

Benefits and Challenges of Fun in the Workplace

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Abstract

Fun that is an outgrowth of a positive organizational culture may be used to enhance the goals of the organization while increasing an employee's commitment and satisfaction with his or her job. However, fun that is used simply to further the organization is disingenuous and often results in cynicism. Additional challenges to implementing a fun philosophy include defining the nature and role of fun within the context of intergenerational relations and the organizational culture of the work setting. This paper reviews the benefits and challenges of playing on the job with an emphasis on library settings.

Introduction

Plato believed that life should be lived as play. The Bible reminds us that a merry heart does wonders. The Talmud warns that we must account for the *permitted pleasures* we failed to enjoy during our lifetime. According to Weinstein, the idea that "laughter, play, and fun are an essential part of life" is not a modern concept.¹ A work environment in which employees are engaged and productive benefits the employee and the employer. Studies suggest that workplace fun may be an inexpensive, profitable mechanism of engagement that correlates directly with increasing employee job satisfaction, cultivating morale, and improving quality of customer service.² Such studies posit that younger workers desire more fun in the workplace, and advise that managers recognize the need for creating a playful, creative work environment to recruit and retain a productive workforce.³

Opposing studies suggest that workplace fun may actually do more harm than good. Such studies recognize that an attempt to create pleasure from what may be mundane or stressful work is no easy task, and that a number of factors including age and personality may affect an employee's perception of fun.⁴ Bolton and Houlihan criticize mainstream literature for its disregard of the distinction between *manufactured* and *organic* fun in the workplace. Manufactured fun, that which is imposed or required, may create an environment of cubicle-decorating cynics. Organic fun, however, is a descendent of a positive organizational culture and will thrive in the most diverse workplace.⁵ While it is most often impossible to execute policies that garner praise from *all* employees, the benefits of implementing a fun philosophy in the workplace far outweigh the challenges. This is true particularly in libraries, where budgets are malnourished and employees are stretched thin. This article seeks to explore the benefits and challenges of implementing a fun philosophy in the workplace, with particular emphasis on libraries.

Benefits of Playing on the Job

Employee Recruitment and Retention

Despite differences between public, non-profit, and private sectors, all organizations are competing in a common labor market when it comes to employee recruitment and retention.⁶ People often work in the public or non-profit sectors to fulfill an altruistic desire to serve others. Unfortunately, these employees often feel undervalued and overworked, especially given the current state of the economy. This is particularly true in many libraries, which have experienced significant budget and staffing cuts in recent years. Undoubtedly, recruitment efforts have tapered due to an overwhelming number of unemployed library employees, and job-seekers are more interested in stable employment and benefits rather than promises of having fun on the job. However, workplace fun can affect a manager's ability to seek and retain the most qualified and talented employees.

A workplace that encourages creativity and playfulness will have little trouble recruiting and retaining employees. Google, for example, has become the gold standard in fun workplaces, and is rumored to attract more than 3000 applicants *daily*. Google Co-Founder Larry Page maintains that "[w]e don't just want you to have a great job. We want you to have a great life. We provide you with everything you need to be productive and happy on and off the clock."⁷ Among the top ten self-ascribed reasons to work at Google, number four on the list states that "work and play are not mutually exclusive: it is possible to code and pass the puck at the same time".⁸ For the fourth consecutive year, Google ranked among the top five of *FORTUNE*'s "100 Best Companies to Work For".⁹ According to Page, "Google is organized around the ability to attract and leverage the talent of exceptional technologists and business people"¹⁰, an attraction that is due in large part to Google's ability to successfully balance work and play.

