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## **An Examination of How Playfulness Can be Used to Enhance Corporate Culture and Increase Organizational Effectiveness**

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**An Examination of How Playfulness Can be Used to  
Enhance Corporate Culture and Increase Organizational Effectiveness**

by

Freemon Wade Nixon

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
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## Abstract

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*Man only plays when in the full meaning of the word  
he is a man and he is only completely a man when he plays.*

Friedrich von Schiller

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This inquiry considers the social psychology dimension of organizational behavior by examining how play influences corporate culture. It asserts that by thoughtfully introducing playfulness into the work setting, any entity can experience a transformation that improves overall organizational effectiveness. With a current business climate characterized by economic globalization, sociopolitical upheaval, and intense competition, enterprises must rely on internal human capital to remain viable. Thus, the origins, forms, and functions of play provide a broad and diverse framework that ultimately leads to the description of such organizational play behaviors as celebrations, rituals, and ceremonies. To establish a business context for the study, the development of modern management philosophy is traced from the earliest classical school ideologies to the most contemporary integrative approaches. Managerial manipulation of play can potentially generate such undesirable consequences as corporate cultism, intellectual stagnation, or widespread cynicism if work dominates and intrudes upon employees' private lives. Conversely, the more desirable outcomes of boundless creativity, unfettered innovation, and coordinated teamwork have a higher probability of flourishing when structural rigidity is loosened with the introduction of play into the workplace. In the latter scenario, companies can reap the tangible benefits of improved profitability, longer employee retention, and increased sales. The findings of this descriptive review strongly suggest that organizations can become more adaptive and responsive to constantly shifting marketplace demands when their corporate culture is enhanced and strengthened through the integration of work and play.

An Examination of How Playfulness Can be Used to  
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*The supreme accomplishment is to blur the line between work and play.*

Arnold Toynbee

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For centuries, conventional wisdom has positioned work and play at opposing ends of the human experience. While sometimes viewed as pure drudgery, work has nonetheless been stereotypically portrayed as a virtuous, dutiful activity exercised by responsible adults.

Although there were numerous influences, the Protestant Reformation provided an ideological foundation for modern industrial society by distinguishing self-discipline and systemic work as a profound moral obligation (Parker, 1971). Play, on the other hand, has generally been depicted as a frivolous and indulgent pastime relegated primarily to children. Gulick (1920) observes, “It [play] is frequently contrasted with work and held to cover a series of activities which are highly enjoyable, but quite without utility or seriousness.”

Even for those philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and others who have considered work and play to be more complex and vital human behaviors that transcend superficial boundaries, exploring associations between the two elements were rare.

Psychologist William MacDougall’s observations in 1919 were atypical: “The motives of play are various...and cannot be characterized by a brief formula; nor can any hard and fast line be drawn between work and play” (cited in Cohen, 1987). Mitchell and Mason (1948) describes a more prevalent assumption among the general public and researchers alike: play is the “antithesis of work” and “an impassable barrier separates the two” (p.105). Therefore, while it was appropriate for humans to labor in the workplace and frolic on the playground, the actions and environments remained segregated from one another until a few proponents

of contemporary organizational behavior theory began to challenge old notions and establish new connections.

An interesting phenomenon occurred as organizational behavior evolved into a more widely accepted and serious research and teaching discipline in the late 1950s and early 1960s (“Conversation,” 1990). Since this interdisciplinary field synthesizes such diverse areas as psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, and even engineering, a broader construct could be used to examine the individual-organization interface. For example, psychology assists in explaining individual behavior, sociology studies social systems, and anthropology is concerned with interactions between humans and their cultural environment. Subsequently, contributions from the separate disciplines coalesce to support the premise of a basic organizational behavior model comprised of individual, group, and system level components that can be analyzed for the purpose of improving overall organizational effectiveness (Robbins, 1998).

Because organizational behavior is an amalgam of several dissimilar areas of study, the nature of relationships between seemingly paradoxical and contradictory themes (e.g., work and play) can be freely investigated and described. Due to the complexities inherent in studying human behavior, however, the theories and concepts that have emerged from the field cannot predict with certainty the effect of modifying a particular set of workplace variables (Moorhead & Griffin, 2004). Nonetheless, scrutinizing the research can lead to intriguing conclusions about how certain variables tend to influence one another in disparate organizational settings. Ideally, through a systematic approach, the general strength of the relationships can be assessed as well. Although the art and science of organizational behavior is still in its infancy, managers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have become increasingly

dependent on research in the field for guidance. The powerful and far-reaching environmental forces of economic globalization, sociopolitical upheaval, and intense competition are driving the quest for answers. In order to cope in an unpredictable and often chaotic business climate, organizational leaders must develop greater perceptive insights, extraordinary perseverance, refined analytical skills, and prodigious interpersonal abilities. Furthermore, the more turbulent, ambiguous, and out of control the world becomes, the more the growth and learning process will have to be shared by all the members of the social unit struggling to enlighten itself. As a result, Crawford (1991) observes that organizations are emphasizing human capital (i.e., employee knowledge, education, training, skills, and expertise) more than ever before. To be more precise, previously overlooked workplace relationships are being given serious consideration. If the new linkages prove to be valid, stronger leader/employee partnerships will be forged and greater internal stability can be achieved.

While the field of organizational behavior is expanding, explicit data is limited in the area of so-called corporate play and this deficit prompted my interest in the topic. The idea of integrating playfulness directly into the workplace adds a fresh dimension to the study of behavioral processes. Therefore, the purpose of this project was to investigate the social psychology dimension of organizational behavior by examining how playfulness might enhance corporate culture. More specifically, I asserted that by thoughtfully introducing play into the work environment, the culture of any organization can be transformed in a way that boosts spirits, builds loyalty, encourages innovation, stimulates creativity, and ultimately improves overall organizational effectiveness. In other words, by filling the workplace with a little fun, people are being given permission to move outside formal boundaries. Once



liberated from an endless stream of caustic mandates and repressive rhetoric that still plague many information age companies, individual expression might begin to blossom. If human potential inside the organization is more fully realized, the more impervious that entity may become to the swirl of external factors that threaten its existence.

To support my claim, I will: (1) develop a broad theoretical framework by using historical references to work and play and tracing the evolution of organizational behavior; (2) define play in general terms and provide explanations of why both animals and humans exhibit playful behaviors; (3) examine the diversity of play forms and their links to creativity and innovation; (4) analyze the interrelationship between organizational culture and various types of play activities; (5) discuss the ramifications of playful environments and identify obstacles to integrating play into the workplace; (6) consider the tangible and intangible benefits associated with the blending of work and play; (7) present the basic precepts for establishing and sustaining a playful organizational culture. Throughout the paper, I will compare and contrast the separate elements to determine if any conclusions can be reached that indicate play can be an essential ingredient in creating a vibrant work environment.

### Origins of Work and Play

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*It is not enough to be busy...the question is what are you busy about?*

Henry Thoreau

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### Historical References

From a historical perspective, acknowledging the intrinsic rewards associated with doing a good job has been relatively recent development (Lipset, 1990). Throughout human history, work has been harsh and degrading in most cultures. While the people from the earliest agrarian societies experienced days filled with somewhat varied individual activities,

life generally followed a predetermined pattern in which work and non-work were inextricably confused. Wax (1958) remarks on this fusion of work and play: “I do not believe that any Bushman could tell us – or would be interested in telling us – which part of [his] activity was work and which was play” (p. 4). Because cooperative work was required for survival, a smattering of playfulness such as communal singing lightened the strain. Though there were these brief moments of relative enjoyment, the idea of time being set aside for this sole purpose was unfamiliar. Adult play occurred outside the scope of the workday almost exclusively in the restrictive form of serious ceremonial ritual.

To the ancient Greeks, a society where slaves endured harsh physical labor, work was a curse; it brutalized the mind and was an evil that the visionary elite should avoid (Maywood, 1982). Agriculture was grudgingly accepted as a worthy endeavor because it brought independence, but free artisans and craftsmen were scorned as hardly better than slaves (Parker, 1971). Tilgher (1930/1977) highlights the extent to which the culture debased manual labor by noting that the Greek word for work was *ponos*, taken from the Latin *poena*, which means sorrow. For Greek philosophers like Plato and his pupil Aristotle, freedom from work allowed time for contemplation: an activity they considered to be divine (De Grazia, 1962). Of the primary Greek philosophers, Aristotle was the one who most often used the word *scholē* (halt or cease) when referring to what he called leisure (Parker, 1971). Play and leisure were defined as totally separate activities, however. While the pursuit of leisure (contemplation) could lead to true happiness for the intellectual, adult play belonged to the workers and simply served as temporary relief from exertion and tension. Greek games of athleticism were actually intense competitions built around strict rules – the spontaneity usually associated with play in modern times was conspicuously absent.

The Romans adopted much of their belief system from Greek culture and also held manual labor in low regard (Lipset, 1990). The Romans were industrious, however, and demonstrated particular competence in organization, administration, construction, and warfare. Although the brutal institution of slavery had played a vital role in the ancient world prior to the Roman Empire, the Romans used slaves more widely as compared to the Greeks (Anthony, 1977). Two occupations, agriculture and big business, were suitable for a free man because they would allow a Roman to retire as a country gentleman (Maywood, 1982). From the viewpoint of contemporary observers, respect for workers upon which the economic structure of a nation and society rested would have been logical for the Greeks and the Romans. Unfortunately, no consideration was evident. Archeologists have unearthed artifacts such as toy soldiers that clearly demonstrate Roman children played. Like the Greeks, however, adult contests of skill were not benign play activities. In fact, Roman gladiatorial games often led to the loser's death.

It was not until the Renaissance period of the fifteenth century that a new attitude toward work and play began to emerge. It was admiration and respect for the craft of the sculptor, painter, architect, and scientist that changed collective opinions. Since their work required that hands touch materials, the ancient world's contempt for this type of labor began to slowly melt away. Creative work could be a joy in itself. In a time dominated by humanism and artistic expression, a playful spirit emerged. Huizinga (1950/1955) refers to the *Zeitgeist* of the Renaissance period as a combination of sophistication and spontaneity. When considering the works of artistic visionaries like Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo, a distinction between play and frivolity emerges (Lieberman, 1977). Playfulness characterized by unrestrained creativity that is disciplined in its execution contrasts sharply with frivolous

and purposeless self-indulgence. Huizinga (1950/1955) regards the former type of play spirit as civilizing and unmistakably associated with adult behavior.

The most revolutionary ideas and sweeping changes affecting work and play, however, were set into motion during the sixteenth century by a period of religious and political upheaval in Western Europe called the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation moved beyond the aesthetic endeavors of the Renaissance and restored dignity to all types of labor. It also resolutely established play as the antithesis of work. The two most influential religious figures shaping the new mindset about work during this era were Martin Luther and John Calvin. In Luther's teachings, people could serve God through their work, professions were useful, and work was the universal base of society. While Luther believed that each person should earn an income, accumulation beyond that which met basic needs was sinful. He denounced the contemplative life of some religious leaders as egotistical (Tilgher, 1930/1977). Since Luther disapproved of a true profit-oriented system, he did not advance the concept of a capitalistic free enterprise system (Lipset, 1990; Tilgher, 1930/1977).

According to Weber (1904/1905), John Calvin drew inspiration from Luther's philosophy and then promulgated his own theological doctrine that molded a significant, pervasive, and novel attitude toward work. Calvin's religious beliefs led him to the conclusion that those whose daily life was characterized by activeness, austerity, and hard work were more likely to reap God's blessings (Tilgher, 1930/1977). Conversely, idleness and indifference were decidedly damned. It was the duty of all men to serve as God's instruments here on earth in order to reshape the world in a way in which God had originally intended (Braude, 1975). Therefore, like Martin Luther's followers, Calvinists considered

work a religious obligation. But in contrast to Luther, profits were not an evil as long as they were reinvested into financing activities consistent with religious teachings.

Encouraging the pursuit of unlimited profits by choosing a profession that would provide the greatest earnings possible was a radical departure from the beliefs of previous eras. Since each person must demonstrate their loyalty to God solely through their labors, Calvin boldly proclaimed that helping others to rise from a lesser level of subsistence violated God's will. As a host of vocations became more rooted in the culture, the Protestant work ethic was born. With the rapid spread of a theology that ordained the divine dignity of *all* job roles and heralded occupational choice, the underpinnings of an emerging capitalist economic system were established. Adult play during this period was not valued nor viewed as a topic for debate except for an occasional lambaste. In other words, the concept of a Protestant *play ethic* was nonexistent. Weber (1904/1905) used the eighteenth century writings of Benjamin Franklin to underscore how diligence in work, scrupulous use of time, and deferment of pleasure had become the dominant labor philosophy in the Western world. Although work in pre-industrial America was not continuous, primarily due to the ebb and flow of seasonal demands, leisure time was certainly not prevalent.

While America obsessed about the merits of hard work in the 1700s, the French philosopher Rousseau was perhaps the first person to make a case for the importance of play from an educational standpoint in *Emile*. According to Rousseau, what a child learns is acquired by the spontaneous activities of play like a romp through the woods and fields (Cohen, 1987). Play was seen as unleashing the intellectual potential of children. Rousseau tempers his position slightly by advocating that children should be encouraged to play together. Historically and philosophically, Rousseau inspired educational reformers like

Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Montessori to develop their own educational models (Cohen, 1987). Once again, however, adult play was excluded while children's play became the inspiration and emphasis for these writers.

Even though he has garnered less attention, a mid-eighteenth century German philosopher and dramatist named Friedrich von Schiller offered some intriguing contributions to play research. While Rousseau believed man was born free but soon shackled by social constraints, Schiller proposed a way to loosen those repressive chains. Through play, Schiller said, 'reality loses its seriousness' (cited in Cohen, 1987). If there was enough economic progress to free humans from the slavery of feeding, clothing, and housing themselves, play could then make everyone whole. Through an aesthetic lens, Schiller saw play as being closely linked to beauty – a transforming force that could balance the opposing impulses of reason and sensuousness. He also believed that play, creativity, and imagination could conquer the tyranny of time through its enrapturing qualities. Contrary to Puritan ideals, play would not lead to chaos or self-indulgence; it would be a medium by which humans could become more fulfilled. Schiller's theory was radical and not widely understood. Despite the temporary setbacks yet to come, the concept of play as a more serious topic for inquiry and discussion had arrived.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the industrial revolution, with its ceaseless regularity of machine driven labor, had dramatically secularized work in America. The idea of work as a *calling* had been replaced by the concept of public usefulness. Economists warned of the poverty and decay that would befall the country if people failed to work hard while moralists stressed the social duty of each person to be productive (Rodgers, 1987). This environment also provided a sociological, as well as ideological, explanation for the origins of social

hierarchy through the proposition that effort expended in work would be rewarded (Gilbert, 1977). As the industrial revolution hit full throttle, however, machines dictated intensive division of labor and rigorously monitored the quantity produced. In doing so, the notion that an individual could be the master of his own fate through hard work and individual influence was slipping away. In the factories, skill and craftsmanship were replaced by discipline and anonymity. Feelings of emptiness and fatalism grew out this sense of lack of control over one's destiny.

