



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



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