Narratives of Job Satisfaction on the World Wide Web: Interpretations of Value and Reward Within the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America”

Douglas J. Swanson, Ed.D APR
Narratives of Job Satisfaction on the World Wide Web:
Interpretations of Value and Reward Within the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America”

Douglas J. Swanson, Ed.D, APR
University of Wisconsin–La Crosse

This research has not been published elsewhere. The author thanks the students of CST 362, Public Relations Tools & Strategies, Fall 2003, for their participation in the research endeavor.

The author is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at UW-L, and can be reached at:

Department of Communication Studies
319 Center for the Arts
La Crosse, WI 54601
(608) 787-8728
swanson.doug@uwlax.edu

Running head: Narratives of Job Satisfaction
Narratives of Job Satisfaction on the World Wide Web:

Interpretations of Value and Reward Within the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America”

Running head: Narratives of Job Satisfaction
Abstract

This research analyzed employee job satisfaction narratives on World Wide Web sites of companies named among *Fortune* magazine’s “100 Best Companies to Work for in America.” Fewer than one-third of WWW sites included narratives. Narratives were most likely to express job satisfaction in personal, emotional terms and least likely to identify job security, benefits, or compensation as important rewards of work. Narratives often appeared targeted toward new college graduates. Clichés were used excessively in Web sites and narratives.
Introduction

This research focuses on the use of narratives of job satisfaction on corporate World Wide Web sites. Studying these narratives and their use allows us to learn more about the business community and how it communicates specific messages online – in this case, what businesses want the public to know about worker satisfaction.

In the U.S. and other capitalist nations, there is nearly universal use of the Web by large businesses to establish and maintain corporate image and promote ideas that are in harmony with that image. At the same time, consumers are turning to the Web in increasing numbers as a primary source of information about businesses. In many ways, the Web is becoming the dominant medium of information exchange among major business entities and the people they interact with.

A relatively new development of the Web involves the labor marketplace. Newspapers in the U.S. have experienced a dramatic drop in revenues from classified advertising as businesses have moved job advertisements to the Web. Unemployed people are turning by the millions to online job placement services and bulletin boards to find employment – along with millions of already-employed people who use online resume services to post their qualifications in hope of finding a better job.

In a general promotional context, narratives of job satisfaction on corporate Web sites can help establish the image of a business and support its claims of a positive, productive work climate. Narratives can, indirectly, show how the company supports quality of life issues that are important to its employees and to the general public. Although online narratives exist in the ethereal world, they have the potential to create strong emotional attachments between a business and users of its Web site. These users could be current employees, or people who are not employed by the company but are seeking information about job prospects. These users could later initiate a variety of different real world attachments with the firm based on information obtained from the Web site. Thus, effective use of narratives of job satisfaction would support a company’s personnel recruitment and retention efforts.
This research takes a first step toward greater understanding how narratives of job satisfaction are used on business Web sites. The population for study consists of companies included in the 2003 list of “100 Best Companies to Work for in America” – a ranking for Fortune magazine based on employee attitude surveys, culture audits, and other supporting information submitted by workers. Using these 100 firms as a starting point, the research examines the use of narratives, their structure and focus, and the extent to which narratives appear to contribute to user perceptions of sites analyzed.

The examination cannot gauge the authenticity or accuracy of the narratives. It cannot reveal the decision-making processes that resulted in narratives’ use on Web sites. But it does allow for us to develop new perspectives on how job satisfaction is defined and expressed in the online marketplace.

Literature Review

The World Wide Web is the graphically-driven network dimension of the Internet. Its existence was made possible in the late 1980s through a series of software advances which allowed documents to share a common coded language (Rich, 1999). Today, the WWW is a vivid, colorful environment which uses motion, color, and sound to catch and hold users’ attention (Marks & Dulaney, 1998). It is an environment where people do not just read information. They participate in it (Rich, 1999).

The Web has changed our understandings of commerce through its development of an “informational and global economy” (Castells, 1996, p. 66). In this new economy, information does not just create value – information is value (Negroponte, 1995). The benefits for researchers and scientists are limitless, as thousands of new online sources of information come into being each year, and faster and more accurate browsers allow users to find the knowledge they seek (Bederson, Hollan, Stewart, et al, 1998).

In a recent two year period, CommerceNet estimated a 40% increase in consumer users worldwide, with 349 million people using the Web by the end of 2002, and one-third of those users in the U.S. (CommerceNet, . . ., 2002). While it is difficult to quantitatively estimate growth in the content consumers are accessing online,
researcher R. H. Zakon estimated in early 2002 that somewhere between 35 million and 40 million Web sites were active. This represents a 100% growth since March, 2000 (Zakon, 2002).

