

Fun and games? The pragmatics of workplace humour

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Abstract

This paper presents research exploring the relationship between organisational culture and humour inside four New Zealand companies. A theme emerged from the data indicating that *fun* was a concept encouraged and valued in each of the companies. In the studied organisations fun was not only supported but also marketed as a key feature of the company both within the organisation itself, as well and externally in their own industries. The findings suggested that there were positive and negative impacts and outcomes arising from the seemingly positive strategy of promoting fun at work. This paper discusses these findings and their significance to the workplace participants and concludes with implications for research and practice in relation to fun, humour and workplace culture.

Keywords: *fun, humour, play, organisational culture, management*

Introduction

During research investigating the relationship between organisational culture and humour the related concept of fun was highlighted and discussed by participants. This paper is primarily concerned with the fun concept and its implications for people in these studied companies. Although the term fun was not introduced to participants it was constantly used in discussions about humour and culture. Data analysis revealed some key differences between the concepts of fun and humour in these workplaces as well as where the constructs overlapped. All of the studied organisations purported to be fun companies in official documents but this was only true at two of them. The companies that actively encouraged and created workplace fun also generated more spontaneous humour and fun in their workplaces but there were also drawbacks to this strategy.

Humour, fun, play and organisational culture

Humour is a complex construct that has been studied by researchers in many disciplines (Chapman & Foot, 1976). However the complexity and multi-disciplinarity of the construct has resulted in confusion, dissension and the lack of any consistent definition by theorists. Terms such as humour, laughter, joking, and fun have been used interchangeably throughout much of the research resulting in what Raskin (1985) calls “terminological chaos” (p.8)

Although humour has been widely studied particularly in psychology (Freud, 1905), anthropology (Douglas, 1999; Radcliffe-Brown, 1940) sociology (Mulkay, 1988; Zijdeveld, 1983) and linguistics (Attardo, 2001; Raskin, 1985) there is still limited research into the use of humour in workplace situations and specifically within organisations. Most organisational humour research explores the functions of humour in the workplace and highlights that humour can be used to provide relief from tension (Freud, 1905; Wilson, 1979), achieve bonding in groups (Clouse & Spurgeon, 1995; Fine & De Soucey, 2005), facilitate communication (Greatbatch & Clark, 2002), lighten criticism (Barsoux, 1993), and is an aspect of organisational culture in many workplaces (Holmes & Marra, 2002a). Theorists have also highlighted that humour may be used to express aggressive or subversive attitudes in an acceptable way at work (Barsoux, 1996; Holmes, 2000).

There has been little academic research into the concept of organisational fun and this topic appears to have been adopted by prescriptive management writers exhorting the benefits of ‘fun cultures’. Workplace fun has been emphasised in organisational culture writings particularly from the popular guru writers of the eighties who declared that strong cultures can be created and built. Prescriptive management writers (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Kanter, 1983; Peters & Waterman, 1982) have argued that creating fun at work is a key feature of strong cultures that lead to increased productivity and innovation (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Deal and Kennedy (1982) identified a “work hard- play hard” culture in companies that combined hard work with workplace fun. There is a danger for companies that attempt to manufacture a fun or play culture that organisational members may feel that such cultures are imposed. Therefore contrived workplace fun may be greeted with cynicism by workers (Fleming, 2005). Another issue is that of the conflict between corporate objectives and fun. Some researchers question how far can fun go before it hinders productivity? (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Due to the paucity of research into workplace fun once again a definition has proved elusive. The Collins English Dictionary defines fun: *a source of enjoyment, amusement, diversion, pleasure, gaiety, merriment, jest or sport, frivolous activity*. This definition implies that fun though enjoyable, is not necessarily funny

whereas dictionary definitions of humour include qualities of being funny, amusement and disposition. From this definition there is also an implied active element to fun.

