

# **Play and Professionalism at Work: Boosting engagement while maintaining standards**

Audio transcription of a PersonnelToday webinar in association with BrightHR.

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Original webcast:

ROB MOSS:

Hello and welcome to this PersonnelToday webinar in association with BrightHR. It's a Monday morning at work, many of you may have taken time off last week for half term. Having fun is probably not front of mind, but why shouldn't it be, why shouldn't workplaces be more playful places? Today we're looking at play and professionalism at work. Can introducing more play into the workplace help drive productivity and improve employee engagement? To what extent should employers attempt to make their workplaces fun and can HR encourage the right amount of enjoyment in the organisation, while maintaining professionalism?

I'm Rob Moss, I'm editor of Personnel Today and we're going to be addressing these questions over the next hour with two speakers, the first of whom is Paul Harris. Paul is Chief Marketing Officer at BrightHR and a self-confessed advocate of fun. BrightHR, together with the Wellbeing consultants Robertson Cooper published research last year into play at work, some of which I'm sure Paul will be sharing with you today. And after Paul, we will be joined by Rob Briner, Professor of Organisational Psychology at the University of Bath and also Scientific Director at the Centre for Evidence-

Based Management. Rob's research interests include relationships between work conditions and psychological wellbeing and work and non-work relationships.

Paul and Rob will be speaking for about fifteen minutes each, after which we will run a live question and answer session, which will take us to approximately 12:30. I will need your help with the Q&A, so I urge you to use the chat pane on the left side of your screen to send in your questions. You can do that at any point, so do please make comments and ask questions of our speakers as we go along and I'll submit those questions to Paul and Rob at the end.

Okay, before I hand over to Paul, we're going to kick off with a poll, which you can see on your screen now. If you click on the yes and no button, depending on what you think. Do you think more play at work can boost engagement? And I can see plenty of you voting already. I'll just try and let most of you vote. Do vote in that poll. Do you think more play at work can boost engagement? Okay and let's see what the results are. Okay, overwhelmingly most of you do, so let's have a look. Let's see if it can and we'll welcome Paul Harris. Over to you Paul.

PAUL HARRIS:

Thanks, Rob. Morning everybody. So, that was very interesting. You've obviously got a group of people who do believe in this. Just for a bit of context, BrightHR, we are a cloud based HR software company. We are trying to do things very differently. We are trying to create, we set out to create a brand that was very innovative and a product that reinvents how HR is done. So that's the background as to why we're doing what we're doing. So if we have a look at the world as it stands, 30% of the people in a business at any point in time are typically searching for jobs. 45% aren't engaged, 26% are actively disengaged, which is a particularly worrying statistic. If you add

those numbers together, you've got a large number of people who aren't with you on your journey. 82% are annoyed by the lack of recognition they get from their bosses and from their peers at work. 40% feel stressed and if you're feeling stressed at work you're 70% more likely to go off.

So that's the status quo. That's the world as it is and that is not a great place to create an innovative product to differentiate yourself in the market place, to be good at anything and it's not a great place for your employees either. So it doesn't work for anybody. We're in a work culture at the moment that is very, very driven. It's an always on world, there's technology. We all have smartphones, we look at them out of hours, we look at them at weekends. We have the longest working hours in the EU and the second longest working in the developed world, behind the US, which is worrying. But I'm sure it is something that everyone will be able to associate with.

There is a large body of research that suggests that longer hours don't equate to more productivity. In fact, quite the opposite and the other part of the context for this is the world is changing and millennials in particular, their view on work and what they expect from work is evolving and changing and if you look further forward into the future, what's being predicted is the gig generation, where people don't expect to work for a length of time for a particular company. They are much more transportable. So if we accept the way things are, we're not going to be able to do great work now or engage our people and certainly in the future, I think it's going to get harder and harder. So the picture you should be seeing now, that's Simon Dalley, he's our Brand Marketing Manager and, yes, he is dressed as a lobster and he is on a surfboard. Now fun at work and play at work, surely for most people that seems

incongruous. It's a distraction that must be counterproductive. But we find quite the opposite.

Now that's one extreme and I think it's important what we talk about here will make it very clear, is what we mean by fun. So fun can mean the crazy stuff, and we do that here. But that's not necessarily right for everybody. What does fun mean to me? So if you find great people, what you need to be able to do is empower them. So trusting and empowering people to be brilliant at what they do. Giving people space and time to be able to do brilliant work. Recognising them for what they do, appraising them, giving them a voice. Making sure they feel connected in terms of what they're doing in their job. Every day is connected and they understand what you're trying to achieve as a business and they understand the link between the two of them. And the great story from NASA about the cleaner, when asked what he did for a job he said, 'My job's to help put a man on the moon.' You know, that sort of link, great link between understanding how your job connects to the purpose of the business. So fun for me, there are the more extremes, but if you don't get this stuff right, you know, this is the platform and if you, if you're good at what you do and you're in an environment where you're allowed to do it, that's fun. You are having a great time. There's no conflict of professionalism there, you know this is something that anybody can do in any type of business, in any type of sector. It's just about creating an environment where your people can be at their best and trusting them and empowering them and having policies and procedures that allow that to happen. We tend to work in a one size fits all world, where we all start and stop at the same time, which is quite antiquated. It goes back to factories and what was right for the factories. The world has changed a lot. For me, personally, I don't feel like I have a start or a stop to my week or a beginning or an end to my day, because I enjoy

what I'm doing and I've got an environment where I'm allowed to be good. And that's what I mean by fun at work.

