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Increase Productivity, Profitability, and Morale and Make Work Fun

By: Robin Thompson, MS/TRS

Run. Hide. The "Fun" police have arrived and they are searching for those guilty of breaking a rather unamusing law: businesses must be, above all, serious places. After taking one look around, employers and employees are charged with having "no fun." Bail is set play, play, play.

To meet bail, you need to learn how to incorporate fun into your workplace. We don't need to learn how to have fun, because play is something that we engaged in freely and unconsciously as a child; but we do need to learn to give ourselves and others permission to have fun. Acting "all grown-up" at work has become analogous to having no fun.

Too often fun doesn't see the light of day, not even the office's fluorescent light, because employers have sentenced fun to the bottom of their list of priorities. "Business first, fun last," may be their mantra. If you don't enjoy your job and co-workers are suffering from terminal professionalism, will that create a highly productive, successful environment? Taking our jobs seriously and ourselves lightly is the key to making fun of work.

Fun at work is taking the ordinary and making it, well, enjoyable. It is our reward for commitment and hard work. Fun makes difficult situations less stressful. The common ground of fun helps us bond with others. Physiologically, our brain thrives on fun. Research indicates that when we are having fun, we develop new neural cells in areas devoted to learning and memory.¹

Why does it seem that fun and work are at two opposite ends of a continuum? After all, they've always co-existed and even complemented one another. Thousands of years ago, Stone Age women wove intricate, multicolored patterns into their textiles and used fruit pits to create beaded cloth. Even in the most subsistence economies, plain, undecorated cloth did not satisfy human imaginations. These women learned and challenged themselves to invent new patterns.² But our thoughts on fun work changed after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Some speculate the Roman Empire crumbled because of too much leisure and fun. Subsequent societies debated and feared the impact of fun on their civilizations; they felt emphasizing hard work would protect them from extinction. In the sixteenth century, Puritan leader John Calvin scorned leisure, declaring it a negative pastime. He preached that hard work was the sole path to salvation. People began working hard and denying themselves pleasures. His ideals evolved into what is known today as the Puritan work ethic. This did not eliminate fun, but surrounded it with a sense of guilt that we continue to feel today. Yet the Puritans cannot be blamed entirely for our addiction to hard work and no fun. The Industrial Revolution helped create a consumer-based society where we began to "buy" fun instead of living it. This gets expensive.

A survey revealed that shopping is the most popular "out-of-home-entertainment" on weekday evenings. Four billion square feet of our land has been converted into shopping centers; some 16 square feet for every American.³ Perhaps if more fun is found in the work place, fewer people will be inclined to "buy" or seek out fun in the vicious work spend consume cycle.

Fun work is not the prescription for every organization. It is recommended for companies that realize that the next major boost in productivity will be people, not technology, driven.⁴ For companies that are ready to catapult into the next level of business success, fun is the catalyst.

Initially, some employees may not want to participate in such "childish" activities. They must understand the difference between being "childlike" and acting "childish." Childlike behavior can lead to creative thoughts and actions, while childish behavior can interfere with productivity in the workplace.

Unfortunately, when people define a “right” and “wrong” way to behave at work, they risk eliminating both the childlike and childish behaviors.⁵

By tapping into some childlike play, we will introduce fun into the work place and discover a multitude of benefits for employees and employers.

Fun Increases Productivity

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Benefit #1

The more fun we are having, the more we will accomplish. Skeptics exclaim, "Rubbish! Nothing will be accomplished if everyone is focused on having fun." Yet, numerous examples illustrate that fun increases productivity.

A few years ago at the Thiokol Plant, an employee approached his foreman with a proposal. He suggested that if the team achieved their quota by Friday at 3:00 p.m., then they should shut down the plant for one hour and go outside and fly paper airplanes. “No way,” the foreman responded. This employee was not easily discouraged. After consulting with his team members, he told the foreman they would produce 150 percent of their quota by Friday afternoon. The foreman first balked but then reluctantly agreed to the deal.

