

# I'm H.A.P.P.Y.

*Measuring employee happiness is not an easy business but new technologies could pave the way for a more cheerful and productive workforce*

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**T**he German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said that only an Englishman would be mad enough to chase happiness. But recently some companies have been attempting to monitor the mood of their employees to improve productivity.

There are a growing number of apps and devices to measure employee feedback anonymously. The most typical display a smiley face at one end of the spectrum and a sad one at the other – and the employee taps at a space on a line that joins those two extremes.

If recent research is anything to go by, there are plenty of people gravitating towards the sadder end of the scale. About half of the US workforce are either unhappy, or somewhat happy, according to a survey by the US employee tech company Teem. In 2017, it found that among US employees 48 per cent were unhappy with their work/life balance, 46 per cent felt underappreciated and 49 per cent said, "today's communication tools make me feel obligated to respond to colleagues regardless of where or when."

As with many common-sense assumptions, psychologists have found a correlation between happiness and productivity. Daniel Sgroi, associate professor of economics at the University of Warwick, published a briefing in 2015 summarising his research in the area, *Happiness and productivity: understanding the happy-productive worker*, which showed that happiness increases worker productivity. Watching a comedy clip for 10 minutes before performing a



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Based on that evidence, it is not surprising that happiness has become an area of focus for human resources professionals and that there is a rise in happiness-monitoring devices.

Outside of the lab, though, happiness is not easy to measure. But researchers in mental health, where swings in mood can

be the difference between life and death, are on to the problem. Their methods of preference involve smartphones and apps – the very devices that caused the Teem respondents despondency.

While the reliability of wearable and portable mood-prediction technologies is in its infancy, the field is fast growing. For example, Health is an app developed by the US start-up Mindstrong. It monitors the way people tap and swipe their smartphones and tablets to detect shifts in users' moods. The company has been developing the phone app to measure brain function to help health professionals intervene at an early stage with patients with mental illness. But it hopes to move into the prediction business at some stage in the future.

That has obvious benefits for mental health interventions, but Rosalind Picard, an electrical engineer and computer scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, told *Nature* reporter Matt Kaplan recently that she has high hopes for the technology in the corporate world.

"Why do so many amazing companies that give their employees every perk under the sun still lose so many staff to depression? Can we catch the coming transition before it takes place?" she was quoted as saying.

She also worries that the technologies could be misused by advertising companies looking for the right mood to strike before posting their personalised ads and insurers basing premiums on the state of someone's mental health. But she remains optimistic that apps could be developed with the right ethical guidelines to help corporations become more productive. 