

# The Modern American Worker

## Evaluating satisfaction in an evolving workplace

By Chase Harrison and Kenneth Dautrich

The nature of work in America is changing. The shift to a service-oriented economy, the proliferation of global markets, and increased productivity demands are among the major factors influencing the modern American workplace. A better understanding of the impact of these changes on the workforce is critical for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is their relative impact on employee motivation.

The extent to which employees like their jobs is an important consideration in understanding work habits and an individual's work ethic. Early research on this topic in the 1930s and '40s argued that job satisfaction is critical in assessing the behavior of the workforce.<sup>1</sup> While a portion of the more recent research questions the impact of job satisfaction on productivity, the larger body of available data suggests satisfaction influences employee commitment, turnover, and absenteeism.<sup>2</sup> Job satisfaction remains one of the central tenets of organizational theory, and many claim it is fundamental to understanding workforce dynamics. Even those who claim job satisfaction does not have a direct impact on productivity recognize the potential indirect effects of satisfaction on productivity measures.

This analysis of job satisfaction is based on the "Work Trends: Americans' Attitudes About Work, Employers and Government" project, which includes quarterly surveys conducted by the University of Connecticut's Center for Survey Research and Analysis (CSRA) and the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University. Data evaluated come from two waves of the project conducted in August 1998 and February 1999 with approximately 1,000 randomly selected adult members of the American workforce.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, American workers report very high levels of satisfaction with their current jobs. In February 1999 nearly nine in ten (89%) of workers surveyed reported they were satisfied with their jobs, including more than half who said they were very satisfied (55%). In contrast, only eight percent said they were dissatisfied (see Figure 1).

These findings of high job satisfaction are not new. The General Social Survey conducted by NORC has been measuring overall job satisfaction in the United States since 1972. The percentage of workers satisfied with their jobs typically has ranged between 80% and 85%, with the average percent "very" satisfied between 45% and 50%. The February 1999 CSRA survey does show satisfaction levels slightly higher than the

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1998 GSS results, but this is not surprising, given current unemployment rates and the high level of public confidence in the nation's economy.

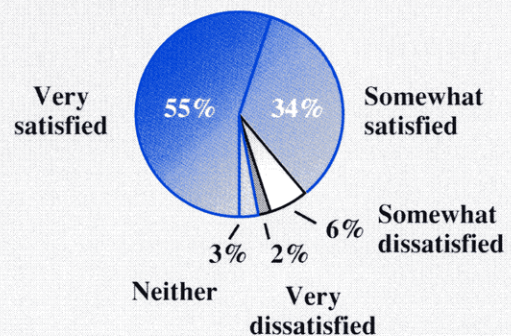
The American workforce is not monolithic. Many different kinds of jobs exist, and the demographic characteristics of the workforce are diverse. Workers differ based on demographic characteristics, structural factors associated with their places of employment, and in qualitative factors related to their jobs.

In terms of overall job satisfaction, 55% of men and women in the February CSRA survey reported being very satisfied with their jobs. Older cohorts tended to report heightened satisfaction in comparison with younger workers. Results pooled from the August and February surveys indicate that workers 30 to 49 years of age (57%), 50 to 64 (58%), and 65 and older (61%) were all more often very satisfied with their jobs than workers between 18 and 29 years old (48%).<sup>4</sup> Given notable differences in other characteristics between these groups, including income level, for instance, this effect was not determined solely by age.

While broad levels of educational attainment did not lead to differences in satisfaction, examining the data by race finds slightly more white workers (56%) very satisfied with their jobs than non-white workers (50%). And, not surprisingly, higher income workers expressed higher levels of satisfaction with their jobs (those earning over \$40K, 59%) than lower income workers (under \$40K, 47%).

Figure 1

**Question:** ...Please tell me whether you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with... your job overall?



**Source:** Survey by CSRA at the University of Connecticut and the Heldrich Center at Rutgers, February 5-22, 1999.

Further, self-employed workers were more likely to report being very satisfied with their jobs (68%) than people who work for others (private sector, 52%; public, 54%; nonprofit, 56%). Although these findings are consistent across both waves, because of the relatively small sample of those self-employed in each survey, the results are only statistically significant when the data are pooled.

