Cover

Thank God It's Monday!

If workers feel engaged and content at work, they're more productive. How to make jobs so satisfying that employees want to say ...

By JYOTI THOTTAM

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In Game 5 of the first round of the 1984 NBA play-offs, Isiah Thomas experienced the most remarkable 1 1/2 minutes of his career. Playing for the Detroit Pistons, trailing the New York Knicks in sweltering Joe Louis Arena, Thomas suddenly couldn't miss. With the last quarter slipping away, he scored 16 points in just 94 sec., forcing the game into overtime. "I remember coming back into the huddle at one time and practically crying because everything was just flowing so right," Thomas recalls. Even an eventual loss in the game doesn't tarnish the memory. It was a classic in-the-zone moment. "Your focus is crystal clear. You are seeing and you are feeling things before they really happen. You just instinctively feel and know what's ready to happen."

Those moments are rare, but Thomas says he could feel the euphoria years later. Nice work if you can get it, right? Well, maybe you can. Ask Carol Young. She isn't a pro basketball player; she's a teacher's aide in Santa Monica, Calif. For Kira Sweeney, a blind student, "I'm her eyes," Young says, anticipating Sweeney's needs through every lesson of the day. Young finds bas-relief globes for the student to touch during geography lessons, plants for biology and Braille versions of everything.

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"While I'm doing my work, I'm not worrying or fussing," Young says. "I'm on a wavelength where I just do what I need to do. It's almost an intuitive thing, like being on automatic pilot." Like Thomas, Young gets emotional thinking about it. "Sometimes I feel as if I assist in miracles." Listen closely, and you can almost hear the cheering fans.

As researchers in psychology, economics and organizational behavior have been gradually discovering, the experience of being happy at work looks very similar across professions. People who love their jobs feel challenged by their work but in control of it. They have bosses who make them feel appreciated and co-workers they like. They can find meaning in whatever they do. And they aren't just lucky. It takes real effort to reach that sublime state. Thomas says those 94 sec. were the culmination of years of good habits that came together on the court. Young discovered her calling in special education only after abandoning her earlier career of 17 years, toiling in an insurance office.

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An even bigger obstacle, though, may be our low expectations on the job. Love, family, community--those are supposed to be the true sources of happiness, while work simply gives us the means to enjoy them. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who coined the term flow, which adherents of positive psychology would use to describe Thomas' and Young's job-induced highs, says that distinction is a false one. "Anything can be enjoyable if the elements of flow are present," he writes in his book Good Business. "Within that framework, doing a seemingly boring job can be a source of greater fulfillment than one ever thought possible."

Csikszentmihalyi encourages us to reach a state in which work is an extension of what we naturally want to do. Immersed in the pleasure of work, we don't worry about its ultimate reward. The Dalai Lama, for example, sums up his life's work this way: "I do nothing." His work and his life are the same. If that sounds out of reach, take heart. You may soon get some encouragement from the head office. A growing body of research is demonstrating that happy workers not only are happier in life but are also crucial to the health of a company.

Thirty-five years ago, the Gallup Organization started researching why people in certain work groups, even within the same company, were so much more effective than others. Donald Clifton, the Gallup researcher who pioneered that work, conducted a series of extensive interviews with highly productive teams of workers. From those interviews, Gallup developed a set of 12 statements designed to measure employees' overall level of happiness with their work, which Gallup calls "engagement." Some of the criteria reflect the obvious requirements of any worker (Do you have what you need to do your job? Do you know what's expected of you at work?), while others reveal more subtle variables (Do you have a best friend at work? Does your supervisor or someone else at work care about you as a person?). Gallup started the survey in 1998, and it now includes 5.4 million employees at 474 organizations; Gallup also does periodic random polls of workers in different countries.

The polls paint a picture of a rather disaffected U.S. work force. In the most recent poll, from September 2004, only 29% of workers said they were engaged with their work. More than half, 55%, were not engaged, and 16% were actively disengaged. Still, those numbers are better than in many other countries. The percentage of engaged workers in the U.S. is more than twice as large as Germany's and three times as great as Singapore's. But neither the late 1990s boom nor the subsequent bust had much impact in either direction, indicating that the state of worker happiness goes much deeper than the swings of the economy.

