



It is an idea diametrically opposed to that of most managers: that play and work can coexist productively. In conversation with [Georgina Peters](#), [Babis Mainemelis](#) and [Sarah Harvey](#) suggest that you and your employees should play more: it can help your company evolve into one that's more creative, innovative – and fun.

Do you find it hard for some people to connect play with the “real world” of hard work?

For some, yes. Play is for kids, poets and hobbyists – it’s not what successful hard working adults do – or so they think. But we try to get them to open their minds to the possibility that many top businesses were started by people who wanted both to work hard and play hard.

Such as?

We could name many companies and even industries. Consider that Disney, Ferrari, Harley Davidson, life insurance, aerospace engineering, and Silicon Valley did not start as sober and detailed business plans. These companies and industries were all born out of the passionate play of their founders. Walt Disney, in fact, admitted that much of what he did was founded on play: “Disneyland is a work of love. We didn’t go into Disneyland just with the idea of making money.”

But hasn’t the world changed to a more serious tone, given fierce global competition?

On the contrary, the work culture is becoming more playful in part because of fierce global competition. Companies that persist with rigid and parochial mindsets have a good recipe for vacillation or extinction in the long run. In the modern global economy the “hard currencies” are flexibility, adaptability, and the capacity for renewal. Nature has given us play to help us practice and calibrate these very qualities. We would also say that global businesses are run by global teams. Compare teams that have sky-high motivation with business-as-usual teams. In most high-performing teams, you’ll find people at play. That might not be what they call

of it, is a big part of that problem. Each year, business journals tout the most admired companies. Isn’t it interesting that, year after year, the same names crop up? For example, think about Apple, 3M, IDEO, Google, Gore, Electronic Arts, Pixar. Now, why is that? Our view is that such companies have crafted an organizational culture that nurtures play to the benefit of both their employees and their clients. Steve Jobs has always been clear about it: “I think we’re having fun. I think our customers really like our products. And we’re always trying to do better.”

Then these companies have become winners because they know how to play.

You will find that the winners have followed nature’s path to creativity: the fun yet serious business of play. A cultural transformation is currently underway in the business world. It is a transformation staged by progressive companies that break away from a 300-year-old work ethic that has tried, unsuccessfully, to exile play from the workplace. These companies have not merely opened the doors of their workplaces to play: they have placed play at the heart of a corporate culture in which discovery and invention thrive. Although these companies have youthful and playful cultures, they can be considered as the true grown-ups in the business landscape. They took a bold decision to break away from the past; they are not afraid to play.

How much of what you’re saying comes down to your own wishes about how you’d like the workplace to be?

While we, of course, have our own preferences about how to work, we have come to believe in the

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it, but it’s play all right. Moreover, compare businesses that survived the test of time by being adaptive with those that became extinct. You’ll find that the former did something other firms failed to do: they embraced play as a part of their cultures.

So, a company devoid of play might also be one that’s devoid of promise?

Well, it is likely to be a company that is not very interesting! And largely void of both human and business promise for that reason. For many people the “real world of hard work” is boring, stifling, or otherwise less-than-satisfying; play, or the absence

power of play after doing extensive research. For several years, we have studied how creative organizations manage to transform play into a winning asset for creativity and innovation. We have collected data and observations about play and creativity in the United States, UK, France, Greece, Portugal, South Africa, and Dubai. We interviewed creative professionals and directly observed creative teams at work in diverse industries, including a large broadcasting corporation, a software firm, a sailing boat company, a telecommunications organization and a symphony orchestra. We spoke to over 100 executives in various industries and →

→ found wide variations in experience; but, in every case, we also found three indelible features. The first one was that leaders who succeed at shaping a highly creative corporate culture know what any parent in the world knows: play is as natural to humans as breathing; and no matter what you do to stop it, people will always find ways to play, whether you like it or not.

But few managers would tell their employees to come to work – and play.

