

THE FUN MANIFESTO

BY RICHARD F. RANSOM, PH.D

Fun is *serious*. Fun is *fundamental*. Fun is as real as your paycheck and as tangible as the taco you had for lunch, and fun can be as important in your life – or more so. Indeed, if fun is missing from your life – your *whole* life, especially your work – you’re missing an essential ingredient for your best performance. I’ll bet you already *want* more fun, but if you want to be more creative and innovative, if you want to perform better and have a better time while performing – you *need* more fun.

This manifesto is about paying real and serious attention to fun because it’s important, and because that fundamental importance hasn’t been widely recognized. It’s *not* about turning your life into a funhouse where the party never ends. It’s about making your life more productive and creative, about feeling better about getting out of bed because you’re eager to see the results

of the clever and fun stuff you started yesterday. It’s about taking fun out of the small box we’ve kept it in so fun can make the rest of our lives more memorable.

More specifically, this manifesto is about fun that’s both *participatory* and *social*. Relaxing on the beach with an umbrella drink and losing yourself in building the perfect kite are often described as fun, but we’re talking about the fun that happens in a group that’s doing something creative and challenging together. Sitting on the beach is *relaxing* fun – really, it’s simply pleasure. And, while building the perfect kite may be fun, it’s *solo* fun, also known as *flow*, a term defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his groundbreaking research in positive psychology. Flow is both important for, and similar to, the fun that’s the focus of this manifesto, but it hasn’t been neglected as much as its social counterpart.

What is this fun you speak of?

Since fun is used so broadly to describe many enjoyable activities, here's my definition:

Fun is the state you're in when you know you're having fun.

This may seem unsatisfying, but I haven't found a better one. In fact, I had to invent this one because the other definitions were so fuzzy and unspecific (seriously, there are books titled *Ferret Fun* and *The Fun of Dying: Find Out What Really Happens Next!*). Fun is subjective, so a subjective definition is both appropriate and consistent with my scholarly and empirical research on fun. People don't really know *what* fun is, but it's unmistakable. You know when you're having it, and when you're not. Period. The fact that we're exquisitely tuned fun detectors strongly supports the fundamental importance of fun in our lives. There must be a big evolutionary advantage to being highly sensitive to the amount of fun in our environment, or it wouldn't be so widespread and well developed.

What are we waiting for?

In our modern world, fun has been pushed to the margins. We've largely banished fun from the workplace, where it's considered frivolous, distracting, and even childish. Fun is a treat you're allowed to indulge in after the chores are done – otherwise it's screwing around. At the other extreme, fun is the mirage of fulfillment we chase with all the money, position, and toys we've accumulated in our desperate strivings at work, in school, and at home. But, despite our frantic efforts, we're usually too exhausted and stressed out to catch the mirage. We think fun is both frivolous and desirable, a luxury and a deep hunger – but we're on a starvation diet.

Despite its barren exile, most of us want fun. We want *more* fun. We want our lives to *be* fun. Many of our best memories are *of* fun, and it's what we hope for at the end of the workday, on the weekend or on vacation, and in our retirement. *So why wait?*

How about *right now*? These questions are especially poignant because we in the “developed” world live in greater material, intellectual, and even spiritual plenty than at any time in human history. And yet, despite this wealth, wealth beyond the dreams of avarice of your grandparent’s generation (and of many now walking the Earth), there are indications that we’re no happier than the inhabitants of the worst slums of the “third” world. Given all our advantages, why aren’t we having more fun?

Because we don’t take fun seriously

Serious fun sounds like an oxymoron, but here are three big reasons why fun is serious and why it should be a fundamental part of *every* aspect of your life, especially your work.

First, because fun is when we’re at our best, when we’re doing what we love. Think of your favorite memories, and I’ll bet that they’re memories of fun, or of triumphs that grew out of fun. Fun comes when you’re in the right place, doing the right thing, able to forget your nagging doubts and the deadlines you’re not going to meet. Fun

happens when you, and those around you, are able to break through the surface tension and clinging weeds of modern life to suck in deep breaths of untainted air. Fun is when you push the mute button on your ringing cellphone because you don’t want to interrupt what’s working so well.

Second, fun is the best measure of when things are working – and when they’re not. Fun as a measure of success follows logically from fun as us at our best. When the fun leaked out of my the workplace in my last job, so did much of the productivity, creativity, and general functionality. Fun was still happening, but not to everyone. The people who were not having fun were either the red flag marking where our group had a problem, or were themselves the problem. When I raised my head above my workaholic workstation, it looked the same in the rest of my life and in the world around me. Losing the fun was a mark of tragedy in the world, and fighting back to fun the sign of success. How do you think the recent war in Iraq would have been waged had we used *more fun* as the measure of our success?

