





When does it start being fun? Or is there even a place for fun at work? **Gerald Khoury** thinks so.

HAVING FUN IN THE WORKPLACE

is not frivolous – it's necessary for business survival. Fun is required for innovation, and innovation is no longer a nice to have, it's critical to business success.

Over the past few years our concept of innovation has shifted. Innovation used to be seen as a luxury afforded primarily to start-ups and a few novel enterprises. We

now understand that, in the age of the web, the game has changed; we are all susceptible to competition from innovators and must innovate ourselves, in order to compete for survival.

Do you consider yourself an innovator? When I ask this question at seminars, around half of the audience raise their hands. Which leaves the rest of the audience in for a surprise. Why? Because we are in fact, all innovators. Innovation is as primal as human life itself (actually, it's been shown now that a number of other animals, including birds, are also excellent innovators).

As humans, we need to innovate to survive. As children, every one of us was an expert innovator. Usually, this took the form of turning 'serious' adult objects into much more useful toys. For instance, as a kid, I used to spend most of my school

holidays building billy carts. Not just your stock standard billy carts, but vehicles with six wheels, different braking systems (some leading to spectacular results), hand torches taken apart and modified into driving lights ... the possible variations seemed endless. While it was undoubtedly educational, I did it purely for fun. I'm sure you can think of similar experiences from your childhood.

Unfortunately, as we develop into adults we become more serious about life. The vivid colours of life fade to shades of grey, and we sometimes forget how to have fun, and how to innovate. For our businesses, this is a tragic shortcoming.

Have you noticed that all the top innovation companies seem a bit like a kids' playground? They have slippery dips running from floor to floor, special cubby house-like work areas, games areas and fully grown adults dressed like they're going to a rock concert. This isn't coincidence. In order to innovate effectively, we need to be willing to be playful. This puts our minds in a different state where we are willing to explore new possibilities, make mistakes (which aren't even considered to be mistakes, just exploration) and to see the world from a new perspective. As Martin Seligman puts it, "When we are in a positive mood ... our mental set is expansive, tolerant, and creative. We are open to new ideas and new experience." (*Authentic Happiness*, 2004)

To regain the ability to innovate we need to relearn how to play.

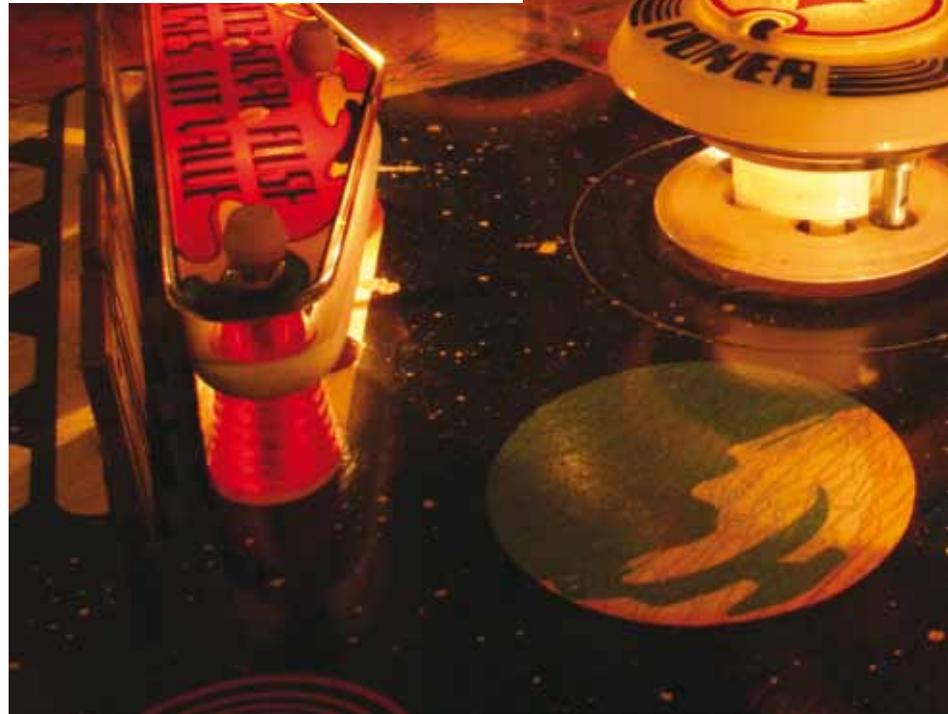
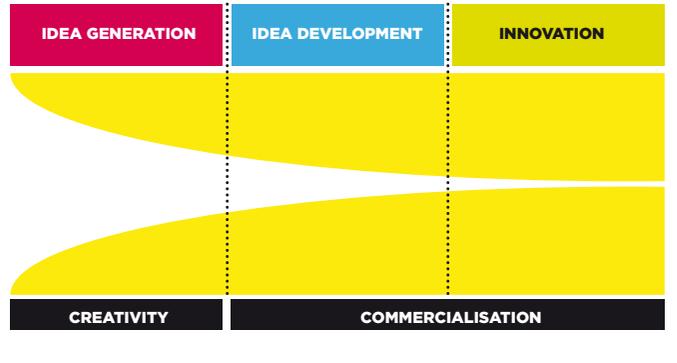
THE INNOVATION GAME