So at a very basic level, that's what's important. Our purpose as a business is to discover the brilliance in everyone and set it free. So that is for our own people. So we want to create an environment where our people can be great at what they do, but also for our customers through our product. The lady on the screen, Kelsey, is personally one of the things I'm most proud of in our business. Kelsey is someone who has really developed and flourished in our business. I think when she came on the journey with us, she didn't feel particularly valued. She didn't feel like she had a voice. She'd never felt particularly worthy in any job that she'd had before. But we created an environment where she did have a voice, she could make contributions, make suggestions that were listened to and it's been fantastic to see how she has really developed. Not just inside work, but outside of work as well. She's so much more confident. She believes in herself and what she can contribute to the world so much more because of the environment that we've helped to create. So that's fun, what I mean by fun at least.

One of the other things that really interests me is that I talk about passion and mastery. To try and sum this up, in sport, sport particularly, if you look at football and rugby as a couple of examples, and we've got Wayne Rooney there on screen, you get people who are very, very good at what they do. Very talented at what they do. But they're also very, very passionate about who they do it for. Passionate about the brand. We've got Wayne there kissing the badge. This is not unusual in sport, that people are passionate and talented. We don't get it in business very often. Obviously there are always exceptions to the rule, but for the most part people turn up and they do a job and there's separation between what you do in work and fun

and enjoying yourself outside of work. And that's a shame, it doesn't have to be like that. People shouldn't have to tolerate drudgery for eight hours a day just to escape into a better world where they can enjoy themselves. What we want is to create a work environment where people are excited to come in, where they want to come in because they know that they're going to be able to do great work and they're going to enjoy what they're doing. And also that throughout that day, if things aren't going well, if they get particularly stressed, they're able to step away from the desk.

Here we have a 60ft garden, we have beanbags and our people can step away and crash on a beanbag anytime and just get themselves mentally back into a better state so they can go back and do their job. And we focus a lot on making sure that people are appreciated and recognised for doing great work. So it would be great if we can help move business more towards this situation where people really enjoy what they do. So that's fun, or my interpretation of fun and how we are using that at BrightHR to try and achieve our ambitions. Play is slightly different.

There's a quote here from Albert Einstein: 'Logic will get you from A. to B. Imagination will take you everywhere'. We focus on play because we're trying to create something different. We want people to think differently. We want people to innovate and be creative and it's very difficult to do that in a traditional work environment that's very regimented, that has lots of rules and policies and procedures. And, typically, people turn up and you'll sit down and you'll do a job and you'll do it in a way that you've always done it. But the problem with that is, if you do what you've always done, you get what you've always got. And that's the same as everybody else. And that means being average or mediocre and we're not trying to be average or mediocre. So for us to help snap people out of that everyday mode of operation and

think differently, we use games and play. So we have Xboxes, we have PlayStations, we have lots of board games around the business. We've got football nets and people spontaneously break off and have penalty shoot-outs and so on. We have daily Nerf gun battles. When we first moved into the building where we are now, we issued Nerf guns out to everybody and that's grown and people have gone out and bought bigger and more dangerous Nerf guns and everyday there's a sort of running battle throughout, through the garden with one department attacking another. And these things are there just really to help people snap out of that work mode, and it helps them to transition into this state of mind where they can be more creative and just think differently.

The polar bear and the husky that you see on screen, there was a really nice pep talk I watched last year, and it was a story about this polar bear. The polar bear came into a camp, it was hungry and was looking for a meal. There were two huskies tied up, or chained up. The polar bear spotted them and it came into the camp, head down, eyes fixed, murder in its eyes and there was going to be a blood bath. One of the huskies cowed away, tried to escape, but it couldn't because it was chained up. The other husky, its tail went up and he started to bounce around. It went into a sort of play state and didn't sense the danger. And what it did was it completely snapped the polar bear out of its state of mind, going from hunting and killing into play and what ended up was this playful transaction between the two of them.

And that demonstrates how play can take you away from, just snap you out of that mental state into a place where you can just think differently. Another thing that's important to us as a business, at BrightHR, is breaking the rules. Again, it's part of being innovative and being creative. A lot of people might recognise the building on the screen.

This is the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao designed by an architect called Frank Gehry. What's great about this, for me, was he had this vision of what he wanted to create but he couldn't do it. Normal architectural software wouldn't allow you to build this building. But rather than compromise his vision what he did was find a way of doing it and by thinking differently he actually used another piece of software which was for designing aircraft. And the aircraft software allowed him to realise his vision and create what he wanted to do. 99.9% of architects in the world just wouldn't make that leap into doing something differently and that's really, really important if you're trying to differentiate your business, if you're trying to create something different, or an innovative product, you want people to think differently and to do that you have to create an environment where people can break the rules.

