



Employee Relations

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Barbara Plester Helena Cooper-Thomas Joanne Winquist , (2015),"The fun paradox", Employee Relations, Vol. 37 Iss 3 pp. 380 - 398

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/ER-04-2013-0037>

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The fun paradox

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Abstract

Purpose – Fun means different things to different people and the purpose of this paper is to attempt to answer the question “what is fun at work?”. Given that perceptions of fun differ among people, the answer is that a pluralistic concept of fun best captures different notions of what constitutes fun at work.

Design/methodology/approach – The research combines two separate studies. The first is an in-depth ethnographic project involving interviews, participant observations and document collection investigating fun and humour in four different New Zealand companies. The second study extends findings from the first by specifically asking participants to reply to survey questions asking “what is fun at work?”.

Findings – Currently fun is described in a variety of ways by researchers using different descriptors for similar concepts. Combining current conceptions of fun with the own research the authors categorize the complex notion of workplace fun into three clear categories: organic, managed and task fun. This tripartite conception of fun combines and extends current models of fun and collates earlier findings into a synthesized model of fun. The investigation found that fun is ambiguous and paradoxical which creates issues for both managers and employees. The authors recognize fun as a multifaceted concept and use paradox theory and the concept of flow to theorize the multilateral fun framework.

Practical implications – The authors find significant implications for managers in regards to creating and fostering fun in the organizational context. Differing perceptions of fun may result in misunderstandings that can negatively impact morale and workplace relationships. A wider conceptualization of fun offers potential for more harmonious and productive workplaces and creates a greater tolerance for competing and paradoxical perceptions of fun.

Originality/value – Current literature on workplace fun uses a variety of descriptors of fun and emphasizes a duality between managed and organic forms of fun. In suggesting a new term “task fun” the authors synthesize earlier conceptions of fun to create an integrated model of fun. The model clearly outlines three overlapping yet paradoxical categories of fun.

Keywords Paradox, Fun, Organization, Workplace, Flow, Humour

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Our research attempts to answer the question “what is fun at work?”. Dictionary definitions of fun reference elements of enjoyment, amusement, playfulness and pleasure and all of these elements may be relevant in modern workplaces. Lamm and Meeks (2009) offer a specific definition of workplace fun as “playful social, interpersonal, recreational, or task activities intended to provide amusement, enjoyment, or pleasure” (p. 614). However, fun means different things to different people. These different perceptions of fun are based on demographic differences, hierarchy, role requirements and diversity among people. In spite of these differences in perceptions, fun is primarily associated with positive outcomes for organizations such as applicant attraction (Tews *et al.*, 2012), job satisfaction (Karl and Peluchette, 2006a, b), work engagement, task performance and organizational

The authors wish to acknowledge and thank the two anonymous reviewers for their guidance and suggestions.



citizenship behaviour (Fluegge, 2008). Indeed these positive benefits of fun are a key reason why it is an emergent focus for research.

Although fun seems a worthwhile cause to sponsor, the multiple and potentially conflicting conceptions of fun make it difficult to promote equally to all employees. In our study we identify three forms of fun: organic, which emerges from employees; managed, which stems from managers; and task, which results from an interaction of employees with the tasks they are assigned. This tripartite division recognizes fun as a multifaceted concept (Tews *et al.*, 2012), yet these three aspects of fun have not been extensively explored in previous research. The three types of fun may potentially compete or even result in misunderstandings that can negatively impact morale and workplace relationships. Hence this division reveals the underlying tensions of paradox inherent in workplace fun. This has implications for how fun is enacted, encouraged and even managed in organizations (Warren and Fineman, 2007a).

By using the notion of paradox and in particular the dynamic equilibrium model (Smith and Lewis, 2011), we contend that all three forms of fun may operate simultaneously. Smith and Lewis' model allows us to examine fun from multiple angles even when these differing conceptions are opposing and paradoxical. We also invoke Csikszentmihalyi's (1975, 2000) concept of "flow" to help understand how our participants experience a level of enjoyment and absorption in their work tasks that they then construct and perceive as a form of workplace fun. In exploring the underlying tension inherent in the notion of fun we find significant implications for managers in regards to creating fun events, and fostering fun in the everyday organizational context.

Fun is important to people at work, influencing turnover, attraction to different roles and industries, affecting personal enjoyment, and impacting upon personal relationships (Tews *et al.*, 2013). In exploring the concept of workplace fun, we make two main contributions to the literature. First, by combining earlier research and our empirical data, we re-conceptualize current conceptions of workplace fun and we adopt the term "task fun" as we further investigate the idea that fun is experienced within actual work tasks. We then synthesize the extant literature and our data to conceptualize workplace fun as a tripartite model including: managed; organic; and task fun. Second, our use of the dynamic equilibrium model of paradox (Smith and Lewis, 2011) as our theoretical framework is novel in fun research. This framework allows us to work with the plurality of competing and overlapping experiences of fun discussed by our participants. Our suggested model of fun encapsulates a clearer pluralistic framework that offers future researchers an updated theoretical platform from which they can further extend the popular and emerging focus on workplace fun.

