We just want to have *(meaningful)* fun

Why fun is a critical driver of employee experience and how organizations can get better at having it.

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Over the last few months,

we set out to explore what really drives and predicts employee experience. In doing so, we conducted a survey that drew insight from across global markets, industries, job types and levels of seniority. In the end, we found four key drivers of employee experience.

1. **What's Non-Negotiable:** Getting a "fair deal" at and from work is critical and evolving.
2. **What I Give:** Motivation to contribute is driven by purpose and appreciation.
3. **What I Get:** Flexibility is important, but as a driver of balance.
4. **What We Create Together:** Fun drives a positive experience, but it needs to be meaningful.

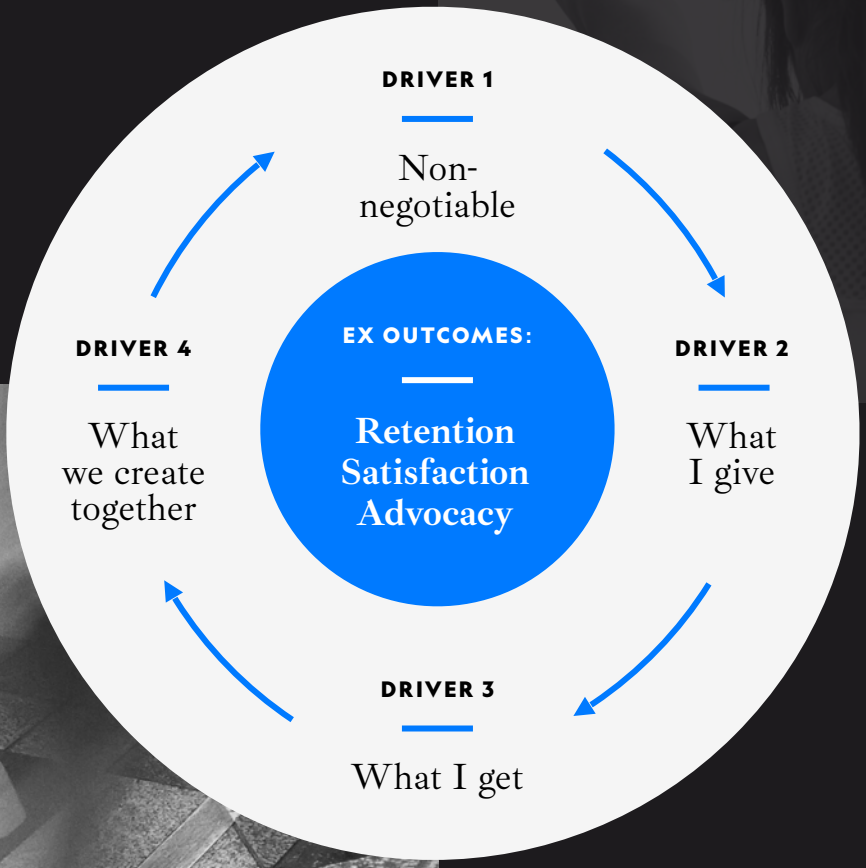
Together they form a mutual "compact" that helps leaders better understand and improve satisfaction, retention and advocacy in employees at all levels.

This article is part of a series that explores United Minds' research on the employee experience, entitled The Contribution Effect.

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United Minds Mutual Compact EX Model



In this article, we're diving into the fourth driver: ***"What We Create Together."*** Specifically, into the idea of fun and how to create meaningful fun within an organization.

What is this *"fun"* you speak of?

No one needs fun defined for them — or so we think. While fun feels obvious to us, it's not straightforward to define. Go ahead, try to define it. You'll likely think of examples of things that are fun before you identify the qualities that make them that way. Activities like "riding a bike" and "sharing a meal with friends" come to mind faster than the reasons we find them fun.

Fun is innate, complex and relatively new to the workplace. So, it's no surprise to see organizations try earnestly to integrate it into their employee experience with spotty results.

But despite its complexity, getting fun right is more important than we may think. In our research, fun ranked fourth among the 79 factors that drove derived satisfaction. And employees who have fun at work are more than five times more likely to perceive their organization as being among the best.

