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Fun times: the relationship between fun and workplace engagement

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Abstract

Purpose – The idea of workplace fun seems positive, straightforward and simple but emerging research suggests a surprising complexity and ambiguity to this concept. Drawing on recent literature and empirical data, the purpose of this paper is to use three different forms of workplace fun: managed, organic and task fun to examine the relationship between fun and workplace engagement.

Design/methodology/approach – Using an ethnographic approach, the qualitative data originated from four different New Zealand organizations, within different industries. Organizations included a law firm, a financial institution, an information technology company and a utility services provider. Data for this study were collected from semi-structured interviews with a range of participants in each company. In total 59 interviews were conducted with approximately 15 originating from each of the four organizations. One full-time month was spent within each company experiencing the everyday life and behaviours at all levels of each organization. The specific focus of the research is organizational culture and humour and during analysis findings emerged that linked to engagement, fun, disengagement and the concept of flow.

Findings – This paper offers exploratory findings that suggest some specific connections between the concepts of fun and engagement. Empirical connections between these concepts are not currently apparent in either engagement or fun research, yet the data suggest some firm associations between them. The exploratory findings suggest that some forms of workplace fun offer individual employees a refreshing break which creates positive affect. Participants perceive that such affect results in greater workplace and task engagement. Additionally the data show that some people experience their work tasks as a form of fun and the authors link this to a specific form of engagement known as “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Moneta, 2010). The authors suggest an organizational-level effect, where workplace fun creates enjoyment which stimulates greater overall engagement with the team, unit or organization itself. Conversely the data also suggest that for some people managed or organic fun (see Plester *et al.*, 2015) creates distraction, disharmony or dissonance that disrupts their flow and can foster disengagement.

Practical implications – The ambiguity and complexity in the relationship between these concepts is an emerging topic for research that offers a variety of implications for scholars and practitioners of HRM and organizational behaviour. The authors contend that workplace fun potentially offers practitioners opportunities for fostering a climate of high engagement which may include most employees and thus create additional workplace benefits. Additionally through highlighting employee reactions to different types of fun we suggest ways of avoiding employee disengagement, disharmony and cynicism and the associated negative effects.

Originality/value – The concept of fun is not empirically linked with current engagement research and the authors assert that workplace fun is an important driver of employee engagement. The authors identify engagement at the individual task level and further extend engagement research by emphasizing that fun has the potential to create engagement at the team, unit or organizational level. These differing levels of engagement have not thus far been differentiated in the extant literature.

Keywords Engagement, Fun, Organization, Flow

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Intuitively, having fun and enjoying oneself at work would seem to foster or create greater workplace engagement – yet the concept of fun has not been strongly empirically linked with current engagement research and literature. From an empirical study into workplace humour, fun and organizational culture, we provide exploratory data that link the concepts of fun and engagement. Specifically, this paper addresses the research question:

RQ1. What is the relationship between the concepts of fun and engagement in organizational contexts?

Our qualitative data gathered from four different New Zealand organizations, suggest that the relationship between fun and engagement is significant, and our exploration into the relationship extends current engagement models by proposing that fun influences engagement at two distinct levels. First, using the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, 1996) we suggest that fun can increase employee engagement with their actual work task or role; and second we suggest that experiencing fun at work can increase employees' camaraderie and enjoyment which enhances engagement with the overall organization or work team.

However, adopting a cautious approach, we also warn that fun is complex, not easily created, and cannot really be delivered as a “package” to employees. As conceptions of workplace fun are socially constructed between organizational members and boundaries are implicitly understood by socialized employees (Plester, 2009) we need to understand fun as a multi-layered concept that is simultaneously collective whilst being also experienced in an individual and personal way. Drawing on recent fun research that theorizes fun as a tripartite model including organic, managed and task fun (see Plester *et al.*, 2015) we extend current research by developing the link between workplace fun and engagement. Using the conceptions of fun presented by Plester *et al.* (2015) we focus upon the forms of fun created by task absorption (or flow) which we empirically link to workplace engagement. We compare task fun to fun that is specifically organized or “managed” (Plester *et al.*, 2015) and discuss the implications that this has for the notion of engagement. This paper presents evidence suggesting that when fun is perceived as forced it can create dissonance, distraction and foster disengagement with the organization, work tasks or both. Our contribution in this paper is in explicating the relationship between workplace fun and engagement. Therefore we extend earlier conceptions of fun by asserting that task fun achieved through flow, creates specific forms of engagement that are beneficial to an organization. Additionally, we show that organic fun is enjoyed by many employees and offers a refreshing break that fuels re-engagement with work tasks but warn that it can also distract other engaged employees. And finally we present the novel idea that “managed or forced” fun although enjoyable to some employees, can also cause some employees to disconnect or disengage from their organization and tasks.

Fun

There is little consensus regarding the meaning of “fun” (Blythe and Hassenzahl, 2003) because what is fun (and/or funny) to an individual may be just as easily considered offensive, demeaning and/or silly to a different person. The term fun is often confounded with the concepts of humour, laughter, funny and joking, but is, in fact, a distinct but overlapping concept. For example, while humour is said to occur when amusing stimuli are contextually appropriate (Zillman and Cantor, 1976), and a reaction such as a smile or

laugh occurs (Chapman and Foot, 1976), fun does not necessarily involve laughter or humour. Rather, definitions of fun comprise elements of activity, enjoyment, pleasure, frivolity (Fluegge, 2008), spontaneity, surprise, informality (Fineman, 2006) and even play (Costea *et al.*, 2005; Dandridge, 1986). Ultimately, workplace fun can be seen as “any social, interpersonal, or task activities at work of playful or humorous nature which provide an individual with amusement, enjoyment or pleasure” (Fluegge, 2008, p. 15).

