

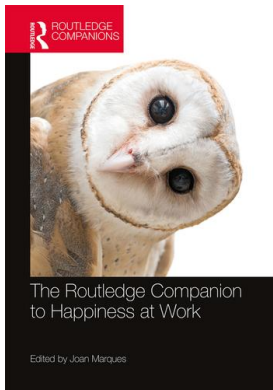
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The Routledge Companion to Happiness at Work

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The Interactive Nature of Happiness at Work

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THE INTERACTIVE NATURE OF HAPPINESS AT WORK

What People Say About Work When They Talk About Life

Ivo Ponocny

Introduction

Work is not only an important part of most people's economic lives, it is also an important part of our emotional life. Obviously, the link is taken for granted by more or less everybody: as an example from our data, when 497 Austrians (aged 15+) were asked in one of our studies (see Ponocny et al., 2015) to speak about the positive and negative aspects of their lives, literally all of them mentioned gainful employment in some context, even those who had not yet worked at all. Therein, the comments about their actual jobs varied greatly, with valuations ranging from being the best to the worst aspect of their lives, from an unwanted obligation to an intrinsic target, or from a source of affection to an unwanted, painful, and body-destroying servitude.

Thus, in spite of the positive aspects of work, we need to understand the delicate character of a prototypical employment arrangement: people are spending their time engaged in activities they would not pursue to the same extent if they did not have to, as they are often required to act against their immediate pleasure. Indeed, time spent at work is considered less pleasurable than time not used for gainful employment: in our study, on average about one point on a 6-point scale. Anticipating the commencement of work on Monday seemingly cast a shadow on Sunday afternoons as well, whereas looking forward to the end of the work week on Thursday and Friday afternoons improved the ratings. This does not come as a surprise—we would expect times with more freedom of choice to be spent in a more delightful way—but it illustrates the minor importance of our momentary hedonic state at work. You may have to persevere, like it or not.

The term “9 to 5” suggests how life is organized around work, rather than work around life. It should go without saying that this strained arrangement implies a significant level of responsibility on the employers' side if happiness is to be considered as at all relevant.

This chapter will be devoted to positive or negative interactions between work and people's hedonic lives, and the variety of ways in which the working population feels substantially pleased or burdened by earning their livelihood. It also shows ongoing differences between genders in lived experiences within Austria, and the considerable hedonic consequences thereof.

The second subchapter deals with drivers of happiness at work itself, as reported by our examinees, with an emphasis on social interactions at various hierarchical levels. Exemplary cases demonstrate the complex interplay between different influential factors.

Scientific Background

The following chapter presents phenomenological insights from the data of an Austrian well-being study (Ponocny et al., 2015, 2016), wherein a total of 497 representatively selected interviewees from ten different locations in Austria reported about their life and well-being. The interviews were semi-structured and were not directly targeted at work life. As a consequence, all reports about work (with the exception of the recognition question) were offered *spontaneously* within narratives about the whole life, and without any prompting or suggestions to address the topic. This prevents us from reporting representative figures, but in return provides a rich collection of statements about topics which were considered by the interviewees themselves to be the most worthwhile to share with us.

The aim of this chapter is therefore not so much to quantify, but rather to illustrate and to add subjective, first-hand experience to the rich scientific literature, often in the words of the working people themselves (translated into English, since all interviews were conducted in German).

In the scientific literature, life satisfaction is known to correspond to work satisfaction, but not especially closely. As usual, the term *happiness* relates herein to emotional experiences, *satisfaction* to (cognitive) evaluations, and (*subjective*) *well-being* is used as an umbrella term. Several studies (such as Judge et al., 1998, see also Wright & Bonett, 2007) show rather moderate correlations between work and life satisfaction. Work satisfaction is shown through the narratives in our interviews to be not only a constituent component of life satisfaction, but also a causal factor affecting life satisfaction. Additionally, work is recognized to provide eudaemonic achievement (e.g., Wrzesniewski, 2003), whereby important targets in *life* may be covered by *work*, at least if the working environment permits. Broader views have introduced terms like spirituality at work (e.g. Marques et al., 2005, for an overview see Houghton et al., 2016). The role of human relations and of enterprises as social systems has been emphasized in organizational psychology since the 1920s (for an introduction, see e.g. Bisen & Priya, 2010), moving ever farther from merely functional concepts of the work environment to ever more human- and well-being-centered viewpoints, including the nowadays popular positive psychology approach (Youssef & Luthans, 2007). Currently, the literature about job satisfaction deals a lot with resilience (see, e.g. Alegre et al., 2016, or Meneghel et al., 2016), and draws special attention to the role of social contacts, in addition to classic factors such as salary and working conditions.

