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# Being creative as identity creation

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## Abstract

This paper examines the common notion that an avoidance of hierarchies and structures combined with a promotion of an atmosphere of fun and play will make creativity and innovation prosper. Based on an ethnographic study, this paper takes a critical look at social processes and the organizational logic that seemed to be at play in a culture of “fun and freedom” of an IT company. The study problematizes and points at the fragility of the recipe fun & freedom = creativity & motivation, by emphasising that fun and freedom might not be the basic elements in this equation as it first might seem. Instead the importance of considering processes of identity work and management of meaning is highlighted.

Keywords: Creative work, identity work, management of meaning, fun

## Introduction

Creativity is a very popular concept nowadays in the business community. The popularity can be related to the argument that creativity is needed in order to achieve innovation, which is important in order to deal with increasing international competitive pressures (Jeffcutt & Pratt, 2002:2225). Initially creativity was studied primarily as an individual factor, but later on contextual factors have been brought into the analysis (Drazin et al, 1999:286), and numerous studies searching for factors leading to increased creativity have been presented in management journals. Within the literature, a functionalistic perspective is dominant (Brown et al, 2010; Drazin et al, 1999).

Research on creativity and management is in other words primarily about how creative workers should be managed in order to use their innovative potential. A recurring recipe is to avoid hierarchies and limiting structures and promote an atmosphere of fun and play in order

to let creativity and innovation prosper (Brown et al 2010; Costea et al, 2007, Fleming, 2005). However often shallow, overwhelming positive images are given, where issues of power and control are not mentioned (Brown et al, 2010). This new way of organizing is often presented as a win-win situation for employees and employers, the creative worker might even be portrayed as the hero, “occupy informal, free-wheeling organizations” (p. 540).

This paper takes a closer and more critical look at the suggested casual relationship: that absence of structures and an atmosphere of fun and play lead to creativity and innovation. It is done by analysing happenings in an IT-firm, which at least at a first glance, could be seen as a great example of an organization functioning according to the fun+freedom=creativity recipe: There were no limiting hierarchical structures, instead workers enjoyed great freedom in their work (they could freely decide what projects to work with, what computer language to use, when to work, how to structure the work etc), the managers encouraged the workers to play and have fun, and the workers seemed extremely motivated if not to say dedicated to their work and managed to accomplish creative and successful solutions.

Fleming (2005:298) discusses a key problem in managerial created fun cultures, namely that employees can react in a cynic way when not seeing the fun as authentic and states that “[i]t is not surprising then that much past research has demonstrated how some of the most authentically fun workplaces are the ones that workers create themselves, independent of and often against management”. This study discusses a case where it all seemed to work (at least initially), i.e. a case where the fun seemed to be perceived as authentic. A driving question is therefore how did this work? Going beyond what Ford refer to the romance of creativity; that is that “‘great women and men’ (mostly men unfortunately) are operating in isolation from all external forces and expectations” (Styhre & Sundgren, 2005:216), this paper takes a critical look at social processes and the organizational logic that seemed to be in play in a culture of ‘freedom & fun’.

To search for general causal relationships, as have been made to a great extent within the creativity literature, is problematic because it assumes that all people are alike and respond to factors in the same way (Dranzin et al, 1999) and the interpretative dimension is neglected. My intention with this analysis is not to suggest any casual relationship or to provide managers tools for tapping some innovative potential of their workers. The purpose with the paper is rather to promote a deeper understanding of the social dynamics that might come to

influence creativity and innovation within an organisation. The study is in other words descriptive rather than prescriptive.

### On creativity and identity

There is a common notion in the prescriptive, practitioner-oriented literature that organizations need to be playful and encourage fun in order to succeed (see for instance Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters, 1999; Nordström & Ridderstråhle, 1999). Fleming (2005:286) points out that, “perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the notion of fun cultures appears to have outlasted the typically brief management fad life cycle”. Costea et al (2007), in their historical analysis, even talk about a new ethos of work where “having fun” has a central place based on the idea that “productivity follows naturally from an overflow of personal well-being” (p. 286). Another common argument is that playful and fun workplaces “unleash the imagination and energy of its people” (Peters, 1999). According to Nordström & Ridderstråhle (1999) hierarchies should be “replaced with playgrounds” in order to attract employees in the future. It is the underlying assumption – that fun & freedom leads to motivation and creativity – that I am going to critically examine in this paper. But first I will describe what research studies have been done in this area and position my study among these.

