

Fun in the workplace: a matter for Health Psychologists?

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Anecdotally, we all seem to agree that some fun at our workplace is desirable and even necessary for letting go of the problems and worries of everyday working life. During the last decades, there has been a considerable interest about the promotion of fun in the workplace. Popular business thinkers have published guides and lists of activities that contribute to promoting a fun workplace. However, such guides lack an evidence-based background and the conclusions that they reach stem from their everyday practice. The study of positivity in Psychology and its importance in the management of our health is increasing exponentially (Luthans, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, fun, as an explicit concept is understudied, especially in the context of workplace where the demands are high.

The concept

Conceptualizing and measuring fun in the workplace is complex. Fun in general is perceived as a positive subjective experience (Baldry & Hallier 2010); consequently it is difficult to categorize what is and is not fun from an external point of view. Workplace fun specifically is defined as a work environment that intentionally encourages, initiates, and supports a variety of enjoyable and pleasurable activities, such as participating in parties, giving awards, playing competitions, and gathering to have fun activities (Ford, McLaughlin, & Newstrom, 2003). Lamm and Meeks (2009) defined workplace fun as playful, social, interpersonal, recreational, or

task activities intended to provide amusement, enjoyment, or pleasure. Several lists of activities that contribute to fun are found in the literature (Chan, 2010; Ford, McLaughlin, & Newstrom, 2003; Karl, Peluchette, Hall-Indiana, & Harland, 2005). Most expressions of these activities have to do with personal events, professional milestones, social events, humor, games and competitions, or community involvement. But, the most highly appreciated are food related activities and outings (Karl, Peluchette & Hall, 2008).

However, the formal initiation that is implied in the above definitions of fun needs to be contrasted with organic fun (Strömberg & Karlsson, 2009), a concept that describes fun that is created spontaneously by individuals in the workplace. Strömberg and Karlsson (2009) in an observational study described how workers used humor in the form of joke telling, physical joking practices (e.g., nudges, pokes, tickles, jostles, grapples, dances, tactics of scaring people) clowning, nicknaming and satire to create by themselves a fun workplace. This is what they called organic fun, to differentiate it from organized fun, the type of fun that is formally initiated and pre-organized. Also, Fleming and Sturdy (2009) conceptualized fun as an expression of the authentic self and associated it with diversity. Plester (2009), after examining interpretations of fun in organizations, proposed that genuine (organic) workplace fun is spontaneous, contextual and has an unmanaged, liberated element that defies control. Fineman (2006) also notes that fun typically gains its “funness” from its

spontaneity, surprise, and often subversion of the extant order.

Health

Fun is not a topic that is covered often in the Health Psychology literature. In terms of health, fun is most commonly associated with humor (Martin, 2001; Overholser, 1992). Humor has been seen as a coping mechanism and researchers have used variables like sense of humor and humor style in order to predict well-being or stress, or to help tolerate the pain (Åstedt-Kurki & Liukkonen, 1994; Bizi, Keinan, & Beit-Hallahmi, 1988; Hulse, 1994; Porterfield, 1987). But, humor is mostly perceived as a stable personality trait and the research about it focuses on the individual, while fun seems to be a state that is context related and stems from social factors. Specifically fun may include humor, laughter or playfulness, but these don't seem necessary in order to experience a situation as fun.

When thinking about the outcomes of fun in health and work related issues, it may become more explicit, if we fit the concept into a model. The job demands-resources model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) provides an interesting platform on which we can conceptualize fun. Individuals use job resources to buffer against the problems they face (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; de Jonge, Le Blanc, Peeters, & Noordam, 2008). Fun could be one type of job resource that moderates the physiological and psychological costs. Specifically, we can conceptualize fun in the workplace as a job resource that stems from the social aspects of work (the daily experience of work for most people is socially constructed). The interactions and interpretations that will occur will label a situation as fun or not. The fun related stimuli (internal or external to the self) can be an array of activities, ranging from time and energy consuming, extreme actions to

simple, instant and relaxing. These actions may have physical, emotional and cognitive effects on the actor or on other people. For example, the use of fun can function as a factor that provides a sense of belonging, feelings of sharing something common between co-workers and even trust. It is important to consider the social-organizational resources in the workplace, for example a supportive climate, which has been consistently related to psychological well-being (Boudrias, et al., 2011) and is negatively associated with the risk of long-term sickness absence (Clausen, Nielsen, Carneiro, & Borg, 2012). Moreover, negative aspects of interpersonal relationships, especially with supervisors, are strongly related to job stress, negative job feelings, depression and physical health (Israel, House, Schurman, Heany, & Mero, 1989). Thus, fun most probably plays an important role in the way that employer-employee-colleague relationships are experienced. For example, fun may be a moderator between social support and well-being. Indeed, fun may be a coping mechanism or an outcome of coping (or both)?