The degree to which each element of a job contributes to overall job satisfaction should be, in part, a function of the relative importance workers place on that attribute. The August 1998 “Work Trends” survey took 16 separate job-related factors and asked respondents to report how important each item was to them and then how satisfied they were with each of these aspects of their jobs.

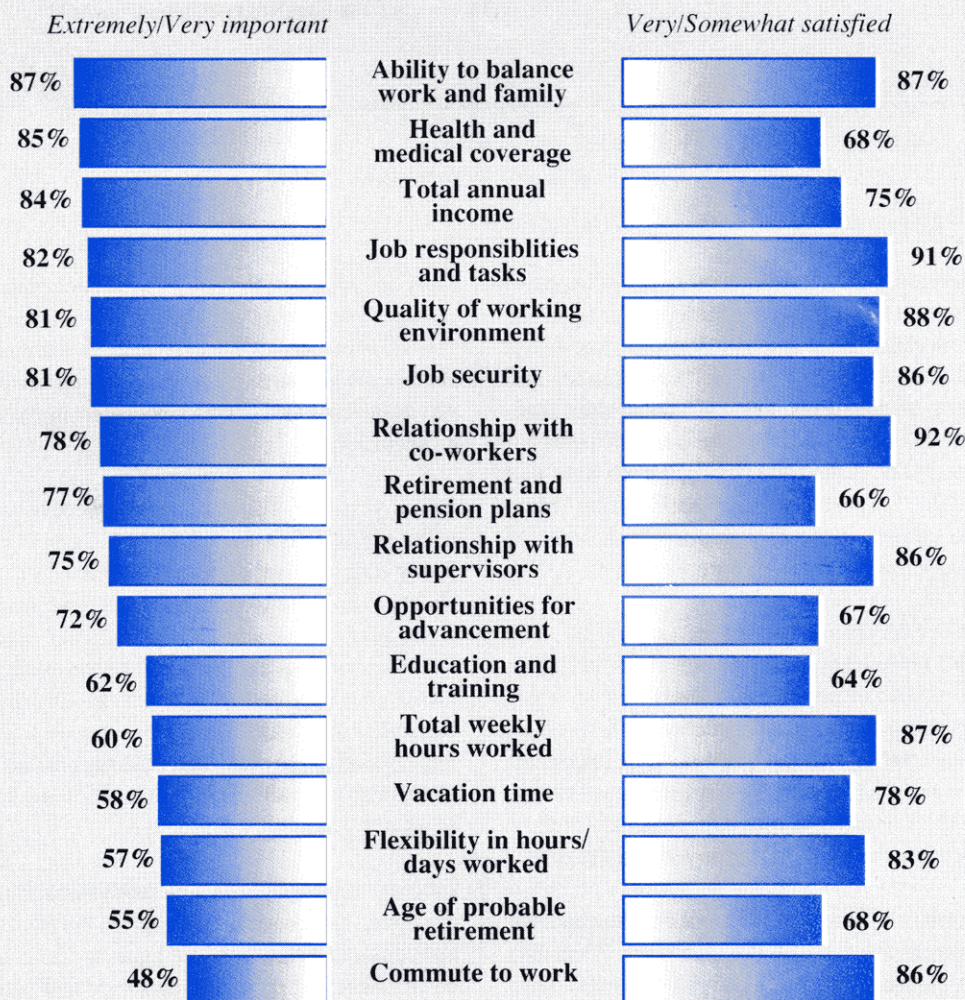
The ratings of the individual attributes, as shown in Figure 2, provide a picture both of the relative importance of different aspects of work, and the relative satisfaction of the workforce with each.

Generally, a majority of those interviewed reported being satisfied with most aspects of their jobs. However, respondents showed greater satisfaction with factors directly related to their daily work environment, in contrast to evaluations of traditional employer-provided benefits such as income and medical coverage.