Paradox

Our focus is on workplace fun and we are examining this using paradox theory. Paradox involves opposites (Clegg *et al.*, 2002), with the key feature being "the simultaneous presence of contradictory, even mutually exclusive elements" (Cameron and Quinn, 1988, p. 2). Paradox can be viewed as two opposite poles that are the "extremes of a continuum" (Clegg *et al.*, 2002, p. 485). Paradox is a common occurrence in many aspects of organizational life, operation and social relations (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Clegg *et al.*, 2002; Cameron and Quinn, 1988; Eisenhardt, 2000). Organizations are key sites for paradox since their quest to be ordered and controlled ("organized") conflicts with elements of freedom, creativity and human autonomy (Clegg *et al.*, 2002). Hence although on first glance paradox may be

viewed as dysfunctional, in fact paradox can create tension that supports creativity and innovation (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Eisenhardt, 2000). Therefore Clegg *et al.* propose that a relational approach is optimal as it seeks to find a synthesis between the opposite positions, rather than trying to solve or eliminate paradox.

The duality view of paradox is expanded on by Smith and Lewis (2011). They create a pluralistic perspective that places the tensions created by paradox at the centre of complex systems, calling this the “dynamic equilibrium model”. They state that “tensions are integral to complex systems and that sustainability depends on attending to contradictory yet interwoven demands simultaneously” (Smith and Lewis, 2011, p. 397). They outline competing tensions that create differing issues for organizations; such as tensions between collaboration and control, individual vs collective approaches, and profit vs social responsibility. These divergent demands create complex and contradictory problems, and paradox occurs at the intersection of these “tensions”.

Based on earlier works (Lewis, 2000; Luscher and Lewis, 2008) Smith and Lewis categorize organizational paradoxes into four groups: belonging, learning, organizing and performing. Rather than treating competing tensions as a dilemma involving an “either/or” choice they suggest that acknowledging the paradox and approaching it from a “both/and” perspective allows an “ambidextrous” approach (see Raisch and Birkenshaw, 2008). Smith and Lewis propose that tensions exist within prevailing organizational systems and are also created through social construction among organizational actors. These tensions remain latent “until environmental factors or cognitive efforts” (p. 390) emphasize oppositional perspectives and thus the latent tensions become salient and are experienced by organizational members.

A dynamic approach to managing paradox allows leaders to support opposing organizational forces, harnessing and repeatedly balancing the competing tensions to create continuous improvement. The dynamic equilibrium model has three key features: first, paradoxical tensions (latent and salient); second, responses that involve confronting the tensions using iterative responses of “splitting and integrating”; and third, outcomes of strategies that involve embracing paradoxical tensions to achieve “short term peak performance that fuels long-term success” (p. 389). Smith and Lewis contend that adopting a “dynamic equilibrium” enables learning and creativity, fosters flexibility and resilience and allows people to achieve their potential. Thus success can be achieved through paying attention to the “often competing needs of shareholders, customers, employees, communities and suppliers” (p. 389). When linking paradox theory to the concept of fun, adopting this notion of “dynamic equilibrium” can allow us to encapsulate a pluralistic perspective of fun and we can then include varying ideas of fun experienced by people with different demographic attributes and across different levels in organizational hierarchies. This offers flexibility in conceptualizing the concept of fun and allows us to consider fun from perspectives, such as fun that is organized and controlled by management alongside creative and autonomous expressions of fun occurring spontaneously. Together paradox theory and the dynamic equilibrium model offer complementary alternative perspectives into how organizations can deal concurrently with competing demands, and we adopt these perspectives to explore the complexities and tensions of organizational fun.

Three types of fun

Workplace fun is associated with notions of spontaneity, surprise and informality (Fineman, 2006) and has a playful or humorous component (Fluegge, 2008). Fun can cover a wide range of activities, such as social activities (birthday celebrations),

professional recognition ceremonies (performance awards), community events (fundraising), and even workplace jokes and pranks (Roy, 1959). However, a number of issues are unresolved in research on workplace fun. A first issue is that, due in part to the subjectivity of experiencing fun, there is little consensus on what comprises fun for organizational members (Aldag and Sherony, 2001; Ford *et al.*, 2003; Plester and Sayers, 2007; McDowell, 2004; Warren and Fineman, 2007b). A second issue relates to the benefits of fun. Fun may be an end in and of itself, but to get traction in organizations it needs to show economic benefits. For example, fun workplaces may recruit more and better quality candidates; fun may encourage individual well-being in terms of satisfaction and engagement (Karl and Peluchette, 2006a, b; Karl *et al.*, 2005; Newstrom, 2002); fun may promote better working relationships between employees which can increase information exchange, organizational efficiency and ultimately performance (Tews *et al.*, 2012); and employees working in a fun organization may stay longer, reducing turnover costs.

The concept of fun is a growing field for workplace research and while studies offer potential benefits to managers and scholars, fun can be difficult to research. It is largely because the notion of fun means different things to different people that the concept of fun is hard to pin down, and this lack of conceptual clarity makes it hard to explore relationships between fun and organizational outcomes (Owler *et al.*, 2010). In spite of this lack of clear evidence, fun at work is receiving increasing research attention and empirical investigation (Baptiste, 2009; Blythe and Hassenzahl, 2003; Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Collinson, 2002; Plester, 2009; Stromberg and Karlsson, 2009).

Using current conceptions of workplace fun, we can begin to uncover some specific tensions that create paradox when exploring the notion of workplace fun. This paradox resides in the tensions between three types of fun. The first type is “organic fun” which occurs naturally between organizational members through interactions that arise spontaneously. A second form is “managed fun” (also termed “official” or packaged fun; Bolton and Houlihan, 2009) which is consciously and even strategically organized by managers to fulfil organizational objectives. Third is “task fun” which employees experience in work tasks and this third dimension in particular, is not extensively examined in the extant research.

