



Does fun promote learning? The relationship between fun in the workplace and informal learning

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ABSTRACT

Although research has demonstrated that workplace fun has important benefits, we have an incomplete understanding of the role of fun in the learning domain, especially informal learning. To address this need, the present study examined the influence of fun activities and manager support for fun on informal learning among 206 managers. Fun activities were significantly related to overall informal learning, but manager support for fun was not. Examination of the dimensions of informal learning found that manager support for fun was significantly related to learning from oneself, while fun activities were significantly related to learning from others and learning from non-interpersonal sources. Furthermore, a negative interaction between core-self evaluations and fun activities in predicting learning from oneself was found, suggesting that fun may not be beneficial for all individuals. The key practical implication is that organizations should consider fun as a viable strategy to promote informal learning beyond traditional learning supports. At the same time, organizations should consider the personality of their learners to ensure fun has its intended impact.

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1. Introduction

Much has been written about fun in the workplace as an important means to engage employees and foster productive work cultures. In their book *Built to Last*, Collins and Porras (1997) found that two great companies, Marriott and Walt Disney World, have strong corporate cultures that emphasize fun. Marriott's core ideology statement is "work hard, yet keep it fun" (p. 89), and Walt Disney World's annual report contained words such as "fun, excitement, and joy" (p. 129). Moreover, a number of Fortune's *100 Best Companies to Work For*, such as The Container Store, Google, SAS, Starbucks, Wegmans, and Zappos, promote fun to enhance their workplaces (Collinson, 2002; Karl, Peluchette, Hall & Harland, 2005).

A growing body of research has shown that fun in the workplace has important consequences. For example, Karl and colleagues illustrated that fun is significantly related to job satisfaction (Karl & Peluchette, 2006; Peluchette & Karl, 2005), emotional exhaustion (Karl, Peluchette & Harland, 2007), and turnover intentions (Karl, Peluchette & Hall, 2008). Furthermore, Tews and colleagues found that fun is related to applicant attraction (Tews, Michel & Bartlett, 2012), job embeddedness (Tews, Michel, Xu & Drost, 2015), job performance (Tews, Michel & Stafford, 2013), and employee retention (Tews, Michel & Allen, 2014). In

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the learning domain, Tews, Jackson, Ramsay and Michel (2015) found that fun delivery of instruction was positively related to learner engagement.

The present study extends research on fun in the workplace by examining the impact of fun on informal learning. Informal learning typically occurs outside of the formal classroom, is not highly structured, is learner-initiated and controlled, and involves a conscious intent to engage in independent actions and interactions (Marsick, Volpe & Watkins, 1999; Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Informal learning encompasses a variety of behavior to learn new knowledge and skills, such as self-reflection, experimenting with new ways of performing work, interacting with others, and reading job relevant material (Noe, Tews & Marand, 2013). Such learning is particularly important to help individuals acquire new knowledge and skills on an ongoing basis in today's dynamic and competitive business environment. Because informal learning is largely volitional and under an individual's control, it is important to determine which features of the work environment lead to informal learning. Toward this end, research has demonstrated that a number of workplace characteristics facilitate informal learning, such as management's commitment to learning, a learning culture, access to resources, and positive work relationships (Ellinger, 2005; Berg & Chyung, 2008; Doornbos, Simons & Denessen, 2008; Kynndt, Dochy & Nijs, 2009). Notwithstanding these findings, much is yet to be learned.

The fundamental premise of this research is that fun is a key antecedent of informal learning. Given that fun may be considered recreational and non-task oriented, one may not necessarily make the link between fun and instrumental benefits, such as informal learning. As will be discussed later, several arguments can be made to support the relationship between fun and informal learning, drawing on Kahn's (1990) theory of psychological engagement. Examining the fun-informal learning relationship expands the nomological network of informal learning and provides a finer-grained analysis of how context contributes to informal learning.

Specifically, this research will examine fun activities along with manager support for fun as antecedents of informal learning. In addition, this study will assess the extent to which core self-evaluations (Judge, Locke & Durham, 1997) moderates the fun-informal learning relationship. Not all individuals may be equally receptive to fun, and individuals with greater core self-evaluations might be more receptive to a fun workplace, which in turn enhances their motivation to pursue beneficial opportunities, such as informal learning (Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen & Tan, 2012). Core self-evaluations is a high-order construct that encompasses broad evaluative traits, including self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, emotional stability, and locus of control (Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997). Furthermore, this study will examine the influence of fun on informal learning above and beyond manager support for learning, a feature of the work environment that has consistently been demonstrated to be important in training contexts (Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Tracey, Tannebaum & Kavanaugh, 1995).

2. Theoretical background and study hypotheses

The present study focuses on fun features of the work environment, which Fluegge (2008) defines as “any social, interpersonal, or task activities at work of a playful or humorous nature” (p. 15). This research focuses on two characteristics of the workplace that fall under the fun umbrella: fun activities and manager support for fun. Fun activities encompass a range of group and social endeavors promoted by a company to enhance employee enjoyment and well-being, such as social outings with coworkers, team building events, and celebrations of milestones and achievements (Ford, McLaughlin & Newstrom, 2003; Karl, Peluchette, Hall, & Harland, 2005). In turn, manager support for fun is characterized as the degree to which individuals' supervisors permit and encourage them to have fun on the job (Tews, Michel, & Allen, 2014). Fun activities and manager support for fun are similar yet distinct. Both are designed to enhance employee enjoyment, create better working relationships, and promote engagement and organizational commitment (Tews et al., 2014). Fun activities are more discrete experiences with a defined beginning and end; whereas manager support for fun is more pervasive and continuous. Not only are both dimensions of fun conceptually distinct, but previous research has demonstrated that they exhibited different relationships with employee outcomes (e.g., Tews, Michel, & Stafford, 2013, Tews et al., 2014).

The overarching framework to support these relationships is Kahn's theory of psychological engagement. In his seminal work, Kahn (1990) describes psychological engagement as “the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (p. 964). Kahn proposes three requisite psychological conditions to engage individuals in any given task: safety, availability, and meaningfulness. Safety relates to the psychological security to express one's self without negative repercussions. Availability relates to the possession of psychological and physical resources to devote toward task endeavors. Meaningfulness relates to the importance of the endeavor and the perceived return for one's investment in effort. Noe, Tews and McConnell Dachner (2010) drew on Kahn's work to describe the relevance of the conditions of engagement for learning. Safety is important as it allows people to make mistakes inherent in acquiring expertise. Availability provides energy to devote to learning, a process that requires sustained attention. Meaningfulness instills a belief that one's effort toward learning new knowledge and skills will yield benefit.

Safety is important for informal learning because inherent in learning is the risk of making mistakes and appearing incompetent. To a degree, fun fosters open communication and camaraderie. When fun is present, individuals may be less concerned with protecting their images and be more open to exploration and making mistakes. Further, fun promotes positive emotions, which may facilitate better relationships and reduce anxiety for learning. Similarly, fun helps build better relationships by putting employees in greater and more frequent contact with one another, often in a non-task context. Furthermore, fun likely creates an

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