Friday at 1:30 p.m., the team reached 110 percent of the quota; by 3:00 p.m., they had surpassed 150 percent of the quota. Paper airplanes were airborne. The employees began negotiating a game of volleyball for the next week's reward if the team met the quota. The team hit record productivity that next week, and continued to “barter” with the foreman for fun in exchange for productivity.⁶

Productivity also increases when everyone feels accountable for their role on the team. If we feel responsible to follow through on our projects, we are less likely to falter. Fun can make us more comfortable with co-workers and supervisors thus increasing our commitment. A recent study found workers who consider their supervisor a friend were more likely to experience high job satisfaction than those that don't (54 percent versus 30 percent) and less likely to look for another job in the next two years (28 percent versus 45 percent).⁷

Fun Increases Profitability

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Benefit #2

A healthy bottom line is crucial to keeping a business alive. Fun contributes to this bottom line, if it is integrated on a regular basis. It generates a company “atmosphere” that results in increased profitability.

Three companies that are known for their “un”corporate culture are Southwest Airlines, Quad/Graphics, and Nucor Steel. Harry Quadracci, the owner of Quad/Graphics takes his trust-the-employees culture so seriously that once a year managers literally walk out of the plant for up to three days and leave it in the hands of hourly workers. Nucor Steel executives do not receive any traditional perks, only what is offered to every other employee. All three companies went from Inc. Magazine 500 size to Fortune Magazine 500 size, even though they were competing with some of the toughest businesses around. They are still thriving today.⁸

Hal Rosenbluth, CEO of Rosenbluth International, the nation's fourth largest travel-services company with \$2 billion in revenues, considers it “almost inhumane if companies create a climate where people can't naturally have fun . . . our role and responsibility as leaders and associates is to create a place where people can enjoy themselves. I know our company is doing well when I walk around and hear people laughing. The enjoyment translates into performance.” He adds, “we hire nice people because

when nice people work together they're effective and they have fun.⁹

Similarly, Ann Machado, founder of Creative Staffing, an employment agency in Miami has seen her average annual revenues soar from 20 percent to 42 percent. She offers incentives to employees like dinner at upscale restaurants and all-expense paid trips. She didn't realize how important these fun incentives were to her employees until she replaced them with more traditional benefits disability insurance and a pension plan. Revenues then only increased 9 percent. "We got too serious." Machado revved up the rewards machine again. She kept the traditional benefits and added on the oldies like giving high-achieving managers \$400 shopping sprees, by limo. Creative Staffing's sales again increased 20 percent. Machado says, "This is a place where employees get charged up. If you don't like to have fun, you won't fit in."¹⁰

Fun Increases Morale

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Benefit #3

Morale tops the list of business concerns. Companies struggle to cope with change and retain top employees. In a survey of 100 major Chicago-area companies conducted by the Cambridge Human Resource Group, 41 percent of responding human resource directors said revitalizing the work force was their top priority.¹¹

Harvey Mackay, author of "Swim With the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive" and owner of Mackay Envelope Company, says he has rarely seen a company with happy employees that was not successful. Companies that concentrate just on satisfying their customers and "whipping competition to a pulp" miss the easiest audience of all: their own employees. At his company, Mackay says it is difficult for workers to visualize themselves on the cutting edge of creativity when they are making envelopes. His managers recognize this so closing shop for an afternoon and taking the employees to a ball game, or ordering pizza-on-the-house, or offering an unexpected cash bonus, all pay off. Fun makes people feel appreciated and increases employee loyalty resulting in fewer stress-related sick days, which in turn translates into lower health-care costs, higher productivity, and better morale. In short, less absenteeism and lower turnover increase creativity and productivity.¹²

I recently consulted with a facilities management department at a local college that wanted to increase morale by making fun of work. Shortly after my presentation, the facility manager received a request from the President of the college: Do something about the unsightly new satellite dish installed on top of the administration building. The facility manager asked two of his employees to take care of it. These employees decided to "get creative." They took a chance. Since Halloween was right around the corner, they painted a giant jack-o-lantern face on the ugly dish. The President loved the creative solution. Now the "face" of the satellite changes seasonally, and employees look forward to their turn in expressing creativity on the job.

Fun Attracts Talented Employees

By: Robin Thompson, MS/TRS

Benefit #4

Southwest Airlines is serious about having fun at work. Their quest for fun has made them the only airline to post a profit between 1990 and 1994 in an industry that recorded a \$12.8 billion loss in the same period. Southwest was the only U.S. airline to earn a profit every year since 1973. Their net-profit margins are also the highest in the industry. Typically, the airlines receives over 24,000 applications a year, interviews a fourth of those people, and hires an eighth of them. A fun corporate culture attracts the most talented employees.

