

South Africans at work: How satisfied are we?

Continuous tracking of work values and attitudes towards work remain critical given a concern to improve the quality of people's work life, write **BONGIWE MNCWANGO** and **LOLITA WINNAAR**.

Thinking about work has changed, and the success of organisations, even their very existence, is now seen as depending on the active involvement and satisfaction of employees, putting workers' job satisfaction at centre stage. These days, knowledge about workers' attitudes and values have become crucial as such factors have been proven to be linked to turnover, absenteeism, productivity as well to one's overall quality of life.

In South Africa, between 1996 and 1998, three important pieces of legislation were passed to eliminate the inequalities of the past and improve working conditions. These were the Labour Relations Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act and the Employment Equity Act. Because of intense interest in the impact of this legislation and the need to monitor the state of workers in changing labour market conditions, many studies have been conducted on the South

African labour market.

Despite this, there has been very little comprehensive empirical work on workers' values and on their attitudes towards work, which is important for examining trends in attitudes towards work among the employed over time. Such studies should go beyond guesswork to improve the quality of life in the workplace by measuring knowledge about factors influencing job satisfaction.

A total of 2 884 respondents older than 16 years participated in the 2005 SASAS round, of which 895 indicated that they were employed. Only data from those who were employed was analysed.

Several key determinants of perceived levels of job satisfaction emerged, namely race, living standard measure, and educational attainment.

WORK VALUES

The study evaluated eight aspects relating to work values on a 5-point scale, ranging from very important to not important. Table 1 presents the percentage of workers that perceived the different values as being either important or very important to them in a job, and the percentage that agreed or strongly agreed that the different work attributes characterised their job.

It is evident that job security (99%) had the greatest importance. This was followed by good opportunities for advancement, an interesting job and high income. Working independently and having flexible working hours were rated lowest, though approximately two-thirds of workers still rated these as important job attributes.

Of these, many indicated that their jobs did not currently provide these attributes, and only about



The discrepancy between work values and workplace reality was especially acute in relation to attaining a high income and good prospects for job promotion.

Work attribute	% viewing work attribute as important to a job	% agreeing that work attribute characterises their job
Job security	99	65
Good opportunities for advancement	94	38
An interesting job	93	65
High income	92	28
A job that allows one to help other people	88	69
A job that is useful to society	84	68
A job that allows one to work independently	81	59
A job that allows one to decide their times or days of work	66	...

Source: HSRC South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2005
 Note: 'A job that allows one to decide their times or days of work' was not included among the job characteristics.

a third and two-fifths believed that their job provides them with the listed opportunities. The discrepancy between work values and workplace reality was especially acute in relation to attaining a high income and good prospects for job promotion.

By contrast, nearly two-thirds of workers (65%) believed that their jobs were secure and interesting, while close to 70% supported the view that their job was useful to society and that it enabled them to help other people. This seemed to suggest that workers were relatively more satisfied with the content of their employment (interesting, useful to society, helps others) than its ability to meet their immediate and longer-term material needs.

LEVELS OF JOB SATISFACTION

On the question of 'how satisfied are you in your (main) job?' over 77% of respondents indicated on a six-point scale, ranging from 'completely satisfied' to 'completely dissatisfied' that they were satisfied to a certain extent with their jobs. A sizeable proportion said they were either fairly satisfied (27%), very satisfied (29%), or completely satisfied (21%). About 9% were very dissatisfied, whilst 5% were completely dissatisfied. Another 9% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

It was expected that determinants of job satisfaction would vary by group or individual characteristics. Therefore, a number of factors influencing perceived levels of job satisfaction were investigated.

Several key determinants of perceived levels of job satisfaction emerged, namely race, living standard measure, and educational attainment. Characteristics such as gender, age, and socio-economic characteristics (for example, salary and employment status) were also investigated, but did not yield significant results.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF JOB SATISFACTION

Levels of job satisfaction by race were the strongest predictor of job satisfaction (Figure 1). Black workers were the least likely (69%) to indicate satisfaction with their job when compared to workers from other population groups. Coloured (83%), white (88%) and

Indian (95%) workers expressed high levels of satisfaction in their jobs.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF JOB SATISFACTION

Levels of job satisfaction by living standard measure (LMS) showed that workers with low living standards had significantly lower levels (59%) of job satisfaction than those with medium (79%) and high living standards (90%).

JOB SATISFACTION BY EDUCATION

There was a strong relationship between job satisfaction and education (Figure 2), probably because those with no education tend to value their jobs more.

CONCLUSION

Further investigations are needed to be able to compare the job satisfaction of South African workers with that of workers in other countries, and also to track workers' attitudes towards their jobs in the continuously changing economic and political context. This information should help the government and other relevant organisations in their attempts to improve the quality of life at work.

In summary, the study found that:

- For most working South Africans, job security is the most important aspect of a job.
- Workers appear more satisfied with their job content than the ability of their job to secure their material needs.
- Most South Africans are satisfied with their jobs overall.
- Workers from the black population group are least likely to indicate satisfaction with their jobs.
- Levels of job satisfaction tend to increase with improvement in LSM and rising levels of education.

Bongiwe Mncwango is a senior researcher and Lolita Winnaar a chief programmer in the Centre for Socio-Economic Surveys in Knowledge Systems.

