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The Politics of Happiness in the Workplace

An honors thesis presented to the
Department of Political Science
University at Albany, State University of New York
Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy
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and
Graduation from the Honors College

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Abstract

Although the realm of political theory has often focused on what makes an individual happy, there is a lack of analysis on what factors within a career environment best serve to increase an individual's satisfaction. By comparing indicators such as the region a workplace is located in, the ability of an individual to pursue career goals and the amount of autonomy an employee is allowed, a better understanding can be made on what conditions are optimal for satisfaction in the workplace. After these factors are compared, the findings are then analyzed under the lens of respected political thinkers in order to gain a greater context within political theory.

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The Politics of Happiness in the Workplace

Introduction:

What makes people happy has been a topic of discussion for as long as political philosophy has been around. From Aristotle, all the way to political thinkers of the twentieth century, there has always been massive conjecture on what makes a person happy. With so much discussion, one would think that political thinkers must now have definitive answers. Unfortunately for us, this is not the case. Topics of happiness continue to arise in everyday publications, often bringing new viewpoints and information to the discussion. Although much of the conversation focuses on personal life, family and friends, one aspect that may play a bigger role in overall happiness is happiness or satisfaction derived from the workplace. As many people turn away from material aspirations such as owning a household, more focus has been placed on what is achieved from one's endeavors. In essence there may be a shift in focus from the ends to the means. If this is the case, what environments should employers then seek to provide in order to facilitate happiness? What incentives, if any, can be provided to make these environments possible? In order to gain further insight and understanding of career satisfaction, several factors have proven effective. Major factors include the type of region someone works in (rural, suburban, etc.), the ability for an employee to pursue self defined career goals or gain promotion, and the availability of appealing benefits packages. Although all of the mentioned

factors contribute to the level of job happiness, autonomy within the workplace will also be focused on, but more intensely in that it appears to be a relatively new emergence. In order to gain a more intuitive understanding, these factors will be analyzed according to what sector of the economy their relevance falls into, namely private and public. After such a distinction is made, implementations of improvements become easier to visualize as government bodies and private companies can be subject to new public policy goals and employer incentives in order to facilitate higher degrees of job satisfaction and happiness. Finally these conclusions can be examined in light of existing political theory in order to bring away lasting concepts that will hopefully maintain relevance as careers and policies continue to evolve.

For the purpose of this paper, I will not attempt to make a definition for happiness in a way that is overly specific. Being that happiness is subjective and much of the research that is conducted through surveys differs in approach, a more general of idea of happiness will be used. If people report being satisfied with their work environments and careers, then, for the purpose of this research, they will be considered happy.

Analysis:

Before determining the exact qualities in a workplace that lead to higher job satisfaction, basic examples can first serve as a basis of understanding. Companies such as Google, Valve and Ben & Jerry's are all examples of workplaces that have relatively high satisfaction rates. Because of their large volume of employees as well as satisfaction rating determined by outside organizations, these companies are fairly reliable in terms of providing usable data.

Google has long had positive evaluations for employee satisfaction from outside organizations. One organization that has measured employee satisfaction for consecutive years is CareerBliss. CareerBliss has used surveys to determine employee satisfaction across the categories of “work-life balance, one’s relationship with the boss and co-workers, the work environment, job resources, compensation, growth opportunities, company culture, company reputation, daily tasks, and job autonomy (Smith).” According to the survey, Google had the greatest satisfaction growth throughout its relatively short history with only minimal periods of satisfaction decrease. To reach this level of satisfaction, CareerBliss cites that Google has copious amounts of employee benefits, most of which do not require tenure to obtain. A death benefit, for example, in which a spouse or partner will receive half of a deceased employee’s salary for ten years, is available to the great majority of the company’s employees (Smith).

Most interestingly in Google’s tool belt of employee perks has been the idea of what has become known as “twenty percent time.” Although there has been some reports of Google discontinuing the policy, technology media sources claim that the practice is still in existence (Tate). The main principle behind twenty percent time is that employees spend approximately one-fifth of their paid work time experimenting with their own ideas. Although the trend is believed to have started largely with Google, companies such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Apple have reportedly followed suit. What makes this company activity most relevant within the discussion of career happiness is that it promotes periods where workers can have autonomy. Autonomous projects have led to successful products for Google and makes for interesting analysis that will be expanded upon further in a latter part of this thesis.

