

Happiness study finds close link between job and satisfaction with life

Many of us spend more than half our lives in the office, so it is little wonder that what we do during working hours has an impact on how satisfied we feel with life. But not only the type of job we do and the position we hold, but even things like the size of our organisation may have an influence.

Beaton Consulting, Australia's leading consultants to the professions, in collaboration with numerous professional associations, conducted the first study into approaches to happiness among business people in Australia.

Whilst much has been publicised about how unhappy lawyers are, much less is known about other professions. The happiness study sought to quantify the claims about lawyers and reference approaches to happiness and general life satisfaction among other professionals and the business community generally.

Mining industry workers less happy than lawyers

Among the professions, the legal and patent and trademark attorney professions are indeed found to have the smallest proportion of 'happy' workers (15% have a higher level of life satisfaction than the mean, while 24% have a lower level) (Chart 1).

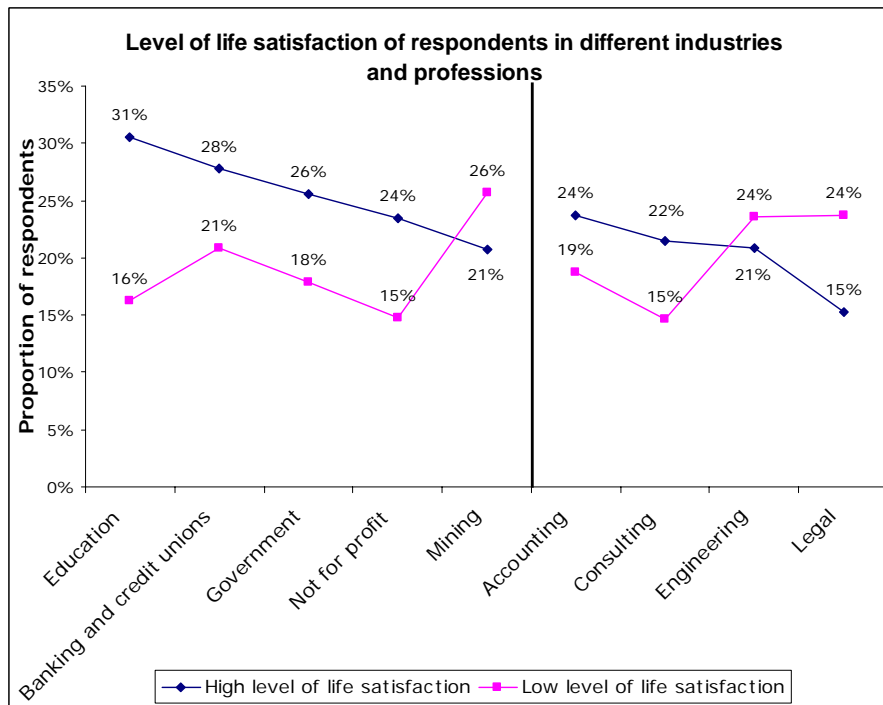


Chart 1. Level of life satisfaction of respondents in different industries and professions

However those in the mining industry have the highest proportion of comparatively unsatisfied workers of all industries and professions (26% have a lower level of life satisfaction than the mean).

In law firms, articled clerks happiest, senior associates least happy

Almost a third of those starting out on their legal career – articled clerks – have a higher level of life satisfaction than the mean (Chart 2). This proportion decreases for lawyers struggling towards partnership status – only 13% of senior associates have a higher level of life satisfaction. But it's not smooth sailing for those who have made it to partner – while the proportion of people who are highly satisfied jumps to 17% (from 13%), the proportion of people with a lower level of life satisfaction only drops 2% (from 30% to 28%).

