Literature Review of Fun in the Workplace

Erica Pentz

Elmhurst College
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In recent years, there has been an increased focus on fun in the workplace in an attempt to bring some levity to the area of our lives in which many of us spend 40-60 hours every week. Much of the popular literature suggests that workplace fun is an easy and sure-fire way to increase engagement, improve morale, and heighten productivity. A review of the scientific literature however, reveals that although adding elements of fun to the workplace can be an effective way to improve the organizational environment, managers should take a cautioned approach and be aware of the implications that come along with doing so.

Workplace fun is a delicate topic that is multidimensional in nature, and if implemented haphazardly, may result in negative outcomes for the organization. In order to develop and maintain a positive work environment for their employees, managers should understand the two important aspects of workplace fun. Managers should understand how workplace fun can impact the organization, and should also be cognizant of how different types of fun can affect employees in different ways. In addition to these two main facets, researchers have also demonstrated that workplace fun can vary along the lines of employee skill level (Tews, Michel, & Bartlett, 2012), age generation (Redman 2002), organization type (public, private, and nonprofit) (Karl, Peluchette, Hall, & Harland, 2005) an skill level (Tews et al., 2012).

Fun at work is a vague concept that encompasses a wide variety of fun activities, social events, celebrations, socialization, and friendly competition. Fluegge (2009) defines fun at work as “any social, interpersonal, or task activities at work of a playful or humorous nature which provide an individual with amusement, enjoyment, or pleasure.” Another definition comes from McDowell (2004), who states that workplace fun is “engaging in activities not specifically related to the job that are enjoyable, amusing, or playful.” These definitions encompass the
overall idea of workplace fun, but are by no means all-inclusive. Although outside the realm of the present paper, other researchers have looked at workplace fun through the lens of humor and how use of humor in the workplace is a “double edged sword” since humor can be perceived differently by everyone (Romero and Pescosolido, 2008). Similar issues exist with regard to general fun activities at work, which will be detailed in the present paper.

Tews et al. (2012) and Karl et al. (2005) suggest that workplace fun can be categorized into two separate classes for the purposes of operationalizing the concept in research. *Formal fun activities* include company outings, team building games, distributing of awards, formal holiday parties, and holding contests. This type of fun is generally officially sanctioned by management or corporate leadership. Because of their formal nature, these types of fun activities usually take place rather infrequently, and are not a good indicator of the everyday experiences of employees. Alternatively, *experienced fun* refers to how much fun is had while actually doing the job. Karl et al. (2005) used several survey items to measure experienced fun including “This is a fun place to work” and “We laugh a lot at my workplace.”

Similarly, Bolton and Houlihan (2009) separate workplace fun into two categories based on whether the fun is “packaged” or “organic.” Packaged fun is similar to Karl’s et al. (2005) formal fun, in that both refer to management-led, company authorized activities. Organic fun can be compared to Karl’s et al. (2005) experienced fun, as both refer to the more inherent and naturally enjoyable elements of the workplace.

In addition to these two categorical views, Chan (2010) developed a typology to be used for the classification of different types of fun, in which he identified four factors of workplace fun: *staff-oriented*, including birthdays, work anniversaries, and extra time off, *supervisor oriented*, defined as happy hours, or lunch hours with the supervisor, *social oriented*, including
social oriented organizational based events such as company picnics, and holiday parties, and strategy oriented which consists of outstanding performance practices or casual dress days. Categorization has been useful in research to help determine whether certain types of fun have more of an impact than others. We also need to be concerned with the outcomes of these various types of fun.

Overall, workplace fun has been shown to have an effect on a variety of different aspects of an organization including communication among employees, customer satisfaction, absenteeism, and the strength of corporate culture (Ford, McLaughlin, & Newstrom, 2003). However, the bulk of the literature has focused on three main areas of impact: new employee attraction, turnover and retention, and employee productivity. The present paper attempts to synthesize both the positive and negative impacts of workplace fun on these three main outcome areas.

Attraction and Recruiting

Tews et al. (2012) found that perceived workplace fun does have an impact on employee attraction, and that in the early stages of recruiting, perceived fun is more sought after than opportunities for advancement and even compensation. Furthermore, Tews et al. (2012) found that organic fun, in the form of fun coworker interactions and fun job responsibilities, had more of an impact than packaged or formal fun. It should be noted that participants in this study were undergraduate students with a mean age of 22 years, thereby limiting the practicality of the results to the Millennial generation. This does however reinforce the ideas of Karl et al. (2005) and Bolton and Houlihan (2009) that workplace fun is a multidimensional construct. Tews et al. (2012) also makes an important point, that while promoting fun is effective in applicant attraction, it is important to only advertise fun if it will truly be present in the position. A realistic
job preview will ensure that new hires’ job expectations are met and decrease unnecessary turnover.

