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If You Want an Enjoyable Job, What Should You Do?

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One day, you will grow discontented. You will hanker for a change, for stimulation, for excitement, and most of all for a fulfilling new job. What should you do?

Thanks to recent statistical analysis, we have a pretty good idea of the factors that are crucial to high job satisfaction.

The first thing to think about is the sector of the economy in which you are employed. Our data show that the most satisfied workers in Great Britain are actually those who work for non-profit organisations. Employees in charities are especially happy and fulfilled. To many economists, this comes as a shock. After all, we know the pay is much lower in charities, and the perks are usually tiny. But human beings are complicated organisms. Once there is enough food on the table, they look for something to stir the mind and reward the heart.

Consider working in the public sector, also, and bear in mind that you can leave Britain. Public employees in most European nations enjoy their jobs more than do people who work in the private sector. Yet in Britain, intriguingly, that is no longer true. Over the 1990s, job satisfaction collapsed in our public sector. Nobody knows exactly why, but it is thought that increasing regulation, and constant monitoring of public workers' performance, destroyed what used to be a kind of job satisfaction premium. Big brother may have watched them just a bit too hard. Today, anyway, British private and public sector workers have identical levels of happiness with their working lives.

Think entrepreneur, too. Self-employed people enjoy their jobs hugely. Here we have good survey evidence on why. Those who are self-employed like the independence. They are not in it for the cash; they are in it for personal autonomy; and they find that.

In passing, it is quite wrong to take a black, Dickensian view on working life. When you look at the data, it is obvious that Marx was too pessimistic. British people really enjoy their jobs. In our work we measure job satisfaction on a scale from 1 to 7, where 7 is completely satisfied. Most British people give encouraging survey answers -- generally between 5 and 7.

Individuals who work for non-profit organisations average a job satisfaction score of 5.7. Those who are self-employed typically come out at 5.6. Everyone else averages 5.4. Although there are a few really fed-up people in our samples, they are rare.

The whole spread of job satisfaction in Britain is given in Table 1.

Table 1

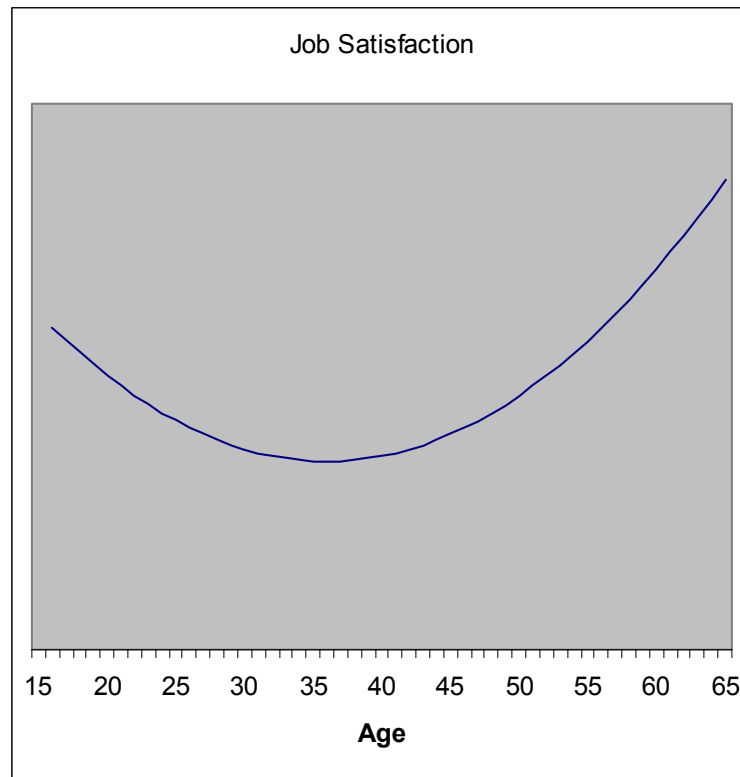
Job Satisfaction in Great Britain

Job Satisfaction Level	Percentage of Responses %
7 (completely satisfied)	20
6	41
5	20
4	8
3	6
2	3
1 (not satisfied at all)	2

Second, a great deal depends on your own nature and characteristics. Age and gender, for instance, have big effects on job satisfaction. Women enjoy their jobs the most. This has created a big debate among researchers: as women earn less than men and generally progress less far in organisations it seems surprising that they like their jobs so much. One conjecture, unproven, is that men are just difficult to please, while women have lower aspirations and settle more willingly for an OK job. Another is that women are simply better workers.

Age counts. Job satisfaction follows a U-shaped pattern through life. This is shown in Figure 1. It starts high. Then people become dissatisfied. Feelings of discontent flatten off in the 30s. After that, the average person becomes steadily cheerier with their job.

Figure 1: Job Satisfaction by Age



We are not sure why. However, one theory is that life tames one's wilder expectations, and that this process hurts but works. Folk realise they cannot all be chief executive and learn to live with their own limitations. Then, life improves for them. They accept themselves.

Third, and this may be practical and constructive, the organisational nature of your workplace has a striking effect on whether your job will be happy. If you can, go for a workplace that is small. Employees in big offices and factories are much more often fed up. This may be because they are impersonal; we are not certain.

Of particular importance is who controls the pace of work. Before we did the statistical analysis, it did not occur to us that this would show

up in our findings. But it turns out to be vital. Satisfaction is low in places where the boss controls the pace of work. It is high in workplaces where customers or colleagues control how fast the work has to be done. This discovery matters. Our work shows that human beings do not mind working hard for someone on the same level, one might say, as themselves. It is pressure from above in a hierarchy that upsets them. So watch out, when you choose your job, that you are not signing away your soul to an organisation in which a grey boss somewhere will dictate your every turn in life.

Fourth, pay makes a difference, as we would expect. But our analysis shows that it is not absolute pay that particularly concerns people – rather it is relative pay. Human beings create in their own mind a mental statistical picture of someone like themselves, with their qualifications and experience, and they keep comparing themselves to that picture of what such a person should be paid. They are not conscious, however, that they do this.

Sixth, having qualifications that exceed those needed is associated with discontent. Many university graduates are currently unhappy in Britain, for instance.

Seventh, London and surrounding areas have the lowest job satisfaction. This is partly because of the commuting, which we know has bad effects on people's mental health.

So, what should you do if you want to be happy?

Work for a charity or be self-employed. Become old. Don't get over-qualified. Find a place where the boss does not control the pace of work. Avoid the capital. Be a woman.