

4.2: Work Attitudes

Learning Objectives

1. Define “work attitudes”.
2. Describe the relationship between attitudes and behaviors.
3. Define and differentiate between job satisfaction and organizational commitment.
4. List the factors related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment.
5. Describe the consequences of job satisfaction and organizational commitment.
6. Identify the ways in which companies can track work attitudes in the workplace.

Our behavior at work often depends on how we feel about being there. Therefore, making sense of how people behave depends on understanding their work attitudes. An attitude refers to our opinions, beliefs, and feelings about aspects of our environment. We have attitudes toward the food we eat, people we interact with, courses we take, and various other things. At work, two particular job attitudes have the greatest potential to influence how we behave. These are job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Job satisfaction refers to the feelings people have toward their job. If the number of studies conducted on job satisfaction is an indicator, job satisfaction is probably the most important job attitude. Institutions such as Gallup Inc. or the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) periodically conduct studies of job satisfaction to track how satisfied employees are at work. According to a recent Gallup survey, 90% of the employees surveyed said that they were at least somewhat satisfied with their jobs. The recent SHRM study revealed 40% who were very satisfied (What keeps employees satisfied, 2007). Organizational commitment is the emotional attachment people have toward the company they work for. There is a high degree of overlap between job satisfaction and organizational commitment, because things that make us happy with our job often make us more committed to the company as well. Companies believe that these attitudes are worth tracking because they are often associated with important outcomes such as performance, helping others, absenteeism, and turnover.

How strong is the attitude-behavior link? First of all, it depends on the attitude in question. Your attitudes toward your colleagues may influence whether you actually help them on a project, but they may not be a good predictor of whether you will quit your job. Second, it is worth noting that attitudes are more strongly related to intentions to behave in a certain way, rather than actual behaviors. When you are dissatisfied with your job, you may have the intention to leave. Whether you will actually leave is a different story! Your leaving will depend on many factors, such as availability of alternative jobs in the market, your employability in a different company, and sacrifices you have to make while changing jobs. In other words, while attitudes give us hints about how a person might behave, it is important to remember that behavior is also strongly influenced by situational constraints.

OB Toolbox: How Can You Be Happier at Work?

- *Have a positive attitude about it.* Your personality is a big part of your happiness. If you are always looking for the negative side of everything, you will find it.
- *A good fit with the job and company is important to your happiness.* This starts with knowing yourself: What do you want from the job? What do you enjoy doing? Be honest with yourself and do a self-assessment.
- *Get accurate information about the job and the company.* Ask detailed questions about what life is like in this company. Do your research: Read about the company, and use your social network to understand the company’s culture.
- *Develop good relationships at work.* Make friends. Try to get a mentor. Approach a person you admire and attempt to build a relationship with this person. An experienced mentor can be a great help in navigating life at a company. Your social network can help you weather the bad days and provide you emotional and instrumental support during your time at the company as well as afterward.
- *Pay is important, but job characteristics matter more to your job satisfaction.* Don’t sacrifice the job itself for a little bit more money. When choosing a job, look at the level of challenge, and the potential of the job to make you engaged.
- *Be proactive in managing organizational life.* If the job is stressful, cope with it by effective time management and having a good social network, as well as being proactive in getting to the source of stress. If you don’t have enough direction, ask for it!
- *Know when to leave.* If the job makes you unhappy over an extended period of time and there is little hope of solving the problems, it may be time to look elsewhere.

What Causes Positive Work Attitudes?

