

## Reasons to be Cheerful – Developing your 'FQ'

By Paul Birch

Why do people work for your company? If you haven't asked yourself that question in the past it might be time to ask it now. There will, of course, be a host of explanations. Depending upon the state of the economy it could just be that they're glad of a job, any job. It could be that you pay more than the competition. It could be that you offer challenges which other employers don't. It could simply be inertia.

For some types of staff, the pundits tell us that, once we pull ourselves out of the current troubles there will be a skills shortage in a few years' time. If and when that happens, what can you offer to entice people to continue working for you? If your answer is money alone, then you've as good as lost the battle already. In the market for scarce staff, just as in the market for scarce customers, you need a sustainable source of differentiation. Money isn't it.

My contention is that a key, sustainable source of differentiation in the employment market is fun; providing a workplace which offers employees an enjoyable time. This not only keeps staff but, I'd also argue, gets them to give of their best while they're there. So, what is the Fun Quotient (FQ) of your workplace? Is it one of the most enjoyable firms in the country? Is it one of the least enjoyable? Most probably it is stuck firmly in the middle of the normal curve; a normal curve with a huge degree of clustering around a soggy, dull average with very few exceptions at the sparkling end.

### **"Nobody expected to enjoy work when I were a lad!"**

Surprisingly, I think that this is broadly true. A large number of people today expect work to be satisfying, even fun, but this was probably not the case in our parents' or grandparents' day. What is it that has altered the expectations of our employees and ourselves? Are these expectations reasonable; and, if so, what can we do to meet them?

One source of change is school. Since the inception of child-centred education in primary schools there has been a trend towards all levels and all types of school work being made more attractive to the child. Children who have worked through schools in the last thirty years and moved into work have carried with them an expectation of enjoyment. Not all of the time but at least some of the time.

Another change is the trend towards people-centred employment. There have been many periods of momentous change throughout history. The start of job specialisation in the early days of man, the agrarian revolution which led to farmers being able to support a larger, non-farming

population and the industrial revolution which, amongst other things, created massive centralisation of the workplace.

There are those who argue that we are going through a similar upheaval. I have heard it described as the information revolution. If it exists I would argue that it is actually a communications revolution. The most likely outcome from this revolution is a break up of the centralised workplaces created by the industrial revolution. We are already seeing a trend towards home working and smaller, autonomous businesses. The short term effect in most firms is a move towards small team working with individuals within those teams becoming more important. To be sure this is not a wholesale change. Some types of work are more affected than others. Some firms are further ahead than others. If this is a trend which continues into the future, then individuals will become less tied to individual firms. Creating and maintaining the right teams will involve finding ways of attracting skilled and motivated individuals to work for you on a short term project basis.

In this sort of job market, money may work as a motivation for a short time but it is easily matched. It is an unsustainable form of differentiation. If you accept that fun may be a sustainable form of differentiation and if you accept that making work fun may be or may become an important role of the employer, what can you do about it?

The first thing I would say is to value your people. That's easily done. Just put the ubiquitous phrase "Our people are our greatest asset" into the report and accounts, and you've succeeded. Well, if you believe that all your employees are simpletons who ignore the evidence of their own eyes in favour of propaganda, you've succeeded. In that case you have no need to make work fun because you obviously do not need to employ high performers anyway.

If, on the other hand, you don't think that this will fool people, why bother? If your people are your greatest asset and everything that the management team does or says reinforces this fact, do you think they'll need the report and accounts to tell them how valued they are? If your people are treated as they are in many firms as a fully interchangeable resource with no individual unit value, do you think that a statement in the report and accounts will make them think otherwise?

Accepting that valuing your people may involve more than simply telling them that you do, what can you do about it? I believe that there are three main weapons in the armoury of the firm which really wants to value its people (and for those of you who remember the Spanish Inquisition sketch, those weapons do not include nice red uniforms). They are power, creativity and energy.

### **Power**

By this I mean offering your people choice and power over their destiny. I would have called this empowerment if that term had not been so grossly misused in recent years. Power takes many forms. The ways in which you can give it away can similarly take many forms. One of the simplest is in the structure and organisation of the job. Given that many managers have not performed the

task they are there to manage, what makes them uniquely qualified to say how it should be structured? Granted, they may have experience of other ways of doing things; they may have some academic knowledge which they can bring to bear. Accepting all of this, there is still a huge role for those who are actually performing a task on a day-to-day basis to say how the organisation of that task could be improved.

