

## Job Satisfaction



**REPORT** by Karl Brenke

The vast majority of employees in Germany  
are satisfied with their jobs

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**INTERVIEW** with Karl Brenke

»Only one in eight workers is dissatisfied  
with his or her job«

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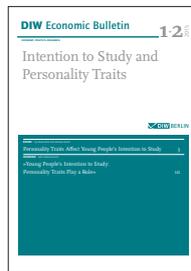
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## NEXT ISSUE OF DIW ECONOMIC BULLETIN

# Net Worth in Germany

# The vast majority of employees in Germany are satisfied with their jobs

By Karl Brenke

The vast majority of workers rate their professional occupations positively; only one in eight is unhappy with his or her job. This has been the case for the past 20 years. There is little difference in the degree of satisfaction between genders, workers in West Germany and East Germany, or among different age groups. Even the level of compensation and the nature of the work itself do not exert any strong influence on job satisfaction.

When a job is being evaluated, not only do its peculiarities play a role, but also the employees' perceptions of what they should be getting out of their jobs. As a result, job satisfaction is significantly influenced by employees' feelings and personal peculiarities. It is relatively common for people who are often anxious or angry, are happy relatively rarely, or who have a less optimistic future outlook to be dissatisfied with work. People who are dissatisfied with work are more prone to changing jobs, and in many cases, their satisfaction increases as a result. There are also quite a few dissatisfied individuals who decide to stick with their jobs and find themselves becoming more satisfied over time; presumably, they come to terms with their circumstances.

In academic discourse, it is agreed upon that the concept of "job satisfaction" is very complex; even today, there is no universally accepted definition of the term (Box). In practice, there are two standard methods for assessing job satisfaction. Respondents may be asked how satisfied they are with their jobs in general, and then asked to assign their level of satisfaction a rating on a defined scale. The other method involves assessing satisfaction with individual facets of the job (duration, location, flexibility of working hours, income, physical working conditions such as noise or dirt, taking pleasure in the results of work, work environment, etc.), which is then factored into an overall picture. The study at hand, which gives an overview of job satisfaction among the workforce in Germany, utilizes the first method.<sup>1</sup> The data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) form the empirical basis;<sup>2</sup> currently, there are data available for the years up until 2013.

## Employees overwhelmingly satisfied with their jobs

The vast majority of the German workforce is satisfied with work: On a scale of 0 (very dissatisfied) to 10 (very satisfied), the resulting values are concentrated between 7 and 9 (Figure 1). On average, self-employed workers are slightly more satisfied than are regular employees.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The choice of method used to measure job satisfaction is ultimately determined by the particular research interest, even though it has been shown that this straightforward, comprehensive measurement method is often entirely sufficient and the examination of individual facets sometimes creates confusion. See: Neuberger, O. (1974): *Theorien der Arbeitszufriedenheit*, 164; Weiss, H. M. (2002): "Deconstructing job satisfaction: Separating evaluations, beliefs and affective experiences." *Human Resource Management Review*, 12 (2), 173-194.

<sup>2</sup> For the SOEP data, see: Wagner, G. G., Göbel, J., Krause, P., Pischner, R., Sieber, I.: *Das Sozio-oekonomische Panel (SOEP): Multidisziplinäres Haushaltspanel und Kohortenstudie für Deutschland – Eine Einführung (für neue Datennutzer) mit einem Ausblick (für erfahrene Anwender)*. AStA Wirtschafts- und Sozialstatistisches Archiv, Nr. 2/2008.

<sup>3</sup> The difference between job satisfaction among self-employed workers and regular employees is not massive, but it is statistically significant. Because the data are not normally distributed, the Mann-Whitney *U* Test was used for the comparison of means.

Box

### Job satisfaction as a topic of research

Job satisfaction is a field of study that has long been being discussed within various academic disciplines. In organizational psychology, it is in fact the primary research theme;<sup>1</sup> it plays little role, however, within the economic sciences, where the theoretical foundations are still influenced by the idea that people are concerned solely with the material benefits of their jobs. A broader perspective was offered more than a century ago by Taylorism, which devoted itself to the research of “working conditions” – that is, it began taking aspects of work beyond salary into account.<sup>2</sup> Taylorism was interested in increasing productivity by altering these working conditions; this motive still forms the basis for a great deal of research on job satisfaction.

