Job Satisfaction in America: Trends and Socio-Demographic Correlates

Tom W. Smith

August, 2007

Counter to the frequently heard complaints about downsizing, dead-end jobs, burnout, and worker alienation, job satisfaction is both high and has shown virtually no change over the last four decades. As Table 1 shows, the percent of Americans satisfied with the work they do averaged 86% from 1972 through 2006 and 48% rated themselves in the top category of being "very satisfied" with their job. In contrast only 4% say they are "very dissatisfied" with their work.[1]

The job satisfaction ratings have been a near constant with satisfaction never dipping below 82% nor climbing above 89%. Moreover, what little trend has appeared has been in the positive direction. The % very satisfied in the three most recent surveys 2002-2006 (51%, 51%, 49%) are each slightly above the overall average of 48%.

Job satisfaction is not similar across all social groups in the US (Table 2). First, job satisfaction is higher among those with more education, more prestigious occupations, and better-paying positions. Among those with less than a high-school education, 45% are very satisfied compared to 58% very satisfied among those with post-graduate degrees. Likewise, of those in the least prestigious 10% of jobs (unskilled manual and service occupations) only 35% are very satisfied vs. 57% among those in the most prestigious 10% of occupations (top professions).[2] Similarly, it rises from 40% very satisfied among those earning less than $12,500 per year to 68% for those making over $110,000 per annum. Second, blacks are less satisfied with their jobs than whites are (40% vs. 53%) and Hispanics have somewhat lower job satisfaction than non-Hispanics do (46% vs. 51%). Third, job satisfaction is greater among those who are still working after age 65 (71% very satisfied) and lowest among the youngest workers under 29 (42% very satisfied). In general, job satisfaction increases with age. This results from a combination of upward career mobility and from workers finding out what type of job best suits them. It is especially high among those 65+ because most people working at that age are not those forced to still work due to financial reasons, but those who choose to do so because they like their jobs. Fourth, full-time workers are more satisfied than part-time workers (52% vs. 46%), but homemakers slightly edge both employed groups with 53% very satisfied. Fifth, workers in the South Central states from Texas and Oklahoma through Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee, rate their job satisfaction the highest 58-59%), while only 47% are very satisfied in the Western states. Sixth, union and non-union workers have similar levels of job satisfaction (union members 51%; non-union members 52% very satisfied). Lastly, men and women do not differ meaningfully in their average satisfaction. That occurs because while women slightly lead mean in being very satisfied (52% to 49%), they also surpass men in being very dissatisfied (5% to 4%).

When all of these socio-demographics are considered together in a multivariate, regression analysis, the factors independently contributing to more job satisfaction in descending order of

---

[1] Data are from the General Social Surveys (GSSs) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center/University of Chicago. The GSSs are national, in-person, full-probability samples of adults living in households. For more details on the GSSs see www.gss.norc.org

[2] For a related report that covers the occupations with the highest and lowest job satisfaction and the greatest and least general happiness see Tom W. Smith, "Job Satisfaction in the United States, 2007 at http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/07/070417.jobs.shtml

importance are holding a job with high prestige, being older, being non-black, and earning more from a job. Gender, union membership, region of residence, Hispanic ethnicity, and education do not appreciably matter. The only result from the multivariate analysis that is unexpected is that more education does not directly contribute to greater job satisfaction. However, by helping workers to secure employment in more prestigious occupations, education does indirectly contribute to job satisfaction.

Table 1

Trends in Job Satisfaction, 1972-2006

(%)

	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1980	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986
Satisfied (Very + Moderately)	85	88	86	87	86	87	87	83	85	87	82	86	88
Very Satisfied	48.3	49.2	47.6	53.8	50.7	47.0	51.2	47.1	46.7	48.9	46.7	47.4	49.2
Moderately Satisfied	36.5	39.0	38.1	33.1	35.4	39.7	35.7	36.2	38.2	37.7	34.8	38.6	39.2
A Little Dissatisfied	11.8	7.5	9.7	9.2	9.6	10.5	8.6	12.1	10.1	8.7	11.9	9.8	8.9
Very Dissatisfied	3.4	4.3	4.6	3.9	4.4	2.8	4.6	4.6	5.0	4.6	6.6	4.2	2.7

	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1996	1998	2000	2002	2004	2006
Satisfied (Very + Moderately)	83	86	86	86	87	84	86	85	87	89	87	87	88
Very Satisfied	43.9	46.1	46.3	46.2	44.8	43.4	45.6	44.9	48.4	45.5	50.8	50.9	49.4
Moderately Satisfied	38.8	39.6	39.3	39.8	41.7	40.8	40.5	40.4	38.7	43.2	36.5	36.1	38.3
A Little Dissatisfied	12.7	10.3	10.4	10.4	9.5	10.8	10.6	10.6	9.7	8.2	9.2	8.6	8.2
Very Dissatisfied	4.5	4.0	4.0	3.7	4.0	5.0	3.3	4.1	3.2	3.1	3.5	4.4	4.0

Question Wording: On the whole how satisfied are you with the work you do – would you say you are very satisfied, moderately satisfied, a little dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied?

Source: General Social Surveys, 1972-2006, n=36,872

Table 2

Job Satisfaction by Socio-Demographics

	% Very Satisfied	Prob.
Gender		
Men	48.6	
Women	51.5	.033
Age		
18-29	42.3	
30-39	48.9	
40-49	50.8	
50-64	53.5	
65+	71.3	.0000
Education		
Less than High School	44.8	
High School	47.7	
Associate Degree	53.5	
Bachelor's Degree	54.5	
Graduate Degree	58.3	.0000
Occupational Prestige		
Bottom 10th	35.0	
2nd	38.0	
3rd	44.1	
4th	50.7	
5th	46.1	
6th	56.5	
7th	53.5	
8th	56.2	
9th	61.1	
Top 10th	57.3	.0000

Table 2 (continued)

	% Very Satisfied	Prob.
Earned Income		
Less than $10,000	40.1	
$10-19,999	56.0	
$20-29,999	45.4	
$30-39,999	49.7	
$40-49,999	53.3	
$50-59,999	59.6	
$60-74,999	58.2	
$75-109,999	55.2	
$110,000	67.7	
Refused	55.9	.0000
Labor Force Status		
Working Full Time	51.5	
Working Part Time	46.2	
Unemployed	37.1	
Keeping House	52.5	.0000
Labor Union Membership		
Belongs	50.7	
Spouse Belongs	50.4	
Both Belong	50.3	
Neither Belongs	51.6	.240 (NS)
Region		
New England	52.3	
Mid-Atlantic	46.7	
East North Central	49.6	
West North Central	50.4	
South Atlantic	49.9	
East South Central	58.9	
West South Central	57.6	
Mountain	46.7	
Pacific	46.5	.001

Table 2 (continued)

	% Very Satisfied	Prob.
Race		
White	53.4	
Black	40.4	
Other	40.4	.0000
Hispanic		
Hispanic	45.8	
Not Hispanic	50.8	.124 (NS)

Source: General Social Surveys, 2002-2006, n=4738

Prob.= probability of statistical significance. Figures greater than .05 are not considered statistically significant (NS).