

## **Taking Fun Seriously**

UK workers have a long-standing reputation for being miserable at work and much energy has been invested in trying to persuade us that work is fun if only we would recognise it as such – especially as we now spend so much time in the workplace. Research carried out as part of an ESRC funded project<sup>1</sup> discovers that this message appears to have been taken seriously, at least by some of the companies branded as the ‘Best’ in the Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work for List (2005). A workplace that earns the description as fun is a defining feature of companies who appear in the list of ‘best’ companies, with employees being asked whether ‘they laugh a lot with people in their team’ and if they ‘find their team fun to work with’. Many companies included in the Sunday Times list score highly with employees on the ‘fun’ dimension with the top 10 ‘fun’ companies, including well known businesses such as Office Angels, W.L.Gore, Beaverbrooks, HFS group and Kwik Fit, reporting between 89 and 93% of employees enjoying a laugh at work. So what are the ‘best’ companies doing to make work so hilarious? Many companies employ ‘ministers of fun’ who organise fancy dress days and team based sporting activities, others have chill out rooms, conker and ping pong tournaments or sponsor exotic trips – skiing and sailing weekends accompanied by an unlimited bar tab.

To make work this much fun must be hard work and no mean feat, especially when attempting to create joy and pleasure from what might be fundamentally low-skilled, poorly rewarded, monotonous and/ or physically and emotionally draining tasks. Take working as a call centre agent or a fast food waiter, for instance, where the days are long, the targets impossible, the customers irritating and the pay packet small. Perhaps that is the point – fun makes up for all of the harsh material realities of work for the majority of people. It is certainly recognised by management gurus as a means of creating energy, performance and commitment and many of the organised fun activities that take place in fast food outlets and call centres is performance based – open inducements for team work, rewards of holidays for the achievement of sales targets and boozy Oscar type ceremonies to award the delivery of quality customer service. And yet, organised fun is also widely advocated in more prestigious circles where the mantra for lawyers, travel consultants and IT specialists is continually muted as ‘work hard and play hard’. In these circles fun takes on a different form with more out-of-office based activities: weekend barbecues and trips to Monte Carlo and Marbella. Of course, the senior partner comes too, sometimes bringing along important clients, and it is important to be seen enjoying oneself as the boundaries between work and play melt away.

Whatever form fun might take, companies, at least, are taking fun seriously as they commit extraordinary amounts of cash to fun activities. In 2004 Hfs spent a total of £151,000 on ensuring their call centre staff had fun at work, Office Angels awarded high achieving recruitment consultants with £216,000 worth of fun activities, Yell spent a massive £713,000 encouraging field consultants to enjoy themselves on company time and Eversheds committed an unbelievable £1.3 million to social activities for their hard working solicitors and support staff.

It takes effort to spend that much money on having a good time and it is also the case that having this much fun can be gruelling. Late nights and heavy drinking are just the beginning. Skiing, white water rafting, fun runs, polo matches, and weekends dancing the night away in Ibiza, in addition to 50 team nights out a year, serve as an endurance test for even the most energetic and committed employee. But then many of the 'best' company employees are young with time and energy to spare and the company takes pride in their exciting party culture where employees report that they 'certainly know how to party'. Not surprisingly, in one particular company, 65% of employees are under 25 and 94% are under 35 when more generally 36% of the labour market are under 35 and 14% under 25. The pictures from one company's 'annual conference' resemble images of a club 18-30 holiday. And it isn't only in the routine service jobs that youth prevails. With up to 68% of the workforce in legal firms in the Sunday Times list comprising of people under 35 years old.

So, are fun cultures actually fun? The workforce of the 'best' companies certainly think so as they enthusiastically endorse their workplaces as fun places to be. And for those who are young; who are able bodied and enjoy sporting activity; who have the capacity to consume large amounts of alcohol and who can travel at weekends without renegeing on domestic commitments it can be a pleasant and productive way to work. After all, fun at work is widely recommended as a means of creating a sense of belonging and commitment to one big and happy corporate family, so why not? But like families, closely managed corporate cultures tend not to foster diversity. Companies tend to recruit in their own image and corporate profiles which emphasise the 'work hard, party hard' culture will ensure potential employees will self-exclude on the basis they just know they will not fit in. Fun is both a subjective and social experience – consuming alcohol is not everyone's idea of a good time, and to many groups even being around people who are drinking can be offensive, so how are they to attend staff meeting held in the pub? Equally, not all people want, or are able, to be sporting heroes. Even if this is your idea of fun, if you are a parent carefully balancing work and home life, weekends away and weekly party nights that intrude on precious time with your kids and partner are not going to be an attractive option. Work life balance? There isn't any in a 'fun' company and even the party animals reporting to the 'best companies to work for' survey comment that work life balance is not an issue simply because they don't have any balance – work is life.

There is little doubt that many of the 'best' companies excel in all sorts of ways that vary from company to company, but being a fun place to work seems to be a recurrent theme throughout. And of course, having fun at work is a laudable aim and hardly a new concept as many of us will have experienced close friendships at work and the benefit of having a laugh with colleagues. But our experience of laughter is more a case of humanity shared rather than an organised activity tied into performance – there is something not quite so funny about fun cultures that are only fun for a small proportion of the labour market and for those who are prepared to play by the fun loving rules of the corporate game.

\* Data utilised with the kind permission of Best Companies Ltd.

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### ***Key Reading***

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<sup>i</sup> ESRC Grant Number 000-22—1048 see Final Research report 'Dignity in and at Work' under 'Interesting Things' section