A common repeated notion in the literature is that creativity and management are oxymoronic (Jeffcut & Brown, 2002:227). A basic message is that creative work is inherent spontaneous, unpredictable and does not follow any strict rules why it, by definition, is impossible to manage and control (deFillippi et al, 2007:511). Eikhof & Haunschild (2007:526) elaborates on this tension in their study of theatres by introducing Bourdieu’s notion of different logics of practice. To be more precise, they discuss the artistic and economic logic of practice, and contrast their primary drivers: the artistic logic of practice is driven by a desire to produce art for art’s sake and the intention of the economic logic is to exchange the output on a market. They alert us on that “[a]ny activity related to managing and marketing artistic practices [...] endangers the very resources required for the production of art: artistic logic, the motivation to produce *l’art pour l’art*” (Eikhof & Haunschild, 2007:533) and argue that a similar work ethos and therefore a similar paradox can arise in other industries as well, particularly in knowledge intensive ones where the workers care for their product.

In the literature on knowledge-intensive company there is a related argument made: that knowledge intensive workers tend to expect a large degree of autonomy (Alvesson, 2004:28f)

and that traditional managerial practices are met with suspicion and are considered as obtrusive. To handle this and the fact that knowledge intensive work process and outputs often are unknown which disqualifies other control mechanisms (Ouchi, 1980), indirect, i.e. normative control becomes an important element, including identity regulation (c.f. Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Lately researchers have approached and highlighted normative control and identity regulation as important elements in managing creative work. For instance have Brown et al (2010) brought up the motivational dilemma that might arise when architects are supposed to work in a bureaucratic environment with sometimes rather mundane tasks when they at the same time consider themselves as free, creative artists. The authors emphasize the power dimension and show how management (and subordinates as well) created and reproduced a “culture of celebratory creativity” (Brown et al, 2010: 541), a construction that made it possible for the architects in the study to identify themselves as “a community of expressive artists, architectural heroes” (p. 543) even if their daily work could be rather mundane. Gotsi et al (2010) in their turn, elaborate on how creative workers could be managed and suggest in a normative tone that identity regulations (more specifically engaging creative workers in internalizing the “practical artist” identity) can support creative workers to cope with their tensions. Even if these studies are different in their nature, they both highlight (a) that identity constructions might play an important role in motivating creative workers and (b) that management can influence the formation of these.

What these studies do is that they primarily treat the assumed need for creative freedom as a discursive construct, which is informing how creative workers view themselves and in turn how they view their work. An important task of managers subsequently becomes to manage the expectations of the workers and their meanings of work and/or their identities. Thereby are these authors strongly arguing against the idea that creativity cannot be managed, as suggested by for instance Lampel et al (2000).

This study is founded upon a similar standpoint. Based on identity theory as a main analytical framework, I examine creative workers’ understandings of themselves and their work practices in order to expand our knowledge of what drives and motivates creative production. This does not mean that actual work practices are not important (as Costa & Kärreman (2011) point out); as will be shown later work practices at the company studied (among other things)

were used as identity material, and minor changes in work practices had large impacts on identity work performance and in turn the creative outcomes. However the work practices are not the main targets of investigation here.

Identity theory has been used in a broad range of studies, in technical/functionalist as well as interpretative and emancipatory/critical studies (Alvesson et al, 2008). In this paper identity theory is mainly used as an interpretative perspective aiming at understanding organizational phenomena. Furthermore, identity is viewed as an accomplishment (cf. Collinson, 2003; Gioia et al, 2000; Kondo, 1990); as something that needs to be produced and reproduced rather than considering identities as something established and permanent that people have. In doing that, identity *work*, i.e. the process in which identities are created and presented, becomes interesting and important to consider (Collinson, 2003; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Ybema et al, 2009). In order to maintain a certain identity, people usually need some kind of verification (cf. Down and Reveley, 2009; Hatch and Schultz, 2002). Following this thought, identity work is not only about convincing oneself, it is about making the identity credible for significant others as well.

