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Employee Engagement

Job satisfaction: what it is, what drives it and how to measure it

Job satisfaction is how people judge their own job. What the research says drives it, why pay matters less than the work itself, and how to measure it and act on a low score.



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The short answer: job satisfaction is how positively a person judges their own job: the work itself, the pay, the manager, the colleagues and the chance to grow. It describes how people feel about their conditions, not how hard they work. The work itself drives it most, and pay level drives it less than most people expect.

A branch manager in Jeddah has two tellers on the same grade and the same salary. One says she likes her job and plans to stay. The other is looking. The difference is not in the payslip. It is in what each of them does all day, who they do it with, and whether anyone notices.

What is job satisfaction?

The definition most often quoted in research comes from the psychologist Edwin Locke: job satisfaction is "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences" (quoted here from Li and colleagues, 2022). Two parts of that sentence matter.

- **It is a judgement.** A person compares the job they have with the job they expected or want.
- **It is a feeling.** The judgement comes with an emotion, and emotions move.

Researchers measure it in two ways. An overall measure asks how satisfied you are with the job as a whole. A facet measure asks about the parts. The Job Descriptive Index, one of the oldest instruments, uses five facets: the work itself, pay, opportunities for promotion, supervision and coworkers, and adds a separate overall scale (Bowling Green State University).

What are the factors of job satisfaction?

The research points in one direction: what people do all day matters more than what surrounds the work.

Factor	What the research found	Source
The work itself	Five features make a job satisfying: skill variety, doing a whole piece of work, work that matters to others, autonomy and feedback	Hackman and Oldham (1976), tested with 658 employees in 62 jobs
The work itself, across studies	These motivating features explained 34% of the differences in job satisfaction	Humphrey, Nahrgang and Morgeson (2007), 259 studies, 219,625 people
The people around the work	Support and contact with others explained a further 17%	Same study
Working conditions	The physical setting and demands explained a further 4%	Same study
Pay level	A correlation of .15 with job satisfaction: "only marginally related"	Judge and colleagues (2010), 92 samples

Two notes on reading this table.

Pay level is not pay fairness. The pay study measured how much people earn, not whether they think it is fair. A person can accept a modest salary and resent an unexplained gap with a colleague. That is why our survey template asks "I am paid fairly for the work I do", not "I am paid enough".

Removing irritants is not the same as creating satisfaction. Frederick Herzberg argued that the things that make people unhappy at work (an annoying boss, a low salary, an uncomfortable workspace, pointless rules) are different in kind from the things that motivate them (interesting work, challenge, growing responsibility). Later tests did not support a clean split, as our guide to employee motivation explains. The practical point holds: fixing the air conditioning ends a complaint. It does not make the job worth doing.

Satisfaction ratings also drift with mood: in a hard year, scores fall across the board. See why engagement scores drop in a hard year.

Job satisfaction vs employee engagement

The two are related, and they answer different questions.

	Job satisfaction	Employee engagement
The question	Am I content with my job and its conditions?	Do I bring energy and attention to my work?
What it describes	An attitude towards the job	A state of involvement in the work
What a high score can hide	Someone comfortable and coasting	Poor conditions that people are putting up with for now
Best use	A yearly, wide view of conditions	Decisions about performance, culture and retention

A satisfied employee is not always an engaged one. Our guides to what employee engagement is and to employee experience and employee engagement cover the difference.

Why job satisfaction matters

It predicts three things, none of them perfectly.

- **Performance, moderately.** A review of 312 samples covering 54,417 people estimated the true correlation between job satisfaction and job performance at .30 (Judge and colleagues, 2001). Satisfied people tend to perform better, with many exceptions.
- **Intention to leave.** An analysis of 178 samples from 155 studies found that satisfaction predicts the intention to leave more strongly than commitment does, and that intention carries nearly all of the link between attitudes and actual turnover (Tett and Meyer, 1993). So ask people whether they expect to stay. See employee retention strategies.

- **Health.** A meta-analysis of 485 studies and 267,995 people found an overall correlation of .31 between job satisfaction and health. The strongest links were with burnout (.48), depression (.43) and anxiety (.42); the link with physical illness was weaker at .29 (Faragher, Cass and Cooper, 2005). These are correlations, not proof of cause. See employee burnout.

How do you measure job satisfaction?

Measure the whole job once a year, by facet, and keep one overall question.

1. **Ask about each part of the job.** Role clarity, use of skills, workload, tools, pay fairness, benefits, recognition, growth, the manager, colleagues, communication and balance.
2. **Keep one overall question.** A meta-analysis of 17 studies with 7,682 people found that a single overall question correlates .67 with a full scale (Wanous, Reichers and Hudy, 1997). One question is good enough to track the trend. The facets tell you what to fix.
3. **Ask whether people expect to stay.** It is one of the most useful early signals a satisfaction survey gives.
4. **Protect small groups.** Report no group with fewer than five answers, and say in the invitation whether the survey is anonymous or confidential.
5. **Choose the timing.** Avoid the weeks around pay decisions or a restructure. Answers given then are about the event, not the job.

Our free job satisfaction survey template does this in 14 questions and two open questions. It comes in Word, PDF and Excel, in English and Arabic, with no sign-up, and the spreadsheet hides any result with fewer than five answers.

What do you do with a low job satisfaction score?

Read the overall question last: it tells you how people feel, not why. Start with the three lowest facets, and compare them by site and function wherever a group has five answers or more.

If the low score is on	Look at	A first move
The work itself, use of skills	How the job is designed: variety, autonomy, feedback	Give one team a say in how it meets its targets
Workload	Peaks, staffing, recurring tasks nobody needs	Remove one report or meeting before adding support
Pay fairness	Whether pay is low or unexplained	Read the open answers, then explain how pay is decided
Recognition	Whether good work is noticed in the week it happens	A recognition program managers actually run
Growth	Whether people can see a next step	Career growth conversations with a date
The manager	Respect, clarity, support	The direct manager survey template for a closer look

Share what you heard within 30 days, with one or two things you will change. A survey that changes nothing makes the next one harder to run.

Know where a satisfaction survey stops. It tells you how people feel about their conditions. It does not tell you what they would trade, or what keeps them. For decisions about engagement or retention, ask people to choose between the things they value. Our GK Engagement Survey is built that way.

Your next step

Download the template and run it with one site first. Take the three lowest questions to that site's managers and agree one change for each.

Frequently asked questions

What is job satisfaction in simple words?

It is how positively a person feels about their job when they weigh it up: the work, the pay, the manager, the colleagues and the future. It is not the same as motivation or engagement.

What are the main factors of job satisfaction?

The work itself comes first: variety, doing a whole piece of work, work that matters, autonomy and feedback. Then the people around the work, then working conditions. Pay level has a weaker link than most people expect, although pay that feels unfair is a common source of dissatisfaction.

Does higher pay increase job satisfaction?

Only a little. A meta-analysis of 92 samples found a correlation of .15 between pay level and job satisfaction. Whether pay feels fair, and whether it is explained, is a separate question worth asking.

What is the difference between job satisfaction and employee engagement?

Satisfaction asks whether people are content with the job and its conditions. Engagement asks whether they bring energy and attention to the work. Use satisfaction for the wide yearly view and engagement for decisions.

How do you measure job satisfaction?

With a short survey that covers each part of the job on the same five-point scale, plus one overall question and a question on intention to stay. Run it once a year, report no group with fewer than five answers, and share the results within 30 days.

Does job satisfaction improve performance?

Moderately. A review of 312 samples estimated the correlation at .30. That is a real link, not a guarantee.

Sources

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