

Play for All Storybook



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Culture Hero

move
merge.

ROWBOAT

Our research

1800

PAGES OF SECONDARY
RESEARCH REVIEWED

Review of existing research to lay the groundworks for the project and feed directly into our State of Play report.

717

DIGITAL SURVEY
RESPONSES

Deep diving into quantitative and qualitative data at scale to examine how people view themselves both outside of work and at work.

44

INTERVIEWS

1:1 conversations with people at each level of partner organisations focusing on their lived experiences of the workplace, factors that influence organisational culture and their memories of play.

180

VIDEO SURVEY
RESPONSES

Analysing videos created by people in partner organisations to explore people's perceptions of play and the outcomes of playful practices at work.

4

WORKSHOPS

Collaborating with Play Champions from partner organisations to uncover key insights into play at work, generate opportunities and develop ideas to unlock the power of play.

Make play your own

There are many ideas of what play is, how people like to play and what is a playful activity. Despite the different definitions, there was almost universal agreement that people felt, among other things, mentally re-energised after play.

During the research voyage, we heard examples of play as a:

- Belief
- Mindset
- Process
- Social phenomenon
- Physical activity
- Event
- Environment
- and many more!

We see this as a positive not a negative and we really want to encourage team members, managers and leaders to approach play in their own way and to create their own relationship with play. And in doing so we empower people at every level of organisation to not worry if they are doing it 'right' but instead to start **using their unique playful skillset to create new and exciting opportunities** at work.



Introducing The Playful Work Equation

The culmination of research has led to the design of **the Playful Work Equation**. At its core, the Playful Work Equation defines the building blocks required to develop thriving workplaces then the value play delivers to individuals and organisations.

Just as we consider the needs of our customers before designing new products, we must consider the needs of play in order to create sustainable playful practices at work. **Permission, space** and **a spark** are interconnected building blocks that are reliant on one another. If a **spark** was created without **space**, play will become a sporadic add-on to peoples working lives. If **permission** and **space** were created without a spark, people will lack the prompt that brings them out of their routine.

Connection, wellbeing and **new thinking** emerge when all of the needs of play are embedded into solutions. This has a significant impact on the future of workplaces at every level and department.

The **Playful Work Equation** is designed to be a guide and thought provoker, providing a set of prompts and challenges to any initiative designed to bring play into workplaces.



The Playful Work Equation

Play
needs



In the absence of permission, play does not happen within organisations. Psychological safety, role modelling from leadership and clear structure provides the necessary permission for people to develop their own relationship with play in the workplace.



The pursuit of efficiency and productivity can leave no room for play. In theory, play is seen as invaluable but in practice, it is often an add-on to people's large workloads. To see the true potential of play, we must give people the space in their day then design physical and digital infrastructure that provides freedom to explore their playful mindset.



Like fire, play needs a spark to catch alight and grow. It begins with a belief that play can deliver unique value to each individual. It then needs an opportunity in order to be front of mind. Finally, it needs a prompt or call to action that encourages people to step outside of their comfort zone.

To
create



An antidote to loneliness, play brings people together in the most human way, often reminiscent of childhood. Play helps people connect to themselves, their colleagues and teams and the mission of their organisation and in turn, helps people can bring their very best selves to work.



Play has the chance to significantly reduce burnout, which is currently recognised by the World Health Organisation as a global pandemic. Play gives people a chance to switch off for a moment, recharge and gain perspective. Play seems to inextricably linked to energy and motivation.



Play creates a playground for learning new ways of thinking, new ways of doing and even new ways of being. It is a mechanism that helps people drive innovation, express their ideas and realise their full potential. Play helps individuals, teams and leaders grow and develop 21st century skills.

Permission

Are leaders helping you be fearless?

Permission

Psychological safety

We found that people who feel they are able to play at work tend to be those that feel safe and trusted by those around them. Play needs a level of vulnerability and openness as a prerequisite to counteract the perceived reputation risk that comes with allowing the indulgence of play.

Leadership

We found that the most powerful form of permission from leaders is modelling play themselves. Respondents ranked 'role modelling from leadership' as the number one factor to being more playful at work. The more hierarchical an organisation, the more important it is that the leaders are seen to endorse and embody a playful culture. It seems like the 'bandwidth' to play is often dictated by managers, and therefore is not within an individual's control.

