State of play report

A review of existing play research

Contents

Introduction

The aim of this research is to define and clarify the field of existing research around play in the workplace. We want to understand the current state of play, identify what works and what doesn't, and most importantly, we want to map out next steps on the pathway into a future of work that is shaped by a sustainable play movement.

For the purposes of this report, we have interpreted the key touchpoints of learning to be the development of cognitive, emotional and social capacities. These serve as the cornerstones for increased creativity, adaptation and collaboration – not to mention collective wellbeing. We have asked ourselves: how can we apply the fundamentals of learning through play to integrate holistic capability building into work?

A future of play is more critical now than ever, as we begin to settle into the new normal. Work, home, and social life have all been altered by the global experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, and both organisations and individuals now face an overwhelming pressure to adapt. Learning through play offers a perfect toolbox of capabilities as we adapt to the new normal.

Our Vision:
Learning Through Play

A world of work where learning through Play is embedded into everyday activities.

Our Mission:
Play For All

To unlock the power of play in adults to develop thriving workplaces, capable of adapting and growing in response to a world of work that is characterised by rapid change.

Breaking It Down

First, we tackle the fundamentals of play: What is play? What are its benefits? And how do we learn through play? Then we examine social and cultural perceptions of play – the pressure to 'grow up', to stop playing and start working. We look at the effects of play deprivation in adults, and outline strategies to overcome it.

With a strong understanding of the psychological, social and cultural parameters of play, we move on to a study of its relationship with work. Why should we play at work? Why don't we? What does a future of play at work look like? And what is the link between play and innovation, creativity and adaptability?

Finally, we explore challenges and opportunities. We outline exciting, real-world play initiatives and case studies – 'play futures', as we call them. We conclude with a comprehensive list of recommendations for collaborators and leads for future exploration.

Research foundations: A two-pronged approach

We have leveraged LEGO Foundation and LEGO Group resources, combining these findings with broader research to synthesise unique insights.

The depth of existing LEGO research offers a strong foundation to understand the benefits and characteristics of learning through play. We have extended our understanding of play into adult and organisational contexts through broader research, identifying focal points for the Discovery phase.

How to use the report

The process of synthesising the research led to many important conversations in our team around the future of play at work. We have embedded these questions as prompts throughout the report as a way to spark your imagination.

We envision this report to live in the hands of collaborators (never in the top drawer!), using it as a continuous reference guide for future exploration.

1800
pages

34
cups of
black coffee

15
cups of tea

01
Miro board
(full of questions and
questions about our
questions!)

05
collaborators

The Fundamentals of Play

Defining play

> *"Though learning happens right from birth, you may wonder how we build more complex, higher-order skills such as creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and problem-solving. One approach – often overlooked – is play!"* [1]

Play is commonly perceived as a childish pastime, incompatible with work and professionalism. But overwhelmingly, the research shows that play teaches vital skills, not just for children in the classroom, but equally for adults navigating the world of work.

What is play?

Play is... →   "Play in adulthood is an activity or behaviour that (a) is carried out with the goal of amusement and fun, (b) involves an enthusiastic and in-the-moment attitude or approach (flow state), and (c) is highly interactive among play partners or with the activity itself.[2]"

Play is a mental state →   "Play is a state of mind, rather than an activity.[3]"

Play is a biological drive →   "Nature's design for play is just too strong to be pushed aside completely.[4]"

Play is an expression of possibility →   "Play is a way of exploring reality, not just as it is, but also as it could be[5]"

Play is work →   "Far from standing in opposition to each other, play and work are mutually supportive[6]."

Types of play

Play is difficult to define because its expression can be found in so many behaviours and activities, from watching TV, to playing tennis, to collecting stamps. For children, learning is a natural result of play, and as an adult, different types of play cultivate a breadth of skills and capabilities. If we imagine play as a genre, like cinema, then LEGO Foundation's play types can be understood as its popular sub-genres, like horror and comedy.