Valve is another company that has a high amount of employee satisfaction. Valve is a videogame development company most notable for having what co-founder Gabe Newell claims

is a corporate structure with no managers or bosses (business week*). Employees can work on multiple projects and alternate between taking a lead and contributing as a member of a group. Newell also puts game developers in charge of determining the best way to optimize a customer's satisfaction (business week*). According to Newell, his unconventional methods have been successful mostly due to the company hiring those who are most effective and also more expensive. In this way Newell believes employees are more efficient at completing successful projects. Along with high mobility within Valve to support individually defined career goals, this structure also lends to autonomy in that employees have a very large degree of creative control over their own projects.

With examples of workplaces that have high degrees of workplace satisfaction, we can begin to delve into what really provides employee satisfaction. Although Google and Valve are fair examples, they operate with incomes and resources that far outweigh what is available to most employers. Information on these companies, from Forbes for example, has also been extremely topical. Although mainstream information serves to give a basic understanding of what work environments promote happiness best, scholarly journals give a higher degree of understanding, many of which analyze specific aspects of workplace happiness by collecting comprehensive data.

One of the more comprehensive studies on the quality of work life mainly focused on job satisfaction in Spain. Given the growing interconnections of states within the European Union, the EU sought to become the most competitive knowledge based economy by 2010 (Royuela, 225). Although that concept did not wholly come to fruition, the data collected serves the purpose of exploring what creates higher degrees of happiness within the work place.

Royuela's finding on work satisfaction mainly concluded that developed regions, service sector jobs, and jobs within bigger firms that yielded greater responsibility were generally the most conducive to job satisfaction. The study was done by determining correlations between objective and subjective measurements of the quality of work life. Because of this two pronged approach, this study is more comprehensive than a study that simply uses one form of measurement. Many surveys, for example, are criticized due to variations in how people subjectively answer survey questions. Objective measurements, on the other hand, sometimes try to encompass too much at once and therefore might make assumptions on what conditions yield happier individuals. This multidimensional approach could be inaccurate in that the single measurement based on so many different components could be inaccurate in that the measurement may not accurately reflect happiness from one person to another (Royuela, 228). For example, positive correlation between income and happiness could vary too much from person to person to be an adequate dimension among the various components. The results concluded that there was high positive correlation between the objective and subjective measurements, which gave each measurement a higher certainty of validity (Royuela, 235).

Assuming that the statistics of Royuela's study are sound, some conclusions can be drawn by his results. As stated previously, according to the study, those who worked in developed regions, the service sector, and in bigger firms were generally more satisfied. Given the available data, however, more information was available for region, which makes the results from the measurements on region more conclusive. Areas that are more developed lead to greater happiness in work life than areas that are less developed, such as rural areas.

Given that more developed areas have greater production, the results from Spain might not be all that surprising. At the same time however, increased productivity did not have to

necessarily correlate with greater satisfaction. To further confirm that they do correlate, another study that can be analyzed in the context of the Spanish study is a study having to do with physicians in rural areas.

Although physicians in rural and urban areas have similar responsibilities, one study found that physicians who lived in rural areas were generally less satisfied with their lives. A larger percentage of these doctors were determined to negatively perceive a larger workload and were also dissatisfied with their life accomplishments (Lavanchy, 95). Although the study did not find that the rural context itself was the cause of the dissatisfaction, it was higher in rural areas, along with higher rates of depression (Lavanchy, 94). The cause of this difference could be a lurking variable that is more heavily existent in rural areas. In any case, from this study and the study on Spain, it would seem as though conditions conducive to satisfying work conditions have a greater presence in developed areas than in less developed areas.

Region, as stated in the Spanish case, is not the only indicator of happiness within the workplace. Opportunities within a field are also crucial to satisfaction. Employees do not want to feel as though there is no room for development within their positions. A study that supports this idea was on personnel within management information systems. Like the Spanish study, this study was very comprehensive with over four-hundred employees included. The study found that those who were most satisfied with their jobs were those who had positions that were relatable to the type of career goals that the individual had (Igbaria, 18). This meant that satisfied employees felt that they had room to grow from within their positions. It is also noteworthy that these employees were also more likely to stay in their positions. Lack of turnover could possibly be an incentive for employers to give their employees jobs with such potential in that they would retain a greater percentage of their workforce.