What makes you satisfied with your job and develop commitment to your company? Research shows that people pay attention to several aspects of their work environment, including how they are treated, the relationships they form with colleagues and managers, and the actual work they perform. We will now summarize the factors that show consistent relations with job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

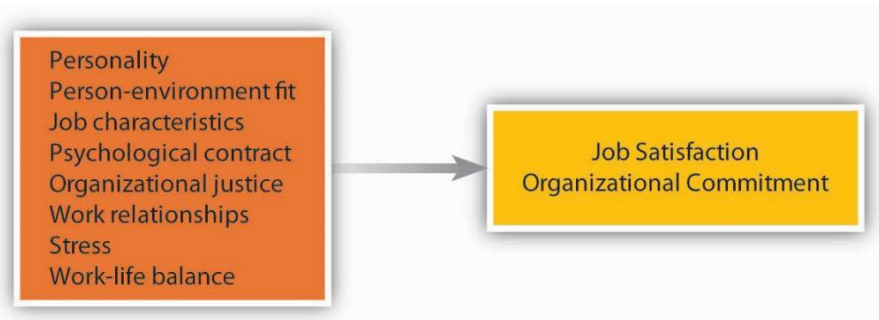


Figure 4.2.2: Factors Contributing to Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment

Personality

Can assessing the work environment fully explain how satisfied we are on the job? Interestingly, some experts have shown that job satisfaction is not purely environmental and is partially due to our personality. Some people have a disposition to be happy in life and at work regardless of environmental factors.

It seems that people who have a positive affective disposition (those who have a tendency to experience positive moods more often than negative moods) tend to be more satisfied with their jobs and more committed to their companies, while those who have a negative disposition tend to be less satisfied and less committed (Connolly & Viswesvaran, 2000; Thoresen et al., 2003). This is not surprising, as people who are determined to see the glass as half full will notice the good things in their work environment, while those with the opposite character will find more things to complain about. In addition to our affective disposition, people who have a neurotic personality (those who are moody, temperamental, critical of themselves and others) are less satisfied with their job, while those who are emotionally more stable tend to be more satisfied. Other traits such as conscientiousness, self-esteem, locus of control, and extraversion are also related to positive work attitudes (Judge et al., 2002; Judge & Bono, 2001; Zimmerman, 2008). Either these people are more successful in finding jobs and companies that will make them happy and build better relationships at work, which would increase their satisfaction and commitment, or they simply see their environment as more positive—whichever the case, it seems that personality is related to work attitudes.

Person–Environment Fit

The fit between what we bring to our work environment and the environmental demands influences our work attitudes. Therefore, person–job fit and person–organization fit are positively related to job satisfaction and commitment. When our abilities match job demands and our values match company values, we tend to be more satisfied with our job and more committed to the company we work for (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003).

Job Characteristics

The presence of certain characteristics on the job seems to make employees more satisfied and more committed. Using a variety of skills, having autonomy at work, receiving feedback on the job, and performing a significant task are some job characteristics that are related to satisfaction and commitment. However, the presence of these factors is not important for everyone. Some people have a high growth need. They expect their jobs to help them build new skills and improve as an employee. These people tend to be more satisfied when their jobs have these characteristics (Loher et al., 1985; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990).

Psychological Contract

After accepting a job, people come to work with a set of expectations. They have an understanding of their responsibilities and rights. In other words, they have a psychological contract with the company. A psychological contract is an unwritten understanding about what the employee will bring to the work environment and what the company will provide in exchange. When people do not get what they expect, they experience a psychological contract breach, which leads to low job satisfaction and

commitment. Imagine that you were told before being hired that the company was family friendly and collegial. However, after a while, you realize that they expect employees to work 70 hours a week, and employees are aggressive toward each other. You are likely to experience a breach in your psychological contract and be dissatisfied. One way of preventing such problems is for companies to provide realistic job previews to their employees (Premack & Wanous, 1985; Wanous et al., 1992; Zhao et al., 2007).

Organizational Justice

A strong influence over our satisfaction level is how fairly we are treated. People pay attention to the fairness of company policies and procedures, treatment from supervisors, and pay and other rewards they receive from the company (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001; Meyer et al., 2002).

