

How To Create a Job for Life

A report this week confirmed what many of us have known for a while. Over the past decade, people have never been so dissatisfied with their work. Professor Francis Green of Kent University has demonstrated this phenomenon right across the board¹, especially among professional workers who exercise the most discretion over what they do. We appear to be working harder than ever before, in environments that are increasingly controlled.

Motivation matters. It affects not only the quality of results, but can make the difference between success and failure. It is contagious, spreading swiftly to customers as well as colleagues. It is elusive, shifting easily with changes in responsibility, location or relationships – frequent occurrences today. And a lack of motivation is costly, resulting in high staff turnover and absenteeism.

However, motivation is notoriously difficult to manage, even in ourselves. This research infers that current job dissatisfaction cannot be attributed to extrinsic factors such as pay levels, working hours, job security or career expectations. What, then, is the solution for creating the type of job we need for the life we want?

Here are three principles for building resilience and satisfaction in ourselves and others.

1. Attend to Values

Human beings share similar needs such as safety, integrity and the desire to make a worthwhile contribution. These fundamental needs drive our behaviours even when they are unconscious. We become enthusiasts when we find ways of expressing what is important to us. We become demotivated when our values are transgressed – for example, a generous compensation policy may not succeed in raising motivation if it appears to be implemented unfairly.

As workload pressures grow, it becomes essential to identify the ways in which our job or current project can promote our underlying values. We also have to respect the needs of others. For example, resistance to change may occur when individuals perceive something valuable is under threat.

2. Find Purpose

Setting and managing goals can be a powerfully motivating process when it provides opportunities for challenge and personal growth. Further engagement can be generated when we are able to link work goals to long-term personal aspirations.

Far from being a distraction, organisations that encourage reflection about outside interests (the very purpose of coming to work) can attract and retain highly self-directed people. They may even be able to save costs where individuals who discover they do not fit manage themselves out.

3. Increase Influence

The Kent research shows that diminishing influence impairs enjoyment at work. However, it is possible for individuals to enlarge their sense of control. For example, we may find we are working within outdated and self-imposed limitations that can be challenged and transformed. We can learn to increase our flexibility of response to our situation, range of available behaviours, and powers of negotiation. Influence also increases when we grow our confidence through developing new competencies and skills.

A wealth of literature is now available to help executives in implementing these principles. Coaching has also become an increasingly popular trend. It is apparent, however, that many organisations are failing to support individuals in managing today's work pressures, and it is probably no coincidence that falling job satisfaction has coincided with a decline in corporate training budgets in recent years.

Can you increase job satisfaction?

- Optimism and confidence deliver a 28% performance improvement
- Individuals can enlarge their sense of control
- Organisations that encourage reflection on the purpose of coming to work retain self-directed people
- Resistance occurs when something valuable is perceived to be under threat

Reducing investment in human capital may be a false economy. Other research studies² show that individuals who exhibit optimism and confidence in their abilities deliver a 28% performance improvement over others. Development initiatives can therefore deliver a good rate of return even if only a small proportion of employees respond well. The success of many market leaders, including Microsoft UK, has been attributed³ to paying attention to human growth and development, and using values as a bedrock.

For it is only in an environment where individuals are able to express their values, purpose and influence that they are living not simply to work, but are truly creating a job for life.

1 Economic & Social Research Council
2 Prof. Fred Luthans, Univ. Nebraska
3 "The Spirited Business" G Lamont