"WORK HARD-PLAY HARD": USING HUMOUR AT WORK

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

This Masters thesis explored the topic of humour in the workplace and investigated the function of humour at work. The key research question asked if people use humour as a tool or strategy in their workplaces. The research objectives were to investigate the functions of humour and determine the different factors that affected this humour. Outcomes and contextual factors were explored as was the potential for humour to have negative outcomes. The research was undertaken inside three local Information Technology (IT) organisations and focussed on differences and similarities of humour uses in similar environments and organisational cultures.

Data were collected using three methods; interviews, participant observation and a critical incident technique. It was intended that these three methods would give a multi-perspective of the observed phenomena and result in triangulation of results. The collected data were analysed using content analysis.

The main finding of the research was that humour was consistently used as a tool or strategy by organisational members and therefore humour was functional in these workplaces. The results also highlighted that humour had multiple functions inside these companies and that many of these functions operated simultaneously depending on the context.

The findings offered potential for future research explorations in several areas such as status, gender and ethnicity effects on workplace humour. The breadth and depth of the functions of humour at work have meant that this thesis may be a mere beginning in larger organisational investigations into this complex and ambiguous topic.

Humour was an important workplace variable for these IT employees and a key component of their organisational culture. They adopted the slogan "work hard-play hard", in regards to using humour, to offset the intense business pressure under which they worked. This thesis reflects their stories and shares their everyday experiences in their pursuit of the "play hard" half of this workplace dichotomy.

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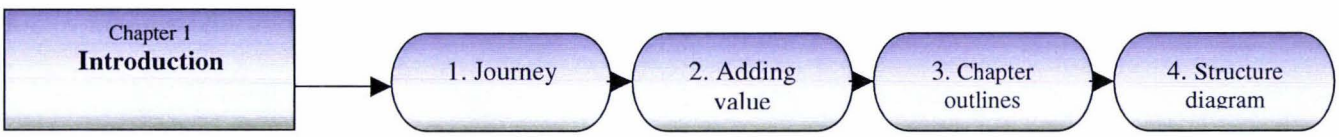


The road to humour: Introduction

The journey

I came to study the topic of humour in the workplace via a variety of paths. From a childish and early 'Humour' assignment conducted while still at high school, my interest continued when a new job in an Information Technology (IT) company emphasised the importance of humour at work. The IT Company was run by a stern and humourless boss that equated workplace humour with decreased productivity and he considered laughter to be noisy and distracting. The implications and effects on employees in the workplace (including myself) were profound. A counter-culture developed in the workplace based on a 'him versus us' mindset. Staff turnover was high, loyalty was low and most people were biding their time until they found better positions. Personally, I became unwell and left the company (and the best salary that I have ever earned) without having found a new place to work. I fondly refer to this time in my life as "the job from hell".

In the same year as this unhappy work experience I began watching a television series *The Office* (Gervais & Merchant, 2002) in which a corporate manager uses humour with his staff at work in the mistaken belief that he is hilariously funny. He (wrongly) assumes that the staff love him due to his comedic tendencies. The work is satirical and makes many cutting and uncomfortable points about using humour at work. Simultaneously, I became involved in a university management paper that deconstructed rhetoric used by management gurus, including some humorous works,

and the paths leading to this research all collided! My research agenda was defined and I began to study humour in the workplace.

Defining the topic became the first key task and an exploration of the literature immediately showed how difficult that this would be. Humour is an elusive and ambiguous construct and finding consensus among theorists was a difficult task. The task was made even harder by the discovery that humour had been studied from many different disciplinary viewpoints and it became apparent that setting some boundaries would be imperative. These are defined in the Literature Review and a management perspective exploring the *function* of humour at work is the one taken in this thesis. Setting this *functional* boundary led to the formulation of the key research question investigating whether or not humour is used as a 'tool' by people at work (Chapter 3, p. 45). A research design was developed and utilising my background in Information Technology and understanding of the prevailing 'fun' culture, the journey began in earnest.

This thesis has constituted a personal journey, and offered a steep learning curve in regards to research processes and pitfalls. The topic offered a unique opportunity to discover in depth the uses of humour at work and provided a reflection of the participating organisations' workplace cultures. As outlined above, the topic of humour has always held great fascination for me and this research topic was interesting, difficult, elusive much of the time, fun and funny, frustrating, highly entertaining, and above all illuminating about people and how they function and cope at work. Fortunately, this topic was of interest to many organisational members and their managers, and the IT professionals were enthusiastic and interested in participating in the study. The topic of humour, as well as being inherently interesting to most people, was also perceived to be non-threatening and people appeared to feel comfortable with the research methods and rationale.

The key finding from the data is that humour is used as a tool or strategy by people in these IT organisations. However, the simplicity of this statement is belied by the complexity of the functions that humour fulfils in these workplaces. There are many varied functions operating simultaneously and sometimes these functions are relatively obvious, while other times latent and only discovered after further

exploration. The answer to the research question underscores the extensive research by those humour researchers before me, by identifying that humour is an elusive and ambiguous construct and used in many ways by people at work.

Adding value

As well as answering the intended question, the research has had some practical values and uses. While writing this thesis, three reports were simultaneously produced for the three participating IT companies and these outlined the humorous findings in each organisation, identified areas of concern and recommended actions for the future (reports included in Appendices B, C & D). The focus of each of these reports was determined by consultation with the management of each company and they represented a form of reciprocity to the organisations which had allowed me access to study the phenomena of the humour construct. Two of the organisations (AlphaTech and BytesBiz) have indicated that the reports have been discussed with a view to revising some current practices and those areas that have been highlighted by the humour research may be addressed in the immediate future. I was also asked to return to the AlphaTech company and exhibit findings in an electronic presentation to the entire staff. This was completed on September 8th 2003.

The research contributes to the current research on humour as it is one of only a very few research projects conducted inside New Zealand organisations with a focus on workplace humour. The key research that has previously been conducted regarding humour has been part of a study on language in the workplace undertaken by a team of linguistic specialists from Victoria University including; Professor Janet Holmes, Meredith Marra, Maria Stubbe and Dr. Bernadette Vine. Much of their research has occurred inside organisations and takes a linguistic focus. The functional and management perspective in my research makes this a unique project and the undertaking of such a project inside the IT industry is another distinctive contribution to management theory and knowledge.

It is important to note that all individual names have been changed throughout the thesis to protect respondents' privacy. Each organisation has been given a fictitious

'nom de plume' to assist with fluency and protect their identity. Rather than referring to abstract participants, people in the study have been assigned fictitious names throughout the discussion of the data. The original organisational reports in the Appendices (B, C & D) have been altered and all organisation names changed to the assigned nom de plume.

The structure of the thesis is diagrammatically illustrated in Figure 1 (p. 8). The five chapters and the function of each are listed in the rectangles. The ellipses display the major sub-headings of each chapter in the chronological order across the diagram. They are numbered in the diagram to show the chronological progression of the sections in each chapter. The relevant 'slice' of the diagram is repeated at the start of each chapter to highlight the sections that make up the individual chapter's structure and offer an on-going overview of the thesis.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2: Humour: From anthropology to zoology

Chapter two presents the literature review and offers a critique of current humour literature, beginning with an explanation of the difficulties in defining the construct of humour. The introduction emphasises the multidisciplinary nature of humour, and a brief discussion of the many disciplinary emanations of the topic and the boundaries of the study are highlighted. A brief look is conducted into the origins of humour and three key theories of humour are presented. These are summarised as relief, incongruity and superiority theories.

