



Happiness at work depends on whether your boss can do your job

Study of 35,000 workers finds your boss's ability to do your job is strongest predictor of happiness at work

Your boss's ability to do your job is by far the strongest predictor of whether you will be happy at work, a new study shows.

Research from a combined UK-US research team found that a managers' technical competence has a "powerful and little appreciated effect" on well-being at work, greater even than where you work and how much you earn.

The study, believed to be the first to uncover the effect, examined three decades of data on job satisfaction among 35,000 employees across the UK and US.

"Our results show that the size of your pay packet or where you work is far less important than whether your boss actually knows what he or she is talking about," said author Dr Amanda Goodall, a senior lecturer in management at Cass Business School.

The research, conducted along with Ben Artz from University of Wisconsin and Andrew Oswald from Warwick University, revealed three crucial influences on workers' well-being:

- *whether the supervisor could do the employee's job;*
- *whether the supervisor worked his or her way up inside the company; and*
- *the supervisor's level of technical competence.*

The authors carried out the study by examining employee responses to a series of survey questions, such as "Could your supervisor do your job if you were away?" and "Does the supervisor know their own job well?"

They observed that satisfaction levels among 1,600 British workers were higher when individuals were managed by a supervisor who could step in and competently do the same job.

In their analysis of 6,000 US workers, the academics found that employee job satisfaction was greater if the boss had worked his or her way up the company, or started it.

And their examination of 27,000 US workers revealed that a supervisor's level of technical competence had a "huge" influence on job satisfaction.

The results remained unchanged even when the authors adjusted for a range of other factors that could affect job satisfaction, including salary and educational level.

"The study's findings are a blow to those who advocate today's creeping managerialism where general managers are parachuted in to organisations they know little about. To run a good wheel stall, you need to understand wheelks, not just be good at running hot chestnut stands," said Andrew Oswald, professor of economics at Warwick University.

Exactly why this pattern occurs is a question Goodall is now working on. She believes that competent bosses are expert leaders because they have a deep understanding of the job, which means they know how to create the right work environment, incentives and motivations for their team.

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“I went through a range of emotions including frustration and confusion.”

James Cartwright, a life sciences professional working in a research organisation, found himself being managed by a boss from a different scientific field. He said:

“I went through a range of emotions including frustration and confusion. At times I found myself becoming reluctant to go to work in the mornings.

“My boss had a lack of understanding of the inherent complexity of the function and role that I worked in. This poor understanding led to an over-simplification of the contribution I made. It also meant that I received less targeted feedback and recognition than people working in her direct field of expertise.

“It caused other problems too. It required extra time to explain certain concepts. My boss would focus on areas that weren’t relevant during conversations instead of going straight to those that needed discussing. At management meetings, she also found it harder to accurately convey challenges and opportunities we faced.

“It affected my happiness because I didn’t feel that I was being recognised and included as an “insider” within the team or beyond. My areas of specialism were poorly understood and therefore side-lined by my boss and the wider department, which meant that I had to find new ways to keep my energy levels up at work.”

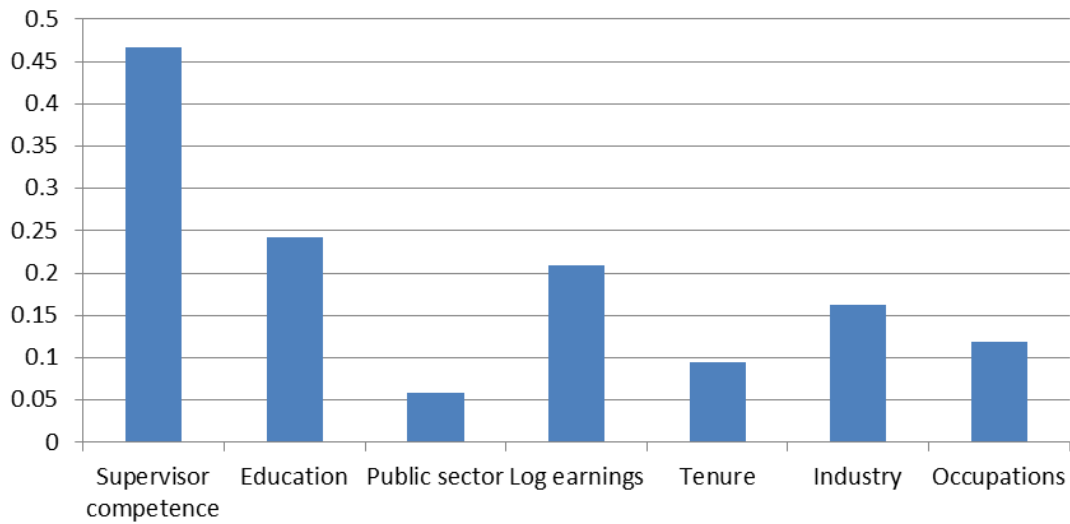
Grocer turned banker

Andy Hornby, the former CEO of HBOS, is a high-profile example of a boss who lacked technical competence in the core field of his business. The former Asda retail executive was at the helm of HBOS when it teetered on the brink of collapse before being rescued by Lloyds TSB in a controversial merger. His part in the bank’s downfall has been blamed partly on his lack of banking experience.

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Effect of significant independent variables on job satisfaction



Note: values are computed by differencing the effects at the 10th percentile from the 90th percentile of each variable. The public sector value is the difference in effect between the public sector and private sector, the tenure value corresponds to differencing the 90th percentile from the 10th percentile, and the education value is the difference in effect between a college degree and a high school dropout. Values based on Table 5, column (4) estimates.

Notes to Editors:

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