When identity work is performed, identity material is needed. Alvesson & Willmott (2002:626) refer to this as “cultural raw material” and suggest that it can be “language, symbols, sets of meanings, values etc” which are drawn from interactions with others in various situations and contexts, messages produced and distributed by mass media and other sources, as well as earlier experiences in life and unconscious processes. My standpoint in this matter is that identity material can be used from all sorts of sources: history, happenings in life or in dreams or even fantasies (c.f. Castells, 1997:7, Svensson, 2004:25). The crucial criterion at the end is about trustworthiness; is the construction made credible for oneself and one’s audience?

## Method

This paper draws on empirical material from an ethnographically inspired study of an IT-company, Technocom AB (a pseudonym), carried out January 2000 to November 2001.

I have worked with an open and emergent approach (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) and inspired by Asplund (2007) my ambition have been to search for interesting empirical phenomena that would problematize existing knowledge and promote new ways of thinking (cf. Alvesson &

Kärreman, 2007). A theme that caught my interest (in addition to the reorganization discussed in Sörgärde, 2006) was what I initially understood as a widespread notion that technology and the fun of it were more important than profits among programmers as well as managers. It surprised me that this kind of seemingly anti-business attitude had such a strong hold. Particularly I noticed that people within this organisation kept coming back to the issue of “having fun” and that it was used as an important decision criterion. There were people, some project leaders and managers, that were complaining that this was the case (and looking down upon this way of reasoning), but they were a minority. Considering research suggesting that manufactured cultures of fun often are not considered authentic, the plot thickens: What made it work here? Did it work? If so, in what way?

Inspired by ethnography (Geertz, 1973/2000; Prasad, 1997) it has been my ambition to interpret and understand the organization members’ (the natives’) points of view: What is going on here? How can we understand this? What does it mean (to have fun) from their perspective? In order to get a rich understanding of their world view(s), I have tried to come as close to the field as possible without participating in their working practices. Practically it meant having an office space at the company for one year (which I used on average 2–3 days a week), which made it possible and natural for me to join informal gatherings such as lunches, coffee breaks and parties and meetings announced on a short notice (which was not uncommon). The managers who gave me access and arranged for my study were very favourably inclined towards my study, which made this possible. This is important empirical data as well, because it indicates, combined with the fact that they often talked about how special the company was, that they were interested in having their ‘success story’ documented.

In total I have conducted 44 semi-structured interviews and had numerous informal discussions with organization members in different roles in the organisation. In addition I have observed general corporate meetings, studied internal documents, newspaper articles about the company and virtual conversations (email conversations). Most interviews have been taped and later transcribed. In situations when it was inappropriate to tape, written notes were taken which later was turned into clean copies. All interviews have been conducted in Swedish. Quotes used in this article have therefore been translated. In addition, field notes of informal meetings and conversations have been written on a daily basis. Excerpts from those are presented without citation marks.

The empirical study was made at a time when managers valuing more traditional bureaucratic principles started to enter the picture and ‘ruined it all’ (which I did not now when I started the study but which I pretty soon realized). This confrontation was interesting because it in a way facilitated the cultural study in the sense that deeply held basic assumptions and values that otherwise might have been remain hidden suddenly became the topic of the day. Furthermore the reactions and the meanings ascribed to the deconstruction of the former organizational logic done by the newly recruited managers, could be seen as indicators of the importance of various elements of the original organizational logic.

### **Introducing the case**

Technocom AB (TC) is a Swedish IT company. Initially their business consisted of providing e-commerce solutions for newly started dot-com companies and conventional companies that wanted to establish their business on-line. Over time their business idea expanded to also include developing different kinds of business system for multinational companies.

These activities can be traced back to a youth centre where Rolf Petersson, the person who later founded TC, worked. The centre had a particular focus on creating web pages and held courses for those who were interested. Soon their services were requested from companies as well, and the activities became too business-like to continue as a youth centre.

When I started my study, the company had been in business for four years and been through a considerable expansion. Initially only “full time nerds; people who both work with computers and have it as their hobby at home” were recruited, according to the founder. But after a couple of years also people with more distance to the job were employed. By the time of my study the original four programmers had turned into 170 employees in various roles (in addition to programmers, project leaders, managers and sales, marketing and administrative personnel) working at four different sites in Sweden. In spite of this development, it seemed as if the spirit that characterized the company in its first years – where technology and the fun of it was valued more highly than profits – still lingered in many ways. For many of the employees, TC was as a special company mainly consisting of professional, knowing technicians; an organisation where freedom, playfulness and an absence of hierarchy were highly valued, even close to sacred (Gagliardi, 1986).