James Harter, a psychologist directing that research at Gallup, says many companies are simply misreading what makes people happy at work. Beyond a certain minimum level, it isn't pay or benefits; it's strong relationships with co-workers and a supportive boss. "These are basic human needs in the workplace, but they're not the ones thought by managers to be very important," Harter says. Gallup has found that a strong positive response to the statement "I have a best friend at work," for example, is a powerful predictor for engagement at work and is correlated with profitability and connection with customers. "It indicates a high level of belonging," Harter says.

Without it, a job that looks good on paper can make a worker miserable. Martina Radix, 41, traded a high-pressure job as an executive assistant at a company where she liked her colleagues for a less taxing position as a clerical worker in a law firm six years ago. She has more time and flexibility but feels stifled by her co-workers and unappreciated by her boss. "I am a misfit in that department," she says. "No matter how good your personal life is, if you go in to a bad atmosphere at work, it takes away from it."

For the growing number of Americans who work from home for themselves or as telecommuters for an employer, the need for supportive co-workers poses a particular problem. They gain autonomy, an important factor in job satisfaction, but may have to find that sense of belonging elsewhere. Christine Stone, 34, a saleswoman in Chicago for an Arizona corporate-relocation company, says she doesn't miss office politics but chafes at her homebound isolation. "There are some days when it's freezing here in Chicago and I don't leave the house all day," she says. "That's not exactly healthy." To compensate for that, she started making plans almost every night with friends from college and took on a second job selling real estate just to meet people in the evenings and on weekends.

The good news is, it is possible to become happier at work. In fact, engagement at work is less a function of your personality than is happiness in general. Harter estimates that individual disposition accounts for only about 30% of the difference between employees who are highly engaged and those who are not. The rest of it is shaped by the hundreds of interactions that employees have every day with co-workers, supervisors and customers.

The most direct fix, then, is to seek out a supportive workplace. Laura Anderle, 28, found one at Uncle Fun, a novelty store in Chicago. The owner, Ted Frankel, begins each new employee's orientation with "the talk." He tells them, "It's just a job. It's not your life. You should have fun while you're here. You should enjoy what you're doing, or you should go somewhere else." Anderle, who used to get stress headaches in her previous job, as a private-school administrator, now has enough energy left for her avocation, playing guitar. "Having a good job spills into the rest of your life," she says.

Gavin Mulloy, a graphic designer in Dallas, left his previous job, at an online brokerage firm, largely because of the sour work environment. "The boss had no time for me," he says, and many of Mulloy's friends had been laid off. While the hours at his new job, at a public relations firm, are long and the work is sometimes tedious, he knew when he arrived that he would enjoy it. "People seemed to be leaping from behind their desks to shake my hand," he says.

For others, finding a job that fits a life calling unlocks the door to happiness. Lissette Mendez, 33, says her job coordinating the annual book fair at Miami Dade College is the one she was born to do. "Books are an inextricable part of my life," she says. She put that commitment in writing--on her skin. A tattoo on her arm

proclaims, BORN TO READ; another depicts "word temple" as a Japanese pictogram.

Even if your passion does not easily translate into a profession, you can still find happiness on the job. Numerous studies have shown correlations between meaningful work and happiness, job satisfaction and even physical health. That sense of meaning, however, can take many different forms, says Michael Pratt, a professor of business administration at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Some people find it in the work itself; others take pride in their company's mission rather than in their specific job. "People can find meaning in anything," he says.

The desire for meaning is so strong that sometimes people simply create it, especially to make sense of difficult or unpleasant work. In a recently completed six-year study of physicians during their surgical residency, for example, Pratt found that the surgeons were extremely dissatisfied in the first year, when the menial work they were assigned, like filling out endless copies of patient records, seemed pointless. Once they started to think of the training as part of the larger process of joining an ??lite group of doctors, their attitude changed. "They're able to reconstruct and make sense of their work and what they do," Pratt explains. "By the end of year one, they've started to create some meanings."

While positive psychology has mostly focused on the individual pursuit of happiness, a new field--positive organizational scholarship--has begun to examine the connection between happy employees and happy businesses. Instead of focusing on profitability and competition to explain success, researchers in this field are studying meaningfulness, authentic leadership and emotional competence. Not the typical B-school buzzwords, but they may soon become part of the language spoken by every M.B.A.