Relationships at Work

Two strong predictors of our happiness at work and commitment to the company are our relationships with coworkers and managers. The people we interact with, their degree of compassion, our level of social acceptance in our work group, and whether we are treated with respect are all important factors surrounding our happiness at work. Research also shows that our relationship with our manager, how considerate the manager is, and whether we build a trust-based relationship with our manager are critically important to our job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Bauer et al., 2007; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004; Kinicki et al., 2002; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). When our manager and upper management listen to us, care about us, and value our opinions, we tend to feel good at work. Even small actions may show employees that the management cares about them. For example, Hotel Carlton in San Francisco was recently taken over by a new management group. One of the small things the new management did created dramatic results. In response to an employee attitude survey, they replaced the old vacuum cleaners housekeepers were using and established a policy of replacing them every year. This simple act of listening to employee problems and taking action went a long way to making employees feel that the management cares about them (Dvorak, 2007).

Stress

Not surprisingly, the amount of stress present in our job is related to our satisfaction and commitment. For example, experiencing role ambiguity (vagueness in relation to what our responsibilities are), role conflict (facing contradictory demands at work), and organizational politics, and worrying about the security of our job are all stressors that make people dissatisfied. On the other hand, not all stress is bad. Some stressors actually make us happier! For example, working under time pressure and having a high degree of responsibility are stressful, but they can also be perceived as challenges and tend to be related to high levels of satisfaction (Kinicki et al., 2002; Meyer et al., 2002; Miller, Rutherford, & Kolodinsky, 2008; Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007).

Work–Life Balance

In the 1950s, people's work was all-consuming. Employees went to work, worked long hours, and the rest of the family accepted that work came first. As society changed, the concept of always putting work first became outdated. In modern times, more employees expect to lead balanced lives, pursue hobbies, and spend more time with their children while at the same time continuing to succeed at work. The notion of work–family conflict is one cause of job dissatisfaction. This conflict can be particularly strong for women because of the time necessary for pregnancy and giving birth, but men struggle with it as well. When work life interferes with family life, we are more stressed and unhappy with our jobs. Research shows that policies that help employees achieve a balance between their work and personal lives, such as allowing telecommuting, are related to higher job satisfaction. For example, the medical resources group of the pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca International does not have fixed working hours, and employees can work any hours they choose. Motorola's technological acceleration group also has flexible hours and can work from anywhere (home, office, or a coffee shop) at anytime (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Shellenbarger, 2007).

Consequences of Positive Work Attitudes

Why do we care about the job satisfaction and organizational commitment of employees? What behaviors would you expect to see from someone who has more positive work attitudes?



Figure 4.2.3: Work attitudes are often good predictors of work behavior, such as performance, citizenship behaviors, absenteeism, and turnover. Pixabay.com – CC0 public domain.

If you say “higher performance,” you have stumbled upon one of the most controversial subjects in organizational behavior. Many studies have been devoted to understanding whether happy employees are more productive. Some studies show weak correlations between satisfaction and performance while others show higher correlations (what researchers would call “medium-sized” correlations of 0.30) (Iaffaldano & Muchinsky, 1985; Judge et al., 2001; Petty, McGee, & Cavender, 1984; Riketta, 2008). The correlation between commitment and performance tends to be even weaker (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Riketta, 2002; Wright & Bonnett, 2002). Even with a correlation of 0.30 though, the relationship may be lower than you may have expected. Why is this so?

It seems that happy workers have an inclination to be more engaged at work. They may *want* to perform better. They may be more motivated. But there are also exceptions. Think about this: Just because you want to perform, will you actually be a higher performer? Chances are that your skill level in performing the job will matter. There are also some jobs where performance depends on factors beyond an employee’s control, such as the pace of the machine they are working on. Because of this reason, in professional jobs such as engineering and research, we see a higher link between work attitudes and performance, as opposed to manual jobs such as assembly line work (Riketta, 2002). Also, think about the alternative possibility: If you don’t like your job, does this mean that you will reduce your performance? Maybe up to a certain point, but there will be factors that prevent you from reducing your performance: the fear of getting fired, the desire to get a promotion so that you can get out of the job that you dislike so much, or your professional work ethic. As a result, we should not expect a one-to-one relationship between satisfaction and performance. Still, the observed correlation between work attitudes and performance is important and has practical value.