The second section of the review puts humour into the organisational context that is the focus of this research. Literature is presented from research undertaken in the management field exploring humour use at work. This section emphasises that a functional perspective of the humour construct constitutes the focus of the review and the subsequent research. Functions of humour that have been explored and identified by other researchers are presented. Humour researchers have identified that the social context for humour is a crucial variable in using humour, and these studies are summarised with a particular focus on workplace humour research. Factors such as

power, status and leadership appear in prior research and these are examined along with the impacts of organisational culture. There is some information outlining the culture apparent inside the Information Technology industry as this research was conducted inside three IT companies. As many humour studies have been conducted within small groups there is a section discussing groups in regards to workplace humour. Humour at work can lead to issues for organisations and this is examined in the review in regards to gender, ethnicity and organisational misbehaviour. The impact of technology upon workplace humour is also briefly explored. The review concludes with initiatives for future research and a justification for attempting this project.

Chapter 3: Methods: Finding the fun

This methods section outlines the three main methods used to collect the data and the way in which the data were analysed. It begins with the research question which is further developed by five research objectives. Three methods were used in the data collection process to achieve triangulation of results and this is defined and justified in 'mixing the methods'. The methods are portrayed in a diagram (Figure 2, p. 47). The reasons for choosing three IT organisations are given as well as the work contexts studied.

The three methods used, interviews, participant observation and critical incident technique, each have a section devoted to them, describing the key components and justifying their inclusion. The participant observation section includes some discussion of the researcher's effect upon the study, due to the reality that a participant researcher becomes a part of the phenomenon studied. Some brief examples are presented outlining humour research by other researchers that have used similar tools and methods in their studies. The analysis section defines the main analytical tool (content analysis) and outlines the application of this tool to the data collected. Limitations are admitted and the steps implemented to offset these in the research design. Finally, ethical considerations are discussed and the protocols implemented in accordance with Massey University Ethics Committee (MUHEC) to deal with ethical issues. The research was conducted fully in accordance with the guidelines and MUHEC approval was granted for the project (4/4/03, Appendix Q).

As well as the official requirements the researcher's personal moral position and ethos is briefly outlined.

Chapter 4: The Multiple Functions of Humour

The results and discussion sections are combined in this chapter, as this seemed to offer a preferable presentation mode for this research. Many of the results are descriptive and outline the contextual background of the organisational humour. It was useful to have this information preceding the discussion to add consistency and continuity in the presented findings.

The discussion contains 12 sections and begins by presenting the key finding in the research. This finding was that humour *was* used as a tool by people in these IT companies, but also that humour has many functions for these people that often operate simultaneously. The complexity of the humour construct and this multi-functional use has made it a difficult to topic to study and analyse. This has resulted in a very lengthy results and discussion chapter as I have attempted to establish some boundaries while still collecting and presenting the variety of humour uses into a focussed functional presentation. Writing the discussion section was one of the biggest challenges in this project because of the huge quantity, complexity, ambiguity and depth of data collected from these companies.

The structure of Chapter 4 has developed from the hierarchy of the findings. The most significant and prevalent results have been presented first and lesser results and findings appear later in the chapter. Each major discussion and results section has a brief summary of the main findings with a heading to indicate this. The chapter culminates in a presentation of critical incidents uncovered in these companies and presented in Table 2 (p. 123). These incidents are analysed and the three most contentious are further explored in relation to relevant theories and implications. These have been presented at the end of this chapter as they appeared to represent a summary of sorts, illustrating actual workplace incidents and exploring the relevance to the organisation and implications for the future. A brief summary of the chapter is provided before the final conclusions chapter.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

The conclusions are presented in four key sections. The first highlights the functions of humour that were found in the study, and these 26 functions are summarised and displayed in Table 3 (p. 142). The multi-functional nature of using humour in these workplaces is again emphasised. The second section points out the limitations that were experienced and identified within this study, and leads into the third section that discusses the implications of this research for these companies and suggests future research potential. Many research areas were identified as potentially valuable, but key among these are gender effects on humour, ethnicity issues and the use of email for non-work related activities such as sharing jokes. The final section reiterates and summarises the main findings; that humour is used as a tool by these organisational members, and it is an extremely important factor of workplace behaviour and culture for the participants in this study. The functional use of humour at work is significant in these three IT companies and this is likely to be a factor for many other such organisations. Identifying this significance highlights the contribution that this piece of research makes to the management and business context.

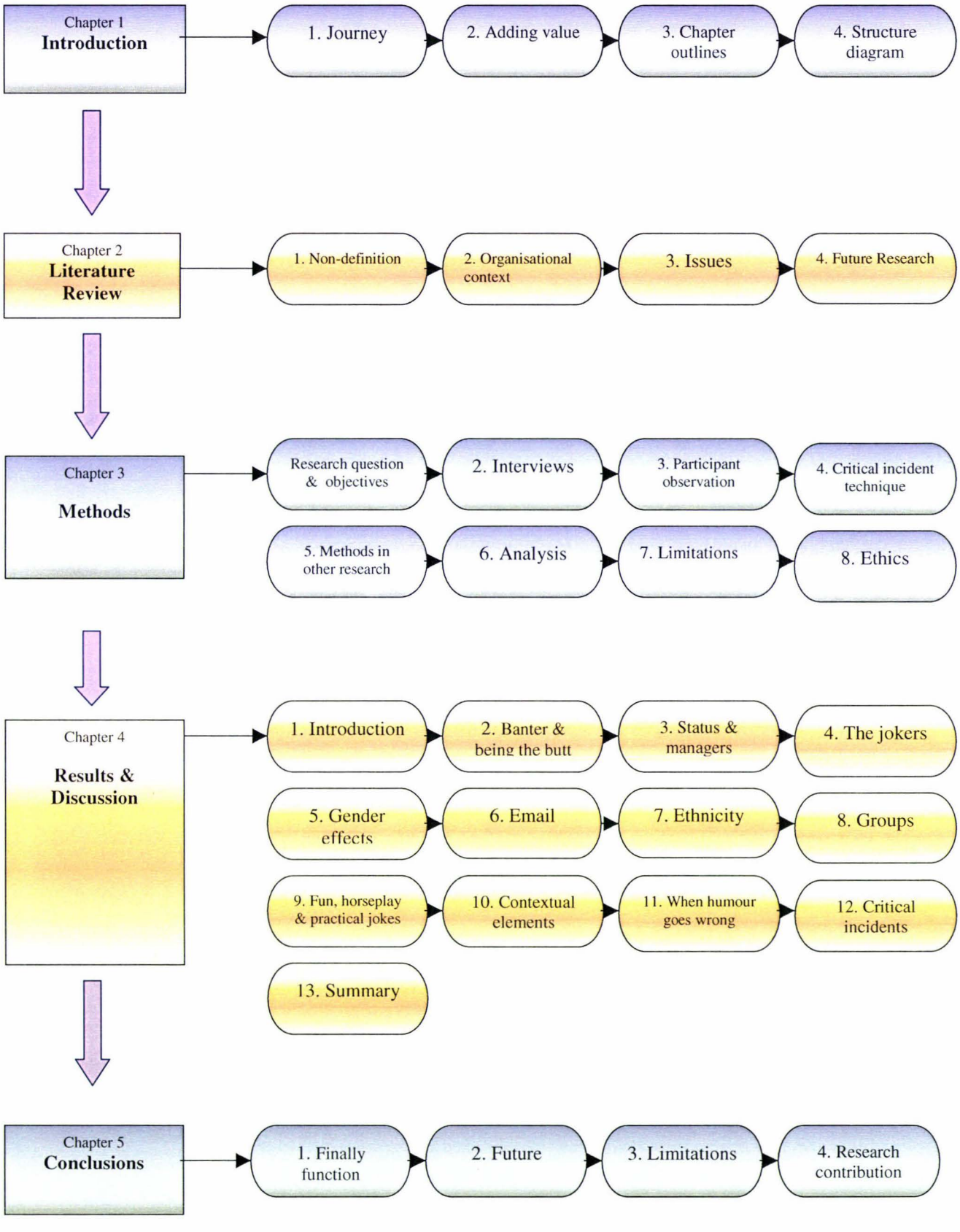
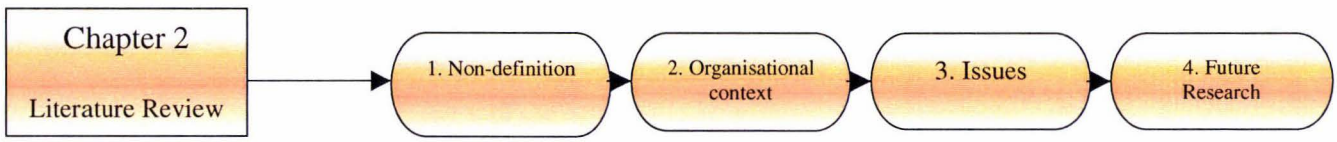


