**[The Unlikely Reasons Why We’re More Satisfied At Work](https://www.fastcompany.com/3051044/the-counterintuitive-reasons-why-were-more-satisfied-at-work" \o "The Unlikely Reasons Why We’re More Satisfied At Work)**

At first blush, the results of a recent Gallup poll about worker satisfaction seem like unequivocal good news. According to researchers, American workers are [generally more satisfied with their jobs](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/10/09/for-most-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-for-decades/), on a broad range of measures, than they were a decade ago. And while that could mean that companies are finally getting better at things like improving vacation time and health benefits, there may be a different explanation, too: We might just be lowering our expectations.

**IT PROBABLY ISN’T THE PERKS**

According to Gallup, which has tracked Americans’ opinions of more than a dozen aspects of their jobs since 1993, a majority of U.S. workers (57%, based on a survey of 485 adults who work full- or part-time) now say they’re “completely satisfied” with the vacation time they’re offered, up 10% since 2005. Health benefits saw an even bigger hike in approval–of 13 percentage points over the past decade–with 40% reporting full satisfaction with their coverage.

But have their benefits actually improved? The answer is complicated. For starters, Americans are uniquely terrible at actually going on vacation. A recent [Oxford Economics study](http://www.projecttimeoff.com/research/all-work-and-no-pay-impact-forfeited-time) found that we only use about 16 of an average 21 vacation days, which suggests that even if employers are offering more time off work, few employees are willing or able to take it.

And when it comes to health care, it’s doubtful that companies are getting more generous. Medical inflation [has been slowing](http://qz.com/356835/obamacare-fixed-us-healthcare-inflation/), thanks in large part to the Affordable Care Act, but David Lewis, CEO of the human resources consultancy Operations Inc., says most employees have yet to feel a difference. While workers may now have “more of an appreciation for and understanding of the system,” which could be boosting satisfaction, Lewis says he’s still seeing more companies tighten their belts rather than open their wallets.

The same goes for salaries. While only a third of U.S. workers today say they’re “completely satisfied” with how much they earn, the share who said the same a decade ago was just 25%. And yet [real wages have barely budged in the past 40 years](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/10/09/for-most-workers-real-wages-have-barely-budged-for-decades/).

**A MATTER OF MESSAGING?**

So why are we more satisfied with our jobs if nothing has really improved?

According to Dr. Jim Harter, Gallup’s chief scientist for Workplace Management and Well-being, “organizations may be doing a better job of communicating” their benefits to employees.

Lewis agrees that companies are now doing far better than they have in the past of “creating perceptions, but the reality is that these areas aren’t really getting a whole lot better.” He even dismisses some of the more recently touted changes–like the [mini-arms race in parental leave policies](https://www.fastcompany.com/3049508/the-future-of-work/how-netflixs-new-parental-leave-policy-will-impact-the-economy-and-the-ge)–as “a combination of PR stunt and sucker bets. They play really well in the press, and it sounds like we’re really becoming more in tune with European ways,” Lewis says, but as with vacation time, few employees will take full advantage of those shifts, and companies know it.

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That view might be a little too cynical. Work cultures may need to adjust before all employees feel justified in taking more time away, but plenty actually will. And the messaging argument doesn’t fully explain the rising satisfaction levels that we’ve already seen. It’s likely that the spread of user-friendly health care websites and apps are earning insurers higher marks from customers, but surely the more you know about your plan the better you can spot its shortcomings.

What’s more, some areas are getting worse marks in spite of genuine progress. Employees’ satisfaction with the flexibility of their hours has actually dropped over the past decade, from 62% to 58%, amid the [boom in telecommuting](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/08/your-money/when-working-in-your-pajamas-is-more-productive.html). And roughly 70% of workers have reported feeling stressed at work since Gallup first started its survey in the early ’90s, despite how much we’ve grown used to hearing about [the perils of stressful workplaces](https://www.fastcompany.com/3043112/the-future-of-work/the-terrible-things-your-work-stress-is-doing-to-your-health).

If employers *aren’t* offering better health and vacation benefits but we *are* gaining more flexible hours, then there must be some additional reason why those satisfaction trends run in the reverse directions.

**“WORK IS WORK”**

Rebecca Kiki Weingarten, a New York City-based executive coach, thinks she’s figured it out. “Sixty, eighty years ago, work was something you did to earn a living.” Then, around the middle of the 20th century, that started to change. “It took on this added, loaded meaning: ‘It needs to satisfy me emotionally, spiritually, in every way.’”

American workers are just demanding less of their employers. They’re also finding fulfillment–and, thanks to the expanding gig economy, income–from side projects.

In Weingarten’s view, the pendulum is now swinging back. As the economy continues to recover from the financial crisis, American workers are just demanding less of their employers. They’re also finding fulfillment–and, thanks to the expanding gig economy, income–from side projects.

She explains, “People are saying to themselves, ‘Well, I’ll make up the extra money.’ Or, ‘Is it really is worth [working harder] because now I get to spend more time with my family?’”

These considerations seem to point toward a new kind of employer-employee relationship–one that’s less oriented around the workplace altogether. “It’s a trade-off,” says Weingarten. “There’s a level of maturity that people are starting to have that they didn’t” a decade ago.

In other words, “work is work.”

**THE RELATIONSHIP FACTOR**

It might seem that employers have figured out how to keep their employees complacent while offering them less, but there’s likely more to it than that.

Perhaps it isn’t so much that employees are making do with worse as they’re thriving on less—or at least adapting to it.

According to Harter, the economic downturn did lead employers to squeeze more productivity from fewer employees, but the fact is that American workers have rated their salaries, chances of promotion, stress, and other factors poorly well before the financial crisis hit. Changes in the labor market, he says, are only “slightly related to levels of satisfaction of workers” and wouldn’t explain the discrepancies between satisfaction and real improvements.

Harter also cautions against reading too much into employees’ satisfaction with these “policy-oriented perks,” whose “value quickly depreciates when you have a poor manager.” Gallup recently found that [some 70% of U.S. employees feel disengaged at work](http://www.gallup.com/services/178514/state-american-workplace.aspx), largely due to managerial issues for which compensation and benefits “aren’t very effective long-term Band-Aids.”

Which may point to another reason why we’re happier in our jobs, one that wasn’t measured in this poll but has proven to be a crucial factor in job satisfaction overall: our relationships at work.

[According to some research,](https://www.fastcompany.com/3045445/hit-the-ground-running/why-it-should-be-important-to-your-boss-that-you-have-friends-at-work) it’s not more leisure time or even more meaningful work that makes us happy, it’s the quality of our relationships. In fact, it’s been estimated that having a friend whom you see on most days (likely in your workplace), increases your happiness [as much as earning $100,000 more each year](http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/10/social-connection-makes-a-better-brain/280934/) does. On the other hand, when you break a critical social tie, it’s like suffering a $90,000-per-year reduction in your income.

So perhaps it isn’t so much that employees are making do with worse as they’re thriving on less–or at least adapting to it. Maybe we’ve adjusted our expectations about what work can provide us and are starting to appreciate less quantifiable benefits, like having a boss you trust or a coworker you can confide in.

That might be something in its own right to feel satisfied about.

Question 1. What are some potential explanations for why job satisfaction levels are on the rise, even in the face of seemingly stagnant drivers?

Question 2. Which theory in the article is more compelling - that organizations are getting better at messaging or that employees are lowering expectations?



