	-.0063 (0.11)	-.0274 (0.37)	-.0361 (0.40)
Supervisor	.2707 (6.44)	.3389 (6.35)	.1801 (2.54)
Public sector	.1163 (2.35)	-.0030 (0.04)	.2266 (3.03)
Job tenure	.0003 (2.06)	.0005 (2.07)	.0002 (0.92)
Commuting time	-.0018 (3.54)	-.0013 (2.01)	-.0027 (3.22)
Agree secure job	.9178 (20.86)	.9696 (16.32)	.8516 (12.78)
Secure job DK	.3672 (5.21)	.3847 (4.05)	.3421 (3.22)
No vibrations from hand tools	-.0783 (1.62)	-.0733 (1.16)	-.0751 (0.98)
No noise	.1167 (2.66)	.0688 (1.12)	.2090 (3.25)
No high temperatures	.0481 (1.09)	.0733 (1.27)	.0379 (0.55)
No low temperatures	.0667 (1.52)	-.0277 (0.47)	.1896 (2.78)

No vapors or fumes	.1434 (3.00)	.2448 (3.92)	.0134 (0.17)
No dangerous substances	-.0652 (1.32)	-.0519 (0.83)	-.0858 (1.03)
No radiation	-.0388 (0.72)	-.0080 (0.12)	-.1097 (1.11)
No painful or tiring positions	.2039 (4.79)	.2095 (3.61)	.1951 (3.05)
No carrying or moving loads	.1478 (3.41)	.1631 (2.69)	.1662 (2.59)
No repetitive tasks <10 min	.1047 (2.51)	.1907 (3.41)	-.0062 (0.09)
No repetitive arm movements.	.0045 (0.10)	-.0467 (0.76)	.0457 (0.66)
No protective clothing	-.1690 (3.81)	-.1789 (3.15)	-.1269 (1.73)
No computers	.0362 (0.86)	-.0459 (0.81)	.1079 (1.66)
No work at high speed	.1107 (2.40)	.0868 (1.41)	.1459 (2.05)
No tight deadlines	.1525 (3.41)	.1703 (2.80)	.1043 (1.55)
No dealing with people	-.1482 (3.03)	-.0995 (1.58)	-.2060 (2.59)
Not working at home	-.1328 (3.18)	-.0906 (1.61)	-.2470 (3.84)
No night work	-.0054 (0.11)	-.0116 (0.19)	.0738 (0.85)
No Saturdays	-.0717 (1.45)	-.1288 (2.04)	.0252 (0.31)
No Sundays	.0819 (1.91)	.1259 (2.23)	.0466 (0.68)
Work pace depends colleagues*	-.0055 (0.14)	.0275 (0.55)	-.0609 (1.04)
Work pace depends customers*	.0465 (1.11)	-.0079 (0.14)	.0908 (1.35)
Work pace depends prodn. norms*	-.1171 (2.86)	-.0711 (1.37)	-.1932 (2.85)
Work pace depends on machine*	-.0388 (0.81)	.0324 (0.54)	-.1707 (2.12)
Work pace depends on boss*	-.1606 (4.04)	-.1463 (2.76)	-.1716 (2.81)
Equal opportunities at work	.2139 (5.93)	.0869 (1.77)	.4423 (8.00)
Boss a man	.0700 (1.58)	.1332 (1.79)	.0491 (0.85)
Health and safety a risk*	-.7638 (17.77)	-.7319 (13.26)	-.8582(12.27)
Can control temperature	.1120 (2.60)	.1218 (2.09)	.1242 (1.90)
Can control lighting	.0376 (0.86)	.0551 (0.93)	.0235 (0.35)
Can control ventilation	.1241 (2.81)	.1446 (2.43)	.0995 (1.48)
Can control position of desk	.0659 (1.46)	.0243 (0.39)	.1328 (1.98)
Can control position of seat	-.0523 (1.16)	-.0259 (0.42)	-.0473 (0.69)
Can control equipment used	.1719 (4.60)	.1796 (3.64)	.1714 (2.92)
Industry dummies	10	10	10
Size of establishment dummies	7	7	7
LR Chi ²	3321.4	1903.8	1611.9
Pseudo R ²	.1099	.1101	.1247
N	14486	8304	6182

Notes: excluded categories, Belgium, <16 years schooling

** = a variable also included where the respondent reported they did not know the answer to this question. This tables draws on joint work by Andrew Oswald and Professor David Blanchflower, Economics Dept, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire USA.*