In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, Karl Marx railed against capitalistic societies driven by an insatiable appetite for power, money, and production that oppress and alienate laborers. Marx argued that a dehumanizing work ethic estranges man from his true nature: a being striving to reach his fullest creative potential by pursuing an intrinsically satisfying occupation. Despite criticism from Marx and others, little was done in democratic societies during the period to encourage originality or promote job satisfaction – people were dispensable. Ironically, as the nineteenth century drew to a close and adults were increasingly treated like robots, the purpose and function of play in children was becoming a popular topic of interest. An adult-oriented work philosophy dominated by rules and structure stood in stark contrast with an increasing preoccupation to examine the freedom and spontaneity of child behavior.

If researchers had been more observant, at least one pre-industrial society would have provided a badly needed example of how to successfully balance work and play. Although the model is not perfect because the two human activities remain independent from one another, the Baluchi tribal sect that inhabits isolated portions of modern day Iran and Pakistan offers a fascinating interpretation of the realm of duty or obligation necessary for

life in civil society and an area that they call the sphere of one's own (Wax, 1958, pp. 9-10). They regard the latter as being a domain of freedom and a buffer from the distractions of the workaday world. When compared with the Western (Protestant) definition of work as the foundation of existence, the Baluchi invert the emphasis. For them, their private world is the cherished area: the one in which they invest their energy, creativity, and ingenuity. Unfortunately, decades would pass until theorists would take a serious look at the type of humanistic issues (Baluchi values) that could potentially have positive workplace implications.

### Modern Challenges

Just as the people of the mid-nineteenth century encountered tremendous cultural and social changes with the dawn of the industrial age, the people of the late twentieth century experienced astonishing cultural and social shifts with the advent of the information age. Toffler (1980) proposed that the widespread use of the personal computer gave rise to a new kind individualistic civilization instead of the old industrial age mass society. His prognostication was correct. While the industrial age promoted uniformity and mass production, the new order is characterized by diversity and customization. Industrial age jobs typically required little decision-making because they had been analyzed and broken down into simple tasks that demanded little judgment or imagination. In contrast, most information age jobs require considerable discretion and more creative decision-making (Miller, 1986).

Yankelovich and Harmon (1988) reported that a significant revision in the meaning of the work ethic itself occurred as people started to search for self-fulfillment in their careers. A workplace model that stressed autonomy, recognition, creativity, and innovation was



slowly replacing the historical depiction that all work was associated with drudgery, anonymity, oppression, and conformity. If this perspective is to solidify itself, however, motivation to work must also involve trust, caring, meaning, self-knowledge, challenge, personal growth, and dignity (Maccoby, 1988; Walton, 1974). While the Protestant work ethic remains a force in Western society today, transforming it into a state of relevance not found in industrial age occupations is more congruent with the modern conception of work. In order for this constructive change to occur, however, the workplace socialization process that either confirms or contradicts the worker's desire for meaning will have to be gently and thoughtfully molded by organizational behavior specialists.

At the heart of this research lies the contention that the introduction of the playfulness into the ongoing workplace socialization process can have a positive impact that will lead to greater job satisfaction for the individual and improved performance for the organization as a whole. Tracing the origins of work and play highlights four significant points concerning this study: (1) workers' needs were generally ignored, (2) references to adult play were rare, (3) the integration of play into the workplace was nonexistent, and (4) dramatic changes in the modern work environment beg for new paradigms. Reviewing the evolution of management theory and reflecting upon how various philosophies can address contemporary workplace issues brings the last item into sharper focus.

### Foundations of Management

The origins of organizational behavior began as a branch of basic management theory. Since my thesis relies upon organizational behavior research to explain certain workplace interactions, a brief history of management is merited to establish a reference point from which to build my case. The *Bible*, Egyptian tomb paintings, and Babylonian clay

tablets provide a record of how early civilizations managed their affairs. Management concepts and practices appeared in the writings of Aristotle and Plato as well. As discussed in the previous section, the roots of modern management originated with the Industrial Revolution – a time when machines replaced human labor to a large extent. Writing of the new managerial skills required of successful industrialists, economic historian P.L. Payne observed, “In many cases, better organizations [those with insightful leaders] contributed almost as much to increased production as the use of the machines themselves” (cited in Plunkett, Attner, & Allen, 2002).

With focus on the constant flow of labor and materials to meet the demands of mass production, the classical/scientific school advocates promoted a rigid organizational structure, strict adherence to the chain of command, a formal hierarchy for coordination, extensive rules, and narrowly defined job functions (Taylor, 1911; Weber, 1920/1947; Fayol, 1916/1949). Close supervision was the primary motivational tool and efficiency the main priority. While Frederick W. Taylor has become known as the “father of scientific management” because his detailed shop-floor methods led to dramatic increases in productivity, Frank and Lillian Gilbreth were likely his most prominent followers. For instance, the husband and wife team developed a way to systematically dissect job duties through time and motion studies (Claude, 1972). To reduce wasted motion in performing tasks, they suggested, “The hands should begin and complete their motions at the same time” and “The two hands should not be idle at the same time except during rest period” (Hopeman, 1965, pp. 478-85). Finding the “one best way” to perform and manage production responsibilities was at the forefront of the classic/scientific school movement while human issues lagged far behind, if considered at all.

Although most classicists viewed workers as cogs in the machinery of industrialization, remarkable societal changes were set into motion by the early 1900s. Job functions became more sophisticated and interdependent, the government involved itself in economic matters, and social reformers encouraged unionism and promoted fair wages. According to Wren (1994), it was from these cultural developments that the behavioral school of management theory emerged. The behavioral approach considered how human factors relate to organizational responsiveness. The focus of the research and the findings themselves were significantly different from established classical school ideology.

One of the earliest behavioral contributors, Mary Parker Follett, believed that administrators at all levels should be more democratic in their dealings with employees and considered the concept of management as a flowing, self-renewing process (Hellriegel, Jackson, & Slocum, Jr., 2005). By observing managers on the job, she concluded that coordination between supervisors and workers was essential to successful operations and that the people closest to the action could make the best decisions. Drawing from both psychological and sociological theories, Follett urged managers to recognize that each person is a collection of beliefs, emotions, and feelings (Hellriegel, Jackson, & Slocum, Jr., 2005).

Hugo Munsterberg was a researcher of the same era who was also interested in how human factors contribute to an organization's success. To describe the scientific study of people at work, he coined the term industrial psychology (Robbins & Coulter, 2005). Of his many curiosities, he looked at problems with monotony, attention and fatigue, and social influences at work. Most relevant to this inquiry, he suggested applying learning theory concepts to employee training and motivation.

A seminal field study conducted between 1927 and 1932 at Western Electric's Hawthorne plant near Chicago that involved Harvard professor Elton Mayo and two colleagues provided additional insight into the dynamics of group pressure, acceptance, and security. In their writings, the Mayo team found that the informal work group develops its own set of norms to satisfy the needs of individuals in the work setting. They recommended that managers consider the worker in a personal context (e.g., family situation, friendships, and membership in groups) in order to understand each employee's unique needs and sources of satisfaction (Mayo, 1933). While several experiments were conducted with groups of workers at this facility, all supported the overall conclusion that individual and social processes within a workplace setting were too important to ignore.

Chester Barnard was another pioneer of the behavioral approach. In *The Functions of the Executive* published in 1938, he considered organizations as social systems that require employee cooperation if they are to be effective (cited in Hellriegel, Jackson, & Slocum, Jr., 2005). According to Barnard, communicating with employees and motivating them to work hard to help achieve organizational goals should be the two primary goals of a good manager. He also thought that administrators must examine the organization's external environment and adjust its internal structure to balance the two. Barnard's early ideas about open systems that dynamically interact with their environment to achieve congruency correlates closely with the suppositions of this study.

The contributions of the Follett, Munsterberg, Mayo, and Barnard were separate and distinct, yet all believed that people were the most important asset of the organization and should be dealt with accordingly (Robbins & Coulter, 2005). As news of the behavioral school spread in the decades that followed, a host of like-minded researchers contributed

their own ideas to a management philosophy that promoted a loose organizational structure, a flexible chain of command, an informal hierarchy supported work groups, relaxed rules, and broader job responsibilities (Maslow, 1943; McGregor, 1960; Likert 1961; Argyris, 1964).

Job enrichment theories, spawned from the burgeoning field of organizational behavior in the late 1950s, substantially influenced and brazenly challenged traditional employer-employee relationships. Several researchers identified factors such as achievement, recognition, responsibility, advancement, and personal expression that, when provided as an intrinsic component of a job, tended to motivate workers to perform better and increase job satisfaction (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959). Contrary to the classical school mentality, motivation was achieved by allowing employees greater control over their work environment and increased participation in the decision-making process.

### Integrative Approaches

Ideological remnants from the classical/scientific and the behavioral schools still exist in organizations today. In fact, information collected from even the earliest studies can play an integral role in a comprehensive management strategy if individual companies selectively choose methods tailored to their particular needs. However, more contemporary branches of management offer novel and compelling paradigms that should be examined more closely. Three so-called integrative perspectives seem to accurately represent the philosophies that influence the majority of 21<sup>st</sup> century writings about organizational behavior: (1) the systems approach, (2) contingency theory, and (3) the interactional view.

The systems approach identifies each entity (e.g., city, company, person, etc.) as a set of interrelated elements (subsystems) that function as a whole. According to this perspective, an organizational system receives these inputs: material, financial, human, and informational.

These inputs are transformed into outputs such as products/services, profits/losses, employee behaviors, and new ideas through the use of technology and various other organizational processes. Then the system receives feedback from the environment regarding the outputs. This unified approach encourages managers to view their organizations holistically – “to envision workers, groups, and tasks as interrelated parts of an organic whole” (Plunkett, Attner, & Allen, 2002). Conceptualizing the flow and interaction of various organizational elements will hopefully lead to synergy: increased effectiveness resulting from a cooperative effort.

Contingency theory results from the realization that the complexities of human behavior and dissimilarities of organizational settings rarely lead to a “one best way” or universal approach described in classical management school writings. Proponents discovered that within organizations, most situations and outcomes are contingent. In other words, the relationship between any two variables is likely to be dependant on the influences of other variables as well (Moorhead & Griffin, 2004). Managers who adopt the contingency view feel free to draw upon all past theories in attempting to analyze and solve problems. It is the ultimate “it all depends” device. In many ways the contingency approach is intuitively logical because organizations are diverse – in size, goals, tasks, functions, workforce, etc.

After analyzing several English industrial firms, contingency adherents Burns and Stalker (1961) expanded the theory beyond daily decision-making and into the realm of overall organizational design by first describing what they called “mechanistic” and “organic” structures. A mechanistic organization is characterized by close adherence to an established chain of command, highly specialized jobs, and vertical communications. By comparison, the organic organization allows for flexible lines of authority, less specialized

jobs, and lateral interactions and communications. Traditionally, the military has been cited as a typical example of a mechanistic structure while the computer industry has been the poster child for organic design. Since organic structures allow organizations to be more flexible, creative, and responsive, more companies are considering the feasibility of making organic modifications in an effort to successfully cope during unpredictable economic periods. For the purposes of this research, contingency theory is helpful because it encourages managers to reexamine decisions on a regular basis and become more experimental in the workplace.

Finally, interactionalism draws from the field of psychology by attempting to explain how people select, interpret, and modify various situations (Terborg, 1981; Turban & Keon, 1993). Continuous interaction between the individual and the situation determines the individual's behavior. This approach contends that simple cause and effect descriptions of organizational phenomena are not enough. For instance, when people join an organization, their own behaviors and actions shape that organization in a multitude of ways. Similarly, the organization itself shapes the behaviors and actions of each individual who becomes part of it. However, this melding together of the individual with the organization is difficult to analyze comprehensively because the process is ongoing and the behavioral variables are not straightforward. It is a multidirectional view that is still somewhat untested but has numerous ramifications for this research due to the ongoing challenges (e.g., globalization, workplace diversity, societal changes, etc.) of modern organizations.

### Current Business Environment

Since the mid-1980s, the conventional organizational norms relied upon in the past to guide the actions of leaders have been as shifting sands in a vast and treacherous desert. An

intimidating environment, shaped by a host of demographic, scientific, socioeconomic, and geopolitical factors, has emerged to make navigation difficult and forward movement incremental at best. Just as a company forms a recognizable footprint that appears to point toward a theoretically familiar and reassuring oasis, the winds of change reduce the marker to a faint memory. As Václav Havel observed in an Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times* (1994) concerning globalization, “it is as if something were crumbling, decaying, and exhausting itself, while something else, still indistinct, were arising from the rubble.” While some organizations reinvent themselves and ultimately flourish in such a harsh and unpredictable business climate, others falter and perish. The difference between the successful and the unsuccessful rests in a firm’s ability to adapt effectively to constant chaos. To survive in such an environment, modern management writers have offered their personal observations and professional recommendations.

According to organizational sociologist Jean Lipman-Blumen (1996), we live in an era characterized by two contradictory forces, “*interdependence* and *diversity*” (p.3), that pull in opposite directions. While diversity is leading nations, organizations, and individuals to evoke isolation, separatism, and self-reliance, interdependence pushes these same entities toward collaboration, mutuality, and universalism. These circumstances challenge both leaders and followers to “transform themselves into active and responsible constituents.... and engage in a radically different leadership dynamic” (Lipman-Blumen, 1996, p.16). She warns that spectatorship must be abandoned. Most writers, including Lipman-Blumen, implore organizations to focus their energies on becoming more agile and adaptable.

From a wide-ranging perspective, Kantor (1989) studied larger corporations like 3M, AT&T, Ford, etc. and determined that fewer management levels allowed firms to be more



flexible. In addition, Peters and Waterman studied eight “excellent companies” and concluded that one reason that they were exemplary was because managers stressed “operational autonomy to encourage entrepreneurship” (cited in Pierce and Nestrom, 2000, p. 45). In other words, leaders must persuade employees to adopt the organization’s core beliefs so they can become empowered – a characteristic that allows for rapid decision-making. However, Schein (1992) warns that values cannot be imposed upon people: “Every group must learn how to become a group” (p. 92) before original and constructive ideas can emerge.

Several management theorists think that in today’s intensely competitive environment, “intelligent enterprises” or “learning organizations” are the best positioned to achieve their goals. Quinn (1992) studied intelligent enterprises (those that rely heavily on intellectual resources such as IBM) and concluded that these companies must ensure that ideas flow quickly among employees to take maximum advantage of the internal human capital. Similarly, Senge (1994) argues for creating the “learning organization” where “people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, [and] collective aspiration is set free” (p. 3). He contends that five components provide the vital ingredients to allow organizations to truly learn: “systems thinking”, “personal mastery”, “mental models”, “building shared vision”, and “team learning” (Senge, 1994, pp. 6-9). Essentially, he is concerned with establishing and maintaining the connections that foster individual learning and organizational learning.

To become more adaptable, part of a manager’s responsibility is to create learning opportunities throughout the organization – from the lowest level to the highest level in all disciplines. Most experts agree that understanding the value of knowledge, like any other

resource, is an important step in this ongoing process of information sharing. Beyond recognition, leaders must deliberately cultivate that base of knowledge. Knowledge management involves nurturing a supportive culture where organizational members systematically gather knowledge and share it with others in the organization to achieve better performance (Hansen, Nohria, & Tierney, 1999; Brown & Duguid, 2000).