And along with breaking the rules comes risk taking. You can't innovate, in my opinion, without failure. So you have to have an environment where people can think differently and fail and they can try things and fail and that's okay. It has to be safe and a traditional business environment doesn't always lend itself to that. Again, here, at BrightHR, I'm much more interested in seeing people trying and failing but really pushing the boundaries rather than staying in their comfort zones. Because nothing great comes from a comfort zone. On the screen you'll see Venus and Serena Williams. What's interesting about them is how part of their journey to becoming amazing tennis players was how their father, Richard, who trained them, how he made them play when they were young. And what he used to do was, they would train to do adventurous and creative shots and then when they played against each other, when he umpired the match, he would award a point to whoever had tried something that they had been doing in training. It wasn't about whether the shot went it,



that was irrelevant, it was just about who was trying the hardest. And another interesting story was the ice skating at the last Winter Olympics. At the podium finishes, the people who fell most in training were the gold medallists and that's because they were pushing the envelope. They were trying to do something that was just a bit bigger and bit better than everybody else and on the day they were able to pull that off.

So you can achieve amazing things if you create an environment where people feel empowered to do things – empowered to think, where they're able to be creative, where they're able to take risks and fail. That's an important part of why we have the culture that we have. And what do we find when we do that? My experience in this business and also in a previous business where we built a similar sort of culture, and also from the research that we've done with Professor Sir Cary Cooper and his research team, Robertson Cooper, is that actually if you create an environment like this, people are a lot more creative, 67% more creative. And that's important if you don't want to just be normal, if you don't want to be average. Ideas are a very, very important part of moving you on into a space that's much more innovative. People feel considerably more valued, more productive and what's interesting here is when we're having our inflatable twister games and we're on surfboards and we have the fun days and the dress-up days, lots of people take photos, they post them on social media and they'll always be somebody from outside the business that will say, 'That's great – but don't you guys do any work?' Well actually, what we find is that if people are having fun at work and they're enjoying themselves, they are more productive. Definitely more motivated, 22% more motivated, 63% less likely to go sick and that's significant. The last two stats there, 63% reduction in sickness and 87% less likely to leave the business – those are massive costs for a

business. The cost of replacing somebody is typically between 30% and 150% of salary. If you've got 30 people looking to leave all the time, you've got that churn in your business and it has that sort of cost and impact on productivity, if you can slow that down it reduces the cost, it makes your more productive. They're massive costs. Normally for a business, we find that creating this sort of environment helps us both from a business point of view and our people are much more engaged and much more with us.

So, finally, my personal experience and what we see in the research from *the It Pays to Play* report, is that this sort of approach, it does work. People are much more engaged. It helps you attract and retain the best people. Again, if you want to do something different, if you want to really go out and shake the market place up, or grab market share, you need great people in your business.

Having this sort of approach allows us to attract the best people to our business. And we are a new business, so we don't have a brand that has a great awareness at the moment, so that's not what's going to make people come to us. And also once you've got great people, you want to keep them. You want them to be creative, you want them to be innovative. Standards go up, productivity goes up and people generally are just happier and healthier and are more motivated. To make it work you need buy-in from the top. It has to exist at every level. Our culture here is driven from myself and the CEO and it has to be right through the organisation. It has to be the air that you breathe and yes, you can do all of the really fun stuff if that suits your business and that suits you industry sector, but the stuff that I was talking about at the beginning about trust and empowerment and recognition and gratitude are the things that underpin it and really make this work. So it's about finding the right balance for your business between fun and play and

associating that fun with your brand and with your business. I hope that makes a little bit of sense about how BrightHR is using culture to drive our business. Thank you, Rob.

ROB MOSS:

Great thanks. Thank you, Paul. Some interesting stuff there and always good to see a man dressed as a lobster on a surfboard! Okay, there's plenty of questions coming in, which is fantastic, so thank you for that and do keep them coming in. Now we're going to hear from Rob in a second and I think Rob is perhaps a little bit more sceptical about some of this stuff, but before I hand over to Rob, I'm going to run our second poll and this is a statement that I want you to agree with or disagree with strongly or neutrally, depending on your answer.

So, let's have a look. Having more fun at work is appropriate in all sectors, organisations and job roles. So this has already come up a little bit in the questions coming through on the chat. Do you agree with that? Are all jobs, are all businesses similarly able, appropriate to have fun at work? And with that I'm going to hand over to Rob. Sorry, I'll just display the results first of all. Most of you have voted. So a lot of you agree that it is appropriate in all sectors. I guess it depends on how much, there's quite a few people who disagree there. Rob, can I hand over to you please?

