Questions and Answers about Fun at Work

Robert C. Ford, University of Central Florida; Frank S. McLaughlin, University of North Florida; John W. Newstrom, University of Minnesota–Duluth

Recently, much has been said about "fun at work" environments and their importance for employee morale and productivity. Yet, there is no serious empirical or theoretical work on the nature or consequences of having fun in organizations. In this article we discover, through the eyes of practicing human resource managers, what a fun work environment is, its component characteristics, and its advantages for employees, work teams, and organizations. We also discover the specific types of things these human resource managers' organizations use to promote a fun work environment. Data were gathered from a national e-mail survey of human resource managers. There were 572 usable replies. The human resource managers strongly favor promoting a fun work environment because they believe such environments offer great benefits both to the individual and the organization. To them, fun working environments are here to stay, not just another passing managerial fad.

Hardly a day goes by without reading an interview with a prominent executive or hearing a knowledgeable observer suggest that having fun at work is important for employee morale and productivity (see, for example: Meyer, 1999; Strand, 2000; *Workforce*, 2000; and Zbar, 1999). Authors of popular business books add further support for the importance of having fun at work. These include Tom Peter's *In Pursuit of Wow* (1994), Deal and Key's *Corporate Celebration* (1998), Schneider and Bowen's *Winning the Service Game* (1995), and Kouzes and Posner's *The Leadership Challenge* (1995). Kouzes and Posner exemplify the general theme of these writers by concluding, "If you—and others—aren't having fun doing what you're doing, chances are people aren't doing the best they can do" (p. 59). Similar sentiments are echoed by many writers in the trade press (see, for example: Boczany, 1985; Casison, 2000; Gordon, 1992; Hemsath, 1997; Kitchel, 1996; Mariotti, 1999; McGhee, 2000; Millis, 1999; and National Underwriter, 1999).

Fun also gets strong endorsements from respected practitioners. Chili's former CEO, Norm Brinker, acknowledges the importance of creating a fun work environment in his book, *On the Brink* (Brinker & Phillips, 1996), by stating, "If you have fun at what you do, you'll never work a day in your life. Make work like play— and play like hell" (p. 195). Freiberg and Freiberg (1996) add further emphasis to the importance of having fun at work. They describe the type of people Southwest Airlines seeks in its hiring process: "First and foremost, Southwest Airlines looks for a sense of humor….We look for attitudes; people with a sense of humor who don't take themselves too seriously….with other-directed, outgoing personalities, individuals who become part of an extended family of people, who work hard and have fun at the same time" (p. 67). Southwest knows that if it is to achieve its core principle, "Make flying fun," for its customers, it must make its employees' jobs fun first.

Walt Disney, the man who established the benchmark of service for service organizations, knew the importance of having fun at work as reflected in his statement, "You don't work for a dollar—you work to create and have fun" (Walt Disney, 1994, p. 80). Disney worked hard to instill this philosophy as a core value of the company he created, and the Walt Disney Corporation is still an exemplar of customer service today.

Although the frequency of its discussion in the popular press indicates there is much practitioner interest on this topic, there is no serious empirical or theoretical work on the nature or consequences of having fun in organizations. There is not even a generally accepted definition of what constitutes a fun work environment or any agreement on what an organization can do to promote a fun work setting. While there are some who write about play, humor, and a positive organizational culture, the lack of any specific definition of a fun work environment means the many discussions of its importance lack general application or specific ideas as to what works and what does not.

The purpose of this article is to discover, through the eyes of practicing human resource managers, what is a fun work environment, its component characteristics, and its advantages for employees, work teams, and organizations. We also discover the specific activities these human resource managers report are done by their organizations to promote a fun work environment. We oriented our study to address eight questions that the current body of writing on fun at work leaves unanswered.

Human resource managers were chosen for this survey for two reasons. First, they are typically responsible for administering programs that focus on increasing the value of the organization's human resources, and they carefully study the impact that various programs and activities have on those human resources. Thus, more than any other member of the management team, they are most likely to be aware of how employees feel about their working environment and how that environment, including its sense of being a fun workplace, affects behavior and attitudes at work. Second, probably more than any other potential group to survey, they have thought about what actually makes or could make their organization a fun place to work.

Data were gathered, with permission, through a national e-mail survey of members of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). (See the Appendix for a condensed

> Southwest knows that if it is to achieve its core principle, "Make flying fun," for its customers, it must make its employees' jobs fun first.

version of the survey questionnaire.) Approximately 4,000 randomly selected members received a questionnaire asking for their opinion on issues related to fun at work. There were 572 usable replies. Selected demographic characteristics of the respondents, such as age and geographic location, were statistically compared with the total membership of SHRM and no significant differences were found. The questions focused on managerial concerns about whether or not creating a fun work environment was worth whatever time and effort it would take. We hoped to discover if the reasons offered by the many writers arguing in favor of promoting fun at work were valid. Although we offer descriptive data, our results add an important new understanding to this largely unstudied issue.

Are Employees Having as Much Fun at Work as Managers Think They Should?

The simple answer is no. Our human resource manager sample was asked to compare what they thought the level of fun ought to be in their organizations compared to their perception of the actual level of fun they thought their employees were having. The responses show that the reported level of fun in organizations is surprisingly low. Less than a fourth thought the amount was about right. On the other hand, three-fourths thought their employees were having less fun at work than they should. Only three percent indicated there was too much fun in their organizations. To expand on this question, managers were also asked how often employees should be able to experience fun in their organizations. More than 75 percent of the respondents indicated employees should have this opportunity frequently or often. On the opposite side of this issue, less than three percent of the respondents said infrequently or never.