Most new employees arrive brimming with enthusiasm, desire, and creativity. They find their new job challenging and exciting with much to learn. What happens to those same people in three months, six months or one year? They can become automatons unmotivated and unenthusiastic. These employees were not hired as "dead wood."¹³ Keep them thriving and growing through fun and

creativity. If you don't nurture employees, another company will.

Wall Street is now looking beyond the stock prices to "people factors" when looking at stock investments. Ernst and Young's Center for Business Innovation presented a study of 275 portfolio managers who showed their decisions on stock picks were over one third driven by nonfinancial factors. A company's ability to attract and retain talented employees ranks fifth among 39 factors.¹⁴

One company, Facilitec Business Interiors in Phoenix, Arizona, started as a small furniture dealership and grew to be one of the largest in their industry. The company recognized that their most valuable asset was motivated staff. Facilitec's dynamic owners expected employees to come to work with a good attitude. If someone did not feel like coming to work, they had them the option to stay home. These leaders knew that a bad attitude spreads like a dreaded virus. If this virus was kept out of the work environment, they would have an office of happy, healthy people. It worked. Although there were some people who abused the system, it was not management that reprimanded them but rather their fellow-employees. Others did not want the policy to be revoked so they policed their peers. People who abused the system did not fit in with the team and ultimately did not remain with the company. Because of this unique policy, talented employees are attracted like magnets to this high-energy environment.

Fun Reduces Turnover Costs

By: Robin Thompson, MS/TRS

Benefit #5

Employee turnover can easily cost over \$100,000. This includes exit interviews, severance pay, hiring costs and lost productivity while the new hire is learning the job. One manufacturer estimated the loss of a salaried journeyman machinist costs \$102,796, an automobile company's human resource manager \$133,803, and a fast-food chain store manager \$21,931. These costs alone are surprising. Then add on top of these numbers the indirect costs like loss of intellectual capital, decreased morale, increased employee stress and negative reputation.¹⁵

Wendy Goff-McKewen of Blue Cross Blue Shield in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina says, "If the employees are happy, they will tend to stay with the company." After a difficult time of growth and the addition of an evening shift, staff workloads were increased. When invited to a seminar encouraging fun in the work place, their response was an impatient, "I don't have time for this." But after participating, those same employees said they came to work the next day with a new attitude. Yet, the skeptics still didn't see the value in spending money on something that may make people too accustomed to fun at work. The vice president's response to this fear, "They might [become accustomed to fun], but they will not want to leave."

In the 1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce, 2,877 employees in blue- and white-collar jobs were surveyed. The quality of the jobs (based on the personal intrinsic satisfaction an employee gains from their job) and the support employees felt within the work place, are more powerful predictors of job satisfaction, commitment to their employers and retention. These characteristics are far more important predictors of productivity than pay and benefits if the compensation package is generally competitive with the marketplace.¹⁶

Sometimes the quality of a job is tied to its intrinsic value to the community and ability to make a difference in peoples' lives. These aspects are meaningful to employees. The work force at a retail outlet that sells dessert food truly believes that sometimes something sweet really made someone's day. They appreciate the several large community contributions the company is dedicating to making. When employees feel they are part of a positive influence, they become more committed to the role they play in the company

Fun Retains and Attracts New Customers

By: Robin Thompson, MS/TRS

Benefit #6

If your employees are enthusiastic about your company, their energy infuses every customer interaction. Imagine Southwest Airlines' 22,000 employees actively promoting their company to potential and existing customers. Success is imminent.

Richard Block, CEO of AGI, considers fun to be an integral part of his company. He says, "If you were a customer and you came here and then you went to all your other suppliers, I guarantee you that the place you'd enjoy most-- the place you'd want to do business with--is this one. Just because of how it feels. And though that's a competitive advantage that isn't patentable, it's also one that nobody can steal."¹⁷

"If employees have to work anyway, they would rather work in a pleasant environment doing something with a purpose," says Howard Behar, Starbucks Coffee President. He admits these "fuzzier" benefits of happy employees and impressed customers are harder to put in a report¹⁸--but they are key to success.

