

Unauthorized Fun at Work (Goofing Off): Predictors and Implications¹

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Abstract

College students enrolled in business courses completed a survey concerning their “goofing off” or “playing around” in job settings. The opportunity to goof off (low workload and minimal supervision), a lack of intrinsic motivation, and viewing one’s work duties as resembling a game were better predictors of self-reported goofing-off behaviors than were the respondent’s gender and ratings of the supervisors’ leadership attributes. Men, however, did report engaging in goofing off more at work than did women. The correlation between viewing one’s work duties as resembling game and goofing off was positive, but relatively low, suggesting the two are largely independent. While personal values are likely to have a significant influence on goofing off, managers can more easily control the opportunity to goof off and some motivational aspects of jobs.

Keywords: Fun at Work, Motivation, Supervision, Gender Differences

1. Introduction

While it seems difficult to deny the potential negative outcomes of playing around at work, there is another side to the story. Opinion pieces, as well as empirical studies, have proclaimed the benefits of fun at work. Holden (1993) asserted that, “The most successful people in business do not go out to work; they go out to play!” (p.17). Many authors have recommended that managers actively promote fun at work (see Oowler, Morrision, & Plester, 2010, for a review). Fun has been credited with benefits that include the lowering of fatigue, anxiety and stress, the alleviation of boredom, the elevation of morale and decreases in conflict (Gropner & Kleiner, 1992; Newstrom, 2002). Managers surveyed overwhelmingly believed that fun in the workplace enhances levels of enthusiasm, satisfaction, creativity, communications among employees, and feelings of group cohesiveness (Akgeyik, 2007; Ford, Newstrom, & McLaughlin, 2004). Workers experiencing more workplace fun reported greater job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion had a less negative effect on job satisfaction when greater levels of fun were experienced at work (Karl and Peluchette, 2006a, 2006b). Furthermore, Abramis (1990) obtained evidence that making work more like play increases learning and mastery of the job. The popularity of fun at work is demonstrated by the fact that recruiting efforts frequently stress the fun that the work entails (Oowler, et al., 2010).

Although proponents of fun at work often recommend structured fun programs, employee-initiated fun, including goofing off, may be more desirable than fun that is management-initiated. Redman and Mathews (2002) found that some employees viewed management’s fun initiatives positively, but others saw them as oppressive and found compliance to be hard work. Similarly, Fleming (2005) reported a case study in which about half of the employees displayed negativity concerning a fun campaign. Some saw it as treating them like children, and some thought it lacked authenticity. Likewise, it has been argued that “people are unlikely to like being told how and when to have fun” (Oowler, et al., 2010, p. 348). In addition, Meyer (1999) warned that some employees could perceive a fun atmosphere as an opportunity to goof off more than management desires them to. Many Turkish employees felt a fun work culture to be inconsistent with professionalism (Akgeyik, 2007). As Fleming (2005) suggested, organizational fun may be best facilitated by genuine self-management. This is consistent with Fineman’s (2006) notion that fun typically involves spontaneity, surprise, and defiance of authority. The nature of fun and the importance of fun at work do not seem to be the same to all people (Karl & Peluchette, 2006b; Lamm & Meeks, 2009; Oowler, et al., 2010).

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Factors such as background, personality, and age are likely to affect the degree to which employees value fun at work and what activities they consider to be fun (Karl & Peluchette, 2006b; Lamm & Meeks, 2009). For those persons whom fun is more important, fun at work appears to be more highly associated with job satisfaction (Karl & Peluchette, 2006b) and productivity (Owler, et al., 2010).