ROB BRINER:

Sure, yes. Thank you. Thank you, Rob and also thank you, Paul, for your presentation. I found that very interesting as well. As Rob said, I'm slightly more sceptical about it, but not for the sake of it. This is because I've thought about this quite a lot and I've been interested in things like fun and people's moods and emotions at work and engagement and how that affects people's performance and behaviour for a long time. And I guess what strikes me about some of the things that Paul just said now for example, I know that

BrightHR claims about the research they've done. I'm not really very convinced, I'm not sure that's very good quality evidence. Though many of the things, in principle, I agree with Paul about, I'm not really sure in practice, or from a practical point of view, how valuable this idea of fun is. I just really want to break this down a bit and think about a few questions.

Again Paul has touched on some of these, which is really helpful, but to talk about what fun at work is anyway, a little bit about that, and also can you actually make people have fun at work? And this is a sense of, well I'll go into that in a minute, but it's a sense of enforced fun and what that does to people. Why would you want to actually make anyone have fun at work, anyway, and when might fun be a good thing and a bad thing and, again, I call most of this evidence light because frankly there is very, very little good quality evidence to base any of those comments on. So it is mostly speculation. I don't want to talk about whether or not I personally am a party pooper and just conclude at the end with some comments.

Okay, so first of all, what is fun at work anyway? It's very hard to define. On the one hand it's things like positive emotions clearly, but which ones? It might be laughter, it might involve things like going to activities and it may be fun, I suppose, in terms of the work itself and I think listening to Paul's definition, it was extremely broad and very wide. It's talking about things like valuing people, giving people a voice. I mean all this is good stuff, but I was really personally struggling to see what any of that had to do with the concept of fun. So I get the point about valuing people, giving people a voice, but none of that necessarily involves fun. So I felt there is a lot of shifting sand there. We started off with fun, but then Paul was talking about everything in HR, so it was a bit unclear to me exactly what fun means.

I think another issue is fun at whose expense? So when there is a group of people having fun or a pair of people having fun, I think there is an issue about whose expense it is at. And also I think there's another thing about fun, it can be very idiosyncratic. What I think is fun, you may think to be absolute hell. So when we're thinking about what fun is and if we should enforce it and how we do it, there are quite a few issues there about what fun is. This is an example, actually taken from the *It Pays To Play* report and that may be your idea of fun, I know they are only examples, but to me it looks like hell at work, not fun at work. And also it's worth remembering in terms of expense, at whose expense the fun is. Those of you familiar with *The Cat in the Hat* book will know that, 'Look at me! Look at me! Look at me now! It is fun to have fun, but you have to know how.' And this is part of the idiosyncratic nature of fun, I think, that really what *The Cat in the Hat* is talking about is it's a thing you have to work out for yourself and find out. It's not the same for everyone. And again those of you know this book, it shows the dangers of enforced fun.

So the second question then is actually, can you make people have fun at work? If you can't then seriously, from a practical point of view, what's the point of discussing it? I don't know whether you can or whether you can't, but there isn't a lot of good quality evidence about that. Sure, people have fun at work, but can you make people have fun? It's kind of a different issue. And I think there's a contradiction here that fun is, by definition, spontaneous. So it's quite hard to engineer something that is supposed to be spontaneous. The best fun I certainly ever have is not something that's been engineered – now it's half past three, it's fun time! I don't think fun really quite happens like that.

Although you can't make people have fun, I think you can perhaps set up context and environments

where it is perhaps more likely to happen and perhaps, I don't know, some of the things Paul was talking about they do at BrightHR, maybe that does set a context where people have more fun. But I frankly haven't got a clue, because I don't think he or I have any good evidence about that. Also in particular, I think, enforced or engineered fun is quite likely to backfire and actually alienate some people, who may feel that they're being treated like children who need to be somehow entertained and have fun.

So you can't make people have fun at work, you may be able to set up contexts where it's more likely to happen, but it also may backfire. So I think it's a kind of double-edged sword. It's not all good, necessarily. And this graphic, it's not mine, and I've forgotten the source of it, but I think it's trying to make an interesting point, which is saying that, yes on the one hand, on the left-hand side you have this big category of not having fun, you have a big category of having fun, but somewhere there might be a sweet spot in the middle which is a bit of both.

And I think the most fun people have at work is often to do with the work itself. It's not firing Nerf guns, it's not lying on a beanbag. I think the most fun people have at work – and there is some evidence to support this – is the work itself. Not all that stuff around it. Okay, so I think a key thing from a practical point of view is why would anybody want to help people make people have fun at work? Paul has given some suggestions there and there is an assumed causal link here that fun leads to things like positive aspects, satisfaction and engagement, which in turn leads to performance. And this is basically based on three, I would call, quite dodgy assumptions. One is that you can make fun happen, which I'm just not convinced about. Second is that fun is an important cause of positive effect, satisfaction and engagement. Well it may be, but there really isn't

much evidence to support that at the moment. The third assumption is that positive affect, satisfaction and engagement are important drivers of performance. Well, again, there is a lot of evidence about this and there is some evidence to suggest they don't have much effect or quite weak effect and this to me is one of the key points. And again, Paul touched on this when talking about things like innovation and creativity. There is a view that positive feelings are good for work performance. That fundamentally is untrue. The evidence suggests that positive affect is good for some kinds of work performance and it is terrible for other kinds of work performance. So it really depends what kind of performance we're interested in, what kind of performance we're talking about. And certainly it's a bit of a myth to assume that creativity is actually driven by positive effects and positive emotions. The evidence around creativity suggests that negative emotions are also extremely important. Things like feeling anxious, feeling concerned, really getting frustrated about something are also a very important driver of creativity.

