

Laugh out loud

More companies are using humor to motivate and retain workers

RACHEL BERNSTEIN | STAFF



Matt Doud, president of Baltimore advertising firm Planit, says fun can stimulate creativity and productivity.

Imagine standing in front of Edgar Allan Poe's white grave marker, the fresh Baltimore air blowing through your hair, your favorite co-workers standing next to you as you pose for the camera.

Not to be confused with a bizarre dream, the trip to Poe's grave was a part of a scavenger hunt held by advertising agency Planit Inc. as a way to build teamwork and knowledge about Baltimore.

Outings and special events at Planit are common as part of the agency's theory of

balance in the workplace. Members of the advertising agency believe that with work comes play, and that even play can lead to greater productivity among employees and enriched relationships with clients.

"We don't discourage things like loud laughter and being frivolous," said Matt Doud, president and co-founder of Baltimore-based Planit. "I go in the elevator and there are lots of suits, and that's fine. But we foster fun and find people who believe in it."

Humor in the workplace is proven to be a

good asset of the office dynamic, as well as for your health, according to a study from the University of Maryland Medical Center. The study indicated that people with heart disease were 40 percent less likely to laugh in a variety of situations and events than those without heart disease.

Dr. Michael Miller, director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland Medical Center and associate professor of medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, reported, "We don't know yet why laughing protects

Laughter: Experts warn that office humor could offend some employees

the heart, but we know that mental stress is associated with impairment of the endothelium, the protective barrier lining in our blood vessels. This can cause a series of inflammatory reactions that lead to fat and cholesterol build-up in the coronary arteries and ultimately to a heart attack.”

Several additional studies, including those done by the College of William; Mary and Stanford University School of Medicine, also show that humor stimulates the brain, especially the frontal lobe, which affects decision-making skills, and the prefrontal cortex, which is involved in language processing and memory. Studies that happiness and feeling fulfilled in life equate to more productivity in the workplace may be the reason why more companies are using humor in the workplace to motivate and retain employees.

But can humor sometimes go too far?

Certainly, says Stephanie Kinder, an attorney in downtown Baltimore whose practice focuses on workplace training and discrimination. “Make sure clients have a policy in place, and they should train employees on what is and is not appropriate,” Kinder said.

Bottom line: There are certain things you know you have to avoid, but sometimes there are some gray areas, and that’s what causes the problem, she said.

A chuckle among a few close employees may be a stroke of embarrassment to a fellow worker. One of Kinder’s clients recently sent an e-mail to fellow employees that poked fun at a certain race. The e-mail fell into the hands of someone

outside of the client’s circle of friends who was of that race, and the joke stopped being funny. Kinder says it can be a fine line as to what is appropriate, especially when co-workers are friends and develop a comfortable relationship. Kinder suggests a standard policy that addresses behavior in the workplace and the disciplinary action that ensues after offensive behavior.

Employees shouldn’t be waylaid by office entertainment and silliness, either. Doud agrees that the fun shouldn’t overshadow the work that needs to be done by the end of the day.

Jill Shaner, marketing coordinator of the Clovis Group, said employees are free to gauge their own workloads and participate in fun company events at their own discretion.

In addition to the basketball hoops in the office and happy hours at least once a month, Clovis, a recruiting firm, also plans office trips to Atlantic City and rope challenge courses.

Mike Oliver, with Towson law firm Bowie & Jensen LLC, uses humor as a way to communicate with his co-workers about high-stress situations. “The character they most identify with me is the crispy orange M&M, the one who’s usually worried about everything. So when I’m high stressed about deals, I put a little version of him on the door outside my office so people know not to come in.”

The self-effacing humor helps ease what would otherwise be tension in Oliver’s office.

The upward trend in making the work-

Funny Bone

Tips for incorporating humor in your workplace:

- Make humor accessible to everyone, and not at someone else’s expense or by excluding certain employees.
- Encourage family-friendly humor, with a G-rating.
- Avoid overly-distracting humor or play by having time limits for fun.
- Stay away from jokes based on race, religion or gender.
- Keep a standard policy for disciplinary action for off-color humor or behavior.
- Watch for repeated offenses of behavior that may be borderline, but could develop a pattern.
- Be empathetic that not everyone appreciates your brand of humor.

place a little more humorous and fun may also be attributed to what Doud calls the dot-com era. “It was a little bit of an eye-opening time in business,” he said. “We realized that we can have it both ways, to be successful at being hard working and having fun. The dress doesn’t always correlate. Goofy doesn’t always mean lazy, and a three-piece suit doesn’t always mean success.”