PHYSICAL PLAY

SYMBOLIC PLAY

GAMES WITH RULES

PRETEND PLAY

PLAY WITH OBJECTS
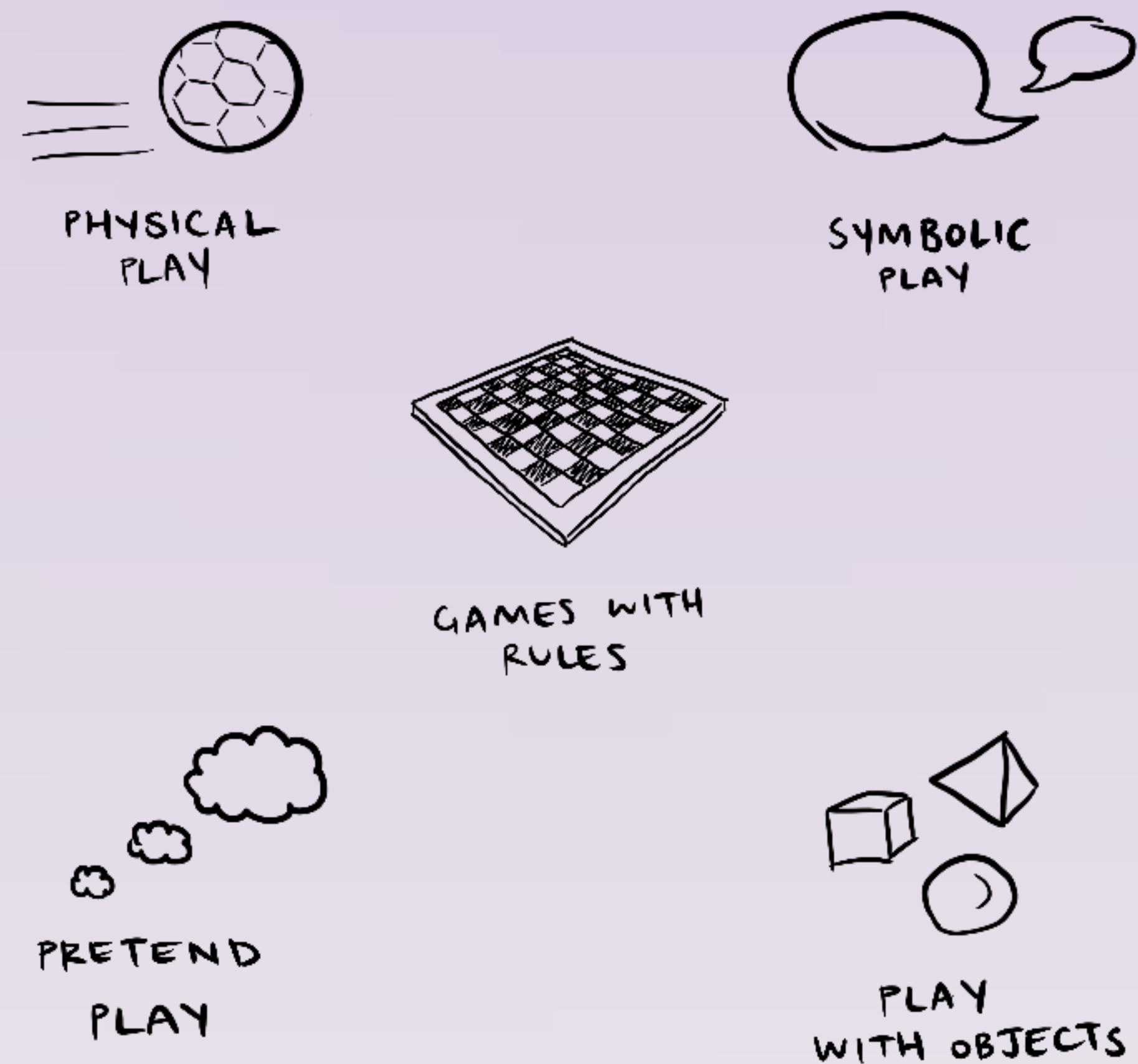
PROMPT

Which of these are appropriate for adults in the workplace? Which are compatible with work?

Learning through Play

Defining Learning through Play

LEGO Foundation research offers extensive evidence regarding the nature and benefits of learning through play. Far from a pointless pastime, play equips children with the necessary skills and capacities to navigate the world and solve problems for the future. Before moving into an exploration of research relating to adults and the workplace, let's explore the wealth of knowledge that exists about play as it relates to children.

Characterising Learning through Play

"Research has repeatedly shown that play experiences are not merely fun – play also has a critical and crucial role in learning and in preparing children for challenges in childhood and throughout adulthood."[1]

The five characteristics of playful learning experiences

- *Meaningful*
- *Joyful*
- *Socially Interactive*
- *Actively engaging*
- *Iterative*
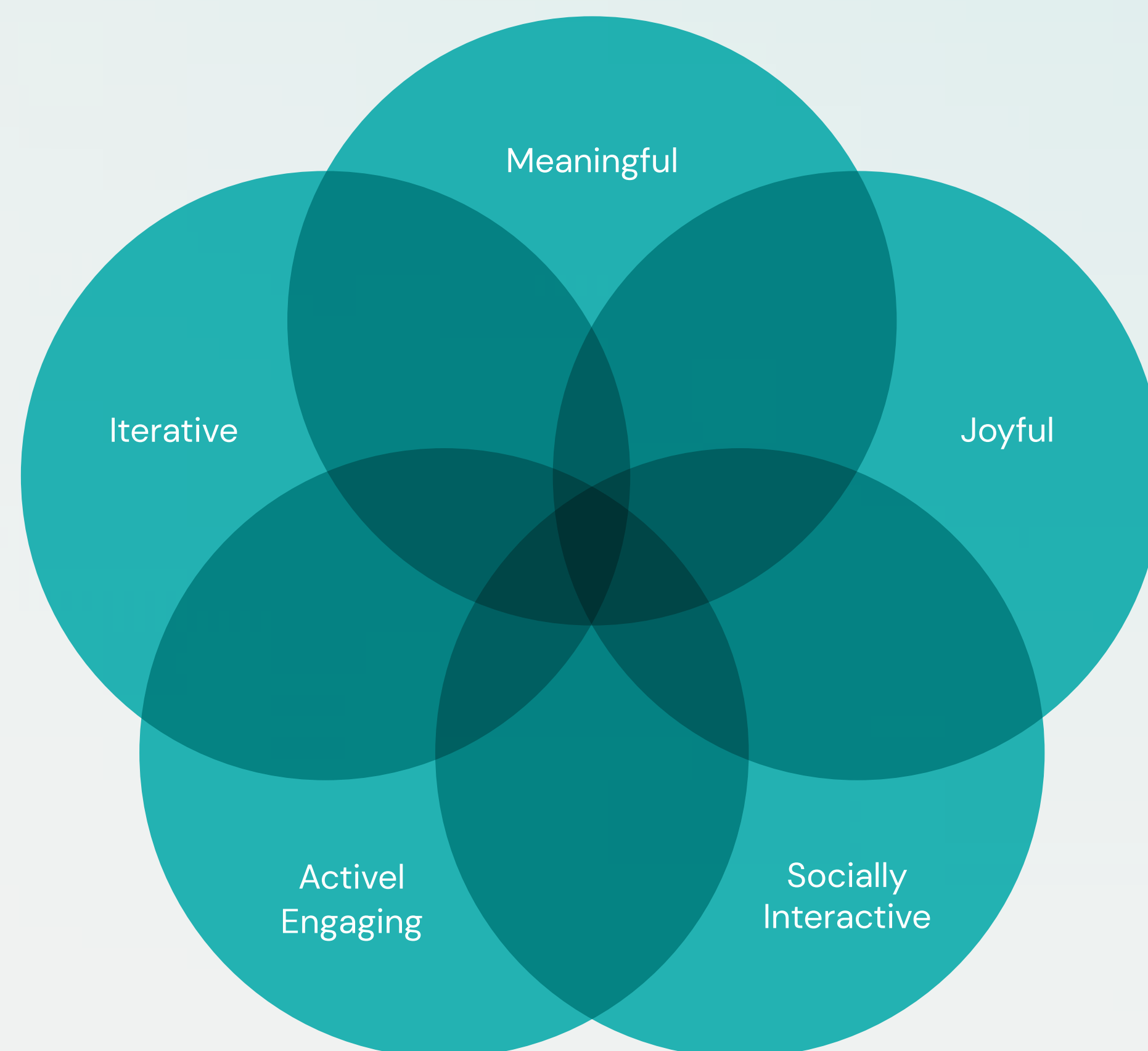
The benefits of play

With so much existing research on the benefits of play for children, it's important to ask: How much of this research also applies to adults?

