Will Smile for Food

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By KAREN LANGHAUSER, Editor-in-Chief, Food Manufacturing

This just in: A recently released Conference Board research survey revealed that U.S. job satisfaction has reached the lowest recorded level in 22 years.

The survey found that only 45 percent of Americans are happy with their jobs. Given a U.S. labor force of around 140 million, this means 77 million people wake up and go to work unhappy every day. No wonder our morning commutes are so rough.

While visiting Thailand last November, I couldn't help but notice that every employee I encountered seemed happy and engaged in his or her job. After visiting a few plants, I found out that food processing facilities in Thailand take very good care of their employees. This includes shuttling them to and from work, and even in some cases, offering them housing. The plant manager at the Jelly Belly facility told me the company provides free meals for its workers while they are at work. I looked at him quizzically and he said, quite simply, "People are happier when they have enough to eat."

Can it be that simple? On a small scale, maybe. Who doesn't get cranky when they forget to eat? Looking back on the holidays, the most enjoyable times for me were, in fact, family meals and holiday food traditions. If food really does equate to happiness, it would mean that on some level, the food industry holds the key to its country's happiness.

That's a lot of responsibility. It is estimated that nearly 1 billion people around the globe do not have enough to eat. That's a lot of unhappy people. We recently ran an article [1] by Jeff Simmons, President of Elanco Animal Health, about the disturbing new trend of criticism against technologies that allow farmers to produce food more efficiently. Simmons points out, "technology drives improved efficiencies which translate into lower production costs. So, what if efficiency-enhancing technologies were denied or removed from the food manufacturing industry? The consequences of lower efficiencies and higher production costs that would result from restricting food manufacturers' access to technology would challenge all sectors involved in the food supply chain."

Basically, the food industry has a huge job to do, and yet is potentially being denied the tools to do this job because our society has become overly critical of mass food production.

Back to the disgruntled employees. I'm sure there are plenty of well-fed Americans who still hate their jobs, so maybe the food equals happiness equation is somewhat simplistic. But I'm always fascinated by the extensive role the food industry plays in people's lives. It makes your realize how far the industry has come in the last few decades. I'm one of those people who watches automated, mass production of food in awe, rather than in disgust. Maybe next time they survey American workers, they should wait till after lunch.

Are you more productive on a full belly? Let me know by e-mailing karen.langhauser@advantagemedia.com [2].

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