The role that fun plays in organizational life is significant, with fun offering a means for escape as well as engagement at work (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). Workplace fun is complex and ambiguous. Part of the complexity arises from differing perceptions about what comprises fun for organizational members (Aldag and Sherony, 2001; Ford *et al.*, 2003; Plester and Sayers, 2007; McDowell, 2004; Warren and Fineman, 2007b) and what outcomes are generated by workplace fun (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Fluegge, 2008). Although fun is usually associated with positive organizational outcomes (Tews *et al.*, 2012) and can create a sense of involvement for some organizational members (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Barsoux 1993; Duncan and Feisal, 1990), it may also be ignored or just tolerated by others (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Burawoy, 1982; Collinson, 1988). In fact, fun has the potential to divide groups and to cause disharmony and disquiet among colleagues (Warren and Fineman, 2007a).

Recent interest in workplace fun parallels the positive scholarship movements in psychology, economics and organizational studies (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). Fun at work has become a popular concept that transcends a mere “fad” (Karl *et al.*, 2005; Fleming, 2005) and is garnering increasing research attention (Blythe and Hassenzahl, 2003; Collinson, 2002). Workplace fun has been tentatively linked to improved employee engagement, satisfaction and performance (Karl and Peluchette, 2006; Karl *et al.*, 2005; Newstrom, 2002) and is “promoted as a mechanism for enhancing organizational effectiveness” (Tews *et al.*, 2012, p. 106). The mainstream press has endorsed companies that foster a work climate conducive to fun (Tews *et al.*, 2012), and praise has been effusive for companies such as Southwest Airlines, IBM, Google and PikePlace Fish Market in their deliberate attempts to promote fun as a key element of their corporate cultures (Collinson, 2002; Tews *et al.*, 2012; Karl and Peluchette, 2008). However after investigating boundaries to fun and humour, Plester (2009) cautions that although promoting workplace fun may seem desirable, the linkages between fun and workplace outcomes are not always straightforward. Fun is a socially constructed phenomenon, monitored and regulated by organizational members, rather than being something that can be easily “managed”.

Conceptions of fun

Researchers recognize the ambiguity created by differing perceptions of fun (Owler *et al.*, 2010) and suggest that fun should not be investigated as a “unitary concept” – rather the multidimensional aspects of fun must be considered (Tews *et al.*, 2012, p. 111). Organizational tensions in defining fun reside in the contrast between fun as a phenomenon that occurs naturally between organizational members (organic fun; Plester *et al.*, 2015), and the idea that fun can be deliberately and even tactically organized by managers to fulfil some organizational objectives (managed, official or packaged fun; Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). Such strategically created fun includes activities such as events, parties, games, sharing food and drinks, outings, gift exchanges and light-hearted competitions (Ford *et al.*, 2003; Karl *et al.*, 2005; Karl and Peluchette, 2008; Peluchette and Karl, 2005). Although it seems positive and aspirational when organizations attempt to create fun activities or events in workplaces, such contrived (managed) fun can result in cynicism and employees may feel patronized and demeaned (Fleming, 2005;

Warren and Fineman, 2007a). Contrastingly, organic fun that is spontaneously generated by organizational members and occurs naturally, often in small interactions such as jokes, horseplay and even physical interactions (Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990; Lamm and Meeks, 2009; Plester and Orams, 2008; Plester and Sayers, 2007) is usually preferred and perceived as genuine.

The third, emerging perspective on workplace fun suggests that for some organizational members, fun is experienced within actual work tasks (Groppe and Kleiner, 1992; Peluchette and Karl, 2005; Plester *et al.*, 2015). This final construction of fun suggests that work itself is a form of fun and some workplace responsibilities are “personally enjoyable” (Tews *et al.*, 2012, p. 108). This third conception of fun is paradoxical to popular assumptions that assume fun and work are separate and distinct from each other. Recent research (Tews *et al.*, 2012, Plester *et al.*, 2015) challenges the traditional dichotomy between work tasks and fun activities suggesting that for some people they can be synonymous. This notion of fun experienced within work tasks suggests that such an experience of fun constitutes what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) termed flow – related to the concept of engagement (Fluegge, 2008) and considered to be a short-term experience of engagement (Albrecht, 2010; Moneta, 2010). As very few (if any) studies have explored the relationship between fun and engagement, or fun and flow, we now consider literature on these related concepts.

Engagement

Employee engagement is currently a hot topic amongst human resource (HR) practitioners and academics alike, as it appears to deliver a range of positive outcomes, such as higher job performance, lower turnover intentions, and higher levels of organizational commitment and extra role behaviour (Harter *et al.*, 2002; Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Rich *et al.*, 2010; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Sonnentag, 2003). Fundamentally it is a motivational construct that reflects an employee’s intention to throw their full self – heads, hands, and heart – into their work (Kahn, 1990; Rich *et al.*, 2010). There are numerous definitions of engagement (Albrecht, 2010), and most include components of cognitive, physical and emotional connection with work (Kahn, 1990), capturing the notion that engagement is about full absorption, dedication, energy and effort (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2006; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Engagement is also about identification (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008), purpose, and focus towards organizational goals (Macey *et al.*, 2009), and has even been touted as the opposite of burnout (Maslach *et al.*, 2001), suggesting that is not just about motivation, it is also has well-being overtones. While the definition of engagement is likely to remain somewhat fluid and ambiguous given the literature’s scope, Albrecht (2010) emphasizes that engagement is ultimately a “positive work-related psychological state characterized by a genuine willingness to contribute to organizational success” (p. 5). When understanding what drives engagement, it is important to recognize that both organizational factors and individual differences play a role. There are certain conditions that organizations can put in place to enhance engagement, but the fact remains that some employees are more likely than others to be naturally engaged. Rich *et al.* (2010) capture this idea in an empirical study of 245 firefighters. Building on Kahn’s (1990) initial seminal model of engagement’s antecedents, Rich and colleagues show that employees who find their work meaningful (psychological meaningfulness); and experience a safe and supportive environment (psychological safety) are more likely to be engaged. Simultaneously, their personality traits play a role, with high-core self-evaluations, that is, high levels of confidence, emotional stability and perceptions of control (psychological availability), predicting higher engagement. As we will ultimately argue that workplace