Given the importance of fun, we could benefit from a more useful way to think about it. To advance the conversation, let's first get clear on how our ideas about fun in the workplace have evolved over time.

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A *brief history* of fun in the workplace

Fun at work has come a long way since the beginning of the 20th century. But not far enough.

Fun as a waste of time (1900s)

1904 was a big year for fun in the home when Lizzie Magie patented the board game that would become Monopoly. But 1904 was not a big year for fun in the workplace.

That year, German sociologist, economist, and politician Max Weber published his essay "Waste Not," where he wrote that "loss of time through sociability, idle talk, luxury, even more sleep than is necessary [...] is worthy of absolute moral condemnation [...] every hour is lost to labor."

Austere stuff. But Weber's ideas were common in many capitalist, Protestant-leaning societies at the time. Work—to people like Weber—was to be no fun by design because work was fulfilling enough in itself.
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Fun as rest from work (1940s & 1950s)

Things loosened up in the decades after Weber, with President William Howard Taft advocating for workers to have up to three months' vacation each year, unions securing paid time off for millions, and the United States' post-war prosperity and new highway infrastructure opening new opportunities for leisure.

Fun was gaining ground in people's lives, but it still wasn't showing up in people's work.

Fun as a management tool (1980s)

In the 1980s, influential business writers like Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr. were among the first to document fun's transition into the workplace. In their 1982 book, In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies, they describe how top organizations used fun as a managerial tool for energizing and motivating employees.

- David Ogilvy urged his firm to "try to make working at Ogilvy & Mather fun. When people aren't having any fun, they seldom produce good advertising."
- Hewlett Packard's people philosophy (what we'd call an "employer value proposition" these days) emphasized infectious enthusiasm as a powerful quality in managers: "People in important management positions should not only be enthusiastic themselves, they should be selected for their ability to engender enthusiasm among their associates."
- Andy Pearson, then-president of PepsiCo, said: "Perhaps the most subtle challenge facing us in the decade of the eighties is to ensure that PepsiCo remains an exciting place to work."
- Chuck Knight, former Chairman Emeritus of Emerson Electric, said: "You can't accomplish anything unless you have some fun."

Fun had arrived, but as a means to an end. A jolt of motivation to boost engagement, retention and productivity.

Fun as a bean bag chair (Today)

In a little over a century, we've progressed from no fun whatsoever, to embracing fun but only outside our work life, to courting fun as a carrot for productivity.

And it seems like, for going on 40 years, we've kind of stalled there.

The tactics we use for instigating fun at work have become more diverse and sophisticated. But our idea of what fun is—a tool for driving productivity—hasn't evolved much.

Meanwhile, the idea of fun at work has largely become something superficial, unimaginative and easy for employees to see through.

As David Droga, Droga5 founder and Accenture Interactive CEO, said of the advertising industry's struggle with fun as a cosmetic tool for retention: "Beanbags and softball matches and a cool Twitter handle doesn't make young people want to work at your office."



And if you don't believe him, take Adam Grant and Daniel Coyle's word for it.

So, if fun isn't a tool to drive productivity, what is it?

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A more useful definition of fun

Based on what we learned, fun isn't a tool or a cause — but a hard-earned, long-term effect that these *three conditions* lead to:

1. When what we do matters
2. When who we do it with makes us happy
3. And when why we do it aligns with that of our employer

For business leaders, understanding each will help you think about how your organization can have meaningful fun.

01

When what we do matters.

It may seem counterintuitive, but fun is hard work.

When people are immersed in solving problems that are new, difficult and important, they're engaged, and progress feels like recurring proof that their work matters.

With so many challenging external forces, people are looking to their workplaces as havens for mental and emotional engagement —for deep fun. Fun as the end, not necessarily the means.

It's a distinction that Alex Turnbull, founder and CEO of Groove, wrote about when he decided to drop "fun" as one of his company's core values: "In many ways, core values like 'Fun' led us to the critical issues we were experiencing."

At Groove, an employee experience that prioritized fun meant that everything must feel that way. When presented the option to do difficult work or avoid it and have fun, fun was chosen. As was inaction and avoidance of work that was hard yet important.

When Groove reframed fun as the effect of meaningful work, not the criteria for it, they saw results. They saw ***real*** fun.

