



PLAY:

THE NEW SECRET WEAPON FOR HEALTHY WORKPLACES



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ARE YOU LOSING TALENT GAME?

“21% of Millennial workers had left their job in the last year to do something else”, according to Harvard Business Review. This may be the most immediate dilemma facing modern businesses – how to create a great workplace culture that attracts the brightest talent and continues to support them feeling fulfilled and happy.

The other major issue raised by the same article is abysmal employee engagement. In the above referenced article, Amy Adkins and Brandon Rigoni share that “American workers aren’t particularly engaged at work as a whole. And Millennials lead the pack: 71% are either not engaged or actively disengaged at work, making them the least engaged generation in the U.S.”

How will you create a workplace that will attract the brightest talent? How will you bring your team together so that communication and collaboration are core elements of your workplace culture? How will you ensure that employees are actively engaged at work?

Competition between companies is high for top talent. This is especially true in the tech sector, where there is high demand for software engineers and there are short pipelines from ideation to production. Human capital has never been so important, since creativity is one of the greatest differentiating factors influencing success.

Today’s college graduates are no longer just interested in steady pay and benefits. The Society for Human Resource Management’s latest Employee Job Satisfaction and Engagement Report ranks “respectful treatment of all employees at all levels” as more important than compensation.

Employees are seeking inspiring workplaces, healthy cultures, teamwork, opportunities to learn and grow, and doing something meaningful. According to Deloitte, millennial employees (who account for the majority of the workforce) prioritize a sense of purpose around making a positive difference in people’s lives via their products or services.

Inspiration and professional growth are not enough to drive performance and productivity. For that, you need team alignment and collaboration. According to this 2017 survey by ClearCompany, 97% of employees and executives believe lack of alignment within a team impacts the outcome of a task or project.

Telework and globally distributed teams add new dimensions of complexity to these teamwork and communication issues. Many distributed or remote teams experience a lack of the community and culture building that occurs more naturally with regular face to face interactions. And according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019 American Time Use Survey, telework is on the rise. 19% of the American Workforce worked from home in 2003, compared to 24% in 2015, and with numbers as high as 37% of people in management, business, and financial operations. (ATU Survey Table 1, page 7.)

Research from top minds in the fields of organizational dynamics and psychology cited below, shows that employee turnover, disengagement, and miscommunication can be remediated through a surprising solution – PLAY! Gamified team-building experiences impact measurable outcomes like increased employee engagement, productivity, and revenue.





Play is so important that Dr. Jane McGonigal believes it necessary for the very survival of the human species. McGonigal is a game designer and author of The New York Times bestseller, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*.

Practically speaking, in a fiercely competitive business world, play can help individual employees hone basic work survival skills and also brings teams together to tackle these issues more efficiently. According to McGonigal, the use of mobile and digital gaming technology can be used to channel positive attitudes and collaboration in a real world context:

When we're in game worlds, I believe that many of us become the best version of ourselves -- the most likely to help at a moment's notice, the most likely to stick with a problem as long as it takes, to get up after failure and try again. And in real life, when we face failure, when we confront obstacles, we often don't feel that way. We feel overcome, we feel overwhelmed, we feel anxious, maybe depressed, frustrated or cynical.

Through interactive games, play is used as a tool to help teams trust one another so that they are willing to communicate innovative ideas and vital information about their work. Play is used as a tool to expand possibilities, foster deep engagement, build communities, increase resilience and create ideal environments for discovery and growth.

PROBLEMS OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORKPLACE

LACK OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Employers are struggling with disturbingly low employee engagement levels, with average numbers for US employees hovering at 32-33%. This is due in large part to poor internal and external communication. Harvard Business School Management Professor, Amy Edmondson has performed detailed research in the area of psychological safety and its impact on workplace communication and culture.

In Harvard Business Review Amy C. Edmondson and Mark Mortensen explain psychological safety as “the belief that one can speak up without risk of punishment or humiliation... When it comes to psychological safety, managers have traditionally focused on enabling candor and dissent with respect to work content. The problem is, as the boundary between work and life becomes increasingly blurry, managers must make staffing, scheduling, and coordination decisions that take into account employees’ personal circumstances — a categorically different domain.”



