



## IS “WORKPLACE FUN” A NEW MANAGEMENT FASHION OR ANOTHER PASSING FAD?

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose-** The aim of the paper is to shed light on the issue whether the fun work environments are of strategic importance for organizations or they are only a new management fad or fashion.

**Methodology-** The research includes a qualitative study (interview with five Human Resource managers and five management consultants) and a quantitative study (surveys with 388 with Turkish private bank employees who work for the headquarters of these banks).

**Findings-** The results of both studies indicate that the respondents do not believe that fun working environments are a management fad or fashion. The paper also provides evidence that there has been a sustained interest in workplace fun that it is quite unlike the other popular management techniques that are suggested as panaceas or quick-fixes for organizations.

**Conclusion-** This study provides evidence that the workplace fun initiatives are neither management fads nor fashions and that they are believed to be one of those dominant management concepts that survive.

**Keywords :** Workplace fun, fun at work, fun work environment, management fad, management fashion

**JEL Codes:** M10, M12, M19

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The adoption of new management ideas and practices has become an important area of study within organizational studies, often under the label of “*management fads and fashions*”. Where the new management ideas and techniques are analyzed as “*managerial fads and fashions*”, the organizational consultants are analyzed as “*fashion setters*” and the reformers and the managers as “*fashion followers*”. However, neither the fashion designers in management such as consulting companies, nor the managers and reformers analyzed as fashion followers are comfortable with this labeling, believing that the management fashion perspective represents a critique. Because although their advocates represent these new practices as promising and innovative, they are often criticized for having no or little impact and so for not being promising and also not innovative and that they are being adopted only because they are fashionable (Benders & van Keen, 2001: 34; Saxi, 2015: 400).

All prominent business magazines regularly run cover stories or articles describing the latest management fashion. Workplace fun is one of these management ideas which are promoted by popular press. As a result of this, the following question raises: “*Is workplace fun a new management fashion or another passing fad?*”

As Abrahamson (2009: 238) noted that pointing to fads and fashions in an area of science undermine its and its participants’ authority. Hence, this paper tries to emphasize the importance of workplace fun, based on the claims of Redman and Mathews (2002: 52), which is in line with Biro (2013) that it is actually a very serious business issue. And it also aims to critically discuss the phenomenon of workplace fun, whereby the organizations encourage and promote their employees to have fun at work.

As Meyer (1991: 823) stated “*A central aim of strategic management, perhaps the central aim, has been to understand sustained competitive advantage and figure out how it can be systematically created.*” The organizations are under substantial pressure to pursue and achieve a competitive advantage through acts of latest innovations (Porter, 1990). However, the management world is highly susceptible to innovations which are accepted as crazes, namely fads and

fashions that change so frequently. Thus, it is important to indicate that whether the workplace fun initiatives are regarded as management fads or fashions. In spite of the attention that the workplace fun draws from many practitioners, consultants and scholars and in spite of the evidence that the academic studies have provided that it has a positive impact on both individual and organizational outcomes, the managers are still not sure whether a workplace fun culture should be a part of their future, believing they might be one of those fads or fashions which are quite popular in business, driven by a heady mix of desperate and naive managers as well as avaricious consultants (Furnham, 2015). So this research topic is of great importance in the strategic human resource management literature.

Since the workplace fun initiatives are named by some scholars and practitioners as a management fad or fashion, the objective of this paper is to discuss the workplace fun phenomenon from a management fad or fashion viewpoint and to investigate whether the workplace fun activities constitute an example of faddish or fashionable concepts presented in the management literature.

The selected method is to combine theory and practice, through a literature review, qualitative and quantitative studies.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Management Fads and Fashions**

A fad is defined as a craze for something; a short time when there is an exaggerated zeal for a particular idea or practice (Furnham, 2004: 1) or a nontraditional preoccupation by diffuse collectivities on a circumscribed object or process (Aguirre, Quarantelli & Mendoza, 1988: 569), where a fashion is defined as *"a prevailing custom, a current usage; esp. one characteristic of a particular place or period of time"* (Oxford English Dictionary, 2010).