"Our focus on fun has shifted to a focus on execution, doing what you do and being held accountable for results," Turnbull said.

"Customer satisfaction is up, team morale is high, our tech is running smoothly and I've never been more optimistic about our future. And guess what? We're having a lot more fun now." Work that matters is fun, not the other way around.





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Work that matters is fun, not the other way around.

As leaders, ask yourself:

Are your teams aware of the novel, hard, important problems that they contribute to solving? How can the connection between their work and the solving of those problems feel more real and direct? What feedback loops can be put in place to continue refreshing the feeling of meaningful work being done every day?

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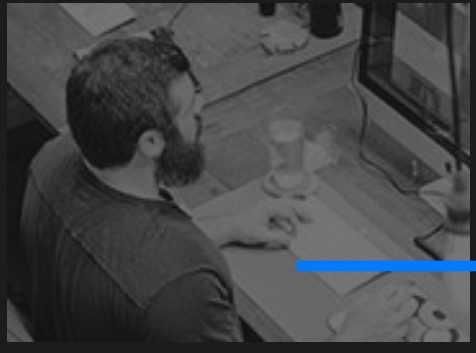
When who we do it with makes us happy.

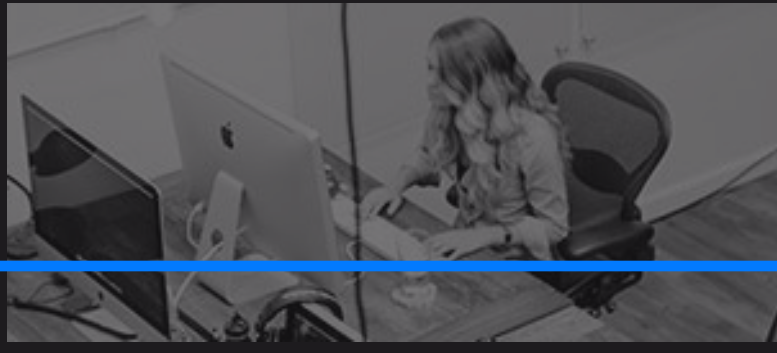
Close-knit relationships between peers are elemental to a positive work environment.

Doing meaningful work is an important condition for fun. And, as we highlight in our research, doing that work in a positive environment alongside people you feel a connection with is too.

When it comes to stated importance, having a positive work environment ranks at the top of the list for employees, second only to job security. And its importance doesn't seem to wane over time: people who consider their work environment to be positive are more than seven times more likely to stay with their employer.

Research from Atlassian echoes this point and gives dimension to what these relationships often feel like. According to the report, people on teams that shared candid feedback, encouraged cross-functional collaboration, treated each other with mutual respect and prioritized inclusion "were 80% more likely to report higher emotional well-being."





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As leaders, ask yourself:

How are you creating space, opportunity and incentive for people to meaningfully connect with others—across disciplines, geographies and layers of the organization? What rituals and behaviors bring those connections to life? How are you modeling this behavior?





03

When why we do it aligns with our employer.

For decades, our idea of fun in the workplace has revolved around the metaphor of the tool—something used to drive employees to be more productive, more efficient, more engaged.

That idea of fun assumes a need for extrinsic motivation—for overcoming a misalignment of interests between an employee and their employer.

We think differently. To us, fun is about feeling you're in the right place. And feeling that there's something real and exciting shared between what you and your employer values.

In the 2010 study "Value Congruence as a Source of Intrinsic Motivation," lead researcher Ting Ren shows the relationship between value alignment and employees' work effort, initiative, autonomy and trust—all ingredients to fun in their own way.

At its best, our work can be an extension of values we care deeply about. And that's what's deeply fun about it.







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As leaders, ask yourself:

How well do your values reflect what it's really like to work at your organization? Crafting values that are clear, specific, interesting and unique can go a long way to attract new talent and inspire fun. Be careful, though. A perceived lack of credibility can really damage your employee experience. Read more about this in The Employer Brand Credibility Gap.



Doing work that matters, finding real connection with the people we work with and feeling we're in the right place—this is what drives the employee experience.

Creating these conditions will take hard work, but that's what makes it fun.

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We'd love to talk.

If this or anything else relating to your employee experience is on your mind, get in touch.



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