No authentic connection between co-workers. Challenging and engaging bonding experiences are necessary to break down barriers and form cohesive teams.



Vital information not being shared. Employees who don’t feel safe do not volunteer information especially about mistakes or potential problems. They are afraid to seem ignorant, incompetent, intrusive, or negative. “This played out tragically in 2014, when lack of psychological safety at General Motors prevented information from traveling up the ladder regarding faulty ignition switches.”



Innovation suffers. Every withhold robs ourselves and colleagues of “small moments of learning”. We don’t contribute innovative solutions to improve the product, the company, or its internal processes. These organizations often fail in a competitive marketplace.

Essentially, psychological safety depends on building a culture of trust through vulnerability. This is a main reason why companies like Uber, Facebook, and Salesforce engage in team-building. They all know that teams where employees trust each other, and respect everyone’s contribution can make significant cognitive leaps when innovating or problem-solving. Team building, which often takes the form of playing games together, creates trust and improves communication and creative flow.

NEGATIVE CULTURES & GROUP NORMS

In 2012, Google went on a quest to build the perfect team. They studied hundreds of internal teams to figure out why some stumbled while others soared. One of the main initiatives was to figure out how to create psychological safety faster, better and in more productive ways. They discovered that “human bonds matter as much at work as anywhere else...even more so.” They also found that,

“in the best teams, members listen to one another and show sensitivity to feelings and needs”. As the Google researchers led by Julia Rozovsky struggled to figure out what made a team successful, they kept coming across research by psychologists and sociologists that focused on what are known as group norms – the traditions, behavioral standards and unwritten rules that govern how people function in group settings.

When people work together towards a common goal while having fun, they establish positive group norms that will transfer back to the workplace.

Amy Edmondson

Associate Professor, Harvard Business School



The Google researchers looked to this Carnegie Mellon study to see if a collective IQ emerges within a team that is distinct from the smarts of any single member. Researchers from that study concluded that what distinguished the “good” teams from the dysfunctional groups was how teammates treated one another: “The right norms, in other words, could raise a group’s collective intelligence, whereas the wrong norms could hobble a team, even if, individually, all the members were exceptionally bright.”

The Google researchers arrived at an astounding conclusion about the power of play and fun in the workplace, in contrast to the destructive force of competitive group norms:

Rozovsky’s study group at Yale was draining because the norms – the fights over leadership, the tendency to critique – put her on guard. Whereas the norms of her case-competition team – enthusiasm for one another’s ideas, joking around and having fun – allowed everyone to feel relaxed and energized.

In other words, play (which creates an environment of joking around, having fun, and building trust) is a fundamental element that makes teams work together better. Or as Rozovsky puts it, “success is often built on experiences – like emotional interactions and complicated conversations and discussions of who we want to be and how our teammates make us feel”.

Does play help to establish norms? The University of Southern Maine published a 2016 dissertation by Josiah Eikelboom entitled, “Engagement, Gamification, and Workplace Satisfaction.” On page 30, Eikelboom discusses qualitative assessments of employees, where gamification increased motivation, productivity, engagement and efficiency. What’s interesting here is that social motivation (which is based on behavioral norms) emerged as one of the top four themes for what users enjoyed about gamification:

Those who enjoyed social aspects liked collaboration and interaction with others and saw helping others as a way to prove themselves and feel like they were “part of something”... Interestingly, users also expressed anxiety that they would be disappointed in others, or that they would let others down.

This study shows how normative social behaviors in the workplace are established through game play. We learn about other people’s style and boundaries, their strength and weakness, but we also solidify behaviors like collaboration and teamwork.

PLAY INFLUENCES PRODUCTIVITY

Flow is the mental state in which a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and enjoyment in the process of the activity. The Psychology of Flow teaches that these states can lead to improved performance, further learning and skill development.

