The Only Variable That Matters

Idea In Short

People working in demanding, well-compensated professional roles generally have most of the objective boxes checked: fair pay, interesting problems and access to genuine influence. Despite that, satisfaction varies enormously from one assignment to the next, and the single biggest variable is not the work itself. It is whether the people surrounding that work are people worth working with, a distinction research on job turnover confirms repeatedly.

The boxes that are already checked

Professionals working in demanding, well-compensated roles across strategy, consulting and management generally have several objective boxes already checked: fair pay relative to the market, genuinely interesting problems to work through and access to real professional influence. Despite that, satisfaction with any specific assignment swings widely, sometimes within the same organization, working under the same broad compensation structure, solving similarly interesting problems.

The variable that actually explains the swing

The factor that most consistently explains that swing is not the work itself. It is whether the people surrounding the work, teammates, direct managers and client counterparts, are genuinely good people to work alongside. Framed simply, professional life sorts into two broad categories: people worth working with, and people who are not, and that distinction ends up mattering more than almost any other factor once basic compensation and challenge are already in place.

What research on turnover actually shows

This is not simply a matter of personal preference. Multiple large-scale workplace surveys

consistently identify relationships with a direct manager as the single leading reason people leave jobs that otherwise look strong on paper.1 People rarely quit a role because the work itself became uninteresting overnight; they far more often leave because the relationships surrounding that work deteriorated past a point worth tolerating.

A subjective standard, and that is fine

Who counts as a good colleague varies from person to person, a pattern consistent with broader research on interpersonal compatibility at work, and that variation is entirely acceptable.2 What matters is applying the standard honestly and consistently: seeking out people worth working with, and genuinely investing in those relationships once found, rather than treating colleagues as interchangeable inputs to a project plan.

Two quick questions worth asking

A pair of simple, almost gut-level questions offers a surprisingly reliable way to evaluate whether someone belongs in that category. Would you hypothetically trust this person with your own money. If you owned the company, would you actually hire them. Neither question requires a formal assessment process, and both tend to surface an honest answer quickly.3

Do not chase universal approval

Trying to be liked by absolutely everyone is a losing strategy, and it usually produces the opposite of genuine respect. A frequently cited observation on this point states it plainly:

> I don't know the secret to success, but the secret to failure is trying to please everyone.

Investing energy in a smaller circle of genuinely good working relationships produces far more durable professional satisfaction than spreading that same energy thin trying to win over an entire organization.

Making this a deliberate career filter

Treating colleague quality as a real, deliberate factor in career decisions, alongside compensation and the nature of the work itself, changes how job offers and project assignments get evaluated. Professionals who apply this filter consistently tend to report meaningfully higher satisfaction over a career than those who optimize purely for title, pay or the technical interest of the problem in front of them.

- 1Employee Turnover
- 2Workplace Relationships
- 3Organizational Trust

Summary

Among people with strong pay, interesting problems and genuine professional standing already in place, the single biggest swing factor in job satisfaction is the people surrounding the work. Research on turnover consistently identifies relationships with managers and colleagues as the leading reason people leave roles that look objectively strong on paper, which makes choosing good colleagues, and being one, a genuinely strategic career decision.