

Joy can help us be better at work—here's how to find it

March 1 2023, by Tina Kiefer



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

"Choose a job you love, and you'll never work a day in your life."
Attributed [without much evidence](#) to Confucius, this quote has been featured on email signatures of workaholics for years.

[Recent research](#) has found "passion" is becoming a regular part of job

listings. At the same time, [younger workers](#) (millennials and [Gen Z](#)) have been [stereotyped](#) for protecting their work-life balance, with critics saying they are not interested in working hard and have a sense of entitlement about work.

The rise of quiet quitting and calls for better work-life balance suggest that falling in love with work and following our passions is unattainable, or at least out of fashion. But research shows that finding joy at work doesn't have to come at the expense of doing good work. In fact, it can even help.

[Positive emotions](#), such as joy, happiness and pride, happen when we accomplish something that brings us closer to a goal. This can be a work achievement (finishing a project), or a [social experience](#) with a colleague. These emotions [can improve](#) employee well-being and job performance, keep us motivated and engaged and lead to better work quality.

They can also [enhance teamwork](#), trust and a sense of belonging. This is especially true when we [have fun](#) in the workplace.

Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson, an expert in [positive emotions](#), suggests that experiencing fun and joy at work can [broaden our horizons](#). When we are enjoying ourselves, we are willing to try new things, engage in different kinds of behavior, and as a result, improve our abilities over time.

Negative emotions can focus our minds and narrow our attention on a particular issue, evident when we are anxious about solving a problem or overcoming an obstacle. But positive emotions can act as a [buffer against the many negative experiences](#) that we are inevitably exposed to at work. They can relieve stress, diffuse tension in difficult group situations, and reduce burnout.

Finding your flow

The pandemic has changed our experiences and expectations of work. Today, many [office workers](#) view some degree of flexibility—and the resulting improvements in [work-life balance](#)—as a standard job requirement. The "[great resignation](#)" suggests that some people would rather quit than lose flexibility and autonomy in their working arrangements.

[My research](#) found that people enjoy their work more when they are in a hybrid working environment, spending at least part of their week working from home. Of course, some were happy to be away from toxic office cultures or micromanaging supervisors, but crucially, they had a heightened sense of mastery over their work.

Many of us have experienced how much easier it is to accomplish things and stay motivated when we are deeply engaged and focused on a task. This phenomenon is [called "flow"](#), and it can be associated with feelings of joy, creativity and deep focus. For some people, it might be easier to find a flow state when they are working from home. For others, home might be a place of more distraction, and they might prefer to go into the office or work from a cafe.

Fun and joy can also be found in interactions with coworkers. Of course, this is more difficult to find when you are working in your own home. In [survey data](#) I collected during the pandemic, people said that they found their sense of belonging and connection with colleagues at work decreased.

The downside of joy

Despite the evidence in favor of more joy and positive emotions at work,

some organizations and managers remain skeptical. In some fields, there may be concerns that joy and fun can be a health and safety risk, or make it difficult to uphold professionalism.

And just as fun at work can enhance one's sense of belonging to the organization, it can also make some feel excluded and alienated, if they cannot or don't wish to participate in social activities or camaraderie.

There also seems to be a deeper running concern. For decades, company leaders and managers have strived to enhance productivity, make work more effective and cut costs. They might view people having fun at work as not taking the job seriously or not wanting to work hard.

This is very much in line with traditional thinking of the early days of management writers. Frederick Winslow Taylor, a pioneer of management consulting, [saw emotions as a distraction](#) from the main goal of work, which was to get the job done as efficiently as possible.

The puzzle of autonomy and flexibility and home, with belonging and socialization with colleagues, is one that will likely take more experimentation with hybrid working to solve. Some companies have [ordered](#) workers to return to the office, but the magic doesn't just happen by putting people in the same place. This is particularly the case when there are so many advantages to working from home.

Instead of worrying that joy and fun at work will distract people, managers should know that feelings of belonging and other positive emotions can also make people more creative and motivated. And if you're struggling at work, try talking to a colleague—even a short interaction could remind you that you're part of a team, and that joy is possible.

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Provided by The Conversation

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