fun can play a role in supporting or hindering certain drivers of engagement we will briefly describe the drivers below because it is these organizational factors that may be influenced by workplace fun.

Psychological meaningfulness, then, is the extent to which an employee's work goals are aligned with their own values, goals and needs. Generally, meaningfulness is enhanced when an employee has good person-job fit, their values are aligned with the organization's, and their job has positive characteristics, such as being challenging, interesting, and under their control. Psychological safety, on the other hand, is the extent to which an employee feels they can invest in their work without fear of negative consequences. Psychological safety occurs when the environment is trustworthy, secure and predictable. Workplace relationships play an important role here, as does the caring and concern of management. Finally, psychological availability is the extent to which an employee feels they have the psychological resources to invest in their role. This includes confidence in their ability to perform, and whether or not they have sufficient personal energy and resources to devote to their role.

Critical perspectives of engagement

Engagement is not a static concept and it fluctuates over time but this is not always acknowledged in engagement literature. For instance, new employees demonstrate high levels of engagement but this tapers over time (Trahant, 2009). Wollard (2011) raises the question: "is full engagement at all times actually possible or even fair to ask?" (p. 529). When considering questions such as the one just cited, it can be useful to examine the antithesis of the studied concept and thus we discuss differing conceptions that are suggested as the opposites to engagement: disengagement; over-engagement; burnout and workaholism.

Although there is a large and growing body of knowledge concerning engagement and its' antecedents, disengagement is not often discussed or even considered. Disengagement is an important concept as low-quality work is harmful to people and therefore the ability to disconnect from work mentally, physically and/or emotionally is a crucial form of protection for some workers. It is postulated that 50-70 per cent of worker are not engaged and there is very little research on disengagement (Wollard, 2011). However, in much of the engagement literature the antithesis of engagement is hypothesized to be burnout rather than disengagement. Burnout occurs when a person is emotionally weary or exhausted and it includes the failure of coping strategies. This raises the question is it possible to become too engaged and thus suffer burnout? And we must also consider whether burnout can be partially caused by being over-engaged.

Using "conservation of resources" theory Halbesleben *et al.* (2009) argue that employees' energy and personal resources are limited and when significant amounts are used at work this reduces the resources that employees can use at home. Therefore high levels of work engagement can have repercussions for employees' family life. They further claim that employees who are highly engaged at work are more likely to perform organizational citizenship behaviours and may have difficulty "balancing the demands of multiple roles" (p. 1452). Although engagement is primarily discussed as a highly positive construct, engaged employees are likely to experience greater interference with family life which may erode employees' finite cache of coping resources which then ultimately erodes their workplace engagement. This raises further questions about the long-term effects of high workplace engagement as the "depletion of resources" perspective suggests that people invest their personal resources in one role at the expense of another (Halbesleben *et al.*, 2009).

Over-engagement is not as widely researched as engagement but it can lead to problems with work/life balance and stress. This occurs from being too willing “to go the extra mile or an inability to let go” (McBain, 2007, p. 19). Additionally, the organization may become a key source of identity for an employee which can lead to personal problems (McBain, 2007). Different levels of engagement may occur within different workplace groups and raises the question whether there can actually be an optimum level of engagement (McBain, 2007). The dangers of over-engagement are not often articulated within the engagement literature, rather current conceptions of engagement focus mostly on leveraging engagement to improve performance. Therefore the concept of engagement needs to be reframed to embrace ideas such as meaning and purpose in work and its overall impact on employee well-being (Schuck and Rose, 2013).

Finally, we consider the concept of workaholism as a critical perspective on the notion of very high engagement, whereby employees become so engaged with their work that they are obsessive about it. Gorgievski and Bakker (2010) define engagement as “employees ‘harmonious passion’ and connection with their work activities” (p. 265). Engaged employees are dedicated, feel pride and inspiration and “feel happily engrossed (absorbed) in their work” (p. 265). Contrastingly they link workaholism to “obsessive passion” that results in employees who devote much of their time to work; find it difficult to disengage from work; and are compulsive about their work. The crucial difference between engagement and workaholism is that workaholism lacks the “positive affective (fun) component of work engagement” whereas work engagement does not include the “compulsive element of workaholism” (Gorgievski and Bakker, 2010, p. 265).

Gorgievski and Bakker basically suggest a dichotomy between positive affect (engagement) and negative affect (workaholism) but what none of these current studies or the ones cited earlier postulate is that there can be a differing states of engagement on different days or during different work cycles and for different tasks. Therefore we contend that engagement can occur with an individual job task or role and/or with the organization itself. Thus we need to consider a more fragmented picture of workplace engagement and more research is needed to further deconstruct current notions of engagement in order to consider a more fluctuating concept that includes different types of engagement – both task and context driven. We can consider engagement as a dynamic state that alters at different times with different conditions. Similarly we need to be wary of the almost overwhelmingly positive attributions made to workplace engagement and to seriously consider the other side of the concept that may include workaholism, over-engagement, cynicism, stress and burnout at different times during an employee’s tenure. With this in mind we turn to the concept of flow, considered to be a special short-term form of engagement, less likely to cause issues such as burnout.