We found that many of the recognised benefits of play for children are lifelong developmental skills – skills that are just as important to maintain as adults, if not more so. Application and context are generationally distinct, but some understandings are salient throughout life.

Developmental benefits of play

Holistic Development

- Emotional skills
- Cognitive skills
- Physical skills
- Social skills
- Creative skills
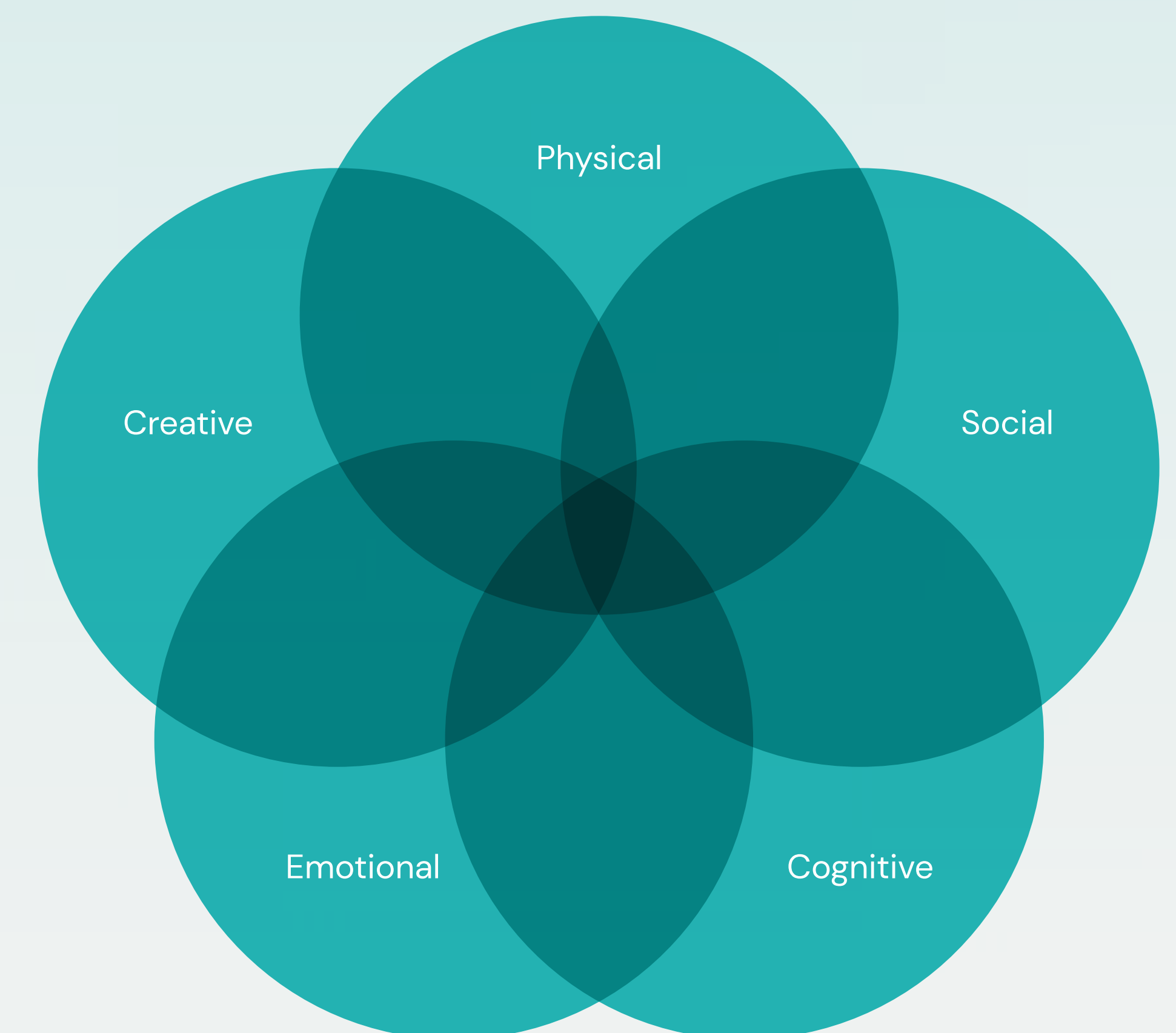
Educational benefits

Pedagogical outcomes

In addition to the intrinsic rewards of play and associated developmental benefits, children experience better educational outcomes. Learning through play leads to:

- *Long term learning gains*

- *Transferable skills and problem solving capacity*

- *Low performers catching up to high performers*

- *More accurate recall of knowledge*

- *A greater range of skills*

- *Integrated skill development: Physical supports emotional; emotional supports social, social supports creative, etc.*

- *Deeper semantic encoding*

- *Teachers and parents benefit from increased motivation*

The play mindset

"Regardless of whether a play activity falls closer to free play, guided play or games with a particular learning goal, a critical requirement is that children must experience agency and be supported rather than directed." [1]

We tend to think about play as a behaviour or an activity but at its heart, play is a state of mind.

PROMPT
How can we translate pedagogical outcomes for children into 'professional development' outcomes for adults?

PROMPT
How can we apply the agency and self motivation of children's play to a work context?

Conditions and stakeholders for Learning through Play

The LEGO Foundation defines four conditions that must be in place for children to learn through play, which are also the four key target groups for interventions.

- *Parents and caregivers*

- *Teachers and the ECD workforce*

- *Systems, or the schools, childcare centres, communities, and other institutions surrounding a child*

- *Governments and policy*

Case Study: Happier families

Shared play isn't just good for a child's development – parents and families benefit too. LEGO Group research has established clear links between the levels of happiness families feel and the amount of time spent playing together.

- 9 in 10 families who spend more than five hours playing together each week describe themselves as happy.

- This figure falls to 7 in 10 families where less than five hours of family play happens each week.

- 9 in 10 parents say they gain valuable perspective on their own lives when they play with their children and that they are able to unpack their day and let go of daily stresses.

- 8 in 10 children also say that play helps them switch off and relax after a day at school.[3]

PROMPT

Will play bring about happier communities?