Figure 1: Thesis structure



Humour: From Anthropology to Zoology

The non-definition of humour

Humour is a desirable part of life for most people, indicating happiness, pleasure and good mental health (Chapman & Foot, 1976, McGhee 1979). It has been researched in many different forms and contexts with little consensus to be found among theorists and academics over causes, functions or even terminology (Chapman & Foot, 1979). There is divided opinion over whether a single global theory should be developed to account for humour or a large number of limited theories to account for specific aspects and characteristics. Traditionally, philosophers have been fond of arguing that their explanations account for the multifaceted and complex nature of humour, yet psychologists have realised that is not possible to develop a single broad theory to encompass all of the key qualities of humour simultaneously (McGhee, 1979). Anthropologists argue that humour can allow people to view the world from an alien perspective that makes the familiar 'exotic' and inverts everyday beliefs (Critchley, 2002).Wilson, (1979) asserts that researchers have not acknowledged each other's efforts and many theories have been repeated and represented as new. More recently, interdisciplinary studies are emerging that take into account other perspectives from different academic fields. It is concluded however that humour must be analysed in its differing dimensions as it cannot be attributed solely to any one field (Palmer, 1994).

The construct of humour is multi-disciplinary and has been analysed in several academic disciplines including psychology, philosophy, linguistics, physiology, sociology and anthropology. There are even studies that examine Darwinism and

suggest the presence of humour in animals (Apte, 1985, Critchley, 2002, Kivy, 2003, Mulkay, 1988,). It is suggested that few specialists in these disciplines have bothered to read each others material until as recently as the last twenty years and there is no common framework to point the way for future research (Duncan, Smeltzer & Leap, 1990, Palmer, 1994). Humour appears to exist in many contexts yet defies any one discipline to provide an adequate definition that encompasses all its facets (Apte, 1985, McGhee, 1979). There is no one encompassing definition that satisfies the researchers from all the different disciplines (Goldstein & McGhee, 1972). Little is actually known about humour. It is ambiguous and there is disagreement on which aspects of humour form its foundations. Part of the disagreement and confusion in defining it comes from the different aspects from which it can be viewed. It can be considered a stimulus, (that which causes laughter), a response (an amused reaction to a stimulus) or a disposition (the ability to see the funny side of situations) (Chapman & Foot, 1979). Godkewitsch, (1976) offers one definition that is quoted by several different writers in their academic papers:

> The term 'humour' can be used to describe a process initiated by a humour stimulus, such as a joke or cartoon, and terminating with some response indicative of experienced pleasure, such as laughter (p. 117).

Humour is a serious subject for consideration because it is an element of most human communication. Conversations are full of jokes, puns and word play (Palmer, 1994). Although humour is a cognitive, intellectual experience there are emotional influences and sexual and aggressive elements. The context in which it occurs is highly important. The concept of humour means different things to different people and each brings his own perspective, values, feelings and background to the experience, making humour a difficult topic to explore, define and summarise. "Humor (like beauty) is something that exists only in our minds and not in the real world" (McGhee, 1979, p. 6).

For the purposes of this literature review some boundaries must be defined in order to work with a manageable perspective of the topic of humour. This work discusses humour in a management context and therefore will have, in the most part, a behavioural science focus concerned with the function of humour in the workplace.

There will be some sociological and anthropological aspects that are gently diffused through the discussion and it is considered elemental that a psychological perspective is at least briefly presented. Little speculation regarding physiological effects and philosophical viewpoints will be undertaken and linguistic perspectives will be largely un-investigated. The terms 'humour', joking and 'laughter' will be used interchangeably in this work because they are intrinsically linked (Coser, 1976). Laughter is the usual response to the occurrence of humour and joking, 'joking' implies the presence of humour and elicits the response of laughter and the term humour usually refers to the presence of joking and /or laughter.

It is not possible to completely disregard the multi-disciplinary factors that comprise the construct of humour but throughout this writing it is a key intention that the boundaries for investigation are provided by adopting a managerial focus. This first section of the review lightly touches on several of the contributing disciplines by giving a brief background to humour studies and summarises the key theories evident in humour research. Origins for humour research are grounded in philosophy and psychology and will be briefly presented. The review then moves into the organisational context to focus on the research that pertains particularly to humour and management. This comprises a look at the function and context of humour and examines the literature in regard to culture, management and groups. There is a section of the review concerned with issues that arise in relation to humour and the final section outlines the need for future research and sets the scene for the research presented in this thesis.

Origins of humour

The word 'humour' originates from the Latin word 'humor' meaning fluid or moisture. Mediaeval physiology believed there were four basic bodily humors or fluids that determined a person's temperament, mood or disposition. These fluids comprised choler a yellow bile, an excess of which led to anger or irascibility (choleric disposition), melancholy or black bile that caused depression or gloominess (melancholic disposition), blood, that promoted confidence and cheer if an excess was present (sanguine disposition) and phlegm that was thought to produce sluggishness and apathy (phlegmatic disposition). If the four humors were in balance, then a person

was considered to be of good humor and a person with a humor imbalance was deemed 'out of humor'. Through time 'humour' gradually came to refer to someone's mood or frame of mind in a general sense, and finally evolved to refer to the specific disposition that appreciated absurd, ludicrous and comical events (McGhee, 1979).

Theories

Possibly the most famous academic to offer insights into the construct of humour is Sigmund Freud (1905), who claimed that jokes have a fascinating charm, are definitely worthy of study, and play an important part in our mental life. Freud argued that jokes have not received nearly enough "philosophical consideration" (Freud, 1905, p. 39). Freud's greatest contribution to the study of humour has been the recognition of the role of the unconscious in all human behaviour and its implications in humorous interchange. Intrigued by the ambiguity of humour, Freud (1905) posed that a joke can say what it has to say in too few words or by not actually saying it, jokes bring forward that which is hidden in the subconscious, such as emotions and feelings. These hidden emotions stem from all of the experiences that a person has had in their life. Joking provides an outlet for expressing life's triumphs and pitfalls and Freud links the telling or hearing of jokes to all that has already occurred in a person's life and to all that subsequently occurs (Fry, 1963).