First Tennessee National Bank fills its job openings in 19 days or under, compared with an industry national average of 31-days. The bank has doubled its loan volume. Customer-service ratings have soared to 98 percent in 1997 (from 38 percent in 1992). Results began climbing in 1993 when a new CEO came on board. His philosophy was "until you treat your employees well, they're not going to treat your customers well..¹⁹

Fun Facilitates Communication

By: Robin Thompson, MS/TRS

Benefit #7

One can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation. Plato

When we enter the world of play, only the present matters history and future vanish. Our inhibitions fade as well, and we become caught up in the moment. The more we focus on the fun task at hand, the more comfortable we become with ourselves and others. In this state, we are more open to new ideas and information and more willing to generate new ideas. We also feel more comfortable expressing ourselves; this allows unspoken concerns or issues that may be hindering job efficiency to be brought up.

A Northwest-based high-tech computer company hired me to work with them on team building. They had been developing a computer chip for more than two years, but had yet to present a product to the marketplace. This delay was causing tension and negativity between the marketing and engineering teams. The engineering team did not want to roll out an inferior product too early. The marketing team needed a product to present to their potential clients. As we worked on team building, we designed an activity that would help facilitate communication between these two teams.

Each team was asked to find an object that started with every letter of the alphabet and to write it down. The marketing group finished long before the engineering group. Upon further examination of the techniques used, the members of the marketing group had brainstormed as a team and had randomly decided on words. In contrast, the engineering group leader had divided the alphabet and assigned each person a series of letters the first person had A through E, the second person had F through J, and so on. If someone in this group presented an item that was not part of their assigned letters, the group leader (who was also the chief operating officer) rejected it. In discussing this activity, the leader began to realize that he was much too controlling and had not let his team members use their creativity. He also verbalized that he controls the office environment similar to this and that he may be causing some of the difficulties between the two teams. By observing his own behavior while "having fun," the leader gained insight into his management style. Fun is a disarming way to learn. One month after this

training session, the engineering and marketing departments made their first joint decision on the time line for a product introduction.

Fun Stimulates Creativity

By: Robin Thompson, MS/TR

Benefit #8

Many companies report dramatic increases in productivity and creativity when their employees stopped taking themselves so seriously at work. Monsanto managers and top research scientists increased creativity by 50 percent after a humor session with Joel Goodman, director of The HUMOR Project.²⁰

The founders of the Internet directory Yahoo! were graduate students just fooling around when they stumbled on the concept of what would later become Yahoo. "We began to index all of the information on the Web, just for fun," says co-founder Jerry Yang. Unintentionally, they had created a vast market through their play.

Employees gain confidence through fun interactions. It puts everyone on a level playing field. This is the time when supervisors and CEO's aren't necessarily more knowledgeable than other employees. The entire group gets involved in generating useful ideas. The stakes are not as high as when producing solutions to business problems and the CEO has the final word. Fun activities help employees shed their worries in expressing ideas ones that they might otherwise fear would be perceived as silly or stupid by others. CEOs and managers can let employees create solutions in a no risk environment. As both teams observe the synergy that occurs from generating ideas together, creativity in business situations will soar.

In Silicon Valley 54 percent of employers found department morale to be high compared with 44 percent nationwide, according to an extensive research study of 17,500 employees who report working long hours. John Stanek, survey chief, says, "I think employees would rather work to death than be bored. Employees are excited by what they are doing. They should be wearing out. But they are not. The reason is the creative and intellectually attractive environment."²¹

Fun Relieves Stress

By: Robin Thompson, MS/TRS

Benefit #9

Laughter boosts cardiovascular fitness by lowering blood pressure and heart rate. It also reduces pain perception, stimulates blood flow, strengthens the immune system, and reduces levels of hormones that create stress--all of which could have positive effects on the person's creativity and productivity.²² These physiological effects translate to lower health-care costs, less sick leave and absenteeism.

Few people do a great job when they are stressed out. The most productive workplaces have at least ten minutes of laughter every hour, says Barbara Glanz, author of *Care Packages For The Workplace*. The amount of laughter is a good indication of the morale and productivity.²³

There is no evidence that learning to lighten up reduces employee interest in working. Actually, the opposite occurs. According to Paul McGhee, author of *The Laughter Remedy*, as job satisfaction increases, employees work more and become more efficient at remaining effective under stressful conditions that used to disrupt work.²⁴

Fun . . . Because It Is Fun!