Looking at each of these in more detail, organic fun refers to forms of naturally occurring fun and is characterized by casual or spontaneous initiation (Lamm and Meeks, 2009; Plester and Orams, 2008, Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990). This type of fun is generated by organizational members often in small interactions such as banter, joking and horseplay (Plester and Sayers, 2007). In order to encourage organic workplace fun the popular press has endorsed companies that seek to create a work climate conducive to fun (Tews *et al.*, 2012). Companies such as Southwest Airlines, IBM, Google and PikePlace Fish Market have been applauded for deliberately making fun a part of their corporate cultures (Collinson, 2002; Karl *et al.*, 2008). However, it is also possible that once a company has been identified as being “fun” (particularly in the media) true organic fun may be reduced in favour of managed imperatives and endorsements to have fun. Such requirements would then risk fun becoming a managed organizational component; having a specific objective of fun collides with spontaneous and unguided organic fun. Managed fun incorporates formal fun activities such as games, sharing food and drinks, outings, gift exchanges and light-hearted competitions (Ford *et al.*, 2003; Karl *et al.*, 2005, 2008; Peluchette and Karl, 2005). Managed fun occurs when organizations attempt to create activities or events in workplaces with the specific purpose of encouraging fun and engagement (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009). Intentionally

attempting to create workplace fun runs the risk of backfiring, chasing fun away and creating instead discomfiture, ridicule and dismay – again highlighting the complex and paradoxical perceptions of fun. Although fun creation is seemingly an innocuous and aspirational objective, researchers warn that such contrived fun creation can cause cynicism in employees who may feel patronized by management (Fleming, 2005; Warren and Fineman, 2007a). Moreover, the term “managed fun” in itself appears to contain a paradox in the juxtaposition of two such competing terms, to the point where “managed fun” can be considered an oxymoron (Warren and Fineman, 2007a). Thus, if fun needs to be managed and introduced, this suggests that it does not emerge spontaneously from tasks or organically within the work environment.

Task fun, the final conception of fun that adds to our pluralistic and paradoxical conceptions of workplace fun, is the notion of fun being experienced within actual workplace tasks (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Gropper and Kleiner, 1992; Peluchette and Karl, 2005). Peluchette and Karl (2005) define “experienced fun” as the “extent to which a person perceives the existence of fun in the workplace” (p. 269) and link this to increased energy and motivation for workers. However, the common element among earlier studies is that fun “experiences” focus on the notion of infusing fun into the working environment so that people experience fun alongside, but not within, their work activities and tasks (see Peluchette and Karl, 2005; Karl and Peluchette, 2006a; Baldry and Hallier, 2010). These studies emphasize the work environment as important to the experience of fun and sample items from scales used show that this categorization of “experienced fun” arises from the wider workplace climate (e.g. “This is a fun place to work”; “we laugh a lot at my workplace” cited in Tews *et al.*, 2012, p. 107). Therefore although these prior conceptions of fun incorporate the notion of experiencing fun in the workplace, they do not specifically propose that fun may be experienced in work tasks and could just as well refer to organic or managed fun (Karl and Peluchette, 2006a, b; Peluchette and Karl, 2005; Tews *et al.*, 2012). Tensions also exist between organic and task fun, since organic fun necessarily entails time off-task. There is one study that explores sources of workplace fun (Tews *et al.*, 2012) and these are formal fun activities; co-worker interactions; and fun job responsibilities. Tews and colleagues’ research examines fun as a predictor of applicant attraction and does not specifically focus on developing or categorizing sources of fun but rather uses dimensions of fun to predict how individual perceptions of fun influences the quality of applicants for organizational roles. Their formal fun aspect incorporates fun at work that is officially organized (akin to Bolton and Houlihan’s “packaged fun” and what we call “managed fun”). Their second dimension of friendly social interactions aligns with our conception of organic fun, although our notion of organic fun is broader including a wider range of activities and experiences. The third dimension used by Tews *et al.* (2012) suggests that some job responsibilities are fun due to the enjoyment and fit with a person’s personal interests. This third dimension of fun is tested by Tews *et al.*, with them asking participants to evaluate work tasks in scenarios which provided the basis for their ratings of their attraction to the job and organization. The jobs being evaluated had tasks that were described as “personally enjoyable, meaningful and a solid fit with one’s personal interests” (p. 108). This is useful in showing that some work tasks can be considered fun and their findings show that although fun is “fundamental” in the workplace, job responsibilities have a stronger impact on applicant attraction than specifically created fun activities. Therefore it is this responsibility dimension that we co-opt and extend in our research by asking questions that invite participants to tell us what constitutes fun at work for them and thus we extend understanding of this

recently identified fun dimension. In further investigating Tews and colleague's third dimension of fun we re-label this using the shorter nomenclature "task fun".

Other concepts exist which can inform our conceptualization of task fun, particularly flow and engagement. Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 2000) explored the notion of what makes activities enjoyable and why people persevere at tasks that may have no specific extrinsic reward. He found that people enjoy tasks due to the following key factors: the use of skills; the pattern and actions experienced in tasks; the development of personal skills; friendship associated with the task; the chance to measure oneself against others and against one's own ideals; emotional release; and prestige or regard from others. He coined the concept "flow" as the state where people act with total involvement and claimed that such an experience creates enjoyment. He deemed that although play activities allowed the greatest experience of flow, flow could occur at work also. Csikszentmihalyi concluded that the challenge and utilization of one's skills, and the sense of control over one's environment, can create great enjoyment that makes work similar to play.

