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Chronically Dissatisfied: Work Characteristics, Personal Expectations and Job Satisfaction - Empirical Evidence in Young Italian Workers

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Abstract

Job satisfaction is the degree to which people like their jobs. Companies are interested in job satisfaction of their employees, because it is positively correlated with certain desired outcomes and contributes to reduce significantly the rate of absenteeism and job turnover. Job satisfaction needs to be divided into three separate but related components: the overall opinion about the job, affective experience at work, beliefs about the job itself, and can be considered as a global feeling about the job or as a related constellation of attitudes about various aspects or facets of the job. The global approach is used when the overall attitude is of interest, the facet approach is used to find out which parts of job produce satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This article presents and discusses the results of a study carried out using both approaches to get a complete picture of employee job satisfaction on a consistent and significant sample of young workers (less than three years of tenure) belonging to the mechanical sector in a province in the Northeast of Italy. Using an analytical protocol the present study has identified aspects of work related (positively and negatively) to the job satisfaction.

Keywords: Human resources management; Job Satisfaction; Need/Satisfaction Theory; Apprenticeship;

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1 Introduction

Job satisfaction (henceforth JS) is probably the most studied theme in psychological literature: companies are interested in job satisfaction of their employees, because it is positively correlated with certain desired outcomes and contributes to reduce significantly the rate of absenteeism and job turnover. This paper presents and discusses the results of a study carried out on a significant and homogeneous sample (N = 117) of young workers (less than three years of tenure) belonging to the mechanical sector in a province in the Northeast of Italy. Within the classic approach expectations/rewards, the research has investigated analytically aspects of work considered important by the workers (expectations). It has compared the subjective perception between these expectations and what is really achieved at work finally correlating each specific expectation with overall assessment of expressed job satisfaction.

The research described herein was expected the following results: identify the main expectations relevant to the position of the mechanic operator; calculate the degree of congruence between what is desired by the operator and what is achieved at work; identify a statistical relation between work rewards perceived and job satisfaction expressed. The paper is organized as follows: section 2 presents the theoretical framework, paragraph 3 presents the research and the tools used, paragraph 4 presents the data collected, and paragraph 5 concludes.

2 Job satisfaction and business performance

JS is the degree to which people like their jobs. In the past, JS was approached from the perspective of need fulfillment, today most researchers tend to focus attention on cognitive processes rather than underlying needs (Spector, 1997).

Job satisfaction can be defined in terms of range of emotions, positive (or negative) felt toward their own job: Locke (1976), in fact, called the JS 'a pleasurable emotional state resulting from feedback on own job or work experience'. On the other hand, Miner (1992), states that 'it seems desirable to treat the JS as a similar attitude towards the job'; Brief (1998) says that the JS is the attitude towards their job. According to this second approach, the idea behind the reflections of Weiss (2002) is that it is conceptually correct to identify three constructs distinct but correlated with the JS: job evaluation, beliefs and emotional experiences related to the job. In other words, JS can be defined as 'a positive (or negative) evaluation related to own job or work situation'.

This judgement is not an emotion, and therefore neither is the JS. Certainly affective responses (such as feelings or emotions) have a positive or negative direction, but also experiential components, often physiological, which go beyond the pure evaluation (Eagly, Chaiken, 1993). Affective states, in fact, have a long-term influence on their evaluation processes, as described, but do not coincide with the judgments. The same emotional reaction is a complex concept: it is necessary to distinguish between feeling and emotion, the first is a generic response and widespread, the second is linked to a specific cause (Frijda, 1983). Finally, the judgement on an object (in this case the job) should be distinguished from beliefs that the individual has about that object: this belief system has practical implications beyond the overall assessment (think about the beliefs regarding your superior or the salaries of others company's employees), and therefore their nature shall be studied more accurately. In summary, JS needs to be divided into three separate but related components: the overall opinion about the job, affective experience at work, beliefs about the job itself, and can be considered as a global feeling about the job or as a related constellation of attitudes about various aspects or facets of the job. The global approach is used when the overall attitude is of interest, the facet approach is used to find out which parts of job produce satisfaction or dissatisfaction: in this paper, I used both approaches to get a complete picture of employee job satisfaction.

The organizations are concerned with the causes of job satisfaction because in turn can cause the desired results, but the literature on this is rarely univocal. Bowling (2007) using the method of meta-analysis of existing data in the literature shows that the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance can be regarded as spurious, because both constructs (satisfaction and performance) would be due to common causes such as aspects of personality and self-esteem above all linked to the work context. In other words, satisfaction and performance share the same cause but are not themselves linked by causal relation. There are people productive, but dissatisfied, or satisfied but not very productive, and in any case, the causal relation between these two elements and work performance remains to be proved, beyond the views of common sense. Furthermore, performance is the result of the correspondence between the person behaviour and requests of role/task.

