

Seriously, you should take your toys to work with you

By Amy Yelin, Globe Correspondent, 5/11/03

A friend called me the other night to rave about her perfect new job. As a good friend should, I listened attentively to every detail. Besides the miracle of landing a new job in this economy, I didn't think there was anything all that unusual or interesting about this particular position or company - at least until she mentioned the policy regarding personal items. Then, as if a dentist's drill had inadvertently touched a sensitive nerve, I bolted upright in my chair and opened my mouth in disbelief.

"You're only allowed to have *two* personal items?" I asked, rudely cutting her off in midsentence. "*Two items?*"

With her voice now serving merely as background noise, I closed my eyes and tried to imagine how I could possibly choose if this were my fate:

Would it be a photograph of my fiancé and my monkey puppet? My monkey puppet and my Dilbert cube? Then what about that photo? And what about my mechanical penguin?

Her perfect job now sounded like my perfect nightmare.

I wished her luck and got off the phone quickly, relieved that it was she, not I, who would be subject to what was clearly a hostile and joyless office environment.

Let me explain: I am a firm believer in the benefits of having toys at the office, and the more toys the better. Work can be serious business, and who couldn't use a little finger monster, fuzzy morph ball or wind-up sushi toy (yes, this is a real toy geared specifically for offices) to wind down when things get too stressful? Mix in the additional horrors beyond our office doors like terrorism, the economy, SARS, and Michael Jackson, and getting a grip on the ol' stress ball while surrounding oneself with stuffed animals sounds pretty comforting.

But playing with toys isn't just about reducing stress. Toys can also serve as important business tools. I am aware of at least two respected professionals who have turned to the Magic 8-Ball and even a Ouija board to make key business

decisions. While I don't necessarily endorse this practice, I do find it interesting, like Nancy Reagan's reported reliance on astrologers.

Most importantly, however, I've come to believe that for human beings, play, like eating and sleeping, is a primal need. We need toys, and we need to play. Even in the most toy-repressed environments, I've witnessed co-workers sadly attempting to quench this need for play. They twist and untwist paper clips. They fling rubber bands like slingshots. They roll up pieces of Scotch tape and flick them across the desk like hockey pucks.

But of course, I didn't expect that you would just take my word for it that toys are important, so I consulted a few experts. My father, a New York psychiatrist, swears by toys and keeps a collection of miniature knickknacks in his office. His adult patients don't just play with them, but continuously bring more toys to add to the collection. I imagine that my father's toy collection also has something to do with helping him maintain his own sanity, although he has yet to admit it.

And then there's "Dr. Toy" and "Dr. Play." No, I am not making this up. "Dr. Toy" and "Dr. Play" are highly educated professionals in the science of toys and play, and both maintain that play contributes to our intelligence, our productivity and our well-being. According to "Dr. Toy," when children play with the right toys, their brains are stimulated, and their intelligence increases. Not a bad deal and something we adults could use as well. Plus, play releases endorphins in the brain, which makes us humans happy. According to Dr. Toy, "Adults need to play with toys, too. It's never too late, and you are never too old to play."

In addition, Dr. Play, a California consultant who helps organizations embrace the concept of fun, believes we all have inner children who come to work with us and who are dying to put on their smocks and play. "The more people are in touch with their childlike qualities," claims Dr. Play on his website, "the more creative and productive they become."

Still, not all employers welcome play with open arms. So, while I stand firmly by my belief that toys should be allowed and encouraged at work, I do want to add this important cautionary note: one should always carefully assess a company's toy tolerance before boldly placing one's Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head set or similar objects in one's new cube.

One of the least toy tolerant environments I've worked in was an Internet start-up. While start-ups, in their hey-day, were famous for their foos ball and air hockey tables, this particular company's toy tolerance level was in the gray area. I knew something was amiss when the other writers and I were quarantined in an area of the lobby nicknamed "the pen" due to its shape, which resembled a holding pen designed to keep the more threatening creatures away from the rest of the

animals. So I proceeded cautiously, bringing in no more than a simple hot pink slinky and a Rubik's Cube rip-off featuring Dilbert cartoons.

As time went by, however, we became restless, and we naturally began creating our own fun. First it was the spinning game, which involved each player spinning in his or her chair to see who could go around the longest without stopping or falling or throwing up. As the general nature of chairs is more functional than pleasurable, this game went largely unnoticed for quite some time. However the beach ball was another story. Because the CEO sat right across the hall from us, playing with an oversized, bright yellow, red, and blue ball was probably not a good idea. But we risked it anyway, taking breaks from long stretches of writing to toss the ball around "the pen." It was a happy time, but it didn't last. As expected, the CEO quickly caught on, and our ball was immediately taken away and deflated, and so was our motivation.

At my next job, however, I stumbled into toy nirvana: an advertising agency. Like a scene straight out of Willy Wonka, this place was filled with evidence of 30 or so inner children run amok: dart boards, Nerf basketball hoops, water guns, Frisbees, Yahtzee lunch tournaments, mini Pac-Man and Frogger games, stuffed animals, squishy toys, blow up dolls, Beatles figurines, you name it! People got along. They were happy. And despite being surrounded by so many toys, we were not distracted, but rather reached a level of creativity and productivity I have not experienced.

Now, I am not proposing that all organizations should operate like advertising agencies. Obviously, monkey puppets and Frisbees wouldn't fly in a law office. But I do believe there are some lessons that my experience demonstrates that can benefit any organization. For instance, toys can build friendships between co-workers. They can stimulate creativity, and make us laugh when we want to scream. They can comfort us at the end of a bad day, and if absolutely necessary, help us make decisions. They can contribute to our overall happiness.

So the next time you're forced to choose between taking that new calculator or your mechanical penguin, remember to carefully assess your company's toy tolerance. If it's safe enough, go with the penguin. You won't be disappointed.