

# Joy at work? That's a laugh

- **Geoff Maslen**
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Researcher Maren Rawlings

Having a good time at work or school can do wonders for a person's job and learning satisfaction, says Swinburne University of Technology researcher Maren Rawlings.

In a study for her PhD, Ms Rawlings found that people who use, and are surrounded by, humour at work have higher levels of job satisfaction than those whose workplaces are grimmer and their workmates glum.

"I found as a teacher that a lighthearted approach to topics makes learning more enjoyable," she says. "I used to run fun classrooms but once the introduction was over, I then told the students, 'This is serious, now get on with it.' If you have the kids with you, the rest is a lot easier."

After teaching science and psychology for about 30 years, Ms Rawlings decided to undertake research into the effect humour has on work output.

The idea arose in part from her experience in public and private schools where she often heard teachers describe a school as having no humour, with the advice: "Don't go there."

"I did expect before I began the research that if a workplace was more fun than a labour camp, people would get more from it. And that is what I found: the more positive the humour climate in a workplace, the greater the job satisfaction of employees. In fact, personality and mood, combined with the use of humour, explained more than 40% of the workers' job satisfaction."

Ms Rawlings began the project by asking a sample of 100 Australians whether the way they used humour at work was different from the way they did with their families. Almost half the respondents said they were more careful with humour at work out of concern for others, 20% said their use of humour was no different and 21% said they used humour to get their own way at work.

This was followed by a further survey of 350 workers in 23 countries about how they used humour in the workplace and how they perceived the humour used by colleagues. Two factors came out of an analysis of the results, one indicating a pleasant climate to work in and the other an unpleasant climate.

Ms Rawlings then prepared a "humour at work" or HAW scale that combined measures of personality, altruism and "impression management", or lying, with measures of job satisfaction, climate of fear and predictors of productivity.

More than 400 Australian workers responded to a further survey. Statistical calculations showed the HAW scale itself contained two scales. One was labelled "pleasant climate" and the other "unpleasant climate"; items about people sharing humour with others made up the first while the "unpleasant climate" scale was about using humour in a negative way with others.

Ms Rawlings says there were no differences between men and women in the way they answered the scales, between the tertiary-educated or those with a secondary education, or between managers and employees.

"People who scored high on the unpleasant climate scale, who saw others at work using humour for nasty reasons, also had low scores for job satisfaction and productivity predictors, and high scores on climate of fear," Ms Rawlings says.

The findings contradicted the misconception that people who enjoy themselves and make jokes in the workplace are not as productive.

"People often complain there is no time for humour, and that being humorous is not appreciated," she says. "But research shows a strong association between job satisfaction and performance. So if humour makes people satisfied in their job, it should definitely be encouraged."