Locke (1976) worked out an extensive study of literature identifying a negative correlation between JS and turnover, although correlation does not necessarily imply causality. Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) suggest that certain behaviours are affected in the immediate future by certain judgments at work. In fact, these behaviours are the result of a decision-making processes in which the overall assessment is a part of the decision itself. The turnover, then, could be one of these behaviours, and if so, it would explain why this phenomenon is mainly determined by the JS. Freeman (1978) showed that the JS is negatively and significantly related to the probability to resign. Furthermore, he found out that for workers JS was more important than pay, but also that the causal relation ranged from JS to the future job performance.

In addition to what said about the relation with productivity JS seems to be negatively correlated with the rate of absenteeism and the decision to resign (Jones et al, 2008; Shields, Ward, 2001; Kinjerski, Skrypnek, 2008). Absenteeism has significant and well known costs for the company (Oi, 1962), although, actually, from the psychological point of view can sometimes be seen as a break with positive effects (Steels, Rhodes, 1978). Barmby and Stephan (2000) found out that larger companies have a higher rate of absenteeism, part-time much more than full-time (Barmby, 2000) and trial period much more than the permanent contract (Ichino, Riphahn, 2005). Vroom (1964) found out that low levels of JS contribute to a higher rate of absenteeism, a fact confirmed by Clegg (1983), which also found out lower accuracy and more willingness to resign.

In addition to the approaches related to the personality of the worker (Weis, Nicholas et al, 1999) there are other models for the study of job satisfaction which focus on aspects of the work itself, models largely validated, considering the job satisfaction as a complex of sub-elements. Hackman (1980) identified five aspects of work that affect job satisfaction: identity (the clarity of the assignment), significance (the impact of the task itself on the lives of other people), variety, degree of autonomy, feedback (the extent of information received from other actually available on the work). The literature has confirmed that these sizes have a high correlation with overall job satisfaction (.53 and .88 respectively in two different meta-analysis: Loher et al, 1985; Spector, 1985), particularly for people with high motivation to growth professionally and performing complex tasks, non-manual or non-repetitive.

In other words, the overall satisfaction is based on partial satisfaction related to specific aspects of work whose derived utility is evaluated by the subject more or less consciously (Skalli et al, 2008). The JS would be a multi dimension composed of partial satisfaction arising from different aspects of the job, which occupy different positions in the scale of satisfaction. The overall JS (or utility derived from job) is an aggregation of this partial satisfaction: different mix of satisfaction can generate the same level of overall JS. Skalli et al, (2008) following an economic approach, consider JS a measure of the utility that the worker derives from his job: it is therefore important to identify those job characteristics that have a different impact on overall JS. The authors' conclusion is that there are not aspects of JS, but different aspects of the work environment that are evaluated.

In other words, the attempt to identify those issues that are important for overall JS have not led to univocal results. It seems that the JS is something more and different from the individual assessments composing it (Highhouse, Becker, 1993; Scarpello, Campbell, 1983). Furthermore, in

research design is often used a list of features produced spontaneously by the interviewees adopting an idea (considered incorrect by many authors) according to which consciousness is synonymous with important, error pointed out by Locke (1976). A significant number of studies (Herzberg, 1959, Argyle, 1987) have long investigated the effect of JS on the characteristics of the job, although this effect is mediated by the personal characteristics of the worker or social and institutional aspects (Sousa-Poza, Sousa -Poza, 2002). In any case, the key assumption is that people formulate an overall opinion about the job as a whole.

Other researches have shown that the JS depends on specific aspects of the work characteristics (Warr, 1999; Frey, Stutzer, 2002), and each feature can be seen as a component of overall satisfaction having a different and specific weight according to the 'utility' perceived by the worker, similar to Lancaster's theory (1966, 1971) of consumer behaviour.

Finally, training is positively and significantly correlated with the JS (Allen, van der Velden, 2001; Siebern-Thomas, 2005; Grugulis, Stoyanova, 2006, Jones et alli, 2008, Dearden et al 2000, 2006) and JS positively and significantly correlated with organizational performance i.e. turnover and absenteeism. More complex is the relationship between training and performance: if too short has no other positive effects besides the two mentioned, if covers a large portion of the company employees has an impact on corporate financial performance and productivity. Having a greater proportion of highly skilled workers increases financial performance but also the resignation rate, which does not happen if there is skill match.

