Why business suddenly cares about staff being happy

Christopher Scanlon

This article is part of a series, On Happiness, examining what it means and how it might be achieved in the 21st century.

Clothing retailer Cotton On hit the headlines this year after reportedly instructing staff that failing to have “fun” and “keep it real” are sackable offences. Has Cotton On suddenly — and unexpectedly — gotten in touch with its sensitive side?

Unlikely. A more likely reason for businesses’ current interest in happiness and wellbeing has to do with cold hard economics and shifts in the labour force. Happiness, in short, is good for business.

This is particularly the case in economies such as Australia, where around four out of every five jobs are in the services sector. Services by their nature tend to be delivered in person and are intangible.

In an economy where profit increasingly comes from delivering services rather than making stuff, the emotional comportment of workers isn’t just an added extra. It’s indistinguishable from the product itself.

Service with a smile

Whether it’s a flight attendant calming a white-knuckle flyer, caregivers looking after patients or a sales assistant greeting customers with a smile, the rise of service jobs places an added premium on what US sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild called “emotional labour” — that is positive emotional displays performed for paying customers.

Little wonder that happiness — and its outward expressions such as “fun” — have become big business.

In retail and other service industries, competition from online providers is only going to intensify employers’ focus on the emotional lives of their workers since it’s one area where in-person service providers can carve out a competitive advantage.

After all, the army of warehouse wage slaves who fill the tubs at ASOS or The Iconic could have the emotional range of a parsnip, and the customer experience wouldn’t be dented one bit. So long as the parcels are delivered on time, customers aren’t even aware of whether workers are having a good day or not.

Things are different for bricks-and-mortar operations like Cotton On. To attract and retain customers, they need to create an experience that makes people want to come back for more. Positive emotional displays by workers are one of the ways in which these service providers can distinguish their offerings from competitors.

As such, we can expect service companies to invest much more in developing their staff’s capacity to perform – or fake – emotions for better or for worse. And it’s probably for the worse.

The emotional cost of faking it

The intensification of emotional labour in the service industries is likely to have a range of unintended consequences.

Just as the introduction of electronic typewriters and computers in the 1970s and ‘80s produced a range of hand and forearm conditions known as repetitive strain injuries (RSI), as office workers sat at desks in fixed postures performing repetitive tasks for long periods, the spread and intensification of emotional labour throughout the workforce is likely to produce its own set of maladies.
German researchers Christian Dormann and Dieter Zapf, for example, argue that workers who fake emotions risk “emotional dissonance”, which can be defined as “discrepancies between felt and displayed emotions resulting from emotional labour”.

As Hochschild writes in her book The Managed Heart:

> Maintaining a difference between feeling and feigning over the long run leads to strain.

Emotional dissonance can lead to emotional burnout and situations where people become estranged from their own emotions from the effort of displaying — and often fabricating — positive emotions day in and day out.

With the intensification of emotional labour, conditions like emotional dissonance threaten to be the RSI of the service industries.

Such is the concern about the impact of such problems on productivity and profitability that there is now academic literature about how to avoid emotional burnout. Strategies range from more effective screening procedures – to weed out employees who might be susceptible to such emotional burnout – to devising coping strategies.

Pieter A. Van Dijk and Andrea Kirk-Brown note the negative side of emotional dissonance but also suggest that “display rules” — such as those provided to Cotton On staff — can help workers to manage such emotions by rationalising them.

Interviews with tourism and visitor staff revealed a number of coping strategies to rationalise away negative feelings. As one interviewee explained to Van Dijk and Kirk-Brown:

> You’re constantly reminding yourself (what you’re here for) if you are having an off day.

Whether such strategies work over the longer term is open to question. And whether such emotions come back to bite workers in other area of their lives is another question.

While much attention has, rightly, been paid to the physical working conditions of workers in warehouses and the world’s sweatshops that churn out the goods we buy, it’s perhaps time that we thought through the consequences for workers who engage in the mass production of happiness.