This book chapter does not add to existing theoretical frameworks or provide surprising new knowledge, but through first-hand phenomenological descriptions of actual life experience it does demonstrate the existential importance of many scientific findings.

Happiness at Work in Life Narratives

Interactions Between Happiness in Life and Work Life

As expected, when people talk about their lives, they talk a lot about their work. The transcribers of our interviews also categorized the contents according to a couple of criteria, and rated them according to relevance for overall well-being (“leading aspects”). The summary statistics show that about 10% of the positive leading aspects were related to work (compared to 18% related to family), as were about 10% of the negative ones. About 75% of the positive and half of the negative issues mentioned were categorized at least as “central” in life, if not “overarching”. A more critical impression about work emerges from the questions about the *most* influential positive/negative circumstance in life, resp.: here, work is listed as the most positive by only 5% of the respondents, but by 18% as the most negative one.

Work as such is not necessarily good or bad—that depends on the circumstances.

Work as a Source of Well-being

In spite of the obligatory character of work, it is also an important source of meaning, self-actualization, social contacts, and pleasure. No less than 62% of our sample of a supporting survey ($n = 1462$) reported frequent or ongoing joy from work, whereas only 11% responded in the same way regarding suffering from problems at work. Hence, even at a hedonic level the positive influences of work seem to outweigh the negative ones by far, at least statistically speaking. This positive perception of work is well in line with the usually obtained high job satisfaction averages.

So how does work contribute to our general well-being after all? (We do not focus here on the indirect effects stemming from earning the money which affords a higher standard of living.) First, many interviewees simply like to work and consider times spent in good jobs as good times “*really, really, really beautiful*”. If the circumstances suit well, it makes working people feel needed, as they contribute to their families’ livelihoods, to achieving the goals of their clients, or to the functioning of society in general: “*very, very good; it’s so rewarding to me to perform*”. Such circumstances often provide for interesting activities and opportunities to learn, grow, and extend one’s view of the world. For many it is a source of social contacts, “*often such funny times, a really nice team*”, and an efficient measure against isolation by preventing people from living in restricted surroundings such as the household: “*It was super-stressful, but simply a way to see something different for two days*”. Some gain flow experience (“*I pretty much lose myself in my work*”—“*I never look at my watch, suddenly it’s time to end*”). Repeatedly, liking the job was revealed to provide resilience against its challenges: “*And then they hired me which resulted in six beautiful years [...] I worked more than 80% [of the time], then, it was partly very stressful, but very beautiful. I loved it*”.

Of course, not all interviewees were that fortunate, as seen in the following.

Work as a Burden on Life

Work can also appear as an unavoidable nuisance. Without being prompted, just over a fifth of our interviewees (108 of 497) directly motivated their professional activity by the need to earn money, often under some specific financial pressure. Not everybody enjoyed intrinsic motivation: “*To be honest, if you look back and consider all the efforts, work is not worthwhile, for the short life you have*”. Similarly, in the formulation of a person working seasonally without a holiday for 4 months: “*In fact, there is no meaning in life. You just have to work to get something*”. Others refer to their own obviously dissatisfying employment history, “*Who wants to work in a factory for a whole life?*”, or at least lament missed opportunities (in particular young people): “*You are born free [...] suddenly you are constrained [...] why can’t I have freedom and decide upon my time for myself?*” While such summary complaints are rarely raised, the amount of working time is addressed much more often, as in this provoking remark: “*Who would work voluntarily? Maybe a little, but not for 8 hours a day!*” Others just miss some small pleasures in life, for instance making use of nice weather outside, or savoring good moments: “*That would be great, just to stay and sit and not think about work!*”

Since work takes time, it directly interferes with our everyday life. Accordingly, about every 8th respondent (59 people in total: 12%) spontaneously revealed that their professional activities resulted in a lack of time for family, friends, or leisure. They expressed their longing to work less, and looked forward to working less and/or enjoying their freedom after retirement. In cases, partnerships had broken down under the workload of at least one of the partners, and several times children had felt neglected due to long parental working times, or had been raised by their grandparents rather than their parents as a result.