The notion of flow is also linked to the concept of engagement popular in HRM literatures. Engagement is associated with high-energy and a positive psychological state (Albrecht, 2010). There is some linking of the concepts of engagement and fun in the suggestion that for engaged employees actual work becomes fun and Gorgievski and Bakker (2010, p. 265) differentiate workaholism and work engagement by the positive aspect of fun associated with engagement. However, there is surprisingly little discussion of fun as a component of engagement and this is an area for future development (see Plester and Hutchison, 2012).

Although the ideas of workplace engagement (Fluegge, 2008) and flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Moneta, 2010) are linked to perceptions of play and fun, and they are associated with positive affect at work, few studies specifically examine the notion that fun might be experienced within actual prescribed workplace activities. There is some early evidence that some forms of work can also be regarded as fun by some individuals (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Gropper and Kleiner, 1992; Peluchette and Karl, 2005), but such a conception is in itself paradoxical to traditional assumptions that work is concerned with labour and toil (Weber, 1930), and as such work has been traditionally perceived as inimical to the idea of fun.

This initial review of fun at work suggests three – potentially competing – conceptions of what is and is not fun, namely organic, managed and task fun. This illustrates how the simple idea of workplace fun starts to emerge as complex, paradoxical and problematic. With such complexity, ambiguity and paradox beginning to become apparent, we seek to extend both research and current popular assumptions about the so-called "simple" concept of workplace fun and the effects it may produce. Tews *et al.* (2012) strongly argue that fun should not be investigated as a "unitary concept" (p. 111) but that the multidimensional aspects of fun must be explored to further understand the organizational fun phenomenon.

From our review, we suggest three conceptions of fun: experiences that occur organically in the workplace; managed fun that is planned and organized by management; and task fun that we position as an extension to the concept of "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000; Moneta, 2010). We use the notion of paradox and, within this, the dynamic equilibrium model (see Smith and Lewis, 2011) to build upon existing conceptualizations of fun and present a clear, unified model of fun from our research and that of our colleagues in this research field. We turn next to our empirical findings to answer the question; "what is fun at work?" and to investigate whether our synthesized model is

relevant and pertinent to participants from both our studies. We suggest that the three contrasting forms of fun are part of a range of multidimensional fun conceptions within organizations. We explore this pluralistic and paradoxical conception of fun, and suggest some emerging implications for both managers and scholars.

Method

This paper combines data from two separate studies using both qualitative interview and survey methods. The first study comprised an in-depth ethnographic study of four New Zealand companies. Within these companies elements of humour and fun were investigated using an organizational culture framework (Schein, 1985, 2004). This in-depth study included detailed recorded observations of fun, humour and cultural events as well as everyday interactions between coworkers, peers and managers. Simultaneously, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 59 participants from all levels of the organizational hierarchy in each company. The interview duration ranged from 30 to 60 minutes per interview and these were audio recorded and later transcribed. Some documentary data was also collected whenever appropriate. The studied organizations comprised: a law firm (119 staff); an energy provider (800+ staff); a financial institution (800+ staff); and an information technology (IT) company (25 staff). Whilst this data has been explored in an earlier paper (see Plester, 2009) we are using the data in a different way in this current paper.

Interview participants ranged from 20 to 64 years old with an average age of 35. The majority of the sample was female (59 per cent). Participants were primarily New Zealanders of European descent (79 per cent), with 5 per cent European, 4 per cent Maori and 2 per cent Asian. The average tenure of these participants was 4.5 years and 38 per cent had a tertiary qualification. Interview questions included asking participants to describe situations when fun occurred; asking them for narratives of fun experiences; what was considered not fun; describing participation (or non-participation) in fun events; questions about organizational culture; events; rituals, humour; and reactions to fun and humorous experiences.

The second part of our study specifically examined the composition and importance of fun at work using survey responses. We asked 131 New Zealand workers, from a variety of industries, open-ended questions about what they considered to be "fun" at work. This sample comprised 66 per cent female participants with the mean age range being 36-40 years. Most participants had a tenure of longer than one year, two-thirds of the participants had a tertiary qualification and the average salary earned by these participants ranged from NZ\$40-\$60,000 per annum. Ethnically over half the respondents were New Zealanders with 13 per cent European, 12 per cent Chinese and 8.4 per cent Indian cultures represented. The survey questionnaire was circulated through eight participating organizations via the HR manager. The four qualitative questions asked participants: first, what they considered "fun at work" and how this phrase made them feel; second, to list all of the activities that they experienced as fun during their working day; third, which actual work tasks they enjoyed and why; and fourth, any forms of fun that were disapproved of at work.

In both sets of qualitative data, thematic analysis was used to analyse the responses using a six-phase process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The six steps involved: familiarization with data through reading and rereading; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; clearly defining and naming themes; and writing a scholarly report from the themes. It was during this iterative process with both sets of data that we identified three separate but overlapping categories of fun and these are discussed next with representative examples from the data.

Findings

First, we report how the themes emerged from the interview data; second, we provide further evidence for these from the survey data; finally, we provide quotes from the interview data that provide a richer illustration of these themes.