Another variable to analyze via social science research, studies also found that benefits packages were also an important factor in job satisfaction. This one may be somewhat more obvious in that such packages provide security for employees and the families of employees. The death benefit at Google, as stated previously, was very popular among Google employees.

Benefits are extremely important to analyze in terms of incentives for employees and the cost for these incentives to employers. As a percentage of payroll costs, benefits have risen from as low as three percent in 1929 to as high as forty-one percent sixty years later (Blau, 669). Things such as health insurance, disability and maternity leave were among top priorities for employees (Blau, 677). Once basic benefits such as these were provided, employees felt more secure and were less likely to leave the occupation. In terms of happiness, benefits did not indicate job satisfaction in the most direct way, but added a sense of security. “Career enrichment” benefits could change depending on what employers are offering at the time so cannot be defined specifically. Benefits that lend towards the skills and development of the employee, more or less, can be considered enriched. According to the study, enriched benefits led to more engaged employees (Blau, 683). In today’s terms, many of the benefits from Google could be considered enriched in that they go above what would usually be considered normal benefits and provide more than a sense of security.

What seems to carry out the most happiness from one study to the next is that autonomy plays a part in work life satisfaction. More substantial benefits, for example, give people a means by which they can become more mobile within their lives in general. If maternal and paternal leave are given as well as death benefits, people can be freer to operate within their personal lives as they would like and also contribute more heavily within the workplace to ensure that their professions continue to thrive (Blau, 683).

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the information thus far is that autonomy might play a role in other workplace conditions that are favorable. In the Spanish work life study, for instance, larger firms that gave more responsibility in more developed regions were often more desirable for satisfying for employees. Google is an example of just this type of scenario. Given Google's vast size and resources, the company is more capable of taking risks on employee proposed projects.

The successes of autonomous projects have greatly assisted Google in becoming the technical giant it is today. Gmail, Google's search bar auto-complete system and its ad software were all created as autonomous projects (Tate). Even more interesting is that, despite the great success of this practice, Google has not specifically codified it into its corporate policy. More accurately, twenty percent time has become an unofficial common practice within technical companies, more or less a characteristic of tech company culture (Tate).

As the practice started to become a norm throughout tech companies, it would seem as though little incentive is necessary to keep the process going in this area of employment. Employees benefit from the satisfaction that is derived from seeing their own ideas come to fruition and the employing company then reaps the profits. One might then ask if greater satisfaction may be granted from self employment, in which all projects would be autonomous and all profits could be taken by the creator, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

As with Google, Valve also exhibited similar autonomy benefits. Without a company hierarchy, each employee structurally has the same amount of influence on how projects are performed. Although, in practice, equality of influence is probably not the case if an informal power structure is in place, the company still seems to enjoy higher satisfaction ratings than most among employees (businessweek*).

Evidence to support autonomy within the work place has been argued for with scholarly articles as well. In a study regarding the balance between engineer autonomy and regulation, an argument is made that complete regulation of an engineering project is not necessary (Coeckelbergh, 237). Perspectives on engineering serve well in developing a model to promote work life satisfaction through autonomy in that the cost of the failure can be potentially high for both the acting private company and the public. Examples of public costs would be faulty consumer goods, or even more costly, faulty public infrastructure projects. By analyzing this study, a limit is found on how much autonomy can be pursued in certain types of work places, which has consequences for how much satisfaction can be derived from such a career.

In argument against having complete oversight on engineering projects, Coeckelbergh argues that most engineers have ethical principles that constrain their behavior. If the engineer is left with more autonomy, then that engineer could possibly operate with more responsibility in that accountability would not go to the controlling regulatory body, but more to the engineer. Accountability for mistakes would be less likely to be displaced from those responsible onto others (Coeckelbergh, 246). Autonomy could also work well in that relevant industrial institutions would want projects to go well and would likely support professionals with significant information to adequately complete tasks (Coeckelbergh, 246-247).

