# Enhancing Workplaces with Constructive Online Recreation

**Jo Ann Oravec**
*University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, USA*

## INTRODUCTION

Organizations have become more permeable— integrating more influences from the outside world— as participants engage in such online diversions as trading stocks, engaging in multiplayer games, or viewing images of their children in daycare. Ready availability of these activities has brought the potential for abuse but also new opportunities. Constructive uses of online recreation and play can enhance many workplaces (especially high-tech and information-saturated ones) and perhaps ultimately make them more productive. This article proposes that these complex issues be resolved through participatory approaches, involving workgroups in discussions as to what constitutes "constructive recreation" as well as in development and dissemination of effective and fair policies. This discourse can also ultimately increase levels of trust among team members and between employees and management.

## BACKGROUND

Issues concerning the boundaries between work and play have provided continuing struggles for managers and employees. Workplaces have become more "porous" and permeable— integrating more influences from the outside world— as individuals engage in such online diversions as trading stocks, playing games, or viewing images of their children in daycare. Everyday workplace life is becoming more diverse and chaotic. Although many organizational roles today demand high levels of creativity and mental flexibility, they can also fail to provide the means through which individuals can gain fresh perspectives. In the "information age," playful, exploratory, and spontaneous interaction can also facilitate the exchange of ideas for tackling workplace problems. Managers who expect employees not to use the Internet for some amount of off-task activity severely misjudge the nature of workplace life— which is solidly infused in online interaction. Depriving employees of opportunities for Internet recreation in some cases excludes the possibility of nearly any form of diversion from assigned responsibilities.

Workplace use of the Internet for activities that are not directly authorized by management is often considered as the "theft" of human and computer resources, while construed as a just reward by employees (Lim, 2002). Even though many managers consider the personal use of the Internet as an ethical lapse (Greengard, 2000), the "moral high ground" concerning these issues is not entirely clear. Much of the rhetoric and advertising copy associated with workplace computing incorporates recreational imageries and motifs, which can send misleading signals to employees. A number of individuals have already had significant experience combining work with online recreation; convincing them that hard work cannot be combined with online play is thus a tough sell. Telecommuters returning to organizational settings are often not entrusted with the autonomy to engage in online breaks at appropriate times— latitude they take for granted when doing the same tasks in their home offices. Many young people became comfortable with computing through video games and online interpersonal interaction and took online breaks during their demanding college studies (Colkin & George, 2002). Individuals must find ways to cope psychologically with increased pressures on the job (Weil & Rosen, 1997) and management should explore creative but feasible ways to assist them in these efforts.

Wireless Internet applications add more complexities, further increasing the porousness of organizations and making employees' access to recreation less dependent on systems controlled by their managers. Daniels (2000) reports how wireless technologies (such as PDAs with Internet access) are used within meetings to amuse and distract participants, often resulting in productivity losses. Since wireless technologies are still in the early stages of adoption in many organizational contexts, placing severe restrictions on their use (and penalties for misuse) could be counter-productive. Personal computers became familiar workplace additions in the 1980s in part because of their use for gaming, an activity that encouraged employees of a variety of ages and backgrounds to explore the various dimensions of the devices and to become more comfortable with them.

If engaged in constructively, online recreation can aid in awakening creativity and increasing wellbeing, just as

appropriate and timely face-to-face diversions have restored employees' energies over the past decades. However, some individuals may not be able to deal with online recreation constructively. They indeed will use it in ways that affect their organizations and themselves negatively, just as some individuals cannot perform adequately on the job for other reasons. Forms of "positive discipline" can be utilized if employees choose to exceed reasonable, agreed-upon limits; implementing such discipline "requires that the supervisor and employee work together to correct the problem behavior" (Guffey & Helms, 2001). Managers and employees should strive together to harness online recreation toward positive ends, rather than condemning or seeking to stifle it completely.

## WHAT IS "CONSTRUCTIVE RECREATION"?

Online recreation has already served many supportive purposes in organizations; games can be used to help decrease computer anxiety as well as encourage experimentation and the early stages of learning (Kendall & Webster, 1997; Oravec, 1999; Webster & Martocchio, 1992). What would make online recreation optimally beneficial to individuals, project teams, and the organization as a whole? To start the discussion: recreation is "constructive" when it is in synch with pending work responsibilities, allowing individuals to use time not consumed by workplace demands in ways that equip them to face future tasks with greater energy and expanded perspectives. Constructive recreation is also in keeping with technological constraints, as exemplified by the organizations that allow online recreation but place limits during certain hours to avoid system overload (Verton, 2000). Policies established are developed in participatory ways, and are disseminated broadly. Constructing ways of assigning tasks and evaluating employees so that significant and meaningful measures of productivity are involved can lessen an emphasis on the "surface" behavior of employees. Other characteristics of constructive recreation initiatives include:

- *fostering flexibility:* A major impetus behind constructive recreation initiatives is facilitating the rapid adaptation of individuals to changing circumstances. Constructive recreation affords individuals the means to maintain their flexibility in workplace environments that place increasing demands on their capacities to withstand change.
- *manifesting sensitivity to cultural concerns:* Workplace recreation is also "constructive" to the extent in which it is responsive to the overall culture of the organization and sensitive to the needs and values of other organizational participants (including freedom from harassment). Requirements of project team members in terms of scheduling are especially critical to recognize since the synchronization and sustained involvement of everyone are required during critical periods.
- *providing stimulation and refreshment:* Along with its other aspects, recreation is constructive if it provides intellectual and psychological stimulation or support, the sustenance often needed to take on tough challenges. "Reclaimed moments" that individuals spend in such activity can allow them to reestablish senses of control in otherwise stressful and constraining contexts. Ability to access such recreation and thus momentarily escape can provide a safety valve for those who face unyielding situations or put in long work hours, thus putting the porousness of today's Internet-supported workplaces to good use.

## FUTURE TRENDS

The value of recreation and play in adult realms is not well understood. Play has been given an assortment of definitions in the academic and research literatures (with examinations in the fields of social psychology, philosophy, and anthropology); it is often considered in both its adult and child modes as a "cognitive and symbolic act that is fundamental to the human representational process" (Myers, 1999). Across species as well as cultures, play has been shown to help individuals prepare for the unexpected by presenting varying streams of novel or challenging situations (Spinka, 2001). Play is generally considered as a support for children's intellectual and social development, but its role in adult lives is less clear. Research initiatives on what kinds of recreation and play are most efficacious in different workplace environments—as well as on individual and group "play styles"—could enlighten constructive recreation efforts (although they cannot be expected to provide definitive results).

Simulation is indeed an aspect of play that has some direct implications for employee readiness in the workplace, and it has received some research treatment (Myers, 1999). Michael Schrage's (1999) *Serious Play* examines how simulations expand the intellectual capacities of knowledge workers; forms of online play may equip individuals to utilize an organization's "serious" computer simulations more effectively, thus reinforcing skills applicable in many workplace contexts. Many powerful simulation games with societal or political themes are widely available to the public and have considerable audiences;

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