



# HAPPINESS QUOTIENT

By Michael Schubach

## Happiness is a very elusive condition.

A recent example of this startling truth was a resort guest who, during checkin, attempted to drop off the speeding ticket he had been issued on his drive for doing 75 in a 55 mph zone. The guest seemed genuinely taken aback that the resort did not offer ticket fixing as a part of the package. This was not an “oh-by-the-way” sort of request, either; he became incensed and fairly vocal when no one would step right up to relieve him of his citation. The fact that he had broken the law eluded him entirely; his point was that a destination resort of the highest caliber must certainly have an on-call legal team that would intervene with the state highway patrol. This is an example of someone who seems destined to spend too little time in his happy place.

Sidestepping the issue of general happiness for the moment, let's focus on something slightly more tangible: employee happiness. I think we can all agree that happy is good, or at least better than unhappy. Given those two options (happy and un) as they apply in the workplace, the ideal situation is that we create happy supervisors, coworkers and customers. As an industry, we excel at asking our guests if they're happy in their arrangements and accommodations. A guest has merely to enter a hotel room or restaurant to find the how are we doing so far questionnaire. If a guest leaves an e-mail address with us, by the time they return to their desktops, we're right there like an eager lover, begging to be told how good we are in bed, bathroom and lobby.

Employees, however, do not receive quite as much attention. We long to know the secrets in their hearts as well, but most of us manage to keep our curiosity firmly in check until an annual review is performed. Only then do most employers ask the staff “was last year good for you, too?” If we applied that same level of concern to our guests, they might justifiably conclude that we aren't really looking for a serious answer—we're just asking out of politeness. To overcome the appearance of that sort of indifference, many hospitality organizations are stepping up to survey their employee base on a more regular basis to identify and address the staff's hot-button happiness issues.

The process of soliciting employee feedback has simplified dramatically here in the Information Age. There are many Web-based survey tools available, which are surprisingly flexible and more surprisingly affordable. Using such tools, even small independent properties can get comprehensive survey information in rapidly produced, easy-to-use formats. You can Google the keywords survey

tools to find and compare the available Web products. A few words of caution, however, before you begin to point and click: what you ask, how you ask it and how you interpret the results can be a tricky business. Your good intentions don't count for much if you fail to assemble meaningful data and react to it in a meaningful fashion. Survey away, but be wary of the common pitfalls:

**1** | You won't get honest feedback if employees don't feel that the rankings and remarks will retain their anonymity. Is it any wonder that many employees don't trust the confidentiality of electronic surveys? After all, most companies make it abundantly clear to system users that they can (if need be) read their e-mail, monitor their network movements, and track indiscretions with speeds measured in nanoseconds. Then we ask them to log on and give us honest feedback about working conditions and the general competence of their supervisors, and assure them that no one will ever know their source. Don't kid yourselves—surveys can be engineered to track completions and match survey contents to individual respondents. The issue is the degree to which the company permits that to happen, and who is given access to that information. Loose lips do indeed sink ships.

Don't be too surprised if not everyone believes your well-intentioned disclaimers. Look for a participation rate of 75 percent to 85 percent; if you can't get 60 percent of your staff to take the survey, you already have your first survey answer and know the first problem that needs addressing.

**2** | You won't get feedback at all if employees see actions that smack of retaliation. Of course you will want to share the survey results with the respondents, but tone and manner are crucial. Every manager must understand that the reaction to the information absolutely affects future results. For example, let's say that a department leader is referred to as an “over reactive idiot.” It's a comment that may be worth pursuing, but one must resist the desire to gather the team together and browbeat them into confession and recantation. Remember that happiness is the goal, not defensive justification. Treat survey results like Olympic scores: throw out the high and the low, and concentrate on the

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aggregate of the remainder. Digging too deeply guarantees that honest but controversial comments will not be offered in the future.

**3** | Some departments are just happier than others. Remember that in the absence of comparative data (year over year, or like areas from competitive companies), survey results measure relative happiness from one department to another. That one department is happier than another is neither surprising nor informative. You should only be alarmed when abject misery is widespread.

We tend to forget that certain personality types are drawn to particular professions and those traits will present themselves in survey results. For example, (and I'm sorry to be the one to mention it) IT professionals can be a cranky lot. It is not unusual for IT satisfaction scores to be lower than the rest of the organization. I have also found that the IT shops tend to complain about common workplace shortcomings, regardless of location, supervisor or job assignment. Typical IT complaints include:

**COMMUNICATION** This should come as no surprise to anyone who works in, with or near an IT department. Lack of communication can be a common (and legitimate) gripe. If you ask the employees if they think they're in the loop, you'll likely find many do not. Information is like money—employees almost always feel that more is better and that it's practically impossible to get too much.

The IT staff places a high premium on organized, non-preserved delivery, and advance information and planning are crucial to that process. Nonetheless, the IT workload is largely driven by requests that require urgent attention either today (or yesterday) for events or circumstances that took some advance planning on the part of the requestor. One would surmise that sort of information could be known in IT circles on something other than a last-minute basis. IT professionals are expected to respond immediately to emergencies 24/7/365. The only difference between an emergency and a non-emergency is the amount of advance notice provided. The IT psyche has little tolerance for those who don't appreciate that difference.

**TRAINING** IT professionals will tell you that there is nothing more essential to their value than their awareness of products, trends and industry developments. Anyone paying attention to the 21<sup>st</sup> century can tell you that nothing is changing faster than the landscape of technology. Employers should not expect that the IT staff will have its professional development expectations fulfilled by executing

routine job functions, or that it should be possible for technicians to keep current on their own time. Time and resources must be dedicated to outside training for the IT staff. Free magazine subscriptions that can be read during bathroom breaks are not the answer.

**SELF-ESTEEM** IT professionals tend to like their work and they are driven by the profound majesty of creating information networks that can rival (or exceed) mere mortal intelligence. However, there can be frustration expressed at what we call the "service opportunity," which is the wherewithal to provide the level of service that technicians feel is appropriate. Service opportunity speaks not so much to technical ability or training, but more to being provided with the two most elusive commodities in information technology: time and money. Here's where the management response must be appropriately measured, maintaining a careful balance between the extremes of penny wise and pound foolish or any other cliché you can think of that means excessively thrifty. Don't misunderstand—I think of myself as the voice of reason on IT spending, and I believe it is very possible to deliver excellence within reasonable fiscal guidelines of restraint and responsibility. But it is not possible to make something out of nothing. The measured response is best – the attempt to find a happy place in that lonesome valley between what the IT staff requests and what the controller is willing to approve.

Like everything else, happiness (or unhappiness) must be quantified and measured periodically in order to determine where one stands in comparison with the rest of the world. That relativity process is how we determine many truths about ourselves, such as whether we are rich, smart, beautiful or famous. Knowing how you compare doesn't necessarily add to the happiness quotient, but it does give you a start, and given that you really understand how and why you are miserable, that information can lead you toward the path to improvement. Sometimes you need objective data to validate your suspicions of happiness or to confirm your professional inclination toward happiness dodging. Happily, the tools necessary are readily available. Now get out there and figure out what's wrong with everyone else.

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