As another link between work and private life, some (15) mentioned exhaustion, in particular fatigue after work: “*I have worked like a horse*”, or being too tired for any activities other than sleep, clinical psychological symptoms (11) such as depression or burnout, or, worryingly, tangible health damage (30), in particular in blue collar positions (above all, prolapsed discs and other problems with vertebrae or back: “*The stress ruins you, physically and psychologically*”).

Unlike social scientists, who should always be careful with causal conclusions, the interviewees did not refrain from relating specific external circumstances directly to their well-being: “*Three months. This was a total disaster. Three months. I did not get along with my boss at all. This was my worst time at all. These three months felt like three years*”. In many cases, changing the job was claimed to increase or decrease their well-being—in contrast to common ideas that external influences do not robustly impact our happiness. As a personal comment, I experienced extreme and sustainable happiness changes for myself when switching from one employer to another, and witnessed similar effects on a couple of other people, so I am quite impervious to claims that external impacts hardly matter. In the end, one cannot regard any scientific theory as generally true if it does not even hold for oneself.

Negative work experience may spread to other life domains: “*The negative events which I take home from work depress me, and unfortunately I pass this on to my family, to my kid. [...] The arousal. The stress. [...] Quite often*”—“*Then I am already angry when I come home from work*”—“*When you return to home in the evening, frustrated, and the kids besiege you (laughs) this is not always that funny*”.

Situations like that typically intensify in the presence of double or multiple burdens, such as working to earn money in multiple parallel jobs, being self-employed as a second job, or, most commonly, conflicts between family and work obligations. The latter is still standard in the life narratives of women.

In total, the interviews show an extremely gender-differentiated Austria, and not only among older interviewees. Men continue to predominate in the breadwinner role, yet the very few who even mentioned family obligations merely complained about the scarcity of time after work (which is also true for a few women). In contrast, about 20 of the interviewed women currently either bore double burdens, or stayed at home. Although some women described parental leave as fully positive, others missed the variation in their activities or complained about difficulties in pursuing their professional life afterwards. The content of the narratives makes clear that the well-being of these women is unquestionably affected, as they spontaneously expressed: “*I’d like to have just half a day for myself*”—“*I am so occupied, till the last minute*”—“*You have to watch out that you get some air to breathe, and find some little pleasures to recover*”. Again, the circumstances are important: mainly the support provided by public institutions or grandparents, which effectively mitigated the stress of some interviewees.

The need for work in general is not the only element of force: in our interviews, many elderly people from rural regions missed any choice regarding where, how, and as what to work, and did not get the chance for higher education. They reported some longing to go away, or, in the contrary situation, homesickness. Consequently, some changed their job or started an education later on, whereas others got used to it, in the end: “*It was not too bad, after all*”.

The Role of Social Interaction at Work

Up to now, we have dealt with the links between well-being at work and in life in general. In the following, we consider the perception of the time actually spent at work. In doing so, our focus lies on a topic which was well addressed by our interviewees, but appears still not to have reached sufficient awareness among working people: the quality of social contacts and relationships.

Other issues were certainly raised as well, in particular workload and time pressures, salary levels, and types of professional activity. About 50% of the positive or negative statements about work refer to these other issues. The reason we do not concentrate on them is twofold: they are highly visible anyhow, as well as being subject to economic or structural constraints, the discussion of which would go beyond the scope of this chapter.

