

## WORKPLACE SATISFACTION: WHAT DO EMPLOYEES WANT?

by Thomas Warney

The alarm rings. John turns it off and rolls over. The first feelings in his body are tension and an unexplainable weariness. He drifts back to sleep, wakes up too late to get to work on time, and decides to call in sick. This is not the first time this has happened.

Joanne is up before the alarm goes off. She wakes up smiling and energetic. She already knows that this will be a good day at work, and she's looking forward to getting there and getting started.

What's the difference? Why are some of us happy and satisfied with what we do, while others are not? What is it that makes for high levels of satisfaction in the workplace today?

Recent surveys have suggested that more than 80% of us are satisfied and even happy in our jobs. And yet Scott Adams, creator of the "Dilbert" cartoon series that focuses on the workplace, has noted that as bad as he may portray the workplace, inevitably someone will email him that "theirs is worse."

Is it a matter of management? Or organizational structure? Or of personal attitude? What are the key factors that make us happy in our work?

In the 1950s, as part of the conservatism following World War II, job satisfaction was to be found primarily in job security and in "being taken care of" by a company for life. William H. Whyte's famous study **The Organization Man** documented how people's very identities were defined by the organizations they worked for.

The 1960s saw a resurgence of non-conformity, independence and a rebellion against "the system," perceived as being made up primarily of conservative, stodgy, hierarchical and "old" organizations. Large numbers of people "opted out" and sought satisfaction in "finding themselves," "doing their thing," and committing to social responsibility.

The 1970s was a time of entrepreneurial activity, with small "upstart" companies giving the big guys a run for the money. As well, the decade reflected a desire to "change the system from within" and modify corporate culture to include a higher level of idealism and ethics.

The "Age of the Yuppie" — the 1980s — saw the profit motive and the self-centered ego unleashed on a massive level, with "profit" largely eclipsing social responsibility issues. "Whoever has the most toys at the end wins" was the slogan of many, and satisfaction was supposed to be measured by the level of wealth and possessions gained.

When the waves of restructuring, downsizing and layoffs occurred in the late 80s and the 1990s, triggered by increased globalization of markets and vastly increased competition, many were caught unawares. Those who were still hanging on to the 1950s model of the “organizational cradle” were shocked to find that they could be let go with two weeks’ notice. Those who were working toward more ethical and socially responsible institutions were stunned to find that only the “bottom line” counted in the end. And the high-flying yuppies? Many lost their shirts, as well as their BMWs.

And now, in the late 1990s, in sight of the Millennium, the picture has stabilized a bit. In the remaining workforce, fewer people, supported by more technology, are doing a lot more work. Many people have left the security of organizations to thrive as independent contractors, consultants or entrepreneurs.

And overall, there has been a revolution in what is required to achieve satisfaction on the job.

People are finding satisfaction in the workplace in new and different ways, and the organizations they work for are responding by re-organizing and re-evaluating tradition roles and structures.

Employees today, like customers today, are more sophisticated. They want more, and they know how to get it. Successful organizations are those who recognize and reflect the new needs of employees.

What are these needs?

Gigi Harding, CEO of Kwik Kopy Printing Canada in Aurora, states that the key issue for employees is “Feeling that they belong, that they are in on things, and that they are part of the end result.” Employees today need to feel that they are **involved** in the organization.

This idea is echoed by Nella Iasci, Executive Director of Georgina Job Skills in Keswick and Newmarket. “Workplaces are going through a learning curve, too,” she says. “The old ‘buck stops here’ approach no longer applies. There’s an emphasis on the team approach.”

Organizations “flattened” in the 80s and early 90s, shedding layers of middle management. Today, organizations are re-structuring away from the unwieldy hierarchical approach to the more responsive integrated team design, where everyone is able to experience being a leader and taking responsibility for quality, production and improvement.

The empowered or self-directed team approach allows an organization to make the most of its members’ talents and abilities, encouraging creativity and innovation, and ensuring that the process doesn’t get bogged down in bureaucracy.