To summarize, all of the highly respected and experienced management gurus mentioned in this section emphasize the necessity for an individual to find refuge from the unpredictable world in a place where new ideas can flourish. Therefore, the introduction of playfulness into the workplace may be one way to create a less constraining and more insulated environment that will encourage creative and innovative thought. This notion is consistent with the most modern integrated management approaches by combining the interdependence of the systems approach, the experimentation of contingency theory, and behavioralism of the interactionist perspective. Defining play and examining both animal and human play behaviors now becomes the focus of the research.

#### Explanations of Play

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*When play is suppressed, both the individual and society suffer.  
When play is encouraged, both benefit. The reasons are not clear,  
but somehow play is essential for man and many other social animals.*

Editorial in *Natural History*

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#### Descriptions of Animal and Human Play

Identifiable by laypersons and professionals alike, both animals and humans display a range of play behavior. Humans can easily detect playfulness in chimps, dogs, cats, whales, and other members of the animal kingdom. Conversely, these non-humans can likely recognize playful responses in man as well. Therefore, despite the human focus of this study,

animal play behavior becomes an element for consideration because much of our current knowledge originates from observations of these non-humans. Researchers have studied animals at play from the time of naturalist Charles Darwin's discoveries in the nineteenth century and the scientific literature strongly indicates that the lower the species on the evolutionary scale, the less frequent and varied are play activities. Considering this biological hierarchy, man then becomes the ultimate player.

Early investigations dealt with animal play solely from a survival perspective where instinct served as the driving force for play behavior (James, 1918; Woodworth 1921; McDougall 1923). However, later research dispelled those assumptions and offered a more comprehensive view. The writings of zoologist Karl Groos illustrate how the advancement of a more multi-faceted perspective of play emerged as time passed. For example, Groos (1896/1898) first proposed that most animals practice their survival skills at an early age through play behavior as preparation for adulthood. However, in a follow-up work dealing more with humans, Groos (1901/1916) stressed that there are psychological, as well as biological aspects of play that move past the survival instinct alone. Norbeck (1971) concurs with Groos' analysis by offering a reminder that if we accept the idea of natural selection from an evolutionary standpoint, then finding survival value in human play becomes problematic. In other words, there are likely intrinsic benefits related to human play unrelated to the continued existence of the species.

In particular, the study of play in mammals and primates has become increasingly fascinating to researchers for reasons other than strictly a means of rescuing them from extinction. For example, Suomi and Harlow (1971) determined that the play behavior of young monkeys served as a generalized predictor of their future social capability and status.

Through extrapolation, they hypothesized that human play provides a behavioral mechanism by which activities appropriate for adult functioning can be initiated, integrated, and perfected as well. Interestingly, certain forms of play behavior seem to be so deeply rooted in higher animals (e.g., domesticated animals) that they cross species, genera, families, and orders (Norbeck, 1974).

According to Robert Fagen (1981), a wildlife biologist at the University of Alaska, play teaches animals many things: socializing in groups, traversing terrain, mastering their own bodies, anticipating mating patterns, dominance behaviors, and hunting techniques. While adult animals may not need as much play as the young, their play keeps them behaviorally flexible. Through play, adult animals can deal more successfully with challenges and change. They can also better relate to their young and to their mates. Therefore, one of the primary lessons to be learned from both wild and domesticated animals is an increased understanding of the external environment – knowledge not reserved exclusively for the developmental stages of childhood. Just as animals can become more adaptable through play, it is logical to conclude that playfulness may allow human beings to be more responsive to a myriad of life's issues (e.g., work, family, etc.) as well.

### Definitions of Play

In order for the interface between writer, reader, and ideas to move forward in this study, the primary theme needs to be examined more closely and defined more clearly. Because of the ubiquitous nature of play behavior, I expected an explanation to be simple and concise. I couldn't have been more mistaken. Often, play is seen merely as *all* behavior that is outside the realm of work – a broad spectrum to be sure. In the English language as either a noun or verb, the word play generally refers to any activity that is usually pleasant and

voluntary (Webster's II Dictionary, 1996). Over time, several researchers have also portrayed play in a similar way: a voluntary behavior that may be motivated exclusively by the activity itself (Dewey, 1934; Patrick, 1916). Spearshott agreed that play could be an end in itself, but added that it can exist in both spontaneous occurrences and patterned forms (cited in Neumann, 1971). Lazarus focused on the unrestrained nature of play by stating that it is free, aimless, or diverting (cited in Sapora & Mitchell, 1961). Groos (1901/1916) included the attributes of curiosity and illusion to the description of play while Berlyne (1968) demonstrated that play involves novelty, surprise, and complexity. Although these explanations offer a superficial glimpse of play, they fail to name the participants of this type of behavior and provide few additional details about its makeup.

In common usage when people characterize certain types of behavior as “just play”, it implies the actions are trivial, fruitless, and reserved for the young. While some people dismiss the importance of adult play and a few reject the concept outright, most modern day observers, essayists, and researchers contend that that playfulness extends throughout one's lifetime even though the types and purposes of various activities may change. For instance, Erikson contrasts child and adult play by stating, “The playing adult steps sideward into another reality, while the playing child moves forward toward new stages of mastery” (cited in Reilly, 1974, p. 73). In *Homo Ludens* (playing man), Huizinga (1950/1955) concurs with Erikson by describing adult play is an absorbing and intense activity existing outside the bounds of “ordinary” life.

The widespread prevalence of play in human beings suggests that it is an important behavior to label; yet some writers view it as indefinable. For example, Reilly (1974) warns, “Its relationship [to human existence] is speculative primarily because it eludes

classification” (p. 58). Spearshott contends that clarity in the definition of play depends upon the context in which it is used (cited in Neumann, 1971). As evidenced by these statements, some researchers believe that the traditional process of precisely defining a human activity like play is counter-productive because the behavior does not fit neatly into just one category. Hutt affirms that the “sheer heterogeneity of numerous activities that can be broken down for study seems to preclude the possibility of arriving at general principles predicting the nature, occurrence, and setting of all these [play] behaviors” (cited in Ellis, 1973, p. 15). Spariosu (1989) illustrates the ambiguity of play by calling it “amphibolous,” which means it goes in two directions at one time and is not clear. To toss another variable into the mix, especially as it relates to this study, play is no longer considered to be completely distinct from non-play or work. There can be many settings where play of the individual or group serves some productive function. In other words, work and play are not diametrically opposed to each other as conventional knowledge suggests, but often overlap where the differences are indistinguishable (Mitchell & Mason, 1948; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975).

Notwithstanding centuries of exposition and rhetoric on the subject of play, a concrete description remains beyond reach. Millar (1968) proposes a solution to the definitional dilemma, “Perhaps play is best used as an adverb; not as a name of a class of activities, not as distinguishable by the accompanying mood, but to describe how and under what conditions an action is performed” (p. 21). Csikszentmihalyi (1975) agrees that a particular type of conduct does not predict or limit the occurrence of play. By applying these expanded explanations, behaviors are subsequently identified not as play, but as playful. In doing so, the problems inherent in partitioning play from work are eliminated and the lesser difficulty of discriminating playful from non-playful activities is left to be reconciled.

To conclude, there exists a choice for defining play. We can insist on forcing it to become the conceptual opposite of work, or we can face the complexity of the issue. If we adopt the latter and most plausible position, a behavior may have many motives that are not mutually exclusive and an adequate description must recognize and acknowledge this characterization. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) and others write that play involves physiological, experiential, and cultural components. It seems that pure play, probably only a theoretic possibility, can only occur when all extrinsic consequences are eliminated and the behavior is driven entirely by intrinsic factors (Ellis, 1973). Ergo, play and work lie on a continuum. These final conceptualizations that distort the line between play and work by distinguishing between playful and non-playful activities are consistent with the objectives of this study and offer a measure of clarification. However, I must concede that play remains a malleable term whose definition is still not totally satisfying.

#### Theories and Interpretations of Play

Although definitions can be helpful, they often serve as the building blocks for more complex theories. In developing a premise, researchers attempt to classify and systematically arrange events by cause and effect and try to simplify a bewildering world by bringing order to the confusion. In this process, they present theories as a set of interrelated concepts, definitions, and propositions to explain and predict a particular phenomenon (Kerlinger, 1986). Depending on the topic, theoretical constructs can be insightful, illuminating, and comprehensive and at other times the suppositions are illogical, vague, and limiting. Because they provide more than meager phrases, I was hopeful that the scores of studies addressing play would clear away the definitional haze. Unfortunately, as with the definitions, I discovered an abundance of contradiction and convolution when comparing a host of play

theories. Since explaining the nature of play has intrigued mankind for centuries, there is a voluminous amount of data on the subject. However, a universal affirmation has yet to fully materialize.

Ragheb notes (cited in Ellis, 1973) that while there are biological, anthropological, sociological, and psychological interpretations of human play, theorists have typically formulated their explanations based on the partial knowledge offered by one particular academic affiliation or discipline. Therefore, researchers make postulations related to a broad set of play behaviors based on a narrow range of personal and professional experiences. In addition, writers typically confine their investigations to one or two stages of development (e.g., preschoolers, adolescents, etc.). This habit restricts overall understanding as illustrated in both classic and contemporary ideas about play.

The classical theories originated in the mid-nineteenth to the early part of the twentieth century and viewed play as either a form of release, as recuperation, as instinctual, as preparation, or as recapitulation. Here are several examples of the ideas of these early researchers: (a) Spencer (1896) expanded on the writings of the philosopher/dramatist Schiller and proposed that organisms (animals/humans) channel their surplus energy (not needed for survival) into play; (b) Lazarus stated that play is a relaxing way for humans to cope with the difficulties of life (cited in Sapora & Mitchell, 1961); (c) Patrick (1916) believed that the role of play to be restorative – a necessary recovery from the harshness of work; (d) James (1918), Woodworth (1921), and McDougall (1923) were the originators of the idea that play emanates from an instinctual source; (e) Groos (1896/1898) suggested that animals imitate in play the serious activities of the adults that surround them; (f) Gulick



(1920) and Hall (1916) argued that playful responses emitted by a developing child incorporate the skills of past generations.

More recent theories of play are just as wide-ranging and include these ideas: (a) Freud (1946) discussed how play therapy could rid a child of negative or painful experiences; (b) Erickson (1950) contended that play is a critical process for the normal development of a child; (c) Piaget (1951/1962) viewed play as a result of a child intellectual growth that will become more complex over time; (d) White (1959) pointed out that play is an energizing activity because of its novelty; (e) Menninger (1960) and Berkowitz claimed that recreation and sport allows for the purging of aggression in a regulated and harmless way (cited in Ellis, 1973); (f) Kimble (1961) and Breer and Locke (1965) concluded that inferences concerning leisure choices can be made from the characteristics of a person's work; (g) Hagedorn and Labowitz (1968) generalized that certain types of workers (e.g., managerial, professional, etc.) will participate in particular leisure-time community groups; (h) Ellis (1973) described play as a stimulus seeking behavior unrelated to survival. These explanations include such concepts as task generalization and compensation models, cathartic processes, psychoanalytic models, developmental aspects, cognitive dynamics, and arousal responses.

Although not all-inclusive, these numerous descriptions illustrate the spectrum of assumptions that have been pursued for more than a century. While it is an obvious reminder, these statements are merely fragments of more elaborate expository. However, the snippets represent the range of the body of thought concerning play behavior. Since they were first proposed, many aspects of the classic theories have been winnowed out and only vestiges reveal themselves in modern thought. On the other hand, the more contemporary theories have yet to be proven through time. Thus, the ambiguousness of play behavior

remains. For the purposes of this research, both the historical and modern concepts demonstrate how little attention has been given to adult play behavior and highlight the absence of studies addressing the integration of play into (not separate from) the workplace. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) supports this assertion by stating, “When psychologists and sociologists write about play, they deal with it as a process that is only tangentially related to the rest life” (p. 185).

When generalizing to compare the classical theories that began to emerge in the mid-nineteenth century with more contemporary research, classicists attempt to explain why play exists, whereas modernists try to clarify why a particular play response is produced (Ellis, 1973). As revealed in the sheer volume of ideas presented in the preceding paragraphs, to dissect all the theories regarding play would be futile distraction since many are unrelated to the premise (i.e., adult play, play/work fusion, etc.) of this study. Therefore, I will embrace Neumann’s (1971) assertion that play is a “pervading, yet enigmatic, element of man’s total activity” and examine a few concepts that have either direct or indirect implications for the workplace. Since the phenomenon of play is an array of behaviors observed in both children and adults and emitted under a host of circumstances, an interdisciplinary approach seems to yield the most satisfying results.

The notion of systems, as discussed earlier in reference to management theory, emerged because ordinary explanations were too narrow to deal with the intricacies and complexities of some behaviors. This approach is based on general systems theory developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1969), a scientist who worked primarily in the areas of physics and biology. The main premise of systems theory is that to understand fully the functioning of a behavior or entity, it must be analyzed as interdependent elements

functioning as a whole. General systems theory integrates the knowledge of various specialized fields so that the entire system can be better understood. In regard to play, the systems model allows a multifarious behavior like play to be conceptualized both biologically (evolution) and psychologically. More recent research has created paradigms that are more comprehensive.

Seivert (1998) finds usefulness in the metaphor of organizations as “organic, living systems capable of adjusting themselves” (p. 17). Cavaleri and Obloj (1993) also agree that organizations behave in many ways that are “dynamic, lifelike, and shaped by human components” (pp. 14-16). Considering the original assumption that play is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, it is best explained using a series of integrated (e.g., systems-oriented) theories which can shed light on how man interacting in his environment acquires this behavior and what purposes such behavior serves. The next assumption is that the characteristics of play indicate that it is both a biological and social behavior. It is biological because it is a human behavior that grows increasingly complex over time (Reilly, 1974). It is also a social behavior because it is a result of experiences acquired from interaction with the environment. Ultimately, play can be classified as a biosocial phenomenon (Reilly, 1974). As a biosocial behavior, play can adapt to and interact with its environment. Subsequently, a logical conclusion could be reached that play has the capability to greatly assist in the growth of the individual and the flexibility of the organization as a whole when introduced into a workplace setting.

One other approach that is a more practical interpretation of play behavior is the heuristic (rule of thumb) strategy suggested by Simon and Newell (1972). These rules of thumb can act as a basic structure for inspection that might eventually lead to more

sophisticated forms of explanation. Abbreviated versions of some of the most directly related heuristics include: (a) play is an external expression of the developmental process and the observable skills reflect the learning and adaptation process, (b) the cultural time-worn activities of play converge with the human need to practice an emerging ability, (c) the major characteristic of the process is fun, and (d) the quantity and quality of the skills learned are dependent largely upon the membership within a specific group. By applying these general attributes of playfulness to a workplace setting, it can be concluded that play has the potential to increase adaptability and perpetuate itself within the group (organization). To achieve this lofty goal, however, the behavior needs to be reinforced or practiced to remain viable and it must be pleasurable or fun to the persons involved. Although play is comprised of many variables, these last interpretations are consistent with the idea that play can be successfully infused into a workplace setting to provide useful outcomes (e.g., creativity, innovation, adaptability, skill acquisition, etc.).