Much of the growth in Web content has been in the online labor marketplace, where job seekers can make electronic connections with firms that are planning to hire. According to a recent estimate, at any given moment there could be more than 29 million position vacancy notices online, and at least 7 million unique active resumes of job seekers (Autor, 2001). Web recruitment is seen as overwhelmingly more cost-effective and more immediate than traditional print advertisements – as well as a method that brings more capable candidates and allows for employers to more accurately measure response to an ad (Toppy, 1999). While it is difficult to accurately estimate the number of people who were hired as the result of a Web-based posting, the growth of the online labor marketplace has dramatically reduced reliance on traditional published help wanted advertisements. Newspaper industry revenue from classified help wanted ads “plunged” by more than half between 2000 and 2003, a drop that has been blamed on competition from Web-based advertising (Moses, 2003, p. 9).

The corporate Web site is extensively used in the business community (Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Ho, 1997) because it is an ideal means of communication between a business and its affected publics (Quinn, 1997). The corporate Web site allows businesses to communicate messages without gatekeeper interference and is a key promotional tool in any business plan (Helmstetter, 1997), particularly if the site makes full use of its visual, informational, and operational enhancements (Swanson, 1999). It follows, then, that if corporate entities want to explain issues in depth, a firm’s Web site would be a place to open and continue public dialogue (Hearit, 1999).

A Web site can give competitive advantage in a marketplace with no barriers to entry, aside from technological concerns (Helmstetter, 1997). A Web sites allows a business to target specific information to specific groups (Ellsworth & Ellsworth, 1997), to change and update information easily and inexpensively as market trends dictate (Siskind & Moses, 1996), and to increase the speed at which consumers can gather data and the level at which they may access it (Tennant, 1996). A presence on the Web “raises the level of personal interaction” (Fisher, 1995, p. 38) between businesses and the users who seek information from them. Perhaps most importantly for the long-term, a Web site allows a firm to develop a critical business characteristic – its public image. More than forty years ago, before the concept of the Internet had even been thought of, Boulding wrote that public image was “the
basic bond of any society, culture, subculture, or organization” (1956, p. 64). Web sites allow for this sharing and “influence potential customers’ impressions of firms’ legitimacy, innovation and caring” (Winter, Saunders, & Hart, 2003, Abstract).

Job satisfaction

The concept of job satisfaction has traditionally been difficult to nail down. Everyone seems to know what it is, and can offer examples of how it exists or does not exist in a given employment situation. The difficulty comes when trying to define job satisfaction in terms that are relevant and applicable across different occupational categories. Some basic definitions of job satisfaction would include “the degree to which individuals feel positively or negatively about their jobs” (Shermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, 2000, p. 144), “the feelings the worker has about his (or her) job,” (Hulin, 1969, p.90), and “the pleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job achieving or facilitating one’s values” (Locke, 1969).

Job satisfaction literature tends to hold one of two perspectives. One body of work takes the perspective that job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction are separate concepts. Advanced initially by Frederick Herzberg beginning in the late 1950s, this perspective recognizes the existence of workplace hygiene factors – wages, benefits, and working conditions, along with motivator factors – status, responsibility, and opportunity for advancement. Because hygiene factors and motivator factors are separate concepts, Herzberg’s two-factor theory contends that, depending on the presence and interaction of these factors in the workplace, employees could be not satisfied but not dissatisfied. In other words, the things that satisfy people at work and the things that dissatisfy them are disparate issues (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959; Herzberg, 1966).

The other body of work tends to disagree with Herzberg and instead takes the perspective that job satisfaction is a stand-alone concept that does or does not exist in a given situation (Ritchie & Martin, 1999). Much of the disagreement stems from the argument that Herzberg’s theory is too simplistic to apply in modern times. “There is a significant difference between the problem of how to create a situation in which production workers would achieve challenging output and quality goals, and the new issues of how to energise [sic] creative teams that must continually find unique competitive advantage and win customer preference in chaotic, fast changing markets,” one critic observed (Lessons from Nature..., 2000, para. 4).
Most of the disagreement seems to center on whether job satisfaction is related most strongly to intrinsic rewards such as authority, autonomy and control (Pollard, 1995) or extrinsic rewards such as salary, benefits, and peer recognition (White & Singletary, 1993). Here again, there is disagreement. Some researchers contend salary has no bearing on job satisfaction (American Journalist Survey, 2003), while others contend it has a direct relationship (Job Satisfaction, 2003). One expert who has studied job satisfaction in the media professions for more than 30 years claims salary is “the best predictor of job satisfaction” (Stone, n.d.).