3 The research design: the antecedents of job satisfaction

There has been lot of work conducted to determine the underlying structure of JS facets (Spector, 1997). These studies have suggested several structure, and they clearly separate facets in four areas (Locke, 1976): rewards, other people, nature of the work, organizational context.

Data were collected by anonymous questionnaire given to apprentices (N = 117) employed in the engineering sector in a province in the Northeast of Italy. The questionnaire consisted of 35 items corresponding to particular job characteristics (e.g. 'Secure and stable job', 'High salary', 'Working as part of a group/ team'). It was asked for each item to provide two ratings: one rating relevant to the level of importance of a certain aspect of the work performed in the context of an *ideal job* as perceived by the subject (0 = not interested, 5 = essential), a second rating relevant to the level of attendance at the current job (0 = absent, 5 = fundamental). The aim was to gather data concerning the definition of an 'ideal' job for the subject, namely the basic components of the subject's motivation (motivation to work and to organization). Furthermore, it was necessary to collect information to make a 'process analysis by comparing the level of relative importance of an element with its presence in the real work. In other words, it has been made a comparison between what is desired and what is deemed possible to achieve.

Finally, we asked the subject to make a comprehensive assessment of its level of job satisfaction (0 = 'not at all satisfied', 5 = 'totally satisfied'). In this way, we have tried to take into account all the key factors for measuring JS, as discussed in the literature: the *affective reaction*, by measuring the level of overall job satisfaction perceived by the subject; the *cognitive dimension*, by collecting the beliefs concerning the presence of certain aspects of work; the *evaluating dimension* measured through assessment of the level of satisfaction of expectations with respect to each aspect of the work.

4 Data analysis

What kind of job would like young people belonging to the sample? Generally, the ideal job (Table 1) is stable and safe, with a high salary, not too heavy, with certainty of having trade union rights and based on respect of the worker as a person. On the contrary, there is not a job characteristic which is considered not interesting. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify certain characteristics considered of minor importance among which stands out the following: possibility of continuing

studies, consistency with personal skills, participation in regular training courses, working for a company having high social responsibility, deciding the objectives of the department where person works. The aforesaid characteristics are considered of minor importance by, at least, one fifth of the sample.

Tab.1 The ideal Job

Job characteristics	0	1	2	3	4	5	Tot
Stable employment	0%	0%	2%	4%	20%	74%	100%
Respect me as a person	0%	0%	3%	6%	35%	56%	100%
Satisfactory working hours, free time	0%	0%	0%	9%	55%	37%	100%
High Salary	0%	0%	0%	3%	29%	68%	100%
Working as a part of group / team	0%	10%	17%	38%	26%	9%	100%
Job with good work environment	0%	0%	9%	32%	39%	20%	100%
Discounts on the purchase of company products	0%	10%	41%	39%	6%	3%	100%
Opportunity to do quality work	0%	0%	29%	48%	14%	9%	100%
Guaranteed career growth	0%	0%	0%	25%	27%	48%	100%
Good relations with other workers	0%	0%	0%	29%	35%	36%	100%
Stable and well-structured organizational relations	0%	9%	19%	35%	21%	16%	100%
Opportunity to get involved	0%	11%	19%	39%	21%	10%	100%
Good corporate hierarchical position or status	0%	0%	10%	24%	27%	38%	100%
Possibility of internal mobility (from department to department)	0%	0%	38%	30%	15%	17%	100%
Challenging and various work	0%	0%	28%	38%	19%	15%	100%
Opportunity to continue studies	0%	28%	27%	17%	14%	15%	100%
Consistency with the skills possessed	0%	21%	23%	27%	20%	9%	100%
Certainty of trade union rights	0%	0%	0%	10%	15%	74%	100%
Not too heavy physical work	0%	0%	0%	15%	33%	51%	100%
Be aware of what happens inside the company	0%	0%	17%	27%	33%	23%	100%
Be considered and rewarded for what I do	0%	0%	0%	19%	57%	24%	100%
Participate regularly in training	0%	21%	24%	36%	11%	8%	100%
Having a superior satisfied of my work	0%	9%	21%	44%	21%	5%	100%
Having colleagues that appreciate my work	0%	15%	25%	50%	11%	0%	100%
Belonging to a company with high social responsibility	0%	27%	37%	31%	4%	1%	100%
Working in a dynamic company	0%	12%	24%	30%	20%	15%	100%
Participate in social life of the company (meetings, dinners, etc.).	0%	20%	29%	22%	15%	14%	100%
Decide on targets of the department	0%	24%	27%	40%	6%	3%	100%
Autonomy in organizing work	0%	0%	10%	33%	44%	12%	100%
Opportunities for personal growth	0%	0%	20%	39%	33%	8%	100%
Certain legal protections in the event of unsafe/poor working conditions	0%	0%	0%	38%	38%	24%	100%
Having a competent and respected superior	0%	0%	10%	31%	40%	19%	100%
Possibility to choose the date of the leave	0%	0%	15%	32%	34%	20%	100%
Working under close supervision, certain about being evaluated objectively	0%	7%	10%	35%	27%	21%	100%
Place of work close to home	0%	0%	0%	29%	38%	32%	100%