So we have to be very, very careful about some of these assumptions. Feeling good at work is not necessarily good for work performance. It really always depends on the kind of performance, the kind of context and so on. So just to speculate a bit on that evidence of when might fun be a good thing. Because it potentially can be. I think perhaps in certain contexts, perhaps early on in socialisation, when someone arrives in the organisation. Perhaps some of that fun is a good thing. It makes people get to know people and so on. However, it could also give quite the wrong impression. If you have an induction period or an on-boarding period where you've having lots and lots and lots of fun, finding out two months later than actually the job is just drudgery is again going to cause problems, I think. It also does depend, I

think, on the kind of work and where there is a genuine team but I think building team cohesion can be quite important. So perhaps fun leads to people getting to know each other, to like each other and, for example, in knowledge work there is evidence that team cohesion and liking other people is quite important for things like knowledge sharing which is in turn is important for knowledge work. So that maybe another context.

It's also maybe where people are working with customers or clients and they want them to have a fun experience, I think for employees having fun themselves maybe an important part of that. In other words they learn about what fun means, how to have fun in that context which may transfer to customers and clients and also again Paul mentioned that it may be that where people enjoy having fun, and you want them to stay in the organisation. But this is course is based on the assumption that low turnover of staff is a good thing. Sometimes high turnover of staff might be a good thing. When is it a bad thing? Again, not much evidence for this. I think, and to me this is a very, very important point, where it excludes or discriminates against individuals or groups.

There might be particular personality types, such as introverts, for whom having this type of fun is painful. And they will try and avoid it and if they take part they will hate it, perhaps. So this is discriminating and excluding rather than including people. There may also be important cultural differences. Say, for example, in some contexts people say, 'Oh, isn't it fun. Let's all go out for a drink. Let's all go to the pub afterwards.' Well, hold on. Some people don't like pubs. Some people don't want to drink. So actually it sounds innocent and it sounds like good fun, but actually it is excluding and it's discriminating against people. So that's important.



Fun might also be a bad thing where it detracts from performance, people having fun rather than working. It also could lead to counterproductive work behaviours. I mean fun can be so much fun, that in the end, people are doing stuff that actually in a way is damaging the organisation, though it's tremendous fun to do it. And I also think fun is a bad thing where it's at someone else's expense. And again back to *The Cat in the Hat*, an example of that is where the fish is being held up in a goldfish bowl and says "Put me down" says the fish, This is no fun at all. 'Put me down' says the fish, I do not wish to fall.' So in the book *The Cat in the Hat* is having tremendous fun playing with a fish, but the fish is absolutely hating it.

So just finally, just a couple of comments. Firstly, it may sound as if I'm being a bit of a party pooper here. I'm not really, I personally love having a laugh with colleagues and in my work history I've organised lots of kinds of fun at work, trips, parties, pantomimes, triathlons involving sports such as darts, pool and ten pin bowling. I've also organised many leaving dos. So personally, I like this stuff. But was any of this fun actually good for my work or the organisation? I just don't know. What I'm really more interested in is the validity of the claims made by various people about fun at work and whether it matters practically. Not, 'Do I like this?' But 'Does it matter?' And to me that's the most important question any HR practice should be asking. Does it matter?

So just to finish up now, so professionalism, we talked about this briefly before, Paul mentioned it. It's almost as hard to define as fun, but I think there are three main components. One is competence and that means doing what works and being evidence based in practice. The second thing is ethical standards and the third is maintaining or promoting of the profession. And I actually can't see necessarily how fun is a problem to professionalism. So it may be, it may not, but I

can't see that it necessarily is a problem. And there are a couple of other things to conclude. Firstly, be aware of the claims made about generational differences. These are mostly myths. The biggest, largest studies looking at attitudes between generations show there is basically no difference. So I think there is a bit of myth around generational differences.

And finally, and this to me is the most important thing, if I was an HR manager, if I was an HR practitioner, I'm not, I'm an academic, but I'd be asking this question – what is the evidence that really fun is important or matters? The problem is there is hardly any and it's mostly speculation. It means we just don't know. I'll leave it there. Thank you.

ROB MOSS:

Thank you, Rob. Well some good points there. I think probably the best thing to do is to hand back to Paul. We've had loads of questions come in and obviously this is quite an interesting topic, there's lots to say about it such as, 'What is your definition of fun?' and so on. Paul, I think probably good place to start is to look at some of those statistics that you had up earlier. There are a few people asking a bit more about those statistics. Could you give us a bit more background around the research that you carried out with Robertson Cooper?