In the classical Hawthorne studies that were begun in the 1920s, it was initially assumed that worker performance could be improved through better factory lighting.<sup>3</sup> The desired effect, however, did not materialize through this change, nor did it materialize through other physical changes to the working environment. Instead, after many years of field work, it became apparent that increased worker productivity and job satisfaction depended not only on the level of compensation and the physical working conditions, but also to a large extent on the workers’ status within the organization, their interactions with the group, the recognition of their capabilities, and a less authoritarian leadership style.<sup>4</sup> The first study focused solely on job satisfaction emphasized that the concept is inseparable from other aspects of one’s life such as family, health, or social status.<sup>5</sup> This gave way to the Human Relations Movement, which focused on workers and their diverse needs with regard to the work process. Naive economism was unfit for research related to business.

**1** Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller detected 33,348 records pertaining to “job attitudes”, “work attitudes”, “job satisfaction” and “organizational commitment” in PsyclNFO, a scientific data base for psychologists. Judge, T., Kammeyer-Mueller, J. D. (2012): Job attitudes. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 63, 342.

**2** “The principal object of management should be to secure the maximum prosperity for the employer, coupled with the maximum prosperity for each employee ... The words “maximum prosperity” are used, in their broad sense, to mean not only large dividends for the company or owner, but the ... development of each man to his state of maximum efficiency, so that he may be able to do ... the highest grade of work for which his natural abilities fit him ...” Taylor, F.W. (1911): *The Principles of Scientific Management*, p. 9. Harper & Brothers, 1919.

**3** The fieldwork phase of the Hawthorne Works began in the second half of the 1920s. With an eye on increasing lighting sales to factories, the electrical industry also had an interest in the research. Miner, J.B. (2006): *Organizational Behavior 3. Historical Origins, Theoretical Foundations, and the Future*, 60 f.

**4** Roethlisberger, F. J., Dickson, W.J. (1939): *Management and the Worker*. Mayo, E. (1933): *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization*.

**5** The research began in 1933. See Hoppock, J. (1935): *Job Satisfaction*.

After that came the need- and motivation-oriented research approaches.<sup>6</sup> In the 1960s, a kind of reversal came about: Organization and job content were also being considered increasingly important to job satisfaction – especially to reduce absenteeism and staff turnover.<sup>7</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, the unions focused on the humanization of the working world (known as “redesign of work” in the U.S.), whereas in Germany, job satisfaction was more of a fringe topic.

The more recent research focuses primarily on psychological aspects, which is perhaps also connected to the fact that other disciplines such as industrial sociology, which deals with job satisfaction, have become less important. Accordingly, the more recent research has been primarily personality-oriented – that is, focused on the perceptions or idiosyncrasies of the individual.

### What is job satisfaction?

By the late 1960s, criticism emerged that despite a vast number of studies, the state of research on job satisfaction remained unsatisfactory. According to such criticism, data were being correlated in numerous ways without any sort of theoretical basis: “correlation without explanation.”<sup>8</sup> The criticism also contended that there was no understanding of what job satisfaction even meant. It was then suggested that job satisfaction be viewed as an emotional state that is made up of individual assessments comparing what one expects from a job with what one actually gets from it. This definition zeroes in on affect.

Job satisfaction, however, has become and is becoming more commonly viewed as a state of mind.<sup>9</sup> Mindsets exist according to the classical understanding of three dimensions: an affective reaction; a cognitive reaction (views, opinions); and a

**6** See, among others, Schaffer, R. H. (1953): “Job satisfaction as related to need satisfaction in work.” *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied*, 14/1953. According to Schaffer, job satisfaction depends on to what extent an individual can satisfy his needs with work: The stronger the needs, the more job satisfaction hinges on their fulfillment (p. 19). See also: Herzberg, F. (1966): *Work and the Nature of Man*.

**7** See, among others, Lawler, E. E., Porter, L.W. (1967): “The Effect of Performance on Job Satisfaction.” *Industrial Relations*, 7 (1), 20–28.

**8** Locke, E. A. (1969): “What is job satisfaction? *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*,” 4 (4), 311.

**9** See. Hulin, C. L., Judge, T. A. (2003): Job attitudes. In: Borman, W. C., Ilgen, D.E., Klimonski, R. J. (pub.): *Handbook of psychology: Industrial and organisational psychology*.

conative reaction (behavior or behavioral intention).<sup>10</sup> One key problem, however, is that it is difficult to prove that certain emotions or cognitions result in a corresponding behavior.<sup>11</sup> This is also – and especially – true for job satisfaction. It has even been said that figuring out how to get a certain work behavior out of job satisfaction is the search for the Holy Grail.<sup>12</sup> According to recent findings in neurobiology, affect and cognition cannot be separated; therefore, one usually does not unemotionally ponder an object or circumstance – such as a job – before evaluating it.<sup>13</sup> The use of the traditional “state of mind” concept as a heuristic construct was thus not very convincing with regard to job satisfaction. Therefore, affect will be emphasized in newer definitions of mindsets.<sup>14</sup>

