

3 Ways You Can Find More Happiness at Work by Jill Suttie

The trick to being happy with your job doesn't necessarily lie in earning more money.

We all spend a large part of our lives at our jobs. Yet how many of us are bored or frustrated at work, whether unhappy with our company's goals, stressed from overwork, or dealing with toxic coworkers? Don't we deserve better than that?

The new book *How to Be Happy at Work* makes the case that, yes, we do, and happiness at work should be our ultimate goal. Written by Annie McKee—an international business advisor and senior fellow at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education—the book provides ideas for how to turn your job into a source of happiness no matter where you find yourself working.

According to McKee, part of our collective problem is that too many of us fall in the trap of believing that “work is work” and isn't supposed to be a source of happiness, or that work goals will suffer if we focus on what makes us happy. But research suggests the opposite: Happier employees are more productive, benefitting their companies as much as themselves.

The trick to being a happier worker, though, doesn't necessarily lie in earning more money or getting more “goodies” at work, says McKee, but in making sure that three basic human needs are met on the job:

- Meaning or purpose: the feeling that our work matters and is aligned with our personal values;
- Hope or optimism: the sense that our future can improve if we just understand our needs better and create a plan for ourselves;
- Friendships or positive relationships: connection to others, which matters as much to our happiness as other aspects of our job.

As purpose, optimism, and positive relationships have all been tied to happiness (and often health, as well), it makes sense to look for these in our work lives. Of course, McKee recognizes that these aren't substitutes for good pay—money still matters. Rather, she argues that the pursuit of happiness does not have to stop at the office door and can be easily incorporated into most (if not all) work situations.

Overcoming barriers to happiness at work

McKee believes there are many barriers to finding happiness at work. For example, many of us fall into the trap of overwork, thinking that we will gain prestige and success if we

work long hours. But it turns out that overworking burns us out and makes us less productive, while concurrently turning into a habit that others expect of us. Another common trap is deciding to take a promotion—because it’s good for our career or because we need more money—without taking into account how the new position will fulfill our basic needs or make us truly happy, leaving us feeling stuck.

Not being in touch with our intrinsic values—our purpose and relationships, for example, rather than the extrinsic values of prestige or money—is a mistake, writes McKee. It can lead us to do “soul-destroying” work—the antithesis of happy work.

Envision potential work goals for yourself that align with what makes you happiest.

“When we are unable to see the impact of our work or find meaning in what we do, we often become dissatisfied and resentful,” she writes. But “seeing our work as an expression of cherished values and as a way to make a contribution is the foundation of well-being, happiness, and our ongoing success.”

McKee provides exercises to help people start thinking about their personal happiness and jobs differently. For example, to cultivate more meaning at work and figure out what’s important to you, she suggests, reflect on times in the past you were happy with whatever you were doing. With that in mind, you could “keep your eyes open for opportunities to join a group that is exploring a new idea or trying to solve a problem” that matters to you, she writes.

To cultivate optimism, you might envision potential work goals for yourself that align with what makes you happiest and take concrete steps to achieve them. And one way to build relationships is to offer to help colleagues “with unsavory tasks, not just the fun stuff.”

To be happier at work involves a willingness to really reflect on your internal world and what makes you tick. McKee reminds readers that having emotional intelligence—an ability to read your and others’ emotions, emotional self-control, and empathy for others—can be invaluable in a work setting, where we often have to deal with setbacks or disappointments that might otherwise derail our motivation, productivity, and relationships.

Too good to be true?

Some of McKee’s suggestions on how to be happier at work seem more research-tested, such as being generous toward coworkers as a way to build relationships or using gratitude practices as a way to be happier. Others seem less so. For example, I was unconvinced by her suggestion to stop pessimistic thinking by focusing on personal strengths at work and reflecting on how these have “consistently moved you in the right direction.” In fact, the whole chapter on optimism (or hope) seemed a bit thin to me, and left me wondering more about its potential benefits.

Some readers may balk at McKee’s tips for other reasons—perhaps thinking they are too simplistic, or only work for people like her who earn a lot of money. But it’s clear McKee thinks her advice can be applied to any job—including some of her own less glamorous ones.

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When working as a caregiver for an elderly couple, she found happiness by focusing on

the great relationship she had with her employers, the connection to the natural beauty surrounding their home, and her feeling that she was helping people in need—a true calling. If that seems too good to believe, she also points to the work of organizational researcher Amy Wrzesniewski, who found that hospital janitors who imbued their work with meaning and made connections to patients were much more satisfied with their jobs than those who didn't.

Though the book is based on research—there is a long notes section in the back—many of the references listed are books, making it difficult to assess the strength of the science. But, even so, there is much to recommend of the book for those who feel stuck in a job that makes them miserable. Some of McKee's stories of people who left dead-end jobs and refocused on what matters to them are inspiring and instructive in their own right. If nothing else, the book provides the kind of encouragement that one needs when trying to make a change.