Even though there is so much disagreement over exactly how job satisfaction manifests itself, common sense would dictate that at some level both logical and emotional variables are involved. Workers see satisfaction as a natural, reasonable consequence of work; they also feel satisfied in an emotional, personal way. Surely both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards also contribute to job satisfaction at some level. Workers can perceive themselves as satisfied when they accrue intrinsic rewards – making an emotional connection with the work and the workplace, and having opportunity for growth and advancement, for example. Workers can also perceive themselves as satisfied through accruing extrinsic rewards – receiving salary and benefits that compensate the worker for his/her work, for example.

Other variables that impact job satisfaction would include the level of commitment to the organization (Ostroff, 1992) and the level of commitment to the career or profession itself – beyond that of the specific task being accomplished or the employer being worked for (Job Satisfaction Among, . . ., 1997).

The issue of job satisfaction affects both managers and subordinate employees, in every job and in every industry. And by all indications, the problem with job satisfaction is worsening. In 2003, the Conference Board’s Consumer Research Center reported that less than half of all Americans felt satisfied with their jobs. The percentage of satisfied workers was the lowest recorded since the Conference Board began its survey in 1995 (U.S. Job Satisfaction, . . ., 2003).
This research uses the written narrative as its frame of reference in recognition of the narrative’s tremendous power to shape and define experience. The narrative is used by a writer or speaker with the specific intent of getting an audience to identify with people and situations (Hybels & Weaver, 1989). The narrative is an important tool for establishing claims because it can provide “succinct, irrefutable evidence for an issue” (Rottenberg, 1997, p. 342).

This is especially important for narratives issued in a public relations context. As an industry, public relations has no prescribed standards of educational preparation, no requirement for professional apprenticeship, no laws governing practice, and no licensing or certification for those who call themselves PR practitioners (Wilcox, Ault, & Agee, 1995). As a result, public relations people are often viewed with skepticism (Susskind & Field, 1996). Because public relations efforts are frequently seen by the public as manipulative or dishonest (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth, & Van Leuven, 2003) entire books have been written on the subject of using narratives to communicate appropriate values in a PR context (See Guth & Marsh, 2002).

The public relations professional must use first-person narratives effectively. Doing so allows the public relations writer to “bring a personality and a new voice into your story that a reader welcomes” (Thompson, 1996, p. 290). This would be particularly true in a medium such as the World Wide Web, where users have no other means of assessing the trustworthiness of a narrative aside from what accompanies it in the electronic format.

The study of narratives is a valid and reasonable method for reaching conclusions about communication (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1991). Studying narratives “leads to critique, to a determination of whether or not a given instance of discourse provides a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world” (Fisher, 1987, p. 90). This is because narratives are not just aesthetic elements. Narratives have social function. They are “the way we organize experience and resist disorder” (Gould, 1989, p. 83).

Online narratives of job satisfaction have a social function for workers and for those who want to gather information about work. Workers can use these narratives to organize their work experience, explain the personal satisfaction with work, assess the value of their work, and identify the rewards that result from it. Those who want to gather information about work can learn from these narratives, and in turn make a variety of different evaluations of
the company, the employee, and the work based on the user’s perceived trustworthiness of the online content.

Research Questions

Issues related to use of the World Wide Web to communicate narratives of job satisfaction were presented to undergraduate students enrolled in two sections of an upper-division elective public relations strategies course at a regional comprehensive university in the Midwest. Forty-two students, mostly seniors and Communication Studies majors, were enrolled in two sections of the course and served as evaluators in the semester-long investigation. The issues for study were presented initially as part of a discussion of Web-based narratives and corporate issues management.

Students worked individually and in teams to review existing literature in the areas of corporate communications, issues management, job satisfaction, and effective utilization of the World Wide Web. Students presented and discussed their personal definitions of job satisfaction. After reviewing the 2003 Fortune magazine list of “100 Best Companies to Work for in America” (100 Best Companies to Work for in America, 2003), students worked with the instructor to develop research questions. Later, students gathered data, analyzed the data, and generated conclusions to answer the questions.

RQ1 - To what extent do the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America” utilize employee narratives of job satisfaction to complement other promotional information on their Web sites?

RQ2 - How do employee narratives of job satisfaction offered by the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America” express workers’ personal satisfaction with work, assess the value of the work, and identify the rewards that result from work?

RQ 3 - How might employee narratives of job satisfaction offered by the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America” be interpreted by young adults who may soon be entering the job market?
Methodology

On the first day of the project, student evaluators were asked to work individually to conduct a general World Wide Web search. The stated goal of the search was to define “job satisfaction” and find three Web-based research reports on the subject. Evaluators were allowed to determine search strategies for themselves and assess search outcomes without instructor input to become familiar with the subject at hand. Each evaluator submitted a short paper summarizing findings, to demonstrate understanding of the concept and related research.