What kind of work do young metalworkers carry out? First (Table 2), 60% of them have the certainty of trade union rights, fewer than half (40%) believe they have a good hierarchical position, almost as many (37%) a workplace close to home, less than one third (31 %) claimed to have a job not too heavy, just as many (32%) are considered and rewarded for what they do; only one quarter of the sample declared that they are entitled of a certain legal protection in the event of poor working conditions; working hours satisfactory with free time, secure and stable employment with the opportunity to decide the date of leave, some career growth and a good relations with the other; only one fifth of the sample claims to have a greater context of his work.

Tab.2 Current job

Job characteristics	0	1	2	3	4	5	Tot
Stable employment	0%	0%	19%	29%	27%	25%	100%

Respect me as a person	0%	0%	19%	32%	27%	22%	100%
Satisfactory working hours, free time	0%	6%	12%	19%	38%	25%	100%
High Salary	0%	0%	10%	24%	27%	38%	100%
Working as a part of group / team	0%	21%	32%	32%	14%	3%	100%
Job with good work environment	0%	10%	19%	32%	29%	9%	100%
Discounts on the purchase of farm products	0%	19%	37%	27%	9%	8%	100%
Opportunity to do quality work	0%	13%	27%	41%	13%	6%	100%
Guaranteed career growth	0%	2%	21%	26%	27%	25%	100%
Good relations with other workers	0%	4%	19%	29%	24%	24%	100%
Stable and well-structured organizational relations	0%	15%	23%	28%	16%	18%	100%
Opportunity to get involved	0%	16%	32%	28%	15%	9%	100%
Good corporate hierarchical position or status	0%	0%	0%	31%	28%	41%	100%
Possibility of internal mobility (from department to department)	0%	3%	23%	39%	21%	14%	100%
Challenging and various work	0%	20%	28%	21%	19%	13%	100%
Opportunity to continue studies	0%	28%	35%	37%	0%	0%	100%
Consistency with the skills possessed	0%	21%	12%	35%	21%	10%	100%
Certainty of trade union rights	0%	0%	2%	11%	27%	60%	100%
Not too heavy physical work	0%	0%	18%	27%	24%	31%	100%
Be aware of what happens inside the company	0%	20%	15%	22%	26%	17%	100%
Be considered and rewarded for what I do	0%	0%	9%	15%	44%	32%	100%
Participate regularly in training	0%	27%	31%	26%	9%	7%	100%
Having a superior satisfied of my work	0%	5%	16%	41%	18%	20%	100%
Having colleagues that appreciate my work	0%	20%	21%	48%	11%	0%	100%
Belonging to a company with high social responsibility	0%	30%	32%	37%	1%	1%	100%
Working in a dynamic company	0%	17%	31%	39%	9%	4%	100%
Participate in social life of the company (meetings, dinners, etc.).	0%	24%	21%	32%	11%	11%	100%
Decide on the objectives of the department	0%	27%	32%	38%	2%	1%	100%
Autonomy in organizing work	0%	4%	19%	30%	36%	11%	100%
Opportunities for personal growth	0%	3%	24%	48%	16%	9%	100%
Certain legal protection in the event of unsafe/poor working conditions	0%	0%	9%	29%	36%	26%	100%
Having a competent and respected higher	0%	3%	18%	36%	28%	15%	100%
Possibility to choose the date of the leave	0%	0%	15%	23%	34%	28%	100%
Working under close supervision, certain about being evaluated objectively	0%	19%	23%	34%	14%	10%	100%
Place of work close to home	0%	0%	0%	27%	36%	37%	100%

The comparison between ideal job and present job, in essence, provides comparable data (Table 3): the average mismatch of -0.3 is negative, that is, workers believe they perform an activity slightly below expectations. The most disappointing feature is the stability of employment (-1.1).