Research has yet to demonstrate the effects of fun explicitly on health in general. In spite of this, research on fun in the specific context of the workplace has some encouraging evidence to offer. Karl and Peluchette (2006a) found that when employees experience workplace fun, they enjoy performing their job duties and are satisfied with their job. Adding to the above, Karl and Peluchette (2006b) found that people who experienced fun at work reported less emotional exhaustion and less emotional dissonance. In 2008, Karl, Peluchette, and Hall found that employees who experienced higher levels of fun in their workplace also had lower turnover intentions.

Fun as a relatively new idea cannot be easily conceptualized and its measurement is in its

infancy. In most studies to date, fun is measured using questionnaires and the most common way to perceive it is as an array of activities or as an experience. The problem is that the perception of fun as an experience is represented in these questionnaires in a non-comprehensive way and might not depict all the aspects of fun. As far as the lists of activities are concerned, given the conceptualization of fun as a subjective and contextual factor it is not easy to accept that the activities or behaviors in the lists represent all the possible manifestations of fun. There are also studies that measure the attitudes towards fun in the workplace. Studies that try to understand the concept of fun in the workplace using individual interviews, focus groups, documentation analyses and observations are also found in the literature, but although they provide thorough and deep understandings of the concept, they do not supply us with information about relational aspects of fun with other concepts.

Can fun be created?

There is a critical issue in the discussion about fun; can fun be created in order to balance the demands and resources in the workplace? Given the fact that what differentiates fun from other concepts, like joy or happiness, is the element of spontaneity and freedom, how can we intervene and promote a fun working environment? Fleming and Sturdy (2009) mentioned that in organizations where positive non-work experiences are imitated, the results are not always the expected and desired ones. In case studies, they found that although some employees internalized the philosophy of a culture of fun, some others perceived these programs as patronizing and degrading. They see through this a form of cynicism and note that it is a result of the blend of boundaries between work and non-work time.

The main question here is if workers need

specific fun oriented activities to actually have fun at work. Are celebrations of birthdays, extra time off, wellness programs, informal gatherings, happy hours, annual dinners, organization of provided food, and casual dress days what employees need in order to perceive their workplace as fun? As noted above, lists of activities that contribute to fun in the workplace, recommendations, expert opinions and guides thrive in popular press articles. So far, many well known companies have used fun as a label for their work places and a formal strategy, incorporating "play & fun" culture programs in their human resources or even marketing/recruitment strategies. The benefits of these strategies in health are yet to be studied. Although most of them were initiated as a method of identification with the organization and not as a way to manage stress and promote well-being, the positive outcomes for health cannot be neglected, even from the scope that people desire fun in their workplace and they should have it.

In the issues of stress management and coping, simply infusing activities that people think are fun should not be enough. Organizations that suffer from stress and need this kind of actions should do it collectively and try to spread a culture of fun in their premises. The first step should be to make clear that fun (whatever its source) is an accepted behavior. Leaders and other change agents can play an important role in this plan, by trying to change their own behavior in the first place, and then influence people's attitudes and help them learn new behaviors.

Conclusions

Considering the above, fun in the workplace is not an issue to take lightheartedly. In the workplace context where demands are increasing and the need for coping strategies to reduce stress is great, fun could play the role of an

important coping mechanism that ameliorates the stressors or demands and contributes to well-being.

But one cannot simply incorporate fun activities during work time and expect to have a result. Also, having in mind that fun is a perceived and subjective factor and also that there are regional and contextual differences in humor use and generational differences in attitudes towards fun at work, how can we promote a fun working environment? Further research needs to be done in order to study the concept, so that we can understand the mechanism in the individual as well as in the organizational level, how it is stimulated, how it feels and what the benefits in the workplace are. We need more well-structured models to describe and test the processes and dynamics involved. Researchers should initially approach fun with a qualitative approach. I believe that this is very important in order to clarify conceptual issues and define fun in psychological terms. So, fun should be a matter for occupational health psychology. ■

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