Management consultant and author Peter Block notes that “institutions can no longer survive using the patriarchal, high-control systems of the past.” Today, an organization’s survival may well depend on its ability to redistribute power and control to the employees at large.

As one management consultant put it, “I go into a company with problems and talk to the big-wigs. They don’t know what to do. Then I talk to the line people. They know **exactly** what to do. I take notes and present their solutions, and they work, and I get paid!” A little exaggerated perhaps, but a great many companies have learned the value of asking their employees and tapping the astounding well of innovation and creativity that resides in their workforce.

Of course, this is best done in an environment where ideas and actions are acknowledged, appreciated and rewarded, and when they come as part of a group effort, not just another “management demand.”

This recognition, respect and acknowledgement of the individual within the overall system is perhaps the most essential ingredient in workplace satisfaction today.

Madeleine Thibault-Smith, Coordinator of Staff Development for the York Region Board of Education, notes that “The old way of ‘the organization will take care of me’ has changed to an emphasis on the self-sufficient individual. This doesn’t mean that the organization abdicates, but simply that the balance has shifted more in the direction of the individual.”

And what does the individual want? In addition to appreciation, recognition and involvement, the next most important factors appear to be good monetary compensation, a good working environment, flexibility of hours and scheduling, as well as growth and learning, both personally and professionally.

Pat Clinch, Manager of Human Resource Development at Scarborough General Hospital, states that “People are looking for **balance** in their lives, between work, family, learning and other aspects of life. Organizations need to understand and adapt to this.”

At York County Hospital, Susan Legault, Manager/Team Leader of Organizational Development, says that the key factors for satisfaction, especially during times of large-scale change, are “Communications — knowing clearly where the organization is going, the visibility and sincerity of the senior team, and the sense that management cares about everyone’s input and needs.”

People want work to be “a good place to be.” Marilyn Fabrizio, Health and Wellness Coordinator for Makeup Art Cosmetics in Markham, comments, “It’s being with people you enjoy, people who are in a good mood. It’s being very enthusiastic going in to work, and your head hitting the pillow at night with a smile on your face.”

The relationships we experience at work can make or break us. Psychotherapist Rosemary Holland, with offices in Aurora and Newmarket, says, “Pick your boss and your co-workers very carefully.” It is to the benefit of both the employer and the employee to ensure a “good fit” with the organization’s culture and goals. Rosemary Holland continues, “The ‘Emotional Intelligence’ factor that is of so much interest today is definitely important, for the leaders and for the employees. Knowing how to relate effectively and understand others is a key skill, because good relationships are essential to personal and workplace satisfaction.”

## **The High-Satisfaction Workplace**

In Part I of this series, we found that some of the most important elements in workplace satisfaction are good pay and rewards, good working conditions, good relationships on the job, and, above all, recognition, appreciation and involvement.

How are organizations meeting these needs in order to attract, keep and develop a highly productive, loyal and satisfied workforce?

Husky Injection Molding Systems of Bolton is already legendary in its care and attention to workers. For more than twenty-five years, before it was fashionable, Husky President Robert Schad was promoting and building a workplace that is healthy, clean and aesthetically pleasing, and a workforce that is highly productive and loyal.

Husky's famous "Copper House" contains a state-of-the-art Wellness and Fitness Centre and an innovative Child Development Centre.

Jennifer Seglins, Wellness Administrator at the Copper House, observes that "People work hard here — it's an unspoken ethic." And yet there are no time clocks (Robert Schad abolished them), and people are on an "Honour System" to do their share of work.

"People love to come here," says Seglins of the Copper House facilities. "They can visit their children, use the fitness equipment day or night, or enjoy walking around the grounds." Employees have access, on company property, to a medical doctor, a chiropractor, a naturopath and a registered massage therapist. Plus, they can enjoy subsidized and healthful vegetarian meals, a non-smoking environment, and pesticide-free landscaped grounds. And all of this within an organization that is highly committed to environmentalism and community, and a world leader in its industry. "These are some of the reasons people here are proud, and they give 110%," says Seglins.