PAUL HARRIS:

Yes. So Robertson Cooper carried out some research with about 2,000 participants and asked a number of questions to try and understand what people understand to be fun at work and what people are looking for. What would make work more fun? And it was quite a lengthy piece of work. They are a professional research organisation, they are based out of Manchester University and I'm sure a lot of people on the line will be familiar with Professor Sir Cary Cooper, who is a leading well-being expert in this field. So we feel that the research itself as a body or work is

very, very credible, both in the extent and the independence of what was done. There is also lots of other pieces of research around that we've looked at as well, which does support a lot of the things that we're saying, and we've got our own evidence, our own personal experience and mine, personally, in this business and a previous business where creating an environment where people can be at their best by allowing them to be good, by trusting them and empowering them, creating an environment where it's okay to relax and take time out if that's what they need to do to get in a better state mentally, these are all really, really important and for us. And we are a certain type of business, and I think Rob's right in a lot of ways, it depends on the definition of fun, but you can't force people to play. Forced fun is terrible.

There was quite a funny story, well either funny or very sad, of a company in America where the MD made the people get together on a Friday morning at eleven o'clock and dance to Pharrell Williams *Happy*, en masse, whether they liked it or not. That is not fun. That's really taking things to an extreme and misunderstanding what fun is about. I think it is very much about horses for courses. So the extent that we go to here with games and play, they're right for us and a technology business. And developers, coders are very, very important to our business. If you're in an environment like we are in Manchester, where you have a lot of technology businesses all trying to attract the best coders and we're up against businesses like the BBC and AutoTrader, there's a certain expectation of what they want and the sort of environment they need to do well. So it is specific to us, but that's the play side.

Fun for me, I'll go back to what I said at the beginning which is, it's our job as business owners to find great people. If you find great people, why would you box them in with bureaucracy and rules? Trust them, allow them to do what they're

great at, give them space and time, recognise them. Saying thank you is a very, very simple thing. It's very easy to do. One of the things that I do here is, every week I'll find out from the leadership team who has been great that week. And great doesn't mean hitting targets, it just means they're trying very hard, they're living our brand values. They're doing something good and I'll write them a little post-it note and stick in their screen overnight and they come in in the morning and people love that, it takes a bit of time, that's all. And you see massive companies like Google with billions and billions of pounds that they can invest into this sort of thing, with slides and swimming pools and free food and so on. We're not, we're a small business and small businesses can do this.

ROB MOSS:

Sorry, if I could just interject. I mean, it seems like there can be some credit to the idea of making a workplace a fun place to be or creating the sort of environment that you appear to have at BrightHR, where you've got things to do in between work. But is this really about connecting fun with productivity and fun with engagement? Does your research really show that or is the research showing a connection, perhaps, not necessarily a causal link. So I think that seems to be what Rob was talking about in his presentation.

PAUL HARRIS:

Yeah. I think there's, again, if you go back to the stats right at the beginning, the status quo as it is is not great. On the whole, and there are always exceptions to the rule, there are a lot of people who aren't particularly happy, don't particularly enjoy their work. They do just turn up and go through the motions. And a lot of these stats they aren't ours, they don't just come out of our research, they're drawn from all sorts of sources including Dale Carnegie, CareerBuilder, Bamboo, Society for Human Resource Management etc. Lots of research that says it's just not great now and we have to, if you want to do something

different in your business, if you want to be great, that's not the environment to do it in. So most people don't want to do that. People don't wake up in the morning and think, 'I want to be rubbish today.' People would like to go into an environment where they're allowed to be brilliant, and the environment enables them to be as good as they can be. But that's not the norm, unfortunately and people are recognising that.

ROB MOSS:

Over to you, Rob.

ROB BRINER:

I want to make a couple of comments there. I've put it on my Chat Box as well. I suppose those engagement data, just in general, so from a practical point of view, I'm coming at this from a practical point of view, an academic point of view, the quality of a lot of the data around engagement is extremely poor. Generally speaking, saying people are engaged or actively disengaged is completely practically meaningless. Those measures are not very valid, they are not really well validated. They don't really predict anything. So it's okay, but I think it doesn't really tell you very much. It's not really very good qualitative information.

Also the report you talked about, *It Pays To Play*, there are two issues around that. I do think some of the claims you're making, Paul, you can't really make on the basis of that report. It doesn't matter who did it, it doesn't matter what university it's connected with, you have to look at the data and what the data is telling us. So there are two issues with it and one is it's completely self-report so it's just people's views and opinions, which again is interesting, and that's fine, but you can really make too many strong claims about it. The second problem is it's cross sectional. It means everything was measured at one point in time. So if you're saying that fun or whatever has a causal relationship with some outcome, then you cannot get at that by just measuring everything in a

snapshot way. So I'm not saying it isn't an interesting piece of work, but I think there's a little bit of over claiming going on in terms of, say, does fun really matter? Does it link to these outcomes? Does it lead to absence? For those reasons it's all self-report and it's just a snapshot. So I think we need to be a bit more cautious about really what it's telling us.