Innovation is the quintessential 'numbers game'. You have to generate and develop a lot of ideas, in order to produce one effective innovation. In IT, this is an area where we traditionally tend to be weak. We prefer to don what Edward De Bono refers to as the 'black hat' (*Six Thinking Hats*, 1985). When a new idea is generated, we look for weaknesses, illogicality, bugs and reasons why it won't work. This tends to bring the whole process of generating ideas to a grinding halt.

Instead, we need to put on the 'green hat'. That means that we need to engage our ability for creativity, new ideas, options and alternatives. Sounds a bit like playing, doesn't it? By getting into a creative mindspace, we are able to generate lots of ideas. When a group is supported in thinking creatively, the space comes alive. It's fun, the group is full of energy, and there are an abundance of ideas. This is the idea generation phase.

Eventually, the ideas start to come more slowly. It's like watching popcorn pop. Only once the pops start to dissipate, is it time to take the pot off the stove and move on to the idea development phase. This is where we can start to analyse ideas more critically, using our adult, discerning minds.

The idea doesn't actually become an innovation until that idea



“If you aren't playing well, the game isn't much fun. When that happens, I tell myself just go out and play as I did when I was a kid,” THOMAS J. WATSON

is put into commercial use to deliver competitive advantage. These phases are quite easy for those of us in the ICT industry to manage (although, creating the right processes to support this within an organisation can certainly present its own challenges). The real challenge

however, is in generating enough ideas to make the commercialisation stages rigorous. With few initial ideas, our innovation criteria have to be quite lax.

However, if we've created a playful, creative environment, and generated hundreds or thousands of ideas (a recent cost optimisation workshop I ran for a large defence contractor generated more than 300 ideas in just half a day) then we are in the enviable position of being able to be quite selective in what is taken into the commercialisation phase. Having fun actually supports us to be more discerning and commercially savvy.



“When we are in a positive mood ... our mental set is expansive, tolerant, and creative. We are open to new ideas and new experience.” MARTIN SELIGMAN

One government organisation I worked with recently presented a remarkable example of this approach. While the department as a whole was very focussed on risk mitigation, critical

thinking and due process and diligence (given their mandate, they needed to be), the department still managed to generate some of the most innovative solutions I’ve come across in government, and in time scales that would be the envy of many dot-coms.

How did they do this? As it turned out, most of the innovative solutions were generated by a team of two who had practically achieved legendary status within the organisation for generating continually new, innovative and highly popular solutions. Because of their track record and status, they were pretty much left alone to work (and play) however they liked. The rest of the department waited eagerly for their next generation of solutions, which were then embraced and embedded into the organisational framework.

With the rise of the dot.com era – as prone as that was to business failure – the rules of competition have been rewritten. Traditional competitive strategies are failing. The new rules are unknown – but what is known is that they will be written by the innovators.

The one principle that innovators all embrace is that work is fun. There are game-changing opportunities for enterprises who can remember how to play and innovate. The key is not to get serious, but to get playing. ★

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THE PLAY PEN

Some enterprises (such as Google, with its famous 20 per cent innovation time) are able to instill a sense of fun, creativity and innovation throughout their enterprise. For many established organisations who have a culture that is not yet attuned to this way of working, the creation of a culture of fun can be challenging. In these cases, rather than trying to change the whole organisation, a more circuitous route can be adopted.

In fact, in my observations of organisations that have a track record of generating innovation, it’s apparent that innovations are not generated evenly throughout the organisation. Rather, there are small teams (or one team, or sometimes just one person) that are relatively isolated and protected from the rest of the organisation. This ensures that the creative team can have fun, play with technology in a productive way, and explore options and new approaches in a safe environment.

The creation of a ‘play pen’ such as this can be a much more achievable goal than expecting a rapid transformation of the entire organisational culture to support innovation. The key is to ensure that the kids in the play pen are not so isolated that their ideas aren’t taken seriously.

