

## **Workplace fun: a matter of context and not content**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** During the last years, workplace fun has started to be considered as an indicator of a healthy workplace. At the same time the need for pleasure has become dominant in the modern workplace and is manifested by the growing literature on fun in the workplace, humour and play, but academics and practitioners are still uncertain on the nature of fun and its antecedents. The aim of this study was to explore the concept of fun in the modern organisation and understand the underlying elements necessary for creating environments that valorise and promote fun.

**Design/methodology/approach:** We conducted semi-structured individual interviews with open-ended questions with 34 employed individuals with diverse demographic and organisational indicators and from a variety of professions. The data were analysed using thematic analysis.

**Findings:** Themes that were pervasive across the discourses are discussed including the sources of fun, its antecedents and its characteristics. The analysis revealed organised fun as a distinct type of workplace fun that can have a significant impact through its social support function and psychological safety as the underlying elements for promoting healthy positive fun interactions. The culture of the organization and management attitudes emerged as key issues in promoting a fun workplace.

**Originality/value:** Organised fun emerged as a new type of workplace fun. The relational characteristic of fun and its function as a social support method have emerged.

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**Keywords:** workplace fun, social support, trust, freedom of expression, dyadic communications

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## **Workplace fun: A matter of context and not content**

### **Introduction**

What is the difference between a pleasant workplace, and one that individuals perceive as a living hell? One answer might be the fun workplace; a workplace where events that include activities that are playful, social, interpersonal, recreational, or task activities intended to provide amusement, enjoyment, or pleasure are common (Lamm & Meeks, 2009).

Workplace fun is a relatively new topic in the study of organizations and work life. The development of the topic has followed four distinct paths; the practitioners' path, the business academic literature path, the ethnographic approach path and the critical path. The beginning of the interest in workplace fun can be dated back to popular business literature, specifically to Deal and Kennedy (1982) and Peters and Waterman (1982) who encouraged managers to develop corporate cultures that promoted play, humour, and fun. Since then, the philosophy of fun at work has been embraced and widely promoted in the popular and business press as a key for vigorous and productive work environments (e.g. Lundin, Paul, & Christensen, 2000). The practitioners' literature thrives on papers about workplace fun, with numerous reflective and intuitive papers on the topic and even more guides on how to promote it. During the last 20 years, workplace fun has started being considered by practitioners as an indicator of a good workplace. The reports from organizations who famously incorporated workplace fun in their human resources management agendas, like Google or Southwest Airlines, appear in almost every business literature paper or commentary about workplace fun (Abner, 1997; Mackay, 2010; Rasmusson, 1999). Many articles and news reports talk about workplace fun as part of the management agenda, and many times articles portray a

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president, owner or manager with positive attitudes towards workplace fun (e.g. Elizur, 2017). These publications promote fun as a solution to important organisational outcomes, like performance, or as part of wellness strategies aiming at better physical and mental health (e.g. Olinger, 2016; Ryan, 2016). Not surprisingly, there has been an increasing number of ‘pop psychology’ and ‘pop business’ publications advising organisations about how to introduce fun initiatives.

Historically the business literature has typically portrayed fun as a managerial initiative. Thus, in the literature on fun at work, early work on small group interactions has been neglected, however it’s noteworthy that this early work, for example from Roy (1954), highlights the resourcefulness of employees in creating ways to cope with routine and monotonous tasks. That said, more recent studies like those from Hunter, Jemielniak and Postula (2010) and Stromberg & Karlsson (2009) have revisited this type of fun that is grounded in social connections between the employees. This dual nature of fun is captured by Bolton and Houlihan (2009) who noted that “*fun is autonomous, collective, naturalistic and socially produced, but a “fun” culture can be promoted, motivating and energizing workplaces that value humour, joy, and fun, so it is of little wonder that organisations now seek to harness play in ways that can be managed*”. Unfortunately, broad conceptualizations of fun have led to a wide variety of definitions.

Consistent with the above, fun activities have been classified in the literature into two categories, organic and managed fun. Organic fun occurs naturally between organizational members through interactions that arise spontaneously (Strömberg & Karlsson, 2009; Plester, Cooper-Thomas, & Winqvist, 2015) and consists of humour rituals like joke telling, physical joking practices (pokes, tickles, jostles, grapples, dances, tactics of scaring people), clowning, nicknaming, using satire and horseplay. Managed fun is consciously and even strategically organised by managers to fulfil organizational objectives (Plester et al., 2015) and refers to

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activities like celebrating personal events and professional milestones, social events, games, competitions and community involvement (Chan, 2010; Ford, McLaughlin, & Newstrom, 2003a; Karl, Peluchette, Hall-Indiana, & Harland, 2005). According to Ford and his colleagues (Ford, McLaughlin, & Newstrom, 2003b; Ford, Newstrom, & McLaughlin, 2004) a fun work environment is one that intentionally encourages, initiates, and supports the above activities.