While it may be challenging, infusing a playful spirit into non-profit and public settings may prove to be a much needed release from stressful duties. Fun workplaces tend to enhance learning, productivity, and creativity while reducing chances of absenteeism and burnout. Burnout occurs when an individual perceives a threat to resources, which may be derived from work-related demands, loss of work-related resources, or insufficient return of resources following an investment of resources.¹¹ Sponsoring workplace fun shows an appreciation for the employees' time and effort and is an active prevention measure for burnout.¹² For example, when employees at the Rowan County Public Library volunteered to put in extra hours helping with a county-wide after-hours literacy program, the library director rewarded employees with a pizza dinner. Later when the county upgraded its online public access catalog, employees were required to train on the new system hours before it was to go live. The director encouraged employees to take a break to enjoy homemade muffins and juice in appreciation of their efforts and positive attitudes. During the break, employees were able to unwind, share differences and similarities of the new and old system, and prepare for the day ahead in which they would be required to put the new system to use. In this case, taking a breakfast break may have cost a little time and effort, but it enhanced employee learning and productivity.¹³

Increased Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction can profoundly affect life satisfaction while conversely; job dissatisfaction can affect "physical and emotional health, which may lead to tardiness, absenteeism, and turnover."¹⁴ Satisfaction can significantly affect an employee's performance, commitment, and cognitions, both on and off the job. Ultimately, an organization is only as successful as its employees, and it follows that workers must achieve a sufficient level of job satisfaction to remain productive.

Many factors may contribute to job satisfaction, including fair wages, relationships with administration, and maintaining a fun work environment. In a 2009 study, Leysen & Boydston surveyed 143 cataloger librarians to determine motivators for job satisfaction. While cataloging

is often perceived as mundane and tedious, the study found that 88% of participants experienced high levels of satisfaction with their current jobs. Trust in administration and relationships with co-workers were found to be among the top-ranked indicators of satisfaction.¹⁵ Trust in supervisors and co-workers can relate directly to productivity, commitment, and job satisfaction, which in turn can lead to positive organizational outcomes.¹⁶

Play in the workplace may be a viable mechanism used to build trust, increase communication, and encourage creativity.¹⁷ While befriending employees can be a risky move, deregulating the workplace as much as possible will provide more opportunities for managers to connect with subordinates.¹⁸ Laughter and play speak to the similarities between two people, regardless of their hierarchical caste in the workplace. When two people play or laugh together, there is an unspoken communication between them that says, “I share your values. I am moved by the same things that move you. You and I are alike in some way.”¹⁹ Being playful or humorous illustrates a certain level of vulnerability in a supervisor, as he or she takes a risk that others will laugh *at* instead of *with* them. In exposing oneself to such vulnerability, a supervisor is showing his or her employees that he or she is approachable and personable.

Playing on the job is not just about the perks of casual Fridays and picnics in the park; rather, the true benefit is the organizational culture it creates. Culture may be defined as “the part of [an organization’s] internal environment that incorporates a set of assumptions, beliefs, and values that organizational members share and use to guide their functioning.”²⁰ How effectively an organization functions is dependent in large part upon its employees and their involvement in its culture. A shared set of values and assumptions will facilitate an interconnected team that will work toward a common goal. Employees will share a series of *remember when’s* through the natural course of working with one another over time, but a manager who is willing to introduce team-building exercises outside of the context of work will help facilitate a shared history.²¹ Ultimately, teams who play together stay together.²²

Contagious Customer Service

Matt Weinstein maintains that “if you want your company to provide excellent customer service, you first have to provide that same kind of attention and appreciation to your internal customers—your own employees. You cannot expect your employees to provide ‘service with a smile’ if you don’t give them something to smile about.”²³ Research suggests that workplace fun does have a positive impact on customer service. Ramsey conjectures that fun is contagious and may actually rub off on customers, citing as evidence Seattle’s Pike Place Market. The employees of the market ameliorate the grueling, malodorous labor of preparing and selling fish by integrating a fun philosophy into their daily grind. Employees relax, have fun, and provide extraordinary customer service while tossing fish over, under, and to their customers.²⁴ People travel from all over the world to visit the now-famous fish market, and the simple philosophy of its employees has inspired a host of consultant firms and motivational media companies to create products to inspire employees around the world.