What about what your people do on a day-to-day basis? Most firms that I have come across put a great deal of effort into measuring the inputs to jobs and surprisingly little effort measuring the outputs. They measure the hours worked. They comment on and notice the early arrivals and the late departures as if this was all it takes to deliver a high class result.

A friend of mine once collected together and managed a team of individuals who were generally regarded as mavericks. They were totally unconcerned about the hours they worked. If there was a need to be at work they would stay at their desk until the job was done. Similarly they might take work home and continue working at a problem until it was solved. These same individuals had generally been written off by their previous managers because they would also disappear in the middle of the day if there was something they would rather be doing elsewhere.

The output of the team which they formed was absolutely unbelievable. They would produce high quality products while others were still conceptualising. The inputs to the team were unpredictable and spasmodic. If the individuals felt that they were needed they would be there and stay there. If not, they would go away. The single most noticeable feature about this group was the laughter which always accompanied any work they did. There was always an atmosphere of fun surrounding their work.

"If you aren't part of the solution, you're part of the problem". As a manager this phrase is worth taking to heart. How much of what you do each day adds to the ability of your people to deliver? If you were to scrap all of the work that did not directly help them, how much of a job would you have? For most managers the answer would be very little. I will use American football as an analogy. How much of your time do you spend in the role of coach? How much of your time do you spend in the role of cheerleader? How much of your time is running interference; getting others out of the way of your players so that they can score a touchdown? All of us tend to think highly of ourselves - why not ask your people? If you really are as good as you think then they will give you a ringing endorsement and will rate you accordingly. If you are worried about the idea of asking them then you might learn something from that worry.

On the subject of asking your people what they think. Do you have ways of collecting anonymous feedback from staff about how they feel about working for you and what would make it better? If you do, how much effort do you put into fixing the things which aren't right? It seems to me that there are two prevalent attitudes around the idea of staff feedback. The first is that if you give an opportunity to whinge then everybody will take it and you will get a stream of useless, petty complaints. The second is that the feedback process itself is all that is required in that it gives people a chance to let off steam. To the first of these, if you have such a low opinion of your people

that you do not think them capable of giving useful feedback then you can be pretty sure that the opinion is reciprocated and they think that you are a bit of a jerk. To the second, there is nothing more frustrating than being asked your opinion and then having it ignored. This is probably worse than not asking in the first place.

## **Creativity**

I make no secret of the fact that creativity in business is an obsession of mine. I've written books on the subject and spend a great deal of my working life striving to increase the level of creativity in British business. My obsession with the area, stems from the fact that I think this is one of the largest opportunities for any company to improve their business performance. Increase the creativity of your individual staff, the teams they work in and, ultimately, your whole organisation and you will have a recipe for business success. You are unlikely to predict the form that success will take. You may even end up in a different business to the one you started in. You will certainly feel that you are not fully controlling things, but you will be successful.

A spin-off which you will find from establishing a creative organisation is that the people who work in it enjoy themselves. The FQ rises inexorably.

## **Energy**

Have you ever stepped into a workplace which buzzes with energy? The energy of the human spirit is one of our greatest natural resources and most companies succeed in suppressing it, crushing it, or, more commonly, allowing it to dissipate freely into the atmosphere. Getting energy from your people is like getting water from a well. The pump must be primed. You will get no energy out unless you put some in. If you want people to work with energy and enthusiasm on a project then you must inject energy and enthusiasm at the start. This is not a question of playing the part well. If you do not really feel enthusiastic about a project then forget it. You will not be able to sustain a false sense of enthusiasm. Nobody is that good an actor over a long period of time. Mind you, if you are not enthusiastic about it, ask yourself how much fun you are going to get from working on it. Why should you expect others to have fun, to be motivated, to give of their best when you will not be able to?

## **Summary**

In summary, I would urge you to look at your firm. What is its FQ? I have not yet developed an instrument to measure this, but the idea has real appeal! My guess is that you could easily rate business, subjectively, just by getting a feel for a few other places of work. On the whole I think that there is not a lot to choose between British businesses. They are, as I said earlier, distributed without much spread around a soggy average which is neither terminally dull nor scintillatingly vibrant.

If, as I suggest, the level of enjoyment will become a key determinant of who gets the scarce resource, what can you do about it? It is fairly clear that you will not be able to make your workplace fun overnight. Using the themes of power, creativity and energy, what practices can you change which will make a difference in the future?

Oh, and one final thought, forget about other employees in your firm, what are you going to do to make sure that you work for a company that offers you the fun you deserve in the future?