Later, the instructor presented evaluators with print copies of *Fortune* magazine’s 2003 list of “100 Best Companies to Work for in America.” The list offers an ideal population for study. The list has been prepared annually for several years. Nominations for inclusion in the list are made by employees. Firms considered for inclusion are reviewed on the basis of their policies and practices, an employee survey, and written comment from workers. Two-thirds of each company’s final score is based on employee comments. Without question, there is a great deal of competition to be considered for the *Fortune* list, and to show up in the final 100 is a prestigious honor. As a result, other scholars have already researched communicative relationships within the “100 Best” (See Dickmeyer, 2003).

Evaluators for this research used copies of the “100 Best” list to verify that each firm on the list had an operational World Wide Web site. The instructor then visited each WWW site to verify that it represented the firm named on the list.

In the next step of the research, evaluators were randomly assigned companies from the list. This time, evaluators were asked to visit the Web sites and search for narratives of job satisfaction offered on behalf of employees. Narratives were defined as in-text quotations attributed to employed personnel. Paraphrased comments or second-person comments were not acceptable. Video or audio clips without in-text transcriptions were not acceptable. The first 5 narratives of job satisfaction on each site were to be studied.
The research was designed to gather data relating to an employee’s evaluative inference of work. Specifically, we sought to identify how workers express their personal satisfaction with work, assess the value of the work, and identify the rewards that result from work. The research design is consistent with work by Ozyurek and Trabasso that found “readers’ evaluations of character concerns contribute to the telling and interpretation of narratives” (1997, Abstract). Ozyurek and Trabasso’s categories of evaluative inference were: appraisals, preferences, emotions, goals, and purposes. These categories were adopted and modified to become eight categories used (See Table 1).

Data from Web sites were coded onto sheets that were then collected by the instructor and reviewed for accuracy. Quantitative data were entered into Microsoft Excel and a spreadsheet was created to facilitate data analysis. Simple sums and percentages were determined. Qualitative comments from the evaluators were used to help interpret the quantitative findings. The research was carried out in a reasoned, orderly way to reach the findings shown.

Research Findings

All firms identified as the “100 Best” were found to have operational World Wide Web sites at the beginning of the research effort. In the next phase of the investigation, when Web-based narratives were identified and analyzed, 66 companies were disqualified because no narratives of job satisfaction could be found within their corporate Web sites. Two companies were disqualified because evaluators were unable to judge whether narratives of job satisfaction found on their Web sites represented the words of employees or corporate hyperbole. One company was disqualified because narratives of job satisfaction on its Web site appeared to be offered by interns and not employed personnel. One company was disqualified because its Web site offered video clips of employees describing their level of job satisfaction without any text-based support. One company was disqualified when its Web site became inaccessible during data collection.

A total of 29 company Web sites (29%) were found to contain narratives of job satisfaction that met the criteria for the study. A total of 116 narratives from these sites were selected for study.

RQ1 - To what extent do the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America” utilize employee narratives
of job satisfaction to complement other promotional information on their Web sites?

Less than one-third of the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America” were found to have operational corporate Web sites that utilized text-based narratives of job satisfaction attributed to employees. The 29 sites that met the study guidelines and contained narratives were found to contain a total of 300 individual narratives attributed to employees. The number of narratives on Web sites ranged from a low of 1 to a high of 48. The average number of narratives per site was 10.34. The standard deviation was 11.39. Word count of the narratives ranged from a low of 6 words to a high of 598 words. The average word count was 97. The standard deviation was 106.53.

Because evaluators were instructed to examine only the first 5 narratives found on each site, a total of 116 narratives were selected for analysis. Forty-nine of the narratives were offered by female employees (42%) and 48 of the narratives were offered by male employees (41%). The remaining 19 (16%) were offered without categorization.

Fifty-two of the narratives were offered by employees who were clearly identified as managers (44%). The remaining 64 narratives (55%) were offered by employees whose role in the labor hierarchy was not identified. Job titles were listed for 81 of the employees offering narratives (69%).

Most employees offering narratives were identified, either by first name (99, or 85%), first and last name (41, or 35%), and/or with a photograph identified as that of the employee (68, or 58%). The population studied is shown in Table 2.

RQ2 - How do employee narratives of job satisfaction offered by the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America” express workers’ personal satisfaction with work, assess the value of the work, and identify the rewards that result from work?

Narratives of job satisfaction were evaluated to identify how employees expressed personal satisfaction in the work they do. Narratives most commonly expressed satisfaction in the first person singular, (104, or 89%). This is the form of grammar that is often perceived by the reader to be most personal, and thus most reliable (Barnet, 2001). Narratives that did not take this form of expression but used
another form exclusively were found to be in first person plural (6, or 5%), third person (4, or 3%), or second person (2, or .017%). Findings are shown in Table 3.