Despite conceptual and theoretical ambiguities and a variety of methodological problems, research on job satisfaction has yielded numerous results and contributed to significant advancements in knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

### Results of the research

In organizational psychology (including all related sciences), various theoretical approaches are taken when it comes to assessing job satisfaction.<sup>16</sup> A newer, straightforward and comprehensive systematization is offered by Judge and Klinger. According to it, there is one approach in which the peculiarities of the job, more than anything else, are taken into consideration when studying job satisfaction (Job Characteristics Model - JCM); a second approach, in which the characteristics of the individual workers and their dispositions

play a significant role; and a third approach, which considers an individual's own assessment – based on their expectations and values – of their working conditions. This last approach focuses on the interaction between the individual and their working conditions, whereby the personal component is determined by the significance that the individual attributes to the job and various aspects thereof.

In the JCM Model, the focus is the occupation's core characteristics: The more multifaceted and meaningful a job is, the more freedom of choice (autonomy) it allows workers, the more the workers are involved in the entire process of manufacturing an item, the more they are able to witness the results of their efforts in the finished product (feedback), the greater the job satisfaction. Similar approaches can be found in Industrial Sociology.<sup>17</sup> Therefore of note are working conditions that are favorable for worker expectations. However, it has been shown that it is not solely the working conditions that are crucial, but also the personal components that always come into play as well.<sup>18</sup> Thus two people can have the same job, but experience different levels of satisfaction.<sup>19</sup>

With the *dispositional approach*, the focus is solely on the individual. It was found that an individual's job satisfaction remains quite stable over time – even when external conditions (job, professional status, remuneration) change.<sup>20</sup> It was shown that the degree of job satisfaction depends on, among other things: self-esteem, the workers' assessments of their own performance capacities, whether they believe they have influence over important events, and whether they feel like they are being subject to these events (locus of control). Neuroticism also plays a role.<sup>21</sup>

With the *Cornell Model*, which builds on the concept of the employees' interaction with the working conditions, it can be shown that the higher the perceived gain from the job

**10** “Attitudes are typically defined as predispositions to respond in a particular way toward a specific class of objects (...) The types of responds (...) fall in three major categories: cognitive, affective, and behavioral.” Rosenberg, M. J., Hovland, C. I. (1962) Cognitive, Affective and Behavioral Components of Attitudes. In: Rosenberg, M. J., Hovland, C. I. (pub): *Attitude Organization and Change: An Analysis of Consistency Among Attitude Components*, 1.

**11** Judge, T. A., Klinger, R. (2007): Job satisfaction: “Subjective well-being at work.” In: Eid, M., Larsen, R. (Pub.): *The Science of Subjective Well-Being*.

**12** See Locke, I.

**13** Adolphe, R., Damasio, A. R. (2001): The interaction of affect and cognition: a neurobiological perspective. In: Morgan, J. P. (pub.): *Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition*.

**14** Thus “mindset” is understood as “a psychological (meant, of course, as “psychic”) tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor.” Eagly, A. H., Chaiken, S.: “The advances of an inclusive definition of attitude.” *Social Cognition*, 5/2007, 598.

**15** For a good overview of the state of research, see: Judge, Kammeyer-Mueller, I.

**16** For a classification of the various approaches, see, for example: von Rosenstiel, L. (2003): *Grundlagen der Organisationspsychologie*, 426 f. as well as Neuberger, O. (1974): *Theorien der Arbeitszufriedenheit*, 141 ff.

**17** See: Sennett, R. (1988): *The Corrosion of Character and The Culture of the New Capitalism*.

**18** Hackman, J. R., Oldham, G. R. (1976) Motivation through the design of work: test of a theory. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 16, 225.

**19** Add to this (at least) – as a moderator variable – the extent of the individual desire for personal development. Frye, C.M. (1996): “New Evidence for the job characteristics model: A meta-analysis of the job characteristics-job satisfaction relationship using composite correlations.” Paper presented at the 11th Annual Meeting of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, San Diego. Cited by Judge, Klinger, I.

**20** Staw, B. M., Ross, J. (1985): “Stability in the midst of change: A dispositional approach to job attitudes.” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 70 (3). However, even in this instance a significant change in job satisfaction can be seen over time (p. 474).