Many organisational culture writers have assumed that fun cultures are desirable inside organisations and that they help to boost productivity (Fleming, 2005). The importance of workplace fun appears to have been assumed from adopting the perspectives of the prescriptive culturists. However, research supporting this imperative appears to be scanty. Culture and humour literature emphasises the relationship between fun and productivity and treats workplace fun as a tool that managers can use to enhance performance and develop organisational culture (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995). Fleming (2005) suggests that having fun at work may blur the boundaries between work and non-work and therefore make work more like leisure or play activities that are more enjoyable. He further asserts that fun cultures are not necessarily desirable to all organisational participants and may be met with cynicism and distaste.

To add to the terminological confusion and indecision, when discussing the concept of fun at work the term 'play' is often used synonymously as part of this concept. Costea, Crump & Holm (2005) contemplate modern organisational cultures and in their exploration of workplace play refer repeatedly to workplace 'fun'. Dictionary definitions of play contain references to games, sport or diversion and amusing oneself (Collins English Dictionary). Dandridge (1986) discussed the work/play dichotomy and contended that fun at work was associated with play rather than work. Play at work is being fostered and generated by modern managers and is becoming part of a "wide spread of playfulness and fun as imperatives throughout the cultural body of the West" (Costea, Crump, & Holm, 2005: 140). The ideals of fun and play may influence managerial initiatives and boundaries between work and play are being blurred. This is creating new relationships between work, enjoyment, well-being and performance (Costea et al., 2005). Adopting a fun and playful focus is changing managerial practices and emphasising personal well-being as well as productivity (Costea et al., 2005). Costea et al (2005) raise the question of whether management is appropriating 'fun' or is fun colonizing management?

Those endorsing prescribed workplace fun contend that using *humour* creates a fun-filled environment which in turn creates a desirable place to work that enhances productivity and reduces absenteeism (Santovec, 2001). Writers cite American companies such as Southwest Airlines, Ben & Jerry's, Sun Microsystems and Kodak that have created fun committees to plan events and encourage playfulness in the workplace (Collinson, 2002). Current cultural trends

suggest that playing (hard) and working (hard) are now synonymous rather than dichotomous and that adopting a fun and playful approach inside organisations is a useful tool for managers to achieve organisational goals. This research project which was designed to explore humour and its relationship with organisational culture could not avoid investigating the related and overlapping concepts of fun, play and their implications for the studied organizations, managers and workers.

Methods

In order to investigate the complex constructs of both organisational culture and humour qualitative mixed methods were used to elicit rich descriptive data. Four key methods were used and these were: semi-structured interviews; participant observation; documentary data collection; and a critical incident technique. The research was ethnographic in nature and one month was spent inside each of four New Zealand companies collecting data. The researcher worked the same hours as organisational workers, sat in the general office space and noted humour and cultural activities during this month. In-depth interviews were conducted with willing organizational members from all levels of the organisation and 59 were completed over the four companies. Documents were collected that reflected company cultural initiatives, examples of humour, value statements and any other relevant literature that the company was willing to share. Critical incidents were observed and written notes were recorded that described events and activities that appeared particularly significant to organisational members and/or management. Obvious outcomes were noted as well as interpretations of events by organisational participants in ad hoc discussions or during the arranged interviews. At the end of the research period each company received a report outlining their humour and culture styles and highlighting the fun aspects of the culture.

Fun in four New Zealand companies

The four New Zealand companies were assigned fictional nom-de-plumes to protect their confidentiality and some details were altered and omitted to avoid compromising their anonymity. The four researched companies were: *Adare* a small IT (Information Technology) company; *Sigma* a large financial institution; *Kapack* a medium sized law firm; and *Uvicon* a large utility provider.

Adare

Adare was the company that used the most humour during the observed month and the only company where the organisational culture and humour were interdependent as described in this quote from one worker:

The humour here *is* the culture. You can't separate them (Adare respondent).

