

Economics and Business Quarterly Reviews

Karkuzashvili, Nona. (2021), The Impact of the Pandemic on the Maintaining Happiness at Work. In: *Economics and Business Quarterly Reviews*, Vol.4, No.4, 48-55.

ISSN 2775-9237

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1992.04.04.393

The online version of this article can be found at:
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Published by:
The Asian Institute of Research

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The Impact of the Pandemic on the Maintaining Happiness at Work

Nona Karkuzashvili^{1,2}

¹ PhD, Business Administration, Business and Technology University (Georgia), Professor

² Management Consulting Company Synergy Group (Georgia), Partner

Abstract

During the pandemic, it became especially difficult for companies to maintain employee engagement and motivation. They are cut off from the normal environment and work team, no longer have social relationships with colleagues, which leads to a natural decrease in emotional connection with the company, a sense of belonging and loyalty. In today's environment, the challenge is to manage, attract and retain talent, further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the period of working from home, as a result of the experience gained in the new reality, employees have other requirements that the company must meet. The transition to remote work in early 2020 has forced employees to develop new skills and become more familiar with technologies, manage tasks and solve problems online. It is true that some did more remote work, some less and some did not like it at all, but the fact is that it showed them new opportunities, and companies were challenged - how to maintain and increase the employee happiness index during the pandemic and post-pandemic period. The purpose of the article is to demonstrate the impact of the pandemic on maintaining a happiness index at work and to assess employees' attitudes towards remote work in general. How did the changes in work regime and environment during the pandemic affect employees and their job satisfaction? - In order to identify these factors, a study was conducted in Georgia, in which 200 employees participated and the results of which are given in this article.

Keywords: Employee motivation, Happiness Index, Remote work, Benefits, Pandemic

1. Introduction

There is no standard definition of employee happiness. Each definition identifies different important elements and suggests a different grouping of them. According to one study, happiness includes controls such as motivation, job satisfaction, and employee engagement. However, the critically important is a person's individual perception of how he or she estimates his or her own level of happiness, because it is almost impossible to scientifically generalize the phenomenon of happiness (Benuyenah, Pandya, 2020).

*Why is it important to assess the impact of the pandemic on the employee happiness index and research results?
What is the relationship between company success and employee happiness?*

Employee happiness and their satisfaction is directly related to the success of companies. There are three groups of people associated with any organization. These are the founders, employees and users. Which group happiness is most important and has the greatest impact on the company's results and quality of performance? - Employee happiness is paramount (Wagner, 2017). A satisfied employee can make the customer happy. If the employee is satisfied with the work, the organization and the team, as a result the customer is also satisfied; If the customer is satisfied, it means that he / she enjoys and will continue to use the company's products and services, which is the key to success and therefore the founder is also satisfied.

At all levels, there is evidence that employee happiness has a significant impact on the outcomes of both individuals and organizations (Fisher, 2010). Numerous studies confirm the existence of a strong link between employee well-being and customer satisfaction. A happy employee is associated with companies' ability to provide better service to customers, especially in industries where there is a close connection between employees and customers, including retail, tourism, healthcare and financial services. This is confirmed by a survey conducted by Glassdoor, in which they analyzed the following two data to examine the relationship between employee and customer satisfaction: 1. Evaluations of different companies as employers by employees and 2. Their ratings from the American Consumer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), which records 300,000 Customer feedbacks on products and services (Chamberlain, Zhao, 2019).

That is, happiness at work (HAW) has an effective impact on work outcomes (Salas-Vallina, Pozo-Hidalgo, and Gil-Monte, 2020). That is why, it is important to assess the impact of the pandemic on the employee happiness index. Organizations need to formulate what changes they will make and what offers they will make to employees to retain talent in the long run.

Today, in a Pandemic situation, the task of companies is to make systemic changes and offer employees benefits that will motivate them to a new reality. The Covid-19 virus was first detected in China, soon spread around the world (Kampf, Todt, Pfaender, and Steinmann, 2020) and it is not yet clear when it will end, although even in the post-pandemic period it will be relevant to offer new working terms and conditions.

2. Research Methodology

The aim of the study is to demonstrate the impact of the pandemic on maintaining a happiness index at work and to assess employees' attitudes towards remote work in general.

The results of the study are of interest to the founders and management of organizations to make the right and timely changes in personnel policy and management principles. This is what they need in order to have a good employer reputation and actually offer employees working conditions tailored to their interests.