Finally, as one more approach to answering this question, the managers were asked, on a scale of 1 to 10, how they rated their organizations with regard to its fun work environment. Approximately one-fifth of the respondents rated their organizations with a score of three or less and approximately the same number rated their firm at eight or better. The remainder of the respondents rated their organizations in the middle, which we interpret as meaning they think their own organizations are about average. While that

may be seen as good news, it really is not. When considered in light of the other two questions, it likely means that while these respondents thought their company was somewhere about average, it was not very good. In other words, they believe that even though their organizations were no better or worse than others, they still had a long way to go to be the kind of fun work environment they felt was desirable.

What Makes a Work Environment Fun?

One of the more challenging issues for manager wishing to create a fun work environment is to determine exactly what makes a work environment fun. Academic literature offers little guidance, so the effort to determine which activities contribute to a fun work environment relies heavily on the anecdotal practitioner literature and consultants' books (see, for example: Hemsath & Yerkes,1997; Weinstein, 1996; Yerkes, 2001.) One writer suggests workplace morale and productivity improve when introducing quirky workplace activities, group lunches, or after-hours outings (Hale, 2002). Others suggest Halloween parties—according to a SHRM Benefits survey, more than one-third of reporting organizations offered some sort of Halloween celebration (Lucas, 2000). Although many creative suggestions are made, we wanted to learn what organizations seeking to introduce fun into their work environments actually do to create this fun.

To obtain this data, the questionnaire contained 10 general categories of fun activities frequently mentioned in the literature as good ways to promote a fun work environment. These 10 items included celebrations, entertainment, playing games, having friendly competitions, social events, and humor. Interestingly, humor and play have their own literature (see, for example, Duncan, et al., 1990). In addition, our respondents received a separate list of 23 specific items to determine if they used any or all of these items to create a fun work environment in their organizations. Finally, a "write-in" provision allowed the respondents to list as many as three additional activities their organizations used that were not already mentioned. These three measures gave us a fairly comprehensive answer to the question about what types and frequencies of activities these human resource managers use to define what creates a fun work environment.

EXHIBIT I

Frequency of Activities That Contribute to a Fun Work Environment

Category of Activities	Mean Scores
Recognition of personal milestones (e.g., birthdays, hiring anniversaries)	3.4
Social events (e.g., picnics, parties, social gatherings)	3.2
Public celebrations of professional achievements (e.g., award banquets)	3.2
Opportunities for community volunteerism (e.g., civic groups)	2.8
Stress release activities (e.g., exercise facilities, massages)	2.6
Humor (e.g., cartoons, jokes in newsletters, emails)	2.4
Games(e.g., darts, bingo, company-sponsored athletic teams)	2.2
Friendly competitions among employees (e.g., attendance, sales contests)	2.2
Opportunities for personal development (e.g., quilting class, book club)	2.0
Entertainment (e.g., bands, skits, plays)	1.9

Using the list of general categories of fun activities, the respondents rated each item on its frequency of use. Responses were made on a 5-point scale that ranged from "not at all" (1) to "extensively" (5), and mean scores were developed to report the results. As seen in Exhibit 1, the three most frequently practiced categories of activities related to personal milestones, followed closely by fun social events and public celebrations of professional achievements. The mean scores on the Exhibit also reveal the lack of general use of even these popularly mentioned activities to promote a fun work environment. A "3" represents a middle-range score, so it is surprising to see the lack of strong support for even obvious types of celebratory activities that promote fun at work.

Entertainment was the least used of the categories.

The results presented in Exhibit 2 give more details about what specifically creates a fun work environment. Respondents were asked to indicate whether their organizations participated in 23 different activities that we found mentioned in the popular literature. Exhibit 2 is divided into two groups. The first group includes those items reported as used by more than 80 percent of the respondents. The most frequently mentioned or "big three" were casual dress days, employee recognition and rewards, and company-provided food and refreshments.

The second group lists less frequently used activities, but still used by one-fifth to one-half of the reporting organizations. In this category are a

EXHIBIT 2

Percentage of Organizations Using Fun Activities

Frequently Used Activities	Percent Using
Casual dress days	84
Employee recognition and rewards	83
Company-provided food and refreshments	82
Less Frequently Used Strategies	
Bring-your-child-to- work day	44
Costumes days (e.g., ugly socks or Halloween Costumes)	39
Release time for community projects (e.g., habitat, blood drives)	34
Photos and funny captions (e.g., most beautiful baby contests)	27
Special props (e.g., balloons, flowers, hats, signs)	24
Fun (or "joy") committees	21
Exercise room	21
Creative skits and songs for company events	20

wide array of activities that span many interesting ideas as to what contributes to a fun work environment. These include the obvious activities of having costume dress-up days, using funny props to liven up the work environment, and creating committees of employees (fun committees) who are responsible for lightening up the work environment. Also in this category are less obvious items such as bring-your-child-to-work days, employee release time for community projects, and exercise rooms.

The remaining 12 items, not shown in the Exhibit, were activities used by between 3 and 19 percent of the responding managers and included such things as hiring professional entertainers, creating employee musical groups, and offering employees stress-reduction rooms.

These responses tell us two important things: 1) nearly everyone does three specific activities to promote a fun work environment; 2) there is a wide variation in the other activities organizations offer to create a fun work environment. There is no widespread consensus as to which activities work best. Indeed, the top three activities seem relatively traditional. These results also re-emphasize the diversity of opinion about what makes a fun work environment fun as seen in Exhibit 1.

In a separate section of our questionnaire, the respondents had three open-ended opportunities to provide other examples of what their organizations did to create a fun work environment. This led to one of the most surprising results of the study. In a world of time-pressured people, over 30 percent of these busy human resource managers took the time to write down over 400 different items. While many of these were variations of items already on the list, these managers offered additional unique and novel ways their organizations were promoting fun at work.