Some work and play may be compatible because elements such as competition, teamwork, spontaneity, and feedback seem to be contained in at least some work as well as play (Newstrom, 2002). However, play on the job has been dichotomized as work that is like play or a game and “goofing off”, i.e., play that involves no work activities (Abramis, 1990). The latter is not the result of a formal workplace initiative (Lamm & Meeks, 2009). Although goofing off would seem to be less desirable for the organization than work that is like play, goofing off may have value if it provides a break after which employees are refreshed, reenergized, and ready to be highly productive (Block, 2001). Abramis (1990) obtained a moderately high correlation between goofing off at work and experiencing feelings of play in doing work. This could mean work that is like play leads to goofing off. However, the questions used may not have clearly distinguished between play instead of performing one’s duties (goofing off) while at work vs. play inherent in doing work. The work as play items all contained the phrase “my work is...” which could be interpreted as referring to the job in general rather than the actual work duties. The issue of the relationship of work containing elements of play and goofing off behavior merits further investigation as does the study of factors associated with goofing off.

There is some evidence from the U.S. and China that men goof off at work more than do women (Decker & Calo, 2007a; Decker, Calo, & Yao, 2009). Also, since numerous studies have obtained gender differences in various measures of values and “citizenship behaviors”, it may well be that the amount of goofing off at work varies with the gender of the respondent. Studies of gender differences in ethical decision-making have yielded mixed results, but researchers obtaining differences have most often found women to be more ethical than men (Beu, Buckley, & Harvey, 2003; O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005; Singer & Singer, 1997). Similarly, Decker and Calo (2007b) found women had less favorable impressions of unethical actors and more favorable impressions of whistle-blowers than did male students. Furthermore, women have been found to score higher than men on tests of moral development (Bernardi & Arnold, 1997; White, 1999). Also, Schmidt and Posner (1992) concluded that women are more loyal to their work than are men, as women were found to be more willing to pass up attending an important function at home if it conflicted with an important job-related function and to move their family to a new location or change their lifestyle for a better job. The previous findings concerning various “citizenship” behaviors and values led to the prediction that men would self-report engaging in more goofing off at work than would women.

Goofing off may be a means of bonding for males more than for females and bonding may be more important to males than to females. The effects of social exclusion by co-workers are moderated by gender, with greater exclusion related to stronger negative impact on work attitudes and lower levels of psychological health for males than for females (Hitlan, Clifton, and DeSoto, 2006). A tendency for males to derive their identities more from their profession and performance in the workplace may lead them to exert more effort to “fit in” by various means including joining co-workers who are goofing off or by attracting attention to themselves by initiating such behavior.

Goals of this research included the gaining of better understanding of factors leading to goofing off at work and the providing of insight as to how goofing off may be better controlled. Prior research has investigated a very limited number of possible causes of the experiences of both kinds of play, especially of goofing off. Abramis (1990) found lack of challenge and lack of organizational involvement to be correlates of goofing off. The present study sought to extend the prior research by investigating more specific aspects of the respondents’ job conditions and involvement. Variables studied included the influence of supervisors’ leadership, as well as career goals, satisfaction with various aspects of the job, social needs, and the opportunity to goof off. It was expected that those goofing off more would rate their supervisors lower, seek more pleasure from their jobs, enjoy their work duties less, and have greater opportunity to goof off than would those goofing off less.

2. Method

2.1 Respondents

Questionnaires were distributed to 351 students in upper-division, undergraduate Management classes at a mid-Atlantic university. There were 192 men, 158 women, and 1 person not answering the gender question.

Nine respondents were under 20 years of age, while 305 were 20-24, 27 were 25-29, and 10 were 30 or over. Forty-three reported current full-time employment, 209 listed part-time employment, and 99 stated that they were not currently employed. All of the unemployed respondents reported having been employed in the past. A total of 33 persons reported that they had held full-time, managerial jobs, 74 were employed in full-time, non-managerial employment jobs, 31 had part-time, managerial jobs, while 216 listed part-time, non-managerial employment. (The frequencies for the four job categories sum to 354 because three persons reported holding positions in two categories.)

2.2 Materials

Page 1 of a six-page questionnaire gave respondents information as to the general purpose of the study, that it was a study intended to help in the understanding the role of play in work. Further, it was stated that every effort would be made to keep the information provided confidential, as respondents would not write their names on the questionnaires and data would only be reported in aggregate form. Respondents were informed that participation was strictly voluntary and the choice to participate or not to participate would in no way affect their course grades.