Narratives of job satisfaction were evaluated to identify how employees subjectively assessed the value of the work they do. Narratives were placed into one of seven thematic categories. Narratives most often assessed the value of work in personal, emotional terms (64, or 55%). Narratives least commonly assessed the value of work in terms of career advancement (16, or 13%). Findings by category are shown in Table 3.

Narratives of job satisfaction were evaluated to identify intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that employees identify as resulting from the work they do. The most common intrinsic reward identified was ‘opportunity taken advantage of’ (43, or 37%). The least common intrinsic reward identified was ‘challenge met’ (22, or 18%). The most common extrinsic reward identified was ‘working environment or conditions’ (79, or 68%). The least common extrinsic reward identified was ‘salary, bonuses or other compensation’ (6, or 5%). Findings are shown in Table 4.

RQ 3 - How might employee narratives of job satisfaction offered by the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America” be interpreted by young adults who may soon be entering the job market?

Among the narratives evaluated, several recurring themes were identified. Themes help organize media content and help users make sense of what they see and read. In the online medium, themes are supported by visual, informational, and operational content elements that allow Web sites to appear consistent and credible (Swanson, 1999).

Visual content included photos, illustrations, and graphic elements such as site background colors and patterns that drew users’ attention to narratives and gave narratives a prominent appearance. Informational content included section headlines and other organizing text, paraphrasing of workers’ comments, third-party observations, corporate mission statements, news releases and marketing/sales hyperbole. Operational content included frames that organized narratives and hyperlinks between pages and elements. All served to put narratives in context to facilitate user understanding.
Consistent themes

Each Web site was randomly assigned to at least two evaluators working independently. Written comments of the evaluators indicated that they perceived some recurring themes. Some themes were positively interpreted; others were seen in a negative light. Some were questionable.

Evaluators said many of the sites seemed to target persuasive appeals to college graduates or soon-to-be graduates. Employees quoted in narratives often referred to their job search, the interview process, and their experiences as a new employee. Two sites stood out in particular. Both Goldman Sachs and SEI Investments were perceived by evaluators to be aggressively courting young adults entering the workforce. The Goldman Sachs site featured multiple detailed narratives, each of nearly 400 words, from recent college graduates employed with the firm. Each narrative included three ‘glamour’-style photos; each employee was portrayed as a young, attractive professional working in London or New York City.

The SEI Investments site included “testimonials” from recent graduates of major universities. All were deeply personal stories telling how SEI was helpful in the transition from school to work – everything from recruitment to job interview to helping with apartment-hunting and setting up social contacts.

A common theme perceived in use was that of ease of advancement. Plante & Moran’s site, for example, introduced its employee narratives in a section with a heading “What is it like to expect success and not just hope for it?” CH2M Hill’s site bragged of “Opportunities to share in the company’s success.” The Edward Jones site featured a narrative in which the drive for success was succinctly stated by an employee with twenty years of experience in the firm: “To move up, all you have to do is raise your hand.”
Another theme perceived to be common was that of the supportive – even “fun” – work environment. “It is such a pleasure to come to work where people are happy to be there,” stated a narrative offered by a new employee at Third Federal Savings and Loan. “The environment is so much different than any place I have ever worked at. Everyone is so nice; no one complains about their job over lunch.” A distribution center employee for The Container Store said: “I feel lucky to have two families – one at work and one at home.” An AFLAC communications analyst made note of the collegiality fostered by his company’s Christmas party. “[T]hey always invite the best bands to come and perform for us,” he said, concluding with the observation that these and other actions show the company “really cares about me as a person.” One firm’s site went beyond an expression of concern for its employees – to an expression about concern for their pets. “Employees at all levels,” Autodesk claimed, “even bring their pets to work.”

Other narratives made note of corporate policies that were supportive of child care obligations and personal life emergencies. One worker expressed gratitude for her medical benefits. “Not only do I have a cancer policy as a ‘gift’ from AFLAC, but I keep receiving a ‘gift’ through the Wellness Benefit I receive. What a way to take care of employees.” An audit manager for Deloitte & Touche claimed his company encourages him to vacation abroad “occasionally for 2-3 weeks at a stretch.”

The ability to take pride in one’s work is another consistent theme identified in narratives of job satisfaction. “I like that we produce products that can help people live longer and healthier lives,” said a senior director of finance at Merck & Company. “It’s especially great to hear when friends or family are living better because of one of our medicines. That reinforces my belief that Merck is really making a difference.” One site even managed to work in a reference to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. An Edward Jones supervisor said that after the attacks “I didn’t feel like selling anything. I just wanted to contact my clients and make sure they and their families were ok. Edward Jones not only supported my actions, they encouraged them. They cared about my clients and me.”