Redman (2002) on the other hand, addresses the issue from the viewpoint of the recruiter. He suggests that recruiters in fun organizations should attempt to determine whether or not the applicant has the same “fun” qualities as the organization by asking questions about candidates’ “heart” “attitude” and “sense of humor.” Utilizing both of these theories as part of a two-way recruiting strategy would be beneficial for organizations looking to incorporate their fun work environment into their selection procedures.

In their landmark study on workplace fun, Ford et al. (2003) surveyed 572 practicing human resource managers on various aspects of fun at work, including the advantages and disadvantages of workplace fun. Results showed that 94% of HR managers reported moderate to substantial increases in the ability to attract new employees, when a fun work environment was present. Attraction of new employees was the most frequently reported advantage to workplace fun in this study. Ease of employee attraction was found to be significantly related to a variety of different types of workplace fun (both packages and organic). This contradicts the results of Tews et al. (2012), which is most likely due to the significant age differences (undergraduate students vs. professional HR managers) of the participants in each study.

It may seem obvious that applicants would naturally be attracted to work environments that appeared to be more fun; however, research has not yet addressed the potential downfalls of this strategy. It may be the case that attracting employees based on the amount of fun they are looking to have might not be the best selection criteria to use for certain positions, such as jobs that might require a more serious demeanor or for industries of a more solemn nature. In this
regard, future research on workplace fun in the area of attraction and recruiting should be directed towards whether or not these theories apply universally to all industries.

**Retention, Commitment and Turnover**

Tews, Michel, and Stafford (2013) studied how fun in the workplace impacted employee turnover. Workplace fun was examined in two contexts: fun activities, and manager support for fun. In this study, Tews et al. (2013) defines fun activities as social events, contests, teambuilding activities, and celebrations, while management support for fun was defined as the “extent to which managers allow and encourage employees to have fun on the job.” It was important that this distinction be made because while the results showed that fun activities were not related to voluntary turnover, manager support for fun was negatively related to turnover. In another study, Tews, Michel, and Allen (2014) found again that manager support for fun was significantly negatively related to turnover, but that fun activities were not related to turnover. This finding indicates that employees are looking for an environment in which having fun is not only allowed, but also acceptable and commonplace (Tews et al., 2013).

In a study of healthcare workers, Karl and Peluchette (2006) found an indirect relationship between turnover and fun at work. A strong positive relationship between job satisfaction and experienced fun was found, where experienced fun was defined as "the extent to which a person perceives the existence of fun in their workplace." In the context of the existing research, this would be considered organic fun. In turn, Karl and Peluchette (2006) propose that since job satisfaction is negatively related to turnover, experienced fun must also be negatively related to turnover.

Based on the perceptions of human resource managers, 78% of those surveyed indicated that higher levels of workplace fun improved turnover within the organization. Eighty-eight
percent of those same managers also reported that workplace fun improved employee commitment to the organization (Ford et al., 2003). This research does not however specify which types or elements of fun are contributing to this perceived employee retention. In another section of this survey, the HR managers also indicated what types of activities contributed to a fun work environment. Among the most frequently used techniques were recognition of personal milestones (birthdays, hiring anniversaries), social events (picnics, parties, social gatherings), and public celebrations of professional achievements (Ford et al., 2003). Based on the available literature, these types of fun would be categorized as “formal fun” or “packaged fun.” There was no indication of whether or not organic or experienced fun would have the same effect on turnover or commitment. However, Tews et al. (2014) suggests that manager support for fun might itself qualify as informal fun in the form of casual attitudes of managers.

Although fun activities were not found to be directly related to turnover, Tews et al. (2014) did find that constituent attachment, defined as employee’s attachment to key constituents in the workplace such as coworkers, was a mediator in the relationship between fun and turnover. Attachment to constituents was positively related to fun activities, and attachment to constituents was negatively related to turnover. In this sense, there is an indirect relationship between fun activities and turnover.