Research on workplace fun is gradually evolving, but many relationships between fun at work and outcomes at work remain unexplored (McManus & Furnham, 2010). During the last fifteen years, workplace fun has begun to be considered an important part of organizational life and scholars have taken an interest in its study and its integration in the organizational processes and have done so by using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. These studies can be categorized in three clusters, first those who studied the positive effects on the outcomes by examining employee attitudes toward fun, experienced fun and fun activities (e.g. Cook, 2008; Fluegge, 2014; Ford, McLaughlin, & Newstrom, 2003a; Karl, et al., 2005; Karl & Peluchette, 2006a,b; Peluchette & Karl, 2005; Tews, Michel, & Allen, 2014), second those who have tried to understand workplace fun's components and activities associated to it based on three types; organic fun, managed fun and task related fun (e.g. Chan, 2010; Lamm & Meeks, 2009; Oowler et al., 2010; Plester et al., 2015; Strömberg & Karlsson, 2009) and third those who have examined workplace fun revealing its dark side by exploring the phenomenon's complexities (e.g. Baptiste, 2009; Fleming, 2005; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Grugulis, Dundon, & Wilkinson, 2000; Plester, 2009; Redman & Mathews, 2002).

In this paper, we conceptualize fun in the workplace as the result of organic or managed activities that cause enjoyment; these activities might be interactions that contain humour or playing with co-workers. Humour, in the form of jokes, spontaneous conversational humour

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and accidental or unintentional humour (Martin, 2007), and play thus are events that might trigger a fun evaluation of certain situations and label an event or an interaction as fun.

The degree to which fun activities are accepted and encouraged in an organization is influenced by the organizational culture, because culture determines how individuals behave in an organization, what they pay attention to, how they respond to different situations and most importantly whom they include or exclude (Spataro, 2005). Organizational culture is dictated by the shared beliefs and assumptions, a shared background and the shared understandings of it that makes clear how things are getting done (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 1996). A shared understanding is also a key characteristic of interactions that involve humour (Westwood & Rhodes, 2007) in the way that people that share common experiences are more likely to perceive as humorous the same jokes or situations.

But, fun has been presented as a paradox by many authors (Fleming, 2005; Fleming & Sturdy, 2009; Plester et al., 2015) because of the negative feelings that imposed activities might create. In the group and dyadic level, fun is attributed with several characteristics, the most common being that is subjective and contextual (Plester, 2009).

### **The present study.**

As it is evident in the literature, workplace fun is valued by organisations and individuals but due to its subjective nature it is still not clear how fun can be created. As the literature suggests, the content of fun, i.e. the specific activity that the individual participates in, is not of importance. But although we are aware of this, we still don't have an answer as to what conditions are necessary to create fun workplaces. The main goal of this study is to explore the meanings attributed to the concept of workplace fun by employees and to explore its antecedents. The objectives are to understand fun in the workplace as a psychological phenomenon and explore its underlying processes. Our approach is qualitative utilizing

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individual interviews to collect data, and identify themes that are pervasive across the discourses of the employees we interviewed.

We designed a qualitative study to explore the issue, as it is considered advantageous when examining the perceptions and meaning people give to phenomena and when aiming to find new paths into understanding and studying a concept (Edmondson, & McManus, 2007). With this qualitative study our objective is to reach a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of workplace fun in an effort to distinguish between science-based perceptions and pop psychology. Moreover, previous critical research on workplace fun (e.g. Fleming and colleagues studies) has shown that contextual factors and subjective perceptions may be of significance and that workplace fun is contingent to organizational culture, especially in terms of what is considered fun and what is not and boundaries in relation to people, time and places (Plester, 2009). A qualitative design is the most effective way in studying contextual factors and can add new meaning to the data so far (Bartunek & Seo, 2002). With this paper we contribute to the organisational literature with a more context-specific research (Shapiro, Von Glinow, & Xiao, 2007) perspective on workplace fun. The qualitative approach that we have adopted in this research provides understandings that traditional quantitative studies cannot capture effectively, as workplace fun can be given multiple and qualitatively different potential meanings in the same context. Taking into consideration these factors of context we aim to build a new understanding of workplace fun.

### **Methods**

#### **Participants.**

For this study 34 employed people were interviewed. A convenience snowball sampling method was utilised and we attempted to access a diverse sample. The sample size was determined by data saturation in the sense that conducting further interviews would be unlikely to reveal pertinent new data (Francis et al. 2010; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest, Bruce, & Johnson, 2006). The sample was comprised of 21 women and 13 men. The mean age was

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35 years old, ranging from 24 to 65 years. In terms of the marital status, 9 participants were married, 6 were living with a partner, 1 was divorced and 18 were single. Twenty-eight participants had a degree from third level education and six had completed the secondary education level. The size of the organizations in which the participants described their experiences varied from self-employed to 300000 globally. The size of the working teams also varied, ranging from working alone to working in a team of 25 people. Tenure in the organizations varied from 3 weeks to 35 years. We interviewed people who worked both part time and full time, so the work hours per week range from 25 to 85. The participants were all Greeks but only 27 of them worked in Greece, 1 was working in Albania, 1 in Switzerland, 3 in the United Arab Emirates and 2 in the United Kingdom. The participants interviewed were employed in the following professions: shipping agent, guest relations, sales, electrical engineer, researcher, pharmacist, office worker, super market employee, teacher, waiter, airplane cabin crew, assistant accountant, tax officer, nurse, physiotherapist, marketing & sales, media planner, social scientist, doctor, vacation planning, director of sales, bank employee. During the interview many recalled and described experiences from previous or secondary professions, which were as follows: secretary, English language teacher, accountant, office employee, waiter, consultant, doctor primary care, doctor hospital, senior manager, product marketing manager, exhibition planner.