A management fad is defined as an idea that becomes very popular quickly, stays popular for only a few years, and experiences a steep decline in interest and attention, leaving little trace (Miller, Hartwick & Le Breton-Miller, 2004: 7), a new scheme, a panacea, proposed by consultants or educators that is to provide a quick fix to solve management problems (Manuele, 2003: 40) or a managerial intervention which appear to be innovative, rational, and functional and is aimed at encouraging better organizational performance (Carson, Lanier, Carson & Birkenmeier, 1999: 321), where a management fashion is defined as *"a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads rational management progress"* (Abrahamson, 1996a: 257) or *"the production and consumption of temporarily intensive management discourse, and the organizational changes induced by and associated with this discourse"* (Benders & van Veen, 2001: 33).

Although some researchers have used these terms in conjunction with the other but still made a distinction between the two concepts and note that they describe two very different social processes (i.e. Abrahamson, 1996a; 1996b; Abrahamson & Eisenman, 2008: 720; Czarniawska, 2008; Kaissi & Begun, 2008: 95), others use these terms interchangeably (Gibson & Tesone, 2001: 122).

Both the fad and fashion perspectives assume that the diffusion of innovations occurs under conditions of uncertainty because organizations imitate other organizations' adoption decisions (Abrahamson, 1991: 597).

Kieser (1997: 57) conceptualized the management fashion as forming an arena in which different groups of participants such as consultants, professors, managers, editors of management magazines, publishers, commercial seminar organizers, organizers of internet forums, etc. bustle about. Fashion is not only prevalent in organization theory (Bort & Kieser, 2011: 672) but it is also a striking feature of contemporary organizational life (David & Strang, 2006: 215) and constitute an important research area.

There is a widespread sense of uneasiness with respect to management fashion and the phenomena have been diagnosed as a symptom of the simplicity and shallowness that pervade management thinking (Bos, 2000: 1). It is implicitly believed that the management fashion holds sway only in relatively trivial management matters and this implicit belief exists because words like *"fashion"* and *"fad"*, due to their previous use in primarily aesthetic realms, connote unimportant and trivial when they are used in technical realms (Abrahamson, 1996b: 121).

The management field has been bombarded with fads (Carson, Lanier, Carson & Birkenmeier, 1999) which now promise to be never ending in Management Studies (Macdonald & Kam, 2009: 223). Furnham (2001: 15) explained this in claiming that the management is notoriously faddish, as stressed and troubled managers try to find cheap, quick and effective solutions to intractable problems and add that like overweight adults, they seek one miracle cure after another, while Starbuck (2009) has listed the causes that contribute to faddishness in the research in management and organizational theory and named them as a mass production approach to knowledge creation, an emphasis on mechanistic conceptions, strong emphasis on formulating generalizations, and over-reliance on statistical methods. Collins (2000: 14) asserted that the term *"management fad"* tends to be used in a pejorative sense, to denote the senseless adoption of ideas and initiatives for no good reason other than the fact that others have embraced these fads of crazes.

Kieser (1997: 50) noted that today's management fashions are much more short-lived and add that they still hold much in common with the early ones like bold promises, bustling consultants, magic and sporadic reference to strict academic science. Writers such as Hilmer and Donaldson (1996), Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1996) and Eccles, Nohria and Berkley (1992) have also been skeptical with respect to managerial fashion and they argue that fashionable management ideas have a poor empirical basis, are presented in an informal way and do not meet scientific standards. In their study, Sorge and van Witteloostuijn (2004) argued the application of healthy organization theories to guide organizational change instead of these management ideas.

As asserted by Birnbaum (2000); the management fads on organizations have some negative and positive consequences. The negative consequences are that the people become cynical and resistant to new ideas, the judgment of leaders is questioned, and funds and energy are seen as being diverted from important institutional activities, where the positive ones are that the fads contain a "kernel of truth" that can help institutions reconsider familiar processes. In a similar vein, Miller and Hartwick (2002: 26) claimed that though the term "fad" may seem dismissive, it's not because some fads can profoundly change organizations, for better or for worse and they can introduce useful ideas that organizations incorporate into practice, even as the fad itself fades from the scene and add that the fads often fail to deliver on their promises, a factor that contributes to their short life cycles and rapid decline.