Growing Up

When did we stop playing?

"We have so internalized society's messages about play being a waste of time that we shame ourselves into giving up play."[1]

Adolescence is a time where we are expected to shed our child selves, often accompanied by a pressure to move on from play. More importantly, it is a time when we need to learn to play in an age-appropriate way. Instead, we feel pressure to 'grow up' and abandon play altogether – to leave it behind with our childhood.

The result is an internalised negative perception of play; a stigma that needs to be deconditioned before we feel safe to play.

What happens when we stop playing?

"What of those whose lives have been overwhelmed by the demands of contemporary responsibilities, and who would enjoy more play, have a personal history of healthy childhood play, but now just can't seem to find time for it?"[2]

Severe play deprivation in early childhood is linked to serious emotional dysregulation, including the inability to adapt or self regulate. It has even been identified as an early childhood pattern in serial killers. Thankfully, most of us have playful childhoods. Play deprivation in later life is a whole different kettle of fish – one that can offer important insights into mental health and wellbeing.

Adult play deprivation

Play deprivation can seriously affect our mental health and wellbeing.

Effects of play deprivation in adults:

- Lack of vital life engagement
- Diminished optimism
- Stuck-in-a-rut feeling about life
- Limited curiosity or exploratory imagination to alter their situation
- Predilection to escapist temporary fixes: alcohol, excessive exercise, or other compulsions
- A pervasive victim mindset

Overcoming adult play deprivation: Understanding ourselves through play

"To really regain play in your life you will need to take a journey back into the past to help create avenues for play that work for you in the present."[3]

Remember how you felt when you played as a child? The memory of that emotion could be the first step on the pathway out of play deficiency. The next step is to find age-appropriate activities that allow you to recreate that feeling, but first: *Remember Play*.

Remember play: Employee personas

These four key employee personas build on fundamental motivating traits. Understanding the scope of individual motivators will help us to develop targets for play initiatives, and understand the importance of opt-in tools and activities. We have listed the following personas in order of highest to lowest Net Promoter Score (a.k.a. likelihood to participate in LtP within next year) based on LEGO Group employee research findings.

1. Belief-driven: They embody learning through play and love getting involved in all kinds of initiatives. They have the mindset and the drive to put this into practice. They are passionate about the movement and want even more people to embrace it as part of their daily lives.

2. Goal-driven: They like the idea of learning through play and recognize its potential positive impact on their work. But their skills are lacking – they are unsure how to integrate it into their role through existing initiatives.

3. Fun-driven: They enjoy playful activities, not because of new learning opportunities, but because they give them a much-needed break from work, and a chance to have fun and to socialize. They don't always recognise the connection between learning and play.

4. Independence-driven: While they can see why learning through play is good for kids and other people, they prefer to set their own agenda when getting involved in initiatives. They want to participate in activities on their own terms. They loathe 'forced' play which increases their workload.

PROMPT

How might we take the learnings from the play personality quiz to actionable impact for adults in the workplace?

Authentic play is self motivated

> *"Authentic play comes from deep down inside us. It's not formed or motivated solely by others. Real play interacts with and involves the outside world, but it fundamentally expresses the needs and desires of the player. Being able to create your own version of play is important in achieving the play state of mind."* [4]

The concept of authentic play offers two key insights into the mechanisms of age-appropriate, mindset-focused approach.

1. Self motivation: an internalised value and respect for play.
2. Agency: the power to choose when, and how, to play.

A theoretical background

Existing research contains certain recurring theoretical themes, which we can group into two categories: outcome theories and motivation theories. [5]

Outcome-based theories

1. The cathartic nature of play: play provides psychological and emotional relief i.e. it is a healthy and non-damaging way to express tensions within an organisational context

2. Flow perspective of play: play increases motivation because it creates a sense of effortless flow between learning and acquiring skills.

3. Social and cognitive processing perspectives of play: labelling a work task as play is likely to enhance performance because the label of play improves one's attitude toward that task.

Motivation-based theories

1. Stimulus-seeking perspective of play: argues that stimulus optimisation is a key driver of play-seeking behaviour

PROMPT
How can we teach individuals and organisations to be their own play designers?

A scientific approach: Stop, something interesting is happening here!

When we learn something in a way that is new or surprising, for example through play, our brains release dopamine. This neurotransmitter triggers the attention and motivation centres of the brain, producing a "novelty bonus".

Novelty bonuses increase our mental capacity to learn by heightening mental faculties and making us more alert and engaged. We are also more likely to remember information that is encoded in this way. When we pair learning with play, we create an ideal mental state for attention and memory fixation.

> *"The surge of dopamine that accompanies a novel event sends out a kind of internal alarm in your mind that says: Pay attention. Something interesting is happening here!"*

Play at work

Work doesn't work without play

Over the last quarter century, jobs have become far more insecure and uncertain, with workers bearing the risks of employment as opposed to employers or the government. In an increasingly precarious job market, we can feel personally threatened at work. There is the danger of looking bad, being bad mouthed, costing the company money, or being fired. There is the anxiety that comes from the competition, and from market forces beyond one's control.

> *"When we are curious and playful in the workplace, we experience less stress, are more energized and effective. It not only benefits our well-being, adaptability and productivity, but also increases our commitment to the organizational purpose and the social support for others."* 1 — Bo Stjerne Thomsen

Insulating employees from these anxieties and pressures, giving them space to engage authentically in the play mindset, can lead to excellent organisational outcomes. In short, "work doesn't work without play".

The benefits of play at work

Employee outcomes

> *"Getting oneself into a play state masks the urgent purposefulness and associated anxiety of work, increasing efficiency and productivity."[2]*

Play at work can increase our capacity for a variety of cognitive functions and social outcomes that are highly valued in organisational contexts.

- Creativity
- Productivity
- Stress management (play reduces cortisol)
- Mental health and wellbeing (play releases endorphins)
- Problem-solving
- Team building
- Job satisfaction
- Cognitive processing

Creativity: Adaptable skills for the future

> *"Play supports creativity in the workplace, promoting creativity by giving employees a legitimate excuse to behave in new ways"[3]*

In an organisational context, shared playful experiences engender learning, collaboration and psychological safety—key requisites for group creativity.