Focused imagination

We found that the most effective play initiatives are clearly and intentionally structured. Strong frameworks enable participants to let go, forget about their competing priorities and tasks; while effective facilitation transforms the chaos of imagination into the crystallisation of ideas.

What we heard

"As adults we're so aware of ourselves which is the barrier to letting go and to play. People have an image of being someone that they don't want to jeopardise. They don't want people to see them in another way."

"I wish there were more bosses like mine, that are ready for something new. Instead of just 'do as usual!'"

"I think it's necessary for the leaders of our organisation to legalise [play], to also highlight the meaning - the why."

"So once you model that with people, then they will in return, automatically portray that in themselves. And that's what you've got to be; uninhibited."

"It's hard to play as an adult. We have to do things purposely or with intention. People acknowledge play has a purpose, but they find it difficult to articulate that in the workplace without [the] infrastructure [in place]."

Space

Are you stuck in a hamster wheel?

Space

Workload

We found that time is the biggest barrier to play. Even though play is overwhelmingly perceived as beneficial, there simply isn't enough time or latitude in the day to deviate from explicit productivity and therefore people felt like they just needed to do more. What's needed is the capacity to let go of work stress, deadlines, personal worries, and so on.

Physical environment

We found that physical environment is an important factor for play (respondents ranked designated tools or spaces as the second most important factor to being more playful at work) but physical infrastructure isn't enough if the culture isn't there yet.

Digital environment

Increasingly, some people are working, interacting and playing in a digital environment rather than a physical one. Post-Covid, some people are able to WFH while others prefer or are required to be in the office, but most feel that technology could be more effectively used to create curated and intentionally designed digital 'spaces' for work and play.

What we heard

"I think that the main problem for my work is that I have too many different things going on at once. So it's hard to to go in depth with some of the development."

"Work can just get right in the way of play, you know?"

"It became quite clear that the employee experience is really tied to... flexibility and the physical space and rewards in general."

"I miss seeing people and being in the office with people. I think that's what makes your day, you know, being able to do the work, and share the work, with people you know."

"Yes, everybody can have ideas. It's just, you have to get in the right mood, and that's what I do with my playing."

"How many adults are actually engaging in play for true enjoyment, just focusing on the joy of it? We schedule our lives so back to back to back to back without creating space. I mean, I have a reason, I want it to energise and rejuvenate me. And I think that's the role of play."

A spark

*Do you believe in play enough to
jump straight in when you see it?*

A Spark

Belief

We found that active engagement with play highly correlated with the ability to clearly articulate its value. Belief in the power of play and understanding its relevance to wellbeing and work outcomes is like tinder for the flames of play.

Opportunity

Seeing others play creates a sense of opportunity, a chance to join in or participate, which is vital for engagement. Access to things like physical spaces, team activities, social time, tools, techniques, and training all serve as gateways to play with respondents ranking “being unsure of how to play at work” as the second greatest barrier to play at work.

Prompt

We look at a prompt as a call to action, a reason to engage in something new. Sometimes taking just seconds, seeing this prompt may inspire people to play when they wouldn't have otherwise.

What we heard

“I think we play too little at work. But I can't myself imagine, what would it look like?”

“My job is to not be afraid, as hard as that is.”

“Going through the hamster wheel and not having the time and space to produce something that's reflective of my full capacity.”

“I think you stay too much in your expected roles.”

“I took a course for Creative Leadership a couple of years ago, and it sort of peeled away some of that in my own head around, “you know, gosh, you don't have to be so serious all the time”.

“We are used to getting what comes to us. And that's what we do. So it's very difficult for us to to get new ideas, to get in the mood, to develop new ideas. And I think it demands a new way to see our work.”

Connection

Do you ever feel lonely at work?

Connection

Team work

80% of digital survey respondents feel like they belong at work, and respondents ranked “improving teamwork” as being the second most important outcome of play. 90% of digital survey respondents feel connected to the people they work with.

Cross pollination

It seems like play breaks down silos within organisations and engenders more porous team and departmental dynamics. Strong interdisciplinary relationships create a necessary foundation for inspiration and engagement, with respondents ranking “connecting with other colleagues” as the most important outcome of play.

