

HAPPINESS AND WELL-BEING ON A GLOBAL SCALE: IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS EDUCATION



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Abstract

This article presents information about happiness and well-being and their implications on business education. Focus is placed upon the workplace, social connections, blue zones, and well-being.

Introduction

In the past decade with the rise of positive psychology, the topic of happiness has become mainstream. Articles in the popular press have focused upon various aspects of happiness; in fact, Rubin's (2011) recent book *The Happiness Project* has been a best-seller. The most popular course at Harvard has been one taught by a happiness researcher and author (PBS, 2012). Friday, August 13, 2012, was designated Pursuit of Happiness Day in the United States of America (GNHUSA, n.d.c). Further, a recent conference held in Seattle in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States of America in August 2012 focused on happiness (GNHUSA, n.d.a.). Happiness has become a serious topic among academics from psychologists to economists to health scientists to business management professors.

Indices for measuring happiness have been developed. Two major indices, the Gross National Happiness and the Better Life Index, have garnered much press.

The purposes of this article are (a) to report research findings about happiness, (b) to acquaint readers with measures of happiness including the index for Gross National Happiness (GNH) and the Better Life Index (BLI), and (c) to present implications for business education.

Literature Review

The review of the literature presents information about research pertaining to happiness, which is also sometimes called well-being, and is organized by the following themes: (a) happiness in the workplace, (b) happiness and the role of social connections, (c) happiness in the Blue Zones, and (d) factors that contribute to well-being.

Happiness in the Workplace

Many people, especially in the United States of America, defer happiness until certain events occur. Examples include the following statements: “I’ll be happy when I graduate;” “I’ll be happy when I earn a certain income;” and “I’ll be happy when I retire.” Happiness experts, including Achor (2012), emphasize the fallacy of this type of thinking. Rather than success leading to happiness, being happy in itself engenders success. Positive emotion has been shown to increase workplace success (Achor, 2012). As a result, the study of happiness and well-being is critical for managing one’s self and one’s career.

Working with tax managers at KPMG, Achor (2012) asked the workers in the experimental group to perform one of five activities that are associated with positive change: exercising for ten minutes, meditating for two minutes at their desks, writing down three things for which they are grateful, sending a supportive message to a person in their social network, or devoting two minutes to journaling about their most meaningful experience from the past day. Experimental group members raised their scores after 21 days of practicing one of the five activities daily, while control group members did not practice any of the five activities daily. Further, after four months of engaging daily in one of the five activities, scores on the life satisfaction scale raised from 22.96 (out of 35 possible points) to 27.23 for the experimental group. Achor (2012) concluded that “happiness had become habitual” (n.p.).

Happiness and Social Connections

What are the commonalities, if any, among the top 10% of happiest people in the world? The one commonality is meaningful social connections (PBS, 2012). In fact, the correlation between happiness and how deeply one feels connected with others is .7 (PBS, 2012). As a result of this research finding, Achor suggested that people reconnect with their social support networks. Happier people experience 31% higher levels of energy and have creativity levels 300% higher than those who are not happy (PBS, 2012).

Happiness in the Blue Zones

Researchers, including Buettner (2008), have studied blue zones, geographical areas around the world where longevity is notable. Among the blue zone locations are Loma Linda, California; Nicoya Peninsula, Costa Rica; Okinawa, Japan; and Sardinia, Italy. Studying the lives of those living in the blue zones has yielded strategies that may be

emulated by those living outside of the blue zones to expand not only the length of their lives but also the quality of their lives. Wang (2012) reported that most people grow happier as they become more chronologically enhanced. “People who sustained a higher ratio of positive to negative feelings as they aged were more likely to live longer” (p. D2).

Factors that Contribute to Well-Being

In his continuing work involving blue zones and thriving, Buettner (2010) provided guidelines for increasing well-being and happiness by focusing on elements of community, the workplace, one’s social life, one’s financial life, one’s home, and the self. Interestingly, Buettner (2010) recommended joining the teaching profession since “teachers score higher on most aspects of well-being than people in nonteaching jobs . . . They view their lives more positively, express more optimism, and report a healthier life” (p. 223).

Seligman (2011) preferred the term well-being rather than the term happiness and asserted that well-being is based upon five elements: positive emotion, engagement, meaning, accomplishment, and positive relationships. An advocate of teaching well-being in schools, Seligman (2011) argued that,

All young people need to learn workplace skills, which has been the subject matter of the education system in place for two hundred years. In addition, we [instructors] can now teach the skills of well-being—of how to have more positive emotions, more meaning, better relationships, and more positive accomplishments. Schools at every level should teach these skills (p. 63).

