

## WORKPLACE | Articles & More

---

# The Four Keys to Happiness at Work

**Research reveals the steps you can take toward greater well-being, health, and productivity at work.**

BY EMILIANA R. SIMON-THOMAS | AUGUST 29, 2018

Where I grew up, work sucked. My parents were always drained and exasperated, and never felt financially secure enough to relax. Overwhelmed by unreasonable demands and terrible toilets (my dad was the local school district plumber) and hardened by a sense that nobody else was pulling their weight, they felt defeated by work. To top it all off, people never seemed to acknowledge or appreciate the great lengths they would go through to do things just right.

I know they're not alone. For somewhere between 55 to 80 percent of us, it's normal to see work as something to be endured, not enjoyed. We toil all day, then come home to a drink or some HGTV, trying to find the right "work-life balance"—with the assumption that work is about stress (and sustenance) while the rest of our life is where we derive true meaning and happiness.

---

# WANT TO BE HAPPIER AT WORK?

But  
that

**The Science of Happiness at Work** is a three-course professional certificate series that teaches you the what, why, and how of increasing happiness at work.

**Register** for the first course, which starts on September 3, 2018!

---

In the meantime, find out how happy you are at work by taking our **Happiness at Work quiz**.

---

perspective does not survive scientific scrutiny. In fact, evidence from psychology, leadership and management studies, and even neuroscience supports a different view: that not only is it possible to find happiness at work, but that doing so is unambiguously good. Happier employees do better on all fronts, from day-to-day health to productivity to career advancement, and this consistently perks up the bottom line for the organization as a whole.

So how do we shift our thinking about happiness at work? And how can we make our work lives feel more satisfying—like something that meaningfully contributes to our happiness in life?

I've been exploring these questions in depth while developing a new series of online courses for the Greater Good Science Center, called *The Science of Happiness at Work*, hosted on edX.org (and

launching on September 4, 2018). The courses cover insights from research that are eye-opening and sometimes surprising—and provide practical lessons for anyone who wants to find more happiness at work or across their organization.

## What does happiness at work mean?

Since 2014, my colleague Dacher Keltner and I have been teaching a course called The Science of Happiness on edX.org. In it, we offer the following science-backed portrait of people who are happy in life: They have an easy time feeling good and recovering from adversity; they have close, supportive social connections; and they believe that their presence in the world matters.

We do not consider happiness to be a momentary emotional state like amusement or pleasure or heart-swelling pride, and we don't think you can arrive at happiness by stringing together a stream of positive experiences. Rather, we define happiness as an overarching quality of life that is rich in a variety of emotions, even including episodes of anger, sadness, and stress. While it's not ideal for these more challenging emotions to last too long or have too much influence on how we think, the situations in which they occur are often the ones that fuel our deeper sense of purpose, and draw us into meaningful contact with others.

In our first course of the series, The Foundations of Happiness at Work, we define happiness at work in similar terms: feeling an overall sense of enjoyment

at work; being able to gracefully handle setbacks; connecting amicably with colleagues, coworkers, clients, and customers; and knowing that your work matters to yourself, your organization, and beyond.

With that definition in mind, happiness at work has been tied to just about every desirable outcome that individuals, workplaces, and organizations could hope for. For instance:

- Being happier at work is tied to better health and well-being, more creative and effective problem solving, more productivity and innovation, and faster career advancement.
- People who are happier at work are more authentic, more committed and driven to work, and more willing to contribute beyond their job descriptions; they also find more flow and meaning in their work.
- In the face of adversity and setbacks, people in happier workplaces tend to see the bigger picture, making them less stressed; better at coping with and recovering from work strain; and also better at reconciling conflict.
- Socially, people who are happier at work are rated by others as more likable, more trustworthy, more deserving of respect and attention, and more effective leaders; at happier workplaces, people are also more helpful to each other and more supportive of one another during difficult times.
- Happier workplaces report less turnover,

lower health care costs, fewer mistakes and accidents, more efficiency, greater shareholder value, and quicker rebounds in the wake of adverse events or failures; they also earn higher customer loyalty, commitment, and business growth via word-of-mouth endorsement.

## How to work toward happiness at work

So now that we know the essence and benefits of happiness at work, how can we foster, support, and build it?

There's no single, simple answer to this question. However, in developing our course, we have identified four key pillars of happiness at work: Purpose, Engagement, Resilience, and Kindness—or PERK, as in to PERK up your happiness at work, or make happiness your company's best PERK.

Studies report multiple ways to strengthen each pillar of PERK on personal, social, and structural levels at work—through individual exercises and activities, the development of key social skills, shifts in leadership style, organization-wide initiatives, or changes to company policy. While this field is young and ideas overlap, we offer PERK as a flexible, integrated framework to help guide thinking about how to increase happiness at work.

Below, we summarize some of the highlights from science and industry behind each of the four pillars of PERK.

# 1. Purpose

UC Berkeley management professor Morten Hansen, in his 2018 book *Great at Work*, defines purpose this way: “You have a sense of purpose when you make valuable contributions to others (individuals and organizations) or to society that you find personally meaningful and that don’t harm anyone.”