"Adult playfulness is shown to relate positively to employee creativity and organizational innovation, including involvement and performance."[4]

In a world of work characterised by precarity and rapidly changing social, political and technological contexts—not to mention a growing imperative to radically reimagine both local and global economies in order to address the ecological crisis—we believe that both individuals and organisations will be better placed to adapt if systems and tools that support creativity are integrated into the everyday experience of work.

Organisational outcomes

Organisations that support learning through play are shown to experience:

- Greater ability to attract new employees
- Improved turnover and absenteeism
- Better communication among employees
- Greater employee commitment to the organisation
- Improved organisational culture
- Increase in customer satisfaction
- Individuals are more likely to work toward the benefit of the organization and to exhibit organizational citizenship behaviors

A systems approach to Learning through Play

> *"Systems thinking is a holistic approach to analysis that focuses on the way that a system's constituent parts interrelate and how systems work over time and within the context of larger systems."*[5]

System thinking offers a lens through which we may imagine large-scale, sustainable change: a play movement. In order to apply the tenets of learning through play within the work context, we need to understand the nature of work and jobs—now and into the future—and the structure of organisations—from the individual to the collective.

Understanding organisations

Learning through play requires support to integrate into the workplace. The intrinsic rewards of play can be perceived as pointlessness, and engaging with fun can activate external or internal perceptions of play as a waste of time. For play to thrive, it needs reinforcements.

- Organisational level: It is an organisational reflex to protect the status quo—new ideas and 'unconventional' practices are often perceived as a threat to the existing order. For example, an existing department might shut down an idea for a new product out of fear that a new company direction will take funding away from their own activities. Play can only thrive within an organisational culture that supports creative thinking at every level.

- Manager level: Management can reinforce play by rewarding employees who engage with it at work, and by engaging actively themselves. If management perceives play as a waste of time, it becomes impossible—no one wants to be seen engaging in 'unproductive' pursuits at work.

- Employee level: Employees need to be self motivated and play within realistic boundaries; they must believe there is sufficient potential for a 'novelty bonus', and the activity must seem achievable.

PROMPT
How do we dig beneath the surface to find what is and isn't working with play initiatives?

Case Study:
LEGO Group employee research

Photo by Vlad Hilitanu on Unsplash

Lego Group asked its employees what they thought about learning through play, and this is what it learned:

Love it...

• 83% were passionate about learning through play

Or live it...

• 44% didn't know how to integrate learning through play into their day-to-day

But don't always truly get it...

• 17% didn't understand the 5 characteristics of learning through play

• 11% believed play and learning were two separate things

• 7% believed play could be unprofessional in the workplace

Case Study:
It Pays to Play

Perceptions of play matter. The BrightHR and Robertson Cooper study, It Pays to Play, explored employees' perceptions of fun at work and the conditions that need to be present to make it a reality.

Perceptions of fun at work:

• 79% of school leavers and graduates believe fun at work is important, with 44 per cent of this group believing it encourages harder work ethic.

• 39% of people aged 45–54 thought there was 'no such thing as fun in the workplace.'

• 50% of all business owners we surveyed do not want to play at work, but 45% of graduates think it would make them work harder.

Conditions for play:

• Age-appropriate messaging matters: Employees did not connect with the term "play time" because it reminded them of school.

• Integrating work and play: When thinking about fun they had at work, employees related it to activities integral to their work instead of outside their normal day-to-day work tasks.

• Cheap and cheerful initiatives: The most valued fun activities were simple, inexpensive and easy to implement.

PROMPT

How might these insights inform the design of a sustainable play movement?

Adapting for the future:
The new hybrid reality

COVID-19 has transformed workplaces around the world. Remote working shifted from a temporary fix to a new reality. Throughout the pandemic, leaders had to pivot rapidly to digitise the workplace, support staff changes and ensure their organisation survived. Employees had to adjust significantly to new systems and processes while juggling home commitments, physical health challenges and mental health challenges. Survival depended on the ability to adapt.

As we move into the new chapter of our hybrid reality, we must consider how to equip people with the skill of adaptability and understand the role of play in capability building.

Photo by Daniel Cheung on Unsplash

PROMPT

What new challenges do we face in a hybrid work reality, and can play help us overcome them?

Case Study:
Virtual coworking

Social connectedness has been missing from remote work. Struggling to pick up on nonverbal communication, constantly having to look at oneself and conversing in immobile digital environments are all contributing factors to a national rise in "Zoom fatigue" over the past year.

As the pandemic drags on, some firms are addressing these shortcomings by coworking in the metaverse.

At Topia, Liebeskind and his colleagues started with Google Meet before transitioning to meetings in their own virtual spaces; in Rec Room, a cross-platform social application and metaverse space, employees can use the "maker pen" tool to prototype three-dimensional virtual objects. Employees at Stageverse, a 3D social metaverse platform, started playtesting their product

Photo by Annie Spratt on Unsplash

earlier this year only to find themselves naturally socializing and congregating in it.

