

## Down with fun

*The depressing vogue for having fun at work.*

ONE of the many pleasures of watching "Mad Men", a television drama about the advertising industry in the early 1960s, is examining the ways in which office life has changed over the years. One obvious change makes people feel good about themselves: they no longer treat women as second-class citizens. But the other obvious change makes them feel a bit more uneasy: they have lost the art of enjoying themselves at work.

The ad-men in those days enjoyed simple pleasures. They puffed away at their desks. They drank throughout the day. They had affairs with their colleagues. They socialised not in order to bond, but in order to get drunk.

These days many companies are obsessed with fun. Software firms in Silicon Valley have installed rock-climbing walls in their reception areas and put inflatable animals in their offices. Wal-Mart orders its cashiers to smile at all and sundry. The cult of fun has spread like some disgusting haemorrhagic disease. Acclaris, an American IT company, has a "chief fun officer". TD Bank, the American arm of Canada's Toronto Dominion, has a "Wow!" department that dispatches costume-clad teams to "surprise and delight" successful workers. Red Bull, a drinks firm, has installed a slide in its London office.

Fun at work is becoming a business in its own right. Madan Kataria, an Indian who styles himself the "guru of giggling", sells "laughter yoga" to corporate clients. Fun at Work, a British company, offers you "more hilarity than you can handle", including replacing your receptionists with "Ab Fab" lookalikes. Chiswick Park, an office development in London, brands itself with the slogan "enjoy-work", and hosts lunchtime events such as sheep-shearing and geese-herding.

The cult of fun is deepening as well as widening. Google is the acknowledged champion: its offices are blessed with volleyball courts, bicycle paths, a yellow brick road, a model dinosaur, regular games of roller hockey and several professional masseuses. But now two other companies have challenged Google for the jester's crown—Twitter, a microblogging service, and Zappos, an online shoe-shop.

Twitter's website stresses how wacky the company is: workers wear cowboy hats and babble that: "Crazy things happen every day...it's pretty ridiculous." The company has a team of people whose job is to make workers happy: for example, by providing them with cold towels on a hot day. Zappos boasts that creating "fun and a little weirdness" is one of its core values. Tony Hsieh, the boss, shaves his head and spends 10% of his time studying what he calls the "science of happiness". He once joked that Zappos was suing the Walt Disney Company for claiming that it was "the happiest place on earth". The company engages in regular "random acts of kindness": workers form a noisy conga line and single out one of their colleagues for praise. The praisee then has to wear a silly hat for a week.

This cult of fun is driven by three of the most popular management fads of the moment: empowerment, engagement and creativity. Many companies pride themselves on devolving power to front-line workers. But surveys show that only 20% of workers are "fully engaged with their job". Even fewer are creative. Managers hope that "fun" will magically make workers more engaged and creative. But the problem is that as soon as fun becomes part of a corporate strategy it ceases to be fun and becomes its opposite—at best an empty shell and at worst a tiresome imposition.

The most unpleasant thing about the fashion for fun is that it is mixed with a large dose of coercion. Companies such as Zappos don't merely celebrate wackiness. They more or less require it. Compulsory fun is nearly always cringe-making. Twitter calls its office a "Twooffice". Boston Pizza encourages workers to send "golden bananas" to colleagues who are "having fun while being the best". Behind the "fun" façade there often lurks some crude management thinking: a desire to brand the company as better than its rivals, or a plan to boost productivity through team-building. Twitter even boasts that it has "worked hard to create an environment that spawns productivity and happiness".

If it's fun, it needn't be compulsory

While imposing ersatz fun on their employees, companies are battling against the real thing. Many force smokers to huddle outside like furtive criminals. Few allow their employees to drink at lunch time, let alone earlier in the day. A regiment of busybodies—from lawyers to human-resources functionaries—is waging war on office romance, particularly between people of different ranks. Hewlett-Packard, a computer-maker, recently sacked its successful chief executive, Mark Hurd, after a contractor made vague allegations—later quietly settled—of sexual harassment. (Oracle, a rival, quickly snapped up Mr Hurd.)

The merchants of fake fun have met some resistance. When Wal-Mart tried to impose alien rules on its German staff—such as compulsory smiling and a ban on affairs with co-workers—it touched off a guerrilla war that ended only when the supermarket chain announced it was pulling out of Germany in 2006. But such victories are rare. For most wage slaves forced to pretend they are having fun at work, the only relief is to poke fun at their tormentors. Popular culture provides some inspiration. "You don't have to be mad to work here. In fact we ask you to complete a medical questionnaire to ensure that you are not," deadpans David Brent, the risible boss in "The Office", a satirical television series. Homer Simpson's employer, a nuclear-power plant, has regular "funny hat days" but lax safety standards. "Mad Men" reminds people of a world they have lost—a world where bosses did not think that "fun" was a management tool and where employees could happily quaff Scotch at noon. Cheers to that.

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