The findings of the study of Staw and Epstein (2000) revealed that the organizations that were closely associated with popular management techniques (which are regarded by many other scholars as "management fads and fashions") were more admired by the public and thought to be more innovative. These organizations were also perceived as having better managers. The same research confirmed that CEOs of these firms also benefited from increased compensation, regardless of corporate performance. However, as Nohria and Berkley (1994: 130) also stated, the manager's job is not to seek out novelty; but to make sure that the organization gets results. Keeping in mind that the fashionable practices consume scarce resources and not just time and money, but leadership opportunities and organizational commitment as well, pragmatism is suggested to be the place where they should start (David & Strang, 2006: 215). This may be the reason why Bort and Kieser (2011: 655) claimed that the concepts of scientific development do not leave room for fashion.

## 2.2. Workplace Fun

Workplace fun is defined by various scholars as "predesigned attempts to boost employee commitment through fun moments and structured fun events" (Fineman, 2006: 279), "engaging in activities not specifically related to the job that are enjoyable, amusing or playful" (McDowell, 2004: 9), "a work environment that intentionally encourages, initiates and supports a variety of enjoyable and pleasurable activities that positively impact the attitude and productivity of individuals and group" (Ford, McLaughlin & Newstrom, 2003: 22) or "playful social, interpersonal, recreational, or task activities intended to provide amusement, enjoyment, or pleasure" (Lamm & Meeks, 2009: 614). Fun at work involves any social, interpersonal, or task activities at work of a playful or humorous nature which provide an individual with amusement, enjoyment, or pleasure (Fluegge, 2008: 15).

One of the missions of the workplace fun movement is to make the office a merrier place (Leo, 1999: 19), because the organizations have realized that they need to offer their employees something more than just a salary in return for the high-pressure atmosphere and long hours. A fun work environment might stimulate productivity. And it is crucial for corporate survival (van Meel & Vos, 2001: 330). Workplace fun is desirable and even necessary for letting go of the problems and worries of everyday working life. Fun comes with cheerfulness and happiness (Patel & Desai, 2013: 323). Thus, it is seen as a way to developing happy employees (Biro, 2014). Research also proves that the fun programs at the workplace help to make the employees happier at work (Chodos, 2003: 43) and that happier employees contribute significantly to the performance of their organizations (Chan, Gee & Steiner, 2000), while employee morale decreases issues that hurt organizations, such as turnover rates and absenteeism (Society for Human Resource Management, 2002: 3).

## 2.3. Is Workplace Fun Regarded As a Management Fad or Fashion?

To Owl's (2008: 40) question of "Fun at work. Fad or serious business?", Hamilton (2000) answered "The fun fad is the modern equivalent of Nero fiddling while Rome burns - more specifically, inexperienced managers with too much funny money to spend.", where Nelson (2012) claimed that fun at work is the American management trend of 1990s-2000s and Kellaway (2013) added that workplace fun is among the top ten management fads and although some internet companies still appear to believe in the doctrine, it can only be a matter of time. In parallel to the statement of Fleming (2005: 286) that perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the notion of fun cultures appears to have outlasted the typically brief management fad lifecycle, with still much practitioner, consultancy, and scholarly interest in it; the Human Resource (HR) managers who responded to the questionnaire of Ford et al. (2003: 29) stated that they believe that fun working environments are here to stay and are not just another passing managerial fad. Therefore Baldry and Hallier (2010: 168) emphasized that it is time to take the workplace fun seriously.