While there is reasoning to support such autonomy, which would be conducive to happiness, there are also potential costs if adequate restraint is not applied. In one example, an engineer might design a seat within a car with the distance from the airbag determined by what would be suitable for a person of average height. The engineer might reason that most people would sustain less injuries, but at the same time, shorter people, who would move the seat closer, may sustain worse injuries than if there was no airbag at all (Coeckelbergh, 247). If an engineer

has an anonymous relationship with those who consume his products, he may be less inclined to exercise ethical restraint in that he would likely never come into direct contact with those who would suffer from his product. Even if a lawsuit were to take place after such actions, the suits would most likely not target engineers individually and in any case, they still would not associate their actions with victims first hand in that there would be a lawyer or legal service to represent them (Coekelbergh, 247).

While this places arguments directly for and against the benefits and costs of increasing autonomy, a final conclusion that could be made on such a debate does not have to be absolutely one way or the other. Given that regulations and professional autonomy are complicated, there is likely a middle ground to be found. This middle ground can be defined in general terms in that they would be different depending on what the professional category is and how much it affects those outside of its operation. For instance, professionals can be notified of expectations and given resources to meet those expectations or at least come as close as possible. If the professional is given more responsibility in this manner, but believes expectations cannot be met, then, depending on the type of profession, a dialogue can be opened between the professional and the public or consumers. Greater accountability can then be established from this dialogue (Coekelbergh, 255). Professionals can also have constraints put on them through this dialogue. A professional with autonomy can outline his or her outlook on the ethics of the situation, which can then be responded to by interested parties. If, ultimately, complete outside constraint is to be exercised, Coekelbergh points out that there is then a limit in the amount of personal judgment that can be used since autonomy is then limited.

Although studies show support for multiple variables that can determine the likelihood of satisfaction within a career, autonomy is probably the greatest indicator. What must be kept in

mind, however, is that any reasonable level of autonomy will always have limitations based upon the outlines have a position. Furthermore, as stated previously, there are many considerations to be made in allowing for higher levels of autonomy including the risk of capital while investing employee time into their own works, works that are usually not investigated by the business before action is taken. Considerations must also be made on accountability and the possible repercussions on those outside of the employment of the company or government organization. In this scope, the subject can be analyzed under the lens of political theory.

Findings in the Context of Political Theory:

Utilitarianism, for the most part, is probably the best theory to use for critically considering the balance between autonomy and regulation and fits well with the presented studies. In the case of the engineering study, with the example of the airbags, we can see an exercise in utilitarianism. Given the increases in work satisfaction that autonomy in the workplace might allow, is it worth it if possible harm would be undertaken due to decisions that were more readily acted upon by employees who work with higher degrees of independence? Utilitarianism holds that actions should be undertaken that lead to the highest gain in net wellness or happiness. The question then becomes, if higher degrees of autonomy were pursued throughout all areas of employment, what would the net gain be? Alternatively, having higher degrees of autonomy in some professional areas, but not others, may have greater results.

With the evidence presented within this thesis, it seems obvious that autonomy is safe to pursue within the technology industry. Advances in technology require innovation, which arguably is enhanced by creative control. Given the success of Google and Valve in the context

of their relatively high rates of autonomous employee projects, this idea seems to be well supported. To use utilitarianism conservatively, that is, to not apply the consideration of increasing autonomy across all areas of employment, but in the technology sector, would most likely do well. Employees would have benefit by having increased satisfaction and society as a whole could arguably benefit through its use of the possible advancements in technology that would be brought on. This argument is further supported by the strides that have already been made because of the allocation of autonomous time to employees.

At the same time, however, in the area of technology, the application even in this limited approach could be more complicated than anticipated. Given the informal nature of autonomous work within these organizations, benefits might not be as good as expected if the privilege was given to all employees. Many of the innovations cited as being created through autonomous work periods may have been because of the passionate and efficient nature of those individuals who pursued those projects. To really apply the model of autonomous work time and get a guarantee of a net benefit, the autonomous work time could be limited and only given to employees demonstrating a high amount of competency and passion.

Utilitarianism could also be applied to the other factors that were discussed. Given the increased amount of satisfaction within developed areas, a net gain in happiness could be implemented if more employees were incentivized to move to areas that were more developed. Although an exact outline of such a policy is outside of the scope of this research, the possibility for such policy action is not outside of the realm of possibility. People in places that are highly depressed, for example, and are already dependent on government assistance could be incentivized to move into areas of higher development through an increase in assistance. If ample employment could be gained by the person after such a move, the individuals involved

would benefit in having a higher standard of living while also becoming a lower cost for the public capital that is used for such assistance.

