

Playing to win

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As innovation and creativity become the stamp of high value work, so our working circumstances will have to provide an opportunity for childlike play and creativity to flourish.

REMEMBER that old cliché that school days are the best days of our lives? Have you ever wondered why? Partly it's the fact that we didn't have the responsibilities of being an adult yet, but mostly, it was because we were still allowed to play. The good news is that in the future, playing and work will no longer be mutually exclusive. In fact, play will be a vital part of work. Trouble is, most of us have forgotten how to play.

Work becomes play when we do something we normally don't; when we stop doing something we normally do; when we carry to the extreme the behaviours we normally regulate; and when we invert the patterns of our daily social life. My colleagues Charalampos (Babis) **Mainemelis** and Sarah Ronson call this reversal, intensification, trespassing, and abstinence - the four cardinal points of play and festive behaviour.

We play when we move out of our day-to-day life, when we are not constrained by the normal boundaries of time and space; when we feel free and unconstrained; when we are flexible and lose our normal association between means (what we do) and ends (the result of our actions). These are not antecedents, consequences of something else that is play; rather, they are the very stuff play is made of.

The creative classes, such as advertising agents, creative writers, designers, planners, and social theorists have typically used fantasy and imagination to fire their creativity. Athletes compete; consultants and researchers explore; mathematicians solve puzzles; therapists may use therapeutic play. These people cannot achieve mastery without playing.

Play is so central to achieving mastery because it can result in the combination of pieces of behaviour that are not normally brought to work. It involves making connection beyond the usual working relationships, and playing with others to experiment with diverse ideas and processes. Playful interactions, social gatherings, and hobbies are a great way of keeping crowds energised.

The future of work will increasingly be about breaking down the barrier that separates work from life, and work from play. The social scientist, who on a Saturday evening visits the opera, a theatre, or a sports game, may observe a wealth of information and inspiration for their research on the role of emotions in work group interactions; a dinner party at a restaurant can inspire an interior designer with ideas and insights about designing restaurants. The creative mind does not stop working at the end of the workday but, rather, transcends and blurs the boundaries between 'work' and 'non-work'.

This is a notion that Karl Marx understood well. He observed that the division of labour that accompanied the Industrial Revolution divided the interest of the worker from the interest of the community, and made the worker a passive consumer. This was not, for Marx, what work should be about. At the centre of his ideas is a strong conception of meaningful work as a process of active self-realisation, rather than passive production and consumption. Drawing on the labour theory of value, most notably espoused by Adam Smith and David Ricardo, Marx asserted that value is created when man exerts his labour on an object, defining work as an inherently creative process. For Marx, humans derive meaning from their observed creativity, from interacting with their surroundings in ways that produce tangible improvements and generate value.

He believed that if work is fragmented, and if the productive efforts of workers become focused on a single detail of a bigger picture, this link between production and product, between creation and the thing created, starts to fray. In the bureaucratic enterprise that has emerged since the Industrial Revolution, it is no longer possible to see work as a process of self-realisation. Most of us have become alienated from the product of work, instead generating value that we only experience indirectly, through monetary remuneration. Increasingly, therefore, we define our own value and the value of our work, not by how much we produce, but by how much we are paid. The intimate connection between work and value that makes our productive lives meaningful is no longer apparent.

Like Marx, the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre was also fascinated with this theme of work as a meaningful venture. His interest was in authenticity and individuality. For Sartre, what is important and

authentic in our working lives is the deep experience that leads to mastery. Authenticity and individuality have to be earned, not simply learned. Sartre argued that we are defined by our interactions and through these interactions, continually choose to redefine ourselves. Since man is nothing more than the sum of his actions, a meaningful life depends on meaningful work. What is apparent in both Marx and Sartre's writing is that if we accept the workplace as distinct from the realm of enjoyment and meaning, then part of our very nature becomes diluted through this mechanical repetition, and by doing so we lose our sense of authenticity.

As that other old saw says, all work and no play makes Lynda a dull girl - and we can't have that, can we?

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