

Clergy are the most satisfied with their jobs; lawyers, doctors down on the list

Money really can't buy happiness, study finds

By Barbara Rose
Tribune staff reporter

The old saw "money can't buy happiness" apparently holds true when it comes to work.

Highly-paid professionals like doctors and lawyers didn't make the cut when researchers set out to find the most satisfied workers.

Clergy ranked tops in both job satisfaction and general happiness according to the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Physical therapists and firefighters were second and third ranked in job satisfactions, with more than three-quarters reporting being "very satisfied."

Other occupations in which more than 60 percent said they were very satisfied included teachers, painters and sculptors, psychologists and authors.

"The most satisfying jobs are mostly professions, especially those involving caring for, teaching and protecting others and creative pursuits," said Tom W. Smith, director of NORC's General Social Survey, a poll supported by the National Science Foundation.

The worker satisfaction study, set for release Tuesday, is based on data collected since 1988 on more than 27,500 randomly selected people.

For the most satisfied workers, intrinsic rewards are key, the study suggests.

"They're doing work they're very proud of, helping people," Smith said.

Clergy ranked by far the most satisfied and the most generally happy of 198 occupations.

Eighty-seven percent of clergy said they were "very satisfied" with their work, compared with an average 47 percent for all workers. Sixty-seven percent reported being "very happy," compared with an average 33 percent for all workers.

Jackson Carroll, Williams professor emeritus of religion and society at Duke Divinity School, found similarly high satisfaction when he studied Protestant and Catholic clergy, despite relatively modest salaries and long hours.

"They look at their occupation as a calling," Carroll said. "A pastor does get called on to enter into some of the deepest moments of a person's life, celebrating a birth and sitting with people at times of illness or death. There's a lot of fulfillment."

Others in helping professions describe their work as a calling.

"I believe I was probably put on this earth to make someone's life a little easier; that's what I get out of my job," said Gina Kolk, an Oak Park physical therapist who has practiced 23 years. "I love my job. I think it's because I see results very quickly. I see positive things happen to people very quickly. I get rewarded every day by what I do."

Satisfaction generally rises with social status, and higher status often goes hand in hand with higher pay, Smith said. An exception is doctors, a high-paying profession that ranked No. 1 in occupational prestige. General practitioners earn more than twice as much as physical therapists, for instance, average \$140,370 annually compared with \$65,350, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Yet doctors scored lower in satisfaction and happiness.

Peter Eupierre, 55, an internal medicine physician who practices in Melrose Park, had eight patients in his waiting room and three in examining rooms Tuesday afternoon.

“I think most doctors are satisfied; the problem is we have so much pressure,” he said. “The demand for time is such, we are always behind and sometimes it can be pretty stressful.”

“When someone comes in ill and you’re able to restore them to health, there’s nothing greater than that. [But] there are so many regulations, it’s not like it used to be. The demands outside the actual patient care are much greater than they used to be.”

Occupations with the least satisfied and happy workers tended to be low-skill manual and service jobs, Smith found.

Roofers, waiters and laborers ranked at the bottom in job satisfaction, with as few as one in five reporting they were very satisfied.

Bartenders, known for listening to other people’s troubles, apparently need sympathetic ears: Only 26 percent said they were very satisfied.