## A company of fun and freedom

Taking a closer look at the company from the perspective of the organizational members, three notions kept coming up (directly or indirectly), when they described and talked about it, often accompanied with the clarification that TC was a special company:

1. This is not a hierarchical company
2. This is a company of the employees
3. It should be fun to work at TC

These ideas seemed to be reproduced by managers as well as by employees. Starting with the first element, the founder describes TC as a special company where the best argument always won, not the manager's. A common notion among the programmers were that this was an organisation **freed from hierarchical structures** that are common elsewhere:

[There] is a corporate culture here that is not like the typical consultancy company or the typical computer company. There are not any IBM-ties or an enormous hierarchy with loads of middle managers. (Tom, programmer)

Another recurring notion was that people at TC treated each other as equals and with friendship. "We are there for each other", the programmer Ralf explains and says that "I do not work here for a brand, I work here for the other workers at TC".

Perceptions of friendship and community were also related to the second notion, that TC was a **company of the employees** where managers weren't allowed to decide things over their heads. TC was described as an antithesis to traditional companies driven by managers and business logic:

[...] we, who started it all, we did it out of love for the technology [...] none of us have studied at Handels (a business school in Sweden) for three years". (Rolf, founder)

A common notion was that the employees were in charge since they were the [moral] owners of the company:

If I had started working at Global AB as an anonymous developer... [my attitude would have been:] "Alright, this is a large company, and the company is already established with its rules and structures and I accept that when taking an employment here". The difference is that at TC – this is supposed to be some kind of democracy [since] we built the company and therefore we should have much more to say. (Adam, programmer)

Particularly this concerned the main office:

[T]hese in B-city, they are in a certain way. [...] Ove [the office manager], he was there first, and those employed after must accept that the managers are in charge there. Down here we have built it all. (Ralf, programmer)

The invention *Employee of the Week* can be seen as another element cherishing the notion that TC was not a conventional company and that the workers there were definitely not traditional nine-to-fivers controlled by managers. Employee of the week was an announcement at the introduction page of the Intranet, a feature that was developed and installed solely in order to make fun of the managerialistic idea. The irony in it was that a computer program randomly chose a person and pronounced him or her as the employee of the week. At times when it so happened that a person on vacation was chosen, it was pure entertainment.

Going on with the third notion – that **it should be fun to work** at TC – organizational members referred back to an early saying of the founder in order to legitimize the claim: It should be fun to work at TC, and when it is not fun anymore we will not continue doing it. “To have fun” seemed to be an important, and accepted, criterion for how work ought to be structured and performed. For instance a programmer argued against a structured working process with the following statement: “of course one wants to finish in time, but one does not want to sacrifice everything” and explains that if the work is too structured (and the freedom is restricted) it is not fun anymore.

Significant for this having fun-orientation was among other things the “Useless contest”; a contest that was all about developing a short, but ingenious, computer program, that was of no use. One of the programmers told me that the activity of producing useless programs was spread within computer societies and that programmers from TC have excelled in this matter. Internally at the company two such competitions have been arranged (by management) and they have been popular among the programmers.

TC could along this line of reasoning be described as a “culture of fun” where traditional boundaries between work and non-work have been blurred (cf Fleming, 2005). Other indicators of this boundary blurring can be seen in the furnishing of the main office building, which supports a hobby oriented spirit: it had a rehearsal studio, a photo lab, a gym, showers and a sauna in the basement and a ‘bar’ at the top floor with cosy chairs and sofas, a pin ball machine and a disco mirror ball. In addition, a number of leisure time activities such as movie nights and poker tournaments were arranged at the company after working hours.

Interestingly enough the culture of fun at TC seemed to be seen as authentic by the employees. As they saw it, this was a very attractive workplace and many workers said that they were proud of working there. Above all, the motivation to work hard and deliver seems to be very high. Consider for instance the following email:

From:	Fredrik [Fredrik@TC.se]
Sent:	March 3, 2000 02:16 am
To:	Internalmailinglist@TC.se
Subject:	RELEASE!!