All of these companies found that meeting in an immersive virtual world allowed them to more gracefully interact with each other and more easily recognize social cues, enabling more socially fulfilling work environments within a COVID-19 reality.
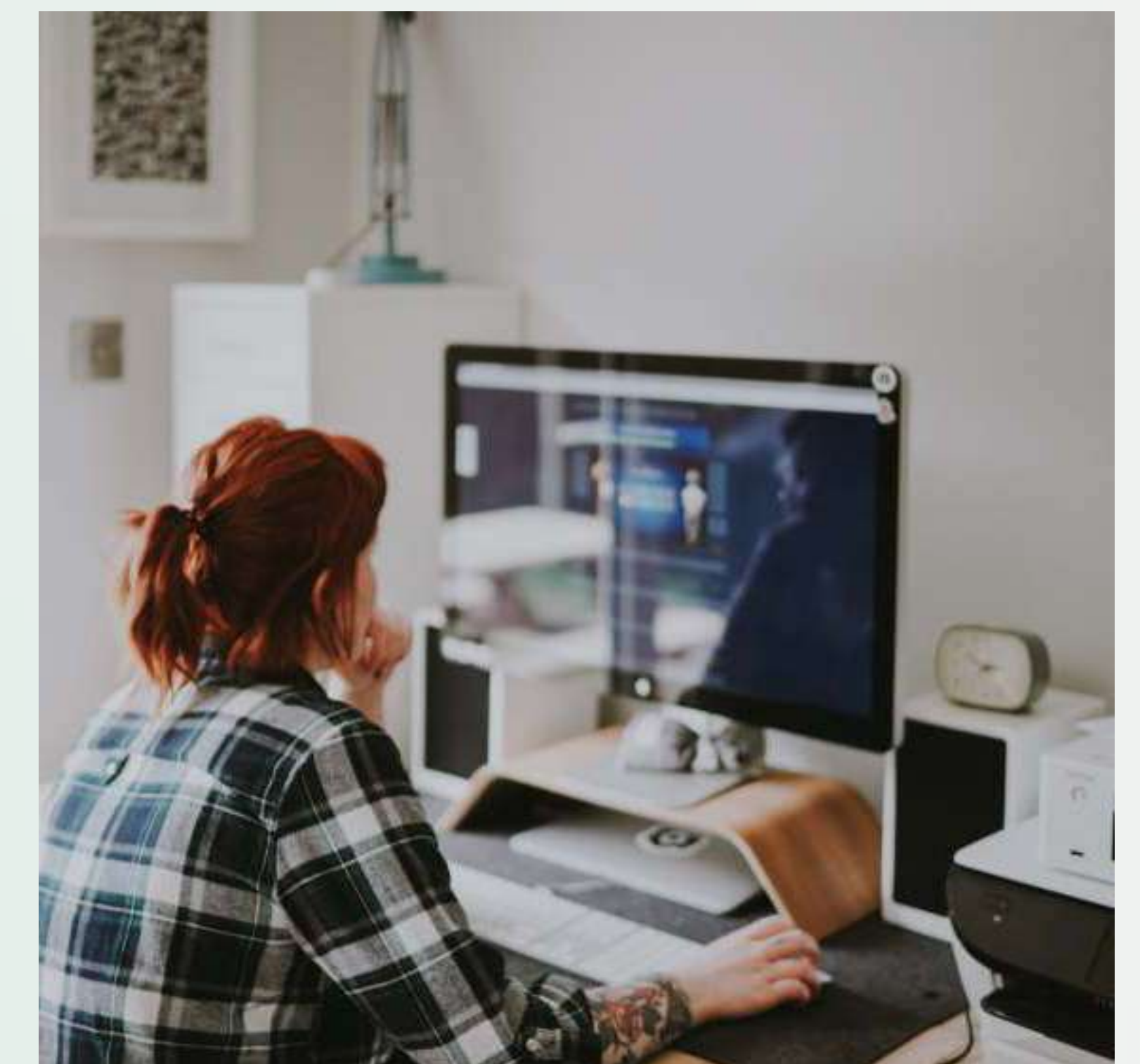
PROMPT

How can play help us build a sense of connection, teamwork and belonging both in-person and online?

Creativity and Innovation

> *"When we play, dilemmas and challenges will naturally filter through the unconscious mind and work themselves out."[4]*

Studies have shown that play facilitates insightful, divergent thinking — in other words, creativity. Play is nature's greatest tool for creating new neural networks and for reconciling cognitive difficulties.

Imaginative play allows people to step back and see both the emotional and the factual elements of a problem; to find the kind of innovative and original solutions that analytic mindsets are incapable of imagining. Engaging in playful practices like imagination, distraction, disassociation, idealisation or multitasking enables creativity and problem solving.

PROMPT

How can we align play and creativity with the strategic direction of organisations?

Case Study: Creativity and innovation through failure at X, the 'moonshot factory'

With billions in funding from parent company, Alphabet (also the parent company of Google), X – or the 'moonshot factory' – is dedicated to ambitious and sometimes wacky research and development projects. Recognising that the possibility of failure is high, the company has created financial rewards for team members who shut down projects that are likely to fail.

Foghorn, a project that developed technology to turn seawater into affordable fuel, ran for several years. But in 2015 the price of oil collapsed and its members forecast that their fuel couldn't compete with regular gasoline. In 2016, they submitted a detailed report explaining that, despite advancing science, their technology would not be economically viable in the near future. They argued for the project to be shut down. For this, the entire team received a bonus.

Some might consider these so-called failure bonuses to be a bad incentive. But the worst case scenario for X is for doomed projects to suck up staff and resources for years. It is cheaper to reward employees who can say, "We tried our best, and this just didn't work out."

Reza Rostampisheh on Unsplash

Prototyping play: What to watch out for
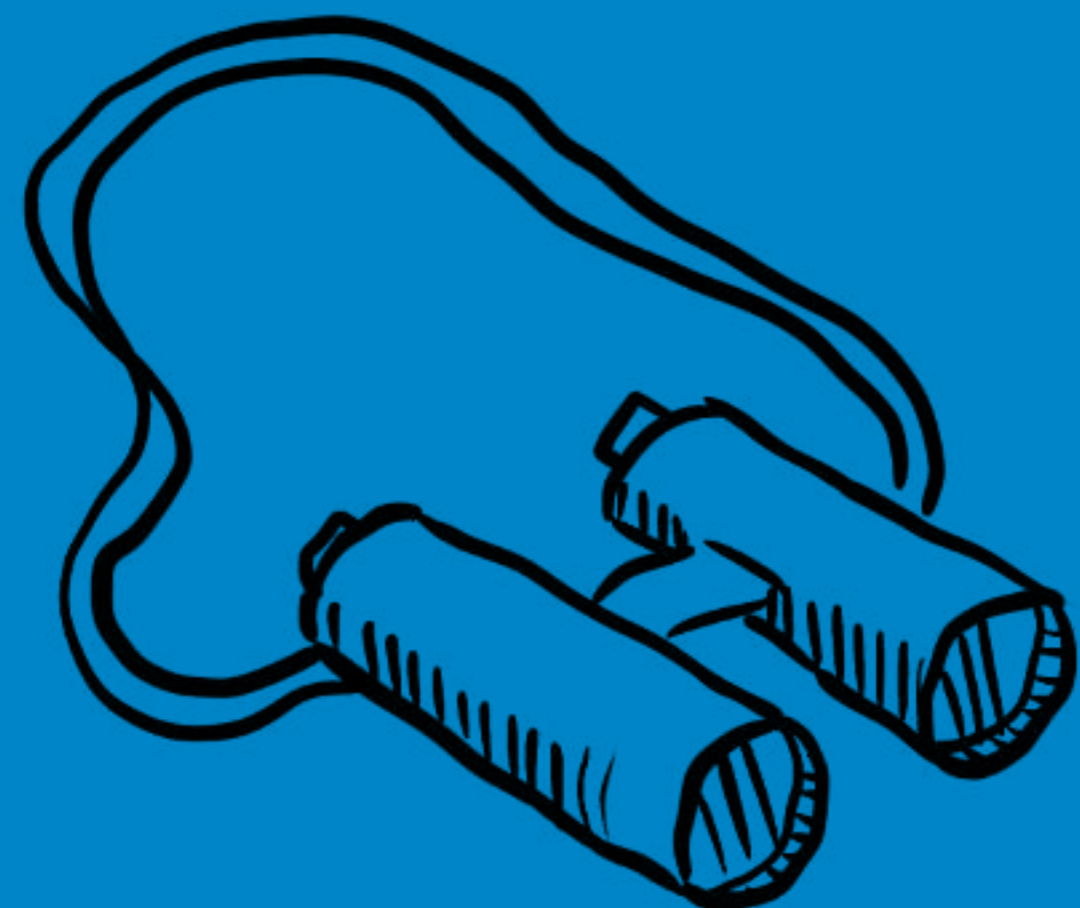
Barriers to Play