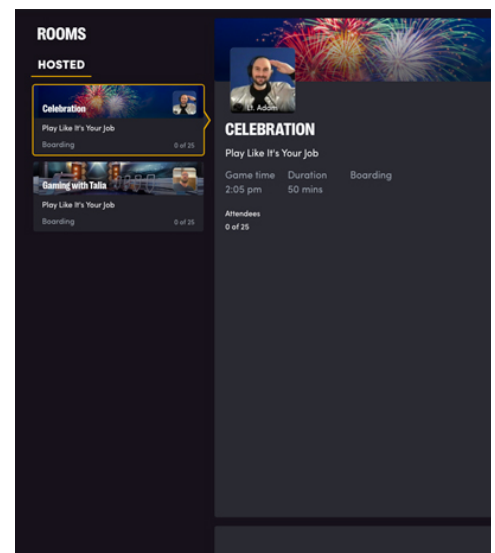
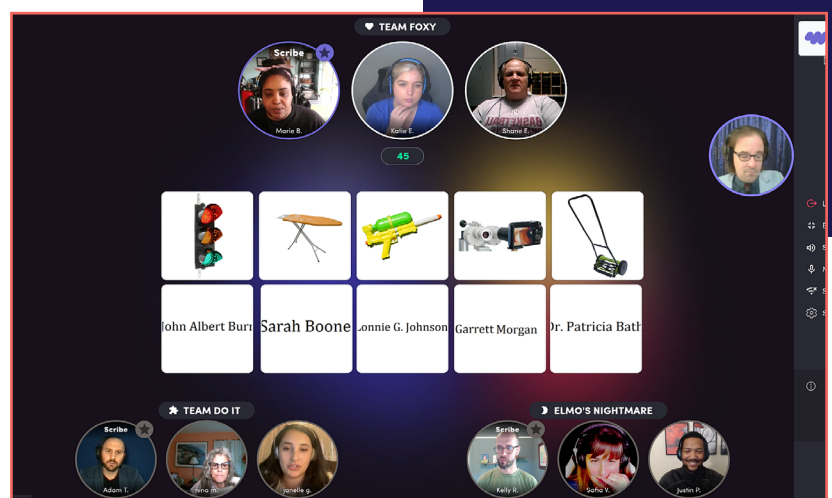
Flow states require setting goals that are just challenging enough so that a person can keep their attention focused for a sustained period of time. All distractions must be removed and they require feedback about performance. Employees who enter these states see a dramatic increase in the quantity and quality of their work, and the satisfaction they feel from doing it.

The more a job resembles a game – with variety, appropriate and flexible challenges, clear goals and immediate feedback – the more enjoyable it will be regardless of the worker's level of development.

Mihaly Csikszentmihaly

From his bestselling book, *Flow*

Flow states can be hard to attain in the modern workplace, with constant distractions, ubiquitous multitasking, lack of clarity on goals, and an absence of feedback. Playing games allows employees to experience the state of full immersion in an activity, a skill which can easily translate to their work.



THE SCIENCE OF GAMEPLAY

Interactive games make people feel like they can achieve anything, even people who often feel limited or frustrated in their day to day tasks at work. Why is that? Is it contextual? Are the tasks in gameplay easier than creating pivot tables or writing lines of code?

Jane McGonigal set out to answer that question in her PhD research. She analyzed games like World of Warcraft and noticed the framework that allows for success. Thousands of other people on your “team” in the game trust you right away with a world-saving mission and are willing to collaborate with you to achieve an inspiring mission. The mission is matched to your level of play in the game, so it’s challenging yet achievable, and progress is marked with immediate positive feedback like +1 points for new or improved skills.

McGonigal codified these four qualities that games bring out in us:



Urgent optimism. This is the immediate need to take on a challenge, coupled with belief in success.



Weaving a tight social fabric. We trust and even bond with people better after we’ve played a game with them.



Blissful productivity. Doing something complex and meaningful is more fulfilling than relaxation.



Epic meaning. People love to make a difference at a global scale.

All of this translates beautifully to a business setting. According to John Seely Brown and Douglas Thomas’s research on organizational health, people who regularly play games are desirable for the contemporary workforce because they are bottom-lined oriented. Games incorporate measurement, ranking and external measures, factors that translate to the workforce for measuring goals, KPIs and other performance metrics. Gamers also become more adaptable since the landscape is always changing.