True. But this is not an either/or option. The question that needs to be asked is: will people play

doesn't see it as unproductive, goofing off.

We found that leaders who succeed at fostering creativity are aware that people can play at work in two ways. They can play with their work – what we call play as engagement; and they can play at work but not with their work – what we call play as diversion. Play as diversion is having fun and playful moments with one's work colleagues while not working. Is this goofing off? Not if it creates a relational and communication context that facilitates creativity and innovation in the long run. Play as engagement, on the other hand, is turning one's work itself into play. Both forms of play

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in a way that a manager will tolerate? Managers of highly creative teams encourage them to play at their work and with their work in ways that generate novel and potentially useful ideas. Managers who subscribe to a sober climate of unrelenting effort tend to be unaware of how often their employees steal time from work to play games on their work PCs. These managers often bemoan the failure of their employees to show the same passion for their work that they have for their outside lives. In organizations that support play, however, people often say how lucky they are to have a job that pays them to pursue activities that are playful, stimulating and fun. For them, the prospect of going to work is the anticipation of pleasure at the start of each workday.

What was the second feature of the highly innovative workplace?

Our second discovery was that leaders who foster creativity are aware that play is not a set of activities – golf, chess, or football – but a way of performing any activity regardless of its content. Cooking, driving, designing and managing can be sheer boredom or pure play; it all depends on how you do them. When we play, we not only have fun with what we do, but we also act in a fluid and flexible way. When you play at work, curiosity, discovery and trial-and-error rule. This is the secret of creativity for children and adults alike. For managers who want to foster creativity, the trick is to help their teams engage playfully in their work – to unlock the creative power of play.

So, much of appreciating play at work comes from appreciating a wider definition of "play" – one that

stimulate creativity by altering the way people feel, think, act and relate in the workplace, but in different ways.

How so?

Play as engagement boosts the creative process itself by influencing the way employees think about and perform work activities. Play as diversion creates a social environment that makes people feel safe and willing to engage in creative activity in the first place. Our research has shown ways to encourage both play as engagement and play as diversion and to find the balance between them that is right for each organization.

Are there essential elements to all this that will help us understand the serious side of play?

Play is not what you do but how you do it. Any activity is transformed into play when people engage it in special ways. Play is rooted in four elements: (1) a threshold world, (2) a dedicated time and space, (3) internal logic and flexibility and (4) positive and diverse emotions.

That first one sounds enticing: a threshold world?

Play is a threshold world that bridges the real and the unreal, the true and the false. The behaviours of a play fight are part of "fighting", but much of the fear, risk, and goals of a real fight are removed, so that the nature of the activity is not the same as fighting. Play transforms the nature of work in the same way and allows managers to consider the "unreal". In 1985, managers at Shell played with an absurd scenario: that the price of oil will suddenly fall to \$15. That was an unproductive activity at the time because the price of oil was \$28

and rising. A year later, however, the price of a barrel of oil fell unexpectedly to \$10. Shell responded to the crisis much better than any of its competitors largely because its managers had already taken the time to visit, in their minds, the world of a huge oil crisis.

What of a dedicated time and space?

People will not play when they are afraid that they will look foolish or be punished if they make an error. Societies historically protect play in a legitimate space and time – sport arenas, theatres, cinemas – in which people feel safe to play freely with new ideas, behaviours and roles. Highly creative companies, like Electronic Arts, Google and Gore, protect play in the same way: they allow employees to use a portion of their work time to play freely with new ideas that at first may not seem promising. The company is protected as well because the errors and accidents that play may cause are contained in a specific time and “space”. A great deal of corporate innovation is born in these play spaces.

What is the “internal logic” of play?

To play is to immerse oneself in the internal possibilities of an activity without worrying too much about external constraints and goals. When you take the old-and-tried route to arrive at a known destination, it is unlikely that you will discover new routes or/and new destinations. Play is a fluid and flexible behaviour that turns ends into means,

they provide you with a net positive emotional experience. This diverse, intense experience of emotion in play triggers, in our minds, divergent and associational thinking, thus facilitating the generation of original and bold ideas.

Interesting. Perhaps we should draw a broader line, then, between the distinction you noted earlier – about play as a diversion versus play as engagement.

We are convinced there are two forms of play at work. Diversion is taking a moment away from a work task to play alone or with other colleagues either at work or outside work. You share a joke with someone, play solitaire on the computer – even take time to play a game of golf before returning to work.

Now, you noted that such diversions can help one's thinking.

In many ways. It provides periods of mental rest from the relentlessly cognitive work of knowledge workers. It fosters the incubation of new ideas on which creativity depends. These mental breaks are the reason that Einstein used to get his best ideas while shaving in the morning.

What about the impact of such diversions on feelings?

Such diversions induce a positive effect that helps people return to their work tasks refreshed and with a good mood. A moment of goodwill fun with colleagues also helps team members break down

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leading in that way to unexpected and surprising discoveries. 3M's Post-it Notes, DuPont's Kevlar, and Gore's Elixir guitar strings are some examples of winning products that were born as surprising and unexpected discoveries in play.

You also mentioned the need for positive and diverse emotions.

Creativity requires diverse thoughts that are facilitated, in turn, by diverse emotions. Play unlocks the power of creative thinking by unlocking emotional experience. Play entails both positive and negative emotions, but it always results in a positive affective experience. You may cry or get scared while watching a movie – you may feel agony and frustration while playing sports; but you go to movies and you play sports because, in the end,

hierarchical boundaries and relate to one another in a personal way. This makes people feel psychologically safe to explore new ideas and discuss them with other colleagues without being afraid of failure and criticism of their ideas.

Then it would be safe to think that a work culture tied to play could help in relationships and communications.

The more diverse the information we consider in our work, the more likely that we will be creative. Play breaks down the company's functional boundaries. Playing golf or basketball brings together employees from different departments and clients as well. This creates informal channels for exchanging insights and ideas about work that otherwise would not be shared. →

What about play as engagement?

Turning one's core work task into play is truly a transformation. Performing any task – be it designing, advertising or presenting – in a fun, flexible, and imaginative way makes one think differently. For example, it boosts the creative process itself. It helps people re-frame their work activities and explore variables, processes and ideas that normally go unnoticed. This is the reason that Einstein described creative thought as a “combinatorial game”.

When play becomes engagement, there must be a fundamental shift in how you feel about your work.

Absolutely. How we feel influences the way we think. When we constrain our emotional experience,

- Create a workspace that signals to employees that it is all right to play and tells them where and when. Design, colour, music, art and other artefacts are the principal tools for shaping a playful work ambience.
- Find the type of playful ambience that is right for your company. Animation studios have playful facilities because the nature of their work involves play throughout. Some investment firms have specific playrooms where people take a break to play a game of chess. This provides a period of rest from work while exercising at the same time the cognitive muscle that investment decisions require.
- Institutionalize play events that bring together people from various parts of the company who normally would not share ideas about their work.

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we also constrain our thinking. The more diverse the emotions we experience, the more likely that we will be creative. Play unlocks a rich variety of emotions because it allows us to experience them in relatively safe ways. This triggers associational and divergent thinking – the basic cognitive muscles of creativity.

So, what happens when multiple people are at work; and, for all of them, play is an engagement?

When people play together, they transcend the normal limitations of their work roles. They feel collectively safe to express and explore ideas and insights that at first may seem weird or inapplicable. When teams play together, they also break away from their normal work routines. They perform their work with greater imagination, flexibility and a spirit of discovery. We have observed animation professionals in a broadcasting corporation in London whose job was to create fictional stories for children's television. Occasionally, they took flights of fancy, laughed, and fantasized ludicrously about seven-legged creatures, green zebras, and sharks flying in space shuttles. Is this play or work? It is play that creates the very work of a huge corporation. It is a fluid between-and-between world that generates a rich variety of characters, imagery, plots, and symbolism, some of which will later become the building blocks of work products in such organizational contexts.

Let's take a manager's point of view: what are things he or she can do to promote play as diversion?

There are numerous things; we will itemize the most important ones:

- A great deal of creative thinking sparks from such informal and incidental exchanges of problems, insights, and ideas.
- Respect the fact that people must play spontaneously and of their own will. Making play obligatory defies the very idea of play. You can create the conditions and spaces that foster play, but employees must be willing to play in such spaces when they feel it is right.
- Make sure you understand how play as diversion influences work. Unless the work itself is stimulating, play as diversion can backfire when people return to a boring and routine work task after a fun moment of play. Remember that stimulating work need not be playful itself, but it can always benefit from play as diversion. Medical teams do not experience life-or-death operations as play. But taking a work break to have some goodwill fun with colleagues allows medical teams to release negative emotions and to charge their batteries with positive emotional energy before they return to the emergency room to face loss, suffering or death.

Would you suggest the same actions for the manager who wants to promote play as engagement?

There are six main things we would stress:

- Provide a legitimate time and space in which people can play safely and freely with new ideas and insights. Gore and Google allow their engineers to spend up to 20 per cent of their time to freely explore new ideas without allowing profitability or marketability to hinder their efforts. Electronic Arts holds play workshops to

assist new product development. According to CEO David Gardner, "Not only does it trigger breakthroughs, but it also releases tremendous energy and breaks the norm. This is important – creativity is triggered by change. And you need time and emotional space."

- Provide a considerable degree of autonomy that allows employees to turn their work into play. In a large broadcasting corporation we studied, the manager of the popular drama division effectively conveyed the basic guidelines of the film to the writers, and then he provided them with the freedom and time to play with new ideas until they generated an elaborate script.
- Reflect on how your business could benefit from turning core work tasks into exciting games. A life insurance company in South Africa motivates teamwork with a game: sales people form teams that adopt the name and flag of a country and then compete for performance awards. The winners are allowed to proudly display their flag in the office for a month. In Taobao.com, an online auction market that competes with eBay in China, every employee adopts a character from the historical novels of Jing Yung (a well-known Chinese author). When they interact with customers, they do so in the guise of their character, creating a very different and playful kind of virtual community. Former President and CEO Savio Kwan told us, "It makes us really Chinese and injects a certain panache into the customer's relationship with the company. It has become part of our secret weapon, our brand image."
- Clearly communicate to your team when it is time to play and when it is not. In uShaka, the largest marine theme park in Africa, play is a part of

brainstorming about new park themes as well as a part of the daily social interactions with customers. If you run an airline, on the other hand, you probably do not want erratic play to be a part of the pilots' core job. But pilots are likely to become better in their jobs if you allow them to experiment with diverse behaviours and situations in playful flight simulations as a part of their continuous training.

- Use play to test and improve your team's reflexes in dealing with the unexpected. Create a case study or scenario about a situation in your market that at the present time seems quite unlikely to occur. Ask your team to play with that situation as if it were true. The net benefit for your team is adaptive flexibility – considering and practicing with new situations, variables and behaviours.
- People have learned by now that business is all about order, rationality and consistency. They tend to be less aware that businesses often die for the same reasons. To help people engage playfully in their work, take the stance as a leader that long-term success requires also a bit of inconsistency, spontaneity and trial-and-error in a safe, playful environment. ■

Resources

C. Mainemelis and S. Ronson, "Ideas are born in fields of play: Towards a theory of play and creativity in organizational settings", *Research in Organizational Behavior* 27, 2006.

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Babis Mainemelis (bmainemelis@london.edu) is Assistant Professor of Organizational Behaviour at London Business School.

Sarah Harvey (sarah.r.harvey@ucl.ac.uk) is a lecturer at University College London.

Georgina Peters (georgina@suntopmedia.com) is a London-based business writer.