A recent policy statement, developed by the Policies Commission for Business and Economic Education (PCBEE), focused upon civility in educational environments (PCBEE, 2012). The statement posited that “civility, defined as courtesy and politeness, is critical in all settings, whether educational, business, personal, or social. Lack of civility disrupts the learning environment as well as negatively impacts workplace, social, and personal interactions” (p. 1). The PCBEE as well as Seligman believe in the importance of encouraging civility, which engenders positive emotions.

This section has presented the results of recent research about happiness and discussed the link between happiness and career and life satisfaction. The next section will present information about two prominent happiness indices, the Gross National Happiness and The Better Life Index.

Indices of Happiness

While there are several happiness indices, the GNH and the BLI are among the two most frequently mentioned in the literature.

Gross National Happiness

In the past decade researchers such as Achor (2012) and Buettner (2008, 2010) have attempted to quantify the happiness levels of nations as a measurement that yields vital information about citizens globally. In fact, even the government of Bhutan gathers data that contributes toward calculating Gross National Happiness. Begun in 2008, Gross National Happiness is currently measured by these nine dimensions: (a) community vitality, (b) culture, (c) education, (d) environment, (e) governance, (f) health, (g) psychological well-being, (h) standard of living, and (i) use of time (9 Dimensions of GNH, n.d.b.). The GNH Index was devised using the Alkire-Foster method, a robust multidimensional methodology, and the 33 indicators contained in the nine dimensions are statistically reliable and “normatively important” (Centre for Bhutan Studies, n.d., n.p.). Further, Each of the nine dimensions of the GNH (GNHUSA, n.d.b.) is reported in Table 1 with respective indicators.

<i>Gross National Happiness Dimensions and Their Indicators</i>	
Dimension	Indicator
Community vitality	Level of confidence; sense of belonging; safety in the community and at home; volunteering and giving; vitality of affectionate relationships
Culture	Core values; local traditions; festivals; participation in cultural events; options to develop artistic skills; gender, race, or religious discrimination
Education	Informal and formal education; skills development; skills capabilities; values education; environmental education; participation in childhood education
Environment	Access to green space; waste management systems; perceptions of air quality, water quality, soil quality; biodiversity; forest cover
Governance	Views of the honesty, responsibility, and transparency of the media, the electoral system, the government, the judiciary, and the police; involvement of citizens in political processes and community
Health	Health policy effectiveness in terms of Disability; patterns of risk behavior; self-rated health; nutrition; exercise; sleep
Psychological well-being	Sense of competence; stress; spiritual activities; self-esteem; and the presence of negative and positive emotions
Standard of living	Family and individual income; debt level; financial security; employment security; housing quality
Use of time	Balanced time management, including time at work, in traffic jams, and in educational activities

Table 1

Source: GNHUSA, n.d.b

Recognition of the importance of the role of happiness was recently emphasized by Chairman Bernanke of the Federal Reserve when he suggested that new measures may need to be developed to measure happiness (Tseng, 2012). But how should happiness be assessed?

The Better Life Index

Calculated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Better Life Index (BLI) is based upon 11 dimensions: (a) civic engagement, (b) community, (c) education, (d) environment, (e) health, (f) housing, (g) income, (h) jobs, (i) life satisfaction, (j) safety, and (k) work-life balance. Each of the 11 dimensions of the BLI is reported in Table 2 with respective indicators. The indicators that comprise the BLI were selected because of face validity and predictive validity, among other factors, in collaboration with countries that are OECM members (OECD, n.d.m). The BLI was developed “to support policy making to improve the quality of life” (OECD, n.d.a, n.p.).

<i>Better Life Index Dimensions and Their Indicators</i>	
Dimension	Indicator
Civic engagement	Voter turnout; consultation on rule making ^a
Community	Quality of support network ^b
Education	Educational attainment; student skills; years in education ^c
Environment	Air pollution; water quality ^d
Health	Life expectancy; self-reported health ^e
Housing	Dwellings with basic facilities; housing expenditures; rooms per person ^f
Income	Household financial wealth; household net adjusted disposable income ^g
Jobs	Dwellings with basic facilities; housing expenditures; rooms per person ^h
Life satisfaction	Self-reported life satisfaction ⁱ
Safety	Assault rate; homicide rate ^j
Work-life balance	Employees working very long hours; time devoted to leisure and personal care ^k
<i>Note.</i> All sources were gathered from the OECD. The specific references are indicated following the superscript references. ^a OECD, n.d.b ^b OECD, n.d.c ^c OECD, n.d.d ^d OECD, n.d.e ^e OECD, n.d.f ^f OECD, n.d.g ^g OECD, n.d.h ^h OECD, n.d.i ⁱ OECD, n.d.j ^j OECD, n.d.k ^k OECD, n.d.l	

Table 2.