The correlation between fun on the job and customer service quality is also exemplified by Sprint, whose call center agents began handling 30% more calls per month, and 86% of customers expressed satisfaction with service after management implemented a fun work philosophy.²⁵ Gymboree uses fun to help employees better understand their clientele—children. Twice weekly, employees enjoy a snack-time and recess, which usually includes a walk around the on-campus lagoon. Management has found that not only do employees share fresh air, but they also share fresh ideas while enjoying a little fun on the job.²⁶ A weekly 30-minute game of charades at a bank in Missouri has helped boost employee morale, which in turn has increased income and reduced overhead.²⁷

Libraries have incorporated gaming, social networking, comfortable furnishings, and coffee shops in an effort to create a more relaxing, fun environment for patrons; unfortunately, they do not often create the same kind of environment for employees. Encouraging fun and creativity will allow librarians to provide innovative products and services to users.²⁸

Challenges of Playing on the Job

Defining and Redefining Fun

The ambiguity of *fun* presents a challenge in and of itself. In the context of the workplace, fun is frequently used interchangeably with such terms as humor, play, playfulness, spirit, and creativity, and it is important to consider these terms when conceptualizing fun. Moving beyond the situational definition, some believe play to be a “state of mind”.²⁹ As such, any activity can be considered play if performed with the right attitude. Under this assumption, fun not only provides short-term amusement, but is also an integral part of every culture, reflecting the “values and assumptions of that culture through actions, discourse, roles, rituals, ceremonies, norms, and stories.”³⁰ It carries with it underlying values and assumptions that help define appropriate behavior in the workplace. It is an attitude of humanity and good humor, and serves to make work more than just a job.³¹

However, determining the salience of fun in the workplace requires one to view it through a number of lenses. As a manager, the better you know your employees, the more effective you can be in defining and redefining the role of fun in the workplace. Generational identity, socioeconomic background, and organizational culture can significantly contribute to individual value systems and personalities.

Generational or Cohort Identity

It is quite possible (and even likely) that up to four generations of employees may work together within one organization. While it is difficult to determine when an individual's generational identity forms, studies suggest that it begins early in life.³² Theoretically, individuals who are born into a certain era will develop unique values, beliefs, personalities, work ethics, and consequently, unique perceptions of fun in the workplace.³³ Therefore, one may assume that personalities and value systems are heavily influenced by broad forces such as parents, peers, media, and popular culture.³⁴

According to Joshi et al., age-based generational identity assumes that the “set of experiences and attitudes that result from the successive entry into adulthood is unique to each generation and continues to shape work-related attitudes and expectations of a generational group in later years.”³⁵ This is an area of study and research with some controversy and differences of opinion on the level of generalizations that can be made about an individual's generational identity. Joshi et al. maintains that current managerial research on this topic is based on popular notions of generations that have not been empirically validated, and that reinforce simplistic if not stereotypic views of generations.³⁶ Born between 1941 and 1960, Baby Boomer employees are said to be naturally competitive and may view workplace fun as counterproductive to their competitive edge. Generation X employees, born between 1961 and 1981, need balance between work and play and tend to value fun, informality, and creativity. Generation Y employees, also known as Millennials, were born between 1981 and 2000. Millennials have been coddled and coached by their apologetic parents, leading to the development of strong ambition, over-confidence, high-achievement orientation, and a narcissistic outlook. Unlike Baby Boomers, who may oppose workplace fun, and Generation

Xers, who may be neutral about workplace fun, Millennials are likely to regard fun in the workplace not as a benefit, but a requirement.³⁷ Generational patterns do not automatically dictate an individual's response, but serve to highlight potential age-based distinctions in how play in the workplace is interpreted.

However, Biggs asserts that the lines of “generational distinctions are becoming increasingly blurred” and “clearly defined roles and meanings attributed to particular age stages are effectively disappearing”.³⁸ A colleague shared that while clearly she falls under the Generation X label, her parents, who grew up in during the Great Depression, raised her much differently than her friends’ parents, most of which grew up during Woodstock. In some situations, environment can be a greater influence on an individual’s perceptions and values than where his or her birth date falls on a timeline. As such, cohort-based generational identity assumes that as groups of individuals enter the same state (e.g. workplace) at the same time, individuals will “undergo similar training and socialization experiences and enter into similar employment contracts.”³⁹ Educational institutions and corporations encourage cohort-based approaches to socializing and training incoming students and employees. As a result, individual cohorts will have unique training and socialization experiences and will maintain distinct personalities and value systems. Based on this assumption, employees belonging to different age generations may hold similar work values based on the cohort in which they belong upon entering the workplace.