What prevents us from playing? Bringing together key findings from Virtual Play Week 2020, participant feedback and post-interviews, we identified several key barriers to play. Our findings aligned with in-depth research conducted by Lego Group into the barriers to play.

PROMPT

How can we balance the competing needs of structure and flexibility when scheduling play?

PROMPT

Research shows that an authentic play mindset is 'apparently purposeless', yet our findings suggest that participants want to connect with outcomes and thought leadership. How can we reconcile these two ideas?

Measuring Play:
Play as an individual trait

Measuring play has focused mainly on the individual, or on playfulness as a trait. Existing playfulness metrics include the Adult Playfulness Scale, the Short Measure for Adult Playfulness, the Older Adult Playfulness Scale, and the Playfulness Scale for Adults.

Many measurements for play as an individual trait already exist, but research into the collective outcomes of playfulness in the workplace is far less resourced.

Photo by Rosalind Chang on Unsplash

Case Studies:
What does a world of play look like?

At this point, we want to take a step back and return to our core objectives. We are striving for a world of work where learning through play is embedded into everyday activities. What does that world look like? We want to unlock the power of play in adults to develop thriving workplaces with sustainable societal impact. Where can we see the power of play in action?

CASE STUDY 01

Fuji Kindergarten: Creating places to enable Learning through Play

Completed in 2007 in Tokyo, Japan, the Fuji Kindergarten is a single-story, oval-shaped building that encourages children to play and interact by breaking down the physical barriers found in the typical early childhood educational architecture.

Large sliding glazed doors lining the interior of the ring are opened up for a majority of the year, allowing children to freely pass between indoor and outdoor areas, encouraging independence and socialization. An accessible roof becomes the main play space for the school, giving students an endless path to run, jump and play.

All these design decisions have led to a learning environment that improves learning ability, calmness and focus, even in children with behavioural disorders.

Block, 2017

CASE STUDY 02

Urban Games: Designing playful cities

One of the great paradoxes of city life is the overwhelming loneliness experienced by city dwellers. In densely populated cities, why is it that so many people feel socially disconnected?

Berlin's *Invisible Playground* collective makes digital games that turn the entire city into a playground. Apps like Street Games, Audio Adventures and Playful Theater are designed to utilise existing architecture and landscapes and create new opportunities to interact and engage.

Urban games change our perception of routine spaces, they invite us as citizens to take over public spaces, they encourage interactions with strangers, and importantly, they're fun!

Invisible Playground, 2021

CASE STUDY 03

Matt + Fiona: Finding new ways to collaborate with children

At the Phoenix School in east London, architect and educator duo Matt + Fiona have worked with children with autism to design and build the Phoenix Playground Room – a sensory playground.

Students designed the playground in their final term at the old school building, then built it their first term at the new school site with the help of a team of volunteers, creating a sense of continuity as the school relocated to a new space.

Involving the students throughout the process has not only empowered them, but also created a better playground. When we recognise the expertise of children and include them in the design process, our outcomes improve.

Ravenscroft, 2021

CASE STUDY 04

Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds: Intergenerational Play

The Channel 4 documentary series called 'Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds' follows the stories elderly residents from St Monica's retirement community and a group of four year olds as they take part in a social experiment to tackle isolation in the UK.

The results were transformative. At the beginning of the experiment almost all of the residents identified as depressed with two being severely depressed. After the six-week program not one resident did. One resident who was skeptical about the program at first, ended up roaring like a lion on the floor. Another, who couldn't remember the last time she had run, ended up sprinting to the winning line with her four-year-old companion on sports day. The show has inspired similar series in Australia and Denmark.

As we face challenges with ageing populations, we need to look for alternative models. Play has the power to bridge the intergenerational gap to benefit both older and younger people.

Johnson, 2021

How to give play the best chance

Play has incredible transformative potential, but it's important we give play initiatives the best chance of success. We've looked at the barriers and challenges to implementing play in the workplace, now is the time to ask: How can we set ourselves up for success?

These recommendations and future explorations form a foundational research framework that will be tested and refined through the primary research.

Top findings to take on board for our Discovery voyage

We have compiled the high level findings and recommendations from the research and also indicated areas that need further exploration. Most of these areas will be explored in more detail with partner organisations as part of the next phase of research work.

Introducing play

1. Communicate early when integrating play

Findings & recommendation: Based on the feedback from previous play initiatives, we recommend providing communication material early, so managers and leaders have time to champion it internally. When creating communication material, it is essential to consider how play benefits the particular organisation and industry. This will help position play initiatives within partners' unique organisational contexts.

Future explorations: We intend to explore examples of successful and unsuccessful messaging around play in the workplace.

2. Reframe play depending on the audience

Findings & recommendation: Findings from the BrightHR case study show that many people in senior-level positions do not want to play at work. We recommend framing the commercial outcomes of play and play initiatives when engaging with senior-level managers to create buy-in. When engaging with graduates play, can be framed in terms of job satisfaction, creativity and curiosity.

