

## Research Shows Unionized Workers Are Less Happy, but Why?

- [Patrice Laroche](#)

AUGUST 30, 2017

Many employers are paying more and more attention to the well-being of their employees and to how they perceive their current jobs, [especially because employee satisfaction is associated with important work-related outcomes](#) such as organizational commitment and job performance, as well as with lower levels of turnover and absenteeism. But what role do unions, historically advocates for the well-being of workers, play in promoting employee happiness? The relationship between union membership and job satisfaction is still disputed vigorously among scholars. Many of the [early studies suggest](#) that union members are less satisfied than nonunion workers but are also less inclined to quit their jobs. This surprising finding has been considered an anomaly by many researchers, as unions should achieve better working conditions, which common sense suggests should lead to higher job satisfaction.

[My research](#) helps answer this puzzle. In a recent meta-study, I found that unions don't seem to make workers less satisfied. Rather, workers who are likely to be dissatisfied — even after controlling for various aspects of their work — are more likely to join unions.

[In his seminal 1978 work](#), Richard B. Freeman suggested that this apparent paradox could reflect the role of unions as a way for employees to voice critical attitudes toward the workplace. In order for the worker's voice to be heard effectively, the union's role included drawing workers' attention to what was wrong with their jobs. (Freeman also noted that this could benefit companies: By providing employees a voice, unions gave workers the option to complain about problems rather than leave their jobs.)

According to this way of thinking, the dissatisfaction of union members makes some strategic sense — dissatisfaction may actually increase the bargaining power of the union and motivate both sides to view workplace problems as more serious.

Although this theory is interesting, an alternative view to the “voice hypothesis” is the “sorting hypothesis.” For example, workers who experience poor working conditions are more likely to complain and to join a union. Similarly, workers can be more or less irritable and fussy and so are more or less inclined to join a union to express their dissatisfaction. Thus, the sorting hypothesis postulates that the characteristics of individuals who join a union or the features of the workplace are likely to influence the discontent of union members and the fact that individuals tend to unionize. In this view, it's not that being unionized makes employees less satisfied; it's that being the type of person who's often dissatisfied or working in a place where there's lots to be dissatisfied about makes you more likely to join a union.

Which theory is right? Ultimately, it's an empirical question.

The purpose of my study was to provide a systematic and quantitative review of the existing empirical evidence on the effects of unionization on overall job satisfaction. I conducted a meta-analysis with results from a pool of 235 estimates from 59 studies published in academic journals from 1978 to 2015. Meta-analysis is particularly useful for identifying and quantifying patterns, for drawing inferences from a diversity of results, and for generalizing from results derived from numerous single studies. I employed a meta-

regression analysis to quantify the effect of unionization on job satisfaction and to identify the main factors underlying the diversity in the results reported in existing empirical studies.

Overall, I confirmed that unionization is negatively related to job satisfaction. Furthermore, the results suggest that the difference in job satisfaction between union members and nonunion members can be explained by a *selection effect* rather than a *causal effect*.

The meta-analysis controlled for differences across individuals, jobs characteristics (such as monthly pay, monthly hours, and so on), and workplace characteristics (industry, workplace size, workforce composition, whether the establishment is publicly owned), and revealed that individual attributes have a more important effect than workplace attributes on the feeling that workers have toward their jobs.

That is, some individuals seem to be characterized by higher aspirations toward their work environment, which leads them to join a union. Evidence also indicates that some other individual dispositions can influence job satisfaction. For example, ideological sympathy toward unions is an important factor that can lead an individual to join one, especially when there is freedom of choice about union membership, as is the case in some European countries.

Unfortunately, many of the studies in this literature don't pay sufficient attention to these sorts of individual attributes. And the literature on this topic peaked in the early 2000s. As we academics like to say: More research is needed.

My results dispute the idea that unions cause their employees to be dissatisfied; the dissatisfaction of union members is real, but it's due to the working conditions and the types of workers that tend to be unionized. That puts the onus for workplace satisfaction squarely on companies. The results suggest that dissatisfaction can't be blamed on the union, which means HR managers should address workers' expectations, in particular their need to express their discontent with certain elements of their jobs. It may be advisable to implement systems of employee representation and expression, especially when there is no union representative in the workplace. Workplace practices such as suggestion boxes or working groups aim to encourage employee participation and involvement in the attainment of workplace objectives. By providing information to management about employees' collective preferences, these workplace practices can enable HR departments to choose a better mix of working conditions, workplace rules, and employee remuneration. This can produce a more satisfied, cooperative, and productive workforce.

---

[Patrice Laroche](#) is an affiliate professor at ESCP Europe (Paris) and a professor of management at Université de Lorraine (France). He is also the scientific co-director of the ESCP Europe Chair on "Industrial relations and firm competitiveness". His research focuses on employment and labor relations and especially on the effects of trade unions on firm performance.