Although consensus of opinion is difficult to find, modern academics have attempted to collapse the many theories of humour into three main streams to explain amusement and laughter. These three theories are superiority theory, relief theory and incongruity theory (Critchley, 2002, Palmer, 1994). There is some agreement that these comprise the main explanations of humour, however, once again disagreement inside each theory is rife and there is overlap apparent in each of the perspectives. These theories seek to explain, why people laugh and are amused.

Relief theory

Relief theory is considered one of three predominant theories explaining why people laugh. Relief theories date back to the eighteenth century when Kant (1790) and Hartley (1749) first suggested that people laugh when a threat, something evil, or something alarming is eliminated or removed (Wilson, 1979). Freud (1905) is an advocate of relief theories, considering that laughter provides a release for relief,

aggression, sexual tension or other emotions. This 'safety valve' function of humour is termed "psychical energy" (Freud, 1905, p.199). Relief theories also contend that jokes are an outlet for sexual or aggressive feelings and Freud (1905) likened jokes to a form of sexual exhibitionism, suggesting that telling jokes is a way of displaying oneself and bringing out hidden feelings from the subconscious. Through joking one can remove inhibitions and escape to childhood and playful feelings. Humour is 'intellectual play' and a channel for sexual and aggressive feelings that are usually repressed. Sexuality and aggression can be couched in a 'play frame' and therefore are able to be deemed 'just a joke'. The release function of humour is essential to the smooth functioning of society and social harmony, providing as it does a safe outlet for feelings that may otherwise escalate and overflow into anti-social behaviour (Eastman, 1936, Gruner, 1997, McGhee, 1979). The main criticism of relief explanations of humour are that these theories fail to account for people being amused by events or jokes that are purely nonsensical and playful fun. Eastman (1936), an ardent critic of Freud, maintains that his theories make everything furtive and take no delight in "playful nonsense" (p. 254).

Incongruity

Alongside the concept of laughing to release emotion there is some agreement among theorists that incongruity is a frequently emphasised quality of amusement (Barsoux, 1993, Duncan et al, 1990, McGhee, 1979). Although the Freudian psychologists argue that relief from sexual tension and aggression are more important to humour, the incongruity theories enjoy more popular acceptance throughout the modern literature. Incongruity in humour comes from the discrepancy between what is expected to occur or be stated and what actually happens and the greater the divergence from expectations the funnier the event (Mc Ghee, 1979, Wilson, 1979). People find events funny when they are surprising, inappropriate, ambiguous or even illogical. The audience to a joke is led along a path one way then there is an abrupt change of path or meaning resulting in amusement from the revelation of the result. There is a "violation of expectations" (Duncan et al, 1990, p259) which is the incongruity, and then this incongruity is reconciled in a way that makes sense but is still unexpected. Duncan et al (1990) add a 'cognitive appraisal' perspective to incongruity theories, maintaining that the incongruity raises cognitive activity, which raises arousal and thus pleasure. Fry and Allen (1976) assert that most delineations of humour stress the

elements of "surprise, unexpectedness, uncertainty or incompatibility" (p. 246) and brought together, these elements form the components of a joke.

Superiority

The third common collection of humour theories are grouped under the title 'superiority theories'. This group of theories can be traced back to Hobbes (1640), credited as the originator of superiority theory.

> Men laugh at mischances and indecencies wherein there lieth no wit nor jest at all…also men laugh at the *infirmities* of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated…for what is else the recommending of ourselves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man's infirmity or absurdity? (p. 45, emphasis in original).

The main tenet of superiority theories are that people laugh when they feel superior to another individual in some way, due to some event or happening associated with someone else's misfortune. People laugh at someone else's misfortune or stupidity or clumsiness because at that particular moment *they* are not being clumsy or stupid, and momentarily feel superior. Roughly speaking superiority theories suggest that when people see something unfortunate happen to someone else, they laugh out of a sense of feeling superior to them. The old classic of snickering at the person slipping on the banana skin is the most obvious example.

Hobbes (1640) used metaphors of war and victory in relation to laughter and likens laughter to the triumph of victory over an opponent. "…men take heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over" (p. 46). Gruner, (1997) also compares superiority theories of humour to a contest to be won and the laughter that signifies the release of 'victory' is similar to the laughter of relief espoused by the Freudian relief theories. In using metaphors of games and winning, he suggests that there is a veiled cruelty and an absence of sympathy for the victim in humour due to a human tendency to be mean and malicious. This is sometimes very subtle and apparent only upon reflective analysis of the exchange. People can unleash cruel impulses normally kept hidden, through using humour. Those present in humorous situations compare themselves favourably with the butt of the joke and express amusement in a jocular

form. The suggestion that emotions such as aggression and competitiveness are *released* in the superiority theories indicates an example of the overlap between the theoretical beliefs of relief and superiority constructs.

Those who oppose superiority theories argue that humour can only occur between some individuals when there is warmth and affection present. It may be that humour derived from interaction between participants depends on one's disposition towards those involved in the events (Fry, 1963). It is also suggested that those indulging in humour are sometimes involved in illicit, forbidden behaviour that can have sexual connotations as well as aggressive elements.

Further theoretical overlap is identified by La Fave, Haddad & Maesen (1976) when they contend that deeper analysis of Hobbesian theory shows that he also identified incongruity in the form of suddenness as a factor of humour as well as superiority. La Fave et al (1976) then offer an overall theory of humour comprising suddenness, superiority and incongruity, stating that a happiness increment is obtained through feeling superior in the humour:

> The necessary ingredients of an adequate theory of humour would seem to involve a (1) sudden (2) happiness increment (such as a feeling of superiority or heightened self-esteem) as a consequence of a (3) perceived incongruity (in Chapman & Foot, 1976, p.89)

Summary

Summarising the three main groups of theories is fraught with difficulty as each theory is the basis for a selection of differing viewpoints within the main construct. Within each theory there are arguments and key differentiations as academics and researchers address parts of the theory from a variety of disciplines and perspectives. These summations of the theories give an outline of the main ideas and key research, while recognising the intense arguments and disagreements abounding in each. It is recognised that there are different interpretations and views inside these theoretical perspectives and that consensus in this area has not, and probably will not, be achieved.

One seemingly accepted factor of humour and joking inside the literature is that humour is *functional* (Freud, 1905, Fry, 1963, Gruner, 1997, McGhee, 1979, Wilson, 1979). It can be used for quite obvious deliberate purposes or more subtle, underlying reasons such as those recognised by Freud (1905) in his association of humour with the unconscious. The next section examines the function, form and content of humour in organisational contexts.

Organisational Context

> In truth, humour in the workplace is rarely neutral, trivial or random. It is deployed for the achievement of quite specific purposes to do with self-preservation, getting things done or getting one's way (Barsoux, 1993, p. vii).

