

Creating Joy at Work with Scott Sonenshein (Transcript)

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Chris Congdon: Have you ever had a job that just sucks the joy out of your work? And no, that is not all jobs because on the flip side, you may have had a job that leaves you feeling energized and full of life, and sometimes it's kind of a mix. The concept of joy and work can feel like an oxymoron sometimes. But today's guest disagrees with that. He says that finding ways to add joy into your work, whatever kind of work you do, is more important than ever because the lack of joy is literally making people sick.

Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host, Chris Congdon, and I'm with our producer Rebecca Charbauski.

Rebecca Charbauski: Hi Chris.

CC: Hi, Rebecca. Will you tell everyone about our guest today?

RC: Yes. Scott Sonenshein is a professor of management at Rice University. Scott co-wrote Joy at Work organizing your professional life alongside organization queen Marie Kondo, and you might remember her from her Netflix show, Sparking Joy.

CC: Yes. And we learned a lot from her about how we need to purge things from our lives that don't spark joy. Yes. So Scott is not going to talk to us about cleaning up our offices, though. He's actually going to talk about how to apply some of those concepts of joy to our work

RC: He does. And if you enjoy this conversation with Scott, we'd like to ask you to share this episode with a friend or a colleague.

CC: Scott joins us today from Houston, Texas. Scott, thank you for joining us today.
Scott Sonenshein: Thanks so much for having me.

CC: I'm really intrigued to talk about a lot of your research and to talk about joy and the workplace, and we're going to get to all of that. But I have a first really important question to ask because I listened to a podcast that you did with Brene Brown, and so I got to know, are the two of you really walking buddies?

SS: Yes, we are walking buddies. It is hard to imagine sometimes that people actually walk in Houston where we're at, but it is possible to actually walk in the summer, and she's a delightful companion to have on my walks.

CC: Well, I think for a lot of people, the harder thing to imagine is like, wow, you get to walk with Brene Brown. We could probably talk about that for a long time too. But I want to shift though and talk about your journey and some of the things that you've done because fairly recently you co-wrote Joy at Work with Marie Kondo in your own book called Stretch, and all of your work is as an organizational psychologist. So I'd just love to hear about how the topic of joy fits with that longer journey that you've been on.

SS: It probably goes back to my first real job, which was as a strategy consultant after school. And to put it bluntly, that was a pretty miserable job. It was a job in which I worked countless hours on projects that I really couldn't connect to any type of purpose, whether it be a higher purpose or even necessarily a client purpose. It was about creating super polished spreadsheets and very sophisticated analysis that didn't really seem to answer any significant question. And so that was kind of my introduction to the workforce as, wow, this is you spending a lot of time doing things that don't really seem to matter a lot. Now, I only lasted about a year in that job. I ended up in another experience in Silicon Valley working for a startup, and that was a totally different type of experience. That was an experience where I felt part of a culture that felt wonderful and at times really special to be a part of, but it also had its own challenges.

That was a time in which we were wasting tons of resources, lots of money, lots of good hires working on growing a business model that was not sustainable. And when I kind of think about both of those experiences, they're really the same, basically two different sides of the same coin. They both involved an incredible amount of waste, waste of time, waste of money, and for me, that really sucked the joy out of what I was doing knowing that all of these efforts were going to waste. So I would say if I kind of went back historically, the foundations of thinking about joy at work started there. Now, after that, I went to graduate school as an organizational psychologist, and we spent about a hundred thousand hours of our lifetime working, which is a lot of time yet overwhelming. Majority of people are not satisfied with their work. And so this is one of the most essential problems that we can be focused on. I mean, almost two thirds of Americans have been physically, not mentally, but physically ill because of unsatisfying work. Wow. Research conservatively estimates up to 75,000 people die because of unsatisfying jobs. Really. So joy is not just about being nice to have. It's a need to have.

CC: Wow. I mean, I had no idea it was that significant from a physical perspective. And building on what you're saying, there are not a lot of people that I know that would put joy and work in the same sentence together. They might think about those as very different things. So just unpack this a little bit for us, that when you're talking about joy at work, I don't get the sense from what you've said so far that it's about, oh, we had fun at lunch, or we're playing ping pong with each other, and so we've got a lot of games and that's what we mean by joy at work. It feels like you're talking about something else.