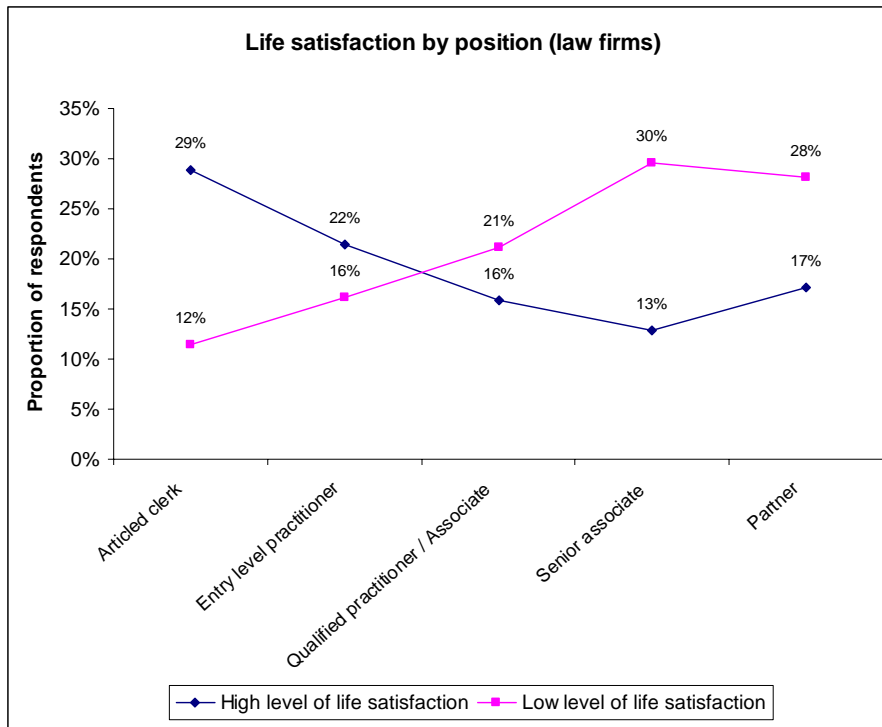


Chart 2: Proportion of respondents in law firms who have higher and lower levels of life satisfaction than the mean

In business, more senior people happier

In non-professional industries, satisfaction tends to increase with greater seniority – 27% of CEOs have a higher level of life satisfaction than the mean, compared with 21% of those working in administration (Chart 3).

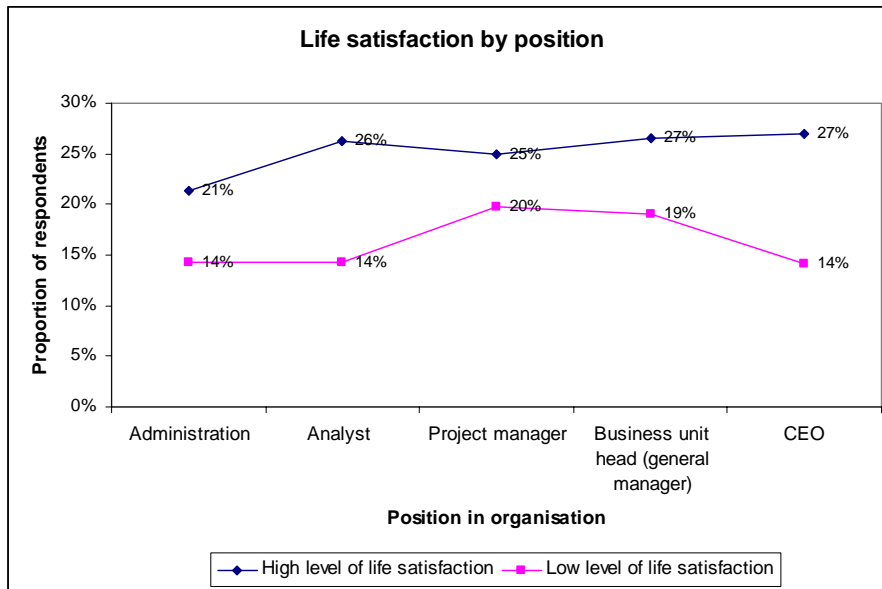


Chart 3: Proportion of respondents in business holding certain positions who have a lower and higher level of life satisfaction

Size of organisation makes a difference to life satisfaction

How satisfied or not workers are may have something to do with the size of organisation they work for. Around a quarter (24%) of respondents in small organisations (fewer than 20 people) have a higher level of life satisfaction than the mean, but this drops away to around 20% in organisations with between 20 and 5000 employees (Chart 4). But once organisations reach a certain size, satisfaction rises again – 27% of those in large national or multinational organisations (5000 or more employees) have a higher level of life satisfaction.