Function

The multi-disciplinary nature of humour is again apparent and emphasised in regard to functions ascribed to humour (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003). Scholars from across many disciplines have explored psychological functions such as coping and gaining status, sociologists have researched social stability, exploring limits and social change and physiologists have studied effects such as endorphin secretion (Duncan et al, 1990). Relatively few management theorists have investigated the topic of humour in workplace settings and in relation to organisational life (Barsoux, 1993, Collinson, 2002, Duncan et al, 1990, Grugulis, 2002) but those that have, found humour to have a high importance to people in their working lives. Work and humour are not mutually exclusive activities and ethnographic research has shown that humour is an essential part of organisational life. It can be functionalist and is often actively used to promote organisational goals. Humour assists in defining situations and creating normative expectations, helps release tension and is used to negotiate shared realities in organisations. Adding humour to a workplace process can achieve these outcomes in a non-threatening manner (Barsoux, 1993, Duncan et al, 1990, Palmer, 1994, Terrion & Ashforth, 2002).

Vinton (1988) identifies three specific functions of humour in the workplace: self-ridiculing jokes that tell others that the joker is willing to participate in teasing

relationships, teasing others in order to get things done and removing the necessity for actual 'orders' to complete tasks and, bantering in order to lessen status differences and improve co-operation. While researchers have raised the importance of humour as a workplace function, they still have different opinions on what actually are the most important or common functions. Some contend that the function of creating and maintaining group solidarity is of utmost importance. These researchers agree that laughter invites 'reciprocity' and therefore brings people together through the shared enjoyment (Coser, 1959, Holmes & Stubbe 2003). In groups, humour is used to bind people together and can help create "interpersonal rapport" (Fry & Allen, 1976, p. 248).

Barsoux (1993) also sees that humour has intrinsic value in bringing people together, taking them out of themselves, and assisting organisational functioning. It relaxes people, fosters team spirit and promotes openness and reciprocity. However, he feels that humour plays its biggest contribution in "ironing out the creases in the organizational fabric" (p. 82) and transforming organisational idiosyncrasies into amusement enjoyed by others. It can be an outlet for frustrations caused by organisational directives or business environment restrictions. Normal rules are suspended when humour is used which relieves individuals of responsibility for their words and actions. This frees workers to parody the organisation and question conventions without causing offence. The ambiguity inherent when using humour allows contentious statements to be made without fear of recrimination, and the joking relationship permits forms of disrespect that give individuals a license to express negative feelings in a safe form (Collinson, 2002, Grugulis, 2002). Humour provides protection against negative consequences from risky actions or words and allows participants to try out an idea or expression under the guise of joking (Ullian, 1976).

There are those that contend that the most important function of humour is as a 'safety-valve' or 'coping mechanism'. This function of humour was first suggested by Freud (1905) when arguing the significance of relief theories. The safety-valve function assumes relevance once more in modern workplaces that are subject to many stressful impacts and Barsoux (1993) deems this use of humour an "organisational necessity, not a luxury" (p. 190). When a humorous attitude is adopted as a 'coping mechanism', it makes distress and anxiety easier for people to manage. Laughter is

the physical manifestation of the 'safety-valve' metaphor, providing the physical release of tension and energy (McGhee, 1979). Adults tire of the constant demands to think and behave logically, morally and rationally and humour provides an escape from these demands by returning adults to playful feelings and actions enjoyed in childhood. Play is a component of humour that adds excitement in the workplace while relaxing people and relieving tension (Dandridge, 1986). Burawoy (1979) suggests that people play games at work to make time pass more quickly and interestingly and to create culture in the workplace. He calls this "making out" and Roy (1958) described a similar phenomenon in a manufacturing plant where workers would shout "banana time" and run and steal a banana from the lunchbox of a specifically targeted colleague.

Using humour and play can provide pleasure at work by lifting repression and easing stress and tension for oneself and the people one works among. The laughter invoked by the use of humour is a useful outlet for this repression, stress and tension. Freud (1905) defined laughter as one of the most infectious of psychical states. According to the eminent psychologist retelling jokes is actually making use of others to arouse one's own laughter. This provides a form of 'time-out' at work and provides an outlet for playfulness and inventiveness. The act of using humour this way has been called a "momentary vacation" (Eastman, 1936) and this break is liberating for people inside the restraints of their working day. This 'liberation' can make working contexts more like social contexts and allows individuals to express facets of their personality other than their work persona (Freud, 1905, Barsoux, 1993). Dandridge (1986) suggests that work and play complement each other and are healthy for organisations, and asserts that play should be integrated with work tasks.

The ability to express one's personality and feelings in the workplace exemplifies another key function offered by the use of humour. Humour offers an opportunity to display facets of one's identity and personality that may not be shared or displayed in the course of day-to-day work activities. Freud (1905) describes the urge to retell a joke to others as a chance to show one's cleverness, display oneself and equates this joking with sexual exhibitionism. Joking at work can be a way of integrating one's social persona with the formal role that one must adopt and conform to at work.

It is suggested that humour provides a social function to society through offering an outlet for passionate negative emotions such as anger and hostility. This function can also be useful at work as it is less risky for workers to express hostility through jokes or sarcasm. Aggressive, hostile humour with an underlying message may be used to resolve conflict and can dilute, diffuse or even eliminate negative emotions and contribute to the smooth functioning of organisations (Fry & Allen, 1976, Smith, Harrington, Vernard & Neck, 2000). As a communication channel, humour can provide a safe way for members in organisations to enjoy innocent jokes or to make 'aimed' jokes to express derision or sexuality (Barsoux, 1993, Freud, 1905, Wilson, 1979). Stauffer (1999) sanctions using humour in the workplace, cautioning that if not permitted humour will 'go underground' and become 'guerrilla humour' which will not be constructive to the organisation. Used well, humour can provide organisational stability and conformity, providing safe outlets for emotions and exhibitionism. Using humour provides social 'armoury' by distancing people from their emotions (Barsoux, 1993, Cheatwood, 1983, Grugulis, 2002). Being funny is usually more acceptable at work than being emotional!

Joking mode can be used to deliver criticism or unpalatable messages or can stir people to action without alienating them. The ambiguity inherent in using humour is what makes it so useful as a workplace 'tool' (Kahn, 1989). Serious messages can be communicated but can be quickly denied under the guise of 'only joking' if an adverse reaction is experienced. If the initial 'joke' receives a favourable reaction the message can be further developed, thus joking acts a barometer to gauge group feelings and attitudes. Under the guise of humour, people can feel liberated to offer more risky suggestions that can be dismissed as joking should they be considered unacceptable. Humour can smooth the way for frank and constructive discussion, put people at ease and encourage mental collaboration. This can be especially useful in the workplace where status differences and power imbalances can affect honest communication (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999, Barsoux, 1993, Mulkay, 1988).

Properly channelled, humour has the ability to relieve boredom, monotony and stress that can lead to workplace accidents. It can reduce workplace stress by reducing conflict. However humour in the form of horseplay and practical jokes can cause accidents and damage (Duncan et al, 1990). 'Clowning' is a form of humour where

particular people make fools of themselves and express excessive behaviour that others in the group may like to enact but dare not. The clowning behaviour of particular members, although outrageous, relieves pressure on the group and allows norms to be broken (Fine, 1976). The role of 'clown' is informally assigned to a willing group member and these clowns are allowed to use humour in potentially difficult situations. Dynamics of a group can be analysed from the behaviour of these clowns "defusing bombs at one point and lobbing them at another" (Kahn, 1989, p. 50). Clowning is extremely common at work but one of the least acceptable forms of humour to managers. It constitutes an "explicit rejection of disciplined and even ordered behaviour" (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999, p.106). Ackroyd and Thompson further suggest that 'clowns', though valued and enjoyed, blight their chances for future promotion. Today's workgroup clown is unlikely to be tomorrow's senior manager.

