



Work

My Job, Myself, My Problem?

Joanne Gordon, 01.24.03, 7:00 AM ET

Next week, a new study will proclaim that today's U.S. office workers are miserable. The reasons and remedies it suggests are sure to roll some eyes.

Here's the gist: Of 1,100 people from 1,004 companies with 500 or more employees, 55% described their work in negative terms--using phrases such as exhausted, confused and unsupported. A full third felt "intensely negative."

What's surprising is why. In short, people feel bad about work because work makes them feel bad about themselves. A higher salary or quirky benefits like a corporate gym, it turns out, aren't the real keys to glee.

"What puts that bounce in your step is a sense of confidence, control and community," says Mark Mactas, chief executive and chairman of Towers Perrin, the New York City-based human resources consulting firm that commissioned the study, "Working Today: Exploring Employees' Emotional Connection to Their Jobs."

Workers, who answered questions online, said their biggest complaint was heavy workloads, followed by helplessness and boredom. Said one respondent, "The work is unchallenging so I don't have any inspiration to perform better."

This has led to low self-esteem. That's not so shocking considering that people, especially in the United States, tend to use their jobs as a measure of self worth. When they feel bad about their skills and their relevance in the workplace--"What difference do I make?"--they feel lousy about the company and don't enjoy work.

The study also found that workers have little confidence in their senior executives' abilities. What's curious here is that it is not unethical behavior that employees are worried about--à la **Enron** (otc: [ENRNQ](#) - news - people) and **WorldCom** (otc: [WCOEQ](#) - news - people)--but incompetence, à la **AOL Time Warner** (nyse: [AOL](#) - news - people) and **UAL's** (nyse: [UAL](#) - news - people) United Airlines. Said one respondent, "There are many mandates handed down to me and some are misleading and contradictory."

Cynical managers will shrug their shoulders and insist that employees' feelings are not their problem, especially in such a cruddy economy. With unemployment at 6%, shouldn't workers just be grateful they have jobs?

Maybe, but the Towers Perrin study found two reasons employers should try to keep workers feeling upbeat.

First and most obvious, disgruntled employees will quit as soon as they can; 28% of those who felt very negative are already job hunting. The rest will stay put but waste time whining at the office.

Second, the study tracked a "statistically significant" correlation between positive emotions and companies' five-year shareholder return. The more positive workers' emotions, the higher company profits. While Towers Perrin admits it doesn't know why or if one informs the other, the mere existence of a relationship should interest employers, says Mactas.

So, what's a caring company to do?

One idea: realize that an employee's happiness has less to do with a chief executive and more to do with his supervisor and colleagues. If his direct boss and coworkers are jerks, it doesn't matter if the company was voted a great place to work. "One of the biggest things you can do for people is provide them with great bosses," says Daryl David, vice president of human resources for Seattle-based thrift giant **Washington Mutual** (nyse: [WM](#) - news - people). Middle managers remember: praise, when warranted, goes a long way. Plus, a pat on the back is cheaper than a raise.

Also, don't be afraid to give workers hard assignments. They're begging for it, according to the Towers Perrin survey. And when people's minds are occupied, they tend not to contemplate their state of mind. They'll also be less inclined to complain about overwork if the work itself is stimulating. As for companies whose work is inherently boring (you know who you are) the least a boss can do is show staffers the results of their efforts--a new client, a deadline met, whatever--so workers feel they sweated for more than just a paycheck. "You have to at least acknowledge the work they do," says David.

For those executives that still don't give a hoot how their employees feel, ask yourself this: If you needed a heart transplant, would you want the surgeon who feels good about his job or the one who complains about hospital policy while you're under anesthesia? Just asking.