Take that a step further. What happens when people at work actually play games together? Suddenly people who work on tough projects

together in one context are placed in another, more enjoyable one. They collaborate, feel fulfillment, and take on a challenge that they believe they can accomplish. When they return to the work context, they bring all of those learnings back with them.

Miguel Sicart discusses this in chapter 2 of his book, *Play Matters*. Sicart examines not just play, but playfulness as a way to extend our understanding of the attitude of play beyond actual moments when we are playing. Through playfulness, we are able to project the characteristics of play like the ones outlined by McGonigal into non-play activities like those found in the modern workplace.

BUSINESS BENEFITS

Playing games increases trust and psychological safety. The practice establishes healthy group norms and cultures, while increasing open communication and collaboration. Games also increase skill levels and help employees enter highly coveted and immersive flow states for peak productivity. How does that translate into positive business outcomes?

1 Increased Employee Retention

Research by Compensation Force found that industry agnostic voluntary turnover rates have been climbing steadily since 2011, with some industries like hospitality as high as 17.8 percent!

Replacing employees is expensive. According to the Society for Human Resource Management's report on retaining talent, the cost of replacing a salaried employee can be as high as 6 to 9 months of their salary.

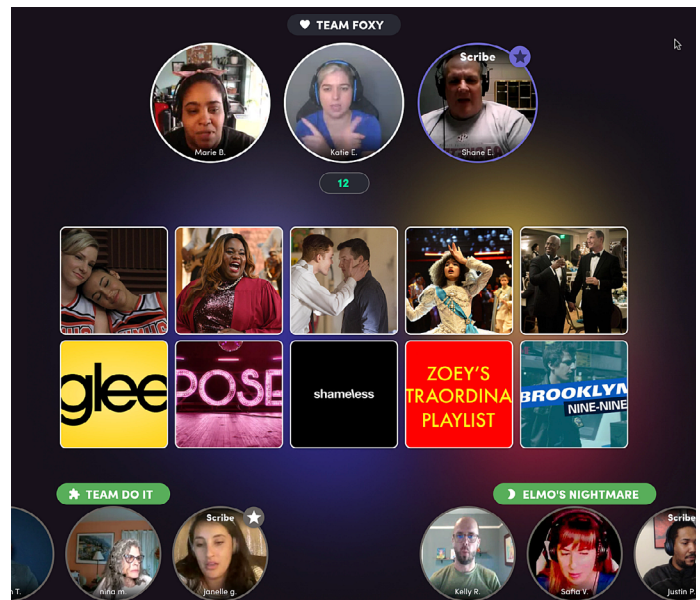
For executive positions, replacement can be as high as 2X their salary. These figures don't account for the other factors such as costs of on-boarding, lost productivity, lost engagement, training costs, and cultural impact on the organization.

Camaraderie and supportive environments that empower employees to think creatively can go a long way towards stemming attrition. According to Christine Riordan's article, *We All Need Friends At Work*:



Camaraderie is more than just having fun... It is also about creating a common sense of purpose and the mentality that we are in it together...

Many companies are engaging in corporate challenges, such as bike to work day, wellness competitions, community service events, and other activities to help build a sense of teamwork and togetherness.



People only consider [looking for a new job] if they're truly not content where they are. If you're really happy at work, you're not interested in going down that road... Nobody wants that if they're already satisfied.

2 Higher Productivity

A 2012 Gallup Report, shows that strong social connections at the office can boost productivity, and can even make employees more passionate about their work and less likely to quit their jobs. The research found that 50% of employees with a best friend at work reported that they feel a strong connection with their company, compared to just 10% of employees without a best friend at work.

3 Faster Iteration Creates a Competitive Edge

Play creates psychological safety, where employees are willing to take risks. Improved communication creates openness and receptivity to ideas of others. When people play and get silly together, they no longer feel embarrassed, rejected or punished for speaking up. Workplaces that are intentional about creating psychological safety have employees who are expected to speak up with ideas, concerns, and mistakes.