### **Procedure.**

We conducted 34 semi-structured individual interviews with open-ended questions (see Appendix A). The interviews were conducted either in person or through video chat. An example question is: "When was the last time that you had fun at work?" The interviews' duration varied from 20 minutes to 70 minutes. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire with demographics related questions.

### **Analysis.**

Data were analysed by using thematic analysis that allows the organization of data in themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The nature of the study is self-report and can contain several potential sources of bias prominently selective memory, attribution biases and exaggeration but this type of study is valuable when the objective is to capture subjective views and opinions.

The six-phase process of analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed: first the analysis involved detailed and repeated readings of interview transcripts (phase 1. familiarise with the data) and the initial coding was produced (phase 2). For phase 2, we conducted readings relevant to the theme of ‘sources of workplace fun’, based on three a priori identified categories, managed fun, organic fun and task related fun. We then proceeded to identify clusters of codes and thus superordinate themes across interviews (phase 3). We then reviewed and refined the identified themes (phase 4) and defined and named them (phase 5). Within an analytical narrative, specific extracts of the transcripts were selected and quoted for the readers to verify or question the interpretations provided by the authors (phase 6). To maintain the anonymity of participating in a research, participants’ names were replaced with pseudonyms.

### **Results**

The appearance of fun was evident in all the interviews. The initial identified codes are listed in Appendix A. After generating the initial codes, we examined them and collated data to identify broader patterns of meaning that would help us understand the nature of fun. The potential themes were reviewed in order to determine whether they can provide answers to

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the research question. In the following section the results are organised into two higher order categories. In the first part titled “What is fun” we are answering the first question using the *a priori* identified categories, managed fun, organic fun and task related fun to code the data on a first level. The majority of participants mentioned the occurrence of organic and organised fun events in their workplace, but organised fun was reported relatively less often. Managed fun and task related fun were also mentioned but by fewer participants. Further readings revealed a fourth type of workplace fun, organised fun, as well as a holistic perception of fun in terms of organizational culture and climate. In the second part we present four emergent themes that were derived after coding. The four themes are “Workplace fun is more than being funny”, “The functionality of fun lies beyond respite”, “Culture of the organization and management attitudes”, and the “Negative side of fun”. Please consult Appendix B, for more quotes.

### **Part 1**

#### **What is fun: moments and general climate perceptions.**

The issue of what is a fun workplace is unresolved in the literature, mostly due to the subjectivity of experiencing fun (Aldag&Sherony, 2001; Ford et al., 2003a,b; Plester& Sayers, 2007; McDowell, 2005; Warren &Fineman, 2007). Although research has started developing concepts and understandings of its meaning in robust ways (e.g. Plester et al., 2015) the interplay of meanings between fun activities and climate perceptions of a fun workplace is not clear. In this study, most participants reported being very familiar with the concept of fun in the workplace, and described it as a general pleasant climate, were fun small things, very context specific, were taking place. Plester (2009) has found that organizational culture is an important factor in terms of workplace fun, which greatly affects the occurrence and perceived appropriateness of humour and fun activities. Additionally, Plester et al. (2015), in their typology of workplace fun activities, suggest that fun can be

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categorized in three ways; managed/official fun, organic fun and task related fun. In the present research, the descriptions of organic fun manifestations were more frequent; only a few of the participants described management led activities to promote fun. The majority of the participants mentioned that workplace fun for them is related to ‘small’ things, for example small talk, joking and laughing and random events that at the moment they considered fun. At the same time, the participants were describing a general climate of their team or organization that they labelled as fun. Consistent with Plester’s (2009) findings it appears that there were cultural “rules” around the appropriateness and acceptability of fun, where boundaries were set regarding the times (e.g. respecting others people’s workload) and contexts in which humour and fun were deemed suitable, and there was a general feeling about the precedents of fun, where themes like psychological safety, trust and respect were prominent. One of the participants of this study answered the following to the question ‘What do you consider fun in the workplace?’

Um, first when there is no pressure and when we have a good climate among colleagues, which has to do with respecting each other's work, understanding each other. When there are no disputes, thinking that someone may want to hurt you and all that, and from there if the characters match, it is possible for humour to exist, and co-workers to coexist outside of work. Well, if all the above exist I consider it ideal thereafter. (Efi)

### *Sources of fun experiences in the workplace.*

Organic fun.

Colleagues – The importance of dyadic communications.

Participants described a wide variety of sources for fun events. The most common sources were their colleagues. Most of the participants mentioned that an event might be fun

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but it was funnier when the experience was shared with other people, highlighting that fun is a social activity.

[...] you might receive the stimuli, but if there is no one to share it with, you might not give it too much attention. [...] I wish I could choose the people I work with [...] even if you wake up in a good mood and you go to your work just fine, it takes two to tango. You might try to create a positive climate but if there is no response from the colleagues it is not easy.

(Barbara)

Several people developed a mode of communication, creating a shared understanding of situations and common reactions to these. Fun is usually conceptualized as an activity that encompasses the whole team or organization, but the findings of this study suggest that analysing dyads might reveal communication processes and activities that can help understand workplace fun's meaning in a deeper way.

