

It Pays to PLAY

How Play Improves Business Culture

by **Kristi Herold**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

“All work and no play” makes for a dull workplace...and a costly one.

Organizations that provide opportunities for employees to playfully connect, bond, and build friendships see improvements in retention, engagement, and innovation. Intentional play at work creates a culture that benefits all employees’ physical and mental health and the company’s bottom line.

Kristi Herold, founder of JAM (one of the largest adult recreational sports league providers in the world), wrote *It Pays to PLAY: How Play Improves Business Culture* as a rich resource filled with ideas for play at work—whether in-person, hybrid, or remote. This book illustrates how the ROI from play is multi-faceted and exponential. Learn the ways play can be easily and affordably implemented—regardless of your industry—benefiting everyone from the most junior employee to the C-suite right through to the end customer. It truly does pay to play.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How intentional play at work benefits all employees’ physical and mental health.
- How intentional play at work benefits the company’s bottom line.
- Ideas for play at work, whether in person, hybrid, or remote.
- The ways play can be easily and affordably implemented regardless of the industry.
- How to playfully connect, bond, and build friendships at work.

Introduction

PLAY: A Definition - Verb: engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose.

Play is powerful. It has stopped war in its tracks. The ancient Greeks valued the art of playing games so much that it took precedence over fighting, leading them to take the remarkable step of suspending all war maneuvers, legal squabbles, army attacks, and death sentences until playtime was over. If play is powerful enough to stop war, imagine how powerfully it can positively impact your workplace!

The fact is, play is both natural and powerful. It provides an energy boost, engages the imagination, and helps to develop problem-solving skills. Certainly, play is prevalent in the lives of most children. But now we also know that individuals who are fortunate enough to keep a playful attitude as adults are likely to benefit in many ways.

Through this book, we will see how play can help busy adults by reducing their stress levels, increasing creativity, creating stronger relationships, boosting their energy levels, keeping their minds sharp, improving their mental and physical health, and staying happier in general.

This book is dedicated to showing leaders—in businesses of all sizes, everywhere—that play in the workplace is an essential part of a healthy corporate culture. Simply put, an investment in play leads to happier, more productive employees, a stronger organizational culture, and greater profits. By the end of the book, you'll see that making time for play is just as important as other facets of your business, like hiring, marketing, or production, and can make your organization stronger than you ever imagined.

Chapter 1. PLAY Improves Retention

The last thing you want is for someone to start working at your business only to leave six or nine months down the road. This type of turnover is a waste of everyone's time and energy, and it's expensive. You've spent too much investing in building this person up to be of service to your organization to have them go elsewhere. Having a fun, playful culture that helps keep amazing people on your team, as well as potentially win some back, absolutely pays dividends when it comes to loyalty and retention.

High turnover is expensive, demoralizing, and time-consuming and should be avoided whenever possible. Fun and play help friendships and bonds develop between

coworkers. When people have friends at work, they're more invested in their jobs and more motivated to do their best for each other. While play is not the only factor that can solve the problem of high employee turnover (money still matters), play is an important and easily implemented factor that improves culture and often gets overlooked. Having meaningful friendships at work makes people want to stay (and possibly return if they do leave), reducing turnover and simultaneously fostering loyalty.

The good news is that employees who play together and feel strong connections to others at work are happier, making them more likely to stick around. Less turnover creates more stability and benefits both the health of the entire team and the bottom line of the organization. In addition to helping with loyalty and retention, making time for play at work can also increase engagement and morale among your staff.

Chapter 2. PLAY Increases Engagement

Employee engagement is the emotional commitment an employee has to the organization and its goals. When your team members are engaged with one another, their work, and the customers they serve, of course your company is going to be better off. Engaged teams are that much more caring, and they deliver better service, keep costs down, and are more willing to help out their teammates.

Employees who are engaged at work tend to be happier, more motivated, more connected, more productive, and more likely to stick around. Happier employees who feel a connection with their peers boost morale across the board, which can also increase the company's profitability and productivity. Actively disengaged employees bring others down and degrade the workplace culture.

Research shows that play at work leads to greater job satisfaction, a friendlier work environment, and a higher level of dedication to one's job. Creating fun connections at work that boost engagement can be simple and not overly complicated or costly.

Happier, engaged employees are also more likely to stay physically and mentally healthy. This benefits them, and it helps your organization stay strong even in the face of unexpected global developments.

It's a basic human impulse to want to connect with the people around us. When we're at work, we want to engage not just over job-related matters as company employees, but on

a much more personal level as well. We want to get to know our coworkers as human beings and bond with them. One of the easiest ways to encourage these bonds—and in turn, increase engagement—is through play.

Chapter 3. PLAY Improves Health

The benefits of play are not new; however, the pandemic definitely amplified the issues being faced by so many in our society in regard to loneliness, anxiety, and depression, when the inability to socially connect in person with others was mandated. Further, as a majority of offices around the world moved to a remote work model, and with many deciding to stay remote or hybrid after mandates lifted, the need for work colleagues to find ways to connect playfully has become more and more apparent.

Forms of play that blend physical activity and fun with social interactions can do wonders for an employee's physical and mental health. Social play amplifies the benefits of exercise, leading to greater mental and physical fitness and less anxiety, stress, depression, and loneliness.

Physical health benefits of play can come from sports, theater, music, dance, and countless other fun group activities. Mental health benefits of play can come from all of the above, as well as just connecting virtually for some laugh-filled play. Workers who have improved their mental and physical health will call in sick less often and perform better at work. Not only do workplace team sports and group activities play an important role in keeping people physically and mentally healthy, but playing together also improves the energy of your team.