Play inspires teams to unite and work together toward a common goal. They form bonds and deepen coworker relationships. This learning transfers over to their work-related efforts.

4 Play is a Vital Component of Motivation

Neel Doshi and Lindsay McGregor are experts at building high performing adaptive cultures. They have developed a framework called Total Motivation (ToMo) outlining the six main reasons people work.

High-performing cultures focus on the direct motivators of play, purpose, and potential, and minimize the indirect motivators of emotional pressure, economic pressure, and inertia. Doshi and McGregor cite an experiment conducted at Harvard where two groups of poets were given an assignment. Group A was directed to focus on the play and enjoyment of being a poet, and Group B focused on economic and emotional pressures of being a successful poet. Group A's poems were deemed to be 26% more creative than those of Group B.

How does increasing play and ToMo work in practice? Whole Foods has been on the “100 Best Companies to Work For” List for 18 years, and their culture is admired across industries. Doshi and McGregor found that they focus on the direct motivators of play, purpose and potential and minimize the indirect motivators mentioned above. As a result, Whole Foods produces triple the Total Motivation compared with the average of three competitors. (Primed to Perform, page xviii)

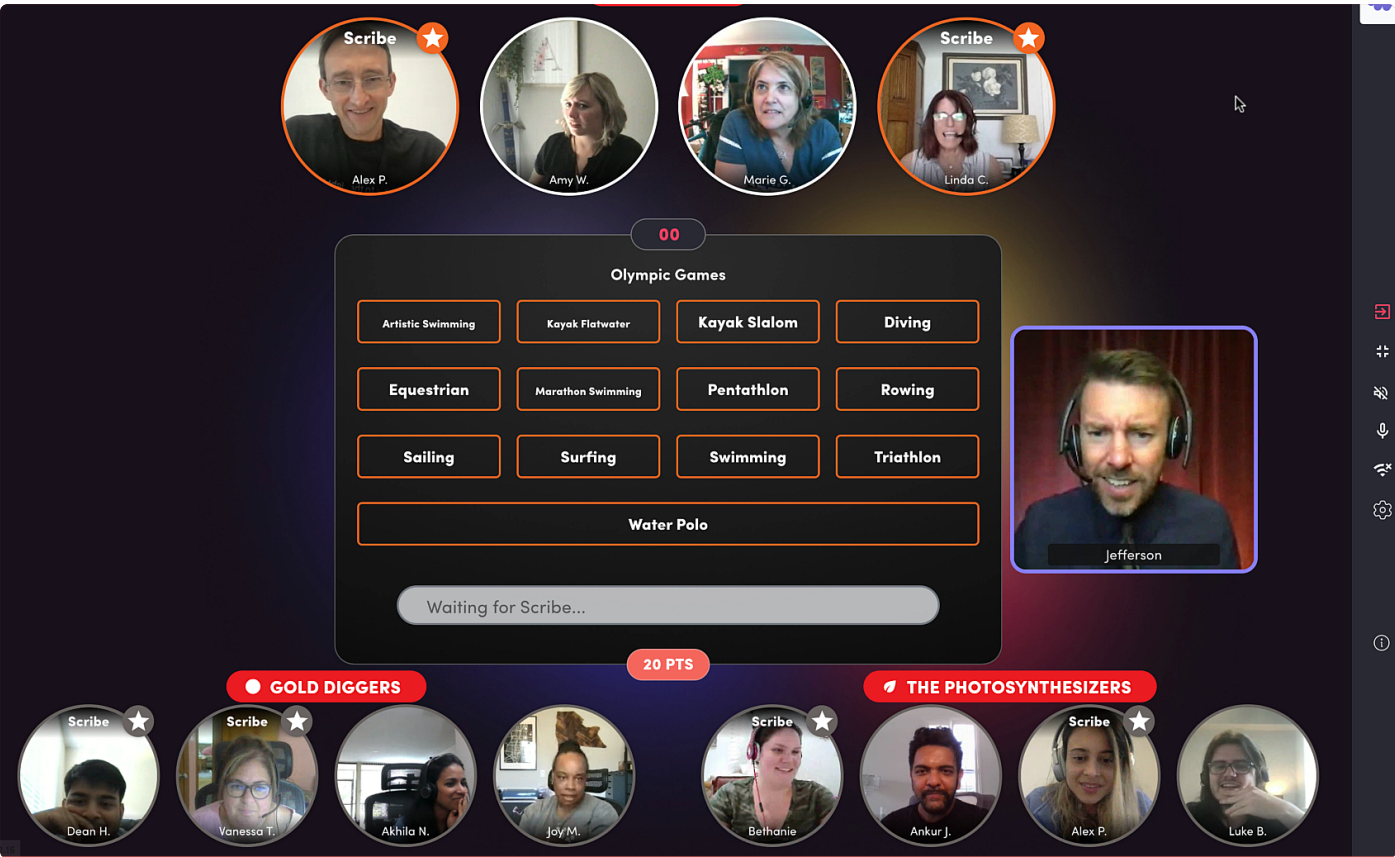
One of the main factors that has been shown to increase performance is play. The authors define it as being motivated by the joy of doing the work itself: “Play is our learning instinct, and it’s tied to curiosity, experimentation, and exploring challenging problems”.