#### Forms and Functions of Play

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*If a man insisted always on being serious, and never allowed himself a bit of fun and relaxation, he would go mad or become unstable without knowing it.*

Herodotus

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#### Common Play

As already established, the play sphere is comprised of a multitude of activities and experiences that can be confusing and overwhelming. While corporate play is the principal focus in this study, the boundaries of play are accommodating enough to allow almost any type of behavior to be included. For example, there are writings about tourism as play (MacCannell, 1976), television as play (Stephenson, 1967), daydreaming as play (Caughey, 1984), ceremony and ritual as play (Huizinga, 1950/1955; Ariès, 1960/1962; Deal &

Kennedy, 1980; Terr, 1999), celebration as play (Deal & Key, 1998); sexual intimacy as play (Betcher, 1987), spirituality as play (Blatner, 1988; Ackerman, 1999), gardening as play, (Terr, 1999), work as play (Coonradt, 1997), and even gossip as play (Spacks, 1985). Obviously, play represents a set of pervasive occurrences that can be compared to such broad conceptual topics as art, war, politics, culture, and religion.

According to Sutton-Smith (1997), the ambiguity of play rests not only with the diversity of play forms but with the many kinds of players as well. From infants to adults, and every developmental stage in between, the participants play somewhat differently. There is even variety in the kinds of play equipment such as balls, bats, cards, checkers, and toys. A vast array of play venues exists as well: playpens, playrooms, playhouses, playgrounds, sports fields, circuses, and casinos. While a listing of activities is important to establish an overall perspective of play behavior, this section is chiefly concerned with comparing commonplace and transcendent play and examining the relationship between play, creativity, and innovation.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975) suggests that people use a variety of techniques to give pattern to their everyday experiences in an effort to sustain their attention, receive positive feedback, and provide a general sense of enjoyment. While these activities exist at a lower complexity level than “deep play” behaviors, they serve a purpose and certainly fit within the play sphere. These conventional and almost automatic behavior patterns may take the form of daydreaming, listening to music, or conversing casually with a friend. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1975), these less structured and inconsequential activities may still be rewarding, depending on a person’s life situation.

In his writings, Dewey (1934) drew distinctions between the ordinary experiences of everyday life such as eating a meal and unusual moments like discovering a scientific breakthrough. However, he considered all activities worthy of investigation. Those commonplace events of daily living, where the full attention and total involvement of people are not required, are liberating in themselves. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1975), people choose “flow” (play) activities to shape the most mundane experience into something bearable and even enjoyable. There are two reasons people pursue playfulness even in the most routine circumstances: (a) to avoid the anxiety of being aware that other things need to be done and (b) to escape the boredom of sensing that there is nothing to do (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). This pursuit of play in the course of an otherwise unremarkable day is extremely difficult understand, measure, and quantify, however.

Bekoff (1972) notes, “It appears virtually impossible to verify experimentally the existence of the play drive” because methodology is insufficient to isolate the play experience. Nonetheless, Csikszentmihalyi (1975) conducted a small systematic experiment involving play deprivation in an attempt to determine the effect of stopping “unnecessary” daily behaviors. The twenty subjects selected for the study were first asked to keep a detailed record of playful yet unessential (e.g., daydreaming, conversing, etc.) behavior they engaged in during a 48-hour period. Although not utilitarian, the activities must be perceived as rewarding by the participants. A week later, they were to stop all “enjoyable, noninstrumental” behavior for another 48-hour period. As a result of the play deprivation, the subjects felt tired, sleepy, less healthy, tense, less creative, and headache-prone. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) concluded, “Trivial activities seem to have an important role in the psychic economy” (p. 178). In other words, the individuals fell out of balance with their

environment since the freedom associated with the everyday playfulness was taken away. This narrow study inferred that even the sense of playfulness people bring to otherwise routine activities serve to stimulate and enhance overall well being. In regard to this study, it suggests that there is no such thing as play without purpose because of the intrinsic reward it provides.

According to White (1959), to engage in activities that may not be necessary to survival can offer a sense of influence or effectiveness for a person. Furthermore, being in control of individual actions rather than the pawn of deterministic fate can be empowering (De Charms, 1968). Bringing novelty to a barren psychological environment can lead to relaxation, alertness, and spontaneous creativity for the individual (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The research suggests that people are continuously busy trying to develop structure, create patterns, and involve themselves in activities that make humdrum periods more enjoyable. According to Caplan and Caplan (1973), “when play is suppressed, man and society suffer” (p. 178). Therefore, when considering corporate play, people will likely gravitate to organizations that offer playful diversions because they benefit the psyches of the individuals. In return, the employers can reap the rewards of satisfied and committed employees such as pride of workmanship, attentiveness to tasks, flexibility in job duties, and formation of new ideas.

### Transcendent Play

Even though there are some people who question the validity of play and will always consider it irresponsible behavior, Diane Ackerman is not one of those skeptics. Ackerman (1999), a poet, essayist, and naturalist, wrote a book entitled *Deep Play* to illustrate how play infiltrates our history, culture, and personal lives. She explored the idea of an awe-inspiring

type of play in which adults experience a sense of rapture and ecstasy. In her writings, Ackerman does not limit the state of deep play to any one environment or activity. While Ackerman perceives play as a mystical engagement of our unconscious, a feat difficult to duplicate in a workplace setting, her depiction of play as a strong creative force is helpful in fortifying this research. Blatner (1988) agrees, “Play partakes of a creative process which suffuses the universe and, as such, has metaphysical and spiritual qualities” (p. 162).

Although Ackerman makes numerous references to animal play, it is human play that is of most interest to her. She characterizes play as “a refuge from ordinary life, a sanctuary of the mind, where one is exempt from life’s customs, methods, and decrees” (Ackerman, 1999, p. 6). Depending on the person, the place might be a classroom, a stadium, a stage, a courtroom, a mountaintop, a church, or a workbench in a garage. Just as diverse, the activity might be baseball, mountain climbing, meditation, writing poetry, sculpting, or motorcycle racing. Huizinga (1950/1955) outlines a few basic tenets of all forms of play, “Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, limited perfection. The least deviation robs it of its character and makes it worthless” (p. 10).

Many writers have examined various facets of the human condition that coincide with Ackerman’s perspective. For example, Groos (1901/1916) discussed the special pleasure that comes from using one’s body and senses to the fullest. Winnicott (1982) wrote about play as a creative state of everyday life and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) coined the term “flow” to describe a sense of effortless enjoyment that can be gleaned from both commonplace and unique play encounters. Maslow (1954) referred to inherently rewarding moments when people discover their capabilities and limits as a key portion of the “self-actualization” process. Furthermore, he described “peak experiences...of ecstasy, rapture, bliss, [as] the



greatest joy” (p. 82). Through examples ranging from Aboriginal wilderness treks to extreme hang gliders to Sunday bicyclists, Ackerman concludes that play is a central characteristic of being human and serves as medium to capture life’s most fulfilling moments.

To make a distinction, Ackerman (1999) contends that, “Simple play takes many forms and has many purposes, but goes only so far” (p. 24). Deep play offers intensely ecstatic moments not present in regular play. Whether it is jogging, stamp collecting, or gospel singing, the player must surrender himself/herself to the tiniest details and allow the activity to become the most important function in life, at least temporarily. The spirit of deep play encourages discovery and growth and a craving for new challenges. While play can be uncomplicated, elaborate, crude, sophisticated, structured, or casual, this special kind of play promotes renewal. Blatner (1988) believes that the significance and value of play in today’s world also includes deeper philosophical considerations that balance society’s overly materialistic tendencies. It might be too lofty a goal for this transcendent play to flood the workplace in the near future. However, if Ackerman’s deep play develops one’s sense of curiosity and desire for new experiences, as she believes, positive outcomes might result regardless of the setting.

### Creative and Innovative Play

Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) eloquently write that all life is creative because it is an experiment in search of infinite possibilities; in this realm of freedom and discovery, playfulness must exist. Herrmann (1996) concurs the creativity is a core component of the human condition and it is an “important aspect of life from early childhood to old age” (p. 203). In this research, creativity and innovation are explored from the perspective of an

adult's contribution within an organizational setting. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung reminds us of the importance of the interrelationship, "Without playing with fantasy, no creative work has ever yet come to birth" (cited in Terr, 1999). Creativity can take many forms ranging from writing, dancing, composing, painting, cooking, gardening, inventing, and problem solving. Of the few creative endeavors listed, problem solving and inventing are the ones that most strongly suggest a business application. Lieberman (1977) proposes that creativity can become part of any given occupation provided the individual is at ease, flexible, and willing to step outside convention to generate new ideas. She advocates that the application of associative play can serve to encourage creativity and innovation.

Although many businesspersons use creativity and innovation interchangeably, there are some distinctive differences in terms of both process and outcome. While creativity is more grounded in originality, innovation is building upon preexisting concepts, processes, and devices (Hermann, 1996). According to Robbins and Coulter (2005), innovative companies take the novel ideas generated by the creative processes of employees and channel them into useful outcomes (e.g., products, services, work methods, etc.). To consider that most organizations must continuously enhance and expand current product lines as well as develop new ones, creativity and innovation offer a distinct competitive advantage if stimulated and nurtured within the company. The challenge for modern organizations is to commit to this type of constant internal revitalization (Oden, 1997). Since creativity can be seen as "out there" in staid corporate environments, it can be overlooked. However, Hellriegel, Jackson, and Slocum (2005) stress that creativity is no longer optional – it is imperative for organizational survival. Subsequently, there is a tandem opportunity to reap

substantial benefits if both innovation and creativity become embedded in the organizational culture.

While creativity and innovation within organizational settings can erupt spontaneously, most often the occurrences are not truly random. According to many researchers, certain types of organizational configurations and climates can foster creativity and innovation (Herrmann, 1996; Deal & Key, 1998; Gyskiewicz, 2000; Moorhead & Griffin, 2004; Hellriegel, Jackson, and Slocum, 2005). According to Sorensen and Stuart (2000), pinpointing the factors that shape the ability of organizations to produce influential concepts and innovations should be a fundamental consideration in an increasingly knowledge-based economy. Schrage (2000) asserts that the challenges of unceasing innovation forces corporations and individuals improvise more freely. Therefore, while some structure is required, it is a largely supported view that tight control and rigidity are barriers to a creative and innovative workplace.

A portion of the life of Albert Einstein, a person who possessed exceptional creative gifts, serves as an example of how the environment can either support or hamper creative and innovative thought. As a youth, he attended a regimented, militaristic school in Germany where the restrictive atmosphere undermined his interest in science and stifled his imagination (Amabile, 1996). When he later attended a school in Switzerland that was more humanistic and stressed the value of a person's unencumbered search for knowledge, his curiosity was piqued once again. According to Holton (1972), the contrast in learning environments represented a turning point in Einstein's thinking. Consequently, inflexible and manipulative environments discourage individuals from taking the intellectual risks associated with a creative and innovative spirit. Gyskiewicz (2000) proposes that an

energizing climate that “upsets the status quo and impels organizations toward renewal” enhances creative output (p. 62).

IDEO, a widely admired and award-winning design and development firm that brought the world such products as the Apple mouse, Polaroid’s I-Zone instant camera, the Palm handheld computerized organizer, and hundreds of other cutting-edge products and services, exemplifies the type of organizational culture that is endlessly creating and innovating. In *The Art of Innovation*, general manager Tom Kelley and co-author Jonathan Littman (2001) reveal some of the secrets to IDEO’s frenetic genius: (a) playful attitudes and free expression run rampant; (b) brainstorming sessions dominated by frivolity are nonetheless taken quite seriously as a valuable problem-solving tool; (c) teams are at the heart of their methods – the myth of the “lone genius” can hinder the company’s efforts. In short, they believe that if they perpetuate a culture that embraces risks and wild ideas and tolerates an occasional failure, the creative and innovative side of each person within the organization can be unleashed. They also believe that this approach, with a few company-specific modifications, can be applied to any workplace setting.

Lieberman’s (1977) studies using the scientific model also demonstrate that there are relationships between creativity, divergent thinking, and playfulness. According to Blatner (1988), creativity and innovation have become central skills for dealing with a world of ongoing change. Based on the research presented here and anecdotal evidence of companies like IDEO, a playful work environment inspires a spirit of resourcefulness and ingenuity and fosters pliability. As demonstrated in the next section, playfulness presents itself in a myriad of ways (e.g., celebration, ceremony, ritual, frivolity) depending upon the leadership and culture of individual organizations.

## Manifestations of Organizational Play

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*We have a killer culture. People work hard and play hard...  
They are here because they want to change the world.*

Jerry Yang  
Yahoo! Co-founder

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Although playfulness can be exhibited in a multitude of ways, Deal and Key (1998) fervently believe that participation in organizational celebrations, ceremonies, and rituals can create a hallowed sense of solidarity and optimism necessary in both good and bad economic times. In other words, these activities can assist in creating a sense of community that anchors the company. A growing number of organizational behavioral specialists affirm this point of view and assert that the playfulness embodied in events of this sort can simultaneously boost spirits *and* the bottom-line. Although these behaviors may initially appear incompatible with purer play forms, many of the researchers cited earlier in this study support the premise that human play cannot be easily categorized and may involve a host of activities (Mitchell & Mason, 1948; Huizinga, 1950/1955; Millar, 1968; Neumann, 1971; Ellis, 1973; Reilly, 1974; Csikszentimihalyi, 1975; Spariosu, 1989). Some experts even draw a direct link between ritualistic and playful behaviors. For instance, Helen Schwartzman (1978) noted that many anthropologists have discovered that play and ritual often meld into one single activity. Two other influential writers addressed ritual and ceremony as vital components of play but reached opposite conclusions about how they are linked.

Ariès (1960/1962) stated that play is a leftover from the disintegration of communal rite and ritual. However, Huizinga (1950/1955) made the point a few years earlier that play is the foundation upon which ritualistic community and religious activities are built. Terr (1999) believes that both researchers were correct because the tight connection between

recreation and rite over time has led to one feeding the other. For example, some play filters down into childhood from ritual. However, other forms of play evolve into adult institutions such as law, philosophy, poetry, religion, art, and myth; all of which are imbued with ceremony and ritual. In addition, some behaviors serve both play and ritualistic purposes simultaneously. Finally, Terr (1999) thinks that “some play stays put – it simply begins and ends with play” (p. 172). Ultimately, play can be viewed as a living thing like the organization itself – both continually influence and possess the potential to transform one another (Terr, 1999; Seivert, 1998; Cavaleri & Obloj, 1993; Reilly, 1974). From the perspective of this study, a sense of playfulness (i.e., escape from the ordinary) is the common thread that connects the seemingly divergent workplace interactions of celebration, ceremony, and ritual.

#### Examples of Celebrations, Ceremonies, and Rituals

Every human being has an emotional craving for celebration, ceremony, and ritual because these activities can be empowering, evocative, and generally playful. According to Frese & Ohnuki-Tierney (1993), “A ritual may be used to refer to many different kinds of cultural performance: public or private celebrations, sacred and secular occasions, and even as experiential, reflexive play” (p. 15). Ritualized behavior can serve as a means by which the cultural system and the social system (organization) are able to interact and harmonize with each other (Bell, 1997). Robbins and Coulter (2005) note that the repetitive sequences of activities characterizing rituals express and reinforce the key values of the organization. These actions infuse substance, passion, and energy into the enterprise.