Yep,

In hardly any time and with tough prerequisites, we have managed to finish the Z-site, which is the first step in project Y.

Thank you all who have contributed even though you have had your own projects to run. And MEGA SPECIAL SUPER TURBO X-3003 ULTRAKICKING NINJA AWARDS goes to Magnus for great help!! Thank you!

/Tired Fredrik

p.s.

the url is [http: www.z.y.com](http://www.z.y.com)

d.s.

In addition to showing that people might work late at TC (the email was sent in the middle of the night), the email also illustrates the helping and supporting spirit common at the company and the dedication to work and to deliver what was asked for, even if the conditions were tough.

Furthermore the motivation to acquire more knowledge and to learn new things also seemed very high at TC; this was something programmers did in their spare time. For instance Klas told me that as soon as he got home he sat down and read about computers and downloaded new programs in order to test them, and continues by explaining that this was not unusual among the programmers:

When they go home at nights they read about programming languages and new developments in areas they are working with, just because it is fun. I do not think that they think that it has to do with work – they just do it. They go home and want to relax

and read about something fun and then they sit down and surf on their own and look up the kind of news that they can use at work. (Klas, programmer)

Looking at what TC managed to accomplish indicates that the organizational principles worked well: In an industry in its infancy, TC was able to deliver innovative/avant-garde applications (they received a number of awards for their work) and creative solutions to ‘impossible problems’; in the industry TC was known as a company that manage to provide a solution when everyone else failed. In sum then, TC could be seen as an example of that the magic formula fun+freedom=motivation & creativity works.

The question is then – how did this work? What organizing elements were in play here, and what made it work/not work? In order to answer these questions, I will continue the ethnographic quest and the endeavour to describe the natives’ point of view, but pay particular attention to sensemaking and identity construction processes.

### Meanings of having fun

A common sense oriented way of understand what it means to have fun is to relate it to play. Framing behaviours as play and motivations as hedonistic would stress the absence of further intensions with the actions, since play usually is understood as autotelic: as an activity people engage in for its own sake, i.e. an activity without any use (Asplund, 1987:55ff; Statler et al, 2009). This would however conceal an important organizational element at TC. Instead, having fun, as I will argue below, could be related to achievement (and a pursuit to receive a positive response of what one have accomplished):

What makes me happy at work [...] is technical challenges – it is really fun to get more money in the pocket, of course, but it is not the main [motivator]. (Krister)

A fun project...if you are getting something to get one’s teeth into [and] you need to come up with new ingenious solutions to things. If you only should do a standard site again, like the last ten ones, it is not so fun, but if the customer alone is having this problem and we need to find a way to solve it to make them happy...that is fun. (Jens)

And the developer Tom put it like this when he described his job:

It is fun! It is a very creative work. *In what way?* You are free to find out [solutions] by yourself.

In contrast, *not* achieving anything apart from the work that has been done, was rather considered boring:

[T]o sit and correct bugs, which I have done for half a year before, is a routine job really[...]. It is pretty boring after a while. For a while it is fun. Because it is fun when you are learning the system. But after a while there is not much more to learn and [...] then it isn't so rewarding anymore. (Tom)

Or even unworthy:

No competent developer wants to work with that [technical support, i.e. correcting bugs]!  
(Fredrik, talking to colleagues at a coffee break)

Working after a pre-made template is “deadly boring” Pontus explained, and continued:

Or not *deadly* boring, but *really* boring, because it means: I should do this, I should do this... I do not need to think, I should just do it. And that isn't fun work.

Furthermore, particularly technical work was considered fun; different kinds of administration and documentation were described as “deadly dull”. One programmer told me that documenting was hard for him “emotionally” and described the phenomena as a “programmer-cultural-barrier”.