In our first analysis of the interview data (study one) we began our identification of three broad themes suggesting that fun at work is composed of three elements: organic, managed and task fun. Subsequently, we designed the second questionnaire to elicit more specific responses as to what participants considered to be fun at work. Participants responded in their own words to the request “describe what is fun for you at work?”. We were able to confirm and consolidate our three earlier themes from these specific participant descriptions of fun activities at work. As part of this consolidation process we reviewed the in-depth interview responses (in our first data set) and further coded extracts from the transcripts into the three themes – organic, managed and task.

Most participants described multiple forms of fun that they enjoyed for different reasons. The notion of organic fun was apparent in the majority of participant descriptions of fun. Our participants described this idea using terms such as: “fun just happens” “it’s natural”, “spontaneous”, “not organized” “created by us together”. We assigned the descriptor “organic” to this category to reflect the variety of phrases that emphasized the “non-manufactured” notion of fun.

In our survey study the concept of managed fun was identified through participant descriptions describing fun activities that were “organized by managers or the company”. Only one fifth of our respondents in the survey study claimed to enjoy this category of fun. Again, we found further examples (presented below) in our interview data set that suggested some enjoyment of “managed fun” but also paradoxically suggested some antipathy and resistance to this form of fun. What was also difficult was that some participants described a dissonant state where although they felt some appreciation for some of the managed fun they simultaneously experienced cynicism and dislike.

Task fun was the descriptor that we assigned to the category of fun described by participants in comments such as “my work itself is fun” and “some of my work activities are fun for me”. This form of fun was described in just under half of the responses in the second questionnaire and we also found further examples when we reviewed our interview data set.

This complexity is apparent in some of our participants’ quotes (below). Our three-pronged categorization arising from these overlapping and divergent perspectives suggests that more than one type of fun is important in the experience of fun at work. Of particular significance is the finding that although organic fun was identified as the most common form of fun occurring in these workplaces, task fun was reported by participants as the aspect of workplace fun they considered most important. This is significant as prior research does not generally recognize work tasks as a form of workplace fun.

While only a small proportion of participants referred to workplace fun in negative terms, those that did make negative comments were mostly referring to managed fun that had been arranged for them by their organization or managers. It appears that managed fun is the form most likely to attract negative responses, perhaps because employees do not always have a choice over whether to participate, and are concerned as to whether or not they will find it fun if they do participate. We include some verbatim quotes from our participants that show their paradoxical perspectives on workplace fun. We have separated the quotes into our three categories of fun: organic; managed; and task. Some of the participants talk about two categories of fun in the same utterance – again illustrating to the plurality of this concept.

Organic fun[1]

The first quote below (Sean) illustrates that although fun and humour are actively encouraged in his workplace and much of it occurs naturally (organic fun), he feels that some of this is not desirable and he does not want to be constantly engaged in all of the fun activities. This illustrates the paradox and ambiguity people feel about workplace fun. Although fun could be deemed organic in the IT company, there is also a perceived pressure to participate and there are types of fun that the respondent dislikes.

Conversely, Jasper describes his (energy) company as being devoid of spontaneous fun when he first arrived. He describes his endeavours to encourage fun among his colleagues and his current perception that more fun occurs since his early days. Contrastingly, Aidan from the same company clearly articulates his reasons why spontaneous and continuous fun is inappropriate and risky. Aidan makes the argument that fun can be unproductive. Kristin would prefer to have more naturally occurring fun during her work day and suggests that although her HR team is very “serious” they try to take opportunities to enjoy fun:

I like being in an office where you can have a good laugh and it’s a lot of fun but on the other hand there is some humour (and fun) that I would be much happier if it wasn’t around (Sean, 25, IT Account Manager).

I have been here for a long time and when I first came here I thought “(expletive omitted) man how am I going to last here” because everything was so quiet. It was just so dry and no one said anything and I thought we’ll shake this up a little bit, have some fun [...] and every Friday we put music on and we would dance in the afternoons and things like that and now there is a lot more talk and a lot more laughter on the floor since I first came here (Jasper, 29 Credit Controller, Energy Company).

It is pretty hard to see the funny side of anything sometimes – like the end of the financial year. The timeline is the target and there’s not going to be a whole lot of fun for some people in the process, in fact it is going to be quite the opposite, but again that is the reality of doing commercial business and giving value to your shareholders. Sometimes fun is just not appropriate [...] you’ve got to let them know that you are taking them seriously. I have coached a few individuals through some of their interactions with individuals and where they thought they were being funny at the time was not the case. So there are factors that contribute, their level of maturity, their level of emotional intelligence, the situation, – those kinds of factors. 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, Energy Company).

I like to have a lot of fun and I always pull a joke and be a bit silly. When I first arrived here it was quite serious sometimes and everyone talked about having fun [...] everyone wanted to have the humour at work because we are very serious, HR is a very serious part of an organisation, so we have a tendency to be quite serious and busy and a lot to do but I think we just take every opportunity to have fun which is why it is fun and I think there could be more because there could always be more (Kirstin, 30, HR Team, Financial Company).

Managed fun

The six quotes below illustrate the participants’ reaction to official or managed fun. Kim, a junior lawyer related her comment in an aggrieved tone. She works at a law firm that markets itself as a “fun” company. Kim disagrees with this managerial claim and suggests that they are just like other companies – citing the billing structure (every six minutes) as an example of why fun could not and did not flourish – every minute of her time had to be accounted for and charged.

