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From Play to Performance: Building an Effective Organization

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From Play to Performance: Building an Effective Organization

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FROM PLAY TO PERFORMANCE: BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATION

By Jessica N. Selee (*Brigham Young University*), Jade Johnson (*Brigham Young University*), Jocelyn N. Murray (*Brigham Young University*), Anna Samuelson (*Brigham Young University*), Jasmine Li (*Brigham Young University*), Andrew Lacanienta (*Brigham Young University*), Mat D. Duerden (*Brigham Young University*), Mark Widmer (*Brigham Young University*)

I**N THE MIDDLE** of January 2016, six students joined a MEG Grant research team (Mentored Experience Grant) to study the impact that non-work activities (recreation or leisure) have on individual contributors or organization. The MEG was directed by Mat Duerden and Mark Widmer, faculty members in the Department of Experience Design and Management, as well as Andrew Lacanienta a graduate student in the same department. We began by asking broad questions related to the

topic. For example, we asked “What recreation do companies provide? Is there any unique value in providing recreation and other non-work activities?”

After narrowing the focus to key factors, we began contacting companies that support or sanction forms of recreation at work. Five companies in various locations and industries, such as technology, non-profit, outdoor appliances, and outdoor gear, agreed to participate. We traveled as far as Washington DC to collect data. We interviewed 44 employees from the C-suite to entry-level jobs.

Ultimately our findings seemed to address the question, “How do you create a work environment that promotes employee engagement and productivity?” Part of the answer for some companies, like Google, is providing opportunities for employees to engage in traditionally non-work activities like sports, hobbies, parties, and video games at work. Duerden, Courtright, and Widmer (2017) have coined the term

“leisure-at-work” to describe these activities which they define as “leisure that originates from work” (p. 3). That would normally be part of their non-work argue that leisure-at-work (LAW) can help attract, retain, and cultivate the right talent and the right teams. While an increasing number of companies are providing LAW activities for their employees, many companies might wonder if this approach is effective.

Since there is so little research, we interviewed employees and employers from various companies across the US who provided LAW opportunities. We asked what they liked and disliked about leisure at work and the effects it had on engagement and performance. In their responses we found that LAW plays a part in productivity, communication, social interaction, attraction and retention, and culture. In addition, we explored potential negative aspects of LAW.

Analysis involved creating a codebook using Grounded Theory methodology (Creswell, 2013) highlighting major themes found in the interviews. The following paragraphs provide an overview of some of the most prevalent themes from our interviews.

PRODUCTIVITY

When we asked employees how leisure impacted their personal work, having a break and engaging in physical activity were the two biggest themes. Breaks were described as opportunities to relieve stress as well as increase focus, creativity, and productivity. For example, “You go someplace, you start doing something, you get your mind activated elsewhere. It is the whole paradigm of ‘You think best when you are in the shower.’ I have actually felt that. When I am sitting in the shower, I think, ‘Wow. Wait I can solve it.’ You are distracting your mind and that helps you connect different dots that you wouldn’t otherwise do.”

Employees saw these breaks as opportunities to “reset” or “relax” from the monotony or demands of the day. One employee noted, “From a business standpoint, the people that are healthier show up to work, don’t take sick days, and don’t leave sick. I mean purely from a fiduciary standpoint; healthy employees are happier and better workers.” As employees manage their mental, physical, and emotional health, they are able to produce higher quality work.

Code	Description
Productivity	LAW enables employees to manage their mental, physical, and emotional health which results in increased focus, creativity, and productivity.
Social Interaction/Communication	LAW increases familiarity with coworkers, teamwork, and communication as well as stimulates new conversations.
Attraction and Retention	LAW is an investment in employees as well as a sign of trust. These aspects increase employees job search and retention at a company.
Culture	LAW facilitates engagement, trust, and camaraderie that ultimately adds to the culture of a business.
Negative Aspects	LAW is most often constrained by lack of knowledge or time. In addition, differing preferences, cliques, or fear of negative perceptions can negatively influence participation.