CONCLUSION

In a business landscape that favors trusted communication, collaboration, and creativity, the teams who feel safest to express themselves have the competitive edge. But intense workplace cultures and distractions like communication technologies often inhibit the creation of psychological safety, teamwork, and intrinsic motivation.

Remote work arrangements made possible by video-chat, collaboration tools, and other software can make it increasingly difficult to create cultures where people feel relaxed enough to speak up and share. The constant distractions that these apps facilitate also make it more difficult to enter the fully-immersed flow states where high quality work is efficiently created.

What is the one solution to business concerns regarding productivity, disengagement, poor collaboration, and high turnover?



PLAY

Play is how we learn, innovate and rejuvenate. Science storyteller Diane Ackerman explains that it is even fundamental to our human biology:

The more an animal needs to learn in order to survive, the more it needs to play... Play is widespread among animals because it invites problem-solving, allowing a creature to test its limits and develop strategies. In a dangerous world, where dramas change daily, survival belongs to the agile not the idle. We may think of play as optional, a casual activity. But play is fundamental to evolution. Without play, humans and many other animals would perish.

Play sits at the core of team-building and is the catalyst for forming trusted bonds between peers, leaders and subordinates. In the business context, play positively influences focus and productivity as a vital element of the highly coveted flow-states. It creates psychological safety so that vital information is openly shared between stakeholders, and results in the natural formation of highly collaborative environments.

Weve is the leading provider of work-life play that sits at the intersection of technology, exploration, and innovation. Playing with Weve inspires teams to unite and work together toward a common goal, and this learning transfers over to their work-related efforts. These experiences allow teams to discover the magic of their real-world surroundings to unleash untapped creative potential, forge lasting bonds and boost workplace satisfaction.

Our next generation group cohesion tools offer in-depth immersive training that engages participants through real-life scenarios, culminating in an unparalleled bonding experience. By investing in the art of play, you can promote learning, development and interconnectivity on your team.

Weve has become a leader in building interactive experiences that allow players to imagine different versions of themselves, practice new skills and absorb information in a way that is seamless, memorable and compelling.



When companies invest in the art of play, using it as a tool to promote learning, development and interconnectivity, they can establish a strong corporate culture and foster a sense of inclusion that boosts employee morale and retention. This leads to increased productivity and engagement that translates into greater business success. From spy games to music video games, and from 10 to 10,000 people, we have everything you need to create lasting bonds with your team members. Play like it's your job. Request a demo at <https://www.weve.co/>.

ABOUT WEVE

Weve is the only culture and team-building platform that offers a fully customizable solution for companies to engage employees and event attendees, virtually. Designed for everyone from small teams to 10,000 attendees, Weve is transforming remote work-life and virtual engagement by offering a suite of games, shared experiences, video components, and more, all in one dynamic platform. For more information about Weve or to schedule a demo, visit <https://www.weve.co/>.

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