

by Boyd Byers

Playing at Work and Working at Play

Every office has at least one. The guy who stockpiles Star Wars action figures in his cubicle. Or the gal with the Hello Kitty screen saver who jams to the same music as her teenage daughter. Twenty years ago, they would have been considered immature and unprofessional. Today, they're more likely to be seen as fun and creative, even hip. What happened to the wall that used to separate the worlds of adults and children? And how has its erosion affected the workplace?

Rejuveniles, adulescents, and kidults

The average age of video game players is 29 and rising. The typical Honda Element owner is 40 years old. And what's up with adult dodge ball and kickball leagues?

The increasing number of adults unashamedly indulging their inner children hasn't gone unnoticed by social scientists and market researchers. Author Christopher Noxon explores the phenomenon in his book *Rejuvenile: Kickball, Cartoons, Cupcakes, and the Reinvention of the American Grown-up*. Rejuveniles, also known as adulescents or kidults, aren't stunted adolescents, according to Noxon, but "a new breed of adult, identified by a commitment to remain playful, energetic, and fun in the face of adult responsibilities."

The question remains: Why the movement toward kiddie culture? Theories abound. It's a byproduct of affluence and abundance. Childhood pleasures are a way to find comfort in a frightening and uncertain world. Fathers are more actively involved in parenting. Workplaces are looser today and not only tolerate but also embrace individuality.

Or perhaps it's just a return to the natural order. Before the industrial revolution, Noxon observes, children and adults lived their lives together and shared the same games, work, and stories. The concept of adulthood as we know it was "invented" just a few hundred years ago, and adults are rejuveniling now that American society has lifted the sanction of disapproval that used to stifle a sudden impulse to play kickball, watch *SpongeBob SquarePants*, or eat Oreos by separating the cookies and licking the creamy center.

All work and no play make Jack a less productive employee

Americans are working faster, harder, and more hours than ever before. That's why it's important to incorporate play into work, according to the Institute for Play. Make work more fun to increase employees' mental, emotional, and physical well-being, the theory goes, and prosperity will follow. Companies large and small are hiring consulting companies — with names like Play, Playfair, and Play with a Purpose — that specialize in making workplaces more fun. Fun and games at work, it seems, is no longer just fun and games; it's serious business. (That sounds weird, doesn't it?)

This isn't play for play's sake but play with a purpose: Improve the bottom line. A more playful work environment results in happier and healthier employees. So increase workplace fun to increase employee creativity, productivity, camaraderie, and loyalty while reducing absenteeism, turnover, and health care costs. Google, for example, encourages its engineers to spend 20 percent of their time playing around on projects of their own choosing. This program has resulted in the creation of several highly profitable new product offerings while increasing employee job satisfaction.

Could increasing the fun factor yield dividends in your workplace? Whether and how to incorporate more play into the workday is something each company needs to decide for itself. Play activities need to be workplace-appropriate and designed to enhance, not distract from, the work. And while many work tasks will never be fun no matter what you do (that's why you have to pay people to do them), you still can incorporate playful ideas — such as giveaways, silly contests, team-building exercises, brainstorming sessions, fitness programs, spontaneous 10-minute play or mental health breaks, or after-work social activities — to make the work environment itself more fun, interactive, and rewarding.

Fun doesn't mean undisciplined, of course. Even playful employees need to be dedicated to the work at hand and display decorum, civility, and respect. The key, as always, is striking a balance. Like Robert Fulghum (the *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* guy) said, "Live a balanced life — learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some."

They said it

Play so that you may be serious.

— Anacharsis

We don't stop playing because we get old. We get old because we stop playing.

— Satchell Paige