**Productivity and Performance**

Of the human resource managers surveyed in Ford’s et al. (2003) study, 74% reported that workplace fun had a positive impact on the quality of employee productivity and 59% reported a positive impact on speed of learning new tasks. Interestingly, Ford et al. (2003) even found that more than 80% of managers felt that accident rates, sexual harassment reports, equipment damage, and error rates would not be hindered by the addition of fun to the
workplace. This is surprising, as it indicates that even items that may traditionally be thought of as disadvantageous to productivity, are really not disadvantages at all.

Tews et al. (2013) found that fun activities at work were positively related to job performance, specifically in the area of sales. Expanding on this finding, Tews et al. (2013) noted that fun activities had more of an influence on job performance for older employees than young employees. Sales results were one specific measure of performance used, and while sales contests were one of the fun activities that were measured, other fun activities including social events, teambuilding activities, celebrations, and recognition of personal milestones were also positively related. Tews et al. (2013) found that while fun activities did positively impact employee productivity, manager support for fun lessened that positive impact. It was suggested that both of these factors combined may encourage too much fun, and thereby diminish the importance of performance and productivity. This is an important finding, as it reinforces the idea that fun at work does require balance, and that there is a fine line between encouraging levity and operating in a realm of flippancy.

Consistent with the findings of Ford et al. (2003) and Tews et al. (2013), Choi, Kwon and Kim (2012) also found a positive relationship between workplace fun and task performance for Generation Y employees (defined as those born between 1977 and 1994). In this study, fun was measured based on the level of fun employees experienced in the workplace (rather than formal fun), and task performance was defined as "behavior that carries technical processes or supports those processes in the organization." Choi et al. (2012) posit that having fun puts employees in good moods and not only are they then better able to perform their own tasks, but are also then more willing to offer help to their coworkers.
Lamm and Meeks (2009) researched the effects of workplace fun on job performance based on generational differences in employees. Millennials (also commonly referred to as Gen Y’ers) were defined as those born between 1981-2000, Generation X’ers 1961-1980, Baby Boomers 1941-1960, and Veterans 1921-1940. The results of this study showed that workplace fun was positively related to job performance for Millennials only (not Boomers or Gen X’ers). This finding is consistent with that of Choi et al. (2012). Although workplace fun was not significantly related to job performance for Boomers or Gen X’ers, this certainly does not mean that the two have a negative relationship; rather the two variables are simply not related for these age groups. While Ford et al. (2003) and Tews et al. (2013) found a positive impact of workplace fun on job performance, these studies did not control for age/generation. It is possible that the results of these studies could have been drastically different for the various generations in the workplace today. As a new generation enters the workforce in the coming years, it will be interesting to see whether the relationship between workplace fun and job performance holds, or if that relationship is truly unique to Millennials.

Even research on Millennials is still quite scarce since they entered the workforce relatively recently. The majority of research on generational differences with regard to workplace fun has focused on Gen X'ers and Boomers. In a survey of attitudes on various motivational factors for example, Jurkiewicz (2000) found that there was no difference in attitudes on “chance to engage in satisfying leisure activities” between Gen X’ers and Boomers. This suggests that Gen X'ers and Boomers may have similar attitudes on workplace fun. While Millennials were not a part of this study, future research might well be directed to re-create this survey today to include Millennials and determine whether the results are consistent with Lamm and Meeks (2009).
Preconditions and Additional Variables

It is certainly necessary to understand the various ways in which workplace fun impacts organizational outcomes, however Karl et al. (2005) found that trust in one's colleagues may be a crucial precondition for employees to accept and embrace fun at work. Karl et al. (2005) surveyed employees in a variety of industries and measured "trust in one's supervisor," "trust in one's colleagues," and employee's "attitudes toward fun." They found that both forms of trust were positively related to attitudes toward fun. Furthermore, employees who rated trust in coworkers highly, were more likely to rate food related fun activities and outings as fun. Based on this finding we can conclude that before working on implementing a fun work environment, employers may want to first focus on improving relationships and trust both among co-workers and between managers and their subordinates.

Another precondition to workplace fun was suggested by Choi et al. (2012) who found that employees who had more positive attitudes towards fun at work were more likely to experience fun at work. This finding may seem obvious or trivial, but it is important for managers to understand that no matter how fun an environment they are able to engender, their efforts may be unsuccessful if the majority of their workforce has negative attitudes towards workplace fun to begin with.

Karl et al. (2005) investigated workplace fun along the dimension of organization type: public, private, and non-profit. They found more similarities than differences among the three groups. One striking difference however, was in the amount of perceived fun for various fun activities. Public sector employees tended to rate certain activities as being less fun than did private and non-profit employees. Karl et al. (2005) explains that this may be due to the perception that public employees should not be spending taxpayer dollars on having fun while
"on the job." Although these differences were significant, employees from all three sectors did agree that workplace fun is an important organizational aspect and that would result in positive outcomes for the organization and it's employees.