According to Joshi et al., irregardless of how generations are conceptualized, the “chronological interdependencies between individuals representing multiple generations are the basis for the transmission of skills, knowledge, ideas, values, and experience in organizations.”⁴⁰ At any given point in time, employees representing different generations must work together to achieve common goals. Managers must be mindful of potential distinctions in generational identities and how these distinctions may affect attitudes, values, and perceptions.

Organizational Culture

Fun in the workplace is a “natural outgrowth” of what is already occurring in the workplace.⁴¹ Organizational motives must be taken into consideration when determining the appropriateness and benefits of fun in the workplace. If employees are required to volunteer at a children’s home, it is important that attendance is required not to bolster the company’s brag book of charitable acts, but to promote team-building, good-hearted enjoyment. If fun is prescribed as a means to an end, it may do more harm than good. Hamilton speaks to the misery that mandatory fun may elicit:

“I am here today to speak for the victims. The poor, downtrodden employees yearning to go home. The party-pooing, costume-hating working stiffs. Those who dream about letting certain colleagues flop straight to the floor in the trust-building, don’t-worry-we’ll-catch-you exercise. The spouses keeping the home front together as Mom’s or Dad’s work group parties on.”⁴²

Fun activities are only fun if employees view them as salient. If activities created added stress or burden for employees, they are not likely to be viewed as fun. For libraries in which duties are increasing and resources are decreasing, extending an already taxing workday to include a pizza party would likely evoke cynicism rather than gratitude from employees.

The value of fun may also depend upon the setting in which a person is employed. A Hawaiian-shirt day may be deemed more appropriate at a YMCA than in a legal or corporate setting. Karl et al. looked at measured attitudes toward fun in the non-profit, public, and private sectors. The

sample for their study included full-time paid employees from six non-profit organizations, five public organizations, and seven private organizations. Of the 242 respondents, the majority found fun in the workplace to be salient, appropriate, and leading to positive consequences or outcomes. Consequently, the study found no significant difference between the groups' attitudes toward fun or in their ratings of fun activities. While workplace fun was perceived generally as beneficial by all three groups, public sector employees rated 25 percent of activities as "less fun", which suggests that those employees have unique views of what is and is not fun.⁴³

Libraries strive to provide service to all patrons without respect to race, socioeconomic status, or age. As such, managers should be sensitive to the diverse backgrounds of employees when implementing a fun philosophy. Going out for drinks after work may be fun for some employees, but it may alienate employees who do not drink alcoholic beverages, or those who have financial or familial commitments that prevent them from participating (a \$6 martini can make quite a few peanut butter and jelly sandwiches). Throwing a birthday party or wedding shower may employees feel more like a family, but it may also create a socioeconomic divide for employees who do not have the means to contribute to the cause. Larger organizations may even implement a social based Staff Association in which staff pay annual dues to fund social events. Although the fees typically are nominal, this added financial commitment may not be feasible for some staff, and can even be divisive at times. Employees may feel pressured to participate to fit into the culture, and those who do not participate may feel segregated from the group. Managers must create an inclusive organizational culture in which employees are encouraged to have fun regardless of socioeconomic factors.

Considerations in Planning Fun Activities

Cheap Thrills

It is doubtful that libraries will ever have the funds to send staff on a cruise or to stuff stockings with chunky bonuses in appreciation of efforts. However, funding of professional development opportunities, flexibility in scheduling, and recognition and rewarding of employee efforts (not just successes) are cost-effective, productive mechanisms of incorporating fun into the organizational culture of the library. Fun in the workplace does not have to be expensive, but it does have to be effective. Put out a few feelers to your employees to determine which way they lean on the fun scale. Communicate with your staff one-on-one as much as possible, utilizing company newsletters and e-mail when schedules are tight. If it is January and your employees are struggling with weight loss resolutions, a pizza lunch may not be the best way to show them that you appreciate their hard work. A note of encouragement or a witty cartoon posted on the bulletin board is an inexpensive, no-carb way to sneak a little fun into the workday and to connect with staff. But be sure to choose light humor or workplace related references to make sure that the cartoon will be received as expected and not be seen as offensive or creating a hostile environment.