Our purpose is a reflection of our core values, and we feel more purposeful at work when our everyday behaviors and decisions are aligned with those values. As individuals, bringing more passion and purpose to work can mean asserting ourselves in formulating and conducting our day-to-day tasks—connecting what we do to what we believe in and care about—rather than passively embracing the status quo. For example, if you value equality and diversity, you can make a point of collaborating with people of different backgrounds from yours.

For leaders, you may be tempted to use financial incentives to try to instill more purpose in your employees, but it probably won’t work. In his book *Payoff*, behavioral economist Dan Ariely reveals that cash bonuses only go so far; his studies suggest that what we really crave are intrinsic incentives like appreciation and making meaningful progress. As Swarthmore professor Barry Schwartz explains, we want to see how our progress is tied to meaningful, important, and self-transcendent impact in the world.

## Why We Work



At the level of the organization, the Patagonia outdoor retail company instills core values of conservation and family into their workplace culture by sourcing environmentally sound materials for their products, discouraging excessive purchases in their marketing campaigns, and providing on-site child care and flexible return-to-work schedules for new parents. If you are in a position of influence, you can promote purpose by making core values explicit at the workplace, and implementing policies that align people's day-to-day experiences with core values.

## 2. Engagement

Do you generally enjoy your work? Are you part of the decisions about what, when, and how you do things at work? How often do you feel curious or deeply immersed and lose track of time while working? Do you feel like you can be effective and get things done?

According to recent reports, a majority of working people around the world say no to questions like these, indicating that engagement at work is troublingly low.

There are three main ways to increase engagement at work. First, fold in some playfulness, creativity, and levity—like Southwest Airlines does. The company has earned a reputation for prioritizing fun; for example, employees are invited to infuse humor and zeal into routine flight announcements.

Second, give people more ownership over their day-to-day schedule, tasks, and professional development, and build in opportunities to learn and grow. New employees at Logitech, Zappos, and Davita participate in multi-day onboarding events that include fun social activities and “job crafting”—an exercise in reflecting on your personal strengths and the collaborative dimensions of your job, and envisioning the most fitting, appropriately challenging, collegial, and growth-focused work experience. For example, an employee who scores high in zest might take on organizing employee team-building activities.



Finally, adopt a less draconian, hectic schedule and make space for the immersive, lose-track-of-time experience of flow at work. To do this, some companies are shifting away from the typical hyperbusy, multitasking, always-available, device-notification-laden, meeting-clogged schedule—and at the same time encouraging off-work downtime. Some are even barring work-related emails after-hours to help people relax and recover, and to leave them refreshed for uninterrupted periods of “deep work” at work.

### 3. Resilience

The ability to handle, adapt to, and productively learn from setbacks, failures, and disappointments is critical to overall happiness at work. Resilience doesn't mean trying to prevent difficulties, stifle stress, or avoid confrontation; it means being able to manage challenges at work with authenticity and grace.



To strengthen your own resilience at work, perhaps the most promising technique

is to get better at real-time, in-the-moment awareness, or mindfulness. Mindfulness can be a starting point for revising our learned habits of self-criticizing or blaming others, or getting

preoccupied about past or future upsets, that make it hard to manage difficult moments at work. Companies can weave mindfulness into their overall climate, as Adobe has done with Project Breathe.

Another way to bolster resilience at work is to be authentic—that is, bring your whole and best self to work—as evidenced by pioneering work by Tina Opie at Babson College and research at Google. Being true to ourselves at work eliminates the stress of surface acting or pretending to feel emotions you don't feel.

Resilience at work is also tied to successfully detaching from work. That means taking time away to recover and pursue restorative, non-work-related wellness, social, creative, and perhaps charitable activities, both on a daily basis and through restful vacations.

## 4. Kindness

Finally, we're happier at work when we tap into our innate tendency towards kindness—orienting our thoughts, feelings, and actions towards care for others and genuinely supportive social bonds. Being kind at work involves treating others with dignity and respect, extending empathy and compassion, practicing gratitude, and constructively managing conflicts.

Kindness at work begins with civility, as profiled in Georgetown professor Christine Porath's book *Mastering Civility*; being civil means building trust;

sharing resources, feedback, and credit; and being a good listener. For leaders, civility skills are critical to avoiding the corruptive influence of gaining power.

A next step to kindness at work is practicing “prosocial” states like empathy, compassion, and gratitude. Empathy is the basis for understanding other people, and guides cooperative choices and effective teamwork. According to Northeastern professor David DeSteno, not only do compassion and gratitude increase kindness, they also help people succeed at their goals at work.

What happens when workplace relationships run into trouble? Research shows that apologizing, often considered a sign of weakness, is good for trust and, in turn, happiness at work. Apologies inspire greater respect and commitment in the people around you, and make organizations better at rebounding from setbacks.

Today, we still face surprisingly high levels of boredom, disengagement, chronic stress, turnover, and even cynicism—a reality that my parents knew all too well. But I believe in a different kind of work life, and I am not alone. Millennials agree that happiness at work, like happiness in life, is a basic human aspiration and, thus, the most attractive perk a workplace can offer. And research shows that happiness at work is essential to organizational success, entirely possible to foster, and well worth the investment and effort.

---

# About the Author



## **Emiliana R. Simon-Thomas**

**Emiliana R. Simon-Thomas, Ph.D.**, is the science director of the Greater Good Science Center.