

Sorry to break it: Work ain't fun

by Dragan Milicevic on December 01, 2023

Key points

- **When people refer to fun at work, it is not about the task**
 - **Fun is a process and happens in the moment. It gets killed by expectations/objectives**
 - **Instead of asking yourself "What is it I enjoy doing" ask yourself "What drives me"**
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Today like never before social media, mainstream media, and management literature bombard us with messages about the importance of doing a job that we enjoy.

Organisations offer everything from fun events, after work parties and pool tables to helping people find their purpose and living in line with their values. Entrepreneur celebrities like Steve Jobs, Oprah, and Richard Branson have all repeated the same mantra – "Do what you love, and you will be happy and successful." Dale Carnegie made it more explicit: "People rarely succeed unless they have fun in what they are doing." And a lot of people accept this as the truth. Work has become the ashram of life-happiness. But what if this isn't true? What if it's impossible for work to be fun?



It's not the work that's fun

According to a Deloitte study, 80% of people are dissatisfied with their work. It comes as no surprise that a significant number of my coachees come to see me in the hope of finally finding the job they love. Take Christian, a 35 year old executive who is in his third job. Christian, like many of my coachees, is utterly unhappy and is desperately looking for that one job. He was quick to give me the 5 things he hates about his current job. When I asked him to think about a previous job – and why he liked it – he had two interesting reasons:

- 1) "I loved the impact that I had"
- 2) "I loved the people that I worked with"

The first reason refers to getting results and achieving a good outcome. In other words, he enjoyed the success. As for the second reason, it's interesting to note that it was about people – and not related to the task itself either.

When I dug deeper and asked Christian to name specific tasks which he enjoyed doing, there was a long pause. No surprise. Who can honestly claim “I love doing PowerPoint slides until midnight”, “I love having difficult conversations with my clients who don't want me there in the first place”, “I love giving tough feedback to my direct reports who are not performing to my expectations”, “I love playing company politics”, “I love excel sheets”? Hardly anyone.

Let's be clear: Jobs in organisations are about solving problems. That's why they exist. Solving problems is usually a tedious process and naturally there's little entertainment in it if we're being honest. It makes sense that people experience joy once they have gone through this tough process and have solved the problem. But that's after the fact! And it also makes sense that it's the people they work with that make work fun – because fun is what happens between people.

Even if the tasks themselves were fun, there's more to taking on a role in an organisation than just the tasks themselves: Not every colleague is supportive. The boss may not agree with all your ideas. Company politics may require you to be less than truthful. A job is far more complex than solving individual tasks. We keep forgetting that.

What is fun and when is it really happening?

The psychologist Travis Tae Oh researched the phenomenon of fun and came to conclusions that mirror my perspectives on this topic. In his article “What is the underlying psychology of having fun” published in Psychology Today, he points out that the “essential characteristic of fun is the sense of liberation – a temporary release from various internalised and externally imposed restrictions.” Basically, fun is a process which happens in the moment. The minute we attach an expectation (e.g. performance goals) to a task it can, by definition, no longer be liberating. Since work is full of expectations to deliver good results it is almost impossible to enjoy what we do. He continues to cite individuals he interviewed who describe a fun moment as something as “letting loose,” “being carefree,” and “getting away from it all. This is not really what is happening when you are working on a task, is it?

Look for motivation, not for fun

Instead of asking yourself “what is it I enjoy doing?”, ask yourself “what drives me?”. What are the things that motivate me? According to Steven Reiss' Theory of Motivation, there are 16 basic desires, life-motives, that drive us. If we have a job in which we can pursue our life-motives we will experience a sense of purpose and eventually satisfaction. The task itself does not have to be fun. To the contrary, living your life-motive will help you overcome any drawbacks or negative aspects associated with your job. For example, writing this article was painful for me as I don't consider myself a good writer. Trust me it was anything but

fun. Yet, my motive to get a message out there to people that is helpful for them when choosing their next job is so strong that I did it.

Likewise, once you know your life-motive it opens up the solution space when it comes to picking a new job. For example, if a sense of honor motivates you, you could choose to explore this as a journalist who wants to uncover the truth about what happens in world politics. Or, you might even decide to become a politician determined to speak out in the name of the people. Same motivation, different jobs. Living your life-motive is not the same as having fun. But with motivation, we are rewarded with the satisfaction of staying true to ourselves. It keeps us going by channelling our energy in a positive direction.

What else matters?

Living your life-motive is a central aspect in having a satisfying job, but there are other aspects that need to be taken into consideration when choosing your next job:

1. ***Go for your strengths*** – In selecting a job, make sure the role caters to your strengths because this is what comes more easily to you and what is most likely to produce good results. That's where success materialises and you can experience a sense of joy (even if short-lived) as described by my coachees. A role which matches your motivation but not your strengths might be the wrong one for you.
2. ***Find the right company culture*** – My coachees said it was the people that made work fun. Check the company culture and decide if you like the way people treat each other and what they value. Can you imagine having an after-work drink with them? Do the same due diligence with your potential boss.
3. ***Job satisfaction is more than just the task*** – Ultimately, it's about being satisfied with your job, not happy. Therefore, look for aspects like salary, development opportunities, location, chances to travel etc.
4. ***Don't go for 100%*** - There will never be a 100% match between your motivation, your strengths and the job. That's unrealistic. But aim for 70% at the very least.

It is time to stop telling people and ourselves that we must find a job which is fun. It may send people on the wrong track and make them desperately search for something that they may never find. The reason being: fun happens in the moment without expectations, restrictions or any goals one has to achieve. And this is not the reality of corporate life. Fun also happens between people and it shows the importance of the quality of relationships we have at work. Yet choosing a job based on people only might be too short sighted. Therefore, I urge my coachees to figure out their life-motives, the desire that drives them. This in the end will give them purpose and satisfaction. Finding a job where you can live your life-motives matters more than looking for fun. Have fun exploring!