

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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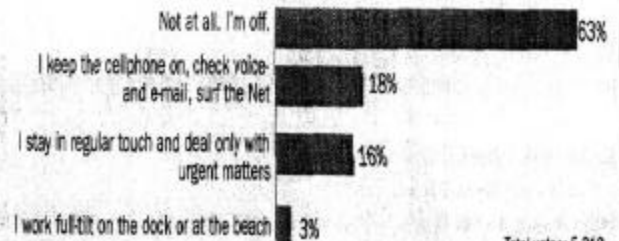
SECTION C • HEALTH CARE, C6 • ACADEMIC, C6

# Globe Careers

## THE WEEKLY WEB POLL

LAST WEEK'S QUESTION:

**When you go on vacation, how much do you work?**



Total votes: 5,312

THIS WEEK'S QUESTION:

**What keeps you cheerful at work?**

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# Do you dare to be an office Pollyanna?



## Having a sense of optimism and innocence brings the best experiences

### JOHN IZZO PERSONAL OPINION

Once in a while in my work with companies, I will hear someone scoff at a manager or front-line worker: "She's such a Pollyanna."

If such a comment were directed at me, I'd consider it a compliment rather than an insult.

After all, we spend almost 70,000 hours at work during our lifetimes. So what's the matter with a little irrepressible optimism and innocence—like the kind the character Pollyanna brought to Eleanor Porter's classic book—to combat workplace negativity and create a better working environment?

So here's a radical suggestion for making work and the workplace better: Let's all decide to be a little more like Pollyanna.

Most of my life has been spent trying to improve the workplace. From my early days as a parish minister—where I first noticed how much our experiences at work influence our happiness and sense of ourselves—to my almost 20 years working as a corporate adviser on creating great workplaces, thousands of conversations have convinced me that the best experiences at work come to those who keep a sense of optimism and innocence about their work—those we might even accuse of being naive.

The first act of greater optimism at work has to do with how we see our jobs. It starts when we realize that, no matter what job we do, we can have a positive influence on others by how we choose to do it.

About 10 years ago, Lloyd Hill took over as chief executive officer of Applebee's International Inc. Having been the CEO of a home health agency, Mr. Hill wondered about the deeper meaning of his new work—going from saving lives to serving beer and pub food.

During his first few months, he spent time visiting Applebee's restaurants. He noticed that in some outlets, customers and employees treated with warmth and friendliness left a little better as human beings while at others, those treated more coldly left a little worse.

It hit him that Applebee's was in the business not only of serving food but of making people's lives better while in his restaurants.

Over the next decade, this message was taken to heart. The company made a concerted effort to hire people with a deep commitment to service; their positive spirit became contagious. Applebee's grew from 54 restaurants in one country to more than 1,600 in nine

she could have a positive impact on any one she came into contact with—each of us can have a positive impact on others through our jobs.

When I was a graduate student, I worked as a drugstore postal clerk in a poor neighbourhood. Within a week, I did not care for the job or the customers. I could not see the deeper meaning in licking stamps, weighing packages and writing money orders.

As summer approached, I was on one of my last shifts when a woman well into her 80s asked me for a money order.

I distractedly asked her how she was doing. She answered by telling me about her daughter who was dying of cancer in a nearby hospital. She lamented not being by her side because she had to pay her own rent by 5 p.m. that day or be evicted. "But I should be there, she is dying as we speak," she sighed.

After an exchange of short and tender words, she walked away. But then she turned around, stepping behind the counter and interrupting the next customer in line. Putting her small, feeble hand on my forearm, she said: "Thank you, son, for being so kind. You do know, don't you, you made my day."

That night I could not sleep. For months, I had seen my job as licking stamps but perhaps there had been a deeper calling. What if I had seen my job as making other people's days better?

The next morning, I wrote out three words on a large piece of paper—Make Someone's Day—and put it behind the counter. The rest of that last week, there were no more parents of dying children but still, in small and gentle ways, my words and actions began to brighten the lives of my customers. The optimistic notion that I could make someone's day changed my day.

