

# The contemporary workplace

[Business](#), [Work](#)



Critically evaluate the significance of pleasure in the contemporary workplace. To what extent is pleasure a benign product of managerial discipline and organisation? Outline The aim of this essay is present the reader with an analysis of the concept of pleasure with particular reference to how it relates to the workplace. The first half of the analysis provides an assessment of its significance, addressing issues surrounding consumerism and capitalism. The second section moves on to consider pleasure more specifically in relation to the management realm of HRM and consultancy as exercised through organizational culture, control, discipline and regulation. The evaluation is based on a reflexive culmination of various readings which are open to individual interpretation and cannot be imposed on the reader.

Introduction Pleasure encompasses a number of ideas, and is often expressed in terms of gratification (often sensual or sexual), contentment, delight and fantasy. The New Oxford English dictionary defines it as 'a feeling of happy satisfaction and enjoyment.' (Pearsall, 1999). Pleasure is rarely associated with things done out of necessity, whereas work is widely regarded as necessary, and this is why the concept of pleasure in the workplace may be seen as something of an oxymoron.

A broader view would suggest that work itself can create pleasure. Often this is seen in terms of the salary we receive, giving us the means to an end, where we are free to spend our wages on more fulfilling, gratifying and indeed pleasurable activities and items. One must question if pleasure takes on a significance of its own within the fabric of the workplace, and furthermore, if it is produced through the tasks that encompass, structure

and discipline our working lives. This essay encompasses a debate around such questions and issues.

Burrell (1996) highlighted three faces of pleasure. The first face offers help for those in charge of managing an organisation, where pleasure encompasses a reservoir of potential energy to be channelled, shaped and directed in the service of corporate goals (Orwell 1949; Peters and Waterman, 1982). The second face offers an escape from reality and the acquisition of 'joyous serenity' (Boss 1979), a notion which will be expanded in discussions surrounding consumerism. The third face is reflected in the tradition of political liberation (Marcuse, 1962), where the pleasure principle is placed in the foreground.

This can be shown in capitalism where free market ideology is believed to lead to prosperity and liberation. In this essay the analysis will focus on these interrelated and interdependent faces, with particular reference to the first face. It will be shown that pleasure is of significance in the contemporary workplace, and that it is both a product and a producer of control and discipline within the organization.

Relationship between work and pleasure 'Work is compulsory production, something done for some other reason than the satisfaction of doing it... When we work we produce without pleasure so as to consume without creating - containers drained and filled, drained and filled, like the locks of a canal.... Work devalues life by appropriating something so priceless it cannot be bought back no matter how high the GNP is.' (Black, 1992)

This quote describes the commonly held view that one does not normally associate pleasure with work. 'Thank God its Friday', 'I hate Monday mornings' and 'live for the weekend' are common expressions, relating time, space and emotions to working life. The workplace is commonly viewed as a place of monotony, drudgery and unavoidable suffering. Reality has been socially constructed (Berger and Luckman, 1966) to divorce ourselves from pleasure at work; instead we look forward to the weekend and 'free time', which offers a temporary release from the shackles of working.

In the novel *Nice Work* (Knights and Willmott, 1999), Vic, the factory manager defends the point that work is not his life, that the two are separate, despite harboring the feeling that he is consumed by it (a point which we will return to later). He firmly holds the moral principle that the workplace is a place where pleasures should not intrude, but ironically has an affair with one of his employees. This serves to illustrate the irrationality, subjectivity and (lack of) control that encompass the dynamics of pleasure.

Braverman's Labour Process Theory (1974) demonstrates how modern day working practices stifle and suppress creativity (one could say pleasure). The heralding of Scientific Management (Taylor, 1967) saw the extraction of pleasure from work. Consequently, workers distance themselves from their work and often view their job as a means to more meaningful ends. The ever-increasing intensity of work practices have led many workers to look for a 'vent' within the confines of the office walls, where they can exert their own sense of identity, equality, security, and power (all of which are sources of pleasure) by 'playing' the organizational system.