Wheatley (1992) states that meaning gives life coherence and meaning itself is derived from shared symbolism that binds people together in a common quest. Ritual and

ceremony, as prominent elements of organizational culture along with vision and values, offer a major source of that glue. Without frequent integration of these shared experiences into the workplace, the common bond can be severed. If cohesiveness is destroyed, the organization will likely lose its competitive edge and deliver lackluster performance. Deal and Key (1998) attest that “ritual and ceremony undergird, interpenetrate, and intertwine with all aspects of corporate life: recognition, rewards, quality, teamwork, and leadership” (p. 11). Although Schein (1992) supports the idea that these behaviors are powerful value enforcers, he warns that placing too much emphasis on workplace rituals and celebrations might limit the ability to understand the countless other variables that shape overall culture. Nonetheless, most organizational behaviorists believe that the various forms of these activities can serve a vital purpose in an organization without discounting or disturbing the traditional managerial elements of structure and strategy. In the examples that follow, all the actions and events invoke a feeling of playfulness because they do not fall within the realm of typical job responsibilities or predictable organizational tasks.

Marking milestones and reinforcing core values. Life is a sequence of “patterns and structures” as we “connect and disconnect from one another” (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, p. 39). Our genetic makeup and cultural heritage reminds us that periodic pauses interspersed with life’s reoccurring cycles assist us in maintaining our sense of direction. The marking of milestones can provide an opportunity to “spice up routine, celebrate progress, and create transitions between seasons and stages” (Deal & Key, 1998, p. 36). Breaking the predictability of work can be done in several ways: (a) acknowledging birthdays, (b) recognizing anniversaries, and (c) sponsoring general festivities. Individual birthdays can be acknowledged through gala events or a simple gesture such as a card or

present. For instance, employees in the Philadelphia office of the Veterans Administration grant the Extra Step Award to a coworker during the month in which he/she was born. In coordination with the birthday celebration, the colleague's contributions to the organization as a whole are acknowledged with a small cash prize (Nelson, 1994). Birthdays provide a legitimate excuse to take a pause from the workday and share an event all people have in common.

Commemorating anniversaries can be another way to break the monotony. Max DePree, the CEO of Herman Miller, Inc., a global provider of unique office furniture, created an elaborate and effective way to honor 400 employees who had twenty or more years of service with the company. In 1987, he hosted a corporate-wide event in which the symbolic focal point was the unveiling of an abstract sculpture entitled *The Tribal Water Carrier*. To clarify its significance, he analogized tribal existence to corporate life. He explained that the water carrier was vital to the survival of the tribe by the essential liquid he provided. Since organizations depend on vitality, renewal, and commitment for their continued existence, the modern corporate water carriers have an ethical responsibility to assist in transferring organizational culture and values to the new people within the company. The base of the sculpture had been inscribed with the names of the honorees (water carriers). Afterwards, employees gathered around the sculpture to touch their names, share stories, and relive memories. In this ceremonial event, employees with experience received recognition while new associates began to envision how they could shape the company and leave their own mark (Deal and Key, 1998).

General festivities that serve to fortify organizational norms can include an endless range of possibilities. For instance, The Philippine Women's University hosts the annual



Intercolor Fungames to promote a sense of camaraderie among university employees. All members of the staff (i.e., administrators, faculty, maintenance personnel, security guards, etc.) are intermingled on teams identified by the colors of a rainbow. Through the day, competitors participate in silly games that give everyone on each team a chance to interact with one another and develop cooperative strategies to win the events. The day provides a unique opportunity for individuals who would normally have no daily interaction to learn and share experiences with one another. Through a fun-filled and playful time, the university's core value of diversity is reinforced (Hemsath, 2001).

Recognizing individual and team performance. In a strictly work-related format and application, Robbins (1998) defines motivation as “the willingness to exert high levels of effort toward organizational goals, conditioned by the effort's ability to satisfy some individual need” (p. 168). While there are numerous psychological theories related to this topic, research related to the dual-structure concept most often cites recognition as a primary factor in job satisfaction and motivation (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman 1959). When the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources conducted a study to measure employees' perceptions of recognition programs, more than two-thirds of the respondents said it was important to believe that others appreciated their work (Nelson, 1994). Since Malandro (1995) states that recognition consists of praise and applause for a job well done, acknowledging employees' contributions with either financial or non-financial rewards has the potential to be a straightforward and effective motivational tool. For purposes of this study, attention will be focused on non-financial rewards since intrinsic factors are more consistent with the other portions of the research.

At Southwest Airlines, one of the most memorable and festive occasions is the Annual Awards Banquet. At the event, pins are given to employees with ten, twenty, and twenty-five years of service to reward dedication and loyalty. At the banquet, President Award winners are honored for demonstrating the cherished organizational values of being compassionate, showing colleague support, learning new things, leading by example, practicing the Golden Rule, embracing change, keeping promises, and bringing a sense of humor and fun to the job. Finally, the most coveted tribute is the Founder's Award. It is given only in years when a continuous history of achievement merits special recognition. This award is based on community service, outstanding job performance, implementation of creative solutions to complex problems, and bringing innovative ideas and programs to the company (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1996). According to one past award winner, "It was one of the most memorable and humbling experiences I've ever had [and] it will be a part of my life that I will never forget" (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1996, p. 193).

With increasing emphasis on superior quality and exceptional customer service, team-based management philosophies are prevalent among American companies. In light of this development, many leaders have shifted their attention to groups and the acknowledgement of their accomplishments. Employee-to-employee recognition within teams may be encouraged or the entire team may be honored for their contributions. At American Skandia, a provider of insurance and financial planning products, catered breakfasts and lunches are a common way to celebrate achievement of team goals. Beyond well-known company-wide practices, teams are free to create their own forms of recognition for members. For example, Warm Fuzzies are 8 ½ by 11 inch computer-generated award certificates that congratulate a team member for group, or sometimes individual,

accomplishments. Whether the awards are predictable or completely spontaneous, recipients proudly display them on the walls of their offices (Yerkes, 2001). According to American Scandia CEO Wade Dokken, “It all comes down to believing and trusting in people. You have to trust people if you want them to succeed. Then you need to reward them. We celebrate success by giving credit to others” (Yerkes, 2001, p. 137).

Praising triumphs and successes. Acknowledging the adept execution of a project or venture allows people to convene and witness how their individual contribution fits into the big picture. It can build esprit de corps, renew faith, and foster hope for the future. Observing triumphs can be an energy source for the entire corporation to relish the moment. As new things emerge – a new service, product, strategy, or vision – taking delight in their progress can create a renewed sense of mission (Deal & Key, 1998). The organization highlighted in the following example provides a good model for this type of activity.

In some manufacturing operations, the time period between the initial design and final product stages can be a lengthy process where nerves often fray and enthusiasm wanes. If the time before the unveiling is extraordinary long, progressive businesses factor in frequent opportunities to stop work, take stock of progress, and celebrate the segments that have been completed. The Boeing Company, the largest aerospace corporation in the world, set out to design a massive jetliner (777) that became one of the most sophisticated products ever manufactured (Plunkett, Attner, & Allen, 2002). Not only was the plane itself revolutionary, Boeing’s approach in using cross-functional teams to coordinate the various phases of the project was also a pioneering effort for this previously traditionally structured organization.

At various points during the design and production process that spanned several months, all levels of employees would take moments to mark their progress, strengthen their resolve, and reload for the next task. Sometimes there were basic work breaks with sandwiches and drinks and at other times multifaceted ceremonies were observed with stories, speeches, music, and expanded socializing. The official rollout of the 777 was an elaborate affair that paid homage to the thousands of individual and group efforts that lead to a successful launch. A well-designed video depicting various stages of the production process interspersed with comments from the workers reached a crescendo as the plane was bathed in light and the narrator instructed the people to move closer. The massive presence of the 777 provided a tangible reminder to the people of how their commitment to persevere through a long and tedious process paid off; their emotions were intense and lasting.

Acknowledging personal transitions. Scott Adam's *Dilbert* comic strip about corporate life reflects the tenor of our times with all its angst and irony. This scenario is imprinted on my computer mouse pad: In the first image the manager announces that the company will be getting a new "bungee boss" today. In the second image, a man tethered to stretchable cord momentarily drops into the room and says, "Hi, I'm your new boss. Let's change everything before I get reassigned. Oops, too late, goodbye!" The new boss quickly recoils and disappears. Dilbert's sidekick laments, "He was like mentor to me." After a moment of contemplation, Dilbert states, "I think he made a difference" just as his boss yells "Incoming!" *Dilbert's* satire about life in the cubicle often captures more truth about the business climate today than most people would like to admit.

Within organizations, employees come and go, customers fade in and out of the corporate picture, and bosses and managers circulate in a seemingly endless game of

promotions and demotions. Some people hang on until retirement while others fall victim to downsizing, rightsizing, or restructuring. Although the flow of clients and customers are expected to change, the entrances and exits of colleagues and managers are important transitions. Each time a member is added or subtracted, the dynamics of the group are modified in some way. Therefore, recognizing the comings and goings in some ritual or ceremony can offer a sense of closure and maintain a degree of continuity that is important to the “wholeness” of the organization (Deal & Key, 1998).

Throughout history, human societies have created ceremonial events to mark the passage from one state to another – the stages and ages of life (Fulghum, 1995). As employees arrive to begin a new job, it is common practice in organizations today for them to be hurriedly greeted, shuffled off to their work area, assigned an initial task, and left to fend for themselves. However, when they sit in their offices or cubicles oblivious to company history, internal politics, and fundamental issues like where to retrieve their mail, a sense of emptiness can result because they aren't connected to their work environment or the people around them. There are some companies, however, that have created well-planned orientation processes brimming with relevant information for new employees.

At Nordstrom Department Stores, they have an indoctrination program designed so newcomers can quickly learn about the company's culture and values. In the Nordstrom training room where new employees first gather, one wall is decorated with an old grainy photograph of the original founders. At the opposite end of the room, there are individual portraits of the current co-chairmen of the corporation. Dispersed around the room on several placards are the faces of outstanding employees and the details of their career paths. There are discussions and explanations about the significance of the day. The entire

experience is carefully orchestrated so new employees can learn about the “Nordstrom way.” For some people, the training event will leave a permanent imprint that communicates how valuable they are to the company and demonstrates various routes to success within this organization. For others, the intense socialization process may signal that this environment is not for them. Either way, Nordstrom makes a point of sharing what the company is like by ritualizing the entrance of a new member (Deal & Key, 1998).

Even if the work environment is a good fit and there is a high degree of job satisfaction, employees still leave. There are promotions, transfers, health-related resignations, and a host of other reasons for changing jobs. Once a worker decides to leave a job, organizational reaction can range from cool to cordial. It is not uncommon for companies to force employees to pack their belongings the same day or gather them in the middle of the night in an effort to whisk them away in a swift, unceremonious, and disapproving way. According to Hemsath (2001), however, a San Francisco-based service company makes parting fun and memorable. The employees cover the office elevator with paper and attach markers to the walls with Velcro. They write “Good Luck, We’ll Miss You” to the exiting employee in large letters. Colleagues and supervisors riding the elevator pen their own personal messages and some people leave behind photographs for their departing co-worker. It is likely that when employees leave this company, they take with them fond memories of time spent at this particular workplace. As a practical side benefit, if a pleasant exit evokes a warm feeling about the work experience, the employee will be more likely to recommend that organization to job-seeking peers.

Promoting internal and external altruism. For all organizations, there is both an inward and an outward focus. Some corporations are almost entirely inwardly driven while

others are moved to invest money and energy into the world outside the office walls. If employees are encouraged to do good for others, it can be a powerful motivator of collective energy – pulling together for a common purpose can help strengthen bonds that transcend individual differences in the workplace. While sharing time, money, and other resources can certainly be a boost to the causes being supported, these types of actions benefit the organizations promoting the giving as well. Experiences that put community interests before personal wants can stimulate celebration and summon the good that lurks in the heart of almost everyone (Deal & Key, 1998).

Hallmark, the Kansas City based greeting card company, has a long history of being a stalwart contributor to the community. While the corporate philanthropy has been generous and extensive for decades, it is the encouragement of individual contributions that is most striking. Hallmark coordinates an initiative that makes it easy for employees to find satisfying volunteer opportunities while supplying various community organizations with a group of enthusiastic recruits. The Volunteer Involvement Pays (VIP) project is a recognition program available to Hallmark employees who contribute a minimum of 25 volunteer hours over a six-month period to a qualifying governmental unit of nonprofit organization. A grant of \$200 is donated to the entity where the employees have offered their time and its success has been phenomenal. Since its inception, the program has administered more than \$1,932,000 (Hockaday, 2001).

Because many Hallmark employees are asked to serve as board directors for nonprofit organizations, the company schedules classes dealing with board governance, operations, strategic planning, organizational change, and the basics of fundraising to assist them in being more effective in their role. Finally, there are group activities as well. Each year the

company sponsors several volunteer projects such as “Christmas in October” where employees scatter across their communities and freely offer their skills by painting, repairing, and rebuilding for those in need (Hockaday, 2001). For the company, the sentimental feelings conveyed through their greeting cards are translated into genuine and lasting acts of kindness and compassion that nourish the spirit of the individuals that work there. It could be one reason why Hallmark is a regular favorite on “best companies to work for” and “most admired companies” lists (Levering & Moskowitz, 1994).

#### Displays of Planned and Spontaneous Frivolity

Several organizations and their playful cultures have already been highlighted and examined in this section. However, I discovered scores of other companies, both large and small, that have created and perpetuated quirky, unique, and original ideas for stimulating creativity, increasing efficiency, promoting innovation, cultivating teamwork, and improving retention. There are also corporations that engage in workplace frivolity simply for the fun of it. I thought it might be enlightening to offer a short description of several environments and activities that illustrate the diversity of playfulness in the modern American workplace.

- To capture the attention and imagination of new employees Hyland, a software company, lists these items with their more traditional benefits: ‘Take Your Boat or Jet Ski to Work (Summer Only), Free Candy, Kickball Lunch, Cool T-Shirts, Sombrero Wearing Classes, Occasional Free Lunches, Free Pen and Paper (Stapler in Your Second Year), Free Llama for Every New Employee, Casual Attire, More Free Lunches.’ Even the fine print is humorous: ‘The llamas are void in the states of MI, KE, LA, AL, ST, OP, RE, AD, IN, GT, HI, S’ (Hemsath, 2001).



- Indelible Blue, a software company, is the daytime home of Einstein the dog who employees fondly call the “chief of security.” Einstein mingles with his “co-workers” throughout working hours. Merely by his presence, the canine encourages informal interaction between employees and promotes a more relaxed atmosphere that company leaders believe generates greater cohesiveness (Elswick, 2000).
- In one effort to reward good performance, Johnson Controls, an automotive systems group, sends continuous improvement teams that have performed well during the year to regional rallies for their 250 facilities. At the gatherings, the teams explain how their particular projects have contributed to a successful year. However, to make a dull subject more exciting, they have hosted mock television shows, satirized movie themes, and reenacted popular historical events to add some zip to the event. Between the presentations, they also enjoy milkshake-drinking contests, gum-blowing competitions, hula-hoop marathons, and toilet paper mummy fashion shows (Hemsath, 2001).
- Tom’s of Maine, a natural products company that manufactures shampoo, soap, toothpaste, and deodorant, encourages creative expression by decorating the workplace with employee-made paintings, sculpture, crafts, and poetry (“Eleven Steps,” 1996).
- In a tough, and not so funny business, employees at Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle stand in *front* of the iced fish stand instead of *behind* it. Here they can interact with customers more directly. They hug, tell jokes, and throw fish in a raucous and circus-life manner that elicits an enormous amount of positive feedback from patrons (Yerkes, 2001).