A gentle criticism of the competition was noted within several of the narratives. Among these was a narrative offered by a QuikTrip store manager, who said: “I was with another chain of convenience stores and the general manager had a habit of comparing our company with QuikTrip. He constantly talked about
how we should do things like QuikTrip. Well, I got tired of hearing it so I decided to come to QuikTrip.”

The feedback given by student evaluators, who would have the opportunity to enter the professional job market in less than two years from the completion of this project, indicated evaluators were positively influenced by these themes and related narrative content. At the same time, however, there were other themes and content on the Web sites that were perceived negatively by evaluators.

Several of the sites offered narratives of job satisfaction from executives, with no comment from rank-and-file workers. Among those was the Genentech Inc. site. It received negative comments from an evaluator who found the narratives difficult to locate. “You have to be looking for the narratives, and there are very few scattered around the site. Most are buried. They are all from the CEO. I am not impressed.”

Evaluators were not swayed by sites that offered large numbers of small narratives. The Medtronic Inc. site offered 34 narratives, but most were only a sentence or two. Some were as short as four words: “I like the diversity.” One evaluator wrote that the brevity of the narratives made her “suspicious” of employees’ sincerity.

Generally speaking, evaluators were not impressed with narratives that used employees’ own words but did not talk about experiences directly related to normal routine of work. The FedEx site, for example, featured 13 narratives; all were a combination of paraphrasing and actual quotes. Several of these narratives were stories of FedEx workers’ heroism and daring in emergencies that happened at work or at other times in their personal lives. These stories were told in a section called “To the Rescue.” One evaluator expressed concern about both the content and structure of the narratives, writing: “I am not positive these are genuine remarks; the stories aren’t always told from the person’s perspective.”

The Third Federal site featured a narrative that seemed to raise an issue that might be better left unsaid, given the promotional context of the Web site. The narrative said the company “has created a
nourishing atmosphere where growth is encouraged and rewarded. And where profanity and sexual harassment simply do not exist.”

Finally, some evaluators noted the excessive use of clichés throughout Web sites and narratives. Such terms as: “state of the art”, “second to none”, “pro-activity”, “confidence to lead”, “giving you the tools”, “achieve all that you can”, and “personal growth” were among a number of over-used professional and personal comments identified.

Discussion

This research does not answer all the questions about the use of narratives of job satisfaction on corporate Web sites. But it does offer a small and interesting portrait of how companies that have been identified as the “100 Best” in America present employees’ words about work life. It also allows us to see how a group of Web users who seem within the target public for these sites reacted to these narratives.

The research makes the assumption that the narratives offered are the actual words of employees. This is probably a fair assumption to make. Sixty-eight of the narratives (58%) were accompanied by an employee photo; 99 (85%) were accompanied by the employee’s first name; 41 (35%) included the employee’s first and last name. While would be possible for companies to post fictitious narratives, surely a blatant effort to do this would quickly be discovered. It is more likely that companies could use creative editing to ‘sweeten’ narratives submitted by employees. While it is outside the focus of this research to speculate about the ability of corporate Web site gatekeepers to post reliable narratives, it should be noted that evaluators did question the sincerity of narratives presented without complete attribution (e.g., employee’s full name and job title).

Perhaps most troubling of the findings is that two-thirds of the firms do not offer any direct testimony from employees about what makes for a good work experience. We know that these satisfied workers exist, because the researchers who compile the annual “100 Best” solicit employee feedback in a
variety of ways to authenticate that satisfaction. It would be interesting to know why some of the “100 Best” firms did not make the effort to include employee narratives on their Web sites.

The findings showed that job satisfaction narratives were most often offered in the first person singular. Employees’ use of the word “I” made their comments seem personal and direct.

The findings showed job satisfaction was expressed mostly in personal, emotional terms. For example, a Bright Horizons Family Solutions employee said “I feel very supported here.” This type of comment was seen many times throughout the narratives evaluated. Narratives were least likely to suggest job satisfaction resulted from learning new skills and advancing one’s career. As a whole, the narratives support the idea that an emotionally satisfying, productive work experience is more fulfilling than career advancement.

Further support for this claim is found in the fact that 68% of the narratives identified working environment or conditions as a primary extrinsic reward of work. Job-related benefits such as medical insurance and vacation opportunities were referenced in only 18% of the narratives and salary, bonuses or other compensation was referenced in only 5% of the narratives – the least of any among the five categories of extrinsic rewards.

