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By David Whitemyer, Globe Correspondent, 2/2/03

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There are 10 minutes to spare before our monthly staff meeting. I'm hunched down, creeping past some filing cabinets. I check my pockets for backup ammunition. Eric, concentrating at his computer, spots me lurking by the doorway. I glance at him and whisper, "Cover me."

Then, in what feels like slow motion, I dive in and pummel half our graphic design department with rubber bands. There is screaming, elastics flying everywhere, and in seconds I'm shot numerous times, leaving at least one oval welt on my neck. Laughter ensues.

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It's just a typical day at the office.

Life is too serious to be taken seriously. It feels unnatural to sit at a desk for eight to 10 hours each day and behave in a businesslike manner the entire time. My brain is wired such that it requires periodic, impromptu playtime. In order to be fully productive, I need to goof off.

There's a difference between goofing off and procrastinating. Few people would disagree that playing around in order to avoid your responsibilities is bad. But taking a minute now and then to be a little silly is just a healthy break for your hardworking mind.

Goofing off is spontaneous and unscripted. Goofing off is fun.

Lots of companies are attempting to put more fun into their daily routines. There are consulting firms that specialize in adding amusement to organizations. You can purchase humorous training videos starring John Cleese, of "Monty Python" fame. And there's even a neat book entitled "301 Ways to Have Fun at Work."

Attempts by corporations to incorporate "fun" into the workday do create better working environments, but there is still an element about them that seems contrived. Herding your entire project team into the conference room and forcing them to wear silly hats and take part in role-playing games makes for an entertaining afternoon, but it doesn't guarantee much camaraderie beyond the day.

My wife once took part in a teacher training session where the group was encouraged to sing and clap while some guy on stage beat a drum. She tells me that the only entertainment and bonding that came out of it was everyone chatting and laughing about "that fruitcake with the drum." I guess there's value in that.

Michele Root-Bernstein, coauthor of "Sparks of Genius," once said in an interview, "When play is

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How often do you goof off on the job?

- Never
- Only at breaks
- When the boss is away
- When the mood strikes
- Constantly

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purposefully put in the work force, it's a play that has rules to it: that this is where you will play, this is why you will play, this is how you will play. So it's not quite the real thing."

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You can't impose fun. Fun just happens.

I'm a supporter of workplaces where employees feel comfortable tossing paper airplanes over cubicle walls and playing trash can basketball. It's the ad lib goofing around that makes the work day really enjoyable.

Research shows that play strengthens the mind. It exercises our neural pathways and sharpens our thinking. Unconstrained play relaxes the brain, and frees up your creative spirit.

You can imagine how brilliant I looked the day I dressed up in a white Tyvek body suit, strutted down the street to my wife's office, and surprised her by playing "Happy Birthday" on my accordion.

We all know that the brain of a young child grows faster than at any time of his life. Maybe there's a connection between the decrease in time we spend playing, as we grow older, and the slowing down of our brain growth.

I've learned a lot by watching my two young sons play. All of it is spontaneous. For them, it's done for its intrinsic value only. They're just playing - just messing around. But they're learning. And they're working harder than anyone I know.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating an office where staffers spend their days telling jokes and tossing Nerf darts. We have jobs to do. We were hired for our hands and our skills. And we have a responsibility to perform those jobs - and perform them well - in exchange for a paycheck.

Our culture mandates a certain businesslike decorum. As adults, we're socialized out of playing. When I skip between the copier and my desk, people look at me strangely. We're not paid to play desk-chair bumper cars. At work, we are expected to be serious and mature, with our nose to the grindstone, doing a good day's work. And why not?

Because goofing off at work makes us better people and better employees.

Assuming that you're fulfilling your work-related responsibilities, there's nothing wrong with acting like a complete fool every once in a while. There's little harm in downloading the "Dancing Baby" as your screen saver.

Being weird with your co-workers creates bonding. Silliness is a social lubricant. In the summertime, one of my colleagues and I sometimes run across the street and do gymnastics on a patch of grass. What's more bonding than doing front flips with your desk mate?

Debates continue about whether or not happy workers are in fact any more productive than unhappy workers. However, you can't really argue with the idea that folks having a jolly good time at work are probably going to stick around longer than those who are not. And there's a clear dollars-and-cents advantage to that.

Most importantly, nonsense and play are stress relievers. Laughter reduces muscle tension and keeps us in a more positive frame of mind. In a recent survey, 96 percent of executives polled agreed that people with a good sense of humor do better at work than others. The connection between gaiety and accomplishment seems obvious. So obvious, in fact, that whoever spent thousands of dollars to commission a report on the value of humor clearly needs to stop being so serious about everything and goof off more.

Albert Einstein once joked, "If 'A' equals success, then the formula is:  $A = X + Y + Z$ ; X is work, Y is play, and Z is keep your mouth shut." Even this world famous physicist understood that a fair amount of unstructured banter is essential for good work. The trick is to find a balance within these three variables.

Granted, I have to buy food and pay our mortgage. The basic requirements of citizenship don't allow me to goof around all day long. I'm fortunate to work in an office that gives me the mental flexibility to jump between Excel

spreadsheets and absurd e-mail jokes.

We spend a third or more of our life at work. Why not have some fun while you're there?

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