Page 2 contained personal information items concerning age, gender, education, and current employment. Also on Page 2 were directions instructing respondents to base their answers to the job-related questions that followed on their current job or, if not currently working, their most recent job.

Pages 3-6 contained 56 questions concerning goofing off and play at work as well as possible reasons for such activities or experiences. Examples included, "To what extent do you waste time at work?", "How much is performing your job duties like playing a game?", "How closely does your immediate supervisor monitor you while you work?", and "How would you rate the amount of work your job requires you to do?". The items included seven-point, rating scales with bipolar anchors. For 39 of the questions the anchors were "Not at All" vs. "Very Much". "Very Low" vs. "Very High" were the anchors for the remaining items.

3. Results

The responses to the 56 rating scales were factor analyzed using a Principal Components Analysis with a Varimax rotation. A 13-factor solution explained 62.48 percent of the variance. In order to develop scales from the factors, loadings of .50 or higher were considered sufficient to include an item in a particular scale. Scales were required to contain three or more items to be used in further analyses. Seven scales (including a total of 35 items) met these criteria. The responses to the items comprising each factor were averaged in order to maintain a possible range of scale means of one to seven.

The seven scales seemed to represent the respondent's 1) proneness to goof off at work (6 items), 2) view of the extent to which his/her job resembles play or a game (4 items), 3) ratings of his/her supervisor's leadership qualities (10 items), 4) workload (3 items), 5) monitoring by his/her supervisor (4 items), 6) intrinsic motivation (5 items), and 7) opinion of the importance of pleasure (3 items). The scales and shortened versions of the items appear in Table 1.

Table 1. Items Comprising Each Scale

Scale/Items	Factor Loadings
Goofing Off	
You goof off on the job	.874
You waste time at work	.718
You play around at work	.798
Your co-workers goof off on the job	.705
*It is your duty to keep busy at work	-.563
*If you goofed off, it would be unfair to co-workers	-.604
Work as a Game	
How much your job duties are like a game	.760
How similar your work duties are to sports	.731
Your supervisor tries to make your job like a game	.653
Your co-workers try to make their jobs like a game	.652
Supervisor Rating	
You like your supervisor	.822
You trust your supervisor	.793
Your supervisor appreciates your work	.534
Your supervisor's leadership abilities	.830
Your supervisor accomplishes what his/her superiors expect	.803
Your supervisor's concern for productivity	.668
Your supervisor's decisiveness	.597
Your supervisor's popularity	.811
Your supervisor's friendliness	.793
Your supervisor's concern for people	.822
Workload	
The extent to which performing your job duties takes up time	.546
The amount of work your job requires you to do	.728
The stress level caused by your job	.711
Monitoring	
How closely your supervisor monitors you	.645
The likelihood of getting caught if you goofed off	.644
The likelihood that you would be punished if you goofed off	.579
The extent to which your supervisor discourages goofing off	.561
Intrinsic Motivation	
You are proud to be part of the organization	.563
You are motivated to do your job well	.635
Your job duties are enjoyable	.741
Your job is important to your organization	.602
Your job duties are interesting	.640
Pleasure Importance	
The importance of having fun at work	.708
The importance of obtaining pleasure from a job	.669
The importance of enjoying life	.503

*Reverse Scored Items

The reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha), means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations are presented in Table 2. The Goofing Off scale was significantly correlated ($p < .05$) with all other scales, except the Pleasure Importance scale. The Pleasure Importance scale also had an exceptionally low reliability coefficient. Therefore, the Pleasure Importance scale was excluded from the regression analysis.

As a result, all scales used in the regression analysis met the standard of a minimum Cronbach’s alpha of .60 for exploratory research (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998), while all except two were above the more commonly accepted standard of .70. The Goofing Off scale correlated negatively with Supervisor Rating, Monitoring, Workload, and Intrinsic Motivation, but positively with the Work as a Game scale. Also, men self-reported goofing off more than did women.