At this company a high emphasis was placed on having fun at work as well as the continuous use of all forms of humour. The company was well known within their industry (IT) for being outrageous and had cultivated the reputation of being a fun place to work. This was constantly promoted and the managing director and employees continually referred to their 'fun culture'. However not all organisational members supported the humour and fun at Adare with dissenters articulating (in interviews) that the humor and fun often went too far. Fun had negative impacts when people were repeatedly targeted and had their feelings hurt. There were even instances when fun had resulted in physical injuries for workers. Employees and managers at Adare suggested that one had to join the fun or risk not fitting in. Although most organisational members were happy to work for a company that highly valued fun and humour there was a prescriptive element to the fun and the feeling that was 'compulsory' and imposed by the managing director.

At Adare there were many forms of fun including: practical jokes; physical horseplay; racial and sexual jokes; toilet humour about bodily functions; and frequent profanity to promote laughter. New recruits were made to drink potent alcohol at 10 am on the day they started whilst wearing a power cable tied around their head. At one workplace function several (male) employees and the managing director sat in the office wheelie chairs and raced down a steep slope in the car park. On another occasion there was a food fight in the open-plan office with sausage rolls hurtling past staff members speaking to customers on the phone. This was a male-dominated environment and the humour and fun here reflected male styles of competitive, physical and aggressive fun. Female employees suggested that they had to tolerate the activities or actually join the fun to feel accepted. When the managing director was questioned about the extreme fun and contentious humour styles he declared "well if they don't like it they can leave". Those that disliked the continuous melee found ways of working within it or in the case of two interviewees, were actually seeking jobs elsewhere. Those that enjoyed the unpredictable fun culture cited it as a key reason why they stayed at Adare and claimed that working elsewhere would be too dull in comparison. This was the only company where there seemed to be no constraints or limits on humour and fun but there was an imperative to join in or risk alienation from colleagues and management. As well as the fun activities created by the managers, employees here felt free to enact spontaneous outbursts of fun (such as throwing balls across the room) and to share humour in this environment that supported such activities.

At Adare there were fewer constraints and fun pushed the traditional workplace boundaries. Management at this company appeared to relish their outrageous activities and embrace their outlandish activities as a way of differentiating this company inside their (IT) industry. The company was well-known among industry peers for being fun and funny and the managing director was regularly approached by people seeking a job with this organisation.

Sigma

At Sigma 'fun' was an official stated value of the company and was encouraged and evaluated in this large company of 800 employees. Employees at Sigma were annually evaluated on the ways that they enacted the four company values. It was a company expectation that employees and managers would have fun at work and find ways to create and promote fun. Fun was serious business at Sigma! It was noticeable at this company that respondents used the term 'fun' more readily, possibly because it was one of the key company values. Respondents cited the company 'fun' value when asked about organisational culture and humour. Here also, fun appeared somewhat prescribed as employees had to be seen to be enjoying, supporting and even and creating fun in this workplace. An award was made to the Sigma *employee of the year* during the research time. During the celebration senior managers highlighted the employee's workplace contributions and emphasised his commitment to encouraging fun in the team that he managed.

Humour however, was not a company-endorsed activity and at this company the delineation between the two constructs was most pronounced. Humour was enjoyed and there was the usual amount of joking and laughing; however humour was careful and for the most part sanitised and politically correct (PC). Employees were careful with humour and interviewees suggested that they adopted a certain style of humour at work which was acceptable and this was different to humour that they used in non-work situations.

Company 'fun' events included managers dressing in fairy wings and distributing ice creams to staff, team competitions to find out little known facts about each other, lolly days and the eagerly anticipated company Christmas Ball. Participating in fun activities was an important part of the culture here and all respondents interviewed at this company claimed to enjoy these activities. Comparable with Adare, Sigma employees felt free to spontaneously perform fun activities and one young woman was observed racing around the open plan space in her wheeled chair, cheered on by colleagues and managers. However humour was used to quietly mock some of the managerial fun initiatives and the idea you *must* have fun was treated with cynicism by some employees. This supported Fleming's (2005) contention that not all fun cultures are positively

received by organisational participants. Respondents admitted that some sexual, sexist and racial humour did occur but that it was quietly shared among select groups. Potentially offensive humour that used profanity, racism or sexual innuendo was discouraged by company management. Therefore it appeared at this company that *fun* was acceptable, encouraged and promoted by management. Using humour however was riskier, not officially sanctioned, shared selectively, and used by some to ridicule the organised fun.