Third, fun is what makes success *feel* like success. There are other things that promote success, and other measures of it, but none of them also *are* success. Again, *why wait?* The workaholic workplace I ran was a lab, and I estimated that 9 out of 10 of our experiments were failures (with predictable effects on morale). If I'd managed affairs so that every endeavor was fun – and each experiment was actually a *successful* effort to prove something wrong or right – we would have seen our failures as the successes they really were. Instead of waiting for the usually strained and desperately exuberant celebrations of the rare triumph, those twice-a-year events where we'd beaten the odds and caught the tape in every race, we would have had the fruits of success *every day*. If we'd let the work be fun, the rare successes would be all the better, and the failures taken in stride.

Lest this sound giddy, let's put fun in perspective with a series of sobering but-not statements. Fun is success, but not the only success. Fun is an attribute of people at their best, but not the only attribute. Fun is the best metric, but not the only metric you should use, if only for your own peace of mind. Fun is best, but it's not appropriate for every situation and every person. But, while fun is special and needs the proper soil to grow, it needn't be rare – or non-existent. So, why aren't we having more fun?

We're afraid of fun.

How often have you heard some variant of, “Let's stop screwing around and get serious here.”? We're afraid of fun, or at least of fun running wild, so we keep it in a box. A small one that contains kids, leisure, and not much else. When fun gets outside that box, it's viewed with suspicion at best. Why?

First, we see fun as childish. Fun is something the kids have at the playground while the adults sit and watch. A search on Amazon™ for “fun” in book titles reflects this view, as the vast majority of the results are books for kids. And, just as your kids don't really belong in the workplace, we feel that fun is inappropriate in ‘serious’ endeavors.

Fun *is* childish, since kids aren't afraid of, or ashamed to be having, fun. In fact, kids are serious about fun, and don't value activities they think won't be any fun. This says more about the stupid arrogance of adults and the wisdom of children than it does about the value of fun. The fear of fun based on its childishness is founded on a false logic: because children are serious about fun, we associate fun with undesirable aspects of childhood like irresponsibility. Just because children take fun seriously, and we usually don't, doesn't mean we *shouldn't*.

Second, we see fun as frivolous. Fun is something you have when you're playing a game. *Having fun with* something is synonymous with doing something useless with it, like playing a serious piece of music in a ridiculous fashion. "Let's get serious!" means stop frittering time away on frivolous fun and do some real work.

Fun *isn't* frivolous, but that's all it's allowed to be. There's no reason that our work, even if it's on profound or even grave issues, can't be serious *and* fun. In fact, there are good reasons to make our sober work as fun as possible. My brother

Jim worked in aerospace and national security, fields not normally associated with fun, but he understood immediately when I introduced him to the concept. He'd already made the observation that the groups with the best performance had fun while working. Fun isn't just a nice but unnecessary thing to add to an otherwise mundane activity, like frosting on a cake – fun is what turns mundane into marvelous, good work into great.

Finally, we see fun as screwing around. When we hear laughter at work and see people having a good time, smiling and joking and having fun, we don't think high performance, or even that they're working at all. We think they must be taking a break and screwing around.

Fun *isn't* screwing around, unless it's fun at someone else's expense. It's another logic flaw to see the association between a practical joke and fun and conclude that because goofing off can be fun, it follows that anything fun is goofing off. This is the most damaging fear, the one that's most effective at banishing fun from our activities, making them . . . *no fun*. It's also the one that's

least accurate when it's applied to situations where *everyone* is having fun. Goofing off is about a *few* having fun at the expense of the whole group. In my experience, when *everyone* is having fun, from the big boss to the gofer, it's always a mark of top performance. Everyone having fun means kicking ass and taking numbers, not messing, screwing, fiddling, or monkeying around. Real fun *is* work – which is why screwing around usually *isn't* much fun. Watch your kid (or keep track of your own actions) playing a computer game. She's having fun *working*. If you take the work out of the game, it's no longer fun, and the times you're working at your best (playing) are also the most fun.

How I became a Funman.

I started becoming a Funman when I'd finished my 20-year-long training (!) and finally became tenure-track faculty at The Ohio State University. It was a dream come true: I had a new, major research grant and a pile of start-up funding – together, more than a million dollars – and a shiny new lab that I promptly filled with expensive science toys. I fell in *love* with my new microscope – I could make it do damn near

anything with software, and I experienced lots of solo fun (Csikszentmihalyi's *flow*) writing the macros to make it jump. My boss and I shared lab space, and I worked with one of his new hires, Josh Manley, to set up the new lab (we've since become associates – he's now a Funman too). Despite the fact that we'd done no science while setting up, it was creative, interactive, and a lot of fun, and opened my eyes to the fact that creation and collaboration are doorways to fun.