SS: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, let me start off by saying it. It's not surprising that people might consider joy work to be an oxymoron, given the statistics that we just talked about. That's not the experience of a lot of people unfortunately. But that doesn't mean that that's not a goal for any of us, no matter what type of work we do. Now, adding lots of perks, whether it be free lunch or games, I mean, those are gimmicks that really don't get at the foundation of joy at work. You've got the office foosball table or ping pong table. Now, I love both of those games. I was pretty good at them in my childhood.

CC: In your Silicon Valley days?

SS: Yes. Yeah, we had all those and the free snack, pool, all that stuff. But that's not what Joy at Work is. Those are things that speak to what we call in my field more of an extrinsic motivator. It is about an external force that is essentially trying to control us. It's an incentive. Joy at Work is more about an internal process. It's about how you connect with the work itself. It's about whether what you are doing is connected to some type of purpose, whether that purpose be a higher or their purpose like helping someone or a purpose like helping a client or creating a product that's going to make a difference. Joy at Work is also about control. How much control do you feel over your day? This is one of the biggest challenges I think as people have been reflecting on what work in the pandemic has done to people and now that we've emerged or emerging from the pandemic, what it's going to look like in the future. I think control and flexibility are going to be an important part of that conversation. So Joy at work is not about these extrinsic motivators that you have and who's got the best office cafeteria. Joy at work is about a feeling that people have when they get immersed in the work that they're doing. They feel connected to some type of purpose and they feel like they have control or at least some control over their journey in that work process.

CC: I also feel like a big change over the past few years is as organizations, as we try and figure out our whole approach to hybrid work, like what degree we're going to embrace it or not, because it's obviously different from one organization to the next that at least for me personally and a lot of other people I've had a chance to talk with, I started to feel a sense of loneliness. And I really missed interactions with people that weren't necessarily planned interactions. They weren't necessarily meetings or structured formal times. I had a lot of that, but I found that just those connections and those relationships between people like my network got smaller. And I've seen research on this also suggesting that for a lot of other people, our networks kind of shrunk in a lot of ways. And I wonder how you feel about that whole social dynamic in terms of the workplace. I get the whole issue with commuting and the hassles of all of those kinds of things, but what do you think about this other dynamic that may have changed?

SS: So we clearly do have a loneliness problem in this country, and I do think that work can be, or a part of that solution, certainly not all of that solution. I also think that when you have these types of spontaneous interactions, it's a great way of not only building connection, but also building trust. Now, when pandemic first started, you had a lot of goodwill among people who used to work altogether. Now as people have been spread across, a lot of that trust might be eroded or never existed because you've got new people rotating into jobs. So I think that having work in person is an absolutely essential part of what the future of work looks like. I don't see us moving to fully remote work for many industries now, some industries for sure. Now of course there's differences in personalities, but I think even introverts, I mean despite what people think want social connection, it's just a different type of social connection. So I think that the model going forward is where are going to be the places that build the most enticing physical work environments to be in. These are the people who when they wake up in the morning, are going to say, I'm looking forward to actually driving into the office because I know this is going to be an inspiring place with people that I connect with. I want to see where my time is going to be useful. It's not going to be me being brought into a building so I could be monitored by the boss to make sure I'm doing a good job. It's going to be me coming into the building so I can connect with people that I care about. So we can collaborate in person and maybe make a decision together, which often works better in person, or we can come up with creative ideas, which also often works better in person as opposed to me just coming into the office and having the watchful eye of the boss and doing the same thing I could be doing at home. That's not what the future looks like. The future, where I think organizations will win out, is a combination of how they think about designing those workspaces and how the leaders inside those spaces create an environment that people are excited to spend time in.