With the grocer we have great communication. Let's say someone enters, who is strange, by the time he will enter, the grocer will look at me, we will understand each other with a glance, and when the client will say something we start laughing. (Ioanna)

In these dyads or groups the same types of jokes are enjoyed, implied jokes are understood quickly, and inside jokes are developed. The key in these relationships is twofold. First, the jokes are accepted by the receivers as they lie within their boundaries of acceptance, and second at the same time the person who is making the joke knows very well these boundaries. In dyads and groups who share this relationship, the sense of belonging is a feeling very often reported by the participants.

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Ok, you belong in a work group, but if you also have people that share the same type of humour, the same experiences and these make you have fun, creating experiences, this I believe makes you feel like a team. (Barbara)

Sometimes these fun dyads or groups develop a type of trust that lets them gossip in a way that not only serves the purpose of informing about events but also of enjoyment.

Consider the below quote:

(Question: Can fun at work be considered a bad thing?) If you consider gossip bad, then yes, because it is obvious that you will comment on the fact that someone has been wearing the same shirt for 3 days, or that he stinks, or what did someone say or do. Gossiping is the biggest fun at work. And regardless whether you are a gossip in your personal life, the moment you enter the office you will ask 'what did the one do, what did the other do'. (Sally)

Clients, patients and students.

Multicultural environments, different customs, different foods, different behaviours, miscommunication among people from different cultures, children and elderly are sources of fun for the participants. But fun that comes as a result of these interactions has a negative valence to it, mostly characterized by satire and mocking.

I was [...] in a [...] clinic and at around two in the morning we heard a voice and we went to see what was happening. It was a lady that was in delirium, she was seeing God, she was saying the Lord's Prayer, and all the other old ladies were awake [...] and were chatting [...] and then one other colleague said 'grandma say the Lord's Prayer' and she started saying it and we were laughing. (Abby)

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Out of the ordinary or difficult situations.

Most of the participants couldn't remember the small things that according to them consist a fun workplace, or a fun workday, so we decided to ask them to describe a situation they remember from their current job that they thought was fun. The majority of the participants reported situations that were out of the ordinary and were disturbing the normal procedure of things in the workplace or were altering the status quo.

[...] some drug addicts entered the store and the girl from the cashier called me because something happened. While I was approaching I saw that he had taken something and was going towards the street, so he runs, I run, I couldn't reach him, and there were some old men on a balcony and started calling my name, "run run to catch him"[...] a little bit further there is a car garage and I started calling the guys from there for help. (Ioanna)

Organised and managed fun.

Organised and managed fun were reported less frequently by participants. Managed fun activities are those which are consciously and even strategically organised by managers to fulfil organizational objectives (Plester et al., 2015). Most of the organised activities had to do with going out for lunch or after work drinks or dinner with the colleagues. Managed activities that were mentioned were in the context of social responsibility, excursions and parties (Christmas, farewells, birthdays).

The CEO organised it [an excursion to the mountains]. He likes hiking himself so he thought "why don't I take the bank with me". (Sofia)

It was my birthday [...] and although I have this team only for 3 weeks, they organised lunch for me, they took me outside, it was like a surprise, then they brought a cake, they sang, they wrote a card. And this was fun

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because in three weeks I managed to build a culture [...] something like an extended family and this was that made it more fun. (Steve)

It was a party where we all danced together without taking into consideration the hierarchy. (Sara)

All the shop owners of the neighbourhood we were gathering at the tavern of this street, we were eating together, we had fun [...] now (after the economic crises) things are very different. (Alexandra)

The group activities organised by the organization as a whole or by a group of employees create the time and offer a space for interactions outside of the regular work routine, decreasing the cultural boundaries that affect appropriateness and acceptability of fun activities.

Attempting though to create workplace fun runs the risk of backfiring, chasing fun away and creating instead discomfort, ridicule and dismay –again highlighting the complex and paradoxical perceptions of fun.

[...] A Christmas party that the company did was like a gathering [...] for 5000 employees to all complain like a group [...] this was not a party, this was not fun, it was a gathering of 5000 angry people discussing how bad the environment is. (Steve)

The organizational culture itself thus plays an important role. Oowler, Morrison, and Plester (2010) based on Schein's framework for understanding organizational culture described how espoused values (second level) like fun at work might not reflect the underlying assumptions and values that exist at a deeper organizational level (third level) and thus cause contradictions, incongruities and dissonance. The probability of orchestrated fun resulting in negative outcomes needs to be examined as it is possible, especially when respect and dignity are not part of the equation (Fleming, 2005) or when the needs of the employees

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are not taken into consideration (Everett, 2011). Thus indirect ways or bottom up approaches to incorporate fun, like action research, might have a better result.

### Task related fun.

Some participants described as fun several tasks and others reported that even only the fact that they were in the workplace was fun for them. Their descriptions included notions of self-development and a sense of accomplishment.

Being able to do something. [...] to do something new [...] that you contribute in some way. [...] It was a challenge. Rewarding. (Sara)

This type of fun, where employees find the tasks themselves as fun has been established in the literature as task related fun (Hunter, Jemielniak, & Postuła, 2010; Plester et al., 2015; Tews, Michel, & Bartlett, 2012).