**21** Judge, Kammeyer-Mueller, I., 353.

continue Box

(such as identifying with the occupation, income, or status) in relation to the subjectively assessed expenditure (labor, education, experience, etc.), the greater the job satisfaction.<sup>22</sup> In fact, there seem to be cyclical influences on job satisfaction, because in times where unemployment is high, one sees their own expenditure as being lower. Job satisfaction would consequently be higher in bad economic cycles, because workers would be happy to have any job at all. Furthermore,

**22** Hulin, C. L., Roznowski, M., Hachiya, D. (1985): "Alternative opportunities and withdrawal decisions: Empirical and theoretical discrepancies and an integration." *Psychological Bulletin* Nr. 2/1985, as well as Hoppock, Ic., 10.

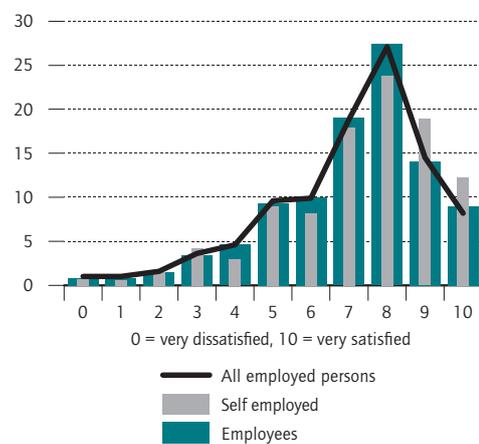
it is worth noting when examining the relationship between employees and their working conditions that an individual's values pertaining to certain aspects of the job can shift. For example, a salary increase would only cause a temporary increase in happiness, because along with the raise comes an increased demand for adequate wages.<sup>23</sup>

**23** Locke, Ic. 327 f. This hypothesis runs contrary to the economic theory of marginal utility. Locke assumes that if more money (or more products) can raise demand, it will be assumed—equally unproven—that there is a saturation tendency in the economy.

Figure 1

**Job satisfaction 2013**

Share of individuals (percent) with the particular rating<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> *Employers without registered unemployed and trainees.*

Sources: *The Socio-economic Panel (V30)*; DIW calculations.

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Self-employed are particularly satisfied with their job.

Only one in eight employees rates his or her level of satisfaction between 0 and 4—that is, only one in eight is more dissatisfied with his or her job. This ratio applies to both self-employed workers as well as regular employees. These findings are not surprising: They mere-

ly reflect the results of a long series of investigations in which it has been confirmed, again and again, that employees are predominantly satisfied with their jobs.<sup>4</sup>

If distinctions are made according to socioeconomic characteristics, one group in particular stands out: those who are registered as “unemployed” yet still have paid work, mostly in the form of a mini-job.<sup>5</sup> According to the SOEP data, 2013 saw a large number of such workers: 1.1 million. On average, they are much less satisfied than the rest of the regular working population (Table 1). Most of them are likely to view their jobs as merely temporary solutions—and, not infrequently, exclusively as a way of increasing their income beyond the social benefits they receive. By contrast, job satisfaction among trainees is slightly higher than average. It is possible that age also plays a role here, since younger workers are generally more satisfied with their jobs than are those in other age groups.

Otherwise, no noteworthy differences involving socioeconomic characteristics show up in job satisfaction. This finding commonly turns up in other studies, as well.<sup>6</sup> Thus men and women are equally satisfied with

**4** See, among others: Hoppock, Ic., 6, Neuberger, Ic., 157, Timper, M., Rudat, R., Smid, M. (1982): *Indikatoren der Arbeitszufriedenheit 1972/73 und 1980* (81, 12f). More current data is available from the Federal Statistical Office: [https://www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/Indikatoren/QualitaetArbeit/QualitaetDerArbeit.html;jsessionid=F47CAAB38C0CC6040F5779E207BAB9C3.cae3?cms\\_gtp=318944\\_slot%253D7&https=1](https://www.destatis.de/DE/ZahlenFakten/Indikatoren/QualitaetArbeit/QualitaetDerArbeit.html;jsessionid=F47CAAB38C0CC6040F5779E207BAB9C3.cae3?cms_gtp=318944_slot%253D7&https=1)

**5** Individuals can be considered “unemployed” if they work fewer than 15 hours a week in a paid occupation.

**6** Compare, for instance, with Locke, E. A. (1969): “What is job satisfaction? *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*,” 4 (4), 321. Locke attributes this pattern to errors in measurement; it would not be possible to determine the underlying values of job assessment using the given instruments. In his

their jobs, just as West German and East German workers are.