CC: So let's stay on this one a little bit because as I'm sure, and our research has found, this tension between whether or not to work in the office is really kind of a unique thing to the US and Canada and the UK. In most other countries around the world, there's pretty good alignment between how much leaders are expecting people to be in the office and how much they are. In fact, in China, people are 95% working in the office and everybody seems to be aligned on that one. But in the countries where we are having these kinds of tensions of trying to figure it out, I want to go back to a thing that I heard you say when I listened to the interview that you did with Brene Brown, and it was a comment you made kind of quickly, but you were talking about fear.

And even though it was a slightly different context, it just kind of occurred to me that you were talking about during the pandemic that we actually started to fear other people. We started to feel like maybe there was a bit of a threat to us from a physical perspective. Are you carrying Covid? And I don't know that, so I'm nervous about being around you, but then also I just wonder what you think about if there were other kinds of fears that we started to develop that we need to get over for those of us who aren't working in person very often. Did we develop a more emotional fear about other people, do you think?

SS: I think when you upend our daily routines and you're facing the tremendous uncertainty that all of us face in the throes of the pandemic, it inevitably shapes our psychology. So I think people have become more fearful of the unknown. I think people have been more fearful and maybe a little more reluctant to connect with people on an emotional level because we kind of lost practice. We didn't have to go ahead and have an in-person conversation with a colleague for several years, and people who were just starting out in the workforce, which was still quite a number of people in the last few years, never really had that experience to begin with. So it is going to take some time to go back into these old patterns, but I think you're beginning to start seeing that happen. And I don't think that this is an insurmountable problem. I think people's general fear of physical fear around getting covid, I think that has largely waned in the last half year or so, and I would expect a lot of things to return to where they were before.

CC: So thinking about this through the lens of joy, how do you counsel organizations to try and if they are still struggling with a transition, or even if they just are recognizing that people need to feel this deeper sense of purpose, what are some of the things that you advise them to do?

SS: So first thing is I think you have to think about what workers' needs are. So how do you get people to a platform of joy? Well, first is you give them the controller flexibility that they need. And I think for a lot of people, the most salient issue around that has been about where they're working. And not every job can be done remotely or can be done hybrid. So the question that I encourage leaders to ask is, well, where might you give people flexibility? We have a very strong psychological need to feel and control, but we can't control everything about our environment no matter who you are. So where is the flexibility? If it's not about the where is it about the when is it about the, how is it about? Who are those moments where you can give people the sense that I control my environment or I feel in control of my environment because so much of the last three years has fallen out of our control. So work can play a really big part in reestablishing the psyche. So I would say that's the first thing to start with. The second thing I would say is what are you doing in terms of trying to connect to some type of purpose? And I think this is where leadership plays an incredibly strong role, but it's a role that often gets overlooked, unfortunately, how you connect what people are doing on a day-to-day job, to something that's bigger than them. And look, not every business organization is set up to save the world, but every business organization should be serving some type of stakeholder, some type of purpose. How are you articulating that to people? Because if people are spending a hundred thousand hours, as we talked about in their lifetime working, it's really hard to find any joy if you're just sitting here clocking in and clocking out and not connecting to something that's larger than yourself. Yeah, I would just add the third one is really looking at work as a place of not just getting stuff done, but there's a place of connection. If you think about what the most state-of-the-art workplaces are going to look like in the future, remember they are competing for them. I don't want to have to drive an hour to be in this place. If you can create an environment where people at the beginning of each morning wake up and say, I'm looking forward to coming into the office because I know it's going to be full of people that care about me, full of people that I care about and full of inspiration. Those are the types of work environments that are going to win out.

CC: So I want to tie this back to your work with Marie Kondo and everybody knows that she's advocating for people to get rid of stuff that doesn't bring them joy. Sometimes that's physical stuff, but maybe there's other aspects. So I want to talk about that a little bit as it relates to this conversation we've been having. So how do you relate to that concept of what are some of the things we need to get rid of, whether they're physical or just behaviors, practices, et cetera?

SS: Well, let me just start off by saying much to maybe people's disappointment, you can't go ahead and look at your boss and say, you do not spark joy. It's time to discard you. So why don't we just get that off the table? That's not what we're advocating. I think the solution is not quite that direction.

