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## Job satisfaction

Who are the happiest people at work? Could it be you? Not if you are middle-aged, have a university degree, work for a big company and are going through the motions in a job you have been doing for years, according to the latest results of a long-running study of workers in the UK.

The study, by Andrew Oswald and Jonathan Gardener at the University of Warwick, covers a random sample of some 7,000 mainly white-collar workers carried out annually since 1991. Although the research is UK-based, the team has made similar findings in other countries.

Overall it found that job satisfaction was lowest among certain groups: those in big companies who had held the same job for some time, university graduates, and the middle-aged.

The idea that people with university degrees should be unhappy at work seems the most preposterous suggestion, until you begin to look for possible reasons. Prof Oswald believes it may have something to do with elevated aspirations and personal comparisons among graduates. It does not matter that they may be doing fairly well in their careers if they perceive that they are doing less well as others in their academic peer group.

"It's fascinating to discover that the most satisfied workers are those lower down the occupational hierarchy," says Prof Oswald. Another finding that seems superficially surprising is that public-sector workers - often portrayed as staid or dispirited - are happier in their jobs than private-sector workers, although their job satisfaction has declined in recent years.

"We have found that when people move from private sector to public sector jobs their job satisfaction jumps up," says Prof Oswald. "I think that many public sector workers automatically think that what they are doing is valued. Maybe it's harder to do that if you're selling advertising."

A graph of job satisfaction over the lifetime of the average worker tends to have a distinct U-shape, with a trough during the early 40s. This probably reflects a realisation among many that early ambitions are not going to be realised. This triggers a mid-life crisis before people come to terms with reality and find other outlets for their abilities.

The study, which included controls for such things as long hours, a recognised source of dissatisfaction, also found a strong relationship between pay and job satisfaction, as might be expected.

But some might dispute another finding: that this is also true of performance-related pay. Not only that, but Prof Oswald says the research suggests that incentive pay can create a lasting effect. "We don't understand the mechanism and we don't know that it improves performance or profitability but the results are suggestive that there may be such links," he says.

Supervisors are happier than the supervised - no shocks there - and another unsurprising finding, given the male preoccupation with posturing and politics, is that

women are happier in their jobs than men.

The happiest group of workers, in spite of their often long hours, in pursuit of success, are the self-employed. Those in big companies also feel less satisfied than people in smaller workplaces. "It appears that people have a preference for smallness," says Prof Oswald.

The freedom of self-employed people to work when they want and how they want could be a big factor in job satisfaction. Workplace freedom showed up strongly in an unassuming little question asked by the researchers. They were curious to know whether people had the right to move their desk. Those who did rated their freedom to do so very highly.

Some of the findings are supported by a new study of employee satisfaction undertaken on behalf of Investors In People (IIP), the UK training and development standard. Half of the 600 people surveyed worked for IIP-accredited employers. Half of the sample worked for employers with more than 200 people and half worked for small employers with fewer than 50 people.

The study left little doubt about the effectiveness of IIP on employee morale. Some 94 per cent of workers in IIP-accredited organisations said they liked their jobs, compared with 37 per cent in other companies.

"A third of the UK working population is now engaged with IIP organisations, and businesses are starting to get the message across to other businesses about its benefits," says Ruth Spellman, chief executive of IIP.

"It's not just about training and development. We know from previous research that it affects the whole performance of the company."

If some of the Warwick findings seem gloomy for big companies, it should be noted that, overall, most workers seem happy in their jobs. Some 80 per cent of the Warwick sample, a finding consistent with the IIP study, put themselves into the top two categories of happiness offered by the researchers.

But when it comes to real happiness, the worker's Utopia would appear to be a publicly funded start-up operation in the garden shed.

*Earlier findings from the Warwick study can be found on Prof Oswald's web site: [www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/Economics/person/oswald.htm](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/Economics/person/oswald.htm)*

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