To sum up, the quotes indicates that getting a difficult technical problem to solve, which was challenging and required a lot of mental activity, was considered fun. The quote from Jens furthermore indicates the importance of breaking new ground in order for work to be fun, i.e. to solve a new and unique problem in a creative way (“to come up with new ingenious solutions”),

This in turn could be interpreted in terms of identity work: to have fun might not solely have to do with the work task in it self, it could also be seen as a matter of constructing themselves and their occupational group. Particularly this could be seen in the quotes stating what was boring: documentation goes against the soul of programmers (it is a “programmer-cultural-barrier”) and to work with simple, routine tasks that are easy to perform were considered unworthy a competent developer (“no competent developer wants to work with that!”). In other words, they did not want to work with a certain kind of tasks – boring tasks – because they were not aligned with the identity projects they were pursuing and therefore activities that they did not want to be associated with. The programmers even had a term for their alterity (Czarniawska, 2002), namely the *code slave*, i.e. “a stupid person who is primarily supposed to sit and write on a paper what is already given. And that is a boring role” as Pontus among others put it.

This way of understanding what having fun might mean to the programmers makes even more sense considering the hierarchy/ies of the company.

### Discussion I: Fun & freedom as an organizing principle

On the one hand, TC could be described as a company with few hierarchical levels, at least if looking at their formal organizational chart. Under the CEO there were a handful of managers responsible for a particular function in the company (sales, development, project management etc). Furthermore the formal hierarchy was strongly downplayed, for instance did programmers describe managers and project managers as administrators; people engaged to make sure that the programmers could work uninterrupted.

On the other hand, another, informal technical hierarchy, seemed to be at play and of importance. For instance, experienced and skilled programmers were considered prominent figures: “Gods of programming” or “super knowledgeable technicians”. This understanding has strong support in the broader developer communities. For instance it is in line with a section in the “hacker ethic” described by Levy (1984:43): “hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degree, age, race or position”. Following this line of reasoning, a possibly more instructive way of understanding the situation is to consider the importance of and interest in doing “fun things” – that is producing ingenious technical solutions to novel and difficult technical problems – as a quest for positioning yourself in this hierarchy. Let me explain this a bit more in detail.

Bringing together the importance and local meaning of having fun with the notion of the technical hierarchy, motivation to be creative and solve complicated technical problems could be understood in terms of identity work. The accomplishment could namely from this perspective be seen as an opportunity to show yourself and your capabilities in public which in turn could be seen as a good opportunity to reproduce the sense of oneself as a skilled developer, raise your status and advance in the informal technical hierarchy. Being creative could therefore, in this case, be understood as a *mean* for employees – a mean supporting their identity work – or even as a *subsidiary effect* of identity creation.

This framing explains the aversion for simple tasks: Working with routine tasks impresses no one, why it becomes useless as identity material. Furthermore, working with things you know

already would not improve your technical skills, why this kind of task is something of a dead end from a status perspective. In addition, you might need to make sure to avoid being associated with the lowest position in the hierarchy, the code slave; “a stupid person” who did not think by him/herself.

Considering this impact of and interest in working on one’s position in the informal technical hierarchy, identity work appears as an important organizing principle in the company, particularly when it came to issues of motivation to perform creative acts. In addition to explain the interest in creating innovative solutions it could also explain the eagerness to constantly learn new things (which was something the programmers did at their spare time): In order to stay on a top position in the hierarchy one could not rely on a formal position, but instead one had to keep up to date with the latest within the field. And the knowledge acquired could be used to show off within a project, in a useless competition, by helping others or by giving lectures to colleagues (all which where activities encouraged by managers).

From this perspective, the interest in “having fun” is infused with meaning and purpose – to reproduce certain self-understandings and if possible, increase one’s status – and therefor far from autotelic play. Glimpses from other studies indicate that this phenomenon is not restricted to this particular case. For instance is a similar interest and demand for fun working tasks reported in other studies of IT companies (cf. Strannegård & Friberg, 2001; Mouritsen & Kreiner, 2003) and the broader category of professional service workers (Lowendahl, 1997). Furthermore are Sutton & Hargadon (1996) discussing brainstorming sessions as “important (and efficient) means through which competition for status based on technical skill occurs between engineers”.

### **A fragile construction: When it was not fun anymore**

The story of creativity at TC does however not end there. After some years things started to change in the company and the magic spell seemed to have lost its power. In one occasions after the other it proved not to work. Such as when the Useless competition was arranged for the third time and no one participated. It is therefor premature to conclude that the identity work of the programmers was the only key social process organizing the creative work.