The majority of these items represented some way of celebrating a personal achievement or having some unique social event. Most of these included food. Company picnics were written in 27 times, more than any other item. Other food events including chili cook-offs, Friday buffets, anniversary dinners, donuts together, and ice cream socials. Interestingly, "food reduction" activities were also mentioned frequently under a

> **Many of these ideas still follow the old tradition of using meals or eating together as a way to celebrate important occasions and signify friendship and fellowship.**

variety of different names. These included weight clubs, weight watchers, weight reduction clubs, and Jack Sprat.

There is no shortage of efforts to do things that are fun. Many of these ideas still follow the old tradition of using meals or eating together as a way to celebrate important occasions and signify friendship and fellowship. Whatever these managers believe are the activities that lead to a fun work environment, they are still fairly well focused on traditional celebratory events involving food.

Definition

To summarize what can be learned from these three different efforts to capture what characterizes a fun work environment, there are many different definitions and little consensus as to what is involved in creating a fun work environment. The most common strategies involve celebrations or special events accompanied by food. There are other activities such as community work projects and exercise programs that at first glance seem to be unusual ways to promote a fun work environment. Doing these supports the idea that a fun work environment represents a combination of factors that collectively add up to tangibly and publicly showing concern for the person, that person's achievements and worth, and the desire to make that person believe that the organization is a good place to be. The respondents seem to believe that the cumulative impact of these diverse types of "fun" activities is to create a corporate culture that shows a sense of appreciation of and respect for the employee and that will allow that person to conclude that this organization is a fun place to work.

On the basis of what these respondents reported, we offer the following working definition of a fun work environment: "A fun work environment intentionally encourages, initiates, and supports a variety of enjoyable and pleasurable activities that positively impact the attitude and productivity of individuals and groups." This might be more succinctly stated as "a work environment that makes people smile." These responding managers indicate that a fun work setting is created through actions, including funny, humorous, or playful

activities, that publicly communicate management's belief to the employee that the personal and professional accomplishments he or she has achieved are valued by the organization. While this definition seems similar in many ways to traditional motivation theory and its explanation of the factors that lead to job satisfaction, a fun work environment goes beyond mere job satisfaction. Our respondents report a broad array of activities that collectively communicate a sense of pleasantness, happiness, and positive well-being that makes working not only satisfying but also fun.

What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of a Fun Environment for the Organization?

An increasing body of evidence indicates that a positive organizational environment or fun work culture is a valuable asset for organizations (Ford & Heaton, 2000). Luthans (2002) talks about the value of subjective well being (SWB) as a contributor to a positive organizational behavior. The linkage between working in a fun work environment and having a sense of well being seems somewhat obvious and the SWB concept incorporates a number of factors such as life satisfaction, job satisfaction, and levels of experiencing pleasant emotions and moods (Diener, 1999). Other authors, like Perrin (1998), state that, "Common sense supports the theory that having fun at work helps generate profitable business" (p. 40). She suggests other important benefits for the organization such as lower turnover and fewer stress-related problems.

This question then is an important one for managers to answer. The organization does not want to create problems for itself or its people by promoting a fun work environment. On the other hand, it does wish to gain benefits sufficient to offset any costs it incurs in promoting a fun work environment. Thus, we asked managers several questions about the advantages and disadvantages writers and observers associate with a fun work environment. Responses were made on a five-point scale with response categories ranging from "substantial decrease" to "substantial increase." The results are given in Exhibits 3. The top part of the Exhibit lists potential advantageous outcomes, and the bottom part lists potential disadvantageous outcomes of endorsing and creating a fun work environment. One column of results combines "substantial and moderate increases" responses (improvement), and the second column of results combines "substantial and moderate increases" responses with "no effect" responses (improvement and no change).

EXHIBIT 3

Effect of Fun Work Environments on Organizations

| | Percent Reporting | |
Advantage	Improvement	Improvement and No Change
Attract new employees	94	97
Communications among employees	92	96
Commitment to the organization	88	97
Customer satisfaction	87	96
Strength of corporate culture	85	96
Employee turnover	78	87
Quality of employee productivity	74	93
Absenteeism rates	72	78
Speed of learning new tasks during training	59	85
Understanding of organization's mission	55	93
Disadvantage		
Accident rates	45	86
Professionalism at work	33	77
Frequency of employee errors	32	88
Cost of operations	28	64
Reports of sexual harassment	21	81
Equipment damage by playfulness	14	84

In sum, Exhibit 3 shows the respondents believe a fun work environment has a positive impact by improving advantageous outcomes and a lesser but still positive effect on disadvantageous outcomes. Human resource managers see little negative impact of any of the items measured, even on the disadvantageous outcomes.

This list offers some good news and some better news. The good news is that the advantages claimed in the literature are seen by the responding managers as positive advantages for their organizations. These managers believe having fun at work leads to a number of beneficial outcomes, such as a greater ability to attract new employees, improved turnover and absenteeism, better communication among employees, greater employee commitment to the organization, an improved organizational culture, and an increase in customer satisfaction. The high percentage agreements shown in Exhibit 3 offer strong support for the idea that organizations can gain several important advantages from promoting fun at work.

On the other side of this issue is the respondents' evaluation of the items noted in the literature as disadvantages of having a fun work environment. Here the good news gets even better. According to these respondents, even the perceived disadvantages of promoting a fun work environment are not really disadvantages. Indeed, as indicated in the "Improvement or No Change" column, no expected disadvantage item gets fewer than six out of 10 respondents agreeing that having fun at work either improves the situation or has no effect at all.