Flow is discussed as a subset of engagement and is considered to be a momentary, less enduring state than engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000; Moneta, 2010). Flow involves complete task absorption, effective cognitive performance, and an enjoyment and pleasure aspect (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) so that a person feels “at one” with the activity (Moneta, 2010, p. 272). There are two contributing factors towards achieving flow and these are: a personality disposition (intrinsic motivation) towards the state; and the opportunity and environment offered within the job for this to occur (Amabile, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Moneta (2010) suggests that the relationship between flow and engagement can be a reciprocal one with engagement fostering and predicting flow but the reverse effect also likely to occur. Engagement and flow are clearly similar in that they reflect a positive attitudinal and affective disposition towards work. It is engagement, though, that attracts more attention from HR practitioners, probably because of its more enduring nature.

Engagement and fun

Engagement is defined in terms of high energy and a positive psychological state. Fun also includes such elements, which suggests significant conceptual overlap. There is, however, to our knowledge, no research that specifically investigates the connection between these concepts. Albrecht (2010) calls for research that focuses on “understanding the psychology or felt experience of engagement” (p. 17) and he specifically suggests that research into organizational climate, organizational culture and organizational values could extend the current models of engagement. Quoting Bindl and Parker (2010) he claims that the more that employees internalize workplace values the greater their levels of engagement. Supporting this, Rich, LePine and Crawford found that, of the three antecedents, it was values congruence that was most strongly associated with employee engagement. Fun is a concept that has been investigated through the framework of organization culture and values (see Plester, 2007, 2008, 2009) and fun is often cited and promoted as a specific workplace value (Plester, 2009).

What we do know is that for engaged employees actual work is fun (Schaufeli, Tarris and Bakker in Bakker, 2010) and Gorgievski *et al.* (2010 p. 265) suggest that workaholism and work engagement are differentiated primarily by the positive affect or “fun” associated with engagement. Therefore in the extant literature there are already some passing linkages to the notion of fun in engagement and calls for greater culture, climate and values studies of which fun is an important component. Thus we proceed to extend research and discussion on the relationship that we have identified between these concepts.

Research design

This fun and engagement research was part of a larger empirical study investigating the relationship between organizational culture and humour in four New Zealand organizations. As themes emerged regarding organizational culture, it became apparent that the experience of fun was significant to employees’ enjoyment at work. The concept of fun was a core value in all of the studied organizations to the extent that two of the organizations had officially documented fun as an organizational value. Therefore the original data were re-examined to specifically analyse participants’ perceptions of fun, engagement, enjoyment, values, absorption, commitment, performance and satisfaction. Although the overall data collection included participant observations and document collection, the data presented in this paper are derived from the semi-structured interviews conducted within each of the four organizations. They represent a cross-section of interviews from each of the companies.

The four organizations are from different industries and have been assigned fictional non-deplumes to protect anonymity. The organizations comprise: Kapack – a law firm with 119 staff; Sigma – a finance company with 800 staff dealing with loans, mortgages and insurances; Uvicon – (853 staff) a multi-network infrastructure company supplying electricity, gas and telecommunications; and Adare – a small information technology company specializing in network solutions and internet security (25 staff). Overall 59 semi-structured interviews were completed and these were audio-recorded and transcribed. The distribution of interviews was similar in each company with 15 interviews conducted at two of the larger companies, 16 at the third large-sized company while only 13 were undertaken in the smallest company in the study.

Although the data were entered into NVIVO software for coding the software was used primarily as a storage facility and data were coded manually and the interviews were conducted and coded by a single researcher. We assert that there was no “priming

effect” or leading questions because the interview purpose was to allow participants to co-construct their organizational experiences in regards to organizational culture and humour. The questions that were asked of participants did not actually address the topics of either fun or engagement at all. Participants were asked questions that allowed them to describe their organizational culture; discuss the importance of their organizational culture; describe humour activities and contexts; and explore the relationship between humour and organizational culture in a series of interlinked and overlapping questions. The terms engagement and fun were not introduced to participants but these terms originated independently from the participants who spent quite some time richly discussing organizational context and the aspects that were important to them.

In our first analysis, data from each organization were analysed separately to achieve a contextual overview of the organizational culture and humour activities within each organization. Then the data were combined as we started to identify categories and themes. This second analysis resulted in research examining the relationship between humour and organizational culture (see Plester, 2009). Our third separate analysis examines the current data (presented next) and in this we identified some in-depth participant reflections on their insights into workplace fun and engagement. These insights appeared to be highly relevant to the participants as their ideas on these topics were offered independently of the actual interview questions. The reflections were garnered from a variety of different participants from all four of the studied companies. Therefore our data discussing engagement and fun were an unexpected finding. When we realized that many participants had discussed these concepts we re-analysed the interview transcripts and manually searched for the specific terms engagement and fun. We then reconsidered our data from this different angle and this has allowed us to offer some early and exploratory findings in our arguments about the relationship between fun and engagement.

We do not focus on the frequency of themes but use empirical material that offers insights and rich descriptions of how our participants perceive fun and engagement within their own organizations. We attempt to highlight the relationship and connections suggested by the empirical material and we emphasize the participants’ sensemaking in regards to the topics under research (see Weick, 1989). Adopting the approach of Alvesson and Kärreman (2011) we view our empirical material as a social construction between the researcher, the participants and the social phenomena under investigation. Kvale (1983) asserts that an interview subject “seeks to understand the meaning of the phenomena in his life-world” (p. 174). Our purpose was to understand what was important to these participants and our investigation into fun and engagement was “presuppositionless” (Kvale, 1983) as we had not actually considered these topics in the semi-structured interview questions.

