

Fun Workplaces Also Promote Learning

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One of the core company values of the online shoe megastore Zappos is “create fun and a little weirdness.” At Google, the offices themselves are designed to “to spark conversation[s] about work as well as play.” And Marriott describes their core ideology as a company as “work hard, yet keep it fun.”

There’s a good reason so many top companies make fun a priority: Years of research have demonstrated that a little fun in the workplace has important consequences. In a recent study, psychological scientists Michael J. Tews, (Pennsylvania State University), John W. Michel, (Loyola University Maryland), and Raymond A. Noe (The Ohio State University) found that fun on the job had a positive influence on learning.

“Many organizations have created fun workplaces to promote employee wellbeing, engagement, and retention,” Tews, Michel, and Noe write. “A growing body of research has validated that fun has a favorable benefit for individuals and organizations.”

Specifically, the researchers were interested in the kind of on-the-job informal learning that employees

need to excel, but aren't taught in school or through formal training.

"To a degree, fun fosters open communication and camaraderie," the researchers explain. "Because informal learning involves asking questions and seeking expertise, individuals are more likely to seek out others with whom they have good relationships. Learning involves a degree of vulnerability, and individuals will likely seek to learn from those who will not judge them negatively."

In an article on adult play in *Perspectives in Psychological Science*, researchers Meredith Van Vleet and Brooke C. Feeney explain that, compared to other activities, "play lends itself more to unexpected, casual banter, repartee, and both fluid and coordinated communication/interaction."

For the study, the researchers recruited 206 managers from an organization that runs a large chain of restaurants in the US. The managers were in charge of running the day-to-day operations of their restaurants, which included everything from health codes to finance. Because the different restaurants are all independently managed, staff has "limited opportunities to attend formal classroom training," making informal learning particularly important for picking up new skills.

The managers completed two online surveys 6 months apart. In the first survey, managers answered questions about how frequently "fun" activities (e.g., social events, team building activities, competitions, public celebrations of work achievements, and recognition of personal milestones) occurred in their workplace. They also completed an assessment of their manager's support for fun and a self-evaluation of traits related to self-worth and self-esteem.

Six months later, the managers completed a second survey that assessed informal learning. Participants were asked to use a 5-point scale to rate how often they engaged in activities such as attempting to improve their performance, learning new skills, and searching for new knowledge and skills online.

After controlling for demographic factors, such as age, gender, and job tenure, there was a significant, positive relationship between fun activities at work and informal learning. However, manager support for fun was not found to be significantly related to overall informal learning.

The researchers argue that these findings may help counter criticism of fun in the workplace by providing additional research validation of "the positive impact of fun."

"When there is 'all work and no play,' individuals are less likely to direct their efforts toward informal learning, which may ultimately have a negative impact on performance and an organization's ability to remain competitive," the researchers write.

The significant relationship between fun activities and learning from others may be due to more frequent contact between employees. Interactions that get their start during fun activities may then spark an interest in seeking out new information and resources. For example, during an office happy hour, a colleague might recommend a helpful article or an online training to check out.

"When employees are afforded opportunities to socialize with one another, higher quality relationships are more likely to develop, which can open the door for the exchange of ideas," the researchers explain.

However, Tews and colleagues also caution that “not all fun is equal” and that fun in the office should not be used as a “magic bullet” for promoting informal learning. Instead, it should be viewed as one component within a broader set of training, development, and learning support.

“Perhaps, sometimes the best support that management can give employees to encourage learning from experimentation and self-reflection is remaining in the background and allowing employees to be themselves, rather than directly providing aid and assistance,” the researchers conclude.

Reference

Tews, M. J., Michel, J. W., & Noe, R. A. (2017). Does fun promote learning? The relationship between fun in the workplace and informal learning. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 98, 46-55. doi: 10.1016/j.jvb.2016.09.006

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