As new people were hired, they arrived full of enthusiasm and possibility, and so at first things were great fun. But once the honeymoon period ended, the fun began to fizzle. This is when I got my first lesson in fun: *where fun is, is good – and where fun isn't, is a problem*. In the beginning people were having so much fun, being so creative and productive, that we almost danced around the labs. Joint lab meetings were a bit raucous, quite contentious, but almost always good natured and productive. As the fun drained away, so did the creativity and productivity, and the lab meetings – well, my lab quit going. No more dancing, and soon the air felt thicker and resisted every movement. We developed problem

children, and when they simply walked into the room, a vacuum seemed to suck away the fun – and in the draft went a significant part of the lab’s functionality.

One of my successes in restoring fun developed in the crew I assigned to perform some elaborate animal studies. This required a lot of coordination and cooperation, and at first there was considerable resistance and friction, in particular people pointing out that they were doing more than their share, or that Bob, Steve, or Susie weren’t holding up their end. I received another important lesson after I’d let my white-knuckled grip off the steering wheel – after all, I’m a scientist, and so I know *everything* and I’m a *bit* of a control freak. Once freed, people self-assembled into roles *they* felt appropriate to their skills, and set up a hierarchy *they* felt was appropriate to their expertise and experience – and things got done. And things got fun. It isn’t easy to work with experimental animals for many reasons, from the regulatory issues to the fact that we want them to be as comfortable and happy as possible – and, most importantly, we want our work to be worthy of their sacrifice. The lessons

I learned were that when people felt comfortable in their roles, doing what they thought they could do best under conditions they felt were fair, they could have fun – and, unexpectedly, that the solemn nature of our work made it *more* likely to be fun, because it had *meaning*.

I learned a lot while leading a group of intelligent, ambitious, stubborn, creative, opinionated, innovative, and often fun scientists. I would disparagingly speak of ‘herding cats’ when I got frustrated, but their cat-like behaviors gave me the gift of bringing fun to the surface and making me pay attention.

Fun Now!

If my experience investigating people's attitudes and beliefs about fun is any guide, you've nodded your head in agreement while reading this manifesto. There's nothing truly new or shocking, except perhaps that we make so little use of such a powerful part of our lives. The point of this manifesto is that we need to have fun, especially when there's no good reason not to. In fact, we should have fun even when there is a good reason not to, unless the reason is *very* good.

I will make a further speculation that's not so obvious, an idea that's the current focus of my work on fun. I believe that fun and creativity are two different words for the same thing, labels for different parts of a single spectrum. Encouraging fun is the same as encouraging an especially enjoyable and productive kind of creativity – and banishing fun limits you to a less productive and enjoyable creativity. This may seem like a strange idea, but think about having a great conversation with your friends. A great conversation is a creative act, and the degree to which it's fun is a function of how creative it is. Take away the

creativity, and there goes the fun – and I think it works just as well when inverted: take away the fun, and there goes the creativity. Along with the productivity, the innovation, and the morale.

Fun is also fundamental for a more important reason than the performance and creativity boost and the good feelings. Fun gives you a story. One of my favorite authors, Neal Stephenson, made the observation that our modern, corporate society has jealously gathered up all of our good stories. In properly functioning corporation, the only stories left are the bad ones: we don't come home and tell the husband and kids about meeting our monthly budget target – we talk about the guy who spilled his coffee into the fax machine, or about the big car accident we saw on the way home. Fun brings good stories back into our lives, and the stories make our otherwise uneventful lives memorable. Stories are *how* we remember, and our memories are who we are and how we define and measure our lives. Fun gives you more memories, and thus more life. So, life is not only too short to settle for no fun – life is too short *when* there's no fun.

I hope . . .

. . . I've encouraged you to think more about fun, and to think about fun as a positive and necessary force in your life. It has certainly been a positive force in my life, and in the lives of those I've worked with on fun. I try to make fun possible in as many aspects of my life as I can, and look at my life as a series of opportunities to create fun (or, as I think about it, to do the fun kind of creativity). Fun has made me more productive, has helped me measure my success, and has made my life more successful. In my case fun is a calling, a vocation. Fun has given me a goal I feel passionate about and a reason for my existence. For me, fun is the meaning of life.

I believe fun will give your life more meaning too. Try it. And . . . *why not now?*

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