Kapack & Uvicon

At Kapack and Uvicon fun was not an official company value but both companies claimed to be “fun companies” in some of their official documents. Although these two companies documented their fun cultures, respondents from these organisations strongly disagreed with this assertion. Interviewees claimed although they enjoyed humour among their immediate colleagues, fun was *not* part of the culture. In both of these companies participants indicated that they enjoyed humour among their closest colleagues but would like to have more fun in the workplace. In recruitment booklets distributed to university graduates Kapack advertised that the company was a “fun place to work”. This company was keen to differentiate themselves from other traditional law firms. Through advertising their fun culture they promoted a key distinction that they could offer desirable recruits. However this claim was denigrated by organisational members who suggested that this claim was “a lie”. Observation data supported the employees’ contention and very few examples of fun were recorded at Kapack. Interviewees also suggested that a fun culture was inappropriate for a law firm as many people needed a quiet environment to think and interact with clients. Fun activities would create noise and laughter that would be distracting. Since the research period, managers at Kapack have implemented new fun programmes and activities to verify their claims of having a fun culture and these occur in the Friday evening drinks session or at morning tea gatherings.

Staff at Uvicon stated that more fun at work would be desirable but this was not a key concern at this company. Although they were interested in people enjoying their work the key emphasis at this company was in creating a balance between work and home activities and offering a workplace that supported family and personal imperatives for their staff. Their key focus was employee well-being which was supported by flexible work hours and several health and fitness schemes for staff. Surprisingly with such a wellness focus, fun was not officially endorsed at this company. Participants here claimed that they did have some fun events such as the company Christmas party but that work was a serious place. Small doses of humour relieved tension and

this was shared quietly and discretely among teams and groups. This was a very quiet and relaxed workplace and very little humour was observed here. Only two events were recorded as examples of fun during data collection here. These two ‘fun’ events were both Christmas events. One was a company- run party and the other was a *secret Santa* morning tea and present-giving session organised by people from one department. At both Kapack and Uvicon, fun was enjoyed on occasions but was not a general part of everyday work life. Although both companies advertised their fun culture, fun was not prescribed or created by company management and very little was enacted spontaneously by employees.

From the four companies two (Adare and Sigma) officially endorsed and even prescribed fun while at the other two (Uvicon and Kapack) fun was not a key aspect of the culture and daily life. In the companies that actively encouraged and created fun there was more fun and humour. In these two fun-filled companies more spontaneous fun was created by employees alongside the managerial fun initiatives. It is likely that official managerial approval of fun resulted in employees feeling permitted to generate their own fun and therefore more fun occurred overall. Although most appeared to enjoy the fun some of the Sigma respondents ridiculed the fun as being contrived while at Adare some respondents suggested that there was too much fun and it was distracting.

Humour occurred throughout all four companies but it was notable that more humour occurred at the companies where fun was sanctioned. So although fun did appear to stimulate more humour, both in the fun contexts and about them, humour still occurred when there were little or no fun activities. Therefore the two constructs appeared to overlap and take place simultaneously but also occurred independently of each other. Fun was not necessarily *funny*, and humour happened even when there was no fun. All of these companies wanted to be known as fun places even when they didn’t actually create fun or foster the conditions for fun to occur. Managers in all four companies perceived that fun was a desirable cultural facet that would appeal to potential recruits and assist in retaining valuable staff.