Pleasure is a positive emotion but can be derived from other people's misfortunes (the pleasure-pain principle), such as when a colleague may be dismissed and one feels relief in knowing that their job has been spared. Pleasure can also be produced through resistance, breaking away from the rules and norms, such as turning up late to work, but organizational rules and regulation serve to placate such undesirable behaviour, an issue that will be discussed later.

Conversely, those in a position of authority can also derive pleasure by using their power to control others, such as reprimanding a deviant employee. Such actions are way of fulfilling deeper psychological needs which ties into the concept of pleasure. Informal social networks, office gossip, banter and even office romances have become ingrained in the day-to-day fabric of the office culture. Such occurrences offer pleasure and excitement for workers in even the most dead-end jobs (Black, 1992). Orlov (1998) refers to the workplace as 'a big aphrodisiac' and Overman (1998) reports that 80% of all workers have been involved in office romance during employment.

One can question if such pleasures hold any value in the workplace? On the one hand it can be argued that they provide employees with a source of energy to make it through the days work (Black, 1992). The opposing view is that such emotions should be discouraged by the organization as they only serve as unnecessary distractions, leading employees to lose focus of their work, reducing overall organizational efficiency (Baron and Kreps, 1999).

This latter view was shared by Vic in Nice Work, who felt business should not be mixed with pleasure (despite his relationship with Robyn), and

demonstrates how instrumental rationality within bureaucracy can be defined by its opposition to emotionality. Thompson and Mchug (2002. pp 73) conclude that 'employees feelings are suppressed, denied or appropriated by the organization for its own instrumental ends'.

My personal experience of the world of work have led me to the conclusion that too often we look for pleasure attached to a price tag, as something we can possess and HAVE rather than a part of ourselves, our very BEING (Fromm, 1960). Whilst working at an Investment Bank, the demarcation between work and play was very obviously drawn out. The 'dress down day' was introduced but was later abandoned as complaints of staff slipping out of professional roles and into the weekend mode. It seemed the organization was stuck in a trap of mixed signals and anarchy, confusion, almost psychotic!

Burn out was common and people were seen as resources to be drained to the very last drop. The culture was one of 'work hard, play hard.' However, the healthy paycheck was always welcomed, and living in the heart of London, there seemed no end to the pleasure possibilities. I came to view my work as a means to a more meaningful end. We live in a society where pleasure has come to be seen as a commodity (Bauman, 1998) that promotes consumerism and fuels related industries, such as tourism, leisure, retail and other service sectors (Burrell's second face).

Consequently it can be argued that managerial discipline and organization serve to placate pleasure within the workplace, and thus produce the desire for it to be 'made available' outside the confines of the office walls. However,

Vaknin (2003) argues that societies that maintain the distinction between (hated) work and (liberating) leisure are doomed to perish, as they would have failed to develop a class of workaholics large enough to create, sustain and expand capitalism.

It is argued that employees are unwilling to psychologically commit themselves to their workplace in order to protect themselves from the pain associated with failure, redundancy etc. Consequently, instilling pleasure into the workplace can serve as a mechanism to blur the boundary between work and leisure so that employees are unconsciously lured and seduced into committing to the organization.

Vaknin (2003) claims that historically, people went to work out of necessity, and all the rest was seen as 'pleasure.' However, the historical difference between work and leisure has been blurred, and some have begun to find enjoyment in their work, so much so that it fulfills for them the functions normally reserved to leisure time. They are the workaholics, who identify business with pleasure and are the embodiments of the pleasure principle.

Furthermore, some come to develop an over dependence on work, such as Vic in the novel 'Nice Work.' He feels it is the only thing that he is any good at, and derives a sense of identity and security through it. In this sense work acts as a source of satisfaction and need fulfillment, and organizations can, and often do play on these psychological needs by creating an organizational culture which links into business strategy. Thus the work-leisure boundary has started to merge, rendering the endless possibility of organizational gains for management by tapping into the human resources pool of

pleasure. Following from the analysis it seems clear that pleasure is a key ingredient in the contemporary workplace looking to drive the economy forward. The HRM movement signals a response to such claims.