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No Fun at All

When did life in IT get so darn dreary, and what can you do about it?

Matthew Hamblen [Today's Top Stories](#) or [Other IT Management Stories](#)

December 19, 2005 (Computerworld) -- Have you heard the one about the CIO who made work so much fun that the IT staff actually wanted to show up every day? Well, it's no joke. In fact, rising above the deadly seriousness that pervades many IT shops these days are several CIOs who are veteran fun-makers. They say their shenanigans have improved morale, retention and, by golly, even the IT services they offer and the businesses they serve.



Dale Sanders, head of IT at Northwestern Medical Faculty Foundation Inc.

If you think life in IT seems distinctly more serious than it was a decade ago, you're not alone. David Horth, a consultant at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, N.C., blames the lack of levity on the widely held perception that "being busy equals good work." But quite the opposite is true, he says. Others blame it on the recession that dragged on too long or even the lingering pain of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. But Dale Sanders, a CIO devoted to bringing fun into the workplace, points to political correctness. "We seem to have washed ourselves clean of the value of diversity in culture and humor," says Sanders, who heads IT at Northwestern Medical Faculty Foundation Inc. in Chicago.

Sanders also cites the fear factor. "There's so much pressure in American culture to improve," he says. "That pressure causes fear, which excludes humor."

There's too much focus on the wrong things, he adds. "Of all the metrics we fret over in business these days, the most important is the laugh metric," Sanders says. "You can predict the outcome of a business by observing the number of times people laugh in the workplace. You can predict a successful business if you can hear heartfelt laughter 10 to 12 times a day."



John Wade, CIO at Saint Luke's Health System Inc.

Sanders says he has "an obligation as a leader to add some value to people's lives." One way to do that, he says, is through humor. "If people are laughing here at work, they will take it home to their husbands and wives," Sanders adds. "You can make life nightmarish for people -- or meaningful."

Other IT leaders feel the same way, and they say their efforts have made a difference. John Wade, CIO at Saint Luke's Health System Inc. in Kansas City, Mo., suspects that his efforts to make work fun for the IT staff are responsible for holding the turnover rate among his staffers to about 3% over his lifetime as a manager.

And Michael Carper, divisional vice president of technology operations at retailer Coldwater Creek Inc. in Sandpoint, Idaho, says lightening up the workplace has "absolutely" made a difference. Part of that difference may be loyalty. Carper says that a handful of people who work for him now have moved with him from company to company. "They come from San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, Indianapolis, Atlanta and other places to work on my team because this is a fun and rewarding team to work on," Carper says.



Michael Carper, divisional vice president of technology operations at Coldwater Creek Inc.

In an environment where there's fun, teamwork flourishes and workers recommend the company to their friends, aiding recruitment efforts, Carper says. Without fun, it's difficult to build the kind of cohesion often required in IT projects, and "you can bet your retention rate is in trouble and you won't be as successful in recruiting team-oriented employees with good customer service skills," he says. David Foote, president of Foote Partners LLC in New Canaan, Conn., studies workplace issues and sees the value of humor. "A sense of humor will get you through just about anything," he says, "because it diffuses political situations, and everybody knows there's a lot of politics and angst when you're working in IT."

So, how do you build fun into an IT shop? "You can't suddenly say your group is starting today to have fun," Sanders says. "It has to be ingrained in the organization, or it won't work."

That means that having a fun workplace starts at the top, he says. To give folks a chuckle, Sanders has posted photos on the intranet of staffers caught in awkward moments installing cables or servers, for instance. Sanders encourages others to add funny (and tasteful) captions.

At St. Luke's, few holidays go by without some kind of party. At one, Wade dressed in drag for a laugh. IT

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employees echo the levity; it's not unusual to see people wear cheese heads or feather headdresses to work. An air of humor pervades Wade's quarterly planning meetings. At one recently, a staffer joked about Wade's reputation for penny-pinching by presenting a mock-up of a \$1 billion bill with Wade's face on it. But it doesn't have to be about belly laughs. Carper makes it clear that his open-door policy allows people to come in and talk about sports, travel or their hobbies as well as work. And Wade encouraged a worker who wanted to form a "get healthy" group that takes walks together and has set up informal basketball games. The cost to the organization was minimal, he notes.

"What does it cost to have some fun? Nothing," Wade says. "But what is the benefit? It's a happier workforce, which means less turnover, which benefits customers."

Want some suggestions for infusing fun into the workday? See [Sidebar: Lighten Up](#).

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