Joking insults or 'bantering' are a common form of workplace humour and seem to be a constant source of fun and entertainment in some work settings. This 'friendly abuse' often focuses on personal characteristics and can also have subversive intent. Joking insults can be used for ridiculing or criticising group members that are not present (such as the boss) but can also be dismissed as 'just a joke' if others respond unfavourably. This type of interaction can be used to judge feelings or as a catalyst for dissent (Wilson, 1979). Insults between those that know each other well can be a signal of solidarity and show 'in-group' membership, and these jokes tend to stay among those that know each other well. Although more prevalent between workers of equal status, Holmes & Stubbe (2003) did discover cases where lower status workers used joking insults to superiors. This can be quite a risky strategy for lower level workers if there are underlying messages in the humour. There is however also an element of safety in this strategy due to the social norms governing the response that is expected of managers. "It is difficult for a superior to challenge criticism framed in a humorous comment without losing face" (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003, p.121). Joking insults are an area worthy of much more research and are often a component of group humour discussed further in section three (p. 32).

Joking insults are similar to satire, described as "the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of

amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation" (Abrams, 1999, p.275). Although meant to be humorous, satire can become a weapon. Humour that is too bitter becomes scorn and if it passes beyond the laughter spectrum it disappears and is not humour any more. Hostile 'biting' humour attracts more interest than mere criticism appealing as it does to the fun element of playfulness and laughter while making a point. Making a point this way is more effective than making it seriously (Eastman, 1936). Grugulis (2002) cautions against regarding all humour as subversive as it do not have the power to change organisations. At the same time, she asserts that humour can be used as a resistance strategy and should not be underestimated or dismissed as mere frivolity. Humour as resistance is an emerging issue and will be further discussed in later sections.

Some situational humour may be received in a serious way and a serious response given even when a joking mode has been used. Participants in the humorous scenario choose whether or not to be amused (Mulkay, 1988). Although this section has explored the functions of humour in organisational contexts it is important to remember that not all humour has intent, it is a phenomenon that can be enjoyed entirely for its own sake and can be just playful and senseless (Kahn, 1989, Mulkay, 1988, Zijderveld, 1983).

When used with deliberate (or subconscious) intent, humour can be both a good and bad tool for managers and subordinates. It can transform and ease painful or difficult situations, but while it can help soothe conflict it does not necessarily ensure solutions (Barsoux, 1993). Humour functions in organisations as part of a suite of tools that smooth the turbulent paths of human interaction. It has been called a "politeness device" that can serve to "get things done in a socially and professionally acceptable manner" (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003, p.121). Although not always functional, humour can adopt different roles and functions in different contexts (Palmer, 1994, Chapman & Foot, 1976). The next section examines the context in which humour occurs, the impact of this context upon the people involved and the humour used.

Context

Theorists emphasise that humour is inextricably bound to the social context in which it occurs and the nature of the occasion is considered a crucial variable. Laboratory

studies have been criticised as not very meaningful in the study of humour as they do not take this contextual factor into account (Barsoux, 1993, Chapman & Foot, 1976, Duncan et al, 1990, Grugulis, 2002, Palmer, 1994, Wilson, 1979). Amusement is usually greater when the audience shares values or beliefs with the other participants and it is usually a social and contextual experience. Laughter typically occurs with other people and individuals are far less likely to laugh when alone (Chapman & Foot, 1976, Terrion & Ashforth, 2002).

The content of humour varies according to the context or situation in which it occurs yet the content is less important than *who* tells the joke and in *what* situation (Zijderveld, 1983). In interviews with police candidates participating in an Executive Development Course, Terrion & Ashforth (2002) found that amusement to 'dirty' or sexist jokes varied according to the context in which they were told. McGhee (1979) had similar findings in regard to hostile cartoons or jokes; reaction was dependent on context and relationship between the participants. Sexual humour is judged as being entertaining, popular and enjoyable. However people are careful in which context that sexist or sexual humour is enjoyed and most societies establish circumstances where this is permissible as well as situations where it is not (Fine, 1976, Gruner, 1997, Terrion & Ashforth, 2002, Wilson, 1979). For example, in their police candidates study Terrion & Ashforth (2002), found that men enjoyed 'dirty' or sexist jokes but not in the company of women. Men were careful of their image and thus avoided sexist and racist humour at work.

Individual differences are significant in the use and appreciation of humour. Motivation and personality of individuals involved influences the kinds of humour appreciated as well as the context in which it occurs (McGhee, 1979). Further to influencing humour, appreciation of humour can unwittingly reveal personality characteristics, attitudes and intentions (Chapman & Gadfield, 1976). Five basic variables have been identified that influence a person's perception of humorous events, these are: age, gender, education, language and culture. Of these variables the one that has attracted the most research is gender (Stearns, 1972). Gender will be more fully discussed in the issues section (p.35).

Reactions to humour vary depending on the situation, and degrees of humour appreciation, such as smiling or laughing, are either suppressed or feigned depending on the social or business context (Wilson 1979). There are difficulties in assessing humour appreciation using laughter as an indicator as it is difficult to isolate genuine laughter from social factors such as anxiety, ignorance or other reasons. Those who study humour rely on responses such as laughter or smiling to measure levels of appreciation of humour (McGhee, 1979). Laughter can be ambiguous however, and people can laugh at that which they both agree or disagree, find amusing or even offensive. It is often a social and polite response used to mask true feelings and attitudes. Laughter occurs within "patterns of interaction" (Coser, 1959, p.171) and people are invited to laugh as a show of collective affinity with a speaker or group or message. This invitation to laughter is achieved by the joker through cues such as facial expressions, smiling, pausing and other verbal or non-verbal cues (Greatbatch & Clark, 2002, Gruner, 1997). Behaviour such as laughing or smiling varies according to the level of emotional involvement of the participants and people must be in a playful frame of mind to be receptive to jesting about incongruities or inequities in life (Gruner, 1997, McGhee, 1979).

People do tell jokes in inappropriate contexts sometimes through misunderstanding the societal norms governing the situation, but also sometimes do this in order to deliberately "subvert the nature of the occasion" (Palmer, 1994, p. 11). Palmer (1994) also contends that there are very few situations in life where humour is absolutely out of the question. Reaction to humour is both intellectual and emotional. People must be able to understand a joke to enjoy it but simultaneously emotions are aroused and if individuals have strong feelings about a subject, they may not be amused by a joke about it (Gruner, 1997).

Business settings are an ideal context for humour due to fads, pretentiousness, obfuscation and bluff (Barsoux, 1993). Stultifyingly serious practices and pretences provide limitless inspiration for laughter and jokes that emphasise incongruity. The business context is ostensibly an arena that values clarity and logic, and humour is often successful because funny events or sayings are surprising in this supposedly serious context. The build up of tension in difficult workplace circumstances predisposes people to laughter as a form of relief, supporting relief theories promoted

by the Freudian psychologists. As in any comedy, humour in the workplace is dependent on timing and should be appropriate to the situation and the audience. Jokes are 'situation specific' and create a sense of community and meaning for the people present at the time (Barsoux, 1993). Barsoux (1993) deems it possible to joke about the most serious aspects of life and death, but stresses that this does not detract from their importance.

