

Now hiring: Chief Happiness Officer

First appearing in the United States in the early 2000s, the job of 'Chief Happiness Officer' has in recent years begun to attract advocates in Europe. The task of these 'corporate happiness managers' is to introduce ways of making employees feel happier at the office. But can the happiness of the collective really depend on an individual? Read on for a portrait of a profession that, falling somewhere between marketing strategy and managerial innovation, isn't always all smiles.

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At Castelis, a French IT engineering company, Christelle Kirn, 32 years old, has the position of Chief Happiness Officer (CHO). The ultimate nanny, she takes care of her web-developer and project-manager colleagues, who spend their days in front of a screen. To 'improve their quality of life at the office', she has installed a table football set and a ping-pong table in the cafeteria. 'As long as the work gets done, there's no reason why they shouldn't have a game,' she says, smiling. 'It's mostly a matter of trust between them and management.' Christelle also watches over their health, with organic fruit and massage sessions. 'I brought in an osteopath to teach them the right way to sit at a screen, but other ideas are down to their initiative, like the siesta room and the vegetable garden on the terrace,' says this cheerful employee, who is also responsible for organising drinks and get-togethers designed to 'promote bonding'.

'The things I organise are also meant to increase employee loyalty,' acknowledges Christelle. And since her position was created in 2018, it indeed seems that staff turnover has dropped. In the current context of talent shortage, tech businesses have

to 'win candidates over', not only to lure them in but also to retain them. 'It's a kind of reversal of what you normally see in the world of work,' comments Stéphane Woelfel, co-manager at Castelis. Salaries are more or less the same for similar vacancies, so having a CHO on the staff can make all the difference.

Emergence of a new profession

The post of CHO first appeared in the United States in the early years of this century. It was the engineer Chade-Meng Tan, responsible for employees' personal development at Google, who invented the concept of 'happiness management'. Little by little, the position spilled over from Silicon Valley to be taken up by others.

Others like the American billionaire Tony Hsieh. His company, Zappos, sold shoes online, but he claimed he was 'delivering happiness' to customers. To do this, happiness had to be at the heart of his business strategy. 'So he swapped his CEO hat for a CHO one,' says Laurence Vanhée, one of the first happiness managers in Europe,

known for revolutionising the Belgian Ministry of Social Security between 2009 and 2013. Vanhée, who had vowed 'never to be unhappy at work again', was particularly impressed by Hsieh's ideas. In 2010, she changed the job title of HR Manager on her business card to that of CHO. 'At the time, there were only 12 of us in Europe, [including] a Brit who went around hospitals dressed as a clown and styled himself as a CHO, [and] an Austrian employed by Vienna City Council to make it the happiest town in the world.'

In Britain, the post of CHO enjoyed a media buzz when Prince Harry, King Charles III's second son, was recruited by a Silicon Valley start-up as an 'impact manager', often another term used to designate a CHO – others include 'Mr. Happiness', 'Feel-Good Manager' or 'Employee Experience

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Manager'. 'This job is open to everyone,' says Sarah Metcalfe, Co-Leader at Woohoo Inc., one of the few companies that offer CHO training leading to a certificate in the United Kingdom, where the post is not yet common. In France too, the number of CHOs is still limited. There were only around 100 of them on LinkedIn in September 2022. The role of a CHO differs from one company to another and, along with this, the budget and the tools made available. Each of them has to come up with a recipe for happiness from the available ingredients. At Ubisoft France, 32-year-old Marie Simonian manages a team of 12 people. A graduate in hospitality management, she has an annual budget of around 1 million euros to 'make the place attractive'. Among other things, she has set up a gym and a concierge service that will 'clean your suit'. In another variant of the role, Rose*, a former employee of a start-up based in London, recalls that 'the CHO was a cheerful trainee, whose function was to spread her sunny disposition around. She brought round biscuits and didn't have an office.' It seems many CHOs link happiness with food, sometimes to the point of indigestion. When she was appointed, 27-year-old Rose embraced the hedonistic vision of her company, but very soon became disillusioned. The focus on wellbeing made her feel indebted. So, in the end, the biscuits put her off.

'Eating up their whole life'

This vagueness about what a CHO is helps to discredit the position. In France, its appearance at the start of the 2010s met with harsh criticism, including that it was the archetype of the 'bullshit job'¹. 'Candy is carrot version 2.0. A new kind of bait to create healthy motivation and a feel-good atmosphere (...). Even if it's bad for your teeth,' comments Mathilde Ramadier in her book *Bienvenue dans le Nouveau monde* (Welcome to the New World)². Recounting her experiences in American and German start-ups, Ramadier has a go at the corporate drinks gatherings where employees share photos of themselves smiling broadly on their social networks, turning themselves into a 'propaganda tool'. They stay on later at work... and woe betide anyone who turns down the invitation!

Tiffany* has experienced this kind of pressure full on. Every Monday, as an employee of a Parisian company specialising in reintegration into employment, she had to present her 'weather forecast' for the day. '[This was] a meeting at which our managers asked us to assess our mood on a scale

of 1 to 10. If you said 3, you were soon labelled as the moaner, the ungrateful one. People start turning their backs on you and you get blamed for spoiling the atmosphere.' Behind a superficial smile, there is increasing bad feeling. 'The company was growing, so the founders were asking us to be more flexible and 1 000% committed, like them. Except that, for your part, you're paid 10 times less and you don't have all the resources you need to work well.' Backed up by an independent occupational physician, Tiffany, along with some other employees, set up a working group to give voice to their troubles. 'Which the managers didn't like, because they had no control over it. As far as management were concerned, everything was fine, the targets were being met. They did appoint a CHO to "recreate a family spirit", but our claims were ignored.' For Tiffany, this was the last straw. She handed in her resignation – 'reluctantly, because I liked my job, and my colleagues had become friends.'

