

## Guardian sustainable business Values-led business

# Is a chief happiness officer really the best way to increase workplace happiness?

While the trend of chief happiness officers might not have spread like wildfire, companies are increasingly finding ways to make workplace happiness a priority



Chief happiness officers, or CHOs, are important, the thinking goes, because happy workers do more and stay longer at a company. Photograph: Alberto Incrocci/Getty Images

Happiness in the workplace has become such a hot button conversation topic, some companies have created a job specifically dedicated to it. The remit of a chief happiness officer (CHO) is simple: to ensure workers are kept happy.

But for a trend supposedly sweeping the workplace, the list of people who have assumed the position of CHO is rather short.

There's Jenn Lim (Delivering Happiness, an offshoot of Zappos), Chade-Meng Tan (Google, actual title: Jolly Good Fellow), Alexander Kjerulf (WooHoo, a Denmark-based consulting company) and Christine Jutard (Kiabi, a French clothing company). There's also Ronald McDonald, who became perhaps the first CHO in the United States in 2003.

The premise of a CHO seems to be that happy workers do more and stay longer at a company, so it serves the company well to better serve its employees. The work of a chief happiness officer

can range from a focus on employees' day-to-day feelings to providing company perks, such as game nights or group outings.

Virgin, Southwest Airlines, the Container Store and other companies have a strong emphasis on employee happiness – or at least on discussing their emphasis on employee happiness – but the ranks of chief happiness officers themselves are thin.

“Is there a huge groundswell? Eh, not yet,” says Alexander Kjerulf, one of the few existing CHOs. In addition to holding that position at WooHoo, Kjerulf is its founder. WooHoo consults on workplace happiness with clients such as Hilton, IBM, Ikea and Shell.

Kjerulf says although the title of CHO may be oversold and underused, many managers and human resource heads are actively seeking to make work a happier place. And it's not just for show. “There really is a ‘there’ there,” says Sigal Barsade, a professor of business at Wharton who studies emotions in organizations.

Barsade and many others who study employee productivity say the results of focusing on employee wellbeing can be easily and consistently quantified in terms of [decreased turnover](#) (pdf), burnout and absenteeism.

By building what Barsade calls a positive “emotional culture”, a company can expect to see improvements in team behavior, group financial performance and job satisfaction, while also increasing the frequency with which workers help their colleagues and improving how well they accomplish discrete tasks.

“It's not only are you staying with the organization, but literally, you do work better. And not just customer service, but also technical work,” Barsade says. She adds that a growing number of human resource managers have contacted her in recent years for advice on how to redefine their company cultures.

Stewart Thornhill, who teaches entrepreneurship at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, says he's observed an increased interest in a positive work environment from his students. When asked to identify their top reasons for starting a company, Thornhill says his students point to positive change or creating value for customers and clients within the workplace first.

“It's always fascinating to me how long it takes them to get to profit,” Thornhill says. He attributes this change to millennials possessing a higher level of social awareness. “Whether that will change as they evolve and move on to their 20s and 30s and deal with mortgages and student loans, that's another question,” he says.

Laurence Vanhee was chief happiness officer of Belgium's social security ministry from 2009 to 2013, or at least that's what was printed on her business card and in her email signatures. Her official title was more cumbersome: general manager for support service, personnel and organization of the federal public services of the social security ministry.

Vanhee says emphasizing employee happiness by allowing telecommuting and creating group workspaces, for example, made more sense to her than activity-based costing or six sigma, productivity measurement tools popular in the 80s and 90s that treated workers as commodities to be quantified. In such a system, “there is no place for humans”, Vanhee says.

Consideration of workers’ wellbeing may become increasingly important as the global financial recovery forces employers to create more competitive work environments. Kjerulf says he believes the financial crisis “gave companies the freedom to treat their employees like crap”. Market forces may require them to rethink that approach.

Kjerulf says he tried to bring more happiness to an Ikea store in Denmark in 2010, starting with the smallest of gestures. The goal was to make customers happier and that, he says, had to start with the employees. Kjerulf instructed managers to praise employees more freely and make sure to say “good morning” when they arrived each day. The head of the bedding department also organized a pillow fight with employees and customers. The manager of the closet department would occasionally hide inside one awaiting an unsuspecting customer, then pop out and say: “Can I help you?”

“I realize this sounds really silly,” he admits. “But it’s one of the things that create a better relationship in the workplace, that we actually acknowledge each other’s existence.”

Barsade says the research backs this up. A manager can shape the office environment with something as simple as the expression she wears when she walks into work. “We literally catch emotions like viruses in groups,” Barsade says.

For Richard Sheridan, CEO and chief storyteller at Menlo Innovations, a 55-person software development company, a focus on happiness has meant the removal of hierarchy with employees working in pairs that rotate every five days. He says he has tried to eliminate all barriers to human communication, both mental and physical. There are, he says, “no walls, office, cubes or doors”. In fact, the communication at Menlo appears to be so open that Sheridan had to call a reporter from a hallway because the din of in the office was too loud.

Sheridan says he sees no reason to appoint an individual to be in charge of the company’s culture. “If anything, we want a chief happiness officer mentality in the company, rather than a chief happiness officer person in the company,” he says.

Charles D Kearns, a professor of behavioral science at Pepperdine University’s business school, says assigning companywide happiness to a bureaucrat is antithetical to the concept of workplace happiness.

“The top management team and all of the managers and supervisors, and for that matter all of the organization’s employees, should have built into their job description to increase happier high performance, starting with themselves,” Kearns says. “How can you legislate that with a chief happiness officer?”