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## Game Over?

Weekend get-togethers, mandatory participation--boy, your workplace fun is starting to seem like . . . work.

By Chris Penttila | [Entrepreneur Magazine - February 2001](#)

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When employees at Minneapolis-based e-commerce services firm [Imaginet](#) want to unwind, they have a little fun. Sometimes the staff takes in a minor-league baseball game or a picnic. Other times, they get together for bowling or wine tasting. They even had a *Survivor*-esque staff contest once. The goal of all this, says president and CEO Scott Litman, 34, is to take a breather. "It's nice after a long week to get together to relax," he says. "Sometimes it's a wrap-up to the week. Other times, we're just catching our breath because we'll be working over the weekend."

In our low-unemployment, 24/7 economy, employers like Imaginet try to do everything they can to make work fun. These days, companies are promoting their workplace cultures as much as their products. Entrepreneurs hope that offering opportunities for fun, whether picnics, barbecues or watergun fights, will ease their recruiting and retention challenges.

But while employers strive to show their fun sides, surveys show employees are putting more value on their personal time. A May 2000 Radcliffe Public Policy Center and Fleet Financial Group survey of 1,008 workers revealed two-thirds were not satisfied with their work/family balance. When asked to rank job factors ranging from personal time to salary and job prestige, having a schedule that allowed for personal time was No. 1 on the list. (Last on the list? Having a high-prestige job.) In today's crazy, dotcom-fueled economy, personal time is as powerful as a paycheck. "We found people were making family time a priority," says Shannon Quinn, a member of the study's research team at the Radcliffe Public Policy Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "They were willing to trade money for personal time."

### Happy Hour?

The Radcliffe study also revealed another trend: Personal time is becoming more important to younger workers, particularly workaholic Gen Xers heading into their 30s and starting families. Lifestyle changes are suddenly creating the need for more personal space away from the job. "Once only concerned with salary, Gen Xers are now looking for time. They're starting to negotiate time for salary, and it's turning employers on their ears," says Cam Marston, co-founder of [Marston Communications](#), a Charlotte, North Carolina-based consulting firm that follows Gen X trends.

Mark Oldman, 32, co-founder of New York City-based career Web site Vault.com, says companies are hiring "Julie McCoy cruise director types," whose job it is to come up with fun ideas. All employees need to do is show up. "Companies are trying to engineer conviviality," he says. "On the good side, it can increase the quality of life in the workplace. On the other, it can come off as forced, contrived, even counterproductive in some cases." Can employers take fun too far?

Catherine, a Gen X employee who asked that her last name be withheld, has experienced this trend toward fun in Silicon Valley dotcom culture—from beer blasts and dance parties to ice skating. Although events usually aren't mandatory, she says, managers have pressured her to show up. Sometimes the fun lasts late into the evening. Is it frustrating? "Definitely. You have to weigh which ones will be career-limiting if you don't attend and which are better to skip out on," she says. "Trying to juggle all this can be very stressful."

Always worried about productivity, some employers are finding roundabout ways to schedule in some fun. Catherine tells the story of a friend who works for a small Silicon Valley dotcom. The CEO decided employees were too stressed and hired a masseuse to come to the office, but with one hitch: The masseuse was scheduled to come in every other Saturday,

and the employees had to come to work to get their massages. "Each person in the company had to participate in this mandatory 'stress reduction.' Gak!" Catherine says.

Workplace fun defeats the purpose when it happens too often or edges into personal time, says Kevin Cashman, founder and CEO of [LeaderSource Inc.](#), an executive coaching firm in Minneapolis. He sees taking fun too far as one of the pitfalls of leadership. If fun is forced, he says, then it's serving the organization and not the individual. Leaders are imposing what they see as enjoyable activities on employees who don't have the courage to express their disinterest. "If employees are thinking it's a drag, then it becomes a leadership issue," Cashman says.

While employees at Vault participate in what Oldman calls "organized socializing," which includes happy hours, Friday night barbecues and bowling, he says it's not mandatory to do so. Still, he realizes employees might feel obligated to put in "face time," thinking not showing up could make them look anti-social. "I'm sure employees feel the pressure. It's wired in from sixth grade, when your friend asks if you're going to Mary's birthday party," he says, adding that having too many events can hurt employee morale.

But having fun can become a control issue for management, and it can fall into a boring pattern as a result. Marston tells the story of his job at a Washington, DC, firm where he asked the firm's leader whether the employees could plan something instead of the traditional party at the leader's house. The leader finally relented, and the employees planned a scavenger hunt around the city, complete with limos donated by a vendor. "It was crazy, fun and cheap. It was also an idea the employer would have never thought of," he says. What it comes down to is, what management sees as fun, employees may not.

Workers can also end up struggling to balance the company's fun culture with its workload. When a mandatory companywide riverboat trip was looming for Imaginet's staff, the employees in one department were suddenly stressed about meeting a crucial project deadline. "I told them, 'If this trip means gritting your teeth the whole time, it's elective. Besides, the most important thing around here is the work itself.' With their workload, they weren't going to enjoy it anyway," Litman says. It seems to be working. Imaginet, with annual sales of about \$14 million, was selected last year as a "Great Place to Work" by the Twin Cities' *CityBusiness* magazine.

Fun definitely has its place, but it takes communication and finding a balance that works for everyone. Here are some tips for having fun that won't leave employees frustrated:

- **Have a point.** Make sure events have specific purposes and are kept brief. "They have to have a specific purpose other than to kill a keg," Oldman says. Give employees time to plan ahead. At least one month's notice is best, particularly for employees with kids.
- **Keep events limited to work hours.** Does that event really need to be held on a Saturday afternoon? Employees see fun during the work-day as more of a perk than events that happen after hours. They view your willingness to have fun "on the clock" as respect for their personal time, something that can build loyalty, not to mention better-rested employees. A daytime baseball game on a workday, for example, feels like a treat to employees.
- **Get input from all employees.** "If you've got a bunch of folks whose idea of a good time is a good, hard session of video gaming, don't make them go on a windsurfing trip," Catherine says.

John O'Malley, president of Birmingham, Alabama-based consulting firm [Strategic Visions Inc.](#), suggests using a blind survey to learn the events workers enjoy and when they want to do them.

- **Don't force it.** Don't make participation mandatory or pressure employees to attend. If employees aren't sticking around for fun, chances are there's something about the event or the time it's scheduled that's turning them off. O'Malley says giving employees individual "surprise days" every so often can't hurt. "After a huge push, tell an employee that he or she doesn't have to come to work tomorrow, or offer a weekend extension," he says.

Finally, make sure applicants understand your company's fun side. It'll help them decide whether your company is right for them and keep you from hiring someone who doesn't see the fun in what you're trying to do.

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