### Working conditions make little difference

Even when the working conditions examined here are taken into account, there are only marginal differences in the degree of satisfaction among workers. For example, it makes no difference whether working hours take place on Sunday or at night. As well, whether one works full-time or part-time, or pursues a “minor” occupation, plays no notable role. Workers with occupations that require a university degree are only slightly happier than the average, or than those who have a “simple” job. This is also true with regard to remuneration: Low-income earners are not quite as satisfied as well-paid workers, but even among those who earned a gross hourly wage of less than 8.50 EUR in 2013, only one in eight was dissatisfied with his or her job.

Conspicuous, however, are the data on temporary workers: Although the majority of them are also satisfied with their jobs, the proportion of contract workers who are dissatisfied is significantly higher than the proportion of workers who are dissatisfied in the workforce on the whole. The same likely holds true here for those who are registered as unemployed, yet still work: A significant proportion desires a better job.

Hardly any changes in job satisfaction have arisen over the course of time. The lone exception is in the early 90s, when East German workers were somewhat less satisfied with their jobs than those in West Germany. This was likely related to the radical changes taking place at the time. Since then, the satisfaction ratings between East and West have for the most part converged (Figure 2). The level of satisfaction that was determined has barely changed over time. No economic influences are discernible.<sup>7</sup>

review, the question arises as to what constitutes these values in the first place. A newer school of thought in psychological research, the Dual Process Theory, builds on the neurobiological evidence that the human brain is prone to laziness. Perceptions and evaluations are carried out quickly, automatically, and without much deliberation; the so-called “system 1” is active. This means that the intuitive opinions that are already available are brought to the forefront. It is assumed that the study participants are likely to behave in this way when completing the questionnaires about job satisfaction; that being said, perhaps respondents ultimately rely on such spontaneously accessible opinions about work in their everyday lives. These are reactions without longer reflections. For more on Dual Process Theory, see, among others: Kahnemann, D. (2011): *Schnelles Denken, langsames Denken*, as well as Frankish, K., Evans J. S. B. T. (2009): “The duality of mind: An historical perspective.” In: Evans, J. S. B. T., Frankish, K.: “In Two Minds: Dual Processes and Beyond.”

**7** The idea that employees are more satisfied with their jobs during bad economic cycles (times of high unemployment) than they are during good economic cycles was postulated for the English-speaking world. The theory was that in times of weak social security, job satisfaction was remarkably high because workers were glad to have any paid employment at all.

Table 1

### Job satisfaction according to occupation and social-structural attributes

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Proportion (in percentage) of ...	
			Dissatisfied individuals <sup>1</sup>	Especially satisfied individuals <sup>2</sup>
<b>Total workers</b>	7.05	2.16	12	50
Self-employed	7.31	2.07	10	55
Employed <sup>3</sup>	7.09	2.04	11	51
Trainees	7.88	1.87	5	66
Registered unemployed	4.78	3.17	44	27
<b>Employed<sup>3</sup></b>				
<b>Working hours</b>				
Full-time	7.05	2.06	12	50
Part-time	7.17	1.96	10	51
Minor employment	7.23	1.98	9	55
<b>Gross hourly wage</b>				
Less than 8.50 EUR	6.93	2.22	13	50
8.50 to under 30 EUR	7.10	2.00	11	51
30 EUR or more	7.38	1.77	7	53
<b>Sunday employment</b>				
Yes	7.08	1.96	11	51
No	7.02	2.07	12	49
<b>Night employment</b>				
Yes	6.96	2.07	13	48
No	7.10	1.99	11	51
<b>Temporary employment</b>				
Yes	6.22	2.48	25	38
No	7.11	2.02	11	51
<b>Qualifications required for job</b>				
No professional training	6.95	2.15	13	48
Apprenticeship, technical college degree	7.03	2.08	12	50
Applied science degree, university degree	7.31	1.80	8	55
<b>Alternatives in the event of job loss</b>				
Finding a new job is ...				
easy	7.11	2.04	11	52
difficult	7.00	1.97	12	48
practically impossible	6.94	2.19	14	49
<b>Age</b>				
Under 34	7.20	2.05	10	63
35 to 34	7.21	1.93	9	52
45 to 54	6.93	2.06	13	48
55 and older	7.03	2.07	12	50
<b>Work location</b>				
West Germany	7.10	2.04	11	51
East Germany	7.01	1.99	11	49
<b>Place of residence</b>				
West Germany	7.11	2.04	11	51
East Germany	6.99	1.99	11	49
<b>Sex</b>				
Male	7.06	2.02	11	50
Female	7.11	2.05	11	51

<sup>1</sup> Values from 0 to 4 on the satisfaction scale.

<sup>2</sup> Values from 8 to 10 on the satisfaction scale.