CC: So far I've not gotten that feedback on a review from my team that, Chris, you're not sparking enough joy. They might now.

SS: Sorry, that plant that seed, but what we are talking about, so it's not, Maria has done wonderful work about thinking about what your physical environment looks like and finding an environment that sparks joy to you. What we do in the book though, is go beyond that physical metaphor to think about what are the things that are sparking joy throughout your day? And when I talk to most people, the area in which they have the greatest opportunity to do something with is their time. Everyone thinks that they have too much to do and too little time to do it. And so we go through a framework where people really go through everything that they're doing in their day and ask very tough questions about how they're spending their time, what their activities are and what's sparking joy and what's not sparking joy. And this is not only an exercise to really help you get connected with the things that matter most to you, but this is an exercise that is really holding up a mirror to yourself and saying, how am I actually spending my day?

What we find is a lot of people hide behind busyness to conceal anxieties that they have about themselves. Am I good enough? Am I being a good enough employee? Am I important enough? Am I valued enough? And so they add on these activities to their day that aren't serving a purpose either for them professionally or for their organization. Certainly are not sparking joy for them, but they're cluttering their calendars with these activities to overcome this sense of anxiety. Same thing for meetings. I mean, that's another big issue to tackle with clutter in our workday is there's a meeting fomo problem where everyone thinks they have too many meetings to go to, but people get offended if they don't get invited to the meeting because they feel like it's a sign of status or my opinion is not being valued. And what they're not asking is what might they be doing instead with that time? What contribution might they be making? Where might their value be expressed if they weren't sitting in a meeting where they could simply just read a two page document instead of sitting through a meeting that lasts an hour? So meetings suck a lot of joy out of people too. Not only because we have too many of them, but because people don't actually know how to run them.

CC: Yeah. It's so funny you say that, and I think what you just said is so important, this idea that sometimes we load up our work days with things just to cover for the kind of that sense of anxiety that I'm not good enough, I'm not doing enough. So if I have a full calendar, I may not think this at a conscious level, but subconsciously I might be thinking my calendar is full, that I'm clearly somebody who's valued important, that I'm making a difference because you all need me. That's a really, really important insight I think. So Marie said recently that she's maybe given up a little bit on a totally clean house after three kids. So I want to ask you also about what's realistic for us to achieve as human beings in the workplace. Our excellent producer, Rebecca and I had a debate about whether it is better to have an empty inbox or an inbox that has just been curated to pull out the most important things. So I'm just curious what you think in terms of what's realistic for us as people to achieve in terms of this kind of culling what we're doing? Is there something you'd say that is a rule of thumb that we should all be trying to achieve?

SS: So digital clutter is definitely a problem for some people, but this category is a little more complicated than the other categories that we talk about in the book. People are very attached to the type of email management practices that they use, and I think that's exemplified by the debate that you had with Rebecca. Where we come down on this is that this is a category that we kind of give you a pass on in the sense of, look, if you want to have an inbox that's full of things and that's just something that works for you, that's fine. That is something that's totally acceptable. From our perspective, what we recommend in the book is limiting the number of folders that you have. So where things are easily stored, the last thing you want to do is you save all these emails that you need and then you can't find them because there are so many different folders.

We do recommend deleting emails that you don't need. But there's also a lot more complications around this around information technology, retention practices that vary by organizations. So it's really hard to have a one size fits all solution to email. What I can say that I think is more universal is to deal with what's become, I think the biggest issue around digital clutter, which is the constant nagging that we get from our phones that beep and chirp at us with notifications. And that to me is a much bigger problem in terms of distractions at work. So what research shows is every single interruption, let's say you just get a simple text message and you think, oh, okay, let me just respond to this person fast. It takes the brain upwards of 26 minutes to actually recover. So if you're in some type of deep thought process, that interruption is more than the few seconds it takes.

So thinking about what you're doing with your phone, not having it near you when you work, there's research studies that show even having your phone face down completely silenced, but having it on your desk makes you dumber in terms of looking at cognitive tests. So they're like, leave it in your car, or if you need it, put it in a drawer or something. So it's kind of out of sight and out of mind. To me, that's probably the more essential problem to tackle. That's something that everyone can do right now without having to overhaul their email practices that there is a lot of reluctance to do.