Providing an opportunity for your employees to play together doesn't need to be complicated or costly. For approximately \$6–10/week per employee, the value that both your staff personally and your organization overall will derive from playful physical activity will be priceless.

Chapter 4. PLAY Improves Energy

Making time for play—whether it be sports, a game of cards over lunch, or playing music together (play comes in many different shapes and sizes)—packs a powerful energizing punch for those who participate. It really doesn't take much to create these boosts. Depending on the activity, five, ten, or fifteen minutes can be enough to make a big difference.

As company and team leaders, you can encourage your team

members to take energy-boosting breaks. You can also provide ideas as well as props, tools, and resources to help make it happen. With frequent short breaks throughout the workday, your employees will enjoy energy boosts, and you will benefit from a higher level of productivity from your people.

As play releases endorphins in our bodies, it naturally helps boost our energy and offset the effects of stress and burnout. Playful activities during the workday, either in the workplace or in remote or virtual settings, serve as powerful connections to unify and energize employees as teammates. When playing team sports and games, whether winning or losing, camaraderie develops that carries over into the workplace.

Taking mini-breaks throughout the day and week provides the energizing, restorative effects of taking a mini vacation. Even if it may feel counterintuitive, encouraging employees to take breaks will boost their energy and productivity. Play breaks also serve another important purpose: play inspires creativity. And increased creativity leads to innovation and improvement, which all the top companies prize.

Chapter 5. PLAY Increases Creativity

Every company wants to be seen as innovative, and with good reason. Innovation leads to all kinds of benefits, from growing into new markets to operating more efficiently. Innovation happens faster and more easily when companies foster and reward creativity, and the good news is that it's fairly simple and inexpensive to get your employees to be more creative. One easy outlet for fostering creativity is increasing the opportunity for playtime.

One obvious choice that you, as a leader, can make in order to encourage creativity among your team is to establish time for your employees to play. Build play into your budget and schedule. As your business grows and you seek the best ways to do things, continuously look for opportunities to boost and bring out your team's creativity. Doing so will help build creativity among all your employees, so that everyone can learn how to solve problems more easily and get those innovative sparks flying. The benefits of creative innovation will be felt internally among your staff and externally by your customers and will also affect your bottom line.

Organizations can innovate more easily when they encourage and reward creativity. Playful activities that lead to plenty of laughter and social interactions release feel-good hormones, like dopamine and endorphins, that help people become more creative and come up with groundbreaking concepts.

Play develops greater trust between teammates, breaking barriers by eliminating hierarchies and allowing for people at all levels to share their innovative ideas more openly.

Companies known as some of the most innovative in the world value creativity and develop ongoing opportunities for their employees to play. When people are more creative, they come up with better solutions. Creative employees are more empowered and engaged, typically feel happier, and thus serve clients better, too, leading to higher levels of customer satisfaction.

Chapter 6. PLAY Creates Happier Customers

Most business leaders would agree that a key to a company's success is an ongoing stream of happy customers willing to pay for the company's goods and services. And then retaining them—getting them to come back—again and again, year after year. Retaining loyal customers is far less expensive than finding new ones, so it makes sense that happy employees = happy customers = happy profits.

Play at work and outside of work with workplace colleagues boosts employee satisfaction, which makes employees more motivated in their dealings with customers. Happy employees who see their jobs as fun and worthwhile will serve their clients more enthusiastically, creating superior customer experiences. Whether customer-facing or behind the scenes, it's just as important for employees in all roles to access happiness-boosting playtime opportunities, since end users still rely on the products or innovations being developed by these employees. Happier teams create sunnier interactions and stronger consumer relationships. Employees who play feel happier and create a happiness ripple effect around them.

Companies that value people, play, and fun are some of the most successful ones around. Just as Gallup asserts, having engaged employees leads to having happier customers. When customers love your organization, interactions will increase. Sales will go up. Profits will rise. When you invest in your employees' happiness by creating a culture that embraces play and creates opportunities for fun social interactions, you invest in both employee and customer loyalty. From there, the sky's the limit in terms of creating and retaining customers for life.

Conclusion

“We do not stop playing because we grow old. We grow old because we stop playing.” —George Bernard Shaw

The positive benefits that come when business leaders make time for play in their organizations are undeniable. By intentionally focusing a little time and effort on fostering play at work, you and your organization will see amazing boosts in employee retention and loyalty, engagement and morale, physical and mental health, energy and productivity, creativity and innovation, customer satisfaction and retention, and last but not least, your company's bottom line.

This is important: investing in play truly impacts your P&L—it really does pay to play. It's not an exaggeration to say that play can transform your entire business and is just as integral to its financial health as other areas, such as hiring and marketing.

In order to leverage the immense power of play, you will have to heed the call. You will want to look at your retention and eNPS scores and truly ask yourself the tough question as to whether or not your employees are really happy. And from there, you will want to start taking seriously the fundamental human need and desire for play.

Trust me: you will never regret making time and space for play in the workplace.



An innate entrepreneur, **Kristi Herold** combined her passion for sport, business, and community in 1996 and founded JAM (formerly Sport & Social Group), one of the largest adult recreational sports league providers in the world, connecting millions of people through play. When the 2020 pandemic forced sports to pause, Kristi's team created a new service: providing professionally hosted virtual (and now in-person and hybrid) events to help corporate teams all over the world stay connected through play.

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