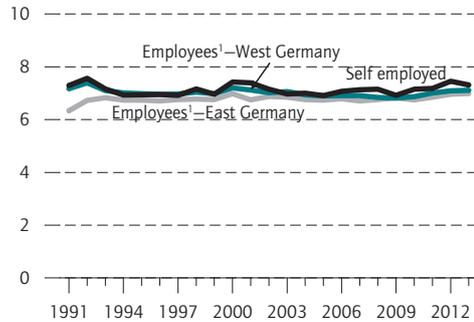
<sup>3</sup> Excluding trainees and the unemployed.

Sources: The Socio-economic Panel (V30); DIW Berlin own calculations.

Figure 2

**Development of job satisfaction**

Means – scale from (= very dissatisfied) to 10 (= very satisfied)



<sup>1</sup> Employees without registered unemployed and trainees.

Sources: The Socio-economic Panel (V30); DIW Berlin own calculations.

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Job satisfaction barely changes over time.

**Relevant personal characteristics**

Feelings and personal characteristics evidently play a greater role in job satisfaction than do the actual working conditions. For example, individuals who do not feel socially isolated, are comparatively happy and seldom angry or anxious, and have a relatively optimistic future outlook are often among those who are especially satisfied with their jobs (Table 2). Accordingly, the “especially satisfied” group is primarily made up of such workers.

Although individuals with the opposite characteristics and emotions are significantly less satisfied with their jobs, positive satisfaction scores, on average, also turn up for this group, albeit with a relatively large scatter.

Job satisfaction is also related to whether one feels that they are being compensated fairly. Those employees who believe that they are fairly paid are satisfied to a greater extent with their jobs than those who feel they are not fairly paid—yet even these employees, for the most part, rate their jobs positively. Here, as well, it is evident that job satisfaction is not dependent on income alone.

Table 2

**Job satisfaction according to personal characteristics and sentiments**

	Mean	Standard deviation	Proportion/Structure (in percent) of ...	
			Dissatisfied individuals <sup>2</sup>	Especially satisfied individuals <sup>3</sup>
<b>Mood over the past four weeks</b>				
<b>Angry</b>				
Rarely, very rarely	7.74	1.66	13	42
Sometimes	7.07	1.83	35	44
Often, very often	5.96	2.38	52	14
<b>Anxious</b>				
Rarely, very rarely	7.22	1.90	61	84
Sometimes	6.46	2.13	24	12
Often, very often	5.79	2.72	15	4
<b>Happy</b>				
Rarely, very rarely	5.48	2.52	23	4
Sometimes	6.73	1.96	36	26
Often, very often	7.38	1.88	42	70
<b>Loneliness</b>				
<b>Do you feel left out?</b>				
Rarely, never	7.28	1.90	57	83
Sometimes	6.42	2.14	31	14
Often, very often	5.74	2.51	12	3
<b>Optimism about the future</b>				
<b>How satisfied will you be with your life in five years?</b>				
More dissatisfied	4.92	2.48	10	1
Neutral	6.21	2.16	30	11
More satisfied	7.36	1.88	60	88
<b>Feeling fairly compensated at work</b>				
<b>Are you fairly paid?</b>				
Yes	7.47	1.85	39	70
No	6.51	2.16	61	30

<sup>1</sup> Excluded trainees and the unemployed.

<sup>2</sup> Values from 0 to 4 on the satisfaction scale.

<sup>3</sup> Values from 8 to 10 on the satisfaction scale.

Sources: The Socio-Economic Panel (V30); DIW Berlin own calculations.

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**Changing jobs can increase job satisfaction**

Many people who are dissatisfied with a particular situation will try to change it; thus a dissatisfied employee could be anxious to look for another job within their current place of employment, or for a new employer altogether. In fact, from 2010 to 2013 a greater proportion of dissatisfied workers changed jobs than that of workers who were satisfied (Figure 3).<sup>8</sup> However: Even among the dissatisfied workers, most held onto their jobs during this time period. Often this may have been due to the lack of employment alternatives.

The vast majority of those who were dissatisfied and changed jobs became statistically significantly more satisfied afterwards. But more than a few dissatisfied individuals who kept their jobs rated their work more positively, three years later, than they did in 2010 (Figure 4). Perhaps it was due to a shift in their expectations and a more positive view of the job.