With the exception of the somewhat obvious "cost of operations," the other noted disadvantages were clustered around 80 percent where the respondents believed the situation would be improved in a fun work environment or would have not been affected at all. In a separate calculation (not reported in the exhibit), the disadvantages leaned in the direction of indicating that any effect a fun work environment has on the expected disadvantages may in fact be positive. In other words, rather than increasing accidents, equipment damage, cost of operating, or even reports of sexual harassment, fun work environments tended slightly to lessen these possible negatives.

These responses are encouraging and lead us to conclude there are few or no disadvantages to promoting a fun work environment and some real advantages. Creating a fun work environment is worth serious consideration by all managers. The degree to which people find working in a fun work environment makes the organization a desirable place to work is important.

Lawler (1992) notes several of the factors we assessed in our study as important contributors to a high-involvement organization. In his review of the types of rewards high-involvement organizations should make available to employees, he states, "When work units are successful, managers should be sure that everyone involved is acknowledged and that celebrations and other forms of recognition occur. This recognition can be something as small as a pizza for everyone; a day of casual attire; a chance to go home early; a meeting in which a senior manager acknowledges the employees' good work; or a special party, dinner or weekend excursion" (p. 195). Later, he adds, "A skilled high involvement manager needs to develop the ability to give social rewards to groups and individuals who perform particularly well" (p. 195). Our data affirm and illustrate the importance of these types of factors in creating a fun work environment. Indeed, it might be argued that a fun work environment is the result of the successful practice of high-involvement management.

> According to these respondents, even the perceived disadvantages of promoting a fun work environment are not really disadvantages.

What Are the Advantages and Disadvantages of a Fun Environment for the Employee?

The other side of the organization's equation relates to the advantages and disadvantages for the employee and his or her work group. Here again, existing literature generally supports the idea that there are both advantages and disadvantages for the employee. It is believed that happy or satisfied workers suffer less stress, show higher levels of organizational citizen behaviors, miss less work, are more creative, and have better, more rewarding friendships at work than those who are not happy. Based on this literature, we asked the surveyed managers to indicate what they thought the advantages and disadvantages of

EXHIBIT 4

Effect of Fun Work Environments on Employees

Advantage	Percent Reporting	
	Improvement	Improvement and No Change
Employee enthusiasm	95	96
Group cohesiveness	94	97
Employee satisfaction	96	96
Employee creativity	92	96
Friendships at work	91	91
Organizational citizenship	85	97
Employee anxiety and stress	84	85
Complaints of boredom	82	87
Mutual trust among employees	79	97
Disadvantage		
Interpersonal conflicts	72	89
Respect among coworkers	63	95
Respect from higher ups	46	88
Work taken seriously by other departments	38	87

a fun work environment were for their employees. Their responses are presented in Exhibit 4, in the same format as Exhibit 3.

Exhibit 4 shows, in descending order, the percentage of managers reporting improvement in each outcome. A high percentage indicates strong agreement from our respondents that the expected advantage was an actual advantage. The low percentage numbers seen at the bottom of the table where the disadvantages are listed means the respondent saw no increase in the items claimed to be disadvantages. Exhibit 4 also includes a column representing the combination of substantial, moderate increase, and no change to reflect the degree to which our responding human resource managers saw little negative impact of any of the items measured.

Reviewing the advantages and disadvantages and the high level of improvement a fun work environment can yield, it seems evident these managers believe there are many advantages and few disadvantages to employees of a fun work environment. The greater than 90 percent positive agreement that a fun work environment leads to increased employee enthusiasm, group cohesiveness, and employee satisfaction is impressive. Equally impressive is the degree to which a fun work environment is believed to be associated with increased employee creativity and friendships at work. Even the lower- ranked advantages gather agreement from almost eight out of 10

respondents who believe a fun work environment results in improvements in the important individual outcomes.

The respondents did not see the expected disadvantages as real disadvantages. The high level of agreement that fun work environments lead to decreases in interpersonal conflicts dispels the popular notion that creating a fun environment can cause increases in such conflicts or that work groups that are having fun are not likely to have the respect of other departments or top management. The responding managers believe otherwise. They indicate that fun work environments lead to an increase, instead of a decrease, in respect from higher-level management and coworkers, and their work is taken seriously by other departments.

In the opinion of these human resource managers, the presumed disadvantages of having a fun work environment, reported in Exhibit 4, are not true. Indeed, when the "no effect" or neutral percentages are considered, fewer than one out of 10 managers felt any of the items identified from the literature as a disadvantage was a disadvantage in his or her organization. Instead, these respondents felt that the item either led to an actual improvement in that factor or had no effect at all. When we calculated average scores for these items (not reported in the table), the data confirm that the degree to which negatives are seen as negatives is minimal. These managers

make a compelling case for the value of creating fun at work for both the organization and the individual.

Do Different Types of Organizations Have Different Types and Amounts of Fun?

Are some types of organizations better able to have fun than others? Some people believe that organizations that sell an intangible service promote fun work environments more than would a manufacturing organization. Others may believe big organizations have less fun than smaller ones. As part of the questionnaire, we asked our respondents about their organization's characteristics to identify which ones, if any, relate significantly to the amount of fun in their work environment. Items included organizational size, gender of the workforce, the degree of union involvement, whether the organization was a for-profit or not-for-profit organization, and the ease of attracting new employees.

We conducted a statistical analysis to better understand the direction and depth of the relationships between organizational characteristics and the different types of fun activities that were measured in Exhibit 1. An analysis shows some interesting things about the relationships between the types of fun different people seek in different organizations. For example, there is an inverse relationship between the number of employees in the total organization and the amount of humor, social events, and recognition of personal milestones. The bigger the organization, the less these activities are used. When the number of employees in a specific unit is analyzed, however, only personal development activities and fun social events are inversely related to size. The only activity that size of organization and size of unit have in common is fun social events. Both report that bigger means fewer fun social events.