In Aurora, "The Willow Farm" houses the Canadian headquarters for Kwik Kopy Printing. In a setting including a beautiful renovated farmhouse as an office building, giant trees, a pool and horses, the fourteen people who work there enjoy an idyllic and inspiring setting. "We wanted a comfortable atmosphere for communicating with owners and suppliers," says CEO Gigi Harding.

John Ecclestone, Plant and Production Manager for Canada Law Book in Aurora, puts his finger on another essential for workplace satisfaction. "There has to be a feeling that what you're doing counts," he says, "and that your efforts are recognized and supported." Opportunities for developing important skills such as problem-solving and communications skills help Canada Law Book employees enjoy more responsibility and more awareness that what they do "makes a difference."

Madeleine Thibault-Smith, Coordinator of Staff Development for the York Region Board of Education, suggests that workers today "are responsible for our own morale" more than in the past, but that the physical and organizational environments are still very important. "Flexible working hours, a comfortable building and workplace, a learning environment and Employee Assistance support are all part of wellness and feeling satisfied at work," she says.

At York County Hospital in Newmarket, the challenge of rapid change is met with optimism. Susan Legault, Manager/Team Leader of Organizational Development, states, "You need to have and encourage a 'developmental' attitude — learning, adapting, problem-solving, being flexible. An environment of openness, willingness to listen and understand, and mutual support at all levels is what is needed to find satisfaction even in the midst of such change."

Nella Iasci, Executive Director of Georgina Job Skills in Keswick and Newmarket, agrees: “One of the most important factors in job satisfaction is **attitude** — being able to embrace change, seeing it as opportunity, being willing to find out how to make it work.”

Research has shown that one of the most important elements in a person’s mental state is the degree of **control** perceived by the person in a given situation. Martin Seligman, in his book **Learned Optimism**, clearly relates a sense of control and involvement to whether a person experiences optimism and embraces challenge, or becomes cynical, pessimistic and clinically depressed.

And Jon Kabat-Zinn, author of the best-selling book on stress management, **Full Catastrophe Living**, agrees, recommending the restructuring of organizations to promote greater control for employees, resulting in less stress and greater commitment. “Open door” policies, an “egalitarian” culture (no special privileges for executives), and a team approach all go a long way toward developing the awareness that “I have some control over my fate.”

Environment, facilities, recognition, good working relationships, attitude and sense of control are key factors essential to high levels of workplace satisfaction. But what about hard currency?

John Ecclestone of Canada Law Book notes that “being well compensated, and a profit-sharing plan are also important in employee satisfaction.” Husky has a profit-sharing plan, bonuses, and a stock-purchase plan, as well as a pay scale at the high end of their industry. Both companies have remarkably low turnover rates, and both emphasize the “pride” that employees feel in their company and their work.

Overall, money counts, but pride, respect, and appreciation count even more. And the support of management — both by supplying resources and growth opportunities, and by “walking the talk” with integrity — is central to success.

Rosemary Holland, a psychotherapist who provides employee assistance programs for organizations, notes that “the ‘Emotional Intelligence’ of the person at the top is a key factor — how they relate, how they communicate, how they model what they value.” “Unfortunately,” she says, “There are still some toxic employers out there who haven’t got the message.”

“If the boss understands,” she concludes, “that a happy employee is a productive employee — that absenteeism, illness and turnover will go down while loyalty, creativity and productivity will go up, and that they’ll be way ahead by providing the environment for this, the company will thrive.”

## How To Recognize A High-Satisfaction Workplace:

- Clear organization mission, vision and values that employees understand and “buy into”
- Managers “walk the talk” with integrity
- An open, team-oriented structure that encourages individual responsibility and initiative
- Excellent reward system, including appreciation and recognition, as well as good pay, benefits and profit-sharing
- Support structures for the “Whole Person”, including wellness facilities, learning programs, EAP and flexible scheduling
- Good, healthful physical environment and safe working conditions
- Pride in the job, and the feeling of being involved and “making a difference”

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