



If you want to stand out in a crowd, experts say you must be responsible for your own career too, and take action to improve in areas that you are weak in.  
ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

# How to be happier at work

Staff can brush up on techniques to cope better or plan road map to leaving job, while employers can offer more autonomy and ensure fairness in dealing with resources

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There are generally three types of unhappy people at work, says life coach Eugene Seah.

You have the ones who are temporarily unhappy due to issues with, say, their colleagues or boss; those who are deeply unhappy because they would rather leave their job and do something more meaningful; and finally those unhappy souls who are just walking in circles, unsure of what they want.

If any of those describes you, you are not alone.

A survey report by data collection platform Qualtrics that was released in January last year said just 49 per cent of Singapore respondents were satisfied with their current job, below the reported global

average of 62 per cent of employees.

Coaches and psychologists agree that happiness at work is important since people spend so much time there.

Singapore Management University associate professor of psychology William Tov notes that while it may not be necessary to be “cheerful” at work, it is important for employees to be satisfied, and feel positive and engaged with their job.

“People who are satisfied with their jobs tend to perform better... Employees who feel positive emotions at work are not only less likely to engage in negative behaviour, they are also more likely to help other colleagues and perform tasks that go beyond their basic job description,” he adds.

Dr Victor Seah, senior lecturer in psychology at the Singapore University of Social Sciences, says un-

happiness at work is related to job stress, decreased mental health and lower levels of life satisfaction.

It also affects family life, he adds. Mothers who are unhappy and stressed at work tend to show less warmth and acceptance towards their children, while workplace unhappiness is also associated with fathers being more inclined to punishing behaviours.

Unhappiness can arise from a myriad of sources, such as feeling disrespected or unfairly treated, not feeling safe when providing feedback, feeling overqualified, being unable to fit in with the organisation’s culture, or being in conflict with or even bullied by a colleague or superior.

#### ROLE OF STAFF

Mr Seah says people who are temporarily unhappy can brush up on people management skills, emo-

tional mastery, time management techniques and stress management to better cope with the pressures they are facing.

Those who are deeply unhappy can plan a road map to leaving their job. This should include monetary considerations and picking up critical skills.

Those who are unsure why they are dissatisfied at work can focus on other aspects of life rather than their career. For example, they can find joy in spending time with their family or volunteering instead, says Mr Seah.

Workplace psychologist Christopher Fong, who heads psychology studies at Aventis School of Management, recommends seizing any opportunity to learn new skills and harness a growth mindset.

Other simple tips include smiling more, decorating your work space and making friends at work.

You can also seek career guidance or talk to your boss about progression or training opportunities.

Dr Seah says one survey of victims of workplace bullying found that the top recommendation the victims gave was to leave the organisation.

This was ahead of more active constructive strategies such as seeking support, defending oneself and engaging in clarification talks.

Victims of bullying should try re-evaluating the situation, ignoring instances of bullying and avoiding interactions with the bully, says Dr Seah. Transferring to another job or quitting should be seen as a possible last option, he adds.

#### ROLE OF EMPLOYERS

Employers can also increase their employees’ happiness by giving them more autonomy and control, experts say.

They add that employers should also ensure that there is justice and fairness in dealing with resources, information and how procedures are applied.

The Qualtrics survey report found that, surprisingly, salary was not the biggest driver of job satisfaction among workers here.

Instead, the main triggers are confidence in the company’s senior leadership team, a helpful manager in resolving work-related issues and getting sufficient training to perform the job effectively.

Dr Seah suggests aligning perfor-

mance appraisal and bonuses with happiness-related outcomes.

For example, management bonuses can be pegged to a reduction in voluntary turnover.

Prof Tov notes that feeling happy or unhappy has different consequences for the workplace.

“Trying to make sure that employees are not unhappy is important, but so is finding ways to enhance their ability to feel good at work,” he says.

A new tripartite advisory on mental well-being at workplaces issued earlier this month encourages employers to – among other things – provide access to counselling services, possibly through Employee Assistance Programmes, to allow staff to speak to a professional about challenges they face at work and elsewhere.

This is how Dr Fong helped an assistant human resources (HR) manager in the hotel industry.

The man was unhappy as he believed he should be up for a promotion to HR manager, after the hard work he had put in for four years.

He often asked if he would be promoted soon and planned to resign if the organisation offered him no advancement opportunities.

His bosses told him to craft a personal development plan towards becoming a manager and assigned him Dr Fong as counsellor.

“Many times, he became unhappy, frustrated and wanted to quit, but aligning him back to his vision of wanting to be a manager gave him a strong purpose to carry on,” says Dr Fong.

Working on a personal development plan also provided a structured framework for him to account for his own learning and career development and take responsibility in areas that needed improvement, adds Dr Fong.

After six months, the man impressed his bosses and won the promotion.

While happiness at work is important, Dr Fong notes that setting happiness as the primary goal might lead people to feel the opposite.

“Why? Happiness, like all emotions, is a fleeting state, never a permanent one. Hence, finding purpose and meaning to your work is the best solution,” he says.

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