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS/ COMMUNICATION

Employees described LAW as a way to get to know other employees on a different level. While engaging in LAW, employees found themselves talking about new topics, new problems, and saw their coworkers in a new context. An employee described his experience competing in a company sponsored triathlon with the CEO of the company on his team: "It was funny though because we were probably four or five months into it and the hardest part is getting someone to swim or whatever. And not all the time is it the cleanest river especially after the rain. But I approached [The CEO]. Actually, we had a welcome/ get to know you employees breakfast and I asked if he was on a team.

It had surprised me that no one had asked him to be a swimmer yet. So we incorporated him into our team and it was a lot of fun."

Not only was LAW noted to help "connect to other employees," but also to increase communication within and across departments. LAW appears to impact how effectively teams function together. Barriers to communication can arise when employees are unfamiliar with the individuals personally or their role in the company. Activities such as skiing, in the case of one of the companies where we conducted interviews, provide opportunities for departments across the company to become more familiar with each other. These activities can build camaraderie, unity, and culture in a department or team. One employee stated that, "Rather than, 'Ahh, I don't really know them very well. It is kind of awkward to go talk to someone that I don't really know or trust.' [LAW] opens up a lot of doors. It just makes it more fun. To me, our department feels more like a family." As facilitated by LAW, familiarity with other employees can help them to know who to talk to when there is a problem and feel comfortable doing so.

During our first data collection, we met one employee that found LAW not only helped him interact with people from other departments but also approach problems in a new way. Here is an excerpt from that interview:

Interviewer: It seems like you are saying that it has really helped you strengthen the ability to work together with your coworkers. Do you have an example of when you have seen that the recreation benefit your workplace productivity and cooperation?

Employee: Yeah, absolutely. I think the week before now [I was with an] individual that I don't actually work with that much on a personal basis... Part of the good thing was that we both know all the same



people. We both understand what our jobs are. We have a little ten minute vent session where we were getting stress out and talking about our problems. What is going on. What is going wrong. That was all in the ten minute break room session one day. That helped. That is what I do. And that ended up helping with a couple guys that I see on a regular basis. Because actually, when we came back we got to talk to the other individual. I try not to name names so sorry for the pause.

It actually ended up helping out [because of] something that I had figured out with some people in another realm after we kind of vented for a little bit. This is all on chairlifts and the on the next lift was "Well what do think about that idea. Have you ever tried that? This and that?" Some problem solving as well. I think it is good because we are not in our normal work environment so that helped us lead to that I guess. Where if we were sitting in our office we normally wouldn't be having a discussion like that. When you are out on chair lifts no one else is around you can say whatever else you want. So if you know the person that you are with and who they are, you know that they are not going to be offended by anything that you say. That definitely helps.

Interviewer: That is great example. Because then you said, I think at the beginning, that is someone that you aren't around a ton in the workplace.

Employee: But you know, he came from a different division than I do. We had seen that problem before and we had found something that had worked well for us. We got the opportunity and also to help solve a problem.

ATTRACTION AND RETENTION

In addition to the impact on productivity and communication, LAW impacts the relationship that the employee has with the company. Employees mentioned they felt that LAW was an investment in the people and led to a reciprocal relationship of trust and loyalty. For example, one employee noted, "I think that we are most successful when the life lines between work and life blur a little bit. But I feel at home here. I



work really hard for them. Also, they work really hard for me in a different way."

Employees also felt LAW was a product of the company's trust in its employees. One individual mentioned, "Obviously I have to get my work done, but at the same time I don't feel like somebody's over my shoulder saying 'You took 35 minutes today and 30 minutes to get back from basketball.' I really appreciate the fact and that kind of helps me feel like I'm autonomous. And I never have been stopped and asked 'How much time did you spend today?' or 'Maybe you guys should spend less time.' They really leave it up to us to be responsible and in return again I think autonomy is a really good feeling."