Hypotheses were developed prior to the survey, which has already been verified as part of the research. The questions in the questionnaire were given in three directions:

1. How employee happiness and job satisfaction have changed under remote working conditions;
2. Key factors that were identified remote working favor or against.
3. Would they like to continue remote working terms

The research was conducted with a questionnaire processed in Google forms, which consisted of 10 questions.

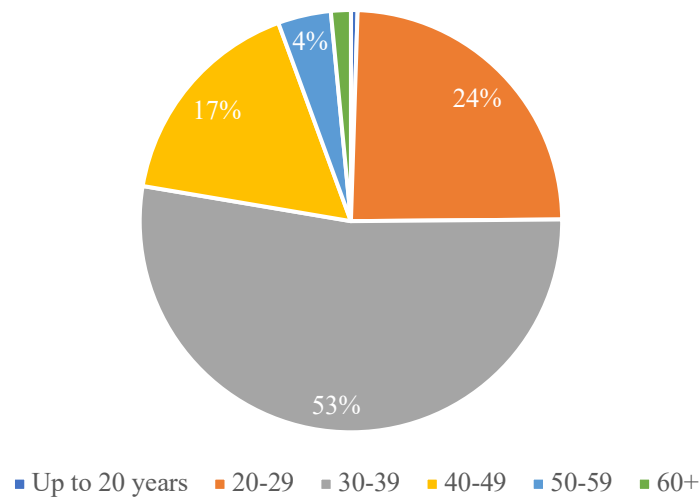


Figure 1: Age ratio of respondents

The survey involved 200 employees from different managerial levels, from different companies, of which 74% are female and 26% male. 94% of respondents are in the age category of 20 to 49 years (see Figure 1); Also, 72% are representatives of senior and middle management (see Figure 2).

The interest and urgency of the research are also indicated by the fact that during the survey a number of feedbacks were received from the employees participating in the research. They expressed great interest in the topic and asked for permission to share the questionnaire with other employees as well, given its relevance. Analysis of the research results, conclusions and recommendations are given in this article.

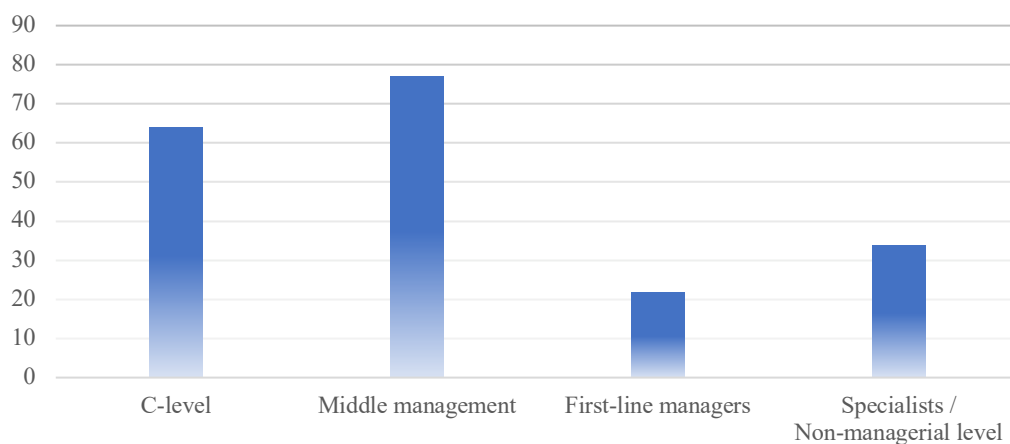


Figure 2: Managerial level of respondents

3. Research Results

3.1. In times of pandemics, the index of happiness was decreased significantly or did not change

Taking up the mode of remote work for significant parts of the workforce showed not quite a simple challenge to carry on. Because of this new approach, with which many had no experience at all before, the reaction of the co-worker was different – some was pro and some against, that means there are all sorts of reasons for that.

Some respondents noticed that in a very short-term period their happiness was increased after the transition to the down mode, but then gradually decreased. Some became less productive, which, in essence, reflected on the results and, as a consequence, increased their indifference to the absence of success in their feelings and self-realization. There are also hidden general responsibilities, hidden command work and an increased time interval, necessary for completing certain tasks. For a number of reasons remote work turned out to be difficult to fulfill, and besides, the employees lacked relationships with company colleagues and the advantage of working on the ground.