By: Robin Thompson, MS/TRS

Benefit #10

If your boss asked you to go outside and walk around in a downpour, would you go? If it was 100 degrees and your CEO said he needed you to hike around outside for four hours, would you? Would you change your mind if you were chasing a little white ball? You get the picture. We jump at the opportunity to play golf even in inclement weather, but if our company asks us to do the same, we are not as motivated.

People perform extraordinary feats under the guise of fun. Fun may just be the answer to entice your staff to go that extra mile.

Perhaps you are swamped at work--always too much to do and too little time to do it. How on earth will you ever have time for fun? Won't this just be one more thing to do? At first, as with any behavior change, it will require scheduling and planning. However, when the power of fun gains momentum, finding time for it will occur naturally. Then the investment will pay dividends that were previously unimaginable.

Once fun becomes a natural part of your attitude and work environment, you'll be free. The "Fun" police will be off your case and they'll move on to other fun violators. You'll also be free of the 40-hour week that felt a bit too much like "jail time." Shake up the daily grind, unplug the clock-in clock-out attitude by adding some playfulness and humor. Keep it light. Your work is far too important in your life, for it not to be fun.

Footnotes

¹Los Angeles Times, April 3, 1997

²Postrel, Virginia, The Future and Its Enemies

³Schor, Juliet, The Overworked American

⁴Peters, Tom, Wow

⁵Human Resource Magazine, March 1994

⁶Weinstein, Matt, Managing to Have Fun

⁷Study conducted for Interim Services Inc. in Ft. Lauderdale, FL. (Gannett News Service, May 30, 1999)

⁸Inc. Magazine, November 1996.

⁹Industry Week, 2/5/96

¹⁰Small Business Magazine, November 1994

¹¹Human Resource Magazine, December 1996

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¹³Wheatly, Margaret, Leadership and the New Science

¹⁴Wall Street Journal, March 19, 1997

¹⁵Associated Press, March 30, 1999

¹⁶1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce, Families and Work Institute, www.familiesandwork.org

¹⁷Inc. Magazine, November 1996

¹⁸The Economist, May 30, 1998

¹⁹Wall Street Journal, March 19, 1997

²⁰Human Resource Magazine, March 1994

²¹Dow Jones Business News, April 4, 1997

²²Human Resource Magazine, March 1994

²³Human Resource Magazine, December 1996

²⁴Human Resource Magazine, December 1996

FUN IN THE WORKPLACE

Joy at Work by Dennis Bakke, PVG - A Revolutionary Approach to Fun on the Job

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- Southwest Airlines Crazy Recipe for Business and Personal Success

Fish! By Lundin, Paul and Christensen, Hyperion - A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results

Lighten Up by Metcalf and Felible, Addison-Wesley Publishing - Survival Skills for People Under Pressure

Managing to Have Fun by Matt Weinstein, Simon and Schuster - How Fun at Work Can Motivate Your Employees

Making Humor Work - Take Your Job Seriously and Yourself Lightly by Terry Paulson, Ph.D., Crisp Publications - A Guide to Improved Morale and Increased Productivity

301 Ways to Have Fun at Work by Dave Hemsath and Leslie Yerkes, Berrett-Koehler Publishers - Ideas for Creating a Dynamic, Fun-Filled Work Environment

The Big Book of Business Games (and the entire Games Trainers Play series) by Newstrom and Scannell, McGraw-Hill - Icebreakers, Creativity Exercises, and Meeting Energizers for Business Groups

Making Work Fun by Ron Garland, Shamrock Press Division of Albrecht Publishing Co. 1-800-447-8254 - Doing Business with a Sense of Humor

Fax This Book by John Caldwell, Workman Publishing - Over 100 Sit Up and Take Notice Cover Sheets for Better Business

EMPLOYEE RETENTION

Who Moved My Cheese by Spencer Johnson, M.D., Putnam - An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work and in Your Life

Finding and Keeping Great Employees by Harris and Brannick, Anacom American Management Association - Best Practices in Staffing and Retention

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