## Part 2

### Understanding workplace fun: emerging themes.

*Workplace fun is more than being funny.*

The participants in this study have described fun in the workplace as a characteristic of the organization's climate that sometimes is difficult to achieve. Many have mentioned that it is not the content of a joke or the happenings of an event that make it fun, but the context, the liberation, the freedom to express oneself and as noted above the feeling of being part of a team. The literature supports these claims. For example, according to Cohen (1990), laughter is the shortest distance between people, as lines of communication are opened through humour. Laughter can enhance feelings of closeness, togetherness, warmth, and friendliness (Parse, 1993).

[...] chasing a fly is not funny by itself, but it has to do with how you express yourself (Christine)

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Several others have mentioned that they only have fun with people with whom they have honest relationships and which they respect.

[...] and I can't have fun with the people that are not 'what you see is what you get', with people who have second, third thoughts hidden. (Helen)

Many participants mentioned that they see fun as a level of good relationship above kindness and good collaboration. They have described being able to have real and genuine fun with someone as a difficult thing to occur in the workplace from the one side but very rewarding and positive feelings generating if it happens.

Fun is an investment. (Mary)

It is easier to collaborate with someone than to have fun with them. So if you reach the point of being able to have fun with someone, then the collaboration is smoother. (Kelly)

The participants, especially those working in teams, have mentioned that being able to have fun within a team builds upon good communication, a virtue that is transferred in the work related communications. Fun can promote better working relationships between employees which can increase information exchange, organizational efficiency and ultimately performance (Lehmann-Willenbrock & Allen, 2014; Tews et al., 2012).

I think that with people, with whom you have fun with, work relations are better, because you know how far you can go with them. [...] you show more tolerance. The collaboration is better with those that you have fun with. [...] This is the good thing, with those that you have communication outside of work, you feel more comfortable at work to say can you give me this, or can you do this for me, or I will do this for you. (Anna)

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*The functionality of fun lies beyond respite.*

The participants mentioned that fun is helpful. One of the most valued functions of fun is that it is used to relief stress and can function as a coping mechanism, instead of just a time of rest and interaction with others. Many participants have mentioned that sharing a laugh when things are difficult helps them feel that they are not alone in the situation and that there is understanding. Research indicates that fun is positively associated with well-being (Baptiste, 2009), and that it can play a critical role in helping people cope with work stress, as 'sharing a laugh' can be helpful in many cases (Charman, 2013; Plester, 2009). This enhancing role of fun has been extensively expressed by many participants in this study as both a long term effect, by building for example good lasting relationships characterised by trust, and as a short-term effect, functioning as a mental fix which is carried through the day, and makes it easier to deal with stress, emotional exhaustion, routine and negativity. Moreover, the participants in this study clearly mentioned that they use fun as a coping mechanism to deal with stress or routine. Congruently, Karl and Peluchette (2006 a, b) found that employees who have experienced workplace fun are more likely to experience less stress and are less likely to be absent or leave the organization. Furthermore, Karl et al. (2007) found that people who were experiencing more fun at work reported less emotional exhaustion. The use of humour, another important phenomenon that is related to fun in the workplace has been studied extensively and has been found to correlate with the quality of functioning under stress (Bizi, Keinan& Beit-Hallahmi, 1988) and to help in the regulation of emotions (Samson & Gross, 2012). This mental fix notion provides support to previous research suggesting the protective role of workplace fun.

Because it was so difficult to cope [...] many times you were connected with the colleagues because you needed it, many times because my manager couldn't understand me during a problem, automatically, I would discuss it with the other people in the team [...], so the fun or the happiness

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that I could have were the friendships that I was creating because of the circumstances, because we couldn't channel our complains anywhere else.

(Steve)

The participants mentioned that fun not only helps with relieving stress but also it changes their perception of time. They have described that time passes faster when they are having a good time in the workplace. Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) concept of "flow" might provide some insight on why participants reported this. Flow is an experience in which the individual is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment.

Without some fun, the 8 hours don't pass. (Anna)

Fun changes the relativity of time. (Elias)

### *Culture of the organization and management attitudes.*

Another important theme that emerged was that even though the colleagues might be people with whom they feel good to have fun, the culture of the company as well as the attitudes of the direct supervisors towards fun were critical in promoting or accepting it. Such culture generated negative feelings and in the worst case reported in this study, it resulted in constant turnover, with the average stay in the company being two years.

[...] It was a company that didn't mind saying "I want to exhaust you". [...]

We don't pay you to make friends. [...] she wanted to see me suffer [...] to prove that she is the boss [...] (*later for another company*) [...] It was a company whose first priority was to keep their employees [...] so they did everything to keep their employees. The salary was not the highest [...] but you had a job that kept you energized. (Steve)

Middle management plays an important role in the creation of subcultures within an organization, and fun as we mentioned above seems to be very much related with the context, especially with the issues of freedom of expression. This results in different departments in

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the same organization having diametrically opposite cultures towards fun. The participants of this study attributed the differences to the direct supervisor of each department.