Fun versus humour

The subtle differences between fun and humour were highlighted in results from this research project exploring humour and organisational culture. The term ‘fun’ was not incorporated into the research design and only discussed in general descriptions of terminology during the literature review. Therefore the term ‘humour’ was the only one used during the research project and all

interview questions asked respondents about workplace humour. The concept of fun was generally implied as part of these questions. It became quickly apparent that this was a conceptual oversight as respondents discussed both humour and fun in answers to questions and although some used the terms interchangeably, many clearly differentiated the meanings that each term had for them. During data analysis it became apparent that the concepts of humour and fun had to be separated and each treated as a different concept as they had different purposes, were treated differently by management and employees and had different implications for the studied organizations. The quote below emphasises the differentiation of the fun and humour terms and highlights that fun was encouraged by the company but humour was not actively supported. She also contends that although the company wants to market itself as a fun company, in her opinion this is not a true depiction:

Fun is probably what they try to project but not humour. 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. We are not really a culture around fun, we don't have a value called fun but I know that HR (Human Resources) are very aware of that. They sort of are trying to bring on people that might create that fun or introduce that fun (Kapack respondent).

This second respondent from the same company (Kapack) supports his colleague's assessment and also reinforces that fun is quiet and constrained in this company and therefore not funny. He also differentiates fun and humour by implying that fun is appropriate at work whereas humour may be loud and disruptive, again endorsing the idea that fun is company compliant and humour is unfettered:

I guess (we have) petty fun, I don't know if petty is the right word. It is not en masse and it's not huge laughter. Because of the quiet environment it could be inappropriate if someone just went, "HA HA HA!" really really loud, or if a bunch a people did something funny (Kapack respondent).

This respondent also differentiates between fun and funny times highlighting that fun is a separate concept from humour:

There is no real frivolity and funny times here. We have fun times, like the ball- but really it wasn't really that much fun- it was fun because you all got to dress up and it was a special outing and it was being paid for- but it wasn't *funny* (Uvicon respondent-emphasis added).

Employees and managers recognised the different impacts from fun and humour inside these organisations. Fun was company approved, endorsed and even created. At three of the organisations fun was regulated by typical workplace boundaries and behavioural norms. Humour challenged traditional boundaries and was less likely to be managerially encouraged and approved. Humour was more likely to transgress corporate boundaries (such as using profanity) and was often only shared selectively among certain groups. Collinson (2002) doubts that humour can be managed or suppressed by management and Malone (1980) agrees that workplace humour may be unpredictable and risky. Humour use in these companies was less overt than fun and was also used to ridicule some company fun initiatives. The following quotes illustrate some respondents' perceptions of differences between humour and fun at work:

I would say we recognise that fun is definitely part of the culture. I don't think they would ever say as much that humour is specifically part of the culture but I think it is always there in the background (Sigma respondent)

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 that I would be much happier if it wasn't around (Adare respondent).

It appeared that managers were keen to link the concept of fun with their organisational culture and presented it as a key component when promoting the company. They associated workplace fun with impacts on organisational recruitment, retention, satisfaction and performance. Employees supported this assumption and most perceived fun to have positive workplace impacts. This was not the case for the humour construct and managers appeared to be much more wary of promoting a culture of humour. The key exception was the Adare managing director who contrasted significantly with his counterparts at the other three organizations, and was the only managing director to actively encourage humour use. He enacted humour himself that was profane, sexual, sexist, racial and would be considered inappropriate in many other corporate environments. Humour was associated with more negative workplace impacts such as targeting specific people and behaviours, promoting racial, sexist and sexual themes and making barbed points in the guise of a joke.

From findings in this research it appeared that when using fun in these modern organisations leaders were 'damned if they do and damned if they don't'. In the organisations that had less organised fun people claimed that they would like to have a fun culture and workplace. However

the companies that promoted a fun culture risked cynicism (see Fleming, 2005) and complaints that fun was compulsory and therefore not fun any more. Finding a balance between prescribed fun and actual fun that people enjoyed was a challenge for managers in these companies. As all of these companies claimed to encourage workplace fun and supported the notion of a fun culture there was some pressure for managers and leaders to follow through and deliver fun. However fun activities could not be juvenile or patronising as this could alienate employees (Hudson, 2001). There was also criticism at Adare that fun was too extreme and that it hurt people physically and emotionally at times. The constant occurrences made it hard to actually work. Sigma seemed to have achieved the most successful balance and most participants here asserted that the company's fun activities were enjoyable, promoted group cohesion and bonding, and created an enjoyable workplace atmosphere.