Another way of analyzing these attributes is to examine the relationship between relative importance and relative satisfaction on a two-dimensional scale. This technique—one of a family of perceptual mapping techniques—displays the large

Figure 2

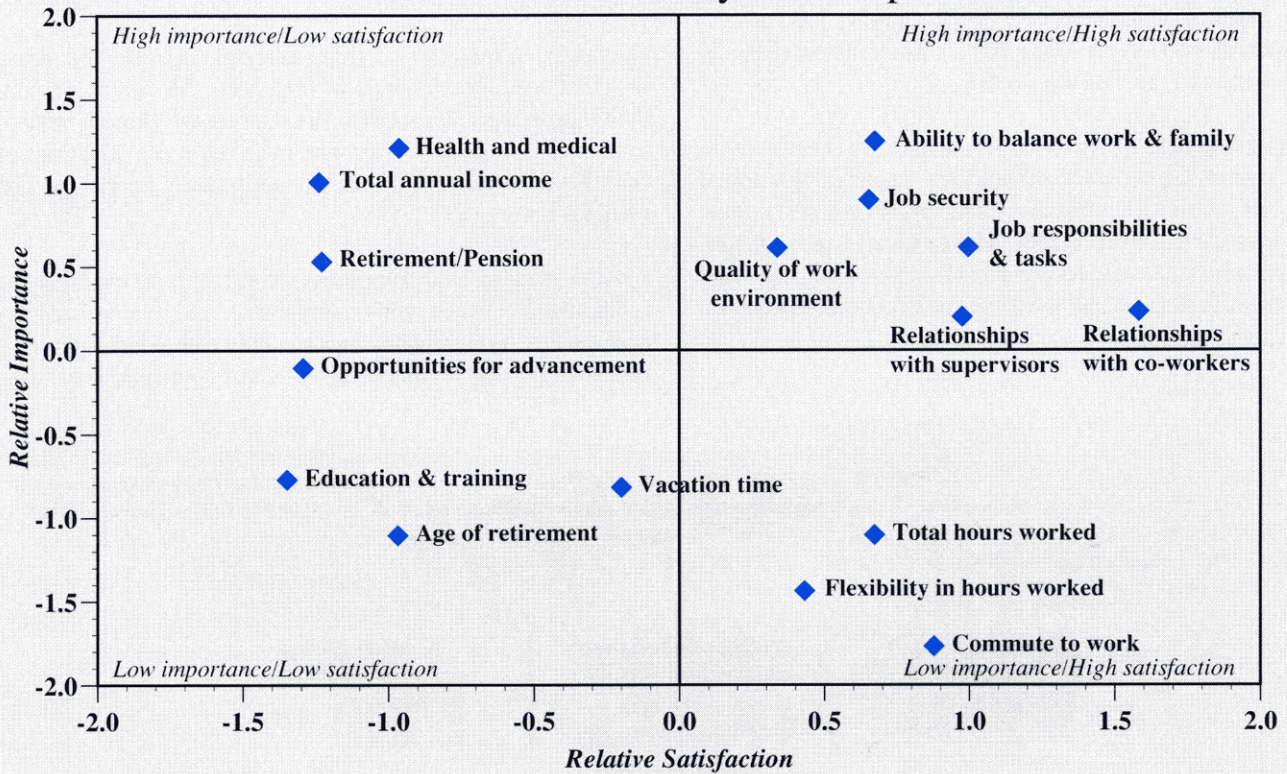
**Questions:** I am going to read you a list of things that might describe a job. Please tell me how important each of these is to you. Is it extremely important, very important, somewhat important, not very important or not important at all?... I'd like to find out how satisfied you are with different aspects of your job. For each, please tell me whether you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with it. How satisfied are you with...?



Source: Survey by CSRA at the University of Connecticut and the Heldrich Center at Rutgers, August 5-16, 1998.

Figure 3

## Employees Satisfied With Many Work Conditions They Find Important



Source: Survey by CSRA at the University of Connecticut, and Heldrich Center at Rutgers, August 5-16, 1998.

amount of data contained in this 16-item battery in a simple and visually intuitive manner. To produce a perceptual map of the relationship between importance and satisfaction we took the mean score for each attribute for both the “importance” and “satisfaction” battery of questions, and then separately standardized each item and compared it to the *overall* mean for each of the batteries.<sup>5</sup> The difference between each item and the overall mean of the “importance” and “satisfaction” measures produces two values for each attribute which serve as coordinates on a two-dimensional axis (see Figure 3).

The resulting map can be divided into four quadrants. The upper-right quadrant represents attributes which yield higher than average levels of both importance and satisfaction, while the lower left quadrant represents items which yield lower than average levels of importance and satisfaction. The upper-left quadrant represents items which rate high importance but low satisfaction, while the lower-right quadrant represents items rating low in importance but high in employee satisfaction.