### **3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

As Kieser (1997: 65) claimed that the arena of management fashion is very dependent on managers who apply the fashion in their organizations and added that the managers are simultaneously the most important players in the arena and also the most important audience, we, the researchers have first carried out a qualitative study among five HR managers with a minimum of five years' experience in large organizations. Researchers have also decided to include five management consultants to the first part of the study, for their role in supporting and actively promoting the ideas, concepts and techniques that are later labelled as mere management fashions or fads (Sturdy, 1997; Jackson, 2001: 15; Williams, 2004: 769; Czarniawska, 2008: 850) and for their role to come out with workplace fun recipes, which is frequently sold by them (Gordon, 1992: 25).

The qualitative research has been planned through interviewing with five HR managers and five management consultants. These personal interviews were conducted through prior appointments. The interviews mainly revolved around the following query: *"Is workplace fun regarded as a management fad or fashion?"*

The four of the HR managers have stated that the workplace fun is neither a management fad nor a management fashion because the nature of fads and fashion are to come on hard and quickly disappear, and considering the importance of a lighter workplace which is not very serious and allows playful behavior for the younger workforce, the workplace fun will be the reality of the future.

This makes sense because, the research reveals that the Y-Generation, who will constitute the 25% of the workforce (Deloitte, 2014) are well-known for their expectation for their work to be fun (Gravett & Throckmorton, 2007: 56; Alsop, 2008; Sujansky & Ferri-Reed, 2009: 96; MTV, 2012; Owler, 2013).

One of HR managers was quite skeptical about the workplace fun initiatives. He has claimed that these activities are management innovations that are popularized by consultants and no innovation can remain popular for long. He also stated that it's the popular press, that encourages the management to enter the mass consumption and workplace fun, which he names *"a prefabricated idea"*, is an ideal example for that. But the majority has agreed that workplace fun initiatives have already outlasted the management fad and fashion lifecycle, which is typically quite short.

It is interesting that the majority of the HR managers mentioned a fundamental need to strengthen their organization's competitive position and in addition to that, success stories told about the new management ideas and techniques sound quite attractive, by which they are promised to achieve a competitive advantage by adopting a certain concept.

The responses of the participating HR managers demonstrate that, although the workplace fun is introduced by the management consultants and many practitioners as a quick fix, a bandwagon and a magic wand, this would be a misguided approach full of good intentions, because here, the organizational culture and the fit of workplace fun activities to this culture play the most important role. There will be cases that these initiatives won't suit the organization unless they are implemented correctly. They also noted that embracing the workplace fun initiatives just because they become a management fashion and turning fun into a corporate strategy will quickly turn it into its opposite and at this point, it will cease to be fun.

All of the management consultants who participated in our pilot study believed that workplace fun activities are served by management consultants as guaranteed to make the organization a success and adopted by the managers to demonstrate the decisive leadership that kept their organizations competitive. But they added that, when all other organizations and HR managers are praising these activities, it would be quite risky for a manager to stand out against it, believing it's another passing fad so the managers had better not criticize them and act as if they approve these activities to take part in their organizations. All the management consultants have also admitted that the reason they are propagating these activities are that they have to offer something new to their clients and this new management idea should be something that would make the organizations look good on the HR market.

One of the management consultants have judged the corporate community to always want to adopt the latest and greatest organizational improvement programs, which become a phenomenon in order to be widely recognized in everyday discourse at work. Another management consultant stated that if you work for an organization that seriously has workplace fun activities, it makes the organization look more *"human"* and even if the organizations would believe that it is just a passing fad or fashion, they would still adopt it and act as if it is the best thing to do. Furthermore, the management consultants have emphasized that although the leaders suspect adopting the workplace fun initiatives in their organizations, just because they want to have an image of a leader with a quite new idea and to be popular with it and to be perceived as human and innovative, they adopt them.

The quantitative study comprises the private banks operating in Turkish Banking Industry and listed in the "Member Banks" list of The Banks Association of Turkey ([https://www.tbb.org.tr/modules/banka-bilgileri/banka\\_Listesi.asp?](https://www.tbb.org.tr/modules/banka-bilgileri/banka_Listesi.asp?)

