

STUCK ON THE WHEEL AND CAN'T GET OFF? WONDER WHY YOU'RE WEALTHIER BUT CAN'T QUITE PULL YOURSELF OUT OF BED IN THE MORNING? THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT MONEY AND STATUS ARE FAILING TO DELIVER HEALTH, WEALTH AND HAPPINESS. IE REPORTS.

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# happiness or the hamster wheel?



At first glance, it might seem illogical to suggest that economic policy should result in something as whimsical as happiness. But, if the anthropologists are right in their assertion that the human condition is hard-wired to the pursuit of happiness, it becomes clear why it should form the basis for economic policy. What's the point otherwise?

Health, wealth and happiness are the triumvirate charged with granting society's wishes. But whilst the first two have romped ahead by exceeding ever-increasing performance targets, happiness seems to be slacking on the job.

In fact, across the whole of the developed world, the past 50 years has seen GDP shoot off the graph whilst happiness levels have remained stubbornly the same. In short, our rampant economic growth has failed to bring us increased happiness.

According to Huw David Dixon in his book 'Controversies in Macroeconomics', it is here that we have

messed up. Our whole economic foundation - which promotes growth and therefore consumption - is built on the assumption that the more we consume, the happier we are. But if that was true, why on earth aren't we now bouncing happily along, en route to rapture?

The answer lies in the power of material possessions to affect our happiness levels; they do, but like a mid-afternoon sugar boost, only for the short term. It is this process of 'habituation', or becoming so accustomed to our possessions that they lose their novelty, which fuels the economy and keeps us scampering away on the hamster wheel of increasing acquisition. As Richard Reeves of the New Economics Foundation says in his 2003 discussion paper 'The Politics of Happiness': "If the definition of insanity is repeating the same action in the hope of a different result, then we are all mad."

And the statistics to support that casual observation are alarming. Not only are we getting no happier, we're actually becoming more depressed. Every year in the UK, ten per cent of adults are diagnosed with a mental

health problem and, according to a Datamonitor survey in 2003, 28 million consumers - i.e. you and me - suffered periods of abnormal stress levels.

Here in the Northwest, where, incidentally, we are the UK's second biggest boozers, more than half of the working-age population are in full-time employment, working an average 38 hours a week, but in a survey by Penna Consulting in 2001, only 21 per cent of those people claimed to be happy with their current position.

"People are working longer and harder to meet massively raised expectations. Management practices are now geared to getting more out of people and the pace and intensity of work has increased, along with stress levels," says Dr Collette Fogan, Senior Lecturer in Sociology at UMIST and an honorary fellow of the European Work and Employment Research Centre. "Even technology, developed to make life easier, hasn't bought us any more leisure time. It's simply increased the amount of work we are expected to do quickly."

And the higher you climb up that ladder, the more you have to deal with. "Those who are in the highest paid

positions usually have the highest expectations placed upon them and, in turn, place high expectations on their employees," adds Dr Fogan.

So what are the alternatives? According to Richard Reeves, we don't have the range of choices we think we do: "In a society where the value system colours our thinking, the range of choices is rendered meaningless," he says. Or in other words, we all want to make the same high-end choices.

One alternative, that of opting out or downshifting, was certainly never seen as a popular choice. But by the nineties, the image of downshifting had changed and no longer suggested suburban self-sufficiency or eccentric hippiedom. In 1997, 1.7m people in the UK had opted for a pay cut and more modest lifestyle rather than scale the icy glacier of career advancement. By 2002, that figure had grown to 2.6m and is expected to increase by a further million by 2007, a sharply increasing trend.

But the innate sense of rivalry, which prompts us to not simply look at our own affluence, but also to examine how it compares to that of our peer group, makes the idea of downshifting too radical for most palates. Instead, the idea of achieving a better work-life balance has become the ideal middle ground where we can still afford to feed our short-term happiness with our consumer fixes but also meet our long-term happiness needs through family, leisure pursuits and a sense of security.

Unfortunately, the UK's lily-livered approach to legislating in favour of a better work-life balance has enabled employers to freely interpret initiatives such as parental leave.

"The leap between what's written on paper and what is put into effect is hard to achieve and government has relied on companies to implement initiatives

designed to be more family friendly. This has resulted in these initiatives being seen as a privilege rather than an entitlement," says Dr Fogan.

This subtlety is one of rights. Here in the UK parents have the right to request parental leave, whilst in the Netherlands, they simply have the right to take it and take it they do.

But why has the UK fought shy of taking the last step, even though Department of Employment figures reveal that 43 per cent of companies believe that a better work-life balance would result in a happier workforce? Is it the fear of reduced productivity?

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"When we stopped sending children up chimneys, the economy didn't collapse as expected nor did it when maternity leave was introduced and then extended, so there's no evidence to suggest that creating a better work-life balance can be anything other than beneficial," adds Dr Fogan.

"Until very recently, Germany delivered a hugely efficient economy on the back of a standard four-day week and any recent changes have been largely down to reunification costs, not shorter hours," she says.

So how do we here in the Northwest achieve that better work-life balance?

According to Dr Fogan, coordinated policies supported by funding and a regulatory framework to encourage employers to take on the business case, such as better productivity and staff retention, would be a natural next step.

Unilever launched in the Northwest two centuries ago but today presents a thoroughly modern picture of human resource management. It has introduced a harmonised policy for flexible working across all of its 30 UK sites, together with a wide range of family-friendly working policies. Now, 90 per cent of women who take maternity leave return to work and retention of skilled staff has improved across the business. Importantly, the company has realised that there are direct links between employee and customer satisfaction and therefore, business performance.

This has resulted in what the company describes as a 'can do' approach to flexible working, which is now encouraged and supported by senior management.

For employees who perhaps don't have the benefit of a large blue chip company such as Unilever behind them, Dr Fogan believes that flexible working is still possible.

"Those in smaller companies often have less formal agreements with employers which allow them to work more flexibly, but on the whole larger companies which have formal corporate social responsibility, equal opportunities and human resource policies tend to do better," she says.

So, the way forward for the Northwest? At your next appraisal, don't waste your breath asking for a pay rise, ask, instead, for a happiness increase. | ie

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