

The key to happiness on the job

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IT is a great shame that our most confident career aspirations - "I want to be a steam-train driver!" - (or astronaut or ballerina) - are usually held at the stage of life when we least need that self-assurance.

Childhood certainties tend to fall away, leaving many grown-ups leafing disconsolately through career guides.

So what is the best approach to finding happiness in your job?

A common and sensible theme of careers advice is to work out what you most enjoy doing. Richard Nolle's best-selling guide *What Colour is Your Parachute?* recommends that you work out which activities leave you, hours later, realising that you've missed lunch or forgotten to pick up the kids from school.

This state of pleasurable absorption, known as flow, offers a golden key to happiness, according to the new field of positive psychology.

Positive psychologists, who ambitiously seek to work out what makes people flourish and thrive, describe flow as the "sense of effortless action (felt) in moments that stand out as the best in their lives".

To ask a job to furnish some of the finest moments of life may at first seem a little exacting. But in fact the workplace is potentially an excellent environment since flow calls for clear goals, feedback on performance, and a good match between skills and the challenges of the task at hand.

Given how much of our lives we spend working, there's much to be said for finding a career that provides regular flow. And, for employers, what could be better than having an office full of people who at the end of each day exclaim in astonishment, "Goodness! Is that the time already?"

Martin Seligman, a founder of the positive psychology movement and a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, has recommendations on how to maximise flow at work. Taking a thoroughly modern approach to soul-searching, dissatisfied workers and directionless students can visit the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Centre website, www.authentichappiness.com, and take the Values In Action Signature Strengths Questionnaire.

This survey probes your aptitude for 24 different strengths of character that fall under the umbrella of the following universally valued virtues: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity and love, justice, temperance and transcendence.

What you receive is a convenient ranking of your character strengths and weaknesses. At the top of this list are your five best, or "signature", strengths. You can then view possible careers with an eye to how well they will enable you to use and develop them, Seligman suggests. Or flow can be introduced to refresh a tiresomely familiar job by recrafting its responsibilities to better suit your

profile of virtue.

Psychologist Barbara Miller, of training and development consultancy Potential Unlimited, uses this approach to help people increase their happiness at work.

"As simple as it may seem, most people need help discovering how to be happy," says Miller.

Prior to coaching, her clients are asked to take the VIA Signature Strengths questionnaire, and to send her a list of their top five strengths. Miller seeks to use this information to make her clients "lastingly happier" by pointing them towards novel ways to use those strengths in their jobs.

This really can work, according to research reported by Seligman and colleagues in *American Psychologist*. About 60 visitors to the www.authentic happiness.com website were asked to use one of their signature strengths in a new and different way every day for a week. Followed up regularly afterwards, the significant gain in happiness these people enjoyed from the exercise was still in evidence six months later. This appeared to be because people took such pleasure in finding original ways to do what they were good at that they carried on doing so long after the week-long exercise was over.

Some psychologists, however, remain unconvinced as to the wisdom of a signature strengths approach.

Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, bringing a curmudgeonly note to the *Journal of Happiness Studies*, argue that we should strive for an Aristotelian mean in all virtues. They claim that by developing only a handful of strengths and neglecting the rest, we become like the proverbial workman who owns only a hammer, to whom everything looks like a nail.

The ultimate flow, they suggest, comes from the master virtue of practical wisdom, which offers the skill and will to use the right virtues at the right time. Instead of focusing on individual happiness, Schwartz and Sharpe suggest that positive psychologists should pay more attention to creating social institutions that offer the flexibility and autonomy that people need to develop practical wisdom.

Until that happens, however, we will have to depend on ourselves to make improvements to our daily lot. And reflecting on, and using, what is best in ourselves may indeed be the most pleasurable and effective route to a more enjoyable work life. By accentuating the positive, we may even come to recapture that enthusiasm we once felt all those years ago for steam trains, ballet shoes and spaceships.

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