Table 2. Scale Reliabilities, Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations

Scales	Cronbach’s			Scale Correlations						
	α	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Goofing Off	.855	3.55	1.22							
2. Supervisor Rating	.925	5.38	1.18	-.113*						
3. Intrinsic Motivation	.816	5.20	1.17	-.336‡	.394‡					
4. Workload	.668	4.81	1.18	-.391‡	.067	.328‡				
5. Monitoring	.613	3.59	1.12	-.352‡	.049	.081	.235‡			
6. Work as a Game	.722	3.02	1.26	.154†	.171†	.200‡	.091	-.050		
7. Pleasure Importance	.489	6.36	.66	.086	.126*	.230‡	.105	.007	.100	
8. Gender				-.125*	-.118*	.048	.048	-.014	.036	.067

* $p < .05$, † $p < .01$, ‡ $p < .001$; $n=351$

A stepwise regression analysis to predict Goofing Off yielded a model including Workload, Monitoring, Intrinsic Motivation, and Work as a Game (see Table 3). The model excluded Leadership and Gender (dummy variable: male =0, female =1). It accounted for 31.0% of the variance.

Table 3. Regression Model: Predictors of Goofing Off

Scale	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		t
	B	Std Error	Beta		
(Constant)	40.15	1.96			20.46‡
Workload	-.54	.10	-.26		-5.41‡
Monitoring	-.42	.08	-.26		-5.61‡
Intrinsic Motivation	-.34	.06	-.27		-5.72‡
Work as a Game	.32	.07	.22		4.83‡

‡ $p < .001$

4. Discussion

The opportunity to goof off at work (low workload and minimal supervision) and a lack of intrinsic motivation were the best predictors of self-reported goofing-off behavior. Appreciation of the supervisor’s leadership qualities had a minimal impact on the proneness of employees to goof off at work. The same is true of gender. Although leadership and gender were correlated significantly with goofing off (leadership was negatively correlated and men goofed off more), the correlations were relatively small and the regression model excluded them. Not examined in the present study, but likely to have a significant impact on goofing off at work, are the employee’s personal values such as work ethic. While personal values are likely to have a highly significant influence on goofing off, the present study has practical implications in that managers can more easily control the opportunity to goof off and some motivational aspects of the job.

While the extent to which the respondent perceived his/her work as resembling play or a game was included in the regression model, the correlation between this variable and self-reported goofing off was considerably less than that reported by Abramis (1990) ($r = .154$ vs. $r = .398$). As noted above, the items used in the Abramis study may have been somewhat ambiguous, not clearly distinguishing play while *at work* (goofing off) vs. play while actually *doing work*.

Meyer (1999) warned that some employees may perceive a fun atmosphere as an opportunity to goof off more than management desires them to and that customers may avoid fun companies, perceiving them as being insufficiently serious minded. However, the low correlation between goofing off and perceiving one's work as being like play or a game suggests that attempts to make work more fun may not run much risk of fostering goofing off. Also, a small amount of goofing off may be a form of temporary release that actually enhances performance in the long run (Block, 2001). Therefore, managers may want to "look the other way" to some extent, allowing employees to goof off. Of course, managers must know when to rein in employees who go too far in having fun.

The use of self-report measures is one limitation in the present study. In addition, there is a need for studies of the relationship of goofing off and work performance. Another limitation is that the respondents were college students. However, it seems the study of college students is worthwhile since students are adult members of society and many organizations employ them. It seems likely, given their ages and student status, that most of our respondents are not currently employed in the profession to which they aspire. The results, therefore, are limited to jobs that are not in line with the employee's long-term career goals. Certainly, the study of other populations is warranted.

In conclusion, while managers may want to allow employees to goof off to some extent in hopes of enhancing later performance, the present study offers insights into how goofing off can be limited. Enrichment of jobs by means of redesign to increase motivation is one alternative and a very desirable one in many contexts, but for the typical low-level, labor-intensive jobs held by college students limiting the opportunity to goof off by monitoring behavior and assigning a relatively "full plate" of work duties seem to be more feasible options.

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