No less than 32% of the interviewees with work experience mentioned positive or negative social relationships at the workplace, with a positive leaning (60% of statements). However, counting (possibly) multiple statements per person, and disaggregating for the hierarchical levels (dropping

cases where this is not possible), there are clear-cut tendencies: colleagues (53 vs. 28) and customers/clients (44 vs. 8) appear predominantly as positive rather than negative forces, whereas supervisors score rather more negatively than positively (22 vs. 41). There were very few passages about subordinates. In total, about every fourth working participant spontaneously mentioned positive social interaction at work in the narrative about their life, whereas only every sixth mentioned negative social interaction (with overlaps between the two groups).

Note that this is not a systematic assessment but a statistic about spontaneous statements in a narrative. If mentioned in an interview about life, an aspect seems to be reasonably important. If not mentioned, this does not necessarily mean it plays no role in life. It should be mentioned that people hardly created the impression of excessive moaning in the interviews and, if they did, they rather complained about less personal topics, such as politics. On the contrary, people rather seemed to avoid negative exaggeration (see also Ponocny et al., 2016), and instead to stress their (at least alleged) resilience: “*I do not care what they say. I am there, I have to withstand eight hours, I earn my money, I need the job, and at 2 o'clock I leave all that behind me*”.

Colleagues

Nice colleagues were often mentioned as a positive aspect of work, be they single people or groups. They appear friendly and honest, laugh and smile, communicate on eye level, create a nice working atmosphere, become friends, in part also outside of the workplace, and constitute peer groups to laugh, have fun, or go for a drink with. They generate affection and team spirit, sometimes almost like a second family: “*And then we sat together and had a picnic. This was the best of all things*”. With associates like that, people find support for their tasks and tend to like their work. At places, comradeship on the same hierarchical level compensates for hassles with supervisors. In many cases, working climate is the first job characteristic mentioned.

Positive professional contacts are not restricted to human beings, however, and can also relate to contact with animals.

Should any reader still believe that people judge their workplace using “professional criteria” only, our interviews show exactly the opposite. People tell about smiles and little presents, being fully aware of the (seeming) bagatelle character: “*Last time I went to work, and someone asked me whether I'd like a yogurt cake, and I said 'yes, a yogurt cake!' That kind of stuff, these are the little thingies there*”.

However, some participants downplayed the importance of social contacts at work (as also evident in some other quotes in this chapter): “*When I quarrel with colleagues in the enterprise, well, that's minor, my priority is the work which is more important in the enterprise than friendship*”. Interestingly, others started in a similar vein, yet reached a rather more ambivalent conclusion, as in this example regarding discrimination relating to origin: “*When such statements are made sometimes, I tend to say to myself that it is not about me personally; but nevertheless it hurts somehow, thinking that not all people are equal*”. Such sentiments were not unusual, as many interviewees with a migration background felt treated incongruently: “*I don't do any harm to them, I am just working here*”. The last quote in this context, “*sometimes they simply treat us like shit*”, stems from a person who later described the meaning of life as “*work, work, and die*”. It is not going too far to suspect a causal relation based on such voluntarily offered reflections.

The narratives of some interviewees described how colleagues had talked badly about them, marginalized them, overly criticized trifles, failed to perform sufficiently well at a cost to the interviewee, complained that *the interviewee* performed too well, or even attacked them on a personal level. Sometimes, stereotypical elements characterized the perception of colleagues: “*shrews, who nobody stops*”, or their behaviors, for instance, when a successful woman describes marginalization: “*I thought I was part of it already, but in fact I was not*”. Sometimes it is simply their mood which generates discomfort: “*And the associates are not cheerful (laughs), let's call them the 'colleagues'*”.

Customers/Clients

At first glance, one might expect that the most intense emotional exchanges at the workplace occur between colleagues working on the same hierarchical level. However, our data suggest something else. Customers as well as clients achieved even higher shares of positive remarks than colleagues, and above all invoked the most intense positive emotional expression, in particular by interviewees taking care of children or elderly people. The following examples give an impression of some benefits these professionals take from their jobs: “*If a child beams at you, unspoiled, honest, with shining eyes, if this isn’t happiness, what else should be?*”—“*The youngsters adore me, they may say ‘Granny’ to me*”—“*Many patients often said, when they saw me, ‘as if the sun would come along’, because they liked me*”. At the extreme, some statements are so overwhelmingly positive that they challenge one’s credulity: “*Working with cancer patients is a beautiful profession which is never a burden*”.