Collective purpose

It seems like people who feel supported and encouraged to play at work tend to feel more connected to their organisation’s mission or purpose. We found that people feel free to express themselves fully when at play, and that it fosters more authentic relationships – with each other, the organisation, and its purpose – building a foundation for authentic accountability and commitment.

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What we heard

“When we have [played], it has been meaningful and I think it is a way to strengthen communication and cooperation. I wish we did it more.”

“I think we are more separated between the sections [departments/teams] than we leaders often think we are, or the top bosses think we are.”

“We’re not here just to move papers along.”

“I can see how elements of play could help create deeper relationships, to build some of that relational equity that you need to work collaboratively together, to accomplish something together.”

“Our culture is free thinking, it’s vigorous. It’s ‘we’ oriented. We want to work together to achieve the best possible results.”

“We are a fun, vibey brand. So, we should be able to live that, but I don’t feel that we are able to at the moment. We’re just like any other corporate that works for profit.”

Wellbeing

Do you prioritise your mental health?

Wellbeing

Physical wellbeing

We found that play often gets people moving, creating opportunities to reconnect mind and body. Physical activity is proven to reduce stress, improve physical health and improve quality of life in a variety of ways – as we all know, exercise is one of the best preventative health actions. When engaging with play at work, survey respondents preferred physical play (such as sports) and tactile play with objects.

Mental wellbeing

We found that play helps to prevent burnout and stress, and has a re-energising effect for many people. Burnout is now a WHO recognised occupational phenomenon, and over 30% of our respondents indicated that they are often or always stressed at work. Put simply, play makes work psychologically sustainable.

Belonging

We found people were able to create deeply meaningful relationships with one another through play. For individuals, belonging provides a feeling of being valued for their unique strengths and being able to bring their whole selves to work.

What we heard

"It's not that you can't spark a new idea by seeing an image on the screen, but we have too much of that... when looking at the different ways that we incorporate play at work, the physicalness of it seems to be really important."

"But right now we are still, in my opinion, locked to our seat."

"There is a hamster wheel culture – just keep providing more, more programming, do more work, more events, more."

"(When I play) I feel refreshed. I have lots of energy and I have a lot of strength, it's like gasoline for me. I can go back to everyday life and be the mother and the boss and the housewife. It refreshes me and gives me strength."

"It's something that harnesses the human capacity for creativity and collaboration without a predetermined endpoint."

"I think being more enabled to think through play and experiment – making that more part of our culture within the organisation – could really help us achieve our mission."

New thinking

Are you able to experiment with new ways of doing things?

New thinking

Innovation

Respondents ranked “experimentation and exploration” as the third most important outcome of play. The capacity to think without constraints through play activates original, progressive ideation and enables teams and organisations to innovate and create.

Creativity

Play helps people to realise new perspectives and activates creativity. Currently people feel that they are much more playful and creative outside of work and play is called out as a way to encourage authenticity and the freedom of self-expression.

Progression

Play helps us see possibilities, rather than probabilities; options, not problems. The capacity to perceive possibility enables teams and organisations to set their sights beyond their current strategy and ‘reveal’ potential to progress.

What we heard

“I’m not the one who has to have the ideas, I’m the one who has to create the workshops and the idea-making structures, so that the people who are invited to the idea workshop can set themselves free and not think about being in control.”

“We were very, very unsure about the quality of what we produced. But everybody said ‘Oh, it’s so good. It’s so fantastic and innovative!’ It was like, yeah, we just had fun doing it.”

“I absolutely think that play can be used in more serious settings and must be used actually to provoke different thinking. I think that senior people in particular, take themselves far too seriously. I think that they need to have a much more rounded 360 view of themselves to build self awareness.”

“(I’m the most playful) when I sit and tinker with my projects. The concentration you are in when time passes without one noticing it. It’s when I’m disappearing into that state I think I’m the most playful, because then my thoughts are free.”

“We are used to getting what comes to us. And that’s what we do. So I think it’s very difficult for us to to get new ideas, to get in the mood, to develop new ideas. And I think it demands a new way to see our work.”

“There’s also an internal fatigue or sense of futility, or, you know, I’ve done this exact same creative project for 30 years. Like, is there a new way to sell a [item] for \$99 in our gift catalogue?”