Work attitudes are even more strongly related to organizational citizenship behaviors (behaviors that are not part of our job but are valuable to the organization, such as helping new employees or working voluntary overtime). Satisfied and committed people are absent less frequently and for shorter duration, are likely to stay with a company longer, and demonstrate less aggression at work. Just as important, people who are happy at work are happier with their lives overall. Given that we spend so much of our waking hours at work, it is no surprise that our satisfaction with our job is a big part of how satisfied we feel about life in general (Brush, Moch, & Pooyan, 1987; Carsten & Spector, 1987; Cohen, 1991; Cohen, 1993; Cohen & Hudecek, 1993; Fassina, Jones, & Uggersley, 2008; Hackett, 1989; Herschcovis et al., 2007; Kinicki et al., 2002; LePine, Erez, & Johnson, 2002; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer et al., 2002; Organ & Ryan, 1995; Randall, 1990; Scott & Taylor, 1985; Tait, Padgett, & Baldwin, 1989; Tett & Meyer, 1993; Zimmerman, 2008). Finally, a satisfied workforce seems to be related to positive firm-level outcomes, such as customer satisfaction and loyalty, profitability, and safety in the workplace (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002).

Assessing Work Attitudes in the Workplace

Given that work attitudes may give us clues as to who will leave or stay, who will perform better, and who will be more engaged, tracking satisfaction and commitment levels is a helpful step for companies. If there are companywide issues that make employees unhappy and disengaged, then these issues need to be resolved. There are at least two systematic ways in which companies can track work attitudes: through attitude surveys and exit interviews. Companies such as KFC Corporation and Long John Silver’s Inc. restaurants, the SAS Institute, Google, and others give periodic surveys to employees to track their work attitudes. Companies can get more out of these surveys if responses are held confidential. If employees become concerned that their individual responses will be shared with their immediate manager, they are less likely to respond honestly. Moreover, the success of these surveys depends on the credibility of management in the eyes of employees. If management periodically collects these surveys but no action comes out of them, employees may adopt a more cynical attitude and start ignoring these surveys, hampering the success of future efforts.

An exit interview involves a meeting with the departing employee. This meeting is often conducted by a member of the human resource management department. The departing employee's manager is the worst person to conduct the interview, because managers are often one of the primary reasons an employee is leaving in the first place. If conducted well, this meeting may reveal what makes employees dissatisfied at work and give management clues about areas for improvement.

Key Takeaways

Work attitudes are the feelings we have toward different aspects of the work environment. Job satisfaction and organizational commitment are two key attitudes that are the most relevant to important outcomes. Attitudes create an intention to behave in a certain way and may predict actual behavior under certain conditions. People develop positive work attitudes as a result of their personality, fit with their environment, stress levels they experience, relationships they develop, perceived fairness of their pay, company policies, interpersonal treatment, whether their psychological contract is violated, and the presence of policies addressing work–life conflict. When people have more positive work attitudes, they may have the inclination to perform better, display citizenship behaviors, and be absent less often and for shorter periods of time, and they are less likely to quit their jobs within a short period of time. When workplace attitudes are more positive, companies benefit in the form of higher safety and better customer service, as well as higher company performance.

Exercises

1. What is the difference between job satisfaction and organizational commitment? Which do you think would be more strongly related to performance? Which would be more strongly related to turnover?
2. Do you think making employees happier at work is a good way of motivating people? When would high satisfaction not be related to high performance?
3. In your opinion, what are the three most important factors that make people dissatisfied with their job? What are the three most important factors relating to organizational commitment?
4. How important is pay in making people attached to a company and making employees satisfied?
5. Do you think younger and older people are similar in what makes them happier at work and committed to their companies? Do you think there are male–female differences? Explain your answers.

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