Despite the size and complexity of many of the corporate Web sites subject to study in this research, evaluators found most of the Web-based narratives of employee job satisfaction easy to locate. No evaluator reported spending more than 5 minutes to find narratives on sites where narratives were included in content. More often than not, narratives were linked to an opening index page for ease of access. More often than not, evaluators were pleased with the overall visual, informational, and operational characteristics of the sites they visited. Fewer than ten of the Web sites generated any critical comment. Only four sites generated detailed comment such as this example: “The site says how the company ‘balances an employee’s work life and personal life.’ Yet, in reality, there is no evidence making this a fact.”
Most of the detailed comments from evaluators were positive. Some examples follow:

“This company goes out of its way to display what a wonderful place it is to work and shop. In reading through the material it has created an image in my mind as a happy-go-lucky and here to serve you kind of company.”

“You can see what employees think and then compare yourself to make your own decision on whether or not you would be satisfied working there.”

“They do have quite a bit of information regarding their company’s goals and job satisfaction. The site is very functional and easy to navigate.”

“The company seems sincere in its mission, and the narratives of the employees are a nice feel for what a great company this is to work for.”

Conclusion

This research had immediate relevance to the students who participated in it, even before the findings were known. Most of the students involved in the project were seniors. At the time of their work, all were aware of the difficulty of finding a job in what was at the time a tight job market. The project proved to be a valuable learning experience for these students because it allowed them to conduct research on a subject that was perceived to have immediate consequence in their lives.

The students needed to know, and have now seen, that a corporate Web site is not a passive document displaying words and pictures in an electronic form. It is an interactive medium with visual, informational, and operational components. These components, working together, tell the “stories of living” (Fisher, 1987, p. 58) that belong – in this case – to companies and their satisfied employees.

These stories have tremendous potential impact on a variety of internal and external publics in the marketplace. Current employees, prospective employees, employee family members, stockholders, retirees, politicians, government regulators, competitors, and the news media are just a few of the targeted publics that would form opinions of a company’s professionalism and credibility based in part on the narratives of job satisfaction contained within the company’s Web site. A company that doesn’t make maximum use of
its narratives of job satisfaction is not doing everything it can to promote positive, pro-active relationships with these publics.

Because the Web site is a key medium of identity management (See Winter, Saunders, & Hart, 2003), it was surprising to find that few of the companies on the “100 Best” list made reference to this fact on their Web sites. Some did, in prominent ways. But most did not. At the very least, this should be an accolade worth devoting significant space to on a firm’s Web site.

There are abundant opportunities for future research related to this topic. An ongoing effort is needed to evaluate corporate Web sites to see how they address the issue of job satisfaction with employee narratives and other content elements. Web site content can change almost immediately. Several of the sites evaluated in this research were drastically altered before the research findings could be drafted into a paper. Surely there will be even greater amounts of change in the future, as resources for Web creation are advanced, technology becomes more user-friendly and corporate leaders see more value in increased online interactivity. These changes could be examined over the long term, through a variety of methods that would produce valuable quantitative and qualitative findings.

There should be additional research work to understand how the Web gatekeeping process works in the corporate world. Who makes the content decisions, and how are they made? At some levels, it would seem that Web site content creation issues in the corporate sector are given less attention than more traditional advertising, marketing, and sales tasks. Is this an accurate perception?

In recent years there has been increasing scholarly interest in the area of commitment and job satisfaction (See Peterson, Puia, & Suess, 2003) but we still need to know more. To what extent might the company Web site influence the commitment of employees to the organization and to its products and services? To what extent might the company Web site allow for shared commitment among co-workers?
A strong argument could be made that in the marketplace of today with its reliance on electronic commerce and communication, the business Web site is the first opportunity for a firm to engage in “protecting its turf” (Ashforth & Lee, 1990, p. 621). Research findings that show businesses are not doing everything they can to protect and increase their investment in people and resources demand that we continue searching for the answers that help explain what’s happening behind the scenes – and why.
References


Narratives of Job Satisfaction on the World Wide Web:
Interpretations of Value and Reward Within the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America”

Table 1
Data analysis categories

- **Sex** of employee offering narrative (if stated): male or female.
- **Employee’s role in the labor hierarchy**: manager or subordinate.
- **Number of words** contained in the narrative.
- **Primary grammatical form of expression**: first person singular, first person plural, second person, or third person.
- **Primary subjective focus of the narrative**: personal appraisal of work, preference for work, emotional assessment of work, logical assessment of work, goals for work, goals for career, or personal goals.
- **Intrinsic rewards identified**: professional advancement/ recognition, advancement within the company or the profession, responsibility assumed, opportunity taken advantage of, or challenge met.
- **Extrinsic rewards identified**: financial compensation, working environment or conditions, professional status or rank, job security or tenure, non-compensatory benefits.
- **Identification** of employee offering narrative (if any): first name, last name, job title, and/or photograph.
Narratives of Job Satisfaction on the World Wide Web:
Interpretations of Value and Reward Within the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America”