PAUL HARRIS:

Okay. In terms of some stats that we do know and this is, what we can do is make that report available to everyone who is signed up for, we can do that can't we?

ROB MOSS:

It's online. There for everyone to see.

PAUL HARRIS:

Okay. So do refer to that report. I mean in terms of this statement and I want to turn to our audience a bit more now. So a lot of people agreed with the idea that it is appropriate for all sectors, all organisations and all jobs. I found this quite interesting really, because there are certain sectors, in my head, for example, social care or air traffic control or supermarkets, I've been in numerous supermarkets where everyone seems to be having too much fun and not necessarily concentrating on getting me through the tills. How much do you think is important, Rob, to look at this idea? I mean we've got a lot of people in the audience who think it is important and they agree with the statement that it's appropriate for all sectors. Presumably to some extent.

ROB BRINER:

Yes, I think so, I mean you gave some examples there. So what is perhaps safety critical work, if you have to pay close attention to something and need to really concentrate, obviously having fun is pretty much counter-productive and quite dangerous. Certainly, if it's detracting you from dealing with customers and clients, the example you gave perhaps of a supermarket or shop, then again, great for the staff but not so great for the customers and clients. So I think it depends a lot based on the job and sector and also maybe, Paul

said maybe people have fun when they're not, actually, as it were on the shop floor, they're doing something else. So it might depend a bit how it's incorporated into that. And another key thing, there are some quite old studies going back to the 1950s of fun at work and it seems where it might be particularly important is in very boring, repetitive jobs. So having that element of fun might be quite beneficial in those contexts and maybe makes less difference in other contexts.

ROB MOSS:

Okay. Let's take a few comments from the chat at the moment. So Geoff says, 'Are we confusing fun with flexibility, i.e. the flexibility and autonomy to work in different ways, have more work/life balance, to have room for the innovation [unclear – 46:16.8]. I mean that certainly sounds like some of the things that you were talking about, Paul, in terms of making the place of work and a better work/life balance and so on. Let me see, so I guess, here's a comment from Abby, 'How do I create a fun environment for delivery drivers that spend the best part of their eight hour shift alone in their van?' I suppose it depends, Paul, do you accept that it depends on the sort of place you work in?

PAUL BRINER:

Yes and again I'll come back to what I said right at the beginning, that we do need to understand what we mean by fun. I've laid out what I thought fun meant and it's different from play and certainly play is not appropriate for all sectors. Jumping around on space hoppers and shooting each other with Nerf guns, for certain types of work that's just not appropriate in front of your customers. Our customers all live in a virtual world, so it's a bit different for us in our business. But I think we need to be more sophisticated in business. We can't have a one size fits all approach and that's typically what we do and it goes back to factory workers and just shoe horning people into a way of working that suited the business owner. I think the world is much more sophisticated now and we've

got technology, we've got remote workers and you've got the fact that we're in this always on world now and we have to adapt and develop as a businesses and the types of jobs that people are doing are very, very different, and what we expect of them is very, very different.

So I think as business owners, we need to become much more flexible in understanding what a particular team or a particular department or even a particular individual needs to enable them to be as good as they can be at their work and we need to create an environment then that allows them to do that. And if we're talking about trust and empowerment and recognition and praise and giving people a voice, you know these are things that I don't think are industry or sector specific. This is something that anybody can do and is relevant, in my opinion, to everybody.

ROB MOSS:

Okay. A point that has come up a few times in the chat and Rob made the point in his presentation as well, was around the diversity of the people that you attract to your business. So this idea that if you have an extrovert workplace, are you going to put introverts off coming to work and could that have a damaging effect on your ability as a business to operate, Paul?

PAUL HARRIS:

Yes, again there's a point about forced fun in there and we don't force anyone to join in with this stuff. The type of culture we have does attract a certain type of person. We do have a relatively diverse workforce. In the survey *It Plays To Play* research, people of my generation – and I'm 50 this year – I'm in an age group that's not supposed to get this, that's supposed to be much more traditional. But I do get it, you know, I understand how important people are to the success of a business. And being much more sophisticated and flexible in how you care for your people is just something that is very important. I think now for any type of business, not everybody that comes for an



interview here wants to join this type of business and we are a very driven, entrepreneurial, fast moving technology business and that requires a certain type of person.

But that's right, if people don't get it, if people don't fit culturally then it's right for them not to come. But the people that do come, we recruit on culture first. It's very, very important that people get what we do and they're the type of person that will flourish in this business and skill second. Because you can train people to do skills, you can train people to run an AdWords campaign or become a customer services operator, but you can't train people to be great people, to be optimistic and positive and high energy and be a creative person. Those are things that you have to find, so we look at culture first and it reduces that issue really of having people in the business that aren't culturally aligned.