On the Clock

Some companies host department picnics during business hours so that employees with after-hours commitments are still included in the fun. This is not logistically possible to do this in some libraries, as many stay open late or even all-night. However, creating small opportunities for fun while employees are on the clock will help boost morale and ensure that employees with after-work commitments are able to participate. Allowing employees to pair up for an afternoon power-walk outside of their normal break periods will encourage worksite wellness and give

employees an opportunity to recharge. When the library hosts special events such as movie nights or guest lecturers, give employees the opportunity to move around and serve in new capacities. Circulation employees may welcome the opportunity to trade out their post behind the desk to help set up the meeting room for a guest speaker or to dress up as Roary the Reading Tiger in the local parade.⁴⁴ Casual Fridays are also an inexpensive avenue for creating a more relaxed, fun environment.

Team-building activities that involve everyone from the library director to the pages are a great way to help staff get to know one another and to share a little laughter in the process. One library hosted a gingerbread house decorating contest to encourage staff to work together toward a common goal. Each group created elaborate designs, one of which involved piping the Dewey call number for cookie baking on the roof of the house.⁴⁵ The houses were then placed on display for decoration and amusement of patrons. Another organization used a paper airplane flying contest to foster teamwork and creativity. Each team was responsible for designing a creative, aerodynamic paper aircraft, and the winning team won a paid vacation day off from work. Everyone from management to administrative staff participated in research and development, sharing a few laughs over failed designs and misguided aircraft.

Trial and Error

Stay in contact with your employees, soliciting their feedback on what works and doesn't work. Before you try to implement a fun philosophy in the workplace, consider the following questions excerpted from Kurt, Kurt, and Medaille's "The Power of Play: Fostering creativity and innovation in libraries":

- How can play be encouraged without seeming disingenuous?
- How can managers model play for their employees and promote play within the organizational culture?
- How might a playful environment be more conducive to the creative and scholarly work that must be produced by librarians seeking tenure and promotion?
- How can play be incorporated into training?
- What kinds of playful solutions can be generated in response to an understanding of user practices and needs?
- How can workflows and traditional library processes be improved through creative thinking and play?
- When resources and budgets are low and time is more valuable than ever, how can library employees find time to play?⁴⁶

It is a process of trial and error, and if the decorate-your-book-cart contest flops, it does not mean that your staff is disinterested in having fun. Rather, it may mean that your employees have different interests and perceptions of what is fun. Perhaps they would prefer participating in a softball tournament or volunteering at the local soup kitchen. Diverse workplaces are beneficial and challenging, and the ambiguity of *fun* itself creates a number of challenges for management. If you find yourself in the midst of a Gloomy Gus, try probing that employee to clarify what he or she deems to be fun. Being sensitive to diversity in cultural, generational, and organizational identities will help you to better understand your employees' value of fun in the workplace. If an employee continues to oppose your efforts, let them sit it out. Requiring a resistive employee to participate in *fun* activities likely will result in cynicism and may inhibit fun for other employees. For a library that seeks to infuse play in the workplace, employees must be allowed to "find their own kinds of self-directed play and experimentation."⁴⁷

Conclusion

In a lifetime, we will spend more than 90,000 hours on the job, too much time not to have fun while we are there. With the downturn in the economy, many public organizations have been forced to operate on a strained budget. Existing staff must now accomplish twice the work with half the resources. Playing on the job enhances employee motivation and productivity, reduces stress, and increases customer satisfaction. Many companies have reported an increase in productivity and customer service satisfaction as a result of incorporating a fun philosophy into the workplace.

The salience and value of fun in the workplace may depend heavily upon a number of factors including an employee's generational identity and the organizational culture of the setting in which he or she is employed. The moment that having fun becomes mandatory, it ceases to be fun and may further disparage stressed employees. However, organic fun, or that which is descendent of a positive organizational culture, may serve as a welcomed release for undervalued and overworked employees. If library managers are to infuse a fun philosophy into their workplace culture, they must do so with delicacy and sensitivity, understanding that what fun is for one may not be what fun is for all.

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