Comparing for-profit and non-profit organizations on the degree to which they participated in the fun activities listed in Exhibit 1 showed differences only in the use of games, fun social events,

> **There is an inverse relationship between the number of employees in the total organization and the amount of humor, social events, and recognition of personal milestones.**

and friendly competitions. For-profit organizations participate in these activities more frequently than not-for-profits do. Perhaps there is some concern by not-for-profits that engaging in these types of fun events and activities will show them to be not serious enough about their not-for-profit mission so they tend to avoid them. For the other seven fun categories, there is no difference between for-profit and not-for-profit organizations.

Comparing the percentage of the workforce belonging to a union with participation in fun activities is interesting because only fun social events and friendly competitions show a significant and negative relationship. The greater the degree of unionization, the lesser the frequency of these two categories of fun. Because many of the remaining eight types of fun activities may fall under a bargaining agreement, the fact that they show no difference based on the degree to which the work force is unionized is curious and worthy of further investigation. In a comparison of unionization with an assessment of overall level of fun, the relationship is also negative: The higher the percentage of unionized employees, the less likely responding managers will see their organization as having fun.

Finally, with regard to the ease of attracting new employees, almost every type of fun activity is significantly related. Those organizations that have an easier time attracting new employees do more fun things than those that have a harder time. The extent to which this is cause and effect is unknown, but the fact that so many of these fun activities are associated with ease of attracting new employees is important to recognize. It seems fair to conclude that these responding managers believe a fun work environment makes it easier to attract new employees. The reason this is true may be attributed to the positive organizational culture that may be associated with such fun activities. It seems somewhat obvious that prospective employees are more likely to be attracted to organizations that have positive employment cultures. The array of fun activities this study assesses can be the foundation of a strategy for organizations seeking to create a positive and attractive organizational culture.

Do Different Types of Employees Want Different Types and Amounts of Fun?

To expand upon the answer to the prior question on what types of organizations have what types of fun, we also sought to find out if a variation in the types of employees had any influence on the types and amount of fun sought in the work environment. Some anecdotal literature suggests older employees are less playful than younger employees, less-educated employees will find different things to be fun than more educated employees, men are more playful than women, and hourly workers seek more fun and different types of fun activities than salaried employees. We collected data from the human resources managers to offer some insights on these previously untested beliefs.

The data show a number of interesting differences in types and amounts of fun activities across different employee characteristics. For example, the age distribution of the managers seems to be quite important while the age of the workforce appears to be much less so. Organizations with older managers participate less frequently in five of the 10 types of fun activities measured. These include celebrations of professional achievements, offering entertainment type events, playing games and participating in company-sponsored athletic events, fun social

events and parties, and friendly competitions. While some of these may be obvious, the reasons organizations with older employees offer these less frequently than organizations with younger employees are certainly provocative and worthy of further investigation. In a separate statistical comparison, the relationship between age of managers and the overall assessment of the level of fun in the organization was also negative. Perhaps these differences reflect a different age demographic and the timeless differences between generations, degree of interest in committing time and energy to work-related activities, and overall energy levels.

On the other hand, that these same differences do not show up for non-managers creates a different challenge for the non-managerial workforce. The frequency of these activities offered in organizations with younger managers with one exception, friendly competitions, does not repeat for younger employees. What younger managers value as fun activities is not generally reflected in the answers representing employees. The type and frequency of desired fun activities that appeal to younger versus older managers present an interesting challenge for those seeking to effectively manage both their managerial and non-managerial employees. Managing managers and managing employees require different strategies to accommodate their differing expectations of types of fun activities desired in the job. It is possible that younger managers have a greater

EXHIBIT 5

Rationale for Managerial Resistance to Fun

Rationale for Resisting	Percent Agreeing
Time constraints (I cannot afford the time)	82
Financial costs (It will cost too much)	72
Lack of personal creativity (I don't know how to have fun)	62
Fear of looking silly (I do not want to look stupid)	60
Perceived employee apathy (don't think they would care)	60
There is no evidence that it will work (unproven benefits)	58
Fear of non-support from superiors for fun	58
It is not part of my job	56
Fear of losing control if I create a little bit of fun	55
Inconsistent with organization's productivity culture	55
Fear someone will take offense or legal action	53
Some employees will be distracted by fun activities	53
Fear that Department's work would not be taken seriously	48

awareness that having fun at work can lead to serious and productive advantages as discussed above under question number three.

Further analysis of these workforce comparison of fun activities show some other interesting points about the value of fun work environments and differences in educational level. This is true for both employees and managers. Organizations with higher levels of educated managers offer more personal development activities, recognition of personal milestones, and stress relief activities than organizations with less educated managers. The only category showing a difference for the non-exempt workforce is that more educated employees work in organizations that offer more friendly competitions. This same category of fun activities also shows up as the only significant difference in age of the non-management workforce. Younger employees are found in organizations that have more frequent friendly competitions. Finally, in comparing male versus female workforces, organizations offer more frequent stress release activities to workforces with higher percentages of female than males. This is an interesting finding that merits further discussion and investigation, because it is the only one of the ten activities that shows a significant difference.

What Inhibits the Creation of a Fun Work Environment?

From the answers to our earlier questions, it is clear that most people would like to have more fun in their jobs than they are currently having. They believe that doing so will have beneficial results for them, their work teams, and their organizations. Much of the reason they are not having the level and kinds of fun that they think should be part of their work environment seems to be due to resistance at the supervisory and managerial levels. Sometimes the resistance can be overt and sometimes it can be more subtle. In order to better understand the factors that lead to resistance, the questionnaire listed thirteen items noted in the largely anecdotal literature cited above as factors that prevent employees from having more fun in the workplace. Responses were made on a nine-point scale with scale categories labeled from "very likely" to "very unlikely." The results are

> **If fun is as important to a productive work environment ... as these managers say it is, then management should increase the level of fun in their work environments.**

summarized in Exhibit 5. Each item shows the percent of the managers that responded positively (above neutral) to the question, How likely is it that this rationale will cause managerial resistance to creating a fun work environment?