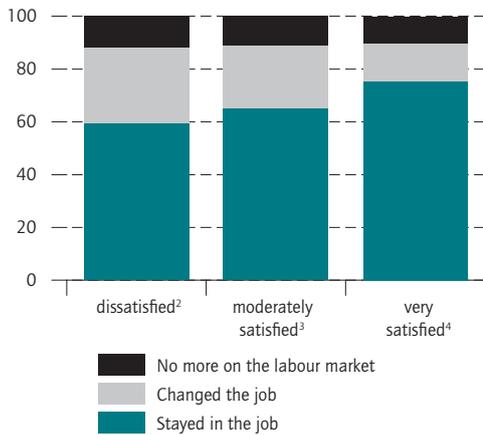
A similar picture emerges for the employees who expressed a more moderate level of satisfaction in 2010: Among those who changed jobs, an increase in satisfaction was seen more often than among those who remained at their jobs.

<sup>8</sup> According to a Chi-squared test, this difference is statistically significant (95 percent level).

Figure 3

**Employees<sup>1</sup> by their job satisfaction 2010 and their occupational change till 2013**

Share in percent



1 Employees without registered unemployed and trainees.  
 2 Ranking values from 0 to 4 on the job satisfaction scale.  
 3 Ranking values from 5 to 7 on the job satisfaction scale.  
 4 Ranking values from 8 to 10 on the job satisfaction scale.

Sources: The Socio-economic Panel (V30); DIW calculations.

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Unsatisfied workers change jobs more often.

For some employees, however, there was a decrease in satisfaction. This applies primarily to those who were especially satisfied in 2010. In this instance, there was no difference between those who had changed jobs and those who had not.

**Conclusion**

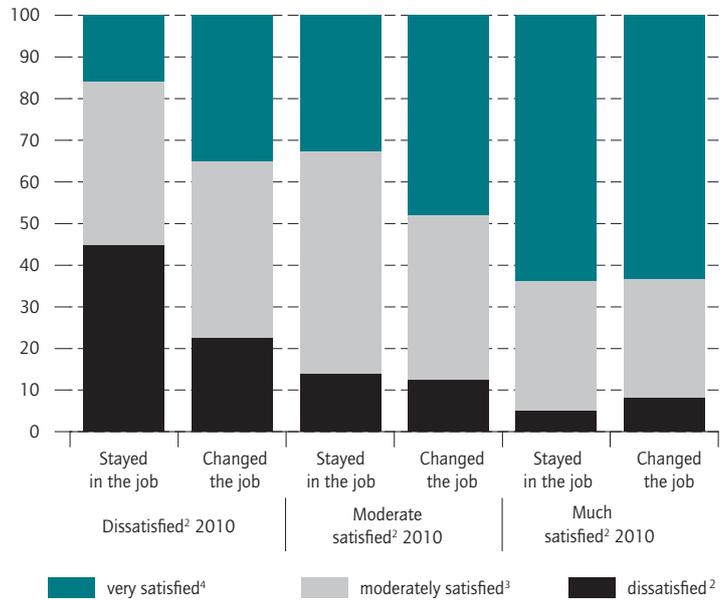
This investigation has shown that the vast majority of workers in Germany are satisfied with their jobs. For many years, the degree of job satisfaction has remained constant and even short-term, cyclical fluctuations have not been observed. Employees do not become more satisfied during bad economic cycles simply because they are happy to have any job at all; and when the economy is flourishing, they are not automatically more discriminating when assessing their jobs.

The level of job satisfaction also depends little on socioeconomic factors such as gender, age, or whether the worker resides in East or West Germany. The working conditions taken into consideration here, as well as the level of compensation, likewise do not have a major effect on job satisfaction. Even low-paid employees and those with simple occupations rarely rate their jobs less positively, on average, than do employees with high salaries and sophisticated occupations. It is possible, however — as earlier research has also shown — that other

Figure 4

**Employees<sup>1</sup> and their job satisfaction 2010 and 2013**

Share in percent



1 Employees without registered unemployed and trainees.  
 2 Ranking values from 0 to 4 on the job satisfaction scale.  
 3 Ranking values from 5 to 7 on the job satisfaction scale.  
 4 Ranking values from 8 to 10 on the job satisfaction scale.

Sources: The socio-economic Panel (V30); DIW calculations.

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Many unsatisfied workers have improved their situation by changing the job.

aspects of work can impact job satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> But all in all, it is important not to place too much weight on the role of economic factors and job characteristics with regard to satisfaction. The only exceptions are those individuals who are registered as unemployed yet still have paying jobs, as well as temporary employees. Many of these workers view their jobs as emergency or temporary solutions, and therefore find them dissatisfying.

Clearer gradations in job satisfaction can be seen, however, if personal qualities and sentiments are taken into consideration. Quite frequently, people who are often anxious or angry, are rarely happy, and have a less optimistic future outlook are dissatisfied with their jobs.