In following Kvale’s arguments about interpreter –reliability we acknowledge that a variety of interpretations may be possible from our data and as suggested by Alvesson we considered a set of interpretive possibilities. In the words of Alvesson (2011, p. 38) “highly diverse material cannot easily be codified categorized compared and aggregated” but a “best interpretation” is possible. We acknowledge that others may interpret our data differently but believe that we have crafted meaning from the co-constructions with participants (in interviews) and through the lived experience of one researcher participating and developing understanding of the everyday organizational reality of our participants. Such a methodological stance is given the metaphor “bricolage” by Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and this sees the research process

as the craft of creating meaning from a collection of empirical materials. We do concede that the arguments derived from the data are co-constructed with our participants, and such work can be ambiguous, but we have attempted to authentically, pragmatically and reflexively (see Alvesson, 2011) craft an interpretation that offers a useful way of understanding the emerging topics of fun and engagement experienced by our participants.

Results

The empirical material constitutes a representative selection of activities and participant reflections from the four studied companies. The data have been arranged into three key thematic areas comprising data that highlight engagement specific to the participants' own roles; refer to engagement with the overall organization or specific organizational division (such as a team); and suggest dissonance, distraction and ultimately disengagement as an outcome of workplace fun. The analytical voice interpreting the excerpts precedes each tranche of interview quotes[1].

Theme 1: role engagement

All of these participants (below) link fun and engagement to their enjoyment of their role and some participants even suggest that if these elements were missing they might leave their job. These participants are enthusiastic about having fun in their roles but also stress the serious nature of some of their tasks. They emphasize that having fun does not mean they are frivolous about their work tasks. In these reflections, fun and task absorption exist synonymously, sometimes blending into each other, sometimes separate and distinct. Their depiction of work tasks as "fun" suggests that they experience the specific form of engagement termed "flow" which includes aspects of enjoyment, pleasure and effective performance (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). As well as fun occurring within work tasks, these participants also suggest that fun may occur around or among them, while they are performing tasks. Although it may disrupt their "flow" and momentarily take their attention from their tasks, participants suggest that fun creates additional enjoyment which they perceive as beneficial to their overall performance. It appears that fun offers release from pressure and frees participants to re-engage with tasks feeling more refreshed and energized. Therefore fun increases engagement in two ways: through offering a "release" from tasks and allowing improved engagement after this momentary break; and some tasks are experienced as a form of "fun" in themselves thus creating flow, absorption and ultimately greater engagement:

If I'm having fun with the work I'm doing then I am going to be doing better simply because I am a bit more engaged (Mike, 32, Customer Service Representative, Sigma).

I am probably one of the very lucky ones in that I come to work to have fun to be honest. I think the days when we are having more fun I enjoy my job more.[...] but if I wasn't having fun I would give it up in an instant [...] with fun you certainly get a sense of engagement but we have to remind ourselves that there are some roles that it's possibly less important – but if you are a customer service consultant and answer the phone all day your ability to be light-hearted and to make a conversation and to engage people is an asset (Natalie, 30, HR Consultant, Sigma).

I'm quite serious about my job. If I'm working I concentrate at work and there is a job to do I want to get it done – I'm quite dedicated and conscientious – but if I can't take a break and have a bit of a laugh and fun to relax then I'm not happy. If I'm happy then I'm relaxed, engaged and enjoying it [...] we use Gallop which helps companies measure employee engagement - how committed an employee is to their role or to the company and to their work. Fun is the top of the list-absolutely. If I'm going to spend half of my life working I want to

enjoy it! I think we just take every opportunity to have fun which is why work is fun and I think there could be more because there could always be more [...] If I'm not happy in what I am doing I tend to not be myself, I become quite negative, more quiet which is not me. If you can't talk to people and have a bit of a laugh and fun you tend to let things build and you can't release it so it would affect my performance because I feel that I would become frustrated with my job and not do so well and be less committed to it - less committed because I'm not happy (Lisette, Learning and development coordinator, 30, Sigma).

It's always fun being on the ground and going 'wow, how we are going to do this today?' [...] and as a lawyer you are doing everything, so the job is very interesting and quite fun (Kent 36, Partner, Kapack).

We can have a little bit of fun with our internal work which is not possible for the outside world [...] but we can have a little bit of fun inside and we've got the variety [...] humour to me is about you have the side down so you can see the fun or you can see the ridiculous [...] the whole point of humour is that it is free (Fiona, 42, Organisational Development Specialist, Uvicon).

I definitely think fun does impact on the enjoyment and the satisfaction of the whole coming to work (Stephanie, 30, People and Culture Advisor, Uvicon).

Fun and humour have the ability to break down some of those pressures that are building and I would say for some that there isn't enough opportunity just to chill out a little bit and put things back into perspective (Dale, 30, Group Manager People and Culture, Uvicon).

If you have a laugh and some fun it always puts you into a better mood and you work better. When I'm grumpy or down I definitely wouldn't do as good a job (Jasper, 25, Engineer, Adare).

Fun is very important. I just believe that it is all part of the big picture that it helps you to enjoy your job. If there's no laughter then it's a bit of a sad little old state of affairs [...] fun disappears probably when we are in the midst of something really huge like doing major acquisitions and that would be just because everybody would be 'flat stick'. I don't think fun is inappropriate; probably it will just be that it's just heads down [...] For me personally, I think the fun does play a big part in that so I think that I would try and sort of wear me down and I wouldn't want to be here (Joanne, 39, Accounts clerk, 39, Uvicon).

I would feel better if there was more humour and fun. You can still be professional because jokes or fun ends and then you focus again, but you know it will happen and you are looking forward to that little bit of humour, it does make a great workplace [...] The day that you have a lot of laughs- that day I feel good, great and I have achieved that, confirmed policies, put through leads that I wouldn't normally not do and you feel great about yourself. Fun is like a cup of coffee it energises you. We use a lot of humour with the clients and they laugh, and sometimes they are hungry for that little bit of humour, you can sense that especially our older clients. You took the time to crack a joke in a professional way, the joke ends and then you get on with the query and then they think oh great she shared a joke with me today, somebody made my day (Mary, 42, Customer Service Representative, Sigma).

Fun is very important I think- in terms of enjoying what you are doing. We've got targets to meet, in a role where the phone is your lifeline and we know that over half of the calls we get aren't going to be pleasant. In terms of the team it is very important that you are all getting along and you are enjoying what you are doing, otherwise you are not going to perform to your best, just a lit bit of a light hearted quip every now and again it is amazing what it does to lighten the mood (Ian, 32, Department Manager, Sigma).

I think the days when we are having more fun I enjoy my job more. On a good day when I'm having fun I'll get 'stuck in' and get everything done (Marilyn, 32, Customer Service Representative, Sigma).

Theme 2: engagement with the organization, organizational unit or team

All of the participants (below) express positive perceptions suggesting that when their organization values fun it creates a more enjoyable work climate and culture which fosters greater overall engagement with the organization. These participants associate the experience of workplace fun with the enhancement of either team or organizational culture (or both). A perceived “fun culture” increases their enjoyment in their workplace which increases their engagement and even influences decisions to stay with their company. Lily highlights that she does not like her current role but stays because of her team engagement. Participants emphasize that a balance between fun and work tasks is important. Sharing fun stimulates engagement with others in the team and people in the wider organizational context:

[...] what we are trying to do is really look at the things for employee engagement in the job and their duties at the same time [...] people are generally quite enthusiastic for our fun initiatives and activities [...] people here love the company, which is good, from an HR point of view you can't ask for much more and we have a good reputation around the place as being a great company to work for (Jerome, 38, HR manager, Sigma).

This company as a whole for a start recognises the value of fun and the company is fairly big on that as you'd know if you've ever seen one of our Christmas parties, they are fairly amazing events [...] we recognise that fun is definitely part of the culture [...] We do actually work but at the same time we have fun, so I think it is in the culture [...] (Mike, 32, Customer Service Representative, Sigma).

I think that we show it every day in just working together and how everyone gets on and has a laugh, has a lot of fun. I guess our team culture is that we like to have fun while working hard. By improving our results and taking on challenges we can show that we do actually work but at the same time we have fun, so I think it is in the culture but there is a fine balance because I guess when you look around this building there are some teams that are very serious (James, 32, Lawyer, Kapack).

This is probably the best company I have ever worked for [...] I they invest in the people that work in the company. This company is excellent- it invests in the people, it does a lot of things together as whole company, I enjoy working here, I mean you guess you have to, you spend so much time here, but I get up and look forward to coming to work here and when I ever leave I'd miss the people and the culture that has been created here [...]. if I didn't get away from my computer and go and relax and have a bit of laugh or a bit of fun with somebody and I was deskbound all day every day, I probably wouldn't like my job as much (Jenny, 33 PA to CEO, Uvicon).

We can't operate in isolation and we have to be interactive, we have to be engaged, we have to care, and care about other people rather than just what we are doing (Matt, 35, Group General Manager Strategic Development, 35, Uvicon).

Fun culture can make it or break it as far as I'm concerned because like when you are doing accounts and I mean the job itself can often get really boring and like even though I get a lot of satisfaction and enjoyment out of it, a fun culture can provide you either with a reason to stay or a reason to leave and that is a huge part of the reason why I left (my last job) [...] it is quite important. It creates a nice atmosphere to work and when you've got a bit of a laugh going on, nothing is too serious or too quiet [...] There is freedom to have fun and it's definitely easier to come to work if you know that you're going to have a fun day. It stops it from being boring (Polly, 25, Finance Officer, Uvicon).

Fun is part of the culture -you know how some corporates are very much no humour whatsoever – this is not like that – you can tell a joke, people laugh, silly things happen we laugh too. I particularly like laughing and joking (Betty, 54, Receptionist, Uvicon).

I'm engaged in this company because I enjoy our team – they can laugh and you know you can enjoy yourself and have fun [...] it is the difference between waking up in the morning, it's raining and dark outside and you go "oh, I've got to go to work" but it's the difference between really not wanting to go to work and knowing that once you get to work it's fine. Fun just creates a good atmosphere at work, it makes going to work a lot easier, knowing there is a friendly, happy environment you are going to. It's fun, the whole floor, everyone is genuine, it's a good place to work [...]. I do my job, have fun doing it [...] on the first day I came in they were all about having fun. They do encourage the whole fun thing but there is a definite line there and as much as we do joke about it is still very professional [...] our team and our management, they have fun with us, it's great for the team, we all have a laugh and a joke, but I think everyone knows where the line is (Brendan, 25, Sales Representative, Adare).

I think the (organizational) values of fun and unity and achievement really comes through. Fun, unity and achievement are things that make it a lot more satisfying about my job than I probably have been in any organization – it is exciting to know that when you go to work even if it is busy, I have a feeling that they are supporting you and it is more of a motivator than anything else. If you have a bad culture and you have a personal view to do your best with your job and be as successful as you can be the culture will just drag you down and demotivate you so I think our culture is the opposite of that it motivates us as much as we want it to be [...] having as a value flows through from the types of performance based measures that we use [...] people like our PA's are responsible for organising events and really pull people together and really encourage people to be happy and to relax and have fun- there are certain administrators within teams who encourage it (Grace, 26, HR Administrator, Sigma).

I think we really do work together and that we have a lot of fun and people really are willing to help each other. I think that we show it every day in just working together and how everyone gets on and has a laugh, has a lot of fun and the Gallup results come up really really positive and that is all about staff engagement and we got some great marks for our team in that space. I guess our team culture is that we like to have that balance of having fun and also working hard [...] I think by adding fun into the values – and fun and humour is something that we have always had in the team – and I guess I am proud of our team environment. In the past we have been a team that has been picked on for our humour and that is just in the sense of when I guess you mix that balance up people tend to think that you are not working, you are all standing around laughing and telling funny stories and jokes and so if you are doing that then you mustn't be working which is what we have tried to work by improving our results and taking on challenges so that we can show that we do actually work but at the same time we have fun, so I think it is in the culture but there is a fine balance (Felix, 32, Operations Manager, Sigma).

I love my team. I don't particularly- to be honest- love my job but I think the most important thing is that I get along with the team and the team is great, lots of fun. I'd be sad to leave [...] I haven't had a single day when there wasn't some kind of joke or fun. I haven't spent a single day without laughing (Lily, 27, Customer Service Representative, Sigma).

Theme 3: disengagement, distraction and dissonance

Although this segment of data is significantly shorter than the earlier segments, it is noteworthy as these comments highlight a conflicting perspective (from the earlier two sections) and thus offer another dimension to the findings. These four comments, although divergent to the majority, suggest that workplace fun can be perceived as a distraction by some people. Fun activities can be noisy and pull people away from their focus and work tasks, this would suggest that fun could therefore cause disengagement with tasks. James' reflection portrays an even stronger reaction and suggests that the "organized fun days" which he strongly dislikes induce such a negative reaction

that he disengages with his organization and deliberately absents himself. Kayla experiences dissonance when her organization markets itself as a “fun” company which she does not believe is true. These participants’ comments suggest that fun can be loud, distracting and hinder task completion but even more insidiously may cause alienation and disengagement from the organization itself-offering a cautionary note to the overall discussion presented next:

When we have fun days at work – like wearing pyjamas – or dressing up as a TV character, I can’t stand it! It’s so childish-so I stay at home and have a sick day (James, 34, Engineer, Adare).

You want to say in general – humour, fun, having people laughing is always good – but it’s not good when it gets in the way of getting things done. If it’s too social where people just sit in the café, and drink coffee and joke and play around and that sort of stuff, I guess that is not productive (Aidan, 30, Group manager, Uvicon).

I like being in an office where you can have a good laugh and it’s a lot of fun [...] BUT – I will work from home if I want to get something done as the office can be too loud, occasionally the antics of the company will be an issue. All the fun and hijinks can be really distracting [...] (Bruce, 25, Account manager, Adare).

I think we want to tell people that we are a fun organisation but they can’t use that word fun because that would be downright lying. It makes me cross when they say we are the “fun law firm”. We are not really a culture around fun, we don’t have a value called fun – but I know that HR are very aware of that – they sort of are trying to bring on people that might create that fun or introduce that fun [...] (Kayla, 37, Marketing Manager, Kapack).

Discussion

The data show that employees often spontaneously use the word “engaged” or “engagement”, when talking about fun. It certainly appears that fun plays a role in engagement. Engagement is associated with positive psychology and emotions such as happiness, joy and enthusiasm. Likewise, fun is primarily perceived as positive and is associated with enjoyment, pleasure, frivolity, play and laughter. Both fun and engagement are linked to enjoyment and for the most part our participants hope and expect to experience some enjoyment at work. Enjoyment is discussed synonymously with fun but people experience this enjoyment through different types of fun. Our first data theme highlights how for some of these workers fun is experienced within the job itself (Marilyn, Mike, Kent, Natalie) which helps them engage their “heads, hand and heart” (Rich *et al.*, 2010). Such absorption is related to the specific form of engagement known as “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1991, 1996) and this is experienced in momentary segments or sustained periods of time. Theme one also demonstrates that fun allows people to take a break from work tasks. Our participants found this refreshing and having fun created a positive effect upon their mood which they then applied to their work tasks. This break or “relief” function of fun promoted a refreshed re-engagement with their work tasks. Therefore, fun experienced within work tasks or fun experienced as a short diversion from work tasks promotes greater engagement in two ways. Experiencing one’s actual work tasks as fun helps to create a state of flow in some people. Additionally, having spontaneous fun, as a break from work tasks assists in renewed engagement with tasks.

Our second data theme supports the idea that fun creates enjoyment and camaraderie, and thus engagement at the team, unit or organizational level. This type of engagement is created through fostering an organizational climate or culture that values and encourages workplace fun – as experienced by participants in all four of our studied organizations. A workplace that allows fun to flourish creates positive feelings about the

team or organization which fuels increased organizational engagement. In terms of antecedents, the data reveal that fun facilitates connectedness with others at work, in addition to a safe and supportive environment, all of which facilitate psychological safety (Rich *et al.*, 2010), showing how fun contributes to one of engagement's key antecedents. Further, the data suggest that fun supports the "heart" part of engagement, in that it enables employees to enjoy work. It supports the "head" and "hands" part of engagement by giving employees a rest and refreshing them so that they are able to come back to tasks and devote their full attention to their work, avoiding burnout. Fun is associated with positive emotions and workplace climate therefore fostering conditions of fun may contribute towards creating a climate of engagement. Fun aside, the data hold interesting implications for engagement theory, in that they suggest that engagement can be directed quite separately towards a role or the organization. When employees talk about "being engaged", they're not always talking about their job. Sometimes they do not enjoy their job or its tasks but they are still engaged with their overall organization.

Our third theme offered data that showed that not all fun created enjoyment and fostered engagement with tasks or the organization itself. This dissonance and cynicism is supported in the literature (see Fleming, 2005, Plester *et al.*, 2015). Prior literature does suggest that workplace fun can create cynicism and disharmony. However from our participants' reflections it appears that there are differing influences on this dissonance. One of these is the type of fun that is experienced and similar to findings by Plester *et al.* (2015) it seems that fun that is managed, packaged and enforced (such as the dress up days so reviled by James), may cause negative reactions such as distancing oneself from both the fun activity and the organization. In James's case this caused disengagement to the point of absenteeism. Second, spontaneous (organic) fun among colleagues can be noisy and distracting for some employees and these elements of fun can therefore cause distraction from work tasks and causes employees to disengage from their tasks, their organization or both. As disengagement is less empirically prevalent in the extant literature, this early finding linking fun and disengagement may offer a starting point for further investigations into the antithesis of engagement.

Implications, future research and concluding remarks

This exploratory research offers some early evidence concerning the relationship between fun and engagement and this relationship has implications for both theory and practice. Our theoretical contribution comes from extending current models of engagement by showing that fun is an important factor in engagement. We also extend the current concept of engagement in illustrating two different levels of employee engagement, in that when employees talk about engagement they refer quite separately to their role and their organization. We demonstrate engagement at the individual task level where employees find the task itself to be a form of fun and thereby feel fully engaged (flow) or enjoy fun as a refreshing break from work tasks and subsequently engage more fully with their tasks after experiencing fun. We also provide evidence suggesting that fun at work can create positive feelings and camaraderie which stimulate engagement at the wider organizational or team level. Contrastingly, we offer some early findings about disengagement and dissonance and how the wrong types of fun can create this less-desirable state in some employees.

For managers and HRM practitioners, the key message is that fun is a tricky area to get right, but is worth endorsing as long as it is done carefully. While some organizations take steps to initiate "fun" initiatives, such as fancy dress days or organized social events, such packaged attempts are not likely to have desired effects on engagement, and may backfire. Instead, our data show that fostering a culture where spontaneous fun is

encouraged, and allowing organic fun to emerge, is likely to help employees refresh themselves, enjoy themselves, and, in turn, be more prepared to invest their full selves into their work. One important point for managers to remember is that fun can help employees connect with each other and develop a sense of relatedness, which in turn can help them feel “psychologically safe” and able to engage more fully with their work. So, if managers notice that organic fun is arising, provided everyone is enjoying themselves it is worth stepping back quietly and allowing it to happen rather than worrying about work that is not getting done at that very moment.

In terms of developing a fun culture, how can one do this without it appearing too packaged? Culture is often perpetuated by leaders’ role-modelling, by stories and symbols, by sending signals about what behaviours are rewarded or punished, or by recruiting and selecting people who fit that culture. It is worth considering how leaders model an organic type of fun that is appropriate and acceptable to others in the organization. It is also worth contemplating whether organizational selection processes allow for the selection of people who fit with existing organizational members’ views of fun, and whether the organization sends discrete signals that it values fun, without being contrived. This could simply involve allowing employees to take time to laugh around the water cooler, and sending discrete signals that they are not expected to be taking their job seriously every single moment of the day. Even when it comes to performance reviews, perhaps one should not come down too hard on employees who do take time to connect in light-hearted ways with their colleagues, as such behaviours can ultimately help engagement, retention, well-being and even performance.

On a separate note, the data also suggest that an employee’s engagement with their role can be different to their engagement with their organization. Therefore, when HR practitioners conduct staff engagement surveys it is worth measuring both of these types of engagement. There are two well-validated engagement measures that are cost-free and easy to use. These are Rich *et al.* (2010) measure, and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Both of these could be reworded to separate engagement in the role and/or task from engagement in the organization itself.

This exploratory study has given us the basis for future research into the phenomena of fun at work. We believe that there are significant opportunities for further research which could include an extensive quantitative survey. Questions for employees could ask about the relevance and importance of fun at work and where or not they actually experience fun at work. The notion of coerced or managed fun could be further investigated and also the related concepts of organic and task fun (as discussed by Plester *et al.*, 2015). Surveys could also address the questions of organizational fun policies, values and the relationship between fun and engagement at both the organizational level as well as the individual’s engagement with their task and/or role. Finally, future studies could consider the concept of fun from the perspective of employees and compare this with a managerial view to consider whether experiences and perceptions are similar or different in varying hierarchical positions and roles. There is much more to be investigated and this early study has begun to address a topic that has great complexity and original insights to offer regarding workplace social processes and the well-being of employees.

In conclusion, we have presented a qualitative study that has shown preliminary links between fun and engagement. Specifically, fun helps employees refresh themselves, enjoy their tasks, and feel positively towards their organization. However, if not treated cautiously, fun can also serve as a distraction which in turn can lead to disengagement. The results suggest that fun is a worth encouraging in the workplace, but it needs to be handled carefully by managers and HR practitioners.

Note

1. The names of all participants have been changed.

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