Workplace characteristics falling in the upper-right quadrant can be taken as a simple display of where the workplace, as a whole, is achieving the most success. The principal attributes located here relate to many of the qualitative aspects of working. The quality of the working environment, job respon-

sibilities, and relationships with supervisors and co-workers all represent day-to-day interactions either with fellow workers or with the tasks and responsibilities of work itself.<sup>6</sup> American workers place high importance on their working environment, and employers seemingly are meeting these expectations.

Employers are also achieving success with workplace attributes that affect an employee’s daily life. As seen in Figure 2, the single most important job attribute measured was the ability to balance work and family, and it is found in the upper-right quadrant of the perceptual map, among the needs the modern workplace is meeting. Other attributes which relate to the balance between work and daily life are total hours worked, flexibility in schedule, and the commute to work. These appear in the lower-right quadrant, thus suggesting that while workers place less overall importance on these attributes, they are relatively satisfied with them.

Income, health benefits, and retirement plans fall squarely into the upper-left quadrant. These are the traditional and essential enticements employers are expected to offer in exchange for labor. Here, workers are relatively less satisfied in areas they consider important.

Education and training and advancement opportunities appear in the lower-left quadrant. Vacation time and the age of likely retirement, which appear in the same quadrant, bear more on the relationship between work and life. While they are relatively less important to those interviewed than many other features of their jobs, workers are relatively less satisfied with them as well.

**T**hese data indicate that as the nature of work and characteristics of the US workforce are changing, workers themselves continue to express high levels of satisfaction with their jobs. When asked to compare their jobs to what they would consider the "ideal" job, many say their current positions already come close.

Our reading of these findings generally is that the American workforce is not only adapting to the changing work environment but is actually welcoming such changes with optimism. In an environment where lengthened workdays are routine, this research suggests that the modern American worker is not, on the whole, feeling unduly burdened. Workers place great importance on the ability to balance work and family and are largely satisfied with their jobs in this respect.

American workers also place importance on traditional methods of compensation. In these areas, the disparity between worker-valued importance and satisfaction is striking. While a gap between importance and satisfaction on income may not be surprising, health care coverage and pensions also produce large disparities. This is especially significant because health care and retirement are core components of the fundamental safety net which has long been an integral part of the workplace, and comprise in part the core compact of the American labor market.

Notably, pensions and health care also represent two areas which are likely targets of government policy. Currently, both Social Security and health care reform are being used in framing political agendas and campaigns for the 2000 elections. The data here suggest that attention to these issues is a response to genuine concerns of the American workforce. Of course, nothing here suggests that workers look to the government to improve their overall health and pension benefits. But if employers and policy makers wish to increase satisfaction in the areas workers think are most important, the clear answer is in health care and retirement benefits. ●

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>E. Mayo, *The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (Boston: Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, 1945); F. Roethlisberger and W. Dickson, *Management and the Worker* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939).

<sup>2</sup>M.T. Iaffaldano and P.M. Muchinsky, "Job Satisfaction and Job Performance: A Meta Analysis," *Psychological Bulletin* 1985, pp. 251-73; P.P. Brooke and J.L. Price, "The Determinants of Employee

Absenteeism: An Empirical Test of a Causal Model," *Journal of Occupational Psychology* 1989, Vol. 62, pp. 1-19; C.E. Michaels and P.E. Spector, "Causes of Employee Turnover: A Test of the Mobley, Griffith, Hand and Meglino Model," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 1982, Vol. 67, pp. 53-59; C.W. Mueller and J.L. Price, "Economic, Psychological and Sociological Determinants of Voluntary Turnover," *Journal of Behavioral Economics* 1990, Vol. 19, pp. 321-35; R.M. Steers and S.R. Rhodes, "Major Influences on Employee Attendance: A Process Model," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 1978, Vol. 63, pp. 391-407.

<sup>3</sup>Although the Work Trends surveys interview both employed and unemployed individuals who are actively looking for work, this analysis includes only the employed workers.

<sup>4</sup>We use pooled results because the overall stability of job satisfaction, combined with the relatively short time period between our surveys, suggest that temporal changes in job satisfaction should be extremely small or nonexistent.

<sup>5</sup>The survey questions produced five-point scales which were treated as interval measures for this analysis.

<sup>6</sup>Although job security may seem a puzzling companion to these other factors, the principal components analysis suggests that job security partially measures an underlying component of workplace satisfaction.