Future Explorations: We intend to explore this perception further to understand the potential stigma surrounding play

3. Avoid parallels between children's activities

Findings & recommendation: While play evokes nostalgia, novelty, and surprise, research indicates that using childhood vocabularies like 'playtime' or 'recess' can negatively impact adults' connection to play in the workplace. Additionally, in more serious workplace cultures, the more theoretical learning through play initiatives was valued over the more 'silly' activities. We recommend designing initiatives that provide optionality depending on the specific culture and workplace preferences.

Future explorations: We intend to explore the idea of 'serious' vs. 'silly' play further with partners to see how the nuance can be integrated into future initiatives.

Safe and inclusive play

1. Make play safe and inclusive

Findings & recommendations: Some studies suggest that sexism and discrimination in the workplace share certain behavioural characteristics with play. For example 'benevolent sexism' is often excused as 'just a joke'. We recommend implementing targeted opportunities for participant feedback, external consultation and the integration of sensitivity training to counteract unsafe behaviours in play contexts.

Future explorations: We intend to explore whether people have had any negative experiences under the guise of 'play'.

2. Consult for inclusive play

Findings & recommendations: With diverse workplaces in mind, values of access and inclusion need to be embedded into the design process from the very beginning. We believe that consultation from experts and people with lived experience around diversity, access and inclusion is a priority, and will ultimately add value.

Future explorations: We intend to explore any lived experiences (both positive and negative) when it comes to inclusion in play.

Play at work

1. Provide choice and opportunity for personalisation

Findings & recommendations: As the lines between work life and social life blur, employees are looking to stay in organisations that celebrate their individuality and provide them with a sense of belonging. Personalisation plays a significant role in creating exceptional employee experiences. The same goes for playful experiences. We recommend designing play initiatives that consider the various play personalities and allow for opt–in participation and/or personalisation depending on individual interests.

Future exploration: We intend to explore the role of personalisation in creating playful initiatives that have a broad impact while providing choice.

2. Describe the value an individual can expect from play

Findings & recommendations: The value of play needs to be integrated into our broader understanding of what work is. One of our long term goals is for work to be unimaginable without play. Before we jump to designing initiatives, we need to provide a level of education around the value of play and how it improves work processes and outcomes.

Further exploration: We intend to investigate how play improves individuals' work outcomes and uncover the enablers of play.

3. Explore differences between individuals, teams, managers and leaders

Findings & recommendations: Collaboration is a huge part of what makes a workplace successful. Both collaboration and play will look different at each level of an organisation. As we embrace the hybrid reality, it is important to understand the differences between individuals, teams, managers and leaders from a play perspective.

Further exploration: Further research is needed to uncover the key differences between each level of an organisation in order to create systemic change.

4. Integrate play into normal work tasks

Findings & recommendations: Research indicates that fun is seen as an integrated aspect of work, not something that sits distinct and independent alongside it. We recommend further research to test whether play is best integrated into people's work outputs or if initiatives are more valuable sitting separately from tasks.

Further exploration: We intend to explore how play is integrated into the workplace and investigate, whether play should have a purpose.

5. Cater to hybrid work realities

Findings & recommendations: Employees are looking to work for organisations that provide them with a sense of connection, belonging and growth opportunities. Flexible work arrangements offer an added layer of complexity that needs to be considered throughout the design process. We recommend that designers consider how future play initiatives could improve the hybrid employee experience. With some employees working completely remotely and others in the office on certain days, the challenge is to examine how play can provide connection, belonging and growth to each individual.

Further exploration: Further research is needed to investigate the barriers and enablers for creating seamless in–person and online experiences. Additionally, more work needs to be done to explore the role of play in creating connection, belonging and growth.

Playful leadership and organisation

1. Build a culture of play from the top down

Findings & recommendations: Key feedback from Virtual Play Week 2020 indicated that play initiatives could be at odds with output-driven, serious cultures. We recommend generating buy-in from key decision-makers within organisations and testing the ways in which play can be embedded into different types of organisational cultures.

Future exploration: Additional work to investigate the relationship between organisational culture and play, and how play initiatives can pivot for changing organisational contexts and priorities.

2. Make time for play

Findings & recommendations: Individuals with heavy workloads (50+ hours per week) said they did not engage in any fun activities at work. For play initiatives to have a sustainable impact, employees need time to play. We have identified two indicative considerations that will help frame an open dialogue with decision-makers at organisations.

Reducing workload to make time for play: if an individual or team is at maximum capacity, how might leaders remove tasks out of their schedule to prevent overloading?

Challenging perceptions around play: The absence of judgement is central to authentic play, but many of us fear being seen as unprofessional if we play at work. How can we eliminate fear around reputation and professionalism?

Further exploration: Further work is needed to understand ways in which organisations can make time for play and challenge potential misconceptions around working 'hard'.

3. Align with organisational outcomes

Findings & recommendations: Feedback suggests that when play initiatives are implemented in isolation to the broader context of an organisation, they are seen as fun but have no sustaining impact. Aligning play initiatives with organisational objectives will ensure the long-term feasibility of initiatives.

Future exploration: We'll be investigating success factors of other organisational change initiatives to see what we can learn about implementing play initiatives that 'make sense'.

4. Designing metrics for success and positive feedback loops

Findings & recommendations: Designing the right metrics, measurements and feedback loops at key touchpoints before, during and after implementation will enable play initiatives to learn and grow as we play. As we gain insight from participant feedback, we will need the in-built flexibility to adapt and evolve. We recommend further research focus on designing success metrics that help to track and measure play initiatives as they relate to organisational objectives.

Future exploration: We intend to explore metrics that are currently being used to track success to understand which may be most applicable to play.

5. Build capability to create a sustainable movement

Findings & recommendations: Research has shown that if leaders and managers advocate for play initiatives, a lot more buy-in is generated internally. In the workplace, management and team leaders have to substitute the roles of parents and teachers. And if the right leadership doesn't already exist, it should be created by appointing dedicated Play Facilitators.

Future exploration: We'll be exploring the capabilities of great play leadership and examples of when people have experienced leaders that have made the difference.

We can't wait to explore this further with you...

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