

Workplace fun is fundamental for learning on the job

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-- All work and no play may dull on-the-job learning at workplaces, according to a team of researchers.

In a study, having fun at work was significantly related to informal learning, which includes most unstructured, non-classroom forms of learning, said Michael Tews, associate professor of hospitality management. Informal learning is a common way employees pick up lessons that can improve their job performances.

"Most learning at the workplace occurs independently at the desk, or with a few other people, not necessarily in a classroom," said Tews.

He added that it may not be the fun activities themselves that instill the new lessons, but how fun creates a better learning environment. People in fun work environments are more inclined to try new things and not fear possible mistakes, for example.

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Michael Tews, associate professor of hospitality management

"You might not think there is this connection between informal learning and fun in the workplace," said Tews. "It's easier to make the connection between fun and retention, or fun and performance to the extent that it leads to creativity, but fun and learning doesn't seem connected at the face of it. The gist of this argument, though, is that when you have a workplace that is more fun, it creates a safe environment for learning to occur."

The study looked at fun activities supported by management to enhance wellbeing -- team-building activities or celebrations to recognize achievements, for example -- and the manager's overall support for fun on the job.

A manager's support for fun actually mattered more than his or her support for learning, according to the researchers, who reported their findings in the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, currently online.

"There's a lot talk in the literature about a manager's support for learning, or creating a climate for learning, and how that makes a culture for learning where workers learn from one another," said



Tews. "What we're showing is that this fun on the job actually matters as much as -- or even more -- than that support for learning."

Fun can also bring coworkers together, which, in turn aids learning between workers.

"It creates this group cohesion," said Tews. "So, when there's fun, then the co-workers may be able to get to know each other, have better connections, and be more apt to help each other."

While fun is often looked at a distraction by managers, it may improve a worker's resiliency and optimism, leading to better attention with tasks, according to Tews, who worked with John W. Michel, associate professor of business and management, Loyola University and Raymond A. Noe, professor of management and human resources, Ohio State University.

However, fun is not a cure-all for workplace productivity and learning, Tews cautioned. In earlier research, he found that fun had a favorable effect on promoting employee retention, but could cause productivity to suffer. Managers, then, should be selective in how they use fun to encourage learning and productivity.

"With most management tactics, there are always going to be pros and cons," said Tews. "There's never going to be a perfect workplace, there's never going to be a perfect management intervention, so you have to choose your battles."

The researchers recruited 206 managers from a chain of 80 casual dining restaurants. The restaurants are decentralized with limited opportunities for classroom learning and rely on informal learning opportunities to improve knowledge and skills.

Participants were asked to rate fun activities, their own bosses' support for fun, their attitude and informal learning at their restaurants.

Tews said future research is needed to validate the study's findings with other groups of employees. However, the current findings are promising to support the notion that fun has instrumental value in the workplace, he added.

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