Fun outcomes

Fun at work blurs boundaries between work and non-work and is pleasurable (Fleming, 2005) and people enjoy working in these types of companies. Most respondents in these companies assumed that a fun culture was universally desired by workers and managers. A 'fun culture' was treated as a marketable asset of these organisations. Respondents wanted to belong to a fun company and the companies wanted to present themselves as a fun place in order to attract top level recruits. This quote from one manager discusses the idea of actually recruiting people to add fun into the workplace:

We have really balanced that up and tried to get that mix, also we have a pretty fair idea of what we are looking for when we go in and do we need more maturity in the team, do we need a bit more fun in the team, do we need more guys, do we need more women, what kind of mix do we need (Sigma manager).

Using fun at work had some other implications for workplace outcomes with some respondents asserting that they chose to work for the company due to their perception of the fun culture.

My sister works for Sigma and she has been here about six years and she loves it here and she told me how fun it is and how great the people are, and how nutty they are basically. When there was a position available she suggested I applied for it and basically based on her recommendation I applied. I have found that what she has said is true.

I knew a few people that worked here and it was really interesting, every person I knew who worked at Sigma always said to me it's such a great place to work. That was years

ago and when I applied for my job, I thought of that, that the people that I had met always said Sigma is such a great place to work, they like to have a lot of fun, and enjoy themselves and they were really supportive.

As well as recruitment outcomes respondents below suggested that retention was also affected by the ability to have fun at work:

For me personally and I am probably one of the very lucky ones, is that I come to work to have fun to be honest. I come to work for just as much for the social side of it as the work side of it- if I wasn't having fun I would give it up in an instant (Sigma respondent).

I found that is a lovely company to work for. 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 (Sigma respondent).

I have been offered jobs with more money but have chosen to stay here because of the culture- the fun and flexibility. I enjoy working here so I stay (Adare respondent)

I left my last company because there was no fun, no laughs. I worked alone. These guys make me laugh (Adare respondent).

Respondents also highlighted that there were performance-related implications from having fun at work:

If I'm having fun with what I'm doing then I am going to be doing better simply because I am a bit more engaged, so there is that follow through from it (having fun) (Uvicon respondent).

You are probably more happy to work for a firm and to do the long hours when needed if you feel like you are sort of valued and that you are having fun on the way (Kapack respondent).

Satisfaction and enjoying work were also emphasised as being important to workers and having fun at work improved job satisfaction for the following respondents:

I think the days when we are having more fun I enjoy my job more (Sigma respondent).

Interestingly enough we are trying to get a bit more of our humour out there to the guys who have come on board- a lot are very straight laced. If you have a bit of fun you will find your

work a lot more enjoyable. You need a release and you've got to have a laugh...Join in and have fun then work is more tolerable (Kapack respondent).

Boundaries for fun

There were limits and constraints on fun and humour at work. Interviewees asserted that there were appropriate limits and although fun and humour were enjoyed by most people there were situations where it challenged boundaries, "crossed the line" and went too far. When discussing boundaries and limits respondents overlapped the concepts of fun and humour and talked about constraints in relation to both concepts. However data analysis suggested that *fun* was more likely to be contained within appropriate boundaries while *humour* was more likely to cross the metaphorical lines. Conversely a different perspective could be that those activities that stayed within appropriate boundaries and were approved of by management may have been labeled as 'fun' with its connotations of frivolity and lightness. Perhaps when boundaries were traversed the activity was labeled 'humour' which has darker connotations and a subversive side (Holmes & Marra, 2002b; Taylor & Bain, 2003).

Interviewees agreed that professionalism must be maintained even when having fun at work and the following quote supports this point:

On the first day I came in they were all about having fun but they really do define some things such as what clothes you can wear. 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 (Sigma respondent).

We need to have young people and we need to have fun, but I still worry a little bit when they get a little bit too loud and laughing too much that it is not quite professional and it might look like perhaps that they are not doing much to other people- that is just in our area (Kapack team leader).

I think there is a line fully, and as much as it is encouraged and again just based on our team and our management. Our managers they have fun with us, its great for the team, we all have a laugh and a joke, but I think everyone knows where the line is... You know where the line is with management because there is a line and you can't go over it. When

you are spoken to and think you've gone beyond the line, I think that is when you really know you've crossed the line where you shouldn't go (Sigma respondent).

There are some things I think are not fun, some things I think are really funny. By in large from my perspective, the things that I haven't like I have tolerated because there is enough good stuff in it (the fun culture) (Adare respondent).

Finding the balance between genuine fun and manufactured fun was crucial. Managers had to be cautious that organised fun didn't polarise staff. One Adare manager told of an organised fun day that occurred in a company he visited and all staff had to dress up as TV characters for a day. He stated that while some enjoyed and embraced the fun day there were those that were so vehemently against the organised fun that they stayed away from work for the day. There was also a perception inside the companies that workplace fun was only created and allowed by managers. There were child-like responses from these employees suggesting that they are *allowed* fun and might get their "hand smacked" if their fun was too naughty. This reaction suggesting that employees are children and the managers their parents may be one of the dangers of organised fun.

You don't want to be so PC (politically correct) that you don't have fun anymore, and sometimes it is actually funny and people can laugh at themselves and it's actually a really good form of humour (Uvicon respondent).

Obviously there are some inappropriate things as well as appropriate things and they are restricting what comes in and there are some things that aren't appropriate that come in but then again they still let us have a little bit of fun (Kapack respondent).

They'll certainly hand out the fun themselves which is kind of nice. But if you think you can do something that's inappropriate- that shouldn't happen- then they'll smack your hand (Sigma respondent).

There does seem to be a danger when prescribing and endorsing fun that spontaneous fun may disappear and that employees may wait until the next managerial initiative when fun is 'allowed'. This would then put much of the onus for workplace fun squarely on management shoulders and may even create pressure for them to continually invent fun. However data showed that spontaneous fun created by employees was more prevalent in the organisations that promoted fun

and therefore it may be worthwhile for management to continue coming up with new initiatives in the hope that fun begets more fun.

Conclusions and future fun research

Fun and humour were overlapping concepts in these companies and although the terms were used interchangeably in these companies there were also some significant differences between the concepts for these organisational members. Fun was associated with more positive outcomes and humour had some negative impacts. Fun was more likely to be approved and endorsed by management than humour.

These organisations wanted to be known as fun places to work. Promoting a fun culture in these companies appeared to create mostly positive impacts such as boosting recruitment and retention of valuable employees, enhancing job satisfaction and even improving performance. Some negative effects arose when fun was childish or when there was too much fun and it became distracting.

Workplace fun and humour was constrained by boundaries of propriety and norms of social behaviour. Fun was more likely to be contained within these boundaries or frivolous behaviour that stayed within the boundaries was considered to be fun. Humour however, had subversive aspects as it was sometimes used to challenge and transgress workplace boundaries.

It was important to maintain a good balance between organised fun and spontaneous fun and ensure that fun initiatives were not patronising to employees. Prescribed fun can engender cynicism and resistance in some organisational members but there was more spontaneous fun and humour in those companies that officially sanctioned and promoted fun.

More research is needed that specifically explores the concept of fun and the assumption that fun cultures are productive and desirable. As highlighted by Fleming (2005) the blurring of work and non-work boundaries through prescribed fun and play is under-researched and worthy of further scholarly attention. Although creating fun workplace cultures may be well-intentioned, issues of cynicism, dignity and worker resistance need to be further explored. Likewise the subtle differences as well as the similarities between the use of workplace humour and the overlapping fun concept need further investigation. Research investigating boundaries to workplace humour and fun may advance theoretical development in humour and organisational culture disciplines

and have implications for managers and their subordinates. Exploring organisational outcomes arising from fun and humour use may assist theoretical development and managerial practices. Blithely adopting the popular assumption that fun cultures are necessary managerial tools may not be as useful as exploring organisational contexts where spontaneous fun and humour can thrive and flourish.

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