In this regard, to see and summarize the overall picture, the results of a survey are interesting, in which only 26% of employees indicated that their level of happiness in remote working conditions has increased. Most said the degree of happiness had decreased or not changed. It is noteworthy that an even smaller number of respondents indicated that they would prefer to continue working in full distance mode in the future - only 12%.

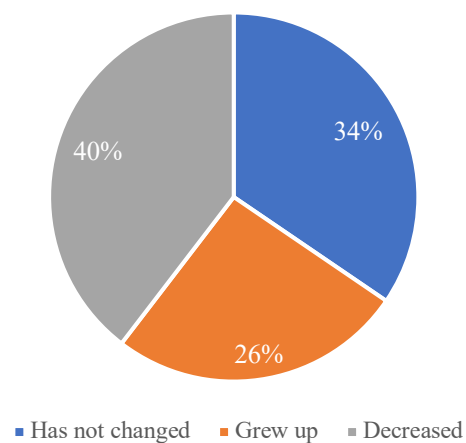


Figure 3: Change in happiness index while working remotely

Within the study process was exposed the basic factors that were mostly liked about remote working and which led to an increase in their happiness index (see Figure 6); Accordingly, companies have the opportunity to analyze them and make decisions accordingly and offer employees changes in the work schedule.

The fact that only 12% of employees wanted to continue working in full remote mode in the future is a clear signal to employees that working from the office and interacting with colleagues is important for job satisfaction. However, the results also show that there are certain aspects of remote work that employees would like to maintain in the future and that is why hybrid mode is preferred and important to most.

3.2. Most employees prefer the hybrid model of work; They are inconvenienced by working remotely, despite some benefits

Most of the employees surveyed want to return to the office and continue working with the hybrid model. They did not find the desired fully remote mode. The hybrid model involves offering employees a remote work mode with a certain scheme in addition to working in the office. When employees are given the opportunity to make a choice according to the specific scheme offered by the company - go to the office and work from there, if they are online.

What is the reason for employees' preference for a hybrid model and what is the reason for this? The point is that man is a social being and he needs to interact with people, make contact with other colleagues, share emotions and get back in return for further productivity and happiness. Research has shown that these are the factors that are significantly lacking when working remotely. In addition, they liked the benefits of remote work and wanted to hold on to some extent. These benefits include: saving time on the road and engaging in other activities (e.g. sports), eating healthily and properly at home, reducing financial costs, spending more time with family and children, going out and keeping the working regime online from distance.

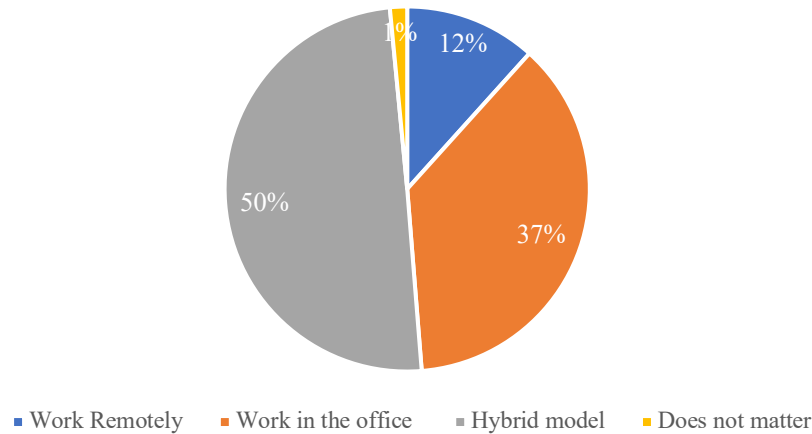


Figure 4: What kind of work format do employees like

Belonging, respect, and self-realization are the three basic human needs from the Maslow Pyramid (Maslow, 1970) method. Accordingly, it is necessary for a person to be recognized at work, to have a sense of respect, to be appreciated, to share his / her success with others and to receive it from them. A person, no matter how humble he/she is, will be happier as more co-colleges are known about his achievements and feels dew respect from them. Even in remote working conditions, it decreases because you do not have the opportunity to receive and share these emotions, which reduces job satisfaction.