The idea of happiness at work has been around for a few decades. 'For more than a century, the dominant model was that of the bureaucratic business concern,' explains Thibaut Bardon, Academic Director at Audencia Business School. 'At the end of the 1970s, this centralised, hierarchical model met with criticism. That was when the idea emerged that a company can be a place of professional, but also personal, fulfilment.' It is often said that employees who feel fulfilled work better than others. But, according to Bardon, research on this subject is contradictory. 'It's hard to say for sure whether there is a positive link between employees' happiness and business performance.'

And the encroachment of working life into private life can be damaging. By trying to make their daily lives easier, CHOs make employees dependent on the company. 'They must be allowed the freedom to build their own happiness outside too,' stresses Bardon. 'If they get dismissed or fall ill, they lose something more important, because work has eaten up their whole life.'

The art of experiment

Should we get rid of CHOs? 'Appointing someone to improve people's wellbeing without asking why they need it or why they are suffering, including in terms of working conditions, is like putting a bandage on a wound without disinfecting it first,' says occupational psychologist Sabine Grégoire. 'Something is being suppressed that, to be healthy, should be expressed.' Some CHOs

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* Name has been changed.
1. See Coutrot article, p. 37.
2. Translator's own translation.

deny this and see their job rather as field-work aiming to analyse and address the things in a company that are going wrong. And that takes time, as Anne Edvire can attest. Appointed in 2018 as the CHO in a French engineering school formed out of the merger of two institutions, it took this 50-something-year-old more than a year to 'get the teams to bond'. Before becoming a CHO, she had spent her career in Anglo-American companies, where the employees were offered 'ice-breakers' to lighten the atmosphere. One of the exercises was to 'make yourselves laugh by pulling faces at each other'. 'People in France were completely averse to them,' recalls Edvire, who soon gained the nickname 'the American' amongst the staff. The CHO ended up keeping a low profile and brought the employees' own recommendations to management to ease the tensions in the school.

If they are really to improve conditions in a company, CHOs should have a seat on the management committee, argues Laurence Vanhée. She introduced teleworking as soon as she arrived at Belgium's Social Security Ministry, well before the Covid pandemic. 'A liberation, because I had more than five hours' travel a day,' recalls her former colleague, Corinne Houbrech. 'My self-confidence increased because, in a one-on-one meeting, Laurence emphasised my qualities rather than my mistakes, unlike my previous manager.' She remembers a day when 'Laurence got annoyed when she received a breastfeeding break form on her desk. Actually, it was compulsory to give line management three weeks' notice of breastfeeding.' The CHO soon abolished this

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aberration. ‘By reorganising the work we were able to save 12 million euros a month in rental and ancillary costs,’ says Vanhée proudly. ‘The resignation rate dropped by 75%, absenteeism by 26%, productivity increased by 20% and applications went up by 500%.’ Another outcome: ‘We logged zero strike days.’ Vanhée now heads up a consultancy on happiness at work. Her average fee starts at 3 500 euros a day.

A right to wellbeing at work

The Belgian General Federation of Labour (FGTB) admits that it has ‘never heard of the job of CHO’ but that it is ‘sceptical’ about this post, for which there is no formal training. In any case, not all firms have the resources or the will to procure the services of a happiness manager. ‘The employer

expects a contribution from the employee, not the employee’s happiness,’ stresses occupational psychologist Grégoire. If there is any obligation, it is the one that falls to every employer, that of ‘taking the necessary measures to ensure the safety and protect the physical and mental health of employees, as set out in the Labour Code in France’ – and, at the EU level, by the Framework Directive on Safety and Health at Work.

As Daphné Breton, occupational risks prevention officer, laments, ‘a lot of companies prefer to pay [for] the number of occupational accidents and illnesses that they log – because it’s simpler – rather than investing in improving working conditions and organisation.’ Nevertheless, in light of the undeniable rise of PSR in European workplaces³, ‘[E]mployers are finally opening their eyes to the consequences of a lack of prevention and detection,’ stresses Kevin

Flynn, Policy and Communications Advisor at Eurocadres, the union of professionals and managers. If there is a consensus on the subject among the various political parties, Flynn hopes the Commission will take action to strengthen European legislation on psychosocial risks.⁴

At Google, having a happiness manager did not prevent a wave of lay-offs. Deemed to be unfair, these dismissals instead triggered, in early 2011, the formation of the very first trade union at the company. Other unions have also sprung up in leading American private-sector firms in recent years, including Amazon and Apple. Meanwhile, in Europe, faced with inflation, labour movements claiming wage increases are multiplying: in Belgium, more than 70 000 workers took to the streets in June 2022, and in the United Kingdom mass strikes brought the country to a standstill in August. As the authors of *Manufacturing Happy Citizens* affirm, with all due respect to Mr. Happiness, feelings like anger or resentment might be ‘negative’, but social change and the rejection of the existing order owe much to them. ●

3. See Bérastégui article, p. 14.

4. See Staunton interview, p. 18.

↳ **CHOs are responsible for spreading joy... up until the point of nausea.**

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