James dislikes the prescribed fun days at his IT company so much that he stays home from work. Sean gives a detailed example of an after-hours “fun” event and describes his strong dislike of a company-arranged evening event including karaoke, drinking and socializing for the purpose of fun, yet alongside this exists the paradox that he acknowledges that there are good parts too. Sean’s CEO is very keen on encouraging fun both during work activities and in special after-work events such as the one Sean describes. At the time of this interview Sean had handed in his resignation from this company as he was upset by the constant pressure to participate in fun activities. Observations made at this IT company recorded this phenomenon and showed that fun was a major cultural component and fun was vociferously encouraged and created by the company CEO. A “food fight” was observed on one memorable occasion.

Sean’s quote illustrates his ambivalence towards fun but also clearly shows his antipathy for managed fun in this instance. Grant from the same IT company supports Sean’s suggestion that managed “fun” events have a coercive element at this company. Contrastingly Mark and Jazmin indicate that they enjoy the relaxation and social aspects of fun events that are organized for them (after hours) by their organizations. Although supporting the fun event, note the ambivalence in Jazmin’s response as she suggests one has to make an effort to attend (“be bothered”):

We say we are different, we are the fun company, we are the one you don’t have to work so hard [...] but here is like every other large law firm that I have ever worked at – we also bill every 6 minutes so we can’t really be the “fun” firm (Kim, 30, Lawyer).

When we have fun days at work, like wearing pajamas [...] 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, IT Company).

I’ll give you an example [...] we were at a karaoke night, I hate karaoke and have never sung it in my life, I hate the attention being on me – it really bothers me. So I hadn’t been there that long at the time, didn’t really know anyone that well. Everybody was up on stage, singing songs together, drunk off their faces. I think it is the sort of fun that you dread, you sit here and think, “Oh god – I really don’t want to” and then you get up there and you find it is really not that bad, in a lot of ways it **can** be fun. There are some things here I think are not fun – some things I think are really funny. By and large from my perspective, the things that I haven’t liked I have tolerated because there is enough good stuff in it (Sean, 25, IT Account Manager).

You feel excluded if you don’t go to karaoke on a Thursday night – which I won’t be attending because I have to go on out tonight. However I wouldn’t be averse to going and it wouldn’t be a problem and you go to have fun – but behind the light hearted attitude, I can see a certain degree of coercion (Grant, 64, Engineer, IT Company).

Friday night drinks, whether you can be bothered [...] it’s social, it’s fun, with the element of competitiveness. I think it is a good sort of bonding and Friday is the day that you can usually leave at 5. Sometimes it is nice just to have a beer and staff pizza and unwind (Jazmin, 23, Law Clerk).

Fun things like people leaving, people celebrating birthdays, Friday drinks, monthly drinks – they put them on but it’s not just a few beers, it’s some foods and things like that but also they encourage the fact that you go down at 4.00pm, it’s not like work, work, work. It makes working here easier because you can relax more and be more comfortable in yourselves, so it’s nice to come here and not sort of be on your guard (Mark, 38, Accountant, Energy Company).

Task fun

This final series of quotes links fun with the prevailing organizational culture and work engagement, and these respondents suggest that they enjoy fun as part of the work

tasks that they undertake. They also link fun in their work tasks to the wider climate and conditions in their workplaces and this suggests that such task fun is closely aligned with the category of organic fun. It appears that fun occurs both within the work tasks but also naturally with other colleagues as part of their everyday workplace interactions to get tasks done.

Kent, a senior Law Partner, identifies his job as intrinsically fun in itself. Marjorie combines the concept of fun with humour and suggests that it is “fun” when funny moments arise from actual work situations. Fiona clearly separates fun into an internal (with colleagues) and external concept (clients and outsiders), suggesting that fun can occur in one milieu but not the other, and that the two exist in tension. Jim also perceives that fun occurs in everyday interactions during work tasks and that this is part of his “team culture”:

We do actually work but at the same time we have fun, so I think it is in the culture [...] 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, Telephone Salesperson, Financial Company).

It's always fun being on the ground and going “wow, how are we 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 in Law Firm).

Some funny things happen; we have humour and fun in our jobs with some of the funny things that have happened that people bring grievances for. It just cracks us up and from that point of view we have a different sort of humour that we can laugh at, we shouldn't be, but you just can't help it because funny things happen (Marjorie, 60, Secretary, Law Firm).

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 when you have let 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, Energy Company).

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 (Jim, 32 Operations Manager, Financial Company).

Discussion

We have identified three competing but also overlapping conceptions of fun (organic, managed and task). Smith and Lewis' (2011) dynamic equilibrium model of paradox suggests that organizations can embrace multiple and pluralistic conceptions of organizational dynamics and their model offers us a way of understanding the competing views of fun expressed by our participants. Using this model, we contend that workplace fun creates competing tensions within individuals and organizations and thus is inherently paradoxical and pluralistic in nature. Tensions arise through different perceptions of what constitutes fun; pressure to participate in so-called “fun” activities; work demands competing with fun times; and even the tension of leaving a work task that one is enjoying and experiencing as fun for a managed or social “fun” activity. Therefore the dynamic equilibrium model allows us to recognize and explain the competing tensions created by different types of fun. Our findings show that the pluralistic experiences of fun are significant to participants and therefore we have synthesized three

types of fun into a tripartite model that clearly articulates how the paradoxical conceptions of fun can operate and flourish simultaneously in the studied organizations.