- A telephone repair company named NRDC has maintained a party attitude at their work. They sponsor Rock and Roll Day, backyard barbecues, employee-formed band dances, tricycle races, and Elvis Day. According to CEO Burgess Oliver, the shenanigans have paid off in corporate profits (Deal & Key, 1998).
- Eagle Learning Center applied the old adage ‘if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and sounds like a duck, it must be a duck’ in an unusual way. Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Dave Hueller endorses personal responsibility and a no-excuses attitude toward getting the job done. Therefore, whenever anyone catches another employee making an excuse, the co-worker will good-naturedly start quacking. Dave is not excluded and he says that it is the employees’ way of staying focused on solutions instead of finding blame (Hemsath, 2001).
- PocketThis, a wireless Internet technology venture, feels that it is important to find time to relax and reload between intense product introductions. It is not unusual to see staffers juggling, playing velvet darts, or bowling in the hallways. At the company headquarters, there is an open area near employees’ offices featuring beanbag chairs, comfortable couches, and Internet access. People can take a break from their desks to read documents, use laptops, or “just think.” The entire firm has even been known to take the afternoon off to go rock climbing (Gatland, 2001).
- A computer distribution business named EMJ America offers employees the opportunity to play games before, during, or after work. There are ping-pong tables, board games, volleyball nets, a trampoline, basketball court, racquetball court, and weight room. According to company representatives, their unique and fun-infused atmosphere has enabled them to retain and attract good employees (Jones, 1999).

- Visiting Pixar, a successful animation studio, is almost like taking a trip to a funky amusement park. According to Executive Vice-President John Lassiter, nurturing the creative spirit is key even when it comes to his office décor that looks like a toy store. In another space where employees must crawl on their hands and knees to enter, there exists a kitschy clubhouse dubbed the “Love Lounge.” Employees can come to meditate, fantasize, or imagine in a small cocoon surrounded by GI Joes, Hot Wheels, movie posters, lava lamps, and furry beanbag chairs (Hewitt, 2003).

The examples noted in the previous bulleted paragraphs encompass a wide array of organizations that promote a playful environment at work. They range from high tech companies, service groups, distribution centers, and manufacturing entities. The individual activities and collective goals are just as varied. However, the notion that the fusion of work and play serves a vital role in the overall success (i.e., retention, recruitment, creativity, innovation, motivation, team-building, etc.) of the company is a core organizational belief that binds them together even though the individual cultures have distinct differences in the way playfulness manifests itself.

#### Ramifications of Organizational Play

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*Play is intrinsically motivated,  
except if you don't do what the others tell you,  
they won't let you play.*

Antonin Artaud

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#### Considerations for Corporate Culture

In the early 1980s, the authors of books like *In Search of Excellence* promoted the notion that a tightly knit, well-focused, value-driven organizational culture can pay handsome dividends in the long run (Peters & Waterman, 1982). The writings touted culture

management as the secret to organizational success (Burck, 1980). Since that time, other researchers have added evidence to support previous claims. For example, Kotter and Haskett (1992) found that companies with cohesive, adaptive cultures geared to the prevailing business environment outperformed comparative corporations by improving net incomes by 756 percent versus 1 percent. Collins and Porras (1994) discovered dramatic differences between the shareholder growth of what they call “visionary organizations with core ideologies” and “average stock market companies.” After analyzing the top five performing stocks from 1972 through 1992, Pfeffer (1994) reported that at least two of the five companies (Southwest Airlines and Wal-Mart) are known for their distinctive cultures and people-centered management style. In addition, Kinni (1996) boldly concluded that investment in people and “culture-building” is *necessary* to create a “world-class organization.” Finally, results from a host of investigations maintain that employees associated with strong organizational cultures are more committed to their work than those linked to weaker ones (Hellriegel, Jackson, & Slocum, 2005; Robbins & Coulter, 2005). Thus, the growing body of knowledge related to culture has altered the way both academics and managers view organizations and cultural assessment has emerged as one of the most important areas for inquiry in the field of organizational behavior.

Notwithstanding a substantial amount of research concerning organizational culture, conceptualizations differ considerably in their complexity. For some authors like Deal and Kennedy (1982), “the way we do things around here” is sufficient (p. 4). Schein (1992) offers a more specific explanation: “The pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group has invented, discovered, and developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration” (p. 12). Ouchi (1981) is more descriptive as well by

stating that organizational culture is “a set of symbols, ceremonies, and myths that communicates the underlying values and beliefs of that organization to its employees” (p. 41). Since the assumptions, values, and norms that form the base of a culture cannot be observed directly, it must be inferred from the visible elements within an organization such as architecture, logos, uniforms, awards, events, and other concrete expressions (Hellriegel, Jackson, & Slocum, 2005). Despite these definitional variations, three common attributes related to organizational culture ultimately surface: (a) it consists of a set of shared values that determine what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior; (b) it is often taken for granted; (c) it is commonly communicated through symbolic means that have evolved over time.

As indicated above, it is generally acknowledged by organizational behavioral specialists that organizations with so-called “strong” cultures, those in which key values are deeply held and widely shared, perform at higher levels than those with weaker identities (Robbins & Coulter, 2005; O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996; Denison & Mishra, 1995).

Subsequently, cultural factors continue to capture the attention of managers seeking to improve organizational performance even though some studies have shown mixed results. For instance, because the cultures or “personalities” of many organizations are comprised of relatively stable and generally permanent characteristics, these elements typically become embedded, resistant to change, and even potentially harmful (Bate, 1996). If the culture is entrenched and dysfunctional, decision-makers may become paralyzed to act because it is easier to be complacent; a stance that usually leads to financial catastrophe in the end. Therefore, if the playfulness is not already a part of an organization’s culture, its introduction will likely be perceived as a radical, misunderstood, and possibly undesirable element. To begin to resuscitate an environment that stifles both organizational and individual

development, a thorough analysis identifying the obstacles to constructive change must be initiated. In the beginning, there must be the acknowledgment that a strong culture does not always equal a strategically appropriate or adaptive one.

### Obstacles to Implementation

Although numerous positive outcomes have been cited in the previous sections, the popular concept of creating a sense of community at work through a dominant and influential corporate culture can be a disturbing and discouraging development for some people. In her book entitled *Work, Self, and Society*, Casey (1995) acknowledges the advent of a trend toward more “social psychology” driven organizations where workplace solidarity is promoted through various techniques. She is also keenly aware that contemporary organizational and managerial studies are increasingly interested in the relationship between cultural practices, organizational goals and strategies, and corporate change. There is skepticism, however, as to whether these circumstances present an opportunity to create a more cohesive workforce or an excuse for a company to exercise an inordinate amount of influence over employees’ lives.

Ulterior motives, corporate cults, and faddists. All researchers agree that the dramatic and sweeping technological, geopolitical, and socioeconomic changes of the last two decades have had a profound impact on the character of the workplace as well as the disposition of individual workers. Therefore, Casey (1995) asserts that in this hyper-competitive business climate “corporate employees are increasingly expected to have their minds and hearts on duty” at all times (p. 86). In doing so, there is a concern by some writers that workers will lose their sense of self and that the new “designer cultures” will adversely affect individual

psyches. In other words, the intense pressures of the “post-industrial” society she describes may lead to digressive and harmful business practices.

LaBier (1986) supports at least a portion of the above proposition by labeling organizations as “psycho-structures” that select and shape employees to achieve a “congruent fit” between the workplace and the worker. To ensure that new hires feel comfortable with established company norms, Nordstrom uses such an approach in their ceremonial-laced orientation process as detailed in the last section. However, the molding in itself is not necessarily detrimental; it’s the methods and the underlying motives that determine if this organizational tendency is to have a positive or negative effect on employees. As stated in the Nordstrom example, some potential employees immediately flee from such a dominant corporate culture after experiencing it firsthand during the acclimation process. The orientation encourages introspection to determine if Nordstrom’s values are compatible with individual expectations. Thus, while Nordstrom is searching for a harmonious relationship between employee and employer, deceptive motives or negative repercussions are not present because the employees remain free to make the final decision.

From a slightly different perspective, perhaps the most scathing and unsettling denunciation of shared work values is the allegation of corporate cultism. In his book about the subject, Arnott (2000) identifies Southwest Airlines (referred to in this research) as “enculted.” While he acknowledges that Southwest’s unique culture has organizational and individual goals in perfect alignment and employees are devoted and loyal to the company, the author questions whether pursuing organizational goals precludes the pursuit of individual ones. Although he doesn’t name the airline, Hochschild (1997) also believes organizations are rediscovering the power of communal ties and some of them are using that

sense of camaraderie to build high commitment organizations that are very efficient yet manipulative. He insists this threat to individuality can be devastating to employees who are typically oblivious to the potential danger. Arnott (2000) claims that a person lives a balanced life when the “organizational circles” of work, family, and community do not supplant one another. Hochschild (1997) agrees and provides an additional warning: When a corporation wins *emotional* allegiance from their workforce, other areas of life (e.g., family, community, etc.) may suffer through neglect. In *Nuts! Southwest Airlines' Crazy Recipe for Business and Personal Success*, the authors vehemently disagree with this assessment and praise the offbeat and playful culture of this financially successful airline. Even though the leaders of Southwest concur with the idea that work cannot replace feelings of emptiness in individual lives, they strongly maintain that a supportive workplace can provide a measure of personal fulfillment and purpose (Freiberg & Freiberg, 1996). Yerkes (2001) describes this philosophy as one that is vital to job satisfaction because it gives employees the “permission to perform” (p. 15).

Although idiosyncratic or playful cultures are most often cited as corporate cult material, companies with traditional hierarchies can also fit the definition. According to Kotter and Haskett (1992), even a small amount of success in the marketplace and the advent of a dominant, yet impaired, corporate culture can easily create an atmosphere characterized by arrogance and insularity. These attitudes support a value system that is structured as a rigid bureaucracy, motivated through politics, and driven by self-interest (Hellriegel, Jackson, & Slocum, 2005; Robbins & Coulter, 2005; Schein, 1992). Such unfavorable attributes can undermine economic *and* human performance within the organization by blinding top management to the need for new business strategies and making progressive



change difficult or impossible implement. Employees who demonstrate integrity, trust, and caring in their relationships will likely become cynical and be stunted in their professional and personal growth (Kouzes & Posner, 1993).

For example, the frenetic chatterbox Ross Perot is credited with creating and perpetuating the hard-driving culture of the information technology conglomerate Electronic Data Systems (EDS). Unfortunately, he has also been accused of sanctioning a restrictive, bureaucratic, quasi-military, cult-like work environment within the corporation that was far from playful. Many employees and outsiders alike allege that the atmosphere at EDS has been suffocating and restraining under Perot. In a bleak observation, Burawoy (1979) contends that browbeaten employees (of any company) may even resort to desperate means in an effort to either endure subordination or rebel against an oppressive workplace. Since Perot's exit in 1984, however, EDS has attempted to redefine itself in a more celebratory and playful style that is built on collective decision-making, team building, and inclusiveness (Kirkpatrick, 1996). The changes seem to be paying off with increased retention and profits. Even Arnott (2000) concedes that every organization has some degree of "cultedness" because people join corporations essentially to accomplish goals they could not do alone, and in the process, subordinate themselves to some extent. Critics still persist, however.

Some detractors claim that the organizations themselves fall victim to what they call organizational fads. They avow that American corporations are easy targets for the self-proclaimed gurus of fluff. According to Asgar and Wigley (1997), "the most prolific generation of fads has come from the application of psychological concepts and theories...promoted by people who have never managed a day in their lives" (p. 189). Although Bolman and Deal (1991) take issue with such derogatory depictions, they

acknowledge that rational approaches to organizational problems are typically held in higher regard than what they term “holistic” methods. It is not unusual for many programs relating to the “softer” side of management to be repudiated. Nonetheless, many corporations still spend millions of dollars on questionable proposals each year in a desperate attempt to gain a competitive advantage.

Seivert (1998) believes that the “jester organizations,” as she calls them, often possess the ability to circumvent obstacles and flourish in times of change. However, she offers a few admonishments as well. When placing these fun-loving companies in the categories of the “more and less-developed,” she argues that the ones with anemic leadership have the potential to jump erratically from one idea to the next without a strategy for completion (Seivert, 1998). Other researchers emphasize, however, that a chaotic and potentially detrimental work atmosphere is distinctively different from an invigorated and focused one (Schein, 1992; Lipman-Blumen, 1996). Even Asgar and Wigley (1997) admit that many of the “new revelations” are based in solid business practices and can be useful if implementation is well planned and expectations are realistic.

Reluctant leaders, clumsy execution, and external pressures. Although most corporate leaders dismiss extreme views like corporate cultism and even faddism, they are still reluctant to shift their mindset from a totally rational set of criteria for organizational success to a more humanistic centered view. The thought of moving outside their traditionalist comfort zone can cause some of them to balk at taking *any* managerial risks. Thus, several barriers may prevent an organization from experimenting with unfamiliar and untested ideas that could potentially be beneficial. The first impediment, as noted in the previous paragraphs, is that many managers experience the discomfort and even fear when

exploring the “soft side” of management (Deal & Key, 1998). It is difficult to make the leap from a restructuring and downsizing mentality to one of revitalization and renewal. They tend to revert back to a task style that correlates closely with the classical school of management and its obsession with time, motion, and control.

According to Hampden-Turner (1990), the results of a worldwide survey show that among their international peers, American managers rank highest in favoring rationality over more intuitive approaches. By comparison, only three percent of Japanese managers share this belief. This information, along with other research, corroborate a view that organizational events related to celebrating and ritualizing are a much lower priority than strategic planning and reengineering even though there have been many questions about the long-term effectiveness of relying exclusively on pragmatic techniques (Claude, 1972; Fox, 1994). Yerkes (2001) implores managers to challenge the bias perpetuated by an American work ethic that prevents work and play from coexisting and think more freely about novel ways to address workplace issues. In addition, she urges managers to move past the anxiety, trust their employees by sharing with the “big picture” with them, describe clearly the expectations for a particular activity, and give up control and allow them to direct the outcomes.

Even if managers are committed to integrating play into the organizational culture, they may inadvertently create repetitious, humdrum, and hollow events that are often worse than not doing anything at all (Deal & Key, 1998). There are scores of ways in which leaders can bungle opportunities for constructive change and even alienate their workers in the process. Many managers simply do not know how to orchestrate worthwhile playful activities. Sincere effort does not replace adeptness for discerning if there is a gap between

the managerial intentions of a program and the employee interpretations of an event. The forward thinking verbiage contained within many corporate credos, mission statements, and slogans matter little to people when their daily experiences contradict such corporate proclamations (Hellriegel, Jackson, & Slocum, 2005). Unfortunately, Morgan (1986) noted that many organizations have “fragmented cultures” of this kind, where words and actions are incongruent with one another.

There is truth to the idea that poorly executed or meaningless events can leave a bitter taste in the mouths of employees that is not easily forgotten. If haphazardly planned or badly timed, corporate play can be perceived by employees as gimmicky, condescending, and devious. According to Gatland (2001), resentments can run high if the fun occurs after hours and infringes upon family time, carries political repercussions for the non-participants, uses money that employees prefer to be in their paychecks, or tries to create a smokescreen to divert attention from more serious organizational concerns. Some companies are appointing a fun czar; this type of action assumes that playfulness can be forced, mandated, and scheduled (Kaye & Jordan-Evans, 1999). However, workplace consultants warn that making fun a mission for the company *can* potentially be a misguided effort. Employees quickly reject initiatives that are disingenuous or heavy-handed. The companies that successfully mix business with pleasure listen to what workers really want and need. Then, they develop creative suggestions to make ordinary job tasks a little more lighthearted and then slowly progress toward more celebratory and/or spontaneous events.