[tarih=18/3/2016](#)). In this context, the opinions and perceptions of the employees who work for the headquarters of these banks are taken as base. The main reason for selecting the banking industry is that it is the sector where fun at work activities are widely used. In this research, 388 employees who work for the headquarters of these banks are reached via questionnaires and asked whether they believe that the workplace fun initiatives are a management fad or fashion. The findings of the survey revealed that the respondents do not believe that the fun working environments are a management fad or fashion.

The findings of the survey have confirmed that the considerations of the employees that the workplace fun initiatives are not regarded as a management fad or fashion are similar to those revealed in the findings of the pilot study of this research, which was assessed by five HR managers and five management consultants.

#### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This paper explored whether the workplace fun is regarded as a management fad or fashion through a qualitative and quantitative study. The findings of both studies have revealed that the respondents do not believe that the fun working environments are a management fad or fashion. That may be the reason why despite the anecdotal evidence of the benefits of fun, academic research has only begun to test the value of fun within the last decade (Tews, Michel & Stafford, 2013: 370) and it has become an emergent focus for research (Plester, Cooper-Thomas & Winquist, 2015: 381). Just like Redman and Mathews (2002: 52) and Biro (2013) claimed, fun is no laughing matter and is a very serious business issue. The evidence for this is the appearance, month after month, of new articles in professional and trade publications calling for work to be more fun (Lyttle, 2010: 532).

Researchers also want to note that the faddish and fashionable cycles occur in the absence of certain evidence of the effectiveness of the innovative management idea. But the academic studies have provided evidence that fun has a positive impact on both individual and organizational outcomes.

Though many techniques once enjoyed the enthusiastic support of consultants, and management scholars, not all but the most of them have fallen from favor and been replaced by newer ideas and techniques (Staw & Epstein, 2000: 523). The adoption of new management ideas and practices has become an important and substantial area of study and debate within organizational studies, often under the label of management fads and fashions. Although adopting these ideas became a way for organizations to signal to the World that they were progressive and committed to change, research shows that in the majority of cases, the management fads rarely produced the promised results and it is only for some businesses, that these new ideas worked (Nohria & Berkley, 1994: 128-129; Sturdy, 2004: 155).

As Gibson and Tesone (2001: 123) asserted, many management practices started as fads. They were discovered or created by someone, after which they found their way into the management practice. How a fad and a practice can be differentiated, is related to the age or newness of the practice, where new practices are often old fads. And as Ramsay (1996: 167) noted, the most important role for academic research is to expose and help to moderate the unproductive consequences of management fashions. Based on the findings of the present study, we can claim that the workplace fun activities are neither a management fad nor a management fashion. Thus, they can be expected to have a fairly long life cycle, merging into a standard management practice. In conclusion, our conceptual contribution provided in this paper together with empirical research might encourage new challenging research in the area of workplace fun. The results of the study may also encourage the organizations to take steps in order to make their work environment fun. We also suggest the managers that they don't implement the workplace fun activities aiming to blindly signing up as a "cure" without a clear understanding of what it can and can't do and rather take a look at the academic research on the concept (i.e. Ford, Newstrom & McLaughlin, 2004; McDowell, 2004; Karl, Peluchette, Hall & Harland, 2005; Strömberg & Karlsson, 2009; Fluegge-Woolf, 2014). Finally, we, the researchers want to note that although we believe that workplace fun will be one of those dominant management concepts that survive, it is only in time, we can make sure if the workplace fun initiatives are management fads or fashions.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

We consider this article an initial, exploratory effort and believe that whether workplace fun and other management ideas and practices promoted by management consultants and popular press is regarded as management fads or fashions should receive further attention by academics and practitioners. While the development of new management ideas and techniques will continue, the researchers should go ahead in testing and criticizing their validity and efficacy, because it is only through research that the credibility of these management ideas and the management discipline in general can be maintained.

This study was limited and only focused on whether the workplace fun is evaluated as a management fad or fashion among the banking sector employees who work for the headquarters of the private banks in Istanbul, Turkey. Further research is suggested to collect data over a wider range like the employees of the whole financial sector overall in Turkey or the high-

technology companies, which are known to have a wide range of workplace fun activities in order to make sure, if the findings of this study can be generalized.

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