CC: Yeah, I forgot my phone in my car the other day, and I actually found it was kind of a beautiful thing that it was like, oh, it really allowed me to kind of zero in and focus. So before we wrap up, I have just two more things I want to ask you about. The first one might seem a little silly, but I'm curious. So after you had a chance to work with somebody like Marie, was there something that you purged? Any object or any behavior that you made a big shift on?

SS: I would say it was before we actually started working together. When we first were communicating, I said to myself, if I'm going to do a collaboration with her, I really want to fully understand and embrace her method. So you can imagine as a professor, I have a problem with books. So I had hundreds, maybe even a thousand books in my office on campus, and they were organized in a, well, they weren't organized. Basically. I had layers and layers of books all piled up on each other. Some books I haven't read for years, let alone even touched for over a decade. So I took all of the books, they all went onto the floor of my office. You couldn't even see the carpet. It was just an office full of books. And I did pick up each book and I touched it, and I asked whether or not it sparked joy, and I ended up discarding a whole bunch of books and keeping the ones that were most meaningful and important to me, and I haven't gone back since.

CC: So for our listeners who can't see us here, if you were able to see what I can see with Scott's background, his bookshelf is beautifully organized so beautifully that it was the first thing I commented on when we met. And my bookshelves look a lot more like what he was just describing from his office with kind of this and that and dictionaries that I never use in a physical experience anymore. But I can't part with them because I guess they bring me joy to have a physical dictionary around. But anyway, the other thing I want to ask you on a maybe more serious note is we've been thinking a lot about having an impact on people, employees, wellbeing, the planet, and I just want to ask you about an experience you had or a story you can tell us about somebody or someplace that really made an impact on you in recent years.

SS: It's hard where we are right now in this time with the summer and how hot it's been, and all of these just horrific wildfires in Hawaii and in Greece, not for the environment to really come up as a real existential threat to our planet and to our society. And just kind of watching this unfold has reminded me of some research I've done with environmental activists at work who find it a really challenging job for them. These are people who work inside organizations, mainstream organizations that are not connected to some type of environmental product, trying to convince their leaders to pay more attention to the environment, whether it mean more sustainable products or work practices that are more climate friendly and the life that they have in spending time with them is pretty tough because they're marginalized at work. Sometimes they don't get the type of resources that they might necessarily need to do this, but even more importantly, they're hard on themselves because they feel like no matter what they're doing, it's never enough.

So I talk to people and they would say, well, I got an electric vehicle instead, but I could be walking to work. And there's always more you can do with these types of issues, but they've really been inspiring to me so much so that despite the Houston heat, I now do a walking commute. So it's about a six mile round trip. Most days I'm in the office, Houston, it's kind of homage to them and all of the work that they've done and the amazing things that they're doing to make a difference to a planet that sorely needs them right now.

CC: Oh, that's a really nice story, and I think that's a good one for all to think about. There's all kinds of reasons we should be walking more, and you just really hit on a couple important ones there for sure. And you might run into Brene Brown when you're walking in the neighborhood too. So you got that. So Scott, I really enjoyed our conversation. I'm just grateful that you were able to take the time to talk with us. So thanks for being on Work Better.

SS: Thanks so much for having me.

CC: Thank you for being here with us. We've had so many great conversations this season, right, Rebecca?

RC: We have, we've talked to people about creating an inclusion revolution in the workplace. We talked about building new workplace experiences like taking after Walt Disney. We talked to people about designing entirely new business models for the next economy. There are so many great prior conversations. If you missed any of them or just want to listen to one of them again, feel free to go back. There's so many that talk about using business as a force for good to support the wellbeing of people and the planet.

CC: I agree. So if you enjoyed this conversation or any others throughout the season, do us a favor and please rate or review it so more people can find it. And visit us at steelcase.com/research and sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered right to your inbox. Thanks again for being here, and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.