These items can be divided into two groups. The first group represents factors that reflect a managerial fear that having a fun work environment will lead to productivity losses, create dangerous situations or produce unnecessary costs. This group contains items like "I can't afford the time," "it costs too much," and "there's no evidence that it will work." The second group represents factors that reflect a fear that having a fun work environment will be seen by others as somehow unprofessional or be personally embarrassing. This group includes items like, "I don't want to look stupid," "My supervisor would not condone it," and "We are here to work and not play." Each of the thirteen items was agreed to by at least forty-eight percent of the respondents. One item, "I cannot afford the time," had eighty-two percent of the responding managers agreeing.

While these managers may not be clear as to what exactly constitutes a fun work environment, they are clear about what inhibits its creation in their organizations. These factors generally center on perceived costs and the negative perceptions of professionalism that a fun work environment may create. These responses provide both a road map for creating a fun work environment and a list of the roadblocks to any such efforts. If fun is as important to a productive work environment and as desired as these managers say it is, then management should increase the level of fun in their work environments by neutralizing the negative perceptions noted here.

Our study data do not allow us to make hard claims that creating a fun work environment is a proven method for increasing productivity or profits. Yet, some of the results from this survey suggest that such positive outcomes are possible. Indeed, when one considers the beliefs of these responding managers that a fun work environment has many advantages, it seems reasonable to suggest that finding ways to decrease road blocks to having more fun at work is worth serious consideration.

Some ways that management can signal to its employees that fun work environments are desirable are to formally make policy statements endorsing it and to formally recognize and reward employees and supervisors who promote fun at work. Our respondents tell us that very little is currently being done along this line. Less than five percent report their organizations have a formal policy relative to a fun work environment and more than ninety-five percent report that there is no reward for promoting fun at work. If having more fun at work is as important as these respondents believe, there is much work to be done.

Who Makes a Work Environment Fun?

Who has the responsibility for creating a fun work environment? A discussion of this question frequently appears in the literature. Most believe that it is the CEO's job. For example, the president of Brady Corporation, Katherine Hudson (2001) emphasizes the importance of her role in building a fun culture. She feels that she benefits greatly by lightening up, and she talks about doubling sales and tripling income during her leadership. She concludes, "Our performance is a sign that a company can be fun and friendly for its employees and fierce with its competitors. In fact, the fun has made us fierce, by making the organization more flexible and dynamic. And, I hope it has made life more enjoyable for people who work there" (p. 54).

To address this question, the survey asked the respondents about whom or what was responsible for creating a fun work environment. One question asked the human resource managers who or what was primarily responsible for providing the impetus for fun at work in their units. One-fourth of them indicated it was based on a corporate culture. Another fourth indicated it was top management who was primarily responsible for creating a fun work environment. Since organizational scholars suggest that top management's most important job is defining the corporate culture, these respondents affirmed the importance of top management in defining the culture of fun (Schein, 1985). If it's going to happen, it must start at the top.

What is surprising in this survey data is the discovery that the efforts of the employees themselves were given credit for creating a fun work environment by seventeen percent of the HR managers. On a less positive note, the respondents identified other managers as initiators of a fun work environment less than one third of the time. They believe that creating a fun work environment is a responsibility of the top management either directly or indirectly through their articulation and reinforcement of the corporate culture. It seems on the basis of their responses that a fun work environment happens only with a commitment by the top management even though there is some evidence that individual employees who are spirited leaders of fun can also make it happen a significant percentage of the time.

Southwest Airlines is the classic example of many visible efforts to promote fun taken by its famous former CEO, Herb Kelleher. Indeed, the quotes at the beginning of this article by Walt Disney and Norm Brinker give further evidence that these top managers knew their role in defining and sustaining a fun culture both by word and action.

Summary

The human resource managers responding to our questionnaire are very much in favor of promoting a fun work environment because they believe such environments offer great benefits both to the individual and the organization. To them, fun working environments are here to stay and are not just another passing managerial fad. However, they believe that in most cases, the level of a fun environment must be increased if organizations are to obtain the many benefits these environments provide.

This article reports information received from human resource practitioners that can assist any manager contemplating the benefits and costs of promoting a fun work environment in his or her organization. The respondents tell us that having a fun work environment is a good thing and has many positive and very few negatives for either the employee or the organization. We see in their answers what types of things and activities they use to promote fun, and what methods are currently being used for implementing a fun work environment. They also show the potential impediments to a fun environment and suggest strategies that managers can use to overcome these barriers.

The bottom line is that fun in the workplace seems to be as good as the anecdotal literature says it is. The large number of respondents and the expertise of Human Resources give us great

hope that this topic is here to stay and that more organizations will be seeking more ways to promote a fun work environment. The exact definition of what constitutes a fun work environment and its exact impact on group productivity, individual satisfaction, and organizational performance is yet to be discovered. However, these respondents give us considerable reason to believe that when future studies are performed, they will confirm the beliefs of these human resource managers. We conclude that a fun work environment is good for the organization, the work team, and the individual employee and should be strongly encouraged and supported by management at all organizational levels.