Relationships and the emotions derived from them are one of the important factors that contribute to job satisfaction. Consequently, it is not surprising that the majority of respondents to the study noted that they had the most lack of contact with colleagues while working remotely during the pandemic period.

3.3. Employees most lacked social relationships and contacts with colleagues; As well as separation of the work environment from the living environment

Analysis of the survey results revealed that for employees the job is not only just to do a specific job and get paid as a result. It's more. It is a way to communicate with other people, not only at work, but also on other informal topics. Pandemic and isolation have once again shown that a person needs a certain dose of contact with others. The following three factors are important for employee happiness - job satisfaction, balance between personal life and work, and well-being. Important elements of job satisfaction are employees and communication with them (Omar, Ramdani, Mohd, Hussein 2018). The study revealed this very factor that employees lacked when working from home.

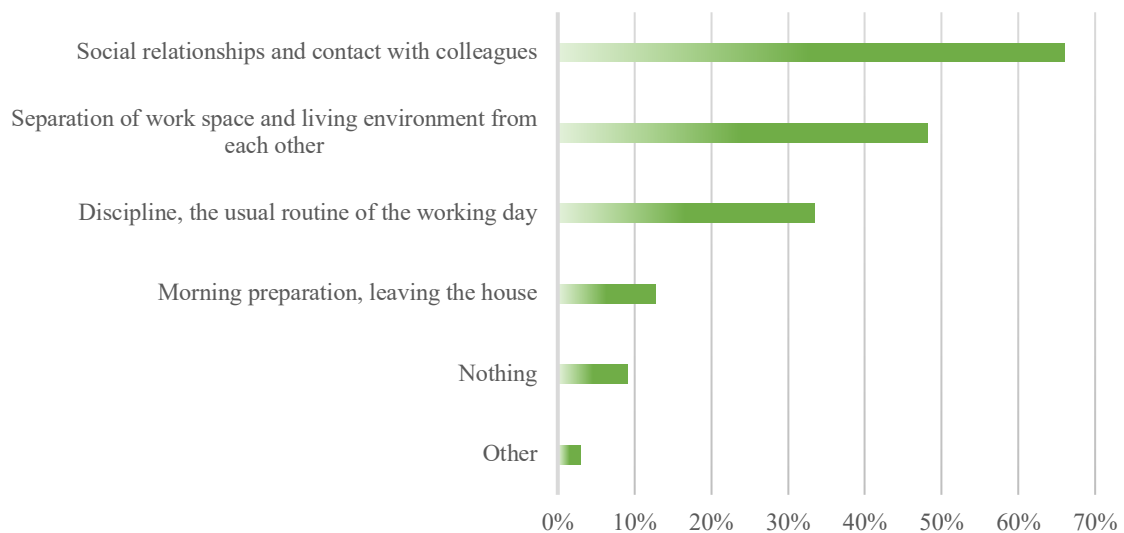


Figure 5: What employees lacked most when working remotely

The most number of employees who lack relationships with colleagues (66%), as well as a sharp separation of work space and living environment (48.2%). While working remotely, they have disturbed the perception of the balance between work and personal life, which has already been proven by numerous studies to be important for job satisfaction (Gragano, Simbula, and Miglioretti, 2020).

Job satisfaction, as already mentioned, directly affects the motivation and results of employees, their desire to stay longer in this or that company as members of its team. As a result, the number of job seekers and those wishing to move to another company increased during the pandemic - on the one hand, loyalty to the company due to distance from it decreased, and on the other hand, job satisfaction and happiness decreased; Even in the category of employees who say that their sense of job satisfaction has not changed, their sense of loyalty and belonging is still diminished, which also pushes them to look for other alternatives.

3.4. When working remotely, the most employees like is flexibility - they do not spend time on the road and can go out of town and work from there if needed

One of the aims of the study was to identify the positive benefits and factors that employees enjoyed while working remotely and that they would like to maintain in the future, in the post-pandemic period. Possessing the information like this is too important for organizations to respond to new labor market demands with competitive offers. Make appropriate changes to human resource management policies and introduce modern management principles adapted to the new reality to make it easier to retain and attract talent.

