

Q + A with Nic Marks

Happier employees, according to Marks, are more productive and more innovative—and he’s got the stats to back it up.

Companies that want a competitive edge should start by fostering happier employees, says Nic Marks, founder of the Centre for Wellbeing, an independent think tank at the New Economics Foundation (NEF) in London. Happier employees, according to Marks, are more productive and more innovative—and he’s got the stats to back it up. He also developed the influential Happy Planet Index, a global measure of human wellbeing and environmental impact published by the Centre.

Marks is director of Happiness Works, a U.K.-based company that helps executives measure and improve workplace happiness. A pioneer in the statistical analysis of happiness and wellbeing, he’s also worked as a psychotherapist and organizational change consultant.

Do business people take the subject of happiness seriously?

When you start playing with a word like happiness, you are being provocative. It can sound light and fluffy, which is why we use measurement to ground it, make it more pragmatic. It’s the pragmatists of the world that we have to appeal to and make the case to them why happiness at work is really important. It’s easier to connect with enthusiasts and innovators, but the challenge is to connect with people who you’ve got to make the case to.

What information goes into creating the Happy Planet Index?

It measures the human experience: the quality measured by how well people’s lives are going and how long they live. Then there’s the ecological footprint, which measures how many resources we’re using to get to good lives. The happiness indicator—how happy they are—is taken from Gallup surveys and the world poll.

The ecological footprint in some ways is the most controversial especially in trying to measure the pressure we put upon the planet. It’s complex to measure everything a consumer uses and touches in their lives and how much of the planet’s resources that uses, but it definitely differentiates in realistic ways between nations.

Costa Rica is one of the happiest countries, according to the HPI. Why?

In terms of straight happiness, Costa Rica did come out on top in the world Gallup poll. The whole of Latin America does better than you might expect, given the economic inequalities there, the poverty, etc. Why does it do better? They have much stronger social networks, much more vibrancy to life and communities that really work well. Family is structurally stronger there, too.

People in that region generally are very vibrant despite difficult circumstances, such as rising crime levels and rising inequality. People in Costa Rica actually live longer than the people in the U.S., a startling fact itself. It also uses a third or a quarter of the resources of what Western European and North American countries do.

How do companies foster happiness and wellbeing?

They do it very explicitly. At Zappos, founder Tony Hsieh built the business model around it. He believed that to create happy customers you had to create happy employees. Zappos has been a very value-based organization for a long time. New organizations, less than 10 to 15 years old, often take this approach from the beginning.

It's more difficult to turn around organizations with a different focus. How do you prove to these organizations that they would become better if they took a different approach? CEOs who are open to learning a new way to do things find it a very interesting business model to adopt. There's so much unfulfilled human potential within organizations, and you're unlikely to release that potential with a command and control approach.

Is there a "Happy Company index" companies can use to make this business case?

That's the focus of our new business, Happiness Works, which addresses how you create positive change. We're designing tools that are measurement tools, but they lean into how to create positive change. They give the whole organization a score, as well as each team and individual. It then breaks those scores into the component parts so they can think about what drivers of happiness are working or not working for them.

What are the drivers of happiness?

For individuals there are five of them, what we call the five ways to wellbeing, which were developed by the New Economics Foundation from evidence gathered in the U.K. government's Foresight Project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing. They're a set of evidence-based actions which promote people's wellbeing: connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give. They're simple things individuals can do in their everyday lives.

Then there's the organizational system and how well it's managed, the physical environment and culture of the organization, what the organization is doing in a larger sense. Those are big things. Then there's what people do at work, where one could say the psycho/social needs start coming in. How much people can express themselves, how much they feel a sense of control, a sense of progressing, the strength of relationships. So being yourself, being autonomous, doing things you're good at and learning new things, getting on with people. Those are the four day-to-day things that translate into positive or negative experiences for people in the organization.

How much of a connection is there between wellbeing and innovation?

There's a lot of research, much of it from psychologist Barbara Fredrickson at the University of North Carolina, on the difference between the way people work if they're in a good mood or a bad mood. It's a huge body of work over 20 years, and I'm summarizing quickly, but basically she finds that people in good moods see the big picture much better. When you're in a bad mood you tend to narrow down to what's wrong. It's the only picture you see. But when you're in a good mood you can make connections and see things better, see relationships more in detail. You are more creative in that you will both be able to do more tasks, and do them better, in a certain amount of time.

There's this urban myth that creativity is a painful experience and great art is done by people who are tortured. There obviously are great artists that are tortured, but what's also true is that they weren't painting or creating when they were depressed. They were painting after those experiences. In a normal organization with normal populations, people in good moods are much more creative than people in bad moods.

Organizations need individually creative people but they also need systems that will support turning creativity into useful innovation. It's not enough to just make people happier, you also have to be open to challenges to the established way of doing things. By adapting internal systems, you can help your people turn that creativity into something the organization can profit from.

How can the physical environment promote happiness and wellbeing?

There are a lot of competing theories about how the physical environment of the workplace affects performance and morale. I would suggest that organizations create spaces that not only support people's direct work needs but also their happiness. So design for "collisions" where people bump into each other, create quiet spaces for reflection time, outdoor tracks for exercise and walking meetings as well as community spaces for gatherings and learning together. I think there is much opportunity to be both useful and playful with office design.

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NIC MARKS

UNDERSTANDING THE HAPPY PLANET INDEX

The HPI measures the extent to which countries deliver long, happy, sustainable lives for the people that live in them, by using data on life expectancy, experienced wellbeing and ecological footprint for 151 different countries.

$$\text{HPI} = \frac{\text{experienced wellbeing} \times \text{life expectancy}}{\text{ecological footprint}}$$

Experienced wellbeing is a number from 0 to 10, based on responses from each country. Life expectancy is in years. Ecological footprint (the amount of land required to sustain a country's per-capita consumption patterns) is measured in global hectares.

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