There are some departments that are like a church, not even a whisper is heard [...] they are more oppressed [...] these people can talk only when they go for lunch. (Anna)

Although in one case, the participant mentioned that even though freedom to communicate was decreased after a change in the team's supervisor, who didn't allow them to talk to each other during work, the employees continued to make jokes and use humour using alternatives way, like communicating through skype, which was a tool of their work.

### *Negative side of fun.*

Fun in the workplace is not always a positive thing. Many participants mentioned that there is a dark side to it in terms of noise and annoyance, especially when the people who don't participate in the fun activities have high workload. Also, it was mentioned that there is a limit to the positivity of fun, when humour includes negative or racist comments about others. The development of cliques was also mentioned as a negative side of fun. For example, humour that was understood only within a particular group contributed to feelings of exclusion, for those outside such groups. Making 'fun' of someone can be enjoyable and bonding for the actor and their co-actors but might have negative consequences for the person receiving the fun comments or being the epicentre of the negative jokes. This highlights an issue to take into consideration, that is, that the line between offending and fun can be a thin one. These observations by the participants might be the main reason for expressing very eagerly the need for limits or moderation in relation to fun in the workplace.

Barbara: Many times it is fun when we comment about these personalities, or these people from specific groups. So this might be the group 'mother

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and child', or the group 'Asian couple', or the group 'old man from another country' let's say.

Researcher: Why was it so difficult to say this?

Barbara: Because it might sound racist.

The concept of moderation has been also mentioned in relation to effectiveness and productivity, as well as in relation to workload. Several participants have described how it is very easy to not work at all and only have fun, something that most of them disapprove.

When you see that something is important to be finished, and the others are busy, you can't distract them by saying something funny, even if it is the funniest thing. (Adrianna)

The assumption that fun is not work, and belongs outside of work practices was reflected in answers to the question 'in which way fun affects your relationships with your colleagues'. Many participants felt an urge to defend their behaviour, by suggesting that it is kept within limits and boundaries. Feelings of guilt can be discerned here and maybe this has to do with manager's support for fun in the department or organization level. Plester et al. (2015) examined this using management paradoxes theory (Clegg, da Cunha, & Cunha, 2002). When these limitations are not respected by the colleagues, negative feelings and attitudes towards the persons seem to appear.

It is very easy to take advantage of all the benefits and not work, you can be sluggish, and not see it really as a job but only as a playground. [...] Just don't abuse the freedom that the workplace offers. (Steve)

## **Discussion**

The main goal of this study was to explore the meanings attributed to the concept of workplace fun by employees and exploring whether the different participants shared similar

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perspectives on what represents the phenomenon of fun. Overall, the analysis revealed that the process and not the content issues emerge as the most important.

In terms of our a priori themes, we have re-confirmed the three types of workplace fun that have been already discussed in the literature and identified a fourth type, organised fun. Organised fun is clearly distinct from the other types in two ways; it is organised by the employees at some level, but it is not management led and at the same time it is organic but not work disruptive. This is an important distinction as it can help future literature provide better understanding of various fun activities and their characteristics that have an impact on desirable outcomes. The boundaries between work and play have often been discussed in the literature, and although having fun with the co-workers and others is considered one of the characteristics of a good day at work (Jackson, 2005) and most importantly is very much desired by the workers, it can have negative consequences. Organised fun has the best characteristics of organic fun, in the sense that it includes co-workers who are close to each other and at the same time the best characteristics of managed fun, in the sense that it can help the employees take their mind off of work and detach, making the boundary of work and play clear. This conceptualization of organised fun is consistent with self-determination theory, which is a theory concerned with the motivation behind choices people make without external influence and interference and focuses on the degree to which an individual's behaviour is self-motivated and self-determined (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intrinsic motivation refers to initiating an activity for its own sake because it is interesting and satisfying in itself, as opposed to doing an activity to obtain an external goal (extrinsic motivation). Employees that by themselves organize a gathering or an event do this in a proactive way and not as a reaction to management's initiatives satisfying their innate psychological need for relatedness that is necessary for their well-being. These activities are self-initiated enough not to compromise autonomy, which is an important characteristic of workplace fun (Fleming, 2005; Fleming, and Sturdy, 2009) and a second motivating need

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according to Deci and Ryan. Self-determination theory has continually found that people feel most related to those who support their autonomy, a finding that can potentially benefit an organization that minimizes regulation and maximizes self-initiative in terms of fun. The second characteristic of organised fun is that it creates a clear boundary between work time and play time. This is an important distinction as several activities that are considered fun, like play, have been viewed as counterproductive and disruptive (Costea, Crump, & Holm, 2005; D'Abate, 2005). Organised fun is a type of fun that takes places outside of specified work time and not while working or instead of working. This way fun activities can be kept separate from work time, minimizing disruptions and absorption barriers.