While the differences in BLI scores between women and men are not large, women tend to score higher on the dimensions of community, education, health, and life satisfaction. Men tend to score higher on the dimensions of earnings and jobs (OECD, n.d.m). Currently, the OECD maintains profiles of the BLI for the 34 countries

that are its members plus partner countries Brazil and the Russian Federation: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States (OECD, Civic Engagement, n.d.b). Other countries will be incorporated into the BLI in the coming years, including China, India, Indonesia, and South Africa (OECD, n.d.a).

It is interesting to note that both the GNH and the BLI indices have common dimensions or indicators such as community, education, environment, health, and income or standard of living. While no index is perfect, the critical aspect is that attempts are being made to measure global happiness. Mohanty (2009, 2012) reported that income does not necessarily account for differences in levels of happiness. While avoiding poverty may contribute to happiness, for Americans any increase in income level over \$60,000 does not make a substantial contribution to a person's level of happiness. As Mohanty (2012) explained, "higher income does not necessarily guarantee higher levels of happiness" (p. 143).

This section reviewed two leading happiness indicators, the GNH and the BLI. In addition, comparisons were made between the components of the two indicators. What are the implications of these indicators for business education?

Implications for Business Educators

Based upon the content of this article, eight implications are presented for consideration.

1. Business educators as well as business students can measure their levels of happiness by completing a simple five-item online survey, accessible at <http://www.gnhusa.org/test-your-happiness/> (GNHUSA, n.d.d). Students could track their happiness at monthly intervals over the course of an academic year. Engaging in this measurement could enhance their self-awareness and could be instructive not only for student teachers enrolled in business teacher education programs but also for all practicing business educators. Adopting one or two of the happiness best practices identified by Achor (2012) and Buettner (2008, 2010) should assist students in increasing their levels of happiness. Simple steps such as keeping a record of what occurred during the day, keeping a gratitude journal, exercising, meditating, and connecting with one's social network have potential to yield substantive results in perceived well-being (Achor, 2012).

2. Business students can compare and contrast the two approaches to assessing happiness according to the GNH and the BLI. What dimensions or indicators do the indices have in common? Which dimensions or indicators differ between the two indices? What dimensions or indicators of happiness may have been overlooked or not adequately incorporated by the GNH and BLI indices? This activity helps students to comprehend the similarities and differences in the two approaches to measuring happiness and builds depth of understanding.

3. Students can form groups to discuss their answers to the following questions: What are some cultural differences in perceptions of happiness and definitions of happiness? Do the levels of social interconnectedness vary between and among cultures? If so, what contributes to the level of community or social interconnectedness? This activity enhances the depth of global cultural understanding.

4. In groups or as an entire class, students can discuss their responses to the following questions: How might the perceptions of people about happiness differ between those living in a developed economy and those living in a developing economy? Why? This activity facilitates the development of economic literacy in the global context.

5. Business educators can have students consider these four stages of life: childhood, young adulthood, mature adulthood, and elderhood. What factor(s) might be responsible for any change in the happiness of individuals during the progression through these four life stages? Why? How might perceptions of individual happiness evolve as people age? This activity helps students to cultivate an awareness of the evolving nature of happiness across the lifespan.

6. Students enrolled in courses focusing upon business communication or teamwork can discuss how positive communication practices, both verbal and nonverbal, and the practice of civility help to trigger positive emotions. Conversely, students can identify how negative communication practices, both verbal and nonverbal, and incivility contribute to negative emotions, which influence the effectiveness of team or collaborative endeavors and happiness and well-being perceptions. This activity emphasizes to students the influence that positive communications and civility have upon individual and cultural happiness and well-being.

7. Students could discuss how the terms standard of living and income are similar and different from each other and the ramifications of each. This activity contributes to student awareness that income is only one component of one's standard of living, which enhances deeper economic understanding.

8. Students can compare dimensions and indicators of happiness by country, by gender, and by other demographic variables. Learning about the dimensions and indicators of happiness in various countries deepens understanding of and appreciation for diverse cultures, an essential component of vibrant global citizenship.

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