It has been my experience that the most optimistic and innocent people have better experiences at work. Like the receptionist at a law firm in Calgary who renamed her job "the first impressionist" and said that every person she met each day would be friendlier for having encountered her. Or the bellman at a Vancouver hotel who called himself the "ambassador of home."

Something happens to us when we begin to see the deeper meaning of our jobs, the possibility that we could make a difference.

Then there is the issue of how to enjoy a job after you have done it for many years. Pollyanna used to play what she called the "glad game." The idea was that you could always find something to be glad about in any situation; by the end of the novel, she had everyone playing.



**DR. JOHN IZZO**, Author of many corporate culture Publications, and his fourth book to hit bookstores *Second Innocence Rediscovering Joy and Wonder—A Guide to Renewal in Work, Relationships and Daily Life*—Berrett Koehler 2004



# Keep playing the glad game

**POLLYANNA** from page C1

How do you keep feeling glad about work after you've done a job for many years? One real-life Pollyanna I met had been teaching fourth graders at the same Vancouver school for 42 years. Yet she seemed to have kept her fire for teaching.

Sitting one day in the small chairs designed for her students, she shared her secret. Each year for the past 20 years, she had set one goal about her teaching methods she wanted to improve. Visiting the classrooms of young teachers, she rediscovered much of what had made her glad about her career in the first place.

She also played her own version of the glad game with a keep box filled with small mementos of her years in the classroom that kept her from forgetting what a difference a teacher can make. Whenever she got discouraged, she would take out a note from a student or parent or a small object of significance that would remind her of the real purpose of her work.

Often, the best leaders are also the most optimistic, bordering on naïve. Take Ray Davis, a young CEO who took over five less-than-spectacular branches of a savings and loan company in a dying lumber town in southern Oregon.

From the moment he arrived, he started telling people it would one day be the world's greatest bank. He even had employees answer the phone: "Welcome to the world's greatest bank." Many customers who'd been in the bank the day before would laugh and ask: "What happened since yesterday?"

Sure, people scoffed, but South Umpqua Bank grew to become one of the most successful independent banks in North America. How? It started with motivational moments at the start of each day, when staff of each branch, often led by front-line employees, would talk about how they could achieve their goals through compelling service. Branches were redesigned and called "stores" so they would not look like other banks. Soon, the bank's Pollyanna spirit captured the attention of customers and, later, Wall Street. The *New York Times* has called it "Starbucks with tellers."

Such irrepressible optimism can help turn other people around as well. Pollyanna helped people become more positive through acts of kindness. This, too, can happen in the workplace.

A nurse I encountered in Edmonton told me about a colleague whose negative attitude was a drag on everyone. Fellow workers had tried everything — except befriend-

## How to be a Pollyanna at work

■ **Go on a sarcasm/negativity fast.** Set aside one day a week that will be free of any negative thoughts or actions. Get your team to agree to a team fast from negativity, as well.

■ **Start every meeting with a show of appreciation.** Comment on two positive things that have happened. Show others you are taking notice — and encourage them to do the same.

■ **Look for the positive in your workday.** At the end of every day, write down two or three things that happened at work that made you glad or fulfilled, or share with family members upbeat anecdotes of the workday. Come in the next day and try to make more of those things happen.

■ **Make someone else's day, every day.** Make sure to do something special for someone at work. Encourage them to follow suit.

■ **Begin with yourself.** We always want someone else to make our workplace better. But really, like everything else, change starts at home. When others complain, challenge them by asking: "What do you think we can do to make this a better workplace?"

*John Izzo*

ing her. So one Saturday, the nurse baked a cake for her troubled coworker, took it over to her house and sat and talked.

That broke the ice for a growing friendship. Over the next few months, the nurse suggested that, much like Pollyanna, the other woman would have a better experience on the job if she came in more "glad."

Within a few short months, the troubled worker became a positive, productive team member — all be-

cause one person saw the possible goodness and dared to be kind.

Bringing some optimism and innocence to work requires us to put aside well-practised cynicism. But the next time you are about to consider someone Pollyanna at work, consider that they are probably having a better day than you are.

*John Izzo, a corporate adviser, is the author of the new book *Second Innocence: Renewing Work & Daily Life*.*