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## Happiness at work in knowledge-intensive contexts: Opening the research agenda

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### ABSTRACT

In today's business environment, management of knowledge-intensive workers has become one of the most challenging elements to consider. To sustain a company's competitive advantage, highly skilled workers who are perfectly aligned and motivated in the organization are essential. However, happiness becomes essential for these type of employees. Happiness at work is a research topic that is growing in importance among academics, but requires further attention. Through a narrative synthesis method, we review, clarify and suggest future research lines to develop research on happiness at work in knowledge-intensive contexts.

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### 1. Introduction

It was Drucker (1959) who introduced the concept of knowledge-intensive workers, and since then the management of human resources has received increased attention. The ideas of knowledge-intensive companies, knowledge-intensive workers and knowledge-intensive contexts are difficult to separate, as all organizations and work require knowledge (Alvesson, 2001). Most knowledge is tacit and exists in the head of individuals (Polanyi, 1967), but the process of exchanging, combining, generating and acquiring external knowledge can be managed (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). Different perspectives on knowledge management highlight that integrative complexity needs an effective atmosphere (Kogut & Zander, 1992), such as the affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). This paper focuses on knowledge-intensive workers, namely workers with the capacity to solve complex problems through creative and innovative solutions (Hedberg, 1990). Managing knowledge-intensive workers to reach organizational objectives is a difficult managerial aspect. Knowledge-intensive

workers create, use and share knowledge, making them decisive to the success of their company, although some issues on how to best manage knowledge-intensive workers persist. Managers of knowledge-intensive companies normally fall into one of two types: scientists that have reconverted to become managers, or executives who have reached the scientific field with no research experience. The former managers conceive employees as equals, and the latter treats them as unskilled employees. The result is that workers become disappointed and unmotivated. Managers need to understand the needs and motivations of knowledge-intensive workers, as they are the basis of any firm's competitive advantage (Milne, 2007). However, this type of worker presents different characteristics and levels of output compared to normal personnel, and therefore needs different managerial approaches (Alvesson, 2001). The main issue concerning knowledge-intensive workers is to attract and retain them, generating commitment and loyalty. The motivation of intensive-knowledge workers becomes crucial for management (Boddy, 2008).

Knowledge-intensive workers need social interactions to communicate, collaborate and brainstorm with their intellectual peers. They also need to be treated as being different from other colleagues, in order to feel fully valued as being unique, and not merely as an interchangeable resource. They need their research projects to be customized according to their passions and skills,

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and closely matched to their main interests. Shaping a context that improves knowledge-intensive employees' happiness at work might lead them to feel motivated. It is crucial for knowledge-intensive workers to feel happy at work for them to perform at their best. Nevertheless, there is still debate on exactly what is happiness at work and how helpful it could be in the work context (Barrena-Martínez, López-Fernández, & Romero-Fernández, 2017; Luthans & Avolio, 2009; Salas-Vallina, López-Cabrales, Alegre, & Fernández, 2017; Vila-Vázquez, Castro Casal, & Álvarez Pérez, 2016). In this sense, the number of positive attitudinal concepts in this field has greatly increased in recent years (Salas-Vallina, López-Cabrales, et al., 2017). For example, a narrative review examined the concept of engagement, revealing an increasing interest in the positive attitudes' field of research (Bailey, Madden, Alfes, & Fletcher, 2017). Job satisfaction, engagement, commitment and well-being, among others, are central concepts in positive attitude research that aims to improve an employee's quality of life at work. The aim of this paper is to advance knowledge on happiness at work, at individual level, based on Fisher's (2010) work, yet focusing on knowledge-intensive workers. In the following pages, we set forth the following questions about happiness at work:

- (1) What are the key positive attitudinal constructs related to happiness at work?
- (2) How can we define happiness at work?
- (3) What are the antecedents and consequences of happiness at work?
- (4) What are the future required research lines?

This paper is organized as follows. First, the methodological approach is described. Next, the concepts related to positive attitudes and happiness at work, as well as the main theoretical approaches to explain positive attitudes at work in knowledge-intensive contexts are reviewed. Then, the findings regarding to the antecedents and outcomes of happiness at work are presented. Finally, the conclusions and suggestions for practice are explained.