Fun events, experiences and creations may in practice involve more than one of the three elements at the same time. For example a “managed fun” workplace event may offer the opportunity for organic, spontaneous fun to occur in a relaxed atmosphere (as suggested by Jazmin and Mark). Although managed fun is often enjoyable for employees, our data highlight that sometimes fun that is arranged by the organization, with the best of intentions, can actually create the opposite effect to what was intended. This is particularly poignant when employees feel obligated to participate in an activity that makes them feel uncomfortable or even foolish (see Fleming, 2005). This is exemplified by Sean and Grant who both express dissatisfaction with managed fun events in their workplace. While they purport to enjoy some managed fun events they both express distaste for the karaoke events organized by their manager – while acknowledging that many of their colleagues enjoy this activity, and even acknowledge that there can be enjoyable aspects. This keenly illustrates the difficulty inherent in fun activities organized by managers – what is fun for one person is not fun for all and supports our adoption of paradox as a supporting framework. Tensions arise for Sean and Grant in their paradoxical interpretation of the fun-filled karaoke evenings. While they see some colleagues enjoying this and considering it fun, they experience conflicting feelings of antipathy and distaste while simultaneously feeling as if they should join the “fun”. Notably, Sean had actually given in his resignation and was in the process of leaving his company citing the constant “fun” activities as a key reason for his departure.

Paradoxically the CEO (also interviewed) felt that he had arranged an enjoyable fun experience for his staff that all seemed to enjoy as described here: “Karaoke is installed as an integral part of the organisation [...] it gives them (the staff) an outlet, otherwise everyone gets uptight [...] we have stuff like this because I enjoy humour and fun” (Jake, CEO, IT company). His version of fun does not coincide with that of his employees (Sean and Grant) yet he expects employees to enjoy the activity as it fits his perception of workplace fun which he sees as an emotional outlet for staff. Indeed, managed fun has become an established and accepted contributor to “good people management” that is often considered to be enjoyable by many employees. However, few “employee voices” are heard in fun research (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009, p. 560) – a gap addressed by our participant voices presented earlier. Our data clearly show the difficulties of “managed fun” activities and the feelings of coercion and dissonance that can be created between employees and managers.

Organic forms of fun such as small joking interactions, horseplay and even mild pranks seem to offer short releases from workplace pressures and occur naturally throughout the day for these employees. It seems that such spontaneous, momentary forms of fun do not contain the implied compulsion to experience fun and enjoyment and this allows employees the freedom to engage with the fun or ignore it if they are busy or just not in the mood. The freedom from coercion and the element of personal choice appears to be an important component of the experience of fun that is integral to organic fun but mostly absent in managed fun.

Some work tasks are experienced as “fun” by our participants (see Kent, Jim, Marjorie, Natalie and Mike above). Each of these participants claims to enjoy some of their work tasks and the fun that may be generated from these. Kent clearly articulates that the challenge of solving legal issues is a form of fun to him and this links to elements in Csikszentmihalyi’s (1975, 2000) model of flow such as using

personal skills and measuring the self-against ideals. Mike and Marjorie both suggest that work activities that generate humour actually create fun, while Jim emphasizes the friendship in shared tasks and measures his team against other more serious teams. These findings challenge popular assumptions that emphasize a dichotomy between work and fun; only more recent research allows for the idea that work and fun can be part of the same experience and occur synonymously (see Karl and Peluchette, 2006a, b; Tews *et al.*, 2012). Our findings extend the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000) by suggesting that not only do our participants experience flow in their daily tasks but that they then construct this experience of flow as a form of personal fun. Therefore for these participants it is not necessary to stop working to experience fun as some fun is generated from their actual work tasks and activities.

Although Tews *et al.* (2012) have briefly discussed the notion of task fun by suggesting that some job responsibilities are fun and therefore attractive to new recruits, task fun has not been comprehensively investigated as a significant element in overall conceptions of workplace fun or as an extension to the concept of flow. There is little literature that suggests that task fun is prevalent within organizations but our findings suggest that this previously underexplored form of fun is important to most participants in our study. Although we have theorized this form of fun using the concept of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 2000; Moneta, 2010) we propose that this category of fun is worthy of further research and theoretical development. Such development could be undertaken within studies on engagement (see Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2008) or as part of more in-depth organizational investigations of fun and humour.

With the three identified types of fun, our findings emphasize that the concept of workplace fun is a paradox experienced by organizational members who have simultaneously competing views of what constitutes workplace fun, as well as some synthesized views where they agreed upon facets of the concept which they link to enjoyment, humour and relaxation. The latent tensions experienced in workplace fun involve assumptions that fun is positive and should be encouraged and enjoyed by all. Deal and Kennedy’s (1982) influential claims that fun, play and humour should be a part of western workplaces may even cause managers to feel that they should be implementing fun in their organizations and that this is an expectation of modern employees (Warren and Fineman, 2007a). Indeed, the recent trend to focus on engagement to drive performance (Harter *et al.*, 2010), and managers’ measurement against their teams engagement (Xu and Cooper-Thomas, 2011), generate imperatives to construct fun. Once fun initiatives are created, such as a dress-up day, then the inconsistent nature of fun is revealed and the very individualized nature of the concept becomes apparent. While some organizational members enjoy and encourage organized fun and they experience and construct these experiences as fun, others disdain the experience and consider it “not fun”. For some individuals, they perceive various aspects of such experiences as concurrently both fun and not fun. This brings to light the latent tensions surrounding fun, making them salient and obvious (see Smith and Lewis, 2011).