Until recently, businesspeople would dismiss employee well-being as "outside their domain and kind of fringe-ish," says Thomas Wright, a professor of organizational behavior at the University of Nevada, Reno. Early hints of the importance of worker happiness were slow to be accepted. A 1920s study on the topic at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric Co. in Cicero, Ill., looked at whether increased lighting, shorter workdays and other worker-friendly fixes would improve productivity. While the workplace changes boosted performance, the experimenters eventually discovered that the differences workers were responding to were not in the physical environment but in the social one. In other words, the attention they were getting was what made them happier and more effective. This phenomenon came to be known

as the Hawthorne effect. "The researchers came to realize that it was people's happiness that made the difference," Wright says. But later studies that looked at job-satisfaction ratings were inconsistent. Broader measures of happiness, it turns out, are better predictors of productivity.

As researchers develop better tools for measuring happiness, businesses may not be able to ignore the evidence. Wright did several studies of white-collar managers at large organizations and found that employee happiness could account for 10% to 25% of the variance in job performance. In hard numbers, assuming a 40-hour week, that translates into as much as 48 min. of lost productivity a day. In a business with 100 workers who make an annual salary of $65,000 each, an improvement in well-being could account for as much as $650,000 in productive time a year. "To me, that's a huge competitive advantage," Wright says.

Companies are finding that improving employee well-being is a difficult task to execute. "A lot of where engagement occurs is really local," says Gallup's Harter. St. Lucie Medical Center in South Florida, for example, traced dissatisfaction among its nurses to work teams organized the same way in every department. Consistency seems like a logical management approach. But by adjusting the teams to the strengths of individual nurses, hospital managers have reduced nurse turnover 65% and improved the medical center's scores in patient satisfaction.

Making any of those changes depends on the boss, although not necessarily the CEO. So a handful of business schools are trying to create a new kind of frontline manager, based on the idea of "authentic leadership." Instead of imposing faddish management techniques on each supervisor, authentic leadership begins with self-awareness. Introverted bosses have to know their own style and then find strategies to manage people that feel natural. In other words, by figuring out their strengths, they learn to recognize those of employees.

The goal of all that rethinking, however, is not necessarily a world in which people love their work above everything else. Work, by definition, is somewhat unpleasant relative to all the other things we could be doing. That's why we still expect to get paid for doing it. But at the very least, businesses could do better just by paying attention to what their employees want and need. Then more of us could find a measure of fulfillment in what we do. And once in a while, we might hope to transcend it all. It can happen on the basketball court, in front of a roaring crowd, or in a classroom, in front of just one grateful student. --With reporting by Elizabeth Coady/ Chicago, Dan Cray and Jeffrey Ressner/Los Angeles,

Jeanne Dequine/Miami, Sean Gregory/New York and Adam Pitluk/Dallas

ARCHIVE PICKS

Chicago's Record

Feb. 25, 1929

It was 10:20 o'clock on St. Valentine's morning. Chicago brimmed with sentiment and sunshine. Peaceful was even the George ("Bugs") Moran booze-peddling depot on North Clark Street, masked as a garage ...

Louis the First

Feb. 21, 1949

The brown-skinned man with the golden horn pursed his scarred lips, blew a short stream of incredibly high, shining notes and then carefully laid the trumpet down. ...

Chanel No. 1

Jan. 25, 1971

Just her name was enough to define a pair of shoes, a hat, a pocketbook, a suit, perfume, jewelry--an entire look. It conveyed prestige, quality, impeccable taste and unmistakable style. It was a sign of excellence. ...

A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to Decorum

Jan. 3, 1964

For month after nervous month, Elizabeth Taylor kept Eddie Fisher at arm's length as a kind of singing duck. It would never do to dump him, not while Richard Burton was still resisting....

Jolly Roger

Oct. 18, 1963

There he stood, looking like King Hal at Agincourt, a slim figure in gold staring at the enemy over the backs of his crouching linemen. "Haaaay, set! Hup-ah-hup-ah-hup-ah..." Back snapped the ball,...