## 2. Research methods

### 2.1. Data collection

This paper used a narrative evidence synthesis method in line with the principles of organization, transparency, replicability, quality, credibility and relevance. We followed a five-step systematic review (Suárez, Calvo-Mora, Roldán, & Perriñez-Cristóbal, 2017) defined by Briner and Denyer (2012). Narrative synthesis is an accurate method to analyze the story grounded in a diverse body of research, by giving reviewers the chance to generate ideas that give consistency to the data (Briner & Denyer, 2012). This method is driven by a set of principles rather than a single rigid protocol: planning, structured search, evaluation of the material against agreed eligibility criteria, analysis and thematic coding, and reporting. The wide diversity of concepts related to positive attitudes makes this method particularly appropriate in this case. Evidenced-based and systematic reviews are an efficient way of understanding what we know and what we do not know about a specific topic (Briner & Denyer, 2012). In healthcare research it is a well established method, and we are convinced that it offers considerable value to management researchers.

A first open-search approach brought 50,154 items from SCI-Expanded, SSCI, A&HCI, CPCI-SSH, ESCI, CCR-Expanded and the IC index. Then, we produced and refined an inclusive long string of appropriate search terms belonging to diverse disciplinary fields, using the CIMO framework (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). For this purpose, we considered the research questions regarding the

context in which data was collected, the interventions being assessed, the mechanisms through which the interventions would generate outcomes, and the outcomes as perceptible results. Taking this groundwork into account, we delimited our search to items written in English, and published since 2000, when Seligman's article of positive psychology was published. This paper was cited 3162 times in the Web of Science Core Collection. The refined search generated 14,805 items.

A group of experts, consisting of senior professors with broad research experience in the management field, and specialized in positive attitudes, set the following topics: 'happiness at work' OR 'employee happiness' OR 'work happiness' OR 'job happiness' OR 'organizational happiness' OR 'staff happiness' OR 'engagement' OR 'job satisfaction' OR 'commitment', ranging from January 2000 to December 2017. The search criteria were defined so that at least one of these terms had to appear in the title of the research paper. This structured search produced a total of 4373 results from the seven databases. The abstracts were first evaluated by two new research experts, who determined their quality and relevance, starting from the most cited papers in each year (Web of Science can order the results by the number of citations). A rating was used to assess papers that had been subject to a peer-review process, were written in English, produced since 2000, framed in knowledge-intensive workers, classified in the management field, dealt with the study of employees, or were theoretical items that presented significant information on the definition of happiness at work. In addition, the abstracts of each of these papers were evaluated again by two experts using previously established quality and significance criteria to reduce selection bias (Briner & Denyer, 2012). At this stage, 4284 items were removed, leaving 89 items to be considered (Fig. 1).

### 2.2. Data analysis

We followed the method of Popay et al. (2006), who suggested that a narrative synthesis should aim to examine the connections in the selected data within and between studies. In line with Nijmeijer, Fabbriotti, and Huijsman (2014), we first explored the main design characteristics of each piece of research and the implementation of the variables affected. Then, we generated factor clusters and produced sub-clusters through thematic examination. Of the 89 considered items, 10 were conceptual, 73 used empirical data and six were meta-analyses. 22 papers evaluated relevant outcomes, nine examined mediation effects, and 58 focused on key antecedents.

## 3. Definitions and theories of happiness at work

### 3.1. Definitions

The literature as a whole revealed that definitions of happiness in the work context could be classified in the following main groups: job satisfaction, engagement, commitment, hedonia and eudaimonia, well-being, psychological capital and happiness at work.

#### 3.1.1. Job satisfaction

Locke (1976) defined job satisfaction as a "positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences". Through the happy-productive worker model, job satisfaction has been connected to job performance (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Job satisfaction is a central concept in the management field (Chiva & Alegre, 2009), and refers to judgements about job characteristics, such as job conditions and opportunities (Moorman, 1993). This is the main difference compared to engagement, which refers to

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