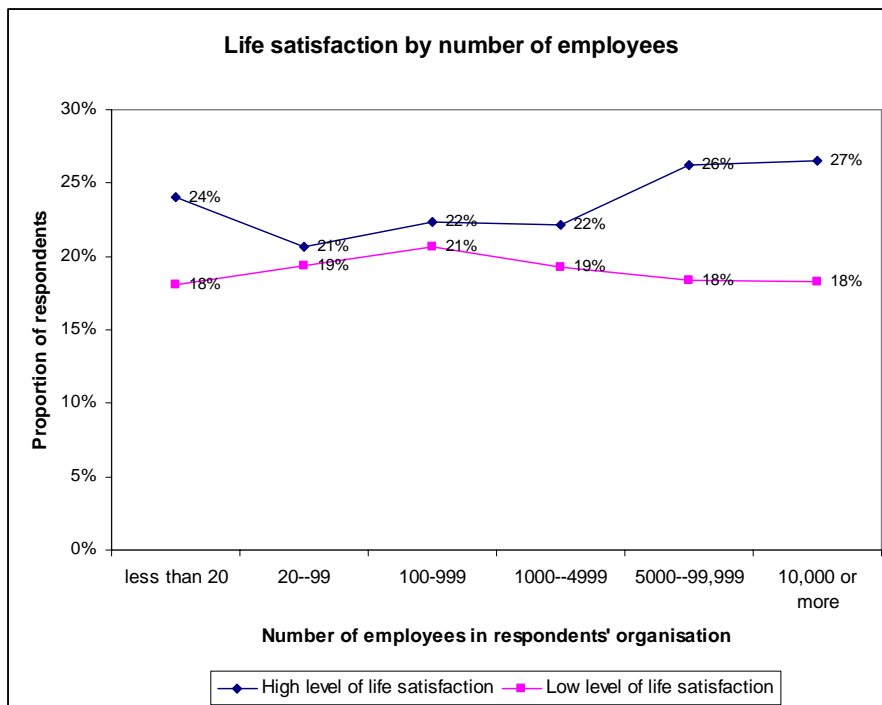


Chart 4: Life satisfaction by number of employees in the respondent's organisation

Over 65s still in business most satisfied with life

Working beyond traditional retirement age is associated with being highly satisfied with life – the age group with the largest proportion of business people with a higher level of life satisfaction than the mean is the over 65s (29% have a higher level of life satisfaction, while only 15% have a lower level) (Chart 5). Those in their early 20s and early 40s experience a peak in life satisfaction, though a slump follows in the late 20s and late 40s.