Customers or clients were characterized as tedious in far fewer cases. Contact with patients can sometimes be judged as cumbersome, and contact with shop customers as annoying. A person selling food at a supermarket pointed to the randomness of experiencing friendly treatment: “*It differs, depending on how people are. Often they are so grumpy. Then you will get it, although you are not responsible. And often they are pretty nice*”.

Supervisors

Since supervisors or bosses are those individuals at the workplace who yield the most formal decision power directly affecting an employee, it comes as no surprise that they feature prominently in the statements, and, sadly, often in a negative respect. Good and/or nice bosses are described as hugely appreciated treasures, acting as sources of motivation and providing reasons to stay. People are willing to accept inconveniences, sudden extra hours, low payment, etc., as long as the boss treats them well verbally, visibly cares, and dispenses recognition and appreciation.

The “*coolness*” of one boss compensated for the burden of night shifts, while supervisors providing positive feedback and recognition are described as “*friends*”, “*nice*”, or “*considerate*”.

In contrast, troubles with bosses often generate quite bitter memories and emerge as reasons to quit the job. Respondents were animated in reproducing dialogues they’d had with their supervisors many years before, with still palpable emotional involvement. We may wonder whether the supervisors in these narratives are aware—or were aware at the time—that they were creating long-lasting impressions in their subordinates, weighty enough to spontaneously feature in a mere 45-minute interview about their whole lives?

In several cases, bosses are characterized as choleric; the following serves as an extreme example: “*My supervisor was terrible and choleric, and me being an 18-year old, the youngest on the set, he made a hog out of me [i.e., gave me a bollocking] in front of the convened crew and stuff (laughs silently), the tears already in my face*”. Interestingly, the interviewee laughs when telling about a bad experience, which is not atypical and is probably a defense mechanism to protect against strong negative emotions which might unwantedly arise. She does not talk about the long-term effect of this experience, we can just observe that she had psychological problems later on, such as a massive panic attack caused by the need to leave for the toilet.

As an exercise, readers may think about any harsh interactions with supervisors they have personally witnessed, and reflect on how long such interactions can continue to impact a subordinate’s happiness. I believe I have seen a couple such incidents in my life, and have observed that people tend to talk about them over and over again for a long time, such as in those interviews.

In real life, and in the interviews, it happened that people decided to quit their jobs more or less on the spot, taking a specific situation as the ultimate provocation. A waitress was told by her boss that her pregnant belly would be unaesthetic and that people would vomit if she served food to

them, so she left. Another woman described her female boss as a person “to run away from”, and stated that due to such behaviors she fell into health troubles. Other supervisors seem overly critical and blame employees for every mistake, or dismiss them when they have successfully fought for employees’ rights. Another interviewee expressed relief that it is safe to express her opinion at her current workplace, unlike her preceding one.

Less extreme examples address difficulties in pleasing the boss’s vanity, their tendency to look down upon employees (“admonitions by men in suits”), too much distance, insecurity when bosses neglect to communicate instructions, the anger which arises when criticism is not understandable, bosses acting against the interests of workers, the envy of bosses when subordinates are successful, or simply designate bosses as reasons to quit without further elaboration. Repeatedly, supervisors are criticized for not providing feedback, in particular positive feedback. The following quote elaborates on that:

There have been times when we missed recognition. I am self-confident and know about my value, but nobody is so modest that he would not enjoy a stroke, so to say, every now and then. Or an appreciative word. The head of the unit—it wouldn’t hurt him to say an appreciative word. [...] I miss this sometimes. There was a head of unit (laughs) who said something appreciative three times in five years. But there were other moments where it would have been due or appropriate. But I got used to that. [...]

Note again that although the interviewee reports some habituation, he talks about the affective consequences and still shows signs of emotion such as laughing or sarcastic wording. Again, above all, the significance of the interaction is evidenced by the fact that he actually dedicates a couple of sentences in his life narrative to the episode.