Generational differences have played an important role in workplace fun research. In the more recent research, Millennials were shown to be affected by workplace fun differently than older generations. In time, we will learn where these differences stem from. From one viewpoint, we can conclude that the culture and truly generational differences between these groups is what causes their varied reactions to workplace fun. On the other hand, as suggested by Jurkiewicz (2000), regardless of generation, it may just be that as individuals progress through their careers, they continuously take on additional responsibilities in the form of family, children, homeownership, and other duties, thereby rendering fun at work inconsequential or a burden.

Finally, Tews et al. (2012) recommend that future research also look at workplace fun along the dimension of employee skill level. They hypothesize that workplace fun may have a stronger impact on low skilled workers than on high skilled workers. This may be the case since low skilled workers are generally not offered as many compensation benefits nor do they have the same opportunities for advancement that high skilled workers often do. In this regard, workplace fun may be a more prominent factor, especially with respect to employee attraction.

**Negative Aspects**

Although much of the research does appear to suggest that fun at work leads to positive outcomes, it is important to understand that when used in the wrong context, fun can backfire and ultimately lead to low morale and dissatisfaction. Bolton and Houlihan (2009) note that organizations that consider themselves to be fun typically have a young employee base, with a majority of employees under age 35. This is consistent with the findings of Lamm and Meeks
(2009) and Jurkiewicz (2000) in that striving for a fun work environment may only afford benefits to younger generations. Bolton and Houlihan (2009) suggest that this difference may stem from the fact that younger generations simply do not have the obligation to return home at the end of the workday. Older employees may simply not have the time or energy to keep up with the demands of longer hours at work, of their children’s and spouse’s schedules, and spend additional time having “fun” with coworkers after hours.

Similarly, Karl and Peluchette (2006), who studied employees in a high stress work environment, note that some fun activities such as bringing in food for a potluck, or having a costume contest may cause unnecessary additional stress for employees who would need to put in additional effort outside of their normal workday in order to participate. In this regard, it may be most beneficial for future research to study experienced fun (fun aspects of the job itself) for both older generations and high stress environment workers.

Fleming (2005) identified two dimensions of cynicism surrounding fun at work. Condescension addresses the thoughts of employees who feel that they are being treated like a child when asked to participate in fun activities, and felt that managers were trying to instill a parent-child relationship with their employees. The second dimension of cynicism identified was inauthenticity. Respondents who reported inauthenticity felt that management was trying to force a program of fun, which was perceived as being disingenuous and fake. To this extent, Fleming (2005) reiterates the importance of understanding the limitations surrounding the creation of fun at work. Respondents in his study also reported that the fun created in the workplace felt somehow different than the fun experienced at home in their personal lives. Fleming (2005) suggests that self-created fun that has not been officially approved by management or by the organization might be the most authentic type. It may be then that organizations looking to make
their workplace more fun should focus on fostering an environment which would allow employees to generate fun on their own, rather than proposing specific fun activities for employees to partake in.

**Conclusion**

While there are still many questions to be answered and much research to be done, we can safely conclude that incorporating fun into the workplace is a delicate balancing act along several different dimensions. With so many variables coming into play, managers must understand that perceived fun can differ along the dimensions of age, skill level, and organization type, that different types of fun can result in different outcomes, and finally that fun can have varying levels of authenticity.

A review of the research on workplace fun allows us to conclude that it may be most beneficial to focus their efforts on organic fun rather than packaged fun. Doing so would help to reduce some of the negative attitudes on workplace fun, which primarily arise when packaged or inauthentic fun is used as a means to engage employees. Tews et al. (2012) showed that organic fun was more effective than packaged fun when it comes to recruiting. Tews et al. (2013,2014) found that formal fun activities (packaged fun) were not related to turnover, while manager support for fun (organic fun) was related to lower turnover rates. Additionally, Choi et al. (2012) found that workplace fun was positively related to task performance.

These findings should encourage managers to focus their efforts on organic fun in the workplace, but also explain that packaged fun will not necessarily result in negative outcomes for the organization. Aside from the empirical findings, an overarching theme in the research is that whether implementing a formal program for fun or encouraging an fun everyday environment,
managers must impose a balance between work and fun. Although this may not be an easy task, beneficial outcomes for the organization are expected to transpire.
References