The story continues when some of the customers of the company (dotcom companies) went into bankruptcy and TC started to get financial problems and the Useless contest was arranged for the third time. At this time, the managers had declared that the solution also could be a new business idea for the company. However, no one participated. A senior developer explained his view and the reason why others with him did not participate:

Why should I spend my time on this? They said that it also could be a business idea, so it felt a bit too business like in contrast to the earlier ones when it all just was a fun activity. So we did not think it was that fun. (Krister)

Elaborating on this development gives an opportunity to get insights into the previous order, when the recipe ‘worked’. In other words, by discussing happenings that made it *not* work, we can get insights into critical elements that made it work. So what made Useless\_1 and 2 so interesting and Useless\_3 uninteresting for the programmers? This knowledge could in turn be useful input to further elaboration on the idea that creative acts could be seen as means deployed in identity creations.

Analysing what is expressed by Krister in the quote above, a main argument not to participate was that “it felt a bit too business like” and thereby not fun. So the business element somehow took the fun out of it, which would have made perfectly sense if we had considered the competition solely as play, i.e. as an activity without purpose; or as the label actually indicates: useless. However, going beyond this framing, and considering the competition as highly useful when it comes to reproducing an informal technical hierarchy, puts the situation in a different light. Based on the knowledge that programmers at TC enjoyed producing unique and ingenious solutions in their work in order to impress others, one could imagine that the additional prerequisite of Useless\_3 (that the winning solution could be used as a future business idea) could have been an even stronger motivator for them. Since if winning, their work would be spread in a larger scale and known to a larger group of people (and in turn possibly proving one’s capabilities for many more). But it turned out to have the opposite effect.

What the happenings indicate therefor is that having fun, i.e. showing that you are creative and talented, was not always interesting for the workers. Identity work is in other words not the only key element in play here, why we should not think of this finding as a casual relationship; it is not a question of people reacting at a certain stimuli in a predetermined way.



This in turn indicates that these processes not necessarily are manageable (as the managers at TC seem to have thought). It is important to consider that identity work is not something that people necessarily do regularly and predictable. It all depends. Among other things it depends on the need to perform identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), and it depends on available identity material.

In addition to this, the happenings also could be used to show how the Useless competition, as an arena for status hunting and identity work, became uninteresting as soon as it became too associated with business. One interpretation of this is that the symbolic value of business in a sense eroded or overshadowed the value of presenting brilliant work and showing off one's programming skills, since another important dimension in the identity work of the programmers were to disassociate themselves from business and to maintain an anti-business attitude. In fact the very idea of Useless could be understood as a rebellion move against a business orientation that otherwise capitalized on their work; as a way to prove their independency (as a group, in relation to managers) in a symbolic way: i.e. 'this time we are using our talent solely for our own purposes and you cannot exploit it'.

Another interpretation is that the Useless competition was used as a key symbol (REF) by the programmers, reproducing the notion of TC as a company of the employees. It could actually be seen as one of the last few remaining symbols that could indicate that this really was a special company, why it becomes understandable if they did not want to contribute to it being hijacked.

In sum then, this analyses shows that (a) performing creative acts could be seen as one opportunity for programmers to work on their identity, since it innovate computer programs could be considered highly charged identity material. But if either alternative possibilities to claim and reproduce a certain identity would arise, or if the act would become associated with something undermining the identity claim that they are aiming to make, the motivation to be creative would fall. Furthermore it shows that (b) identity work might not be the only key element in play here. This idea will be elaborated on below.

## **Discussion II: Free, autonomous workers?**

The analysis so far points in the direction that creative workers cannot be controlled and that managerial invention might ruin their motivation to work. However, then an important

dimension is overlooked. Until now I have primarily talked about identity work as an important organizing element. What however not have been discussed are the underlying meanings that might facilitate this process. As I will show it can be argued that the reproduction of certain basic understandings about the company and its business, of which managers possibly influence some, is a fundamental element as well. The importance of certain understandings of the company became particularly evident when these social constructions of the company fell.