Having explored some of the many functions and contextual implications of humour at work it is pertinent to examine how these relate to management of people. The questions that have concerned the few researchers in this topic are; can humour actually be managed, should it be managed and if so how can this be achieved?

Management

Humour is a welcome intrusion to the working life of people but is often viewed as inconsequential. The manager that understands joking and humour can use this knowledge to foster employee cooperation and improve productivity. Humour can become a useful tool in a manager's repertoire (Barsoux, 1993, Duncan & Feisal, 1990). Barsoux (1993) compares using humour to the practice of management; both require the art of good judgment. If humour is regarded as merely superficial and unimportant by managers, they risk ignoring the undercurrents and deeper meanings masked by the humour. Jokes in the workplace reveal much about an organisation, its management and culture. Managerial attempts to manipulate workplace humour raises the spectre of ethical issues and managers have to be wary of treating humour as a manipulated commodity that can be turned on or off. Humorous managerial exchanges with employees may backfire and be insulting to subordinates, resulting in disruptive workplace effects. Managers have to be cautious with their own use of humour and exercise sound judgement as supervisors of other's use of humour (Collinson, 2002).

Analysing humour use in New Zealand organisations from a linguistic perspective, Holmes and Stubbe (2003) discuss how humour has "mitigating or hedging" effects and can 'control' some speech behaviour in the workplace. Examples investigated by these researchers are in regard to directives and criticisms given by managers. Humour can be used to soften workplace directives and Holmes and Stubbe's (2003)

research found that using humour this way is more likely to occur between equals than between managers and subordinates. The concept of a subordinate giving a directive upwards to a boss is a fairly rare occurrence and was therefore regarded as intrinsically humorous, due to its incongruity. Using humour to soften directives was considered a popular strategy and had the result of saving face for the receiver. It also signified goodwill and maintained good relations and respect between colleagues. Managers in this study were found to be more likely to use humour to soften criticism rather than to soften directives. Used poorly, managerial use of humour has the potential to be destructive and offensive, and therefore it is better to restrict use of humour until respect between colleagues has been developed (Duncan, 1982).

Earlier in this review the concept of using humour as a functional tool to reduce tension has been discussed and presented as having positive outcomes at work. From a managerial perspective there can, however, be negative outcomes in the use of humour when used as a form of resistance to directives. Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) argue that employees use satire and pointed jokes to make pointed commentaries on managerial behaviour. They call this type of activity 'organisational misbehaviour'. Joking is a way that employees can voice a dissenting point of view and "constant badinage" (p. 103) reflects the real relationships in the organisation. Comments masked by humour may allow people to express real feelings and risky viewpoints to equals or superiors (Collinson, 2002, Holmes & Stubbe, 2003). Joking and humour cannot be limited or suppressed and managers equally should not seek to manufacture humour as they risk alienating employees. Collinson (2002) describes the control of humour and laughter as an important and 'deep-seated' managerial concern. He found evidence that managers do attempt to manage humour in organisations by repressing it, succeeding only in stimulating more humour, while conversely trying to stimulate humour often leads to the suppression of humour. A current satire on this very concept is provided by the BBC 'mockumentary' *The Office* (Gervais & Merchant, 2002). The manager in this comedy tries unsuccessfully to take the role of comedian with his staff and through this seeks to be their best friend and a great guy. He succeeds only in suppressing humour through his 'ridiculous' efforts and becomes an object of derision himself, thereby in a roundabout way stimulating the very humour that he sought to create originally. The actual humour however is created in somewhat different manner than he, as the manager, had intended. Most of the

humour that he uses to try and impress his staff succeeds in offending them in multiple ways and results in workplace conflict and disharmony. Much of the humour used by this fictitious and awful manager crosses taboos relating to sexuality, sexism and ethnicity and is an amusing example of what *not* to do in the workplace. This clever satire has captured and exploited the very likely pitfalls of managers attempting to artificially 'create' humour at work and the consequences of it backfiring. In a real organizational example, reflecting on creating a fun culture in a conservative company and the 'creation' of humour, Hudson (2001) states "efforts by an executive to artificially impose fun on a company are likely to land with a thud" (p. 52).

Executive antics are the subject of amusement to one particularly well-known cartoonist. Scott Adams, creator of the popular *Dilbert* cartoons, captures many of the idiosyncrasies of organisational life and takes particular pleasure in poking fun at managers and management activities. This satirical comic strip is often used by managers themselves in presentations and is seen displayed in many corporate offices. *Dilbert* occupies a fairly unique niche as there are few comical representations of organisational life. In the introduction to *The Dilbert Principle* (1996), Adams says that no matter how absurd he makes his cartoon strips, someone always remarks that it is just like their company! This offers an interesting reflection on the vagaries and inherent humour to be found in organisational life. A strip is included below, that comments amusingly on managers' use of humour in the workplace and the potential for using humour very badly.

Figure 2 [1]

[1] *COPYRIGHT COURTESY OF IPL/UNITED MEDIA .*

Humour and amusing anecdotes are often spread via the office 'grapevine' and employees can use this medium to seek revenge on pompous, self-important managers. Tales that are spread may be salacious, surprising, unusual or derogatory (Barsoux, 1993). Understandably managers sometimes try unsuccessfully to restrict the use of this kind of humour, to protect themselves from ridicule. More research in this area may be helpful to both managers and academics (Collinson, 2002, Duncan & Feisal, 1990, Freud, 1905).

Research specifically relevant to humour, management and the workplace is quite recent. A flurry of studies appeared around 1976, prompting a special edition of the Journal of Communication. Humour research then gained impetus and focus in the eighties and nineties, but there are still many under-researched areas inside this topic. Being such a contextual phenomenon, research needs to be ongoing to keep abreast of workplace changes and their impact on humour and the management of humour. Previous literature on management and humour has focused on four key areas; leadership (power and status), group cohesiveness, group communication and organisational culture (Duncan et al, 1990). The next sections look at these areas, collapsing both facets of group literature, communication and cohesiveness, into one section.

Power, Status and Leadership

There are social norms that govern status and laughter. For example there is the "short army laugh" (Ziv, 1984, p. 14), where soldiers know that they have to laugh when a superior officer tells a joke. This behavioural norm exists in any hierarchy and underlings are expected to laugh at the jokes of their superiors. This laughter signifies agreement with the message given by the person of higher status, shows that the subordinate has a sense of humour and confirms 'mutual suitability' between the participants (Ziv, 1984). Status differences between employees can be part of the context for humour. Employees in higher status positions feel free to initiate more humour than those in lower positions. Higher level employees are freer to use humour that puts down subordinates and lower status employees are more likely to tell self-deprecatory jokes as they do not have the privilege to 'put down' higher level people (Levine, 1976, McGhee, 1979). High status people do not tend to use self-disparaging humour as this form of humour would reflect badly on their own rank and status

(Duncan, 1982). Contrary to this, Holmes & Stubbe (2003) cite examples of team managers using self-deprecatory humour to de-emphasis status and power differences "Clearly, the mediation of power relations is an important function of humour in workplace interaction" (p. 114). In humorous workplace interchanges between people of differing status, low status people receive immunity from being the butt of jokes while high status people such as managers are fair game. Humour is a socially acceptable 'contestive' strategy that can be used by subordinates to challenge their superiors (Holmes, 1998).