Other factors, such as promotions and the ability to grow professionally within a position are harder to analyze under the utilitarian model. Because of the vast difference in structures among different places of employment, a broad analysis would not be conclusive.

Considerations that could be made into this area, however, if the model was to be applied to a certain sector or individual business, could be in determining what the net gain would be in creating or reforming tenured positions and what the criteria would be for gaining promotions. The effects of the promotion of an individual could then be compared against others in the company. If more people benefitted because of advancement for an individual, than there could be a net gain. To offer promotions, simply to promote work place happiness, could potentially lead to net loss of happiness in this model if the act of the promotion did not lead to greater innovation or success for the company. In effect, if the person is only being promoted for the sake of happiness, it might be a net loss if the promotion is resource intensive and diverts resources away from operations that would benefit most employees.

Although utilitarianism gives an excellent analysis on ways in which improvements can be made in the work place, another, more foundational approach can also be applied. Aristotle, despite the age of his philosophical writings, is still incredibly relevant within today's political context.

In contrast to philosophers such as Socrates, Aristotle is different in that he had a higher focus on the practice and implementation of ethics rather than on contemplation. For our use, this makes his work more applicable in that his teachings are more readily applied on the subject of occupation. As Aristotle states in the fifth chapter of the first book of the Nicomachean

Ethics, people are often “slavish” to their desires. In this way, as we have seen from various studies, a focus on what kind of work is completed would most likely yield more happiness. Working in a position simply for monetary benefit did not indicate for happiness in any of the previous studies. Therefore it would seem, as Aristotle argues, that a higher degree of satisfaction is taken from an occupation in the way it is done rather than the compensation that is given for its completion.

Aristotle also speaks on intermediate goals. Undertaking a position simply to reap compensation is acceptable while pursuing a happy life, but should only be done on the way to pursuing a higher calling. For the most part, Aristotle’s findings in the context of career happiness are more applicable for the individual. Since Aristotle finds that the concluding method of happiness in a life is through contemplation, it become hard to apply the idea across the whole study. At best, the Nicomachean serves as an analysis for possibilities once a better work environment is produced.

Again, the area of autonomy can be reviewed. In chapter five of the Nicomachean, Aristotle argues that humans differ from animals in the prospect of work, because humans reason through the issues they encounter. As in the engineering example, reasoning is very important, not just in handling a task such as a math problem, but considering the ethical consequences of an action. Aristotle goes onto state that it is the continued reasoning throughout an entire lifetime that really leads to happiness (Aristotle). For Aristotle’s purposes, it would seem as though autonomy would be highly conducive to giving people the ability to reach a level of happiness that is beyond superficial.

The factor of possible promotions also works well within Aristotle’s model. If indeed reasoning is an integral part in achieving long term happiness, then promotions would be

necessary if happiness were to extend to the workplace. If promotions could continue through many degrees of expertise, for example, it could be argued that the employee would come closer and closer to the mark of contemplation in that the reasoning that would be necessary could become more complex as the promotions go on.

In essence, Aristotle's philosophies could be considered in determining methods to promote happiness in the workplace, but for the most part it seems as though his work is much more applicable by the individual. It is also hard to apply in that happiness takes a long time to achieve (according to Aristotle). If it truly took a lifetime to realize real happiness, then there is really not much to be done in the way of careers, unless this happiness becomes the ultimate focus of how the career is planned out – something that is much easier to pursue on an individual basis. Aristotle's philosophies may fit into a model that is supportive of the factors indicative of happiness, autonomy, promotion ability, benefits, etcetera, but do not serve to construct the model from the start.

Conclusion:

The prospect of happiness from a career is something that should fully be considered. Given that so much of one's life is spent in services that take the form of careers, it is probably best that some meaningful form of happiness is derived from the endeavor. Utilitarianism serves as a great method of measuring the cost of implementing conditions conducive to happiness, but is best applied through a case by case basis. Most importantly, factors that promote happiness should be considered more in careers. Although incentives such as higher profits can sometimes be found for employers who make these conditions, it is likely not to be found through every

facet of the economy. For this reason, it is important for individuals to determine career goals in advance and strive for places of employment that meet their happiness needs.

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