

Myth or Science?

Everyone Wants a Challenging Job

This statement is false. In spite of all the attention focused by the media, academicians, and social scientists on human potential and the needs of individuals, there is no evidence to support that the vast majority of workers want challenging jobs. Some individuals prefer highly complex and challenging jobs; others prosper in simple, routinized work.

The individual-difference variable that seems to gain the greatest support for explaining who prefers a challenging job and who doesn't is the strength of an individual's higher-order needs. Individuals with high growth needs are more responsive to challenging work. But what percentage of rank-and-file workers actually desire higher-order need satisfactions and will respond positively to challenging jobs? No current data are available, but a study from the 1970s estimated the figure at about 15 percent. Even after adjusting for changing work attitudes and the growth in white-collar jobs, it seems unlikely that the number today exceeds 40 percent.

The strongest voice advocating challenging jobs has *not* been workers—it's been professors, social-science researchers, and journalists. Professors, researchers, and journalists undoubtedly made their career choices, to some degree, because they wanted jobs that gave them autonomy, identity, and challenge. That, of course, is their choice. But for them to project their needs onto the workforce in general is presumptuous.

Not every employee is looking for a challenging job. Many workers meet their higher-order needs *off* the job. There are 168 hours in every individual's week. Work rarely consumes more than 30 percent of this time. That leaves considerable opportunity, even for individuals with strong growth needs, to find higher-order need satisfaction outside the workplace.

Class Exercise

1. Have students work in teams of 3 to 5 members.
2. Each team should prepare a short presentation based on this feature.
3. The presentation should focus on the role of managers in determining whether individuals welcome and/or "need" more challenging work.

An Ethical Choice

You Might Work Less Than You Think

Traditionally, full-time meant at least 40 hours of work per week. Many jobs today, however, while full-time, require more than 40 hours per week. So how many hours does a job require? Of course answers vary, depending on the culture of the organization and individuals' own expectations. It may surprise you to learn most people dramatically overestimate their work hours.

Most studies of work motivation simply asked workers and managers to self-report their weekly work hours. However, starting in the 1980s, researchers began studying work (and nonwork) hours more carefully, with "time diaries" that track time use minute by minute. In 1985, time diary studies revealed that the average worker claimed to work 40 to 44 hours per week and actually worked 36.2.

As estimated hours rise, the discrepancy between estimated and actual work hours rises, too. Those who claim to work 60 to 64 hours a week in fact average only 44.2 hours. Individuals who estimate they work 65 to 74 hours really work 52.9. Those who claim to work 75 hours or more work only 54.9 hours on average.

The overestimations do not appear to be changing much over time. We overestimate our work hours now about as much as workers did in the 1980s.

Why does any of this matter? People may wrongly think their job is unrewarding (or underrewarding) because they overestimate the hours they work. They may also think they work harder than their coworkers, which might make them less likely to help them. So, when evaluating what you earn relative to how much you think you work, keep the following in mind:

1. Be honest with yourself. Realize we tend to overestimate the time we spend working (and underestimate the time we spend sleeping). You'll make better decisions about how to spend your time if your current "time inventory" is accurate and realistic.
2. If you're prone to overestimating— those in white-collar jobs and those who work the most hours are most likely to overestimate their actual work hours— take particular care to be honest and accurate.
3. Also realize blending work and play can cause overestimating. If you're "working" on your laptop while watching American Idol or House, how much are you really working?

Source: L. Vanderkam, "Overestimating Our Overworking," Wall Street

Case Exercise

1. Have each student go to <http://www.minessence.net/Surveys/VAWSurvey.aspx>
2. Respond to the survey question.
3. Upon responding, the next screen will be an essay about how to interpret the person's feelings.
4. Ask each student to write a short assessment of his or her positioning, based on the figures in the essay, at work or at school.

International OB

Cultural Differences in Job Characteristics and Job Satisfaction

How do various factors of one's job contribute to satisfaction in different cultures? A recent study attempted to answer this question in a survey of over 49 countries. The authors of the study distinguished between intrinsic job characteristics (having a job that allows one to use one's skills, frequently receiving recognition from one's supervisor) and extrinsic job characteristics (receiving pay that is competitive within a given industry, working in an environment that has comfortable physical conditions) and assessed differences between the two in predicting employee job satisfaction.