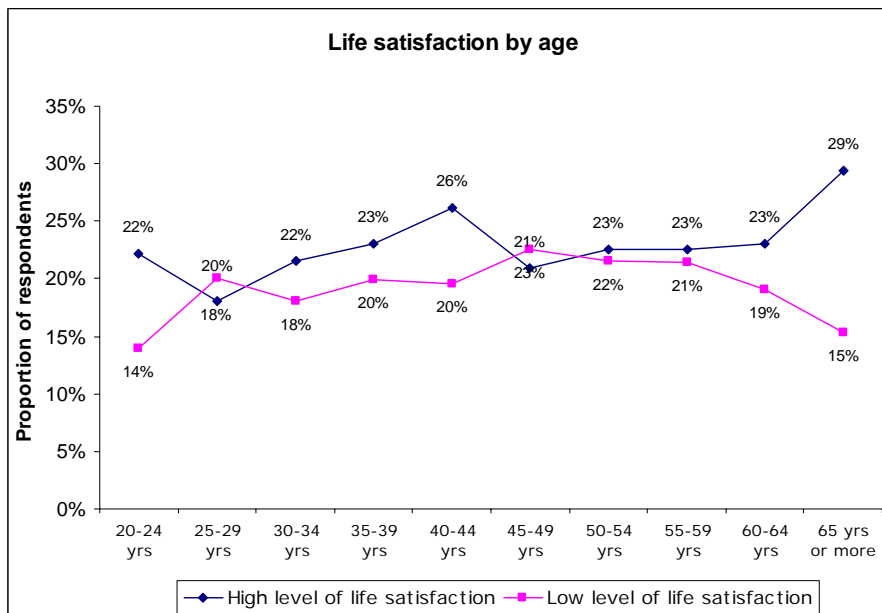


Chart 5: Life satisfaction in different age groups of business people

Older people, government and NGO workers approach happiness through meaning

Martin Seligman and colleagues have pioneered the understanding of happiness, approaches to happiness and its links with life satisfaction.¹ These approaches are:

- Pleasure, a hedonistic concept encapsulated in “don’t worry, be happy”.
- Engagement, the psychological state in which attention is focused on an activity, the sense of self is lost, time passes quickly and the aftermath of the experience is invigorating.
- Meaning, living in accordance with one’s values, striving to develop and apply those things at which one is best for the welfare of others, encapsulated in “be all that you can be” and “make a difference”.

The happiness study researched the prevalence of each of the approaches among professionals and the business community. Those with simultaneously high scores on all three approaches are significantly more likely to state that they are highly satisfied with life.

Overall, business people tend to approach happiness through meaning, followed by engagement and then pleasure. However, in relative terms, people in different positions and stages of life have different dominant approaches to happiness (Table 1).

Table 1: Dominant approaches to happiness examined by demographic segments

Main activity of the organisation you work for?	Dominant approach to happiness
Education	Meaning / engagement
Banking and credit unions	Equal
Government	Meaning
Not for profit	Meaning
Mining	Engagement / Pleasure
Accounting	Equal
Consulting	Engagement / Meaning
Engineering	Meaning / Engagement
Legal	Meaning / Pleasure
What is your current position?	Dominant approach to happiness
Administration	Pleasure
Analyst	Equal
Project manager	Equal

¹ Orientations to happiness and life satisfaction: The full life versus the empty life” – Journal of Happiness Studies. 2005, C. Peterson, N. Park and M. Seligman

Business unit head (general manager)	Engagement
CEO	Engagement / Meaning
What is your current position? (lawyers)	Dominant approach to happiness
Articled clerk	Pleasure
Entry level practitioner	Pleasure
Qualified practitioner / Associate	Pleasure
Senior associate	Equal
Partner	Engagement
Gender	Dominant approach to happiness
Female	Pleasure
Male	Equal
Age	Dominant approach to happiness
20-29 yrs	Pleasure
30-39 yrs	Pleasure
40-49 yrs	Equal
50-59 yrs	Engagement / Meaning
60 yrs or more	Engagement / Meaning

The happiness study formed part of the 2006 Annual Professions Study. The assistance of Professor Martin Seligman and Chris Peterson of the University of Pennsylvania is most gratefully acknowledged. Those seeking more information on the measures used in the survey can visit www.authentic happiness.com.

Written by Maia Gould, Beaton Consulting

About Beaton Consulting

Beaton Consulting is a leading firm of management consultants committed to helping professional service firms improve their performance and profitability. Their expertise is applied in three inter-related practice areas:

- [Market-led strategy](#) to drive business profitability
- [Leadership and change](#) to help organisations compete through their people
- [Research and benchmarks](#) to provide the empirical evidence that guides decision-making on firm growth and development.

For more information on the happiness study or the Annual Professions Study in general, please contact Maia Gould at Beaton Consulting on (03) 9829 0000 or maia.gould@beaton.com.au