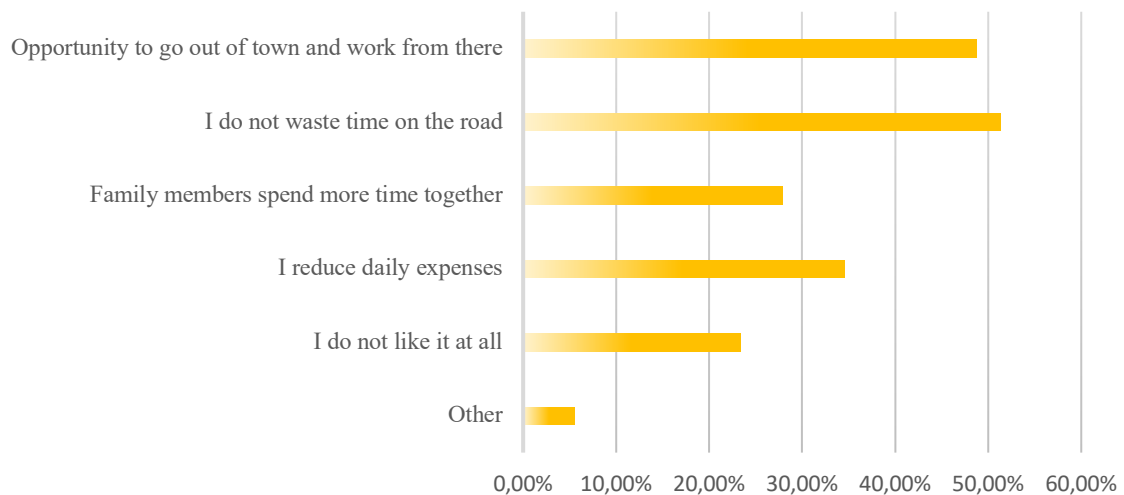


Figure 6: What employees liked most about remote work

Research has shown that employees like flexibility when working remotely, and would like to maintain this when returning to the office. There are two factors that make employees feel very comfortable: one is that they do not spend time on the road (51%) and the other is that they could go out of town and work from there (49%). Mainly because of these factors, 50% of respondents want to continue working in hybrid mode. They want to maintain a certain dose of these benefits in their working life.

4. Conclusion

Remote work has been stressful for many and this has negatively affected the feeling of happiness at work. Job satisfaction of 74% of respondents decreased or did not change during the pandemic period. A large proportion of this, 40%, indicated that it had decreased. There is Dimitri Uznadze's "Theory of Mood" (Uznadze, 1977), which explains well the main bases of the research results and the problems related to this issue. Work needs an environment that creates a specific mood.

In addition to solving specific tasks, people need to be in direct contact with each other, exchange information on achievements or failures, sharing joy and be acknowledged by others, and encouragement aspects in case of failure. In face-to-face relationships, it is easier to understand and manage each other's emotions, and there are more opportunities to express care.

Most prefer to go back to the office and the reason for this was primarily the lack of relationships with colleagues and the separation of work and personal life. Added to this is the stress experienced by many working from home. This is especially true for working mothers and those who do not have adequate facilities at home. These are the reasons why they want to return to the office, although it has become important for them to offer flexibility and hybrid working conditions at the same time.

If companies want to have satisfied employees, they must take into account the current trends in the labor market. In a pandemic, employees had to change their work routine and rearrange to work remotely. They were given the opportunity to experience both the pros and cons of remote work. This has led to the creation of new demands on employees, therefore in the future they will link their careers to companies that will best meet and take into account their interests.

5. Recommendations

Companies need to switch to a flexible work schedule and give employees the choice of whether to work from home or from the office. With the development of technology, the hybrid model is non-alternative and the sooner companies initiate and implement the relevant changes, the better prepared they will be for new challenges.

Of course it is also important for companies to develop and maintain an organizational culture, increase employee belonging and loyalty, and build a team, which is complicated by remote work and even a non-systemic hybrid model. It is therefore important for companies to create a system within which they will offer a hybrid model of work and employees will be given freedom of choice. for example:

1. Give employees the opportunity to work remotely 1 day a week, if desired. This one day could be Friday. This will be announced and if the manager or human resource manager needs to schedule a meeting or event, he / she will use other days of the work week;
2. In addition, besides due vacation give 2 more weeks per year when employees could work remotely. This will allow them to spend more time out of town with family or just relax, changing work environments.

What system solution references would be offered by companies to their employees within hybrid mode depends on them, although, the fact is that for 50% of respondents prefer hybrid mode and making a choice is too important to them.

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