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Does flexible work make R&D employees happier?

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Abstract

Striving for happiness is a universal human goal, and increased happiness is regarded as a key objective in modern scientific literature on socio-economic development. Yet, the connection between happiness and the organisation of work has not received much scrutiny. In our study on Estonian creative R&D employees, we explore the effects of flexible work schedules, the option of teleworking, and other aspects of work arrangements on employee happiness. We uncover that the option to work out of the office substantially increases happiness, and this effect is further augmented by flexible working time arrangements. We also consider the inner circadian cycles of employees and find that evening type individuals (“owls”) feel significantly less joy from their daily lives than their morning type colleagues (“larks”). This is potentially due to genetic factors, but could also be partially caused by a mismatch between the innate time preferences among owls and social as well as employer expectations. Overall, the results of our study suggest that flexible working arrangements could significantly increase the happiness and well-being of creative R&D employees.

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Kas paindlik töökorraldus teeb teadustöötajad õnnelikumaks?

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Kokkuvõte

Õnne poole püüdlemine on inimesele loomumane ning õnnelikkuse saavutamist vaadeldakse tänapäevastes teaduskäsitlustes sotsiaalmajandusliku arengu ühe olulise eesmärgina. Kuigi õnnealane teaduskirjandus on üha kasvav, pole inimeste õnnelikkuse ja töökorralduse vahelisi seoseid palju uuritud. Meie uurimisprojekti üheks ülesandeks on uurida, millist mõju avaldavad töötajate õnnelikkusele erinevad töökorralduse aspektid, sealhulgas paindlik töögraafik ja kaugtöö võimalus. Viisime 2015-2016 läbi Eesti teadus- ja arendusvaldkonna töötajate küsitlusuuringu, mille andmetele tuginedes avastasime mitmeid töökorraldusest tulenevaid õnnelikkuse ajendeid. Kontorist eemal töötamise võimalus tõstab töötajates oluliselt õnnelik olemise tunnetamist ning paindliku tööaja kasutamise võimalus võimendab seda efekti veelgi. Uuringus võtsime arvesse töötajate loomupäraseid ööpäevaseid rütme ning leidsime, et õhtust tüüpi inividid ("öökullid") tunnevad oma igapäevasest elust tunduvalt vähem rõõmu kui nende hommikust tüüpi kolleegid ("lõokesed"). See võib olla põhjustatud öökullide geneetilistest iseärasustest, kuid võib osaliselt tuleneda ka konfliktist loomupärase ajakasutuseelistuse ning ühiskondlike ja tööandja ootuste vahel. Meie uurimuse tulemused osundavad sellele, et tööandja poolt pakutav paindlikkus nii töötegemise kohas kui töötegemise ajas võib töötajate õnnelikkusele ja laiemale heaolule avaldada märgatavat positiivset mõju.

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The world is seeking happiness

We often hear about economic growth being set as the main development goal, and the achievement of growth also used to be the focus of mainstream economics. Some of the more recent approaches in economic policy and research put more stress on increased happiness as a key development objective. On 28 June 2012, recognizing that the “pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal”¹, and to convey the need for a more inclusive approach to economic growth that would account for happiness and well-being, the United Nations General Assembly declared 20 March the International Day of Happiness. Innovation through research and development (R&D) and increased reliance on intellectual capital is another important goal in economic development. Our research group at the Department of Economics and Finance at Tallinn University of Technology in collaboration with our partners studied the interaction point of these two key development issues through the happiness of R&D employees. In particular, we were interested in the work related aspects of happiness.

How can the organisation of work impact happiness?

Our study, based on a sample of Estonian creative R&D employees, aims to contribute to the growing body of happiness literature by investigating the link between the organisation of work and happiness. We focus on the flexibility employees are granted in terms of working time and working place, expecting that added flexibility boosts happiness. Furthermore, we are interested in the links between happiness and the employee’s internal circadian clock in the context of work arrangements.

The literature on happiness is ample, and happiness has been studied in relation to numerous factors, including work (see Krause, 2014 for a detailed overview of previous studies). Yet, the effect of working arrangements on happiness has not received much

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¹ The full text of the resolution is available at www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/66/281.

scrutiny. Although not physically wearing, creative R&D work can be draining mentally due to its intellectually and emotionally intense nature.

Not being able to follow their internal clock might present an additional strain for researchers and developers. The inner circadian clock regulates the individual's preferred sleep-wake balance, also known as morningness-eveningness. Evening types or 'owls' feel more active and alert in the evening and weary in the morning, while the reverse is true for morning types or 'larks'. The rest, the 'hummingbirds', fall somewhere in between. Though not as apparent as characteristics like age or gender, morningness-eveningness is nonetheless an important factor impacting the individual in many ways (refer to Adan et al., 2012 for an overview of past research on that matter). Moreover, morningness-eveningness appears to be largely genetically determined (see Kalmbach et al., 2016), which means that it is difficult to change. Significant mismatches between the individual's circadian clock and their work schedule can yield adverse results, such as raising the risk of several health problems (Veatch et al., 2017).

Flexible work is related to happiness

Our investigation exploits data from our survey conducted among Estonian R&D employees. The study sample contains 146 individuals from 11 organisations. We learned from this study that teleworking has a positive and significant link with happiness. Our findings somewhat corroborate those of Anderson et al. (2015), who discovered that employees experienced more positive feelings like happiness, enthusiasm, or alertness on days they were working at home than on days they were working at the office, and less negative feelings like fear, anxiety or guilt.

Flexibility in working time seems to have an added positive impact on happiness, particularly when combined with working place flexibility. These results are in accordance with a previous study by Golden et al. (2013), who observed that greater discretion over their working time increases employee happiness.

Surprisingly, working more hours appears to increase happiness in Estonian creative R&D employees. Golden et al. (2013), who also spotted a minor positive link between working

more hours per week and happiness, offer that this could partly mirror a “happy worker effect”, through which happy workers are able to work longer hours.

Also, we examined the relationship between circadian rhythmicity and happiness by designating employees as owls, larks, or hummingbirds based on their score on the Reduced Morningness-Eveningness Questionnaire by Adan and Almirall (1991). Evening type employees or owls indicate lower levels of happiness than other types. As previous studies have shown, eveningness is often linked to psychological distress (Adan et al. 2012, Toomey et al., 2015), and it is therefore not unexpected that evening type employees feel less joy. Also, the mismatch between the natural sleeping regime for owls and conventional working schedules might have a detrimental effect on the happiness of evening type employees.

Increased employee happiness benefits the employer and the economy at large

It has been widely shown that the flexible organisation of work can positively affect productivity (e.g. Konrad and Mangel, 2000, Chow and Keng-Howe, 2006, Yang and Cheng, 2011). The results of our study indicate that allowing greater flexibility can also enhance happiness in creative R&D employees. Knowledge-based economies rely increasingly on employees with high levels of human capital, including employees working in R&D. Designing more accommodating working arrangements for these workers could significantly contribute to both improving their well-being as well as effectively utilising their potential, thereby fostering innovation and long-term economic development.

This study is part of a broader research project on the effects of working time arrangements on work results, perceived health effects and the individual wellbeing of Estonian creative R&D employees (see www.ttu.ee/ta2). Moreover, it is part of a larger effort by the research group to investigate the individual, institutional, financial and market driven aspects of development in R&D and knowledge intensive societies. We hope that these papers and research briefs help to stimulate discussion on these important topics in society.

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