

# I can play anytime....when I've finished my work.....

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## Do you make enough time to play?

Following on from work and rest (the subject of the last 2 newsletters), we now come to play. I wonder how many hours a week you play? I'm not talking about on-line poker or any manner of on-line activity - shopping, surfing, social media – but rather the kind of play that releases creativity and energy. The Myers Briggs Type Indicator would sort us into those that can only really play when their work is done (if at all) and those who feel that life is basically one big game and so why should work be any different. In reality, most of us are probably somewhere between these extremes, and yet it seems that most workplaces still frown on the very idea of play as we should be concentrating on the serious stuff of work. Yet deep down, we may recognise that our constant search for innovation and performance improvement will only be enhanced by a more positive attitude to play.

### The dark cult of Presenteeism

We know the 9-to-5 culture doesn't really exist anymore. Tim Aldiss (who defines himself as a social media geek) says most people think of their lives as being split into two distinct parts: work and free time. But what if that distinction didn't exist? What if going to work was so enjoyable that people actually looked forward to being there? It may sound radical but a growing number of forward-thinking businesses and organizations are trying to help their employees have more fun at work. In any case, the boundaries that protect our leisure time are slowly being eroded. From C-suite to junior intern, we see individuals sitting at desks in lit office blocks long past sunset, and many are taking work home on the weekend, too. But this kind of work-life imbalance has a sting in the tail for industry. We know that more and more people are becoming depressed at work and that stress related illness is on the increase. In her book 'Overwhelmed: Work, Love and Play When No One Has the Time' Brigid Schulte explores how we have forgotten to play because we put too much onus on being productive. It is the work ethic gone crazily off-kilter, with a new and dangerous status attached to productivity. But, contrary to common perceptions, this kind of obsession with "presenteeism" does not result in increased productivity. But if we can't go back to the days of being home for supper at 5.30 p.m., what businesses can do is to create leisure time in the working day. By bringing leisure into the work space, organisations can encourage employees to break up their day with allocated periods of creativity, communication, and free play with colleagues.

### The (Playful) Future of Work

Appreciative Inquiry, initiated by David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva, is a model for positive and sustainable change within organizations. One of its core principles sums up perfectly the concepts that might drive a new human-centred workplace, but asking the question, "What gives life?" The

positive principle proposes that momentum and sustainable change requires positive feeling and social bonding. Sentiments like hope, excitement, inspiration, camaraderie and joy increase creativity, openness to new ideas and people, and cognitive flexibility. Instead of dreaming of escape, people might actively choose to spend time in a workplace where play, creativity, social connection, reward, and a sense of fun are woven into the culture

You may say work is the opposite of play, but Portia Tung from “The world of play” would argue that depression is the opposite of play. Ergo, if you are sad, play is an opportunity to overcome it. But specifically she says, “play is a way to improve your work”. She goes on to say “Play leads to creativity and innovation which leads to inventions and growth. But, but, we’ll never get anything finished if we’re playing all the time! And you’re right, it can be far too much of a good thing. So Portia Tung’s recommended dose of play is 10 to 15 minutes per day. She further explains that one day of play can last up to a week. There’s a reason we look forward to the weekend, when we feel freer to let loose even for a little bit. “But what if every day could be like that? Play little and often.”

Michelle Burke at the Energy Catalyst Company encourages us to imagine a workplace where people are allowed to play and even better encouraged to play. And of course there are a few example organisations out there. Take Google, where all employees have access to and can play during their workday. They have all sorts of activities like bowling, meditation, wall climbing, volleyball and more. Facebook, LinkedIn and Ideo also provide opportunities for play time at work, anything from ping-pong to arcade games and a few take it one step further by instilling a culture of play. These fun activities are not just for lunch, employees can get up and go play when they get tired of working on a project or answering emails. Burke says “most of us think of play at work as a distraction, inappropriate or simply a waste of time”. The paradigm of play is that it’s seen as taking time away from “real work.” Just think, what if what we thought work could benefit from play? What if, the opposite of play isn’t work (or depression), but rather boredom? We have made assumptions over the years that play doesn’t belong during work hours. As a communication and culture consultant, she says the typical conversation with clients is often about employee engagement and how to create a more positive and energized workforce. Perhaps play is the vital missing solution at work. Play, according to Burke, is simply having fun, being joyful and energized.

In his book Play, author and psychiatrist Stuart Brown, MD, compares play to oxygen. He writes, “...it’s all around us, yet goes mostly unnoticed or unappreciated until it is missing.” Think about how play shows up in your life? Play is games, art, books, sports, movies, music, comedy, flirting, talking and even daydreaming. More trainers, and consultants are using games and out-of-the-box activities to bring play into the workplace even if it’s within a teambuilding experience or company event. When learning is fun, employees are more inclined to remember what they learned and use it. Dr. Brown is also the founder of the National Institute for Play, and he states, “when employees have the opportunity to play, they actually increase their productivity, engagement and morale.” It begs the question, why aren’t all companies insisting on more playtime at work? Dr. Brown goes on to say, “Not only does having a playful atmosphere attract young talent, but experts say play at work can boost creativity and productivity in people of all ages. There is good evidence that if you allow employees to engage in something they want to do, (which) is playful, there are better outcomes in terms of productivity and motivation.”

## **Forget IQ, EQ, SQ, what about Play IQ (PQ?)**

By embracing play at work — in small, but crucial doses, we are taking down barriers. Dr Brown says when we do this we're actually working to increase our intelligence or Play IQ. So, it's time to consider some changes. "When you awake tomorrow, what would be some of the things you would notice that your life had suddenly become more playful?" And it's scientifically proven to stunt you if you abstain from play — at least in mice. A group of mice were split into two groups — allowed to play and not. Then a cat was released on them and the mice, of course ran into holes. After the cat was removed, the group that played elected and sent out a scout. The other group never went out again. Is this an analogy for the scary boss who scolded us for running a sweepstake on "the mostly likely to be appointed to the executive team" - and so we never play that game again. Yet, without play, we're missing something essential, something that not only makes us happier at work, but makes us more successful.

Enough reading. Time to go out, get back to work, and play!