



# NO JOKE: THE POWER OF HUMOR AT WORK

AN OFFICIAL CLIENT UPDATE OF PT HEADHUNTER INDONESIA



The other day, when I had lunch with one of my good friends, discussing our career choices, he asked me an interesting question about work that eventually sparked an idea for me to write this essay. After he put his glass of iced tea on the table, he asked, “Vidi, what kind of coworker do you enjoy working with?”

“I have always loved to work with someone smart, kind, and, most importantly, fun to work with—someone who is not afraid to use humor at work.”

My answer surprised him, especially my emphasis on working with a fun coworker who is unafraid to integrate humor and professionalism at work.

His surprise is understandable because, in conversations about work, humor is perhaps one of the least discussed topics. Humor and work do not seem to have a lot in common. Most of the time, work conjures up images of prestige, paycheck, or the long hours you have to spend at the office.

There are 168 hours in a week. If we average 7 hours of sleep every night, we spend 49 hours per week sleeping. That leaves us with 119 waking hours per week. If we work 40 hours per week, that amounts to 33.6% of our adult life spent working. It is also important to mention that there are people who work more than 40 hours a week. This is not even calculating the time they need to commute to work.

The question that arises: when work has taken up so much time in our lives, can we make our work fun?

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## What is so good about humor in the workplace?

Dick Costolo was a professional stand-up comedian years before becoming the Chief Executive Officer at Twitter. When he graduated from the University of Michigan in 1985 with a degree in Computer Science, he received several computer programming job offers, all of which he rejected. Costolo chose an unusual career path. He made an audacious decision by moving to Chicago to study improvisational comedy at the Second City Chicago. At the time, he had been fascinated by comedy after taking one class about acting during his senior year of college and doing several stand-up comedy gigs at his school. His biggest dream was to become a cast member of Saturday Night Live.

After years of trying out his luck in the field, he did not see a future in comedy. He packed his bags and moved to work at an IT & services consulting company. Costolo then achieved impressive track records in the business - becoming the Chief Executive Office of twitter from 2010 until 2015 is one of them.

Costolo has said that much of his business success comes from his ability to infuse his improvisational comedy skill into business practice. He believes humor can encourage employees to open up as it offers a tool to lessen the tension in the room. When employees are comfortable opening up to him, communication flows more freely, and as a result, challenges become solved quickly.

Being an improv comedian has taught him to listen, as improv comedians must take in what their teammates say and respond accordingly. "If you don't listen, you learn this in improv and it's true in business, if you don't listen, you can't communicate," says Costolo.

Costolo is not the only business executive who has a rare ability to dissect the use of humor in the business world. The departed Tony Hsieh, the former CEO of Zappos, an American online shoe and clothing retailer, believed that putting humor at the heart of his business would benefit the company. His belief was implemented in one of Zappos' company cultures: "Create Fun and Little Weirdness." Vanessa Lawson, who worked at Zappos as a Senior Facilitator Developer from 2007 until 2015 in an interview with BBC said that Zappos' humor-centric corporate culture made the

employees less likely to leave and more likely to come up with new ideas.

Lawson's statement makes us think it seems there is a connection that working in a humor-centric workplace can propel employees to produce fresh ideas. In an article published in Harvard Business Review written by two Stanford University Graduate School of Business lecturers and authors of a newly published book called "Humor, Seriously: Why Humor Is A Secret Weapon in Business and Life," Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas, they cited scientific research that said, "Leaders with any sense of humor are seen as 27% more motivating and admired than those who don't joke around. Their employees are 15% more engaged, and their teams are more than twice as likely to solve a creativity challenge."

## Be careful with your jokes!

Now, we know humor can bring many benefits to a company. However, we also need to address the fact that humor can be damaging. If we are not mindful of our jokes-not understanding the audience and the situation-there will be times when they do not land perfectly as we initially expected. Inappropriate jokes can cause criticism and even can cost you a job. Regrettably, joking at a colleague's expense, NSFW (Not Suitable for Work) jokes such as sexist, malicious, religious, and bathroom humor still exist in workplace environments.

Intriguing research titled "The Interpersonal Consequences of Humor" done by Thomas Bradford Bitterly, a Wharton graduate student, along with his two co-authors, Alison Wood Brook of Harvard Business School and Maurice E. Schweitzer of Wharton Business School, studies how effective humor can be in advancing a person's status at work. They found that people who told appropriate but unfunny jokes were still rated highly confident but seen less competent and thus lost status for failing to make people laugh. Interestingly, the joke tellers who told inappropriate jokes but could make people laugh were not penalized for going over the line. However, people who told inappropriate and unfunny jokes were perceived as having low competence and therefore accorded less status.

Justine Sacco, a Public Relations Representative for IAC, an American media and internet company, knew how humor could lead to her

tumultuous career fall. On December 20, 2013, right before her plane took off from Heathrow Airport for South Africa, she tweeted, "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!" Her tweet sparked a firestorm of criticism and became the number one trending topic in the world despite her account only having 170 followers then. It ultimately cost Sacco her job.

Another example worth mentioning is the recent sexual harassment case that happened to a female employee of an Indonesian commercial company. This is the case when a joke has transformed into a form of sexual harassment. The case was first revealed to the public in the middle of 2022 when the victim's husband tweeted about her wife who had been sexually harassed by her colleagues in a private WhatsApp group.

The victim had been asked to model for office products. She then had her photo taken from behind without consent while changing clothes for the shot. The picture, which showed her bra strap from behind, was sent to a private WhatsApp group, followed by inappropriate jokes by group members. Just like Justin Sacco's case, the husband's tweet went viral, and people publicly criticized her colleagues. Some Twitter users also revealed the profiles of her colleagues as a way of public shaming. In response to the case, the company immediately stepped up and released an SP 3 / 3rd violation warning letter for her colleagues. The victim's husband eventually brought the case to the police for further investigation.

## Conclusion

It is true that not every company is built like Zappos, emphasizing a "fun and little weird" environment. Your leader might not look like Tony Hsieh or Dick Castolo who knows intimately about using humor to enliven the workplace. However, I think now is the time for us to pay more attention to the power of humor and start bringing it into our workplace.

Robert R. Provine, Ph.D., a former psychology professor at the University of Maryland Baltimore County and someone who also brought scientific rigor to the study of laughter, yawns, hiccups, and other universal human behaviors, suggests that to welcome more humor into a workplace, employees can adopt "laugh-ready attitude" – which means being

more open to laughter by lowering their threshold for amusement. In other words, bringing humor to work does not mean we have to be stand-up comedians in front of our colleagues. This attitude is simply about encouraging lightheartedness, being generous with laughter, and finding moments to laugh.

As I have mentioned above, humor has the power to reduce tension in the room, can create a positive working experience that makes employees more engaged, and make them twice as likely to solve a creative challenge. However, it is also important for us to be fully aware of the downside of humor. Humor does not always look like sunshine and rainbows. It can be as sharp as a knife that can hurt others. The stories of Justin Sacco and the case of sexual harassment that happened to a female employee of an Indonesian commercial company offer a cautionary tale of the inherent risks of using humor. When your jokes are way out of line, the consequences can be severe.

Work is often a serious activity. Many of us in the office might think that when we work, what counts the most is the grind, thus it seems impossible to have fun, share laughter, or spread a little humor among our coworkers. It is okay to crack a joke here and there, but always understand your audience and the context to avoid any mishap. When our work has become too demanding for us, humor has the power to balance the seriousness of labor.

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