Investor resistance can be another stumbling block when transitioning to a playful environment. The external stakeholders are the vigilant watchdogs who are much more concerned about their return on investments than the latest retreat designed to build morale

and loyalty (Deal & Key, 1998). Since the business world has been rocked by several high profile corporate scandals involving financial misconduct over the past few years, investors have a legitimate reason to monitor how their money is spent. On the other hand, prudence must not lead to paranoia. It is a common occurrence in many organizations that promises of “long-term benefits succumb to demands for quarterly accountability” (Deal & Key, 1998, p. 15). While it is impossible for an outsider to feel the emotional impact of a meaningful celebration or ritual, both internal and external constituents should be reminded that new ideas may be an investment in future growth and prosperity. Therefore, an open mind is vital.

The tendency for people to partition off their lives can be yet another hindrance to beneficial change. Activities *outside* of work, whatever form they might take, are the things that are interesting and enriching. Conventional wisdom suggests that to really live means being at home instead of at work. There is a generalized belief that humans merely exist through the drudgery of the week to experience all the fascinating and enticing encounters that happen exclusively on weekends and holidays. Unfortunately, because so much time is spent on the job, a large slice of life may be sacrificed in a sterile, spiritless workplace (Deal & Key, 1998). Autry (1994) describes how a lifeless and limiting work environment perpetuates itself:

Most managers and their companies affirm that people dislike working and, given the chance, would walk away from it. By assuming that people really don't want to work, we establish rules, policies, and procedures that serve to restrict rather than enable and empower people (p. 15).

If organizational leaders regress toward McGregor's (1960) pessimistic Theory X assessment of employee behavior as illustrated above, work truly does become a dreadful chore. On the other hand, managers have the prerogative to adopt the humanistic Theory Y approach that suggests people have the capacity to respond positively to their social environment at work (McGregor, 1960). If so, play can serve as one factor that reinforces the idea that time at work can be as enjoyable as time away from it.

While symbolic gestures may not receive much attention when compared to the quantitative aspects of management, both are crucial to long-term viability of the organization. Schein (1992) offers this reminder, "...the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture" (p. 5). If leadership and culture are as intertwined as Schein suggests, the ability of a leader to periodically adjust in a way that moves the organization forward is an invaluable skill. Furthermore, since play has the potential to maintain, reinforce, and transform the organizational culture in a positive way, leaders should not relegate it to the periphery. The key rests in how the organizational system as a whole is managed and perceived.

#### Implications for Organizational Systems

Etzioni (1975) labeled the dysfunctional organizational systems as "coercive." In a coercive workplace, employees feel alienated and peer relationships develop as a defense against authority. In contrast, he defined a "goal consensus" system as one where employees identify with their leaders and collegial interaction evolves around tasks that support organizational objectives. When the organization makes either positive or negative assumptions about human nature, the impact on the overall culture is dramatic and lasting (Schein, 1992). Therefore, if the core values reflect collaborative efforts, the leaders will

demonstrate concern for customers, stockholders, and employees (Deal & Key, 1998). Every decision and action conveys the message that people are valued for their contribution to the company, new ideas are encouraged, and mistakes are a natural part of the innovative process. On the other hand, if the managers promote unhealthy competition between employees or departments, suspicion becomes the prominent theme. In addition, people are treated as dispensable, creativity is discouraged, and mistakes are castigated.

In a slightly different interpretation, Myers (1970) describes organizational systems as being either restrictive or helpful. Restrictive environments do not come close to recognizing human potential; instead, they evoke anxiety, resentment, and “system-fighting behavior.” Nonconformity is quashed by supervision while “following instructions” is encouraged. Jobs are often designed to fit the lowest level of talent and are “non-thinking positions.” Thus, creativity is seldom rewarded and may provoke reprimands. Systems can “fight” internally with one another when one group or department is given a set of goals that conflict with the goals of another area. In these situations, there is mutual detriment to the departmental efficiency and individual morale. Helpful systems are also called systems for human effectiveness and they incorporate meaningful goals and conditions that are conducive to interpersonal competence. Senge’s (1997) concept of personal mastery where organizations are encouraged to foster skill-based and intellectual growth among employees correlates closely with the helpful system idea. Communication, feedback, and employee involvement are all cornerstones shaping this type of culture. From all the discussion in this section, a central message emerges: a vibrant and healthy organizational culture doesn’t simply happen. In order for a company to nurture creativity, encourage innovation, foster

continuous learning, **and** become more playful in the process, intuitive and visionary leaders are required.

### Benefits of Organizational Play

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*[Work] is about a search too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread,  
for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than stupor;  
in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying.*

Studs Terkel

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In today's frenzied corporate world of mergers, downsizing, rightsizing, and reengineering where the sole intent is to increase profits, suspicion and cynicism in the workplace has become endemic. For instance, Kouzes and Posner (1993) describe a crisis of confidence among American managers that has caused an unsettling employee/leader schism. As a result, work has become less significant to the individual worker. Fox (1994) draws this distinction: meaningless work is derived from the mechanistic model (described earlier) where people perform a narrowly defined task purely for economic gain while meaningful work involves intrinsic rewards. Cox (1969) observes that when people lose their gift for fantasy, life becomes a monotonous grind. Therefore, injecting a sense of playfulness into a sterile and structured environment could certainly have the potential to resuscitate a lifeless workplace.

Corporate play, like jumbo shrimp and taped live, must surely qualify for oxymoron status. It is difficult to imagine how those impersonal, greedy behemoths of capitalism called corporations could be linked to the humanness and light-hearted fun associated with play. The business environment as of late has been characterized by e-commerce entrenchment, a tepid stock market, multiple sector layoffs, high profile ethical scandals, competition from outsourcing, and heightened anxiety in world infiltrated by terrorism. It is a period when life



in general is less predictable and individuals in particular feel more vulnerable.

Subsequently, some organizational behavior experts believe that playfulness, with its potential for both tangible and intangible benefits, must become a more fundamental component of corporate culture.

### General Competencies

Although a few contemporary writers still believe that play is mindless revelry of which humans can derive few benefits except for a few moments of escapism, there are certain groupings of playful behavior that have emerged that can be applied to several aspects of practical living. Imaginative play is one of those areas that many researchers contend assists in the development of a variety of skills that permeate adult lives (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996; Ackerman, 1999; Terr, 1999). Playfulness can positively affect humans emotionally, socially, educationally, and culturally. For instance, Blatner (1988) contends that it can enhance vitality and mental health, strengthen relationships and reduced alienation since it is generally viewed as a non-threatening behavior, aid in the capacity to engage in the learning process more fully, and stimulate the type of creativity that is demanded in coping with the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

The broad dimensions described above can become even more meaningful when broken down into more specific psychosocial components. As an example, the ability of the mind to become more agile and relate to diverse points of view is a useful element. Initiative and improvisation can be improved in a way where mistakes can be recognized and modified. A sense of humor, evident in play behavior, can develop a capacity for accepting and utilizing criticism (Caplan & Caplan, 1973). The ability to more effectively communicate in a self-disclosing, honest, and friendly way can be an outgrowth of exercising playful

impulses (Terr, 1999). Play behavior can lead to a greater consideration for others feeling and the potential to be more comfortable in a group setting (Deal & Key, 1998). It leads to a search beyond the obvious; the overused yet important “thinking outside the box” mentality (Lieberman, 1977; Deal & Kennedy, 1980; Caughey, 1984). Finally, imaginative adult play can lead to greater problem solving techniques and strategies (Robbins & Coulter, 2005; Schrage, 2000; Oden, 1997; Hermann, 1996; Blatner, 1988).

Both the broad dimensions and the more specific components can aid in everyday interaction both inside and outside the workplace. These skills are constantly being tested and utilized in each new setting. According to Ellis (1973), “play fosters the behavioral variability that increases the probability of future adaptation to unpredictable circumstances” (p. 116). As referred to earlier, for the information age and knowledge-based organizations that have evolved over the past several years, there has been increased emphasis and value placed on the attributes of open-mindedness, intuition, and independent thought (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Hansen, Nohria, & Tierney, 1999; Lipman-Blumen, 1996; Senge, 1994; Schein, 1992; Quinn, 1992). Therefore, the unique characteristic of play that allows people to shift roles and make new connections is important to the individual and the group (Deal & Key, 1998; Liebermann, 1997). Since the usefulness and uniqueness of play has been discussed throughout the study primarily in broader terms, the following sections identify specific examples of organizations that are integrating play into their cultures and finding it beneficial.

### Tangibles

While I am concerned with examining such “soft” aspects of organizational culture such as team spirit, loyalty, and morale that are observable, I am equally interested in

analyzing the more tangible variables as well. Because it is difficult to quantify the more elusive elements about how people feel about their work, demonstrating the worth of play in measurable terms could add greater significance to the overall investigative results. Perhaps having a playful environment at work is not the only trait that aids companies in succeeding, but injecting fun into the workplace may be one component that encourages a high level of employee commitment and job satisfaction (Robbins & Coulter, 2005). Therefore, various examples of organizations that have experienced lower turnover and greater productivity are briefly profiled.

Remedy, a software corporation in Mountain View, California, demonstrates how humor and playfulness during the hiring process are linked to measurable results. From the initial startup phase in 1990, the founders promoted fun as a key value for Remedy. For example, applicants may find themselves being interviewed at a mini-car race. In addition, new hires have donned sumo suits to wrestle their bosses. This unrestrictive and unconventional type of employee recruitment and orientation has produced impressive bottom line results for Remedy. The company has grown dramatically since its humble beginnings by doubling in size and revenue for more than five consecutive years. Their cost per hire (i.e., recruiting, interviewing, relocating, etc.) is about \$6,100 compared to an industry average of \$8,450. In addition, Remedy also retains its best employees longer – two years longer than others in a geographic region where high tech industry recruitment is intensely competitive (Hemsath, 2001). From Remedy's point of view, the most capable and talented people are actually self-selecting themselves into their playful corporate culture.

Honeywell, a diversified corporation that manufactures products ranging from aircraft electronic systems to specialty fibers used in bullet proof vests, doesn't sound like an

organization that is overly playful. However, Dawn Morrelli has proven that fun and productivity can coexist and thrive together. Ms. Morrelli, known as the “calendar girl,” keeps two calendars: one measures time in the standard way, the other tracks the number of days saved when a project is completed ahead of schedule. When a “holiday” is approached on the fictitious calendar, she celebrates the occasion. She has been known to hand out Valentine’s Day cards in August, Easter eggs in September, and New Year’s greetings in midsummer. After about six months worth of tracking during a typical year, it is not unusual to observe as much as two years’ worth of holidays. This playful system has helped raise Honeywell’s on-time delivery rate from 75% to 87% (Hemsath, 2001).

Kris Horner, CEO of Auto Glass Plus in Carrollton, Texas, knows how to bring the lure of the beach to landlocked Carrollton. For instance, he invented Hawaiian Day where aloha shirts, virgin daiquiris, and floral leis offer some island atmosphere to an otherwise humdrum workday. In this topical paradise, Kris spends the time delivering pizza and drinks to his employees and considers it is a great way to connect. Mr. Horner comments: “You spend a bit of time talking to them [employees] and I learn a lot” (Sturgeon, p. 23). The theme days have grown in popularity to the point where employees volunteer their own time to help decorate the office before the event. Besides being fun, Auto Glass Plus reports an increase in sales of 5% to 25% on the tropical theme days (Sturgeon, 2000). In this case, the leadership involvement of Mr. Horner seems to be the catalyst for making the day both enjoyable and productive.

Finally, there is the astounding story of Manco’s Jack Kahl, the unconventional CEO of a duct tape manufacturer who led the company for 30 years before passing the torch to his son three years ago (McClenahan, 2001). Along the way, he became a legendary figure for

promoting a family-friendly and fun-oriented management style as his Ohio-based company basked in enormous success. The frivolity and humor exhibited at Manco was definitely shaped by the charisma and personality of its leader. In years past, Mr. Kahl swam across a duck pond in chilly weather and shaved his head when various financial targets were met. One year he spent more than \$200,000 of his own money to bring in several Broadway stars and rent one of Cleveland's stately old theaters for an evening of entertainment for Manco partners (employees). Kahl's philosophy is not complicated,

You have to be good to the people who are good to you. You have to...say thanks so that people are appreciated and have a sense of belonging. When I walk through the company doors at Manco, I want to find the same spirit and enthusiasm that's in a family room (Verespej, 2000, p. 1)

His unique brand of leadership has shaped an organizational culture that is flooded with positive reinforcement and impressive financial achievements. During his tenure, he turned an \$83,000 industrial tape company into a \$300 million corporation that's been part of the German-based Henkel since 1998. His Duck Tape brand has captured 63% of the American market and the future looks bright (Verespej, 1999). His story and the others cited in this section offer a few examples of the tangible benefits that conducting business in a playful manner can produce. However, the intangible factors are important as well.

### Intangibles

Patrick (1916) described play as those human activities that are free, spontaneous, and pursued for their own sake. He also asserts that interest in playing is self-sustaining and the actions are not continued under any internal or external compulsion. While play may be sought for its own sake, within an organizational setting play behaviors can also provide a

host of indirect benefits to both employer and employee. Eliminating material goals in the workplace through playfulness can liberate individuals from the formal boundaries characteristic of most corporations and lead to novel ideas, new visions, better relationships, and simple fun. Rader and Jessup (1976) agree that once utilitarian concerns are set aside, the wonders of a playful attitude can be fully experienced. With their newfound freedom, a few players (employees) may decide to do just enough to get by, but most of them will do more and achieve more than anyone could imagine (Coonradt, 1997). Therefore, a growing number of exemplary companies are creating opportunities for employees to play at work through a range of activities. The non-financial objectives are to build a team atmosphere, nourish a sense of community, and release a positive corporate spirit (Deal & Key, 1998; Hemsath, 2001; Yerkes, 2001).

When people engage in spontaneous, imaginative activities, it functions as a powerful bonding force (Schein, 1992; Blatner, 1988). Within the workplace, this bond can translate into increased team effectiveness or greater individual tolerance among colleagues. This social benefit satisfies the needs of both the group and the individual. When examining the spirit of play, those transitory moments of joy have value in their own right. Heschel (1965) reflected upon this phenomenon and offered a plea for its continuance:

To celebrate is to contemplate the singularity of the moment and to enhance the singularity of self. What was will not be again. The man of our time is losing the power to celebrate. Instead of celebrating, he seeks to be amused or entertained. Celebration is an active state, an act of expressing reverence or appreciation (p. 115).

An individual's personality functions most fully when it is expanding and/or integrating its roles (Blatner, 1988). Consciousness is nurtured by experience, even if it is symbolic, as in fantasy or play. When people are limited to living within certain constraints (e.g., family, work, etc.) for excessive periods of time, there is a tendency to become tired or bored (Cox, 1969). It is a relief to stretch beyond the entrenched role and engage in an activity such as play to bring balance to life and essentially heal our psyches. Playing together more vigorously and spontaneously demonstrates the "commonalities of the human condition and counteracts the sense of emotional isolation" that is sometimes felt (Blatner, 1988, p. 39). This sense of community can greatly reduce the stress and fear that has infiltrated the modern workplace due to the downsizing, rightsizing, restructuring, mergers, buyouts, and closings that all breed a feeling of insecurity.