The study found that, across all countries, extrinsic job characteristics were consistently and positively related to satisfaction with one's job. However, countries differed in the extent to which intrinsic job characteristics predicted job satisfaction. Richer countries, countries with stronger social security, countries that stress individualism rather than collectivism, and countries with a smaller power distance (those that value a more equal distribution of power in organizations and institutions) showed a stronger relationship between the presence of intrinsic job characteristics and job satisfaction.

What explains these findings? One explanation is that in countries with greater wealth and social security, concerns over survival are taken for granted, and thus employees have the freedom to place greater importance on intrinsic aspects of the job. Another explanation is that cultural norms emphasizing the individual and less power asymmetry socialize individuals to focus on the intrinsic aspects of their job. In other words, such norms tell individuals that it is okay to want jobs that are intrinsically rewarding.

Based on X. Huang and E. Van De Vliert, "Where Intrinsic Job Satisfaction Fails to Work: National Moderators of Intrinsic Motivation," *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 2003, pp. 159–179.

Class Exercise

1. Divide students into discussion groups.
2. Ask each group to go to <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>
3. Assign three countries or have the groups select three countries.
4. Compare facts about each of the three countries (People and Economic categories are most significant)
5. Ask students to determine which of the three countries is most likely to have higher job satisfaction among employees.

Point/CounterPoint

Praise Motivates

Point

Some of the most memorable, and meaningful, words we've ever heard have probably been words of praise. Genuine compliments mean a lot to people—and can go a long way toward inspiring the best performance. Numerous research studies show that students who receive praise from their teachers are more motivated, and often this motivation lasts well after the praise is given. Too often we assume that simple words of praise mean little, but most of us yearn for genuine praise from people who are in a position to evaluate us.

Companies are starting to learn this lesson. Walt Disney, Lands' End, and Hallmark have worked on how to use praise as a work reward to motivate employees. The 1,000-employee Scooter Store even has a “celebrations assistant” whose job is to celebrate employee successes. The Container Store estimates that 1 of its 4,000 employees receives praise every 20 seconds. Bank of America also believes in the power of praise. It “encourage[s] managers to start every meeting with informal recognition,” says Bank of America VP Kevin Cronin.

Praise even seems to be important to long-term relationships. The Gottman Institute, a relationship research and training firm in Seattle, says its research suggests that the happiest marriages are those in which couples make five times as many positive statements to and about each other as negative ones. Of course, praise is not everything, but it is a very important and often underutilized motivator. And best of all, it's free.

Counterpoint

Praise is highly overrated. Sure, in theory, it's nice to receive compliments, but in practice, praise has some real pitfalls.

First, a lot of praise is not genuine. Falsely praising people breeds narcissism. Jean Twenge, a researcher who studies narcissism, has said that scores on narcissism have risen steadily since 1982. As she notes, lavishing praise may be the culprit. Told we're wonderful time after time, we start to believe it, even when we aren't.

Second, praise is paradoxical in that the more it's given, the less meaningful it is. If we go around telling everyone they're special, soon it means nothing to those who do achieve something terrific. In the animated film *The Incredibles*, a superhero's mom tells her son, “Everyone's special!” His reply, “Which is another way of saying no one is.”

Third, some of the most motivating people are those who are difficult to please. Think of Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, or A. G. Lafley, current CEO of Procter & Gamble. They are known for being difficult to please, which means most people will work harder to

meet their expectations. Conversely, what happens when you dish out kudos for an employee who just shows up? What you've done is send a message that simply showing up is enough. Praise may seem like it's free, but when it's "dumbing down" performance expectations—so that employees think mediocrity is okay—the price may be huge.

Often what people really need is a gentle kick in the pants. As Steve Smolinsky of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania says, "You have to tell students, 'It's not as good as you can do. . . . You can do better.'"

As one management consultant says, "People want to know how they're doing. Don't sugarcoat it. Just give them the damn data."

Class Exercise

1. Have students read <http://www.inc.com/magazine/19960901/1810.html>.
2. Review the Point/CounterPoint for the arguments for and against praise as a motivational tool.
3. The article in Inc. Magazine online provides suggestions for implementing praise as a motivational tool.
4. Ask students to discuss the pros and cons of praise implementation as suggested in the article.