Bosses can obviously be a pretty powerful factor affecting happiness at work, and this relates not only to the factual decisions they take: anger, sympathy, and hot states in general can play an important role and influence decisions about an employee’s whole professional future. In this vein, some respondents report that they quit their job after a new disliked (or disliking) supervisor entered the workplace situation, or some kind of injustice was perceived: “*And then I packed it all in!*”

Society

Social interactions at the broader societal level featured less visibly with respect to certain professions, but lack of societal acceptance affected some of the unemployed and the housewives, but also the working mothers. One interviewee complained about a societally imposed no-win situation: “*If I worked, I would be a bad mother, such as my sister-in-law who immediately worked again. Staying at home, I am a lazybones*”. But there are also those within regular employment who do not feel appropriately respected, including a couple of Austrian teachers. They are confronted with the perception that they do not want to work much and instead strive for long holidays and free afternoons: “*I have studied, but I do not get any acceptance!*” Though this refers to just a few people in our sample, it shows once more how pejorative talking, even if not directly targeted at individual people, can burden other people’s hedonic balances.

Lack of Recognition – An Epidemic

In contrast to the spontaneously raised topics in the preceding chapters, interviewees were instructed to encourage comments about recognition in life, resulting in 199 people offering such statements in the context of their professional life. Depending on the actual coding rules applied to adjudicate

ambiguous cases, the ratio of people agreeing that they receive sufficient recognition at work to those disagreeing was between 1.6 to 1 and 2 to 1. In other words, for every two people getting enough recognition, one gets too little (at least according to the interviewees' subjective assessments). Regarding the importance of the issue, many respondents make it clear that—for them—positive feedback is an efficient source of authentic happiness, whereas its lack may be connected with quite strong negative emotions. Others talk about it rather shortly (“*It’s ok, therefore yes*”—“*Yes, certainly*”), or even actively downplay the relevance of recognition by their colleagues. We discuss this further at the end of this subchapter.

Recognition can manifest at all organizational levels, be it with bosses, colleagues, clients, or customers. Direct positive feedback is, in many cases, reported as delightful and even as giving meaning to the whole professional activity. In addition to the affection experienced with patients or other clients, as outlined above, the following quotes are quite representative: “*It strokes and pleases your soul very much*” —“*Yes, it gives me joy. It is pleasant, we have such a good team*”—“*I received sufficient acceptance in my job. This was really, really, really good*”—“*A little ‘thank you’ is more valuable than if he would give me 20 Euro*” —“*That motivates. If the customers are satisfied. The people want that what I do; this cheers me up. Then I know that I can’t be on the wrong track*”—“*For that, being a maintenance man in a care home is perfect. Everybody is happy when you come if something is broken*”. The next statement explicitly expresses the connection to resilience at work: “*Otherwise I would not have survived 20 years in that shack*”.

Unfortunately, lack of recognition is also very common. In part, people complain that others are just not aware of their efforts, which is rather a general perception at the workplace: “*I have the feeling that certain things are not appreciated and acknowledged, but taken for granted. In principle it is ok, but it could be a bit more*”—“*At the university, definitely not. I missed that very much at the beginning, this was a change which needed readjustment. Well, and as for recognition, I would not know from whom I should get it*”—“*Definitely not at work!*”—“*Compliments and recognition—this hasn’t taken place for a long time*”. Some take it as a general circumstance in their individual life: “*In fact I am used to that, that things which I do are not appreciated very well*”.

In many cases, we observe not only a lack of recognition, but even a feeling of being looked down upon, which is clearly detrimental to the well-being of those affected. A part-time worker recounted: “*If you are a part-time worker, then you hear sometimes that you are there just for a few hours, you are put down and this is, how to put it, not the best for your self-confidence*”—“*It’s shattering that the others show you that you are actually nothing. (Sadly) And you have no countermeasures. But ok, I have coped with it*”.

Remarkably, except for some positive examples, bosses are hardly mentioned as a source of recognition: for many employees, bosses seem to be distant and barely interested in them. Many respondents interpret indirect acceptance, such as keeping a job, being hired again, being assigned decision making power, or being appropriately paid, as a sign of recognition. In turn, low salaries can be taken as an indicator for a lack of appreciation, even in the presence of explicit compliments: “*I do not need recognition, I need more salary*”.