Joking patterns reflect group members' status and those people that joke more readily are more popular at work (Duncan & Feisal 1990, Barsoux, 1993, Bradney, 1957). There is evidence that humorists have more social power than others (McGhee, 1979) and being considered to be humorous in an organisation confers social power to the 'joker' as others enjoy being with this person. Humour may be used by these powerful people to influence others and as a change agent (O'Quin & Aronoff, 1981). Using humour can have the effect of temporarily mitigating status roles and assuming equality between the participants for the duration of the humour (Bradney, 1957, Thomas & Al-Maskati, 1997). This raises the question, does social power gained through being humorous convert to organisational power and if so are the attributes of being a humorist retained and used in higher-status organisational roles? Can the joker still be the joker when he or she becomes a manager?

Humour can be influenced by leaders in organisations as staff members take their cues from the leaders. Self-assured leaders may use humour to appear more approachable and create a positive team environment, but others may feel threatened by humour being used to mock or deride them (Barsoux, 1993). People in authority are more likely to be listened to when they joke and are unlikely to have listeners 'snap' back at them but authority can be undermined by the familiarity required to share jokes (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999). Leadership in organisations can influence the types and amount of humour in different workplaces and is a factor of the organisational climate and culture discussed next.

Culture

The concept of organisational culture comes from viewing organisations as social entities comprising socialisation processes, norms and structures. Therefore organisational culture can be seen as a set of shared attitudes, values and assumptions that leads to specific behaviours by people in the workplace (Wicks & Bradshaw, 2002). Humour can provide illuminating insights into this company culture and its socialisation processes. The humour can vary considerably in regards to amounts and types, from workplace to workplace but it is an intrinsic part of workplace culture (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003). Jokes and humour can once again, be viewed as *functional* inside workplace culture and can enforce norms without some of the negative side-effects of a "direct hostile confrontation" (Fine, 1976, p.139). Jokes and humour can strengthen workplace culture, especially if it channels aggression towards outsiders such as competitors (Gabriel, 1999).

The humour in an organisation is a key indicator to the organisational culture and a fun culture may reduce absenteeism and retention of employees (Santovec, 2001). Organisational humour may be apparent in forms such as 'in-jokes', rites, rituals, jokes and cartoons displayed on walls, practical gags and even hazing type activities that may be inflicted upon new organisational members. Hazing activities can be inflicted upon newcomers in companies under the guise of humour and Josefowitz & Gadon (1989) suggest that group membership may be valued higher when it has been earned in such rituals. The objective of hazing is inclusion in a workgroup but when the goal becomes exclusion, hazing can turn into harassment. Mild practical jokes played upon newcomers can assist with socialisation into a workgroup culture and lead to acceptance by colleagues (Josefowitz & Gadon, 1989). Newcomers to organisations can benefit from participating in the humour practices to facilitate their socialisation process (Duncan et al, 1990, Vinton, 1989). Barsoux (1993) however, advises showing restraint in the use of humour until parties have achieved familiarity with one another.

Collinson (2002) describes organisations that actively use humour in the workplace. Southwest Airlines encourages and rewards the use of jokes at work. Ben and Jerry's have a joy committee, Kodak a humour room and Sun Microsystems encourage jokes and pranks. British Airways employ a corporate jester and many companies have silly

hat days or other fun events to promote cohesive cultures, reinforce a sense of belonging and encourage productivity. Stauffer (1999) and Santovec (2001) also cite Southwest airlines as an example of a company fostering humour and believe that humour and creativity go 'hand-in-hand'. A humorous and fun culture is seen as a desirable element for the retention and recruitment of sought-after staff and as a method of keeping people excited and motivated about work. This type of culture is considered to be particularly relevant to attract and retain the 'next' generation of employees, accustomed to using computer technology with its inbuilt fun and games style, and expecting to find enjoyment in their workplace (Buckley, Beu, Novicevic, Milorad & Sigerstad 2001, Kets de Vries, 2001).

Information Technology users, enthusiasts and professionals are seen as having a unique and specific attitude that differs at work from non-IT focussed employees. A 'fun' culture reflecting new styles of work is associated with this industry sector (Leinfuss, 1999). The Information Technology industry embodies a unique organisational culture that is based on a different set of organisational behaviours (Prager, 1999). In a study comparing organisational cultures, Prager (1999), identified that "IT professionals create their own values and hierarchical relationships ...based on a set of organizational behaviours that differs from those of non-IT employees" (p. 12). His study suggested that IT workers have more autonomy, responsibility and authority in their jobs and have more contact with customers and those in authority. IT workers are more connected to the philosophy and mission of their organisation and Prager (1999) believes that these differences lead to different organisational behaviours from those who are not IT workers. Leinfuss, (1999) concurs with the concept of attitudinal differences and adds that in the industry of e-commerce, businesses seek employees with "work-hard, play-hard attitudes" (p. 95) that are comfortable among change and chaos. She identifies the cultural differences in Information Technology companies as lying in the three areas of attitude, aptitude and ability and describes people as suitable for this industry if they have a positive, 'work-till-you-get-it done' attitude combined with giving 100 percent effort and the ability to be a team player. In the area of key abilities, IT professionals have "top skills combined with pure raw inventiveness" (Leinfuss, 1999, p.96). She suggests that IT companies care more about passion, customer-focus and community than they do about educational or technological qualifications. The individuals inside IT companies

share unique humour that is embedded in shared knowledge, codes and meanings at work. This shared humour cannot be separated from the group in which it is used, or the individuals that are involved (Baym, 2003). Therefore the implications for humour use in the IT industry are that humour may be different in this industry due to the people involved and the IT culture itself that has been identified as different from organisational culture in non-IT environments. The perceived nature of the 'fun' culture in the Information Technology industry and among IT professionals has lead to this industry sector being the focus of study in this research project.

The culture of an organisation is often attributed to the leaders who have a strong influence on the culture and on the humour that is part of that culture. They influence the jokes, gossip, stories, legends, nicknames and cartoons apparent inside the organisation (Gabriel, 1999). "Many of the managers told us that the humour phenomenon was the direct result of their general managers' style" (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993, p. 523). Norms of acceptable and non-acceptable forms of humour can originate from the organisation's leaders. There can, however, be sub-cultures and counter-cultures inside the larger organisational culture, and humour may form part of these. There may be 'in-jokes' among members of these sub-groups and the humour enjoyed by these may be counter to accepted organisational norms, thus forming an underground or resistance network fuelled by humour.

Jokes are the most widespread form of resistance and provide a release for suppressed feelings and an outlet to express risky ideas (Gabriel, 1999). Rodrigues & Collinson (1995) suggest that humour can provide a channel for employees to express dissatisfaction. The ambiguity inherent in humour allows it to be exploited through joking practices and this was demonstrated by a union group in Brazil in order to express criticism and dissatisfaction with Telecom managerial initiatives. Rather than seeing this humour as having a 'safety-valve' function for workers to let off steam, management attempted unsuccessfully to shut down the staff magazine in which the aimed jokes were published. This union magazine constituted an organised form of employee resistance that used humour to resist the current corporate culture. Ultimately the humour campaign was successful in generating employee support and changing managerial practices. Telecom management, not enjoying the constant lampooning, were forced to confront the issues presented in the joking format. The

authors (Rodrigues & Collinson, 1995) stress that humour is just one method through which organisational resistance might be expressed and humour is not always a tool for resistance but has many other well-documented functions. The managers in this case study underestimated the power of using humour as resistance and wrongly assumed that the humour was controllable, an error of judgement that Collinson (2002) also cautions other managers to avