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## Job Satisfaction

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## Synonyms

Employee satisfaction; Well-being at work, subjective

## Definition

Job satisfaction is the degree to which people like their jobs. In other words, it refers to a subjective evaluation that the worker makes of her own job, either in its entirety or with respect to its different attributes. It is related to the sociological concept of ► [alienation](#) and the economic concept of the (dis)utility derived from work: with respect to them, job satisfaction has a more positive connotation, is defined in a more subjective way, and has a stronger empirical orientation.

## Description

### A Short History of the Field

The concept of job satisfaction comes from the field of industrial psychology and management

studies. Its origins go back to the Human Relations Movement of the 1930s: in response to the increasing problems of performance and labor unrest associated with the spread of Taylorist work organization practices, Mayo and associates argued that workers' feelings and emotions at work were important determinants of their ► [productivity](#) and union militancy (employers were keen on boosting the former and suppressing the latter). This triggered a flurry of interest in measuring workers' satisfaction with their jobs which resulted in an increasing number of papers on this issue, though with few attempts at theorization.

In the 1950s, drawing on Maslow's theory of hierarchy of needs, Herzberg and associates developed the two-factor theory, which posed an asymmetry in the determinants of satisfaction and dissatisfaction at work. According to this theory (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959), satisfaction is mainly determined by attributes that generate ► [motivation](#) in the workers, such as creativity, achievement, or recognition (sometimes called intrinsic job attributes), whereas dissatisfaction is mostly determined by what Herzberg called hygiene factors, meaning extrinsic attributes such as pay and working conditions.

Herzberg's theory continues to be influential even today, but around the 1970s, it started to be displaced by theories arguing that not all workers had the same ► [preferences](#), expectations, or values with respect to their jobs, and hence the same job attributes could lead to different levels of job satisfaction. (Lawler, 1973) proposed a model taking into account both the expectations and actual outcomes with respect to different job attributes, while (Locke, 1976) argued that the relative importance (or value) that each worker attaches to a particular job attribute affects the impact that such attribute has on her satisfaction.

It is around this time that the first sociological theories of job satisfaction appear. Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer, and Platt (1968) argued that the analysis of job satisfaction had to be grounded in an understanding of the meanings (what they called work orientations) that individuals attach to their work: hence, workers

with an instrumental orientation towards their work could be satisfied even if their jobs offered little intrinsic reward. This approach was further developed by (Kalleberg, 1977).

A few years later, though with some reluctance that has not totally disappeared, economists started to take seriously job satisfaction as an economic indicator. In the late seventies, Freeman (1978) argued that job satisfaction is a good predictor for labor market ► [mobility](#) and is correlated with important labor market variables such as unionism. The importance of job satisfaction research in economics has grown together with the field of happiness studies, with which it is obviously related.

### Measurement

Job satisfaction research has always been strongly empiricist (and generally quantitative) in nature: in fact, one of the recurrent criticisms to this tradition of research is that it has focused too much on empirically evaluating the correlation between job satisfaction and any possible job attribute or workers' characteristic, without paying much attention to the theoretical foundations or implications of such analyses.

In terms of the measurement of job satisfaction, the main debate has been whether single measures should be used or rather specific measures for the different facets of work. Each job has many different attributes, and the worker need not be equally satisfied with all of them: paradoxically, this can be used as an argument both for using a single or a multiple measure. On the one hand, the single measure can be understood as an overall evaluation of the job, with the workers themselves averaging the positive and negative attributes according to their own preferences. On the other hand, either a single measure or an aggregate measure will tend to conceal interesting nuances in the evaluations that workers make of their jobs, reducing the overall variability of the index and making the results more difficult to interpret (as it is difficult to know what is the frame of reference of the respondent, especially in the case of single-item measures). In practice, opting for one or the other alternative often depends on the availability of

data (many surveys incorporate a single-item standard question on job satisfaction) and the specific objectives of research.

### Determinants

In general terms, most measures of job satisfaction display a low degree of variability (with few “unsatisfied” workers), which partly explains the persistently low level of correlation between job satisfaction and most social and economic variables (Muñoz de Bustillo & Fernández-Macías, 2005). For briefly presenting the main results of recent empirical research on the determinants of job satisfaction, we can make a very basic distinction between those determinants which are related to the attributes and characteristics of jobs and those related to the expectations and values of workers. Except for Herzberg’s two-factor theory (which only considers the attributes of jobs, assuming a similar set of preferences for all workers), all other recent theories of job satisfaction follow more or less this dual structure.

There is an abundant empirical literature on the effect of basic demographic variables such as gender or age on job satisfaction: generally, such literature tends to assume that the link between those variables and job satisfaction is explained by different values and expectations with respect to work for such demographic groups. For instance, the empirical literature shows that job satisfaction generally grows with age, often following a curvilinear pattern (Spector, 1997): this has been explained in terms of diminishing expectations and increasing accommodation with authority for the older cohorts and in terms of a process of selection of workers into jobs more adapted to their needs over their working lives. But the demographic variable which has been more studied in this field is gender. The vast majority of studies show that women report higher levels of job satisfaction than men. That is the case, for example, of the UK where according to (Clark, 1997), neither the different types of jobs that men and women have, nor a process of selection, can account for the gender satisfaction gap. Similar results apply in other countries as shown by (Kaiser, 2005). As with

age, lower expectations and a different work orientation are offered as explanations of the higher level of job satisfaction found among women.

With respect to the impact of job attributes on job satisfaction, there is an even larger literature, which we can split in two strands. The first strand includes studies which focus on different qualitative (what is sometimes called intrinsic) job attributes such as autonomy, stress, usefulness, or creativity of the job (Spector, 1997). These types of job attributes are usually found to be clearly linked to job satisfaction, but such correlation can be to some extent an artifact resulting from the fact that qualitative job attributes are usually measured by variables which are themselves strongly subjective and therefore arguably “contaminated” by job satisfaction. The second strand uses more or less “objective” indicators of job attributes (i.e., wages, sector, size of firm, or job stability) and therefore avoids such problems: but in this case, the correlations tend to be much lower, and the results are rarely conclusive (Muñoz de Bustillo & Fernández-Macías, 2005). Indeed, in different studies, opposing relations are often found between a certain indicator and job satisfaction.

### Effects

Evaluating the impact of job satisfaction on job and labor market performance is a difficult task because the relationship can go in both directions: it is not always clear whether job satisfaction affects performance or performance affects job satisfaction (for instance, by generating a feeling of usefulness or by being associated to higher pay). After reviewing the available empirical literature on this issue, (Argyle, 1989) concludes that there is a positive but surprisingly low correlation between both variables, around +0.15, slightly stronger for those in supervisory or professional jobs. A more recent meta-analysis of (Judge, Bono, Thoresen, & Patton, 2001) points to a higher impact (+0.30) but still far from signaling an intense relation.

In contrast, job satisfaction seems to be a better predictor of labor turnover, as was already argued by one of the first economics paper on this

issue (Freeman, 1978). In this case, the empirical analysis shows that the (generally low proportion of) workers with lower levels of job satisfaction face a significantly higher probability of quit or separation (Carsten & Spector, 1987). A related strand of literature has focused on the impact of job satisfaction on absenteeism and lateness (which can be considered as low intensity withdrawals and therefore a prelude of quits). A meta-analysis of (Hackett & Guion, 1985) concludes that the relationship is negative as expected but only moderate (0.09).

Finally, it is widely agreed that there is an important correlation between job and life satisfaction, though the causal nature of the relationship is unclear (Judge & Watanabe, 1993).

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Alienation](#)
- ▶ [Employee Satisfaction](#)
- ▶ [Intrinsic and Extrinsic Values](#)
- ▶ [Job Descriptive Index](#)
- ▶ [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#)
- ▶ [Mobility](#)
- ▶ [Motivation](#)
- ▶ [Occupation Influence on Satisfaction/Happiness](#)
- ▶ [Productivity](#)
- ▶ [Unionization Rate](#)

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## Job Satisfaction and Perceived Fairness in Hungary and USA

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## Description

What determines the individual's ▶ [quality of life](#) at home and at work? Experiencing fair treatment and feeling satisfied in day-to-day activities are probably high on the list. Given that most people spend a majority of their waking hours at work, employment is an important