For many people, the extent of their job satisfaction changes over time. Among the dissatisfied workers, in particular, there are quite a few who change jobs and thereby increase their job satisfaction. However, stay-

9 See, among others, Fietze, S. (2011): *Arbeitszufriedenheit und Persönlichkeit: „Wer schaffen will, muss fröhlich sein!“* SOEPpapers Nr. 388.

ing with a job is also often accompanied by an increase in satisfaction over time.

How should all of this be interpreted? If homeostasis—the pursuit of inner balance—physically as well as psychologically also constitutes the basic principle of human life and is critical for the processing of environmental influences in the brain,<sup>10</sup> then it will also play a role in the evaluation of work, especially since for most employees, work takes up a large portion of their waking life. Dissatisfaction is perceived as a disturbance to the equilibrium, and hence as a state of stress that must

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**10** Damasio, A. (2013): *Selbst ist der Mensch. Körper, Geist und Entstehung des menschlichen Bewusstseins*.

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be resolved. In psychology, the theory of cognitive dissonance is based on such a configuration: Dissonances themselves exert a pressure to be alleviated.<sup>11</sup> With regard to job satisfaction, this search for alleviation can manifest in various ways: for example, through a job change or a job “arrangement”—that is, a change to the preexisting external conditions. With a special arrangement in place, the attitudes and emotions associated with the job are bound to change. All the same, there are people who are dissatisfied with their jobs. In this instance, personal sentiments and idiosyncrasies (fear and anger, more optimistic or pessimistic approaches to life, etc.) also play a role.

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**11** Festinger, L. (1978): *Theorie der kognitiven Dissonanz*, 256.



Karl Brenke, researcher in the department of Forecasting and Economic Policy of DIW Berlin

## SEVEN QUESTIONS TO KARL BRENKE

»Only one in eight workers is dissatisfied with his or her job«

1. Mr. Brenke, you have studied job satisfaction in Germany. Which criteria do you use when making your assessments? Job satisfaction is a difficult concept: There is no clear-cut definition, and there are also different ways of measuring it. Of course, you can inquire about individual aspects of the job—for example, the office atmosphere, satisfaction with working hours, compensation, what the boss is like, and much more. That's one possibility. The other possibility is that you ask people how satisfying they find their jobs in general. This method has been thoroughly proven to be effective.
2. How satisfied are Germans with their jobs? It turns out that the vast majority of people in the Federal Republic are satisfied with their jobs. Only about one-eighth is extremely dissatisfied. This finding did not surprise me; even 20 years ago, we were already getting the same results.
3. But isn't that very subjective? The exact same occupation can satisfy one person but not another. That's difficult to distinguish. I have also found in my own research that it's not just the occupation that determines satisfaction, which is what is usually believed. That is, even in the most comfortable conditions possible, employees aren't going to automatically be more satisfied. Job satisfaction is always a subjective evaluation, and the standards can vary greatly. One person can be very satisfied if only a minimum of expectations is fulfilled; others may be very unhappy under the same conditions. A lot also depends on personal qualities and sentiments.
4. How great are the differences among the various groups of people? The differences are very minor. Between men and women, as well as between East and West Germany,

we have no major differences. The vast majority is satisfied with their jobs. This holds true even when the nature of the job is taken into account. However, there are two groups where differences can be found. Unemployed individuals are especially dissatisfied, even if that sounds contradictory. There are unemployed people who still have some sort of job to increase their social benefits, and they are dissatisfied with this job. Similar responses are also found in temporary workers; here we also have a relatively high proportion of dissatisfied individuals. For both groups, this is most likely related to the fact that they view their jobs as temporary solutions.

5. Are satisfied workers more productive workers? I haven't investigated that. It can't be proven using the current state of academic research, and relatively little can be concluded regarding how the degree of job satisfaction affects employee performance.
6. What sort of significance does job satisfaction have for the economy? I do believe that with job satisfaction, there is also an economic significance at play—for the employer, if nothing else. In this case, I'm thinking of the dissatisfied individuals in particular. If you have conditions that contribute to dissatisfaction, it can cause these individuals to either leave their jobs or perhaps just sort of resign themselves unhappily to the situation—in which case they are possibly not as productive as other employees.
1. Are people who are in bad shape financially more satisfied with their jobs, because they are just happy to have a job in the first place? Yes, previous investigations have shown this—for example, studies from the 1930s. But of course back then, we didn't have developed social systems like the ones we have today. They had much higher unemployment and people were certainly pleased to a job at all. Job satisfaction rose accordingly in this unfavorable economic cycle. Today, this relationship can no longer be established.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg