



**ARE YOU PLAYFUL AT WORK? DO YOU, AS A LEADER OR MANAGER, ENCOURAGE YOUR TEAM TO SPEND AT LEAST SOME PART OF THEIR WORKING DAY IN PLAY? IF YOU DO, YOU ARE NOT ALONE AS MANY MAJOR CORPORATIONS ARE RECOGNISING THAT PLAY CAN BE A CRITICAL COMPONENT OF A CULTURE THAT ENCOURAGES CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION IN FAST-CHANGING COMPETITIVE MARKETS.**



# PLAY TIME





On the face of it, work and play seem opposite and incompatible. The *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines play as to 'engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose'. Work, by comparison, is a much more purposeful, ends-orientated activity. But creativity often arises when you match means and ends in a surprising and unexpected way, rather than in an efficient or known way. And play can achieve this kind of matching, according to Babis Mainemelis, Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at London Business School, whose research interests include creativity and play.

Participants in the School's Senior Executive Programme (SEP) are exposed to the power of play through theatre workshops. Yvonne Gilan, Fellow of the School's Centre for Management Development, who runs these workshops, explains what they contribute: "When children play, they are experimental, they imagine, they invent", she says. "They use make-believe, they draw on their sensory capacity to experience the world physically and emotionally without self-consciousness. During our theatre play-day, creative ideas begin to grow organically. First we relax, removing tensions that block our ability to express ourselves freely. People find inner talents and creativity they may not know they had through storytelling, improvisation and performance – and it's fun!"

This is an important lesson for leaders if they are to encourage new creativity. "People are over-anxious about coming up with new ideas they think will sound silly", says Yvonne. "A playful environment gives you and your team the permission, freedom and confidence to discover and share those necessary creative ideas and talents."



**Zayn Khan** (MBA98), Managing Director of Advertising at Ogilvy & Mather in Kuala Lumpur, concurs: "The idea-generation process itself requires some 'playfulness'. You have to constantly ask questions, break the rules, allow crazy thoughts to enter your head and shed your preconceptions. Only then can you truly create ideas, which by definition are combinations of seemingly unrelated elements."

In a recent paper, 'Ideas Are Born in Fields of Play: Toward a Theory of Play and Creativity in Organisational Settings',<sup>1</sup> Dr Mainemelis and current PhD candidate **Sarah Ronson** (PhD2001) focus on two manifestations of play in organisations. The first is play as a form of engagement with work: when employees turn their core work into play, play facilitates the cognitive, affective and motivational processes that creativity requires. It fosters creativity directly. The second is play as a form of diversion from work where creativity is fostered in a peripheral way within a psychological and social-relational climate that is conducive to creativity. The full benefits to creativity are realised when organisations embrace play both as engagement and as diversion, weaving it into the fabric of organisational life and transforming the very nature of products or processes.

## **MOUNTAIN BIKES, GUITAR STRINGS AND RUBBER CHICKENS**

Many companies understand the importance of play as a diversion, according to Dr Mainemelis, but only a relatively small number of progressive companies, like IDEO, Google, 3M and W L Gore, best known for its GORE-TEX® products, truly embrace play as a core aspect of their work. Gore is a particularly interesting example. An engineer in one of its medical products plants took advantage of 'free time' to improve the gears of his mountain bike and, as a result, invented a new line of bike cables. He also developed cables that control the movement of oversized puppets, using guitar strings. Noticing that the guitar strings easily broke, he teamed up with colleagues, one of whom was an amateur musician. They played together for five years in company time and in their own time. The result was a non-breakable guitar string and today, Gore controls 35% of the acoustic guitar strings market, a market the company had not previously served.

Dr Mainemelis and Sarah argue that, in an environment of time pressures and fixed rules, it is difficult for firms to support a five-year exploration of a new product. >>

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CYNTHIA HEIMEL, 'LOWER  
MANHATTAN SURVIVAL TACTICS',  
VILLAGE VOICE, 1983



## HOW TO ENCOURAGE 'SERIOUS PLAY'

**Greg Orme** (SEMBA2002), Director of the Centre for Creative Business (CCB), offers the following suggestions:

- 1** Give ongoing 'permission' to play through the signs and signals that make up your office culture. Little things like toys and interesting objects lying around the place and food integrated into the office environment make it feel more like an extension of home. One firm I've visited has a crazy golf course in AstroTurf running the length of its largest room!
- 2** Ensure your staff have realistic work schedules. Nobody can be playful or creative if they are fitting a 12-hour day into eight.
- 3** Instigate games and downtime inside and outside the working day. A web firm I know took its entire staff off to a rock festival. Behaviour breeds behaviour.
- 4** Ensure your induction process and staff development meetings communicate the idea that commercial playfulness is valuable and rewarded.
- 5** If you find this new and foreign, bring in the experts. There is a small but growing band of boutique consultancies that specialise in commercially applied creativity. At CCB, we work with a UK-based outfit called *think* – they are brilliant!

**The Centre for Creative Business is a joint venture between London Business School and University of the Arts London; for details, go to: [www.ccbusiness.org](http://www.ccbusiness.org)**

>> But play creates a temporary suspension of the daily corporate pressures, providing a transitional space in which members of the organisation can experiment. Play provides space in which creative new ideas can be generated.

Tina Catling, Catalyst for creative consultancy *think* and a participant in Building the Creative Business, a programme run by the School's Centre for Creative Business (CCB), describes her business's approach to play: "One day, we might be hunting for hundreds of eggs around the building, the next someone is nominated as 'god for the day'; we once inserted fireworks into a rubber chicken, setting it alight in the night sky. When people are away, a full-sized cardboard cut-out of them will appear at their desk. Fun simply bubbles out and people get creative", she says.

Tina says that what she describes may seem frivolous and counter-productive but genuine and spontaneous play does increase creativity. It also contributes to employee engagement, reduces staff turnover, attracts new talent, increases the quality and quantity of work completed and reduces stress. In other words, she says, "It's serious fun."

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## CREATIVITY NEEDS PRACTICE

Creativity and the skills associated with creating novelty require honing. Play as engagement gives individuals the opportunity to practise and rehearse the creation of novelty, specifically in the context of their work, according to Dr Mainemelis and Sarah. It also helps people frame problems in new ways and develop divergent thinking skills.

Electronic Arts (EA), the interactive software games company, has developed some of these approaches out of the early experiences of its founders. "Our business is about products which provide opportunities for play", says **David Gardner** (CFE96), Chief Operating Officer for EA Worldwide Studios. "We started the business with play as part of our work style, as a way of making long, hard days fun and worthwhile", he says. "Now we use play to stimulate creativity." To encourage playfulness, EA provides a range of facilities, including soccer, volleyball and basketball pitches and coffee bars, for employees.

It also holds structured creativity workshops involving LEGO bricks, masking tape and what David describes as 'other peculiar items'. Typically, people spend a day trying to stimulate ideas, usually to develop new products or create a new

interactive element in a product they are trying to build. It works fantastically well, says David: "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."

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## KNOWING WHEN TO STOP

It is important to remember that creativity is not an end in itself, says CCB Director **Greg Orme** (SEMBA2002). It has to be turned into innovation. "To be successful, you not only have to generate a hundred new ideas, you then have to carry out the risk analysis and the return on investment (ROI) calculation."

In their paper, Dr Mainemelis and Sarah point out that it is jobs with higher levels of autonomy, more complexity and involving a variety of skills that provide the most opportunities for play. Typically, autonomy goes with responsibility, whether simply for one's own individual performance or for a client or project shared with other team members. In successful teams, people understand when play is appropriate and when it is not. Tina Catling describes her team as "very adult" in its approach. "Everyone knows the commercial realities and that great work has to be delivered to clients on time and budget. There's a sense of shared responsibility to one another and the client, which means they seem to know the right time to play – and when not to", she says.

Nevertheless, some companies feel the need to give specific signals. CCB's Greg says that many companies, including IBM, Capital One and Saatchi & Saatchi, use different environments depending on whether a meeting has a creative or more business-like focus. But, for some, it is not always easy to find the time and space. "I think we should incorporate much more play into our daily work but the sheer time demands make it extremely challenging", says Ogilvy & Mather's Zayn Khan.

Nevertheless, Dr Mainemelis argues that play is a fundamental human function, "an evolutionary endowment to humans that lasts from childhood to senility. Nothing comes more naturally to humans than the impulse to play", he says. "By changing the way we think, feel and act, play keeps us flexible – this is the evolutionary value of play. It is nature's path to creativity." ■

<sup>1</sup>Mainemelis, C. & Ronson, S. 2006. Ideas are born in fields of play: toward a theory of play and creativity in organisational settings. *Research in Organizational Behavior: An Annual Series of Analytical Essays and Critical Reviews*, 27: 81-13, 2006.





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**DR BABIS MAINEMELIS (ABOVE) ARGUES THAT PLAY IS A FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN FUNCTION.**

## MOTIVATION THROUGH POETRY

**Savio Kwan** (MSc09), an adviser to Alibaba.com as well as the company's former President and COO, talks passionately about how play can become part of the company's competitive edge, part of its brand image. In 2003, Alibaba set up a new auction site – Taobao.com – to compete with eBay, which then dominated the market in China.

As part of the company's play initiative, every Taobao 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 kind of virtual community. “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, part of our brand image”, Savio says. And whereas Taobao started as a relatively small competitor to eBay, it now claims more than 60% of the online auction market in China.

Play is difficult to measure in conventional ways but Savio can vouch for extraordinary results among the company's sales people. In 2002, the company introduced the Million Club to encourage sales people to achieve sales of more than RMB1 million. Employees who passed that threshold would get a reward – although what that reward would be was not stipulated at the outset.

Inevitably, one of the sales team achieved the RMB1 million goal. “We needed to do something quickly”, says Savio. “So, over lunch, I wrote a tongue-in-cheek version of a dayou (a Chinese-style poem). The sales guy immediately shot back his own dayou which was even better and longer than mine – and in English. But little did I know what I was starting!”

The sales people really liked the idea of getting a poem from the COO and although they also receive commissions, Savio says the excitement around the poems definitely plays a part in motivating staff. The salesman who achieved the first million went on to make more than RMB6 million the next year and, overall, sales have gone through the roof: 15 people achieved the RMB1 million sales target in the first year alone.