TAB 3. Correlations between mismatch and job satisfaction (n = 117, confidence level 0.05%)

Facets of job	Average mismatch ^o	r
Stable employment	-1,1	0,68
Respect me as a person	-0,9	0,64
Satisfactory working hours, free time	-0,6	-0,91
High Salary	-0,7	0,80
Working as a part of group / team	-0,5	-0,04
Job with good work environment	-0,6	0,40
Discounts on the purchase of farm products	0,1	0,52
Opportunity to do quality work	-0,2	0,34
Guaranteed career growth	-0,6	0,68
Good relations with other workers	-0,5	0,67
Stable and well-structured organizational relations	-0,1	0,39
Opportunity to get involved	-0,2	0,22
Good corporate hierarchical position or status	0,3	-0,47
Possibility of internal mobility (from department to department)	0,2	-0,12
Challenging and various work	-0,3	0,67
Opportunity to continue studies	-0,4	-0,82
Consistency with the skills possessed	0,3	0,02
Certainty of trade union rights	0	0,40
Not too heavy physical work	-0,5	0,70
Be aware of what happens inside the company	-0,4	0,62
Be considered and rewarded for what I do	0,1	0,47
Participate regularly in training	0	-0,07
Having a superior satisfied of my work	0,6	0,25
Having colleagues that appreciate my work	0,1	0,21
Belonging to a company with high social responsibility	0,2	-0,08
Working in a dynamic company	-0,3	-0,40
Participate in social life of the company (meetings, dinners, etc.).	0,1	-0,09
Decide on the objectives of the department	0	-0,38
Autonomy in organizing work	0	0,42
Opportunities for personal growth	0	0,14
Certain legal protections in the event of unsafe/poor working conditions	0,2	0,45
Having a competent and respected higher	0	0,24
Possibility to choose the date of the leave	0,4	0,08
Working under close supervision, certain to be evaluated objectively	-0,4	0,20
Place of work close to home	0,4	0,01
^o > 0 higher than the desired; 0 = consistency with the desired; < 0 = lack compared to the desired		

Table 4 shows a strong congruence between the ideal job and the work done, and this evidence is to be crossed with the figures relevant to the expressed overall job satisfaction, which in total is very low (average of 2.36 out of 5.00)

Tab 4 – Global evaluations of Job Satisfaction expressed

Overall, how satisfied are you in your present job? (Not at all = 0; Completely = 5)	N	%
Not at all	18	15%
Little	23	20%
Not very	16	14%
Enough	34	29%
Very	11	9%
Completely	15	13%
Total	117	100%

Basically, half of the sample is not satisfied, more than one third (35%) little or not at all satisfied, this fact that can't be explained by mismatch between what workers want and what they have received, since this mismatch does not exist.

But if we proceed analytically with the evaluation of the correlation coefficients for each dimension investigated other results arise according to which exist some job dimension that have a significant impact on the level of satisfaction expressed, some in very surprising ways, far beyond the impact represented by the specific mismatch. Considering the characteristics with a coefficient $r > 0.6$ which can explain, at least, one third of the variance of job satisfaction, the dimensions that emerge are, firstly, high salary ($r = 0.68$) and the ability to carry out a work not too heavy ($r = 0.70$); secure and stable employment ($r = 0.68$), respect me as a person ($r = 0.64$), guaranteed career growth ($r = 0.68$), a good relation with the other ($r = 0.67$), and finally, be informed of what is happening inside the company ($r = 0.62$).

It is a surprising fact that the two work characteristics appearing to be more closely related (but in a negative way) to job satisfaction are the following: satisfactory working hours with free time ($r = -0.91$) and the possibility to continue studies ($r = -0.82$). In other words, the employees declaring to be unhappy with their jobs are those who have free time and can continue their studies.

5 Conclusions

The empirical evidence provided by this study suggests that the overall level of congruence between what the worker desires and what is offered by the actual work condition does not determine job satisfaction. Therefore, it has been confirmed that the job satisfaction has a factorial origin, and it is useful to decompose in an analytical way to identify those factors correlated with individual aspects of job satisfaction. The results show an overall figure of a systematically dissatisfied worker, which is not interested in professional growth, but is looking for a stable and secure job, not heavy and well-paid job. Young worker is not interested in being informed about the business dynamics and feel disadvantageous to have satisfactory working hours and free time, presumably because the latter element is usually associated with part-time or work shifts. In summary, it is confirmed that the overall satisfaction is based on partial satisfaction related to specific aspects of work, of which the subject does not seem to be aware, in line with what is described in the literature (Skalli et al, 2008).

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