Not only does the importance of providing LAW vary from company to company, but also the importance appears to vary across industry as well. According to one individual, "If you survey a lot of software companies it's going to be very similar, it's extremely competitive. Not just the pay, but I mean benefits like this that are kind of extra-curricular. So again retaining employees that's a big deal, especially in the software industry."

CULTURE

Feelings of trust and camaraderie all feed into the culture of the company, which in turn can be the biggest challenge in attracting and retaining top talent. "It attracts people with that mindset and if you just orient your perks around what they're already into and why they came into the company in the first place, it seems to be a really good way to retain them."

One employee compared and contrasted their previous employment to their current employment by saying, “I actually think if they would have promoted more of like the family-friend culture, as well as provided ways for those employees to kind of get together and enjoy. Maybe it didn’t have to be ping pong. But something to kind of get to know each other and take that little bit of break from work...It would have made it a much better place.”

Culture is the elusive force that helps employees feel valued, motivated, and engaged in what they are doing. When asking a manager *why* he provides his employees LAW, he responded “... I mean, it’s about building a culture, right? And that’s kind of the underlying principle here, right? These different businesses that are truly just 9-5, cubicles, people come in, they have a set work list. But there’s some passion behind that right? The day starts when they arrive and it ends when they leave and no one thinks about it after

the fact. But that’s not really, that’s not what we’re trying to build here, right? If you focus more on getting people fully engaged so that their work becomes ingrained as part of their life—what they’re passionate about, they put a lot more into it right? The company’s victories and downfalls are all part of these people’s— you know who they are and what they stand for, so like, people just become a different level of committed and there’s different passions behind the place.”

NEGATIVE ASPECTS

While LAW can be a game changer for many employees and teams, it does have limitations and negative perceptions. On a personal basis, employees report that often they are unaware of activities or events available or the LAW offered is not their “thing.” Others mention that they would rather go home and spend time with their families.



We also found employees encountered many social constraints. For example, LAW can create cliques or certain groups of friends. Employees might also fear that participation in LAW will create a negative perception of their work ethic. Others do not participate in LAW due to limited time and the feeling that they are too busy to take a break.

For many companies in the technology industry, LAW becomes a hoop they are required to jump through to keep up with the industry. Employees might not always need, want, or use recreation provided. Yet, recreation is an expected in the companies that wants to remain competitive.

SO WHAT?

If employees of all ages report leisure and recreation as a positive influence in the workplace, how much more applicable will it be to the rising workforce of 73 million millennials that place leisure values and extrinsic values higher than previous generations? An additional looming problem is attracting and retaining Millennials when they are “most likely to switch jobs and be on the lookout for new opportunities” (Gallup). “To recruit GenMe, companies should focus on work–life balance issues and flexible schedules. Programs based on volunteering, altruistic values, social values, or meaning in work will likely be no more successful than they were for previous generations” (Twenge).

Ultimately, LAW feeds into a cycle described by one employee, “You increase employee morale, you increase employee communication and interaction, that increases productivity. As you decrease the amount of time spent slaving over specific tasks, or singularly defined tasks, you increase employee productivity. You stimulate creativity and you stimulate more out of the box type thinking... But those aren’t immediately recognized or ROI isn’t immediately realized.” Companies that consistently provide LAW find that employees feel, see, and believe there is a positive impact on their productivity, communication, social interactions, loyalty, and corporate culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encouraging recreation and autonomy can build more trusting relationships between management and those they lead.
- Intentionally design team activities require employees from different departments to work together to build better interdisciplinary teams and communication.
- Relate the recreation you provide to the overall brand and mission of the company to increase company loyalty.
- Future research should look at some of the following themes:
 - What are the origins of LAW? Does who initiated LAW change the effectiveness?
 - How can LAW be better designed to employee preferences and needs?
 - How can LAW be designed to include minorities based on gender or ethnicity?
 - Can specific types of LAW be linked to specific outcomes?

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