While we approached workplace fun as a concept that reflects activities consistent with the previous literature, the participants constructed their meaning relationally and apart from reporting activities, they were constantly building their understanding of the phenomenon in underlying assumptions of the organisational culture and the quality of relationships between the co-workers, highlighting that the content of a fun activity or behaviour is not as important as other peripheral but directly linked notions like genuineness, spontaneity and trust. The participants of this study who were having fun in their workplace described it as the tip of the iceberg that was reflecting a climate that respects or even promotes freedom of expression, and an environment where genuine fun seems to be the manifestation of honest relationships. These aspects of fun were manifested in the narratives of the participants in agreement with the literature (Beck, 1997), in the sense that those who were having fun also experienced a sense of belonging to the group; they felt accepted and connected to each other. Adding to the above the participants mentioned that teamwork and effective collaboration are higher among people with whom they have fun with. Fun also seems to have a cyclical relation with trust, in the way that people in the workplace who trust each other seem to be able to have more fun in the workplace and at the same time people who have fun are cultivating trust. Our

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findings are in agreement with Fleming and Sturdy (2009) who conceptualised fun as an expression of the authentic self and associated it with diversity.

Synthesising the above, lead us to understand the psychological safety is an antecedent of workplace fun. Psychological safety is defined according to Edmondson (1999) as “a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking”. These beliefs have to do with interpersonal norms, tend to be tacit and are rarely discussed. This common interpretative line for each behaviour can lead to a healthy culture (Hill, Fonagy, Safier, & Sargent, 2003) in which humour is interpreted as a humour and not criticism. A healthy emotional culture helps reinforce positive emotions in the workplace, creating a range of benefits at all levels of the organization. For example, Sy, Cote and Saavedra, (2005) linked positive emotional culture with increased team effort and good coordination. Furthermore, according to Edmondson psychological safety is more than simply positive affect, and it has to do with a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up. This confidence stems from mutual respect and trust among team members, and creates a climate in which people can feel themselves. In terms of psychological safety intteams, support either from their peers or from the supervisor is key, which can explain the functionality of fun beyond respite. It was evident from the results of this study that workplace fun could manifest in a positive way only in healthy organizations and psychologically safe teams. These underlying beliefs and values add to our understanding of the phenomenon, by highlighting that most of the times the activity or behaviour itself is not as important as shared understandings that underlie it. Understanding these underlying elements, can inform our approach to managing people, while taking into consideration the probability of orchestrated fun resulting in negative outcomes, especially when respect and dignity are not part of the equation (Fleming, 2005).

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Two important aspects should be pointed out: the importance of management issues and the interaction among the different types of fun. Direct managers have a considerable role when it comes to implementing fun activities or engaging in fun behaviours in the workplace. Manager support for fun was conceptualized by Tews, Michel and Stafford (2013) as the extent to which managers allow and encourage employees to have fun on the job. Tews et al. (2013) found that manager support for fun was a dominant predictor of employee turnover attributing it to the fact the managerial behaviour is a more constant feature of an employee's day-to-day experiences. Thus we understand that management support for fun can function as a facilitator, and help employees to interact in a friendly manner without the fear and guilt that the participants of the present study expressed. Specifically, the participants of this study very early during the interviews sought to note that having fun during the work hours did not translate into playing around whereby productivity and service quality suffer. In this sense, when fun happens with the support from management it can have different results on desirable outcomes. This finding is consistent with the positive impact on turnover that Tews et al. (2013) found which was present only after the interaction between manager support for fun and fun activities was taken into consideration.

### **Implications for practice.**

Research including the current study has revealed numerous ways in which workplace fun can benefit an organization in terms of generating favourable outcomes (e.g. see the series of studies by Tews et al). This study, can function as an opportunity for learning more on the antecedents of workplace fun that is of equal importance when planning and implementing fun initiatives. The results of this study suggest that organic and organised fun apart from being the most common, have potentially greater impact compared to managed types of fun, as they are motivated by internal sources. Practitioners should be cautious not to be overconsumed by the content of fun activities, but to also make sure that they have two

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underlying characteristics; they are internally motivated and they are supported by the organization that creates a positive psychological environment. Nurturing freedom of expression so that organic and organised fun can flourish will help employees benefit from its enhancing and protective functions. It is common nowadays for organizations to organize fun events and activities. But without safeguarding virtues like respect and honesty, they will remain a superficial event, and might not lead to positive results. Management can assist employees in creating their own fun moment by providing resources but most importantly by encouraging fun experiences that stem from employees themselves. Work practices that allow employees to be in control of their work and break time could be helpful in this path. Also, by helping creating a safe work climate in which fun is considered an acceptable norm could be a valuable context factor to take into account. Furthermore, other types of solutions might be valued more, like the establishment of breaks, or the introduction of play areas. The role of management should not be one of an initiator but as a supporter in order to achieve more positive fun with better results for the employees and the organisation.

Positive genuine fun -as opposed to imposed 'fun'- might be an indicator of a healthy organization. Stress is almost inevitable as things are not always predictable and controllable, but being able to have fun even in situations when stress levels are high, might be an indicator of certain types of organizational culture like a supportive culture. Support cultures are evident in environments with high levels of trust and openness (Cameron & Quinn, 1999) and these virtues should function as the basis of healthy fun manifestations.

We can appreciate that some employers may view the promotion of fun with scepticism and associate it either with a less professional approach in the workplace or a topic not deserving of serious consideration. However, such attitudes ignore the fact that their employees are 'engineering' their own fun regardless of company policy (see organic fun). It is also very important to consider what employees are doing "for fun" when they are not

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allowed to. Managers should take into consideration the negative effects of the absence of fun in the workplace and view the promotion of a healthy fun culture not only as an investment in the employees' psychological capital and consequently in the human capital of their organization, but also as a way to protect the organization itself.