Along this line of reasoning, the happenings at TC could be interpreted as punctured or even broken sensemaking. Modifying the prerequisites for the useless competition was namely not the only move that the managers had been doing lately that did contradict the understanding of the company. To mention a few others: An additional managerial level was set up, standardized working hours were implemented and more strict rules for reporting time/work were introduced which made it problematic to report a quarter of an hour of work consisting of helping a colleague. Even the employee-of-the-week-invention was hijacked and turned into the real thing. The background to this was not that mysterious, and in a sense it was just a matter of time for the sensemaking-bubble to crack: Lately managers advocating more traditional, bureaucratic management practices had been employed and other, much more critical voices about how the company was ran was being heard. For instance did the newly recruited COO describe the production department as chaotic, uncontrollable, and used words like “total anarchy” when talking about how it worked. From their perspective, the programmers advocating the have fun-logic at the company were naïve and had not understood fundamental business principles; they were narrow-minded and selfish and did not care for the company as a whole – they just wanted to play. In other words, they did not seem interested in maintaining a culture of fun and freedom.

Realizing that TC was not a special company after all, a more distanced and sometimes cynical stance towards the company was taken, and the Old TC was mourned. Tom describes his view of the development of the company by referring to Orwell:

TC started off as a small revolutionary company almost. It was a bunch of people who thought that this was damn fun and therefor they did it. And then you happened to make money on it and that was splendid. And then others were employed because you had plenty to do. Then, swish, and you have become a company with a management that is like an undefined grey mass. [...] Initially it was said that ties are banned at TC damn it,

we should not have that style. We should be here because it is fun and [we should be] happy and nice and such, and then one *still* ends up in a company where there are people in ties that decide, that are not a part of the company. [...] It is a bit like these pigs suddenly showing that they have taken over the company and you are back where you started. [Rhythmical and gently banging his fist in the table in front of him when speaking:] The people starting this [company], started it because they did-not-want to have a company such as the one that we are having now. (Tom, Programmer)

Not surprisingly the gradual changes were met with huge protests, but after a while, after realizing the futility of their actions, the programmers did not raise their voices that frequently. And the former sense was broken, followed by a marked downturn in interest and eager to dedicate yourself to the work. Some of the most apparent effects were that some key programmers left and that people started to ask for further training (which had been done in their spare time previously).

What this case then shows is that a culture of freedom and fun, even if only symbolically reproduced, was an important organizing element at TC. As Fleming (2005) writes, managerial cultures of fun often are not seen as authentic, and do therefore involve a risk of backfiring and create cynicism. But what TC managed to accomplish (during at least the initial four years) was extended normative control: by reproducing a complementary culture of ownership and freedom, a trustworthy background to the culture of fun was achieved. Instead of primarily seeing the programmers as autonomous and possibly egocentric youths, they could from this perspective be seen as subjects to rather rigorous normative control and identity regulation; intentionally or not, and by managers and peers (voluntarist sensemaking, cf Brown et al 2010:542). Following this line of reasoning the programmers worked in a business-oriented company, but they had the impression that they where not, due to successful management of meaning (cf Rosen, 1985) which reproduced a spirit very close to the hacker etic on a symbolic level.

Perhaps unexpectedly then, the new managers, and their introduction of more bureaucratic organization principles, could be seen as liberators, freeing the workers from being exploited by breaking their understanding of TC as a special company of and for the programmers which they strongly identified themselves with.

## Conclusions

This study highlights the importance of two social processes that could fuel an organizational logic promoting creativity and innovation: (a) identity work – being creative could be seen as a mean for identity production, and (b) sensemaking/management of meaning – reproducing the notion of the company as ‘the company of the employees’ could make the ‘culture of fun’ trustworthy.

These findings in turn problematize and point at the fragility of the recipe: fun & freedom = creativity and motivation, by emphasising that fun and freedom might not be the basic elements in this equation as it first might seem. Instead having fun might have to do with identity constructions (and therefor turning out to be a complex and ambiguous process) and freedom could be understood at a symbolic level.

The findings also give insights into possibilities and limitations to manage creative work: Firstly it adds to the stream of research that challenges the romantic view that creative workers cannot be controlled, by highlighting the presence of normative control. Secondly, by highlighting the element of identity work, it points both to possibilities to influence this process (by identity regulation), but also at the difficulty to predict and therefore manage, how and when employees will engage in identity constructing activities. Thirdly this study raises ethical questions about different management ideologies: should workers in a culture of fun and freedom be seen as being selfish or exploited?

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