ROB MOSS:

Rob, is there any research that you know of around, there's a couple of questions and I had one myself, around actually making the work itself fun? We hear a lot of the term of gamification, are there certain roles that can be made more fun for the person who's doing it in any way? I mean every now and then I come out of something at work and I say, 'Oh that was quite fun, actually.' It's usually with the word actually on the end, because I don't expect it to be.'

ROB BRINER:

Well I have to say, as this conversation goes on I'm getting increasingly confused about what the Hell we mean by fun anyway, but having said that, yes, I think this goes back to things like actually I keep going to *The Cat in the Hat* here, but it goes to what you mean by fun and how you actually engineer that, help that happen. And I think in terms of the work itself, I think actually doing a job and being productive, yes that can be fun and this goes to very old stuff like basic job design. Giving people autonomy and giving them control, giving them challenge, giving them the resources they

need to do their job. Explaining what is required, what the goal is and those kinds of things. And I think in that sense it can be fun, but again let's bear in mind, a lot of the things that are fun, when you walk out of that meeting, 'Oh that was fun, actually' is probably hard as well.

So fun is not just about having fun, because things that are fun overall are often difficult, challenging, boring, frustrating as well. So in that sense, and I'm trying to think about the links between fun, whatever that means, and work performance. It's important to see that probably work performance is based on the whole range of emotions and feelings that are both negative and positive in that sense. So yes, I think there are links there, but it's probably about the balance of things and actually getting the work itself is something challenging and actually allows people to achieve things and do things and for most people that is fun.

PAUL HARRIS:

I think gamification is an interesting one, Rob, because gamification, again, it's just about thinking more creatively about how people can enjoy their job. One of the examples that we've been talking about recently is how we induct people into the company and making our induction process rather than sitting people in a room and giving them PowerPoint presentations for a day, we can do that with a treasure hunt around the office. That's just thinking a bit more laterally about how you can achieve the same objective but making it much more engaging for people.

ROB BRINER:

Yes and I think one of the things about gamification, if my understanding of the evidence around it is right, is people don't necessarily enjoy it more, but they're more likely to do stuff. So if you think about the gamification in the workplace, on websites, on social media, it gets people to respond [unclear – 53:52.2] but I don't think it's any more fun, but it certainly drives or directs behaviour in a certain kind of way. I was also

interested, Paul, in what you said about getting people to think differently and the role of games and play in that. Of course one of the very interesting things about games and play is what defines them are the rules. So you mentioned I think some board games and people going outside and treasure hunts. These are games, but they're rule-based, they are really strictly rule-based. I was quite interested in how you feel helping people to play games actually makes them break the rules when they are so much about rules.

PAUL HARRIS:

Because it's the state of mind, really. What we try to do here is, when people come into this business, most people have worked before, they've done their job before somewhere else. We do have people that are coming in and it's their first job but most people have learnt their job, they've learnt how to do it in a certain way and they'll sit down at their computer and they will do the job in the way that they've always done it and they'll think about it in the way that they've always done it.

And what we're trying to do is just stop people doing that really. And just say, well, we don't want that, we want you to stop and you find that having fun and having an environment where people can step away, either go and collaborate with other people in the garden or just sit and relax or read a book or play a game, it just helps people break that M.O. and get them to a different state of mind where they are just more relaxed and where creativity comes more easily.

ROB MOSS:

Okay. We've got a comment here from Gordon. He says, 'I agree. A spontaneous approach is needed to make this work and a move away from rigidity. However, how can we integrate a play strategy with some sense of order in terms of how we blend this into the workplace? Or is this perhaps more a management style that needs to be adopted?' How much of this, Paul, is about using that more

relaxed environment to identify leadership skills or identify certain skills that the workforces have? Are you using it in a way that is more than just trying to have fun?

PAUL HARRIS:

Absolutely. Yeah. And we talked quite a bit about what does fun mean on this and that's a great debate for us to have and it's just one word, it over simplifies it really. But leadership was mentioned and it is absolutely important that everybody in the organisation, right the way through, who has the responsibility for man-management, understands what we mean by fun and what we're trying to achieve and what the purpose of us doing this and taking this approach is for, and a lot of it does come down to great leadership skills and man-management skills.

ROB MOSS:

Rob, any final comments from you?

ROB BRINER:

I presume BrightHR and Paul talk about fun partly because it is a kind of hook to talk about other things in HR. So I accept that they're not really talking about fun, they're talking about lots of other stuff as well. Having said that, I do think thinking about fun and what it means at work and how you engender it, is a very important thing to think about and I do think it's maybe not something HR is very good at or has thought very much about. So I think this kind of discussion is quite important in that it's maybe helping people to think more seriously about what fun is and its role in the workplace.

ROB MOSS:

Okay. Well thank you, Rob. Thank you, Paul, and thanks everybody who's contributed to the chat. It's been a very interesting hour. It just leaves me to thank my guests, Paul Harris from BrightHR and Rob Briner from the University of Bath. Many thanks to you both.

PAUL HARRIS:

Thank you.

ROB BRINER:

Thank you.

ROB MOSS:

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END OF TRANSCRIPT