Many interviewees spontaneously expressed the importance of recognition. A few, however, explained why it does not mean too much to them, in particular by claiming that individuals should know by themselves whether work has been performed well. This seems plausible, but, from a psychological point of view, social status, acceptance, and recognition are basic needs, and it is hard to imagine that people are really indifferent regarding positive social signals, or the lack thereof. Readers might quietly question themselves again as to whether authentic compliments, or a continuous absence of them, can be disregarded as unimportant when they pertain to an area as central to one’s life as work.

Given this, the author again favors the interpretation that downplaying the need for signs of acceptance is a defense mechanism shielding against disappointment rather than an objective

description of how people's psychological needs are structured. This interpretation is supported by the fact that statements like this were only contributed by people with little to say about recognition, or who complained about some lack. In addition, some accounts showed indications of disappointment, despite downplaying the relevance of recognition: "I do not need that anyway. Waiting for recognition is over—never again! [...] As if I were distinguished, nobody cares for you. [...] After 43 years, once a 'thank you' and that's it, for 43 years"—"People say 'no criticism is the best compliment', but I think this is a little meager as well".

Those who accept the importance of experiencing recognition will probably also agree that this reportedly widespread scarcity of positive feedback at the workplace is a significant waste of human happiness, among other things. Not only is it detrimental to motivation, engagement, and leadership efforts, and therefore also to profit, not only does it represent a missed opportunity to foster fairness, good manners, friendliness, and social cohesion, but as well as all that, it imposes an unnecessary burden on the well-being of the working population.

Interactions Between Different Aspects

We have illustrated certain important aspects affecting life satisfaction one by one until now, but these aspects, in fact, influence each other, with the interplay between them governing the final outcome. At places, soft skills on one level can compensate for weaknesses on another. Gender and generativity still show strong impacts on our work lives, and seemingly little events foster happiness in our jobs, which make us willingly bear the stress to be borne, instead of suffering from depression and being unfit for work.

This is an example of the interplay between gender, generativity, work arrangement (typically female parental part-time), and social contacts at work:

I keep feeling restricted in my profession, since I'd like to work more. Since I had kids, I have been restricted. Work is really funny, I really experienced it like that, it was really great fun being there for 40 hours, to have colleagues and to spend time with them. In particular the coffee break. Since I have kids, there is no coffee break. I do my work and go home immediately. [...] I think all part-time workers miss the comfortable part of work. It is ok, my kids need me, there is no alternative, but I miss the beautiful part of work.

Similar interactions with gender were observed regarding recognition (or at least its perception), "men cannot really accept that women can do such things as well", or where gender, parenthood, and multiple burdens intersect: "Well, staying at home with the kids, whereby my husband was hardly at home, he pursued his career and worked a lot. This was a very exhausting time. And very tedious".

Finally, the last and most complex quote in this chapter links the economic situation of the enterprise to the priority placed by supervisors on giving feedback, which in turn affects recognition, and seemingly also resilience against regular work strains, whereby feedback and recognition go hand in hand:

The work depresses me a bit. [...] It is fun and I don't care about long working times. Of course they suck. But if the result is ok, I am fine as long as I achieve something. But at the moment, in the enterprise [...] the projects do not run well since the supervisors have no time. [...] I want to do my best, but the boss does not provide time and does not take the time to discuss. And then it violates what you learn as a child: 'please', 'thank you', this has to be on the table. This is said when somebody has done good work. This depresses me a bit.

Conclusions

Well-being at work and in life are intertwined and can hardly be fully disentangled. More than half of our interviewees mention work in the context of livelihood, which is not surprising, yet it is remarkable that the topic of work should be addressed, directly and spontaneously, so commonly in whole-life narratives. However, whether the impact of work is perceived as rather positive or rather negative depends on how work is experienced, and the collection of quotes presented herein shows much variation in that respect.

Needless to say, working conditions and work-life-balance profoundly impact people's well-being. Interviewees complain about stress and time pressure, about health challenges and pain (especially in blue-collar professions), and lack of time at home, but they also talk about joy, meaning, and fulfilment. In addition, when people talk about the good and the bad aspects of life, much time is dedicated to even less visible aspects of their working lives, in particular to social interactions.