Biographical Sketches

Robert C. Ford, PhD, *is a professor of management at the University of Central Florida. His doctorate is from Arizona State University. He is the co-author of several books on subjects that include principles of management, organizational theory, and hospitality management. His research has appeared in the* Journal of Applied Psychology, The Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Management, California Management Review, Cornell Quarterly, Business Horizons, Academy of Management Executive, *and other journals.*

Frank S. McLaughlin, PhD, *is a professor of management at the University of North Florida. His PhD is from the University of Florida. He is a co-author of a textbook on quantitative methods for management. His research has appeared in* The Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Business Research, California Management Review, Industrial Management, Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society, IEEE Transactions in Management, Public Personnel Management, *and other journals.*

John W. Newstrom, PhD, *is a professor of management at the University of Minnesota-Duluth. His doctorate is from the University of Minnesota. He is the co-author of the popular* Games Trainers Play *series of books for trainers and* Transfer of Training. *His research has appeared in* The Academy of Management Journal, Business Horizons, California Management Review, Workforce, Supervision, Training, *and other journals.*

References

Boczany, W. J. (1985, April). "Productivity Improvement: Making Work Fun," *Journal of Systems Management,* 45:20-21.

Brinker, N. Phillips, D.T. (1996). *On the Brink: The Life and Leadership of Norman Brinker.* Arlington: Summit Publishing.

Casison, J. (2000). "Service with a Smile." *Incentive,* 174(11): 79-80.

Deal, T.E. & Key, M.K. (1998). *Corporate Celebration.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Diener, E. (1999). "Subjective Well Being: Three Decades of Progress." *Psychological Bulletin,* 125(4): 276-302.

Duncan, W.J., Smeltzer, L.R. & Leap, T.L. (1990). "Humor and Work: Applications of Joking Behavior to Management," *Journal of Management,* 16(2): 255-278.

Ford, R.C. & Heaton, C.P. (2000). *Managing the Guest Experience in Hospitality.* Albany, NY: Delmar.

Freiberg, K. & Freiberg, J. (1996). *Nuts!* Arlington, TX: Bard Press.

Gordon, J. (1992). "Structured Fun," *Training,* 29(9): 23-30.

Hale, S. (2002). "Don't Forget the Fun Factor." Central Florida Business, *Orlando Sentinel,* June 24:24.

Hemsath, D. (1997). "Are We Having Fun Yet?" *The Journal of Quality and Participation,* 20(1):52-4.

Hemsath, D. & Yerkes, L. (1997). *301 Ways to Have Fun at Work.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Hudson, K. M. (2001). "Transforming a Conservative Company – One Laugh at a Time." *Harvard Business Review,* 79(4): 5-11.

Kitchel, K. (1996). "Yearlong Workplace Fun." *Incentive,* 170(10): 59-61.

Kouzes, J.M. & Posner, B.Z. (1995). *The Leadership Challenge.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Lawler. E.E. (1992). *The Ultimate Advantage: Creating the High-Involvement Organization.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lucas, J. (2000). "Halloween Parties: A Tricky Treat." *HR Magazine,* 45(10): 94-100.

Luthans, F. (2002). "Positive Organization Behavior: Developing and Managing Psychological Strengths." *The Academy of Management Executive,* 16(1): 57-75.

Mariotti, J. (1999). "A Company that Plays Together, Stays Together." *Industry Week,* 248(6): 63-70.

McGhee, P. (2000) "The Key to Stress Management, Retention, and Profitability? More Workplace Fun," *HR Focus,* 77(9): 5-6.

Meyer, H. (1999). "Fun for Everyone." *The Journal of Business Strategy,* 21(4):13-17.

Millis, M. (1999). "Don't Underestimate the Power of Celebration." *Credit Union Magazine,* 65(8): 15-16.

National Underwriter. (1999). "Employers Stress Workplace Fun." *National Underwriter,* 103(20): 25-27.

Perrin, S. (1998, February). "A Serious Business." *Accountancy.* 53:2, 40.

Peters, T. (1994). *The Pursuit of Wow!* New York: Vintage.

Schein, E. (1985). *Organization Culture and Leadership: A Dynamic View.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schneider, B. & Bowen, D.E. (1995). *Winning the Service Game.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Strand, P. (2000). "Angling for Workplace Fun," *Incentive,* 174/(174): 135-136.

Walt Disney: Famous Quotes (1994). Anaheim, CA: Printed by Walt Disney Theme Parks and Resorts.

Weinstein, M. (1996). *Managing to Have Fun.* New York: Fireside.

Workforce, (2000). "Are You Having Any Fun?" *Workforce,* 79(5):25-26.

Yerkes, L. (2001). *Fun Works.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Zbar, J. (1999). "Are We Having Fun?" *Computer World,* 33(38): 70-71.

APPENDIX

Condensed Survey Questionnaire

SECTION A: POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES

Listed below are several statements regarding the possible effects or results of a fun work environment. Please indicate, to the best of your ability, the degree to which you believe that a fun work environment produces each of the listed outcomes. (Indicate the degree to which you believe that a fun work environment increases or decreases the following outcomes by *clicking on one of the responses in the 5-point scale shown*. Click **No Opinion** if you are totally unsure as to its probable effects.)

Organizations that endorse and promote a fun work environment are likely to experience how much change in their:

	Substantial Decrease	Moderate Decrease	No Effect	Moderate Increase	Substantial Increase	NO (No Opinion)
1. Accident rates (frequency)	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	NO O
2. Ability to attract new employees	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	NO O
3. Absenteeism rates	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	NO O

Other items measured on the scale are communications among employees, customer satisfaction, cost of operations, employee anxiety and stress, employee complaints of boredom, employee creativity, employee enthusiasm, employee satisfaction, employee friendships at work, employee turnover rates, equipment damage caused by playfulness, frequency of employee errors made, group cohesiveness, interpersonal conflicts, level of employee commitment to the organization, mutual trust among employees, organizational citizenship (voluntary acts of helping behaviors) by employees, professionalism at work, quality of employee productivity, reports of sexual harassment, respect among coworkers, respect from higher-ups, speed with which new tasks are learned by employees during training programs, strength of the corporate culture (shared values and norms), understanding of the organization's mission and priorities, work taken seriously by other departments.

