Chapter III

When Work Morphs into Play: Using Constructive Recreation to Support the Flexible Workplace

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ABSTRACT
Organizations have become more permeable — integrating more influences from the outside world — as participants engage in such online diversions as trading stocks, engaging in multiplayer games, or viewing images of their children in daycare. Availability of these activities has brought the potential for abuse but also new opportunities. Constructive uses of online recreation and play can enhance many workplaces (especially high-tech and information-saturated ones) and perhaps ultimately make them more productive. Human resource (HR) professionals can become active in exploring and tailoring constructive recreation strategies for...
specific workplace contexts. Many organizational roles today demand high levels of creativity and mental flexibility, and constructive uses of online recreation can help individuals gain fresh perspectives. This chapter proposes that these complex issues be resolved through participatory approaches, involving workgroups and HR professionals in discussions as to what constitutes “constructive recreation,” as well as in development and dissemination of effective and fair organizational policies.

INTRODUCTION

Issues concerning the boundaries between work and play have provided continuing struggles for managers and employees as well as headaches for human resource (HR) professionals. Sociologist Donald Roy (1959-1960) used the “banana time” notion to capture how employees have made workplaces more tolerable by participating in off-task camaraderie. Banana time was the collectively determined break time of factory workers, the start of which was signaled with a lunchbox banana. Industrial economist Robert Schrank (1978) wrote of how “schmoozing” supported the informal organization of workplaces, providing not just recreation but increased levels of workplace cohesion. In the “information age,” such playful, exploratory, and spontaneous interaction can also facilitate the exchange of ideas and insights for tackling workplace problems. HR professionals within organizations should have some sense of how online play relates to work (especially knowledge work) so as to increase the productivity and support the well-being of organizational participants.

The Internet has supplied new dimensions to workplace recreation issues. It infuses a bevy of opportunities for diversion into everyday work contexts — although the individuals with whom one “schmoozes” or enjoys “banana time” can be many miles distant. Online games can be seen on workstations in nearly every organization, and growing numbers of employees regularly access online sports scores. Workplaces have become more “porous” and permeable — integrating more influences from the outside world — as individuals engage in such online diversions as trading stocks or viewing images of their children in daycare. Availability of these activities has brought the potential for abuse (as related elsewhere in this book), but also new opportunities. This chapter presents the case that constructive uses of online recreation and play can enhance many workplaces and perhaps ultimately make them more productive.
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