The importance of high quality social relationships at the workplace is not just concluded from the time interviewees dedicate to it in their narratives, but also from direct causal attribution by the respondents themselves, and from the observation that reported happiness changed when jobs changed. The narratives are full of joy or grief, with the latter often designated responsibility for overarching negative mood, depression, or other health problems. Encouragingly, colleagues on the same hierarchical level are predominantly mentioned as sources of positive affect, and the same holds for customers and clients. In contrast, a harsher light is shed on supervisors, who feature in the majority of critical narratives.

That statements about negative supervisor behavior by far outweigh the positive ones does not automatically mean that there are in fact more problematic bosses than favorable ones—it just means that people talk more about them (negative signals are well-known to attract more attention than positive ones)—but it does document that negative perceptions of supervisor behaviors are widespread, and sufficiently meaningful to be included in many individuals' life narratives. Hence, recognition at work is revealed as an issue of significant relevance to well-being for a considerable share of the population. The message we want to send here is that people do not complain primarily about actual decisions that bosses have taken, but about the ways in which they treat people and, above all, how, and how much they communicate. Hiring decisions, payment schemes, and working conditions which dissatisfy workers can be at least partly explained by the competing and potentially irreconcilable interests of the supervisor or the enterprise as a whole, but nobody benefits economically from embarrassed employees who feel disregarded and offended. Quite the reverse, positive psychology is bursting with studies identifying happy and satisfied employees as the more productive ones (e.g., the meta-analysis by Harter et al., 2002). There is no longer any reason whatsoever to believe that treating employees harshly leads to better profits by keeping them from idling or otherwise. Therefore, any lack of consideration from the supervisors' side reveals exactly what the words express: a lack of consideration.

Consequences of such oversight include the fully superfluous waste of human and economic well-being.

Generally, it seems that many working people are not sufficiently aware of the consequences of their behavior for the well-being of other people. We may justify economic restrictions on salary and working conditions, but which external pressure could serve as an excuse not to maintain friendly conversation with our colleagues and subordinates? Not to spread appreciation and affection?

In particular when it comes to recognition at the workplace (with the general caveat that the data pertains to Austria), a distinct lack of even epidemic proportions can be reported, in spite of a rather positive global perception: a large number of employees do not feel they get enough recognition,

and an alarming number of bosses are regarded as insufficiently generous in that respect. This is particularly striking since there is common agreement in the relevant literature that, of course, outcomes improve when supervisors provide sufficient feedback, including positive and respectful feedback:

They don't compliment anybody nowadays, no, they don't. In seminars they learn that they should motivate their team and say that something was good, but the top management, the CEOs, the store managers and so on: rarely any compliment, but also no criticism.

Thinking of the popular fit-for-work initiatives, these findings seem to indicate that it is not only the subordinates who should be made fit, this should also be understood as a call to action for supervisors and the rest of the working environment. Strengthening resilience against adverse social influences is valuable, but it might be even more efficient to mitigate the adversity of those impacts before resilience against them is required. I strongly believe that one very simple yet important factor currently fails to receive the awareness it deserves, both at the workplace and in many other situations: considerate and friendly talking and behaving. As expressed by the term ripple effect (Marques, 2006), favorable, appreciative communication behavior helps to build up strong positive mindsets for work and will, due to the complex interlinkages, also show positive impacts on the whole life as well.

“Just because you have a lousy day and do not enjoy your work, do not vent it on someone else .”—“If you do something good and are well-meaning to [sic] another person, or at least not negative, this will come back to you. 100%.”

One of the greatest achievements of civilization was hygiene. Who would go to the office with an unwashed body and dirty clothes? However, in our behavior towards others, we are much less reserved about exhibiting our obvious lack of attention to psychological hygiene, and much less ambitious to keep clean. It may well pay off for individuals and workplaces to exert more effort into raising awareness of the needs of others, on an individual basis as well as through appropriate trainings (cf. Marques, 2019) involving all hierarchical levels.

Happiness at work is an essential part of our lives. We should behave accordingly.

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