Moreover, in a workplace where fun is the norm, a positive organizational culture will be created where feelings of psychological safety, empowerment and psychological presence are leading towards a healthier organization. Fun could help relieve feelings of anxiety, stress and even insecurity as well as creating a sense of belonging in a group, with consequences in many sensitive issues that the organization has to deal with, like the introduction of new employees and their socialization process or 'surviving' transition periods.

Fun should be a key to creating human relations and nurturing connectivity given all the positive effects that it has to offer (Losada & Heaphy, 2004). Moreover, the feeling of having a good day at work could easily be transferred at home, and eliminate the need for recovery, mainly because of the feeling of anticipation of going back where fun is accepted, especially organic fun (Rodriguez-Munoz, Sanz-Vergel, Demerouti, & Bakker, 2014). However, understanding the underlying elements, the basic pillars of fun, which are freedom, trust, open communication and tolerance, can inform our approach to managing people.

### **Future research.**

A suggestion for future researchers is taking into consideration that discussions around fun might involve the identification of negative behaviours too. For example the participants in our study were aware of and reported several negative implications of workplace fun including the creation of cliques, the use of negative gossip and the disruption of the work pace confirming the work of Plester et al. (2015) that the 'simple idea of workplace fun starts to emerge as complex, paradoxical and problematic'. The above should prompt us to consider that fun may also have a dark side. In order to understand the concept, important issues

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regarding fun need to be disentangled, especially regarding organic fun and its manifestations, as they are those inherent to human nature and less controllable. Future research should shed more light to these negative aspects of fun. In addition, different behaviours that entail organic, organised and managed fun should be identified and importantly, the emotions that follow the experience of organic versus organised and versus managed fun should be distinguished.

Organised fun which is the type of fun that this study revealed should be studied in relation to the outcomes that the literature so far has shown that fun has a significant impact to and explore its distinct explanatory power compared with organic fun and managed fun. We hypothesize that as organised fun is initiated by the employees themselves but at the same time it has an element of support by management it can have a significant impact on both team and organizational variables.

Our results are limited by the few participants with management positions participating in the interviews, so we urge researchers in the field to take into consideration the differences between the roles of manager and employee. Our data enrich the literature in terms of cultural contextual factors as we used a diverse sample in terms of organizations, occupations and jobs, but also, because the data are culturally specific. The developments of our understanding on workplace fun would benefit by more data collection in different contexts in relation to culture, societal values and organizational health.

Further taking into account the contextuality element of workplace fun, studies that analyse the same fun interaction from multiple sources and points of view will be valuable in terms of further developing our understanding of the subjectivity of workplace fun.

### **Conclusion**

This paper argues that fun is a highly contextual phenomenon. Employees that participated in this study explained how the context and the relational elements of fun

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mattered more than the content in relation to their perception of an event or an interaction as fun. The analysis showed that organic fun can potentially have the most significant impact in terms of outcomes and that organised fun, is a type of fun distinct from managed fun, which future research should study. It is suggested by the results of this study that fun can potentially be an indicator of organizational variables and group dynamics, like psychological safety, which emerged as an important antecedent of workplace fun.

This paper contributes in the literature in two ways. First by further developing the concept of workplace fun by revealing a new type fun and by offering new theoretical foundations for building understanding around its antecedents and impact. Second we add to the management literature with a qualitative study that emphasizes the importance of contextuality in the workplace. There is a need for future research in the workplace to address more issues of context especially in terms of workplace fun.

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### Appendix A

- Abusing the limits
- Activities in the context of social responsibility
- After work drinks/ dinner
- Animals
- Annoying the others, while there is workload
- Boredom
- Break areas
- Characteristics of the people that we don't have fun with
- Characteristics of the people that we have fun with
- Chatting
- Clients / Passengers / Patients / Students
- Cliques
- Colleagues from other offices / other companies/ suppliers
- Cooperation / We finished the job successfully / Things are normal, are going well
- Coping
- Culture of company
- Doing things together
- Eating lunch together
- Excursions
- Family like relationships
- Flexibility
- Flirt
- Flow
- Free food and drinks
- Freedom
- Friends that visit the workplace
- Fun at work and performance
- Fun is context specific
- Fun is different from routine
- Fun is people oriented
- Gaffes
- Games
- Gossiping about the others
- Intrigue
- It's more than being good to each other
- Jokes
- Long term teams
- Making coffee
- Making fun of difficult situations
- Making fun of the colleagues
- Managed and organised fun is needed
- Micro-breaks
- Middle management
- Mimics
- Moderation is the best thing
- Music
- Negative comments about others
- No competitiveness / No jealousy
- Not everyone understands the jokes of all
- Not something extreme, small things
- Open communication
- Open minds
- Open space work environments
- Opportunities to meet
- Out of the ordinary situations
- Parties (Christmas, farewell, birthday)
- Physical activities (yoga, other exercises)
- Positive Atmosphere / Climate
- Racist comments
- Recreation room
- Sense of belonging
- Supportive
- Task related fun
- The need for limits
- Tolerance
- Trust
- Unofficial character
- Working as a team / Collaboration / Team spirit/
- Workload
- You can't be friends with everyone