SECTION B: FREQUENCY OF PRACTICES

Listed below are several statements regarding activities potentially leading to a fun work environment. Please indicate your personal assessment of the *frequency* with which your organization actually uses the following items.

	Not at All		Moderately		Extensively	NO (No Opinion)
1. Humor (e.g., cartoons, jokes in corporate newsletters, e-mails, and managerial messages).	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	NO O
2. Opportunities for personal development growth through opportunities for non-job-related learning (e.g., quilting classes, book clubs, aerobics).	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	NO O
3. Public celebrations of professional achievements (e.g., award banquets, recognition for outstanding results, naming an "employee of the month").	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	NO O

Other items measured on the same scale are entertainment, games, fun social events, recognition of personal milestones, opportunities to engage in community volunteerism, stress release activities, friendly competitions among employees

SECTION C: UTILITY (CONTRIBUTIONS) OF FUN PRACTICES

HRM professionals are in a good position to assess the utility of various activities designed to produce a fun work environment. In this section, we are soliciting your insights into the potential effectiveness of each type of fun activity. The responses below relate directly to your beliefs regardless of the extent they are actually used in your organization.

Listed below are several statements regarding activities potentially leading to a fun work environment. Please indicate, to the best of your ability and using the response scale shown, the degree to which you feel each practice below **contributes** to creating a fun work environment.

The 10 items used in this section are identical to Section B. Section B asks for frequency of use. Section C asks for contributions to a fun work assignment.

SECTION D: IMPORTANCE OF VARIOUS EMPLOYEE NEEDS

HRM professionals are also in a good position to assess the relative importance of a fun work environment in comparison to other typical needs of employees. In this section, we are soliciting your insights into the relative importance of a wide range of things that employees may desire.

Listed below are several statements regarding factors that employees may seek at work. Please indicate, on the five-point response scale shown, the degree to which you feel each is important to typical employees in your firm today.

	Not at All Important		Moderately Important		Extremely Important	NO (No Opinion)
1. Being able to relax, have fun, and enjoy oneself at work.	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	NO O
2. Being free to express oneself openly at work.	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	NO O
3. Having control over one's own decisions at work.	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	NO O

Other items measured on the same scale include having control over resources, feeling listened to, freedom to engage in laughter, autonomy and independence, opportunity to play at work, building interpersonal friendships, satisfying job security needs, opportunity to belong to a group, opportunity to express and receiving caring at work, satisfying physiological needs, satisfying psychological well-being needs, receiving personal recognition at work.

SECTION E: COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENTS

On the following questions, please use the response scales or space provided to indicate your reactions and assessments.

1. Compared to what you think there ought to be (optimum level of fun at work), what is your perception of the actual level of fun in your organization? (Check only one.)
   O a. Much less than there should be
   O b. Moderately less than there should be
   O c. A little bit less than there should be
   O d. About the right amount
   O e. A little bit more than there should be
   O f. A moderate amount more than there should be
   O g. Much more than there should be

2. Overall, how often do you believe employees should have the opportunity to experience fun in your organization? (Check only one.)

Never	Infrequently	Occasionally	Frequently	Very Often	No Opinion
1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	NO O

3. Other things being equal, at what level do you agree or disagree with this statement: "Companies that promote fun at work are more effective than companies that don't."

Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Disagree nor Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree
1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	6 O	7 O

4. On occasion, some managers and supervisors resist employee desires to create a fun environment at work. In your opinion, using the 7-point scale below, how likely is it that each of the rationales shown below underlie managerial resistance to creating a fun work environment in your organization?

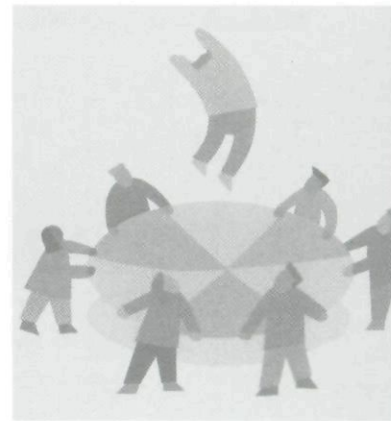|	Very Likely			Neutral			Very Unlikely	NO (No Opinion)
a. Time constraints (e.g., I can't afford the time).	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	6 O	7 O	NO O
b. Financial costs (e.g., It will cost too much).	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	6 O	7 O	NO O
c. Fears of feeling silly (e.g., I don't want to look stupid).	1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	6 O	7 O	NO O

Other items measured on the same scale include lack of personal creativity, unproven impact, perceived employee apathy, fear of non-support from above, belief of non-responsibility, fear of losing control, inconsistency with the organization's productivity culture, fear of offensive responses, some employees will be distracted, fear that department work won't be taken seriously

5. Overall, how would you rate your organization with regard to its fun work environment (1 = poor, 10 = excellent)

Poor									Excellent
1 O	2 O	3 O	4 O	5 O	6 O	7 O	8 O	9 O	10 O

1. Approximately what is the number of employees in your total organization? Please check the most appropriate response.

2. Approximately what percentage of employees at this location are unionized (under a collective bargaining agreement)?

3. Approximately what is the total number of employees (full and part-time regular) in the unit for which you are reporting?

4. Is your organization For profit or Not for profit?

   O For profit

   O Not for profit

5. How would you describe the average age of your production and service workers (non-exempt)?

6. Approximately what is the average age of your supervisors and managers (exempt) at this location for which you are reporting?

7. Please indicate the level of education which would best describe your organization's exempt workforce:

8. Please indicate the level of education which would best describe your organization's non-exempt workforce:

9. In comparison to other organizations, the task of attracting new employees to join your organization is:

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) is a sponsor of this research.