Practical implications

The salient tensions are experienced by organizational members in a variety of ways as shown in Warren and Fineman’s (2007a) research that described organizational members mocking and deriding managerially organized fun activities. Our quote from James suggests that his way of coping with the duality and tension between what is

and is not fun is to simply stay away from work and avoid it when he finds it distasteful and childish. This suggests some significant implications for practitioners when organizing fun days or events. Trying to provide fun for everyone at work may not be a realistic objective and people tend to be cynical about some managed or packaged forms of fun (Fleming, 2005). However, paradoxically, the naturally occurring (organic) forms of fun enjoyed by the majority of our participants do need the right kinds of conditions to thrive and flourish, and management therefore has a role. Managers may wish to create events and activities and a tolerant culture in the hope that fun will follow but should avoid rhetorical exhortations that fun will occur.

While activities and events away from actual work tasks may be pleasurable and enjoyed by some people, and they experience these activities as fun, others will experience more fun through their actual work tasks. If managers are truly intent on offering fun activities to all, then they may have to accept that for some people work tasks are fun and therefore work itself is preferable and more enjoyable than other forms of fun.

This offers another useful organizational implication. While some employees are keen to take a break and enjoy managed fun activities, those that experience fun via “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Moneta, 2010) may be better employed completing essential organizational tasks that they consider fun. Such people may prefer to continue working on their tasks rather than be exhorted to join the fun. Being compelled to have organized fun could create dissonance if people have to abandon work tasks they are experiencing as fun to participate in activities that they deem demeaning and childish, or simply not fun.

Understanding these multiple conceptualizations of fun, and the inherent tensions, could be useful to managers. Specifically, it may help managers to accept the paradoxes inherent in the varied perspectives of fun, and – for example – allow task-focused employees to continue their work while their colleagues participate in alternative fun activities. Our findings show that assuming everyone desires fun to be arranged may cause distress, embarrassment and even extreme reactions – such as James’ absenteeism and Sean’s decision to leave. Of course the differentiation is not likely to be so clean cut and there will be some activities that most (if not everyone) will choose to participate in, while other activities will appeal to only the hard-core “funsters”.

In addition, people’s moods, emotions and contextual factors are also likely to play a role in determining fun participation and these factors also require further investigation. It is likely that there will be times when the fun of a work task will capture the attention of the individual in preference to an organizational official fun initiative that may be occurring. Conversely a particular organized fun event, or an opportunity for organic fun, may appeal at a time when an individual is completing a routine and boring work task. Understanding the different conceptions of fun may help organizations considering organizing “fun” initiatives. Recognizing the paradox arising from different types of fun can create a tolerance for different ways of experiencing fun without favoring or imposing a specific fun framework upon any individual. After all, if it is imposed and compulsory, it is unlikely to be fun anymore – and that is the paradox that is fun.

Limitations and future research

Our results are generated from only New Zealand companies and this research may need to be extended into other organizations. Although the study encompasses data

from a variety of different industries, further replication into a greater range of industries could ascertain whether the tripartite categorization is supported in these other contexts, and whether there are industry norms around what kind of fun predominates (frequency) and is considered most fun (potency). Further research could examine also whether organizations with more homogenous populations have more consensus on what is fun. For example, organizations in the entertainment industry may have high levels of fun in contrast with time critical industries such as our law firm where a six-minute billing mandate limits fun. Finally, more research is required into the outcomes of fun, and questions could consider the impact of fun on social relationships; the relationship between fun and workplace friendships; and the role of fun in both productivity and creativity.

Conclusion

Our paper makes two contributions to fun research. First, through analysing earlier research (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009; Karl and Peluchette, 2006a, b; Tews *et al.*, 2012) and our own empirical data, we develop further a third dimension of fun which we label “task fun”. This extends current conceptions of workplace fun by challenging the current duality between managed and organic fun. Using the concept of flow allows us to extend conceptualizations of fun by clarifying the third dimension of fun as “task fun”. Clarifying this third dimension allows us to conceptualize workplace fun as a tripartite model including: managed; organic; and task fun.

Our second contribution is in adopting the dynamic equilibrium model of paradox as our theoretical framework. This framework allows us to understand the complex, competing and overlapping notions that constitute workplace fun for our participants. Identifying the salient, competing tensions that create paradox helps us to account for the plurality of perspectives in defining what is fun for different people at work. Our pluralistic approach recognizes that different forms of fun occur simultaneously within organizational contexts, and that individual perceptions vary greatly as to what constitutes fun, and even within individuals the same event can have elements of both fun and not fun. In identifying the paradoxical nature of fun we can then work towards approaches to workplace fun that incorporates all dimensions of the concept. Our analysis offers an increased understanding of the concept of fun which may guide managers to desist from trying to force their notion of fun upon resistant subordinates who may respond with mockery, cynicism and withdrawal. Our findings show that fun is a pluralistic concept and therefore tolerance and diversity in activities and approaches is needed to account for the multiplicity of perceptions and desired experiences of organizational members.

Our early findings suggest that the overall concept of workplace fun needs more comprehensive research. We further contend that forms of fun experienced within work tasks are currently an underdeveloped component of the fun concept. Studies that discuss fun in relation to task flow and engagement may offer frameworks for further investigations. Such investigations would extend the field of workplace fun as well as offering new implications for practitioners and organizational members. Let the fun begin!

Note

1. In the interests of anonymity, pseudonyms have been used for individual participants.

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