Matt Weinstein, founder and CEO of Playfair, Inc., an international consulting company, has devoted his life to designing seminars related to team building, reward and recognition, internal customer service, stress management, and fun in the workplace. While he believes in his message, he also acknowledges that cultivating a playful attitude in the workplace often requires an organizational culture transformation that allows play to be on par with profit. In his words, "Laughter and play and fun on the job can help create a culture of caring and connection in the workplace that is just as important – if not more so – than productivity and profitability" (Weinstein, 1996, p. 24). While not everyone supports such an extreme view, Blatner (1988) agrees that play offers an "attitude of the mind" and method of cultivating an organization's human resources by validating the qualities of initiative, enthusiasm, improvisation, and inclusion. Therefore, if the human potential for creativity,

ingenuity, and innovation is more fully realized, those intangible qualities have a high probability of being converted into tangible long-term benefits.

### Principles of Organizational Play

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*Many people know how to work hard; many others know how to play well;  
but the rarest talent in the world is the ability to introduce the  
elements of playfulness into work, and to put some constructive labor into our leisure.*

Sydney J. Harris

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### Establishing a Playful Culture

In today's vacillating economic climate, environments where employees are encouraged to deal with workplace challenges in a creative, novel, and innovative way are experiencing better results (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Hellriegel, Jackson, & Slocum, 2005; Robbins & Coulter, 2005). Motivating employees at all levels of the organization to take a more "proactive attitude" and "step into the unknown" is not an easy task, however (Morgan, 1988). Yerkes (2001) offers some candid advice if a company is serious about infusing a sense of playfulness into the workplace. She notes that success with the integration process is based on a systemic, long-term approach that considers the unique cultural characteristics of each organization and the individuals who are employed there. She warns that the change process is not simply about how people "act" but more about how people "think." In other words, the focus should be not be on "changing what is done" as much as it should be targeted to "changing who we are." She offers the reminder that playfulness is not an artificial action or a set of beliefs that can be adopted or mandated – it's a mindset that must be woven carefully into the fabric of the organization and eventually realized through both individual and group expression. While ideas gathered from playful organizations can be helpful, a detailed action plan listing the concrete steps for successfully integrating play with



work is not productive because it does not influence attitudes, only behaviors. Most organizational theorists agree with the assumption that incorporating both cognitive and behavioral elements into any change initiative is more ideologically sound than relying on just one dimension (Sims, 1992). There are a few suggestions, however, that encourage open-mindedness: a characteristic that provides a receptive environment to allow playfulness to *happen* within an organization.

It is important to challenge and question preconceived notions about work and play. We may be like fish in water: immersed in our workplace cultures but oblivious as to how its various components determine, sustain, or obstruct the “life force of our work” (Seivert, 1998). Being a bit irreverent toward existing workplace decorum tends to shed a realistic light upon various practices. Even within an intensely structured environment, questioning what is being done on a day-to-day basis and why it is done can bring clarity and a fresh perspective. In other words, being “confident enough to laugh and smile when it feels like the right thing to do – regardless of the established protocol or potential fallout” can make playfulness possible (Yerkes, 2001, p. 144). Taking a holistic view of the organization that encompasses the dominant culture, as well as its various subcultures, can make facilitation somewhat easier (Moorhead & Griffin, 2004; Bolman & Deal, 1991). In other words, being a sharp observer of *all* the personalities, tasks, structures, activities, and information sources within the company can provide valuable insight into what makes it tick. However, no one should ever underestimate the complexity associated with systemic change. In an interview by Webber (1999), Peter Senge claims that truly successful organizational-wide change must start small and understand the interplay of competing forces (i.e., self-reinforcing influences that assist in growth and limiting processes that impede growth).

The pace of the entire process should be monitored continuously and may need to be slowed. There is no reason to rush headlong into a program to initiate sweeping change without a clear vision of the future and without savoring the present. In fact, as mentioned many times in this study, imposing fun and playfulness upon individuals is a recipe for failure. Although involvement is crucial, the play spirit cannot thrive in an environment that is contrived and inauthentic. Therefore, all employees must feel that they are accepted and included without being pressured. Everyone may not want to participate in frivolity at work, but each person should at least have the opportunity. While the commitment, enthusiasm, and example of organizational leaders is vital, it's the active involvement of the masses that truly has a transformational effect (Deal & Key, 1998). Until employees know that it is safe to take risks and experiment with new behaviors, they will continue to abide by the status quo, however (Hemsath, 2001). Therefore, organizational leaders must provide support, encouragement, resources, inspiration, and foresight in a deliberate and incremental manner where far-reaching positive change is the ultimate expectation. However, a radical and revolutionary departure from established routines over a short time span is a counterproductive approach.

According to Hemsath (2001), the lines of communication must be open and active within the organization in order for new ideas to gain traction. Corporate communication in the form of company-wide goals can set the tone. Whether the communication is formal or informal in nature, playfulness can be nurtured only in an environment where information and ideas are shared freely. If there are negative forces such as gossip, jealousy, and perceived favoritism within the company, these elements can destroy any hope of a more open and caring workplace where colleagues, supervisors, and other employees interact in a

positive manner. Communication and trust are closely connected factors. A high degree of trust should be firmly established within the organization before beginning the transformation process. Mistrust can undermine any progressive or experimental program. The lack of trust might be between management and subordinates, co-workers, or even customers. If workers are regularly mocking the intelligence and questioning the motives of management, these are sure signs that trust is missing. These behaviors are typical of people who believe their contributions are unappreciated and overlooked by company leaders. To counter an atmosphere of distrust, the rationale for decisions and changes that are implemented should be explained. Ideally, instead of issuing dictums, it is important to involve employees in the decision-making process as much as possible. If management demonstrates that they believe in the competencies of the people they have hired, the trust level will rise. Since a playful environment may mean taking chances and completing tasks in unconventional ways, management must put their confidence in the employees' ability to act appropriately to maintain productivity while simultaneously experiencing fun. Once past this hurdle, spontaneous and creative ideas can incubate.

An enlightened workplace built on trust can then proceed to soliciting broad-based participation. As mentioned earlier, not everyone will want to get involved and many others will have an initial reluctance. However, the process has the potential to gain enormous momentum at this point. Vertical integration from all levels of the organization is one of the keys to success. It is not beneficial if only the production area or the finance department is willing to embrace unique ways of conducting their daily routines and celebrate successes in daring fashion. Bureaucratic tendencies and rigid organizational structures can be obstructions to overall participation from all sections of the company. Mackenzie (1996)

wrote a book entitled *Orbiting the Giant Hairball* in which the hairball is the “tangled mess” of a large company that wanders in the confusion of too many layers of management, a maze of policies and procedures, and an inflexible organizational structure. He proposes that in order to survive and thrive in corporate life, individuals must interact with the hairball without being entwined in the dysfunction. In reference to participation in particular, it is vital that an organization garner involvement from as many quarters as possible without getting mired in the bureaucratic muck.

If the existing hierarchy is preventing constructive change to occur, dismantling it should be a consideration. There was a time when the bureaucracy was hailed as a great organizational innovation because it created the division of labor, transformed management into a profession, and brought order that allowed specialists to coordinate work efforts (Pinchot, 1993). However, the unwieldy bureaucratic systems of the past seem passé and grossly ineffective in their ability to respond quickly to an increasingly dynamic economic environment. In the early life of most corporations, there is an informality that permeates the atmosphere and the guiding tenet is basically to succeed. In this initial phase, adaptability and resourcefulness are typically prized and encouraged. As organizations age, however, shared assumptions and cultural norms become more entrenched, policies and procedures multiple, reaction time to both internal and external factors normally slows, and the “hairball” emerges. This natural progression holds true for historically non-bureaucratic entities as well. Ultimately, “a business born of new ideas and absolute freedom becomes burdened with restrictive attitudes and rules” (Yerkes, 2001, p. 146). Even the rituals and ceremonies discussed earlier that can bring a sense of meaning to the workplace can have a downside. If the activities are narrow and limiting, they should be discarded or modified to

allow for more free flowing thoughts to flourish. According to Freiberg and Freiberg (1996), an organization can initially begin to recapture the entrepreneurial spirit by abolishing unnecessary meetings, minimizing paperwork, and simplifying communication.

As the process moves forward and workers become more enthusiastic about their jobs, organizational leaders must emphasize the importance of maintaining a healthy balance between work and home while simultaneously keeping employees focused on company priorities. As referred to earlier, Seivert (1998) describes the “less developed”, and much too playful, “jester organization” as one that can veer off course, take shortcuts with products or services, and ignore and miss deadlines. In addition, the free wheeling atmosphere may lead to difficulties in understanding or acknowledging who is really in charge. In previous sections, some researchers cautioned that high commitment organizations promoting the concept of collective ties are often both efficient and potentially dangerous because individuals may invest too much time and energy in the work circle and neglect family obligations (Hochschild, 1997; Corbin, 1993; Arnott, 2000). If company responsibilities become all consuming, even if they seem enjoyable and fun, the delicate balance between work, family, and community may be disrupted (Hochschild, 1997). A healthy perspective is when employees who find their work fulfilling are able to leave it and pursue other self-satisfying endeavors outside the office (Arnott, 2000). In the perfect symbiotic relationship, playfulness makes work more meaningful, enjoyable, and profitable. However, work is only one dimension of a well-rounded life.

Although organizations are always evolving, when a unique and special character materializes within the workplace, substantial change has been accomplished. Oftentimes, comments from outside the company that reflect the knowledge of a playful culture can

signal that a distinctive identity has been established (Hemsath, 2001). An organizational “personality” speaks to the celebrations, rituals, ceremonies, artifacts, stories, and other elements that define the work environment (Pfeffer, 1992; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Ouchi, 1981). As time goes by, ideas for these types of activities start to bubble up from all levels within the organization. Through the power of synergy, tangible outcomes such as employee retention, customer satisfaction, increased sales, and overall productivity become evident while the intangible elements of initiative, improvisation, loyalty, and esprit de corps begin to reveal themselves as well. When this desirable state has been achieved, the company creates its fun internally and spontaneously. This feeling of oneness stimulates creativity, innovation and a sense of continuous self-renewal (Hermann, 1996).

While difficult, it is ultimately up to individuals to liberate themselves from self-imposed behavior. Kelley (2001) states that getting off the “beaten path” can move us beyond the mechanical and unconscious actions that guide much of our everyday life. At those times, a more childlike (not childish) sense of amazement emerges from our personality – one that asks questions, interprets impressions, and generates reactions to all sorts of experiences. As our society has generally compartmentalized work and play, individuals are compelled to do the same. Since there are quantitative benefits to be gained from infusing playfulness into the workplace, discarding the erroneous belief that having a good time at work as silly and unprofessional is vitally important. Resistance to change is a well-documented, powerful, and natural human response (Staw, B.M., 1982; Wanberg & Banas, 2000; Kegan & Lahey, 2001). According to Machiavelli (1532/1998), implementing change is difficult because even though a small number of people are often in favor of it, the opposition will be “numerous and enthusiastic in their resistance.” However, if individuals

understand that success isn't only the result of dispassion, control, and power, there is hope for constructive change (Yerkes, 2001). Other writers also believe that if the shackles of fear and inhibition are broken, play can be expressed freely and human potential can be more fully realized in workplace settings (Deal & Key, 1998; Seivert, 1998; Terr, 1999; Hemsath, 2001). If playfulness is introduced in a thoughtful and incremental way, the rewards can be innumerable.

### Conclusion

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*Respond to every call that excites your spirit.*

Jeluddin Rumi

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The primary purpose of this study was to consider and examine the often underestimated and overlooked aspect of play as it relates to corporate culture and organizational effectiveness. Initially, I constructed a broad theoretical framework based on historical references to work and play. I then reviewed the early management theories leading up to contemporary organizational behavioral models to establish a business context for the study. The rapidly changing and often unstable business climate of the 21<sup>st</sup> century sends a powerful message to organizations that human capital must be valued, protected, and rewarded. Through my research, I discovered scores of various types businesses that have embraced the idea that work can also be fun. In many cases, the fusion of play and work has resulted in tangible benefits such as employee retention, greater profitability, and increased sales. Although more difficult to quantify, the intangible attributes of creativity, ingenuity, innovation, loyalty, team spirit, job satisfaction, and a sense of community were reoccurring themes as well.

W. Edwards Deming, a pioneer of management thought, believed that the ultimate business of business is the human spirit – giving people a chance to unleash their talents, flourish intellectually, and produce modern miracles (Deal & Key, 1998). Even though the humanistic characteristics listed above are difficult to measure, intuitively we know when they exist, and especially when they cease to exist. It is also apparent that the intangible factors are inextricably linked to tangible outcomes. I agree with Seivert's (1998) assessment that the ever-changing, hypercompetitive, impersonal era of “lean and mean” business practices have increased our thirst for meaning and a need for individual and group sustenance. Depressed, tense, angst-ridden environments are self-limiting and rarely cultivate growth, commitment, or personal expression. My research affirms that emancipation doesn't come through mandated, forced, disingenuous, or contrived activities. It is possible, however, for our spirits to be lifted and nurtured through spontaneous or planned events like celebrations, rituals, and ceremonies. Frivolity for its own sake can be energizing as well. The common characteristic of these dissimilar behaviors is the element of play. Thus, the overwhelming amount of anecdotal evidence presented in this paper strongly suggests that allowing and encouraging playfulness strengthens individual relationships, facilitates team-building, and assists the organization to thrive in both good and bad economic times through a collective sense of determination.

For this study to move beyond descriptive evidence and offer definitive answers, simple recipes, and lock step procedures that lead to a targeted methods for increasing organizational effectiveness through play would be ill advised, however. Even when considering the various psychological, philosophical, sociological, and biological analyses, there is no consensus of the role or impact of play on our lives. Unfortunately, the



voluminous amount of research in the area still yields ambiguous and sometimes conflicting explanations of how play is defined and conceptualized. Furthermore, the organizational outcomes of playful cultures have yet to be studied and substantiated long-term. However, through this research, I can confidently surmise that play is a force that enthralls, thrills, revitalizes, and motivates. Most importantly, it offers a unique opportunity to learn. Since adaptability, flexibility, and productivity follow learning, this combination has the potential to create a distinctive and vibrant workplace. Therefore, when playfulness is integrated into the organizational culture of a company in a thoughtful manner, people flourish. If employees find their work more fulfilling, the organization prospers as well. Therefore, additional investigations in the area of corporate play is highly recommended and clearly merited based on the information I gathered.

Lee Hecht Harrison (LHH) is a global career management corporation that provides outplacement, leadership development, and organizational consulting services. Steve Harrison serves on the board of directors and offers this quote from an unknown author that encapsulates how he perceives his work and how I view the essence of this project:

A master at the art of living draws no sharp distinction between his work and his play; his mind and his body; his education and his recreation. He hardly knows which is which, he simply pursues his vision of excellence through whatever he is doing and leaves others to determine whether he is working or playing. To himself, he always seems to be doing both (Yerkes, 2001, p. 105).

Based on the results of this study, blurring the lines between work and play can enrich employees' lives and enhance the overall atmosphere of entire organizations. Therefore, any

company should at least experiment with adopting a more playful philosophy in the way it does business.

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