

When identity is tied to former employer, unemployed report higher well-being

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Unemployed workers who continue to identify with their former employer report higher well-being even after being fired or laid off from the company, according to a study published Nov. 9 in the *Journal of Managerial Psychology*.

The study, conducted by San Francisco State University Assistant Professor of Management Jennifer Tosti-Kharas, is among the first to explore how organizational identification relates to [job loss](#).

"These [unemployed](#) people have something to cling to by having had very positive associations with their [employer](#) in the past," Tosti-Kharas said. "If you never had a positive association with your employer, now you're out of a job and you don't have something positive in your past to make you feel better."

Tosti-Kharas surveyed 1,191 workers after recruiting participants through the alumni office of the university that they had attended. She surveyed the participants in June and December of 2008, and separated the participants into two groups: 45 who were unemployed at the start of the study, and 41 who lost their jobs during the course of the study. Workers who were self-employed, had willingly quit their jobs, or were fully employed throughout the study were discounted.

The unemployed professionals answered questions designed to measure their psychological well-being, [self-esteem](#), continued identification with the company and their [judgment](#) of the reason for their job loss. Those

who strongly identified with their former employer reported feeling more confident and having a greater sense of purpose and belonging during their [unemployment](#). For example, when someone insulted their former employer, they reported it felt like a personal insult. When referring to the organization, they used the term "we" rather than "they." This strong sense of self that was developed in relation to their company appeared to offset the [isolation](#) that is common during a job loss.

The results held only for those employees who attributed their job loss to themselves or their position in the company, rather than blaming the company itself.

"It's well known that when an employee strongly identifies with the organization they work for, they're more likely to go above and beyond and be engaged in their work, which is great for the well-being of individuals and organizations," Tosti-Kharas said. "But that sense of individual well-being had never been assumed to extend to former employees."

"It's all mental," she added. "It's a question of how much is your former organization still a part of who you are and how you define yourself as a person."

Tosti-Kharas noted that the mental benefits the unemployed workers enjoyed were a result of their own perceptions about themselves, not necessarily a continued social connection or interaction with former co-workers. Their positivity and self-esteem extended to their job search as well, further showing links between well-being and success in finding a new job.

The sample of participants was highly educated, and nearly half had worked in the financial industry prior to their job loss. The global economic crisis of 2008 occurred between the two survey dates, possibly

contributing to the amount of [participants](#) surveyed who had lost their jobs. The study was funded by the Management Department of the NYU Stern School of Business, where Tosti-Kharas earned her Ph.D.

Tosti-Kharas plans to extend the study in the future to a more diverse range of employment fields, economically disadvantaged workers and a longer time span.

Provided by San Francisco State University

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