
Plumbing for Joy? Be Your Own Boss The Wall Street Journal

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By economic yardsticks, Roger the Plumber should be feeling pretty low. Roger Peugeot, owner of the 14-employee Overland Park, Kan., plumbing company that bears his name, is part of a sector hit hard by shrunken credit and slumping sales. He has been forced to reduce staff and is battling new competition from other plumbers fleeing the construction industry.



'Roger the Plumber' owns his own business and is excited to go to work every day.

So why is Mr. Peugeot so happy? He genuinely likes fixing plumbing messes, for one thing, and despite the worst recession he has seen, "I'm still excited to get up and go to work every day," he says. He relishes running into people at the local hardware store whom he has helped in the past. And in hard times, he says, his fate is in his own hands, rather than those of a manager. "Even when things get tough, I'm still in control," he says.

In the broadest, most-comprehensive survey yet of how occupation affects happiness, business owners outrank 10 other occupational groups in overall well-being, based on the landmark survey of 100,826 working adults set for release today. Defined as self-employed store or factory owners, plumbers and so on, business owners surpassed 10 other occupational groups on a composite measure of six criteria of contentment, including emotional and physical health, job satisfaction, healthy behavior, access to basic needs and self-reports of overall life quality.

This puts Roger the Plumber well ahead of movers and shakers typically regarded as the top of the heap in society—professionals such as doctors or lawyers, who ranked second, and executives and managers in corporations or government, who came in third—according to the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, a collaboration between Gallup and Healthways, a Franklin, Tenn., health-management concern. This is despite business owners ranking below those more-prestigious occupations in physical health and access to basic needs, such as health care.

The findings, psychologists say, reflect the importance of being free to choose the work you do and how you do it, the way you manage your time, and the way you respond to adversity. Regardless of occupational field, the survey suggests that seeking out enjoyable work and finding a way to do it on your own terms, with some control over both the process and the outcome, is likely for most people to fuel satisfaction and contentment.

"Despite the recession, it still pays to be your own boss," says Frank Newport, editor in chief of the Gallup Poll. The survey, adds John Howard, director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, "reaffirms my view that the more control you have over your work, the happier you are."

Smaller studies have shown links between certain kinds of stress and particular job roles or employment groups. But the huge size of the Gallup-Healthways project, which conducts 1,000 telephone surveys a day, makes it possible to draw detailed, reliable distinctions among a large number of occupational groups. "I know of no other survey of this size" on the subject, says Humphrey Taylor, chairman of the Harris Poll, a competitor. The 11 occupational categories surveyed also include farmers and sales, clerical, construction, installation and service workers.

Unlikely Winners

Business owners may seem unlikely winners. About half of the nation's full-time small businesses typically fail within five years of start-up, and the rate has risen in the recession, says William Dennis, a senior research fellow with the National Federation of Independent Business Research Foundation. They are more likely to work extremely long hours than people in any other occupation group, other Gallup research shows.

The findings likely reflect declining quality-of-life in some professions, Dr. Howard says. Rising cost controls in medicine, for example, and mounting pressure to chalk up billable hours in law, have curtailed doctors' and lawyers' flexibility to control their work.

"Where professionals may have had greater freedom 20 or 30 years ago, many are now experiencing loss of control, erosion of satisfaction and increased stress," Dr. Howard says.

At the bottom of the heap, transportation and manufacturing workers scored lowest on well-being. These occupations tend to foster conditions Niosh has identified as contributors to unhealthy stress: lack of control or participation in decision-making, conflicting or unclear job expectations, and hectic tasks with little inherent meaning.

Management and executive jobs have gotten tougher, too, during the period the Gallup-Healthways data were gathered, the first eight months of this year. Beset by cost cuts and layoffs, corporate bosses at all levels now share more of these stress-inducing conditions.

Business owners stand in stark contrast. Even in tough times, "you do your own thinking and no one can tell you you're wrong," says Edwin Locke, an industrial psychologist and professor emeritus of leadership and motivation at the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland. "You make your own decisions, and if you're wrong, reality gives you the feedback," he says.

In a study of how occupation affects happiness, business owners came out on top.

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Overall well-being</u>
Business Owner	72.5
Professional	71.5
Manager/Executive	70.9
Farming/Forestry	67.8
Sales	67.6
Clerical	66.1
Construction	65.0
Installation	64.4
Service	64.0
Transportation	62.6
Manufacturing	62.1

Source: Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index

Note: Scores are based on respondents' answers to six categories of questions about work and life quality.

Staying in Control

As a business owner, Mr. Peugeot says, "even when things are out of your control, as they are with this economy, you're still in control of your relationships" with customers. Corporate managers and executives may "sit and wonder if they're going to be laid off, or get frustrated with the inabilities of management," he says. "If you're the owner, you may have to say, 'I screwed up,' but it's a lot better than saying, 'I didn't deserve that.' "

Other patterns among the self-employed help explain their psychological well-being. Entrepreneurs tend by nature to be optimistic, evidenced in their willingness to strike out on their own, psychologists say. Laura Street, of Pleasanton, Calif., isn't making a profit in the handmade-jewelry business, Ampersand Designs, which she co-founded last year. But to her, the glass is half

full: She says sales are rising, she expects to turn a profit soon, and she loves her work.

"Yes, the economy is bad. But we aren't coming into a workplace wondering, 'Are we going to get fired today?' " she says. "If you control your destiny, the well-being is something that just comes naturally."

The freedom business owners have to control their schedules enables them to adhere more closely to their personal priorities, says Amy Neftzger, an organizational psychologist for Healthways. They have the flexibility to "make it to a child's play, or spend time with family," she says.

Golfing With the Mayor

Many also have community ties that feed a sense of well-being. James Barnard, chief financial officer of his family's business, Barnard Manufacturing in St. Johns, Mich., didn't have a great summer. He and his cousin Gary Barnard, president of the heavy-equipment parts maker, stopped drawing paychecks to help the company through a steep sales drop. They agonized over a decision to lay off dozens of workers, and Gary sat nearly alone in the plant for several weeks, answering phones.

But their company has a good image in the community, and "it's a big deal to us to keep that going," James says. He takes part in civic groups and enjoys golfing with the mayor and police chief. Pressed to describe the rewards of running a family business, he says, "It's pride. Definitely pride."

Another surprise from the survey: Farmers and other outdoor workers, from farmhands to forestry workers, scored No. 1 among all groups in "emotional health," as measured mainly by the amount of smiling, laughter, enjoyment and happiness they report experiencing the previous day—despite the fact that farmers ranked near the bottom in access to basic needs.

Steve Swenka, a Tiffin, Iowa, farmer, had just finished mowing two fields of hay when I reached him by phone last week to discuss the poll. The results didn't surprise him. Farm work, he says, is pretty trying. "When you're out there in the heat and the dust, sweating, you may feel miserable," he says. But over time, "you can see the progress, the fruits of your labor".

"And when the day is over and you see the loads of hay stacked, there's something fulfilling about hard manual labor like that," he says. "You forget your little troubles, and start to see the bigger picture."