Table 2
Study population
N = 29

"100 Best Companies to Work for in America" 2003
Published by Fortune Magazine
Great Place to Work® Institute produces the "100 Best Companies to Work for in America" lists; the lists are co-authored by Robert Levering and Milton Moskowitz. See also Fortune Magazine's February 2003 Article.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Firm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Edward Jones</td>
<td>50.</td>
<td>AFLAC Incorporated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Container Store, The</td>
<td>52.</td>
<td>Autodesk, Inc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Xilinx, Inc.</td>
<td>55.</td>
<td>Colgate-Palmolive Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Wegmans Food Markets, Inc.</td>
<td>56.</td>
<td>Valassis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Plante &amp; Moran, LLP</td>
<td>64.</td>
<td>SEI Investments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Duncan Aviation Inc.</td>
<td>70.</td>
<td>Valero Energy Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Intel Corporation</td>
<td>72.</td>
<td>FedEx Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Merck &amp; Co., Inc.</td>
<td>73.</td>
<td>Recreational Equipment, Inc. (REI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>SGI (Silicon Graphics Inc.)</td>
<td>79.</td>
<td>Deloitte &amp; Touche LLP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>Goldman Sachs</td>
<td>80.</td>
<td>Genentech, Inc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>QuikTrip Corporation</td>
<td>81.</td>
<td>American Century Investments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>AmeriCredit Corp.</td>
<td>83.</td>
<td>Vanguard Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>Bright Horizons Family Solutions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Narratives of Job Satisfaction on the World Wide Web: Interpretations of Value and Reward Within the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America”

Table 3
Satisfaction, value, and rewards of work as identified in narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression of personal satisfaction in work</th>
<th>Use / frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Primary structural form of expression taken by narrative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First person singular (e.g.: “I am happy working here.”)</td>
<td>104 (89%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First person plural (e.g.: “We are happy working here.”)</td>
<td>6 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third person (e.g.: “A person can be happy working here.”)</td>
<td>4 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second person (e.g.: “You can be happy working here.”)</td>
<td>2 (.017%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employee’s assessment of the value of work</th>
<th>Use / frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Categorical orientation taken by the narrative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal, emotional assessment (e.g.: “I feel good working here.”)</td>
<td>64 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal, logical assessment (e.g.: “I am productive working here.”)</td>
<td>47 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal, goals orientation (e.g.: “My work improves my quality of life.”)</td>
<td>32 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal, professional appraisal (e.g.: “My work is good.”)</td>
<td>28 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, work preferences (e.g.: “I prefer this kind of work.”)</td>
<td>24 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, future goals orientation (e.g.: “I want to learn new skills.”)</td>
<td>17 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, career advancement (e.g.: “I want to advance in the company.”)</td>
<td>16 (13%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total exceeds 100% because some narratives fit into multiple categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employee’s assessment of the rewards that result from work</th>
<th>Use / frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Thematic orientation taken by the narrative)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal, emotional assessment (e.g.: “I feel good working here.”)</td>
<td>64 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal, logical assessment (e.g.: “I am productive working here.”)</td>
<td>47 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal, goals orientation (e.g.: “My work improves my quality of life.”)</td>
<td>32 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal, professional appraisal (e.g.: “My work is good.”)</td>
<td>28 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, work preferences (e.g.: “I prefer this kind of work.”)</td>
<td>24 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, future goals orientation (e.g.: “I want to learn new skills.”)</td>
<td>17 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional, career advancement (e.g.: “I want to advance in the company.”)</td>
<td>16 (13%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total exceeds 100% because some narratives fit into multiple categories.
Narratives of Job Satisfaction on the World Wide Web:
Interpretations of Value and Reward Within the “100 Best Companies to Work for in America”

Table 4

Primary intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of work, as identified in narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary intrinsic rewards of work</th>
<th>Use / frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity taken advantage of</td>
<td>43 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional achievement/ recognition</td>
<td>32 (27%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility assumed</td>
<td>29 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advancement within company or profession</td>
<td>27 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge met</td>
<td>22 (18%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total exceeds 100% because some narratives fit into multiple categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary extrinsic rewards of work</th>
<th>Use / frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working environment or conditions</td>
<td>79 (68%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional status or rank</td>
<td>28 (24%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits (insurance, vacation, or other perks not directly related to salary)</td>
<td>22 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job security or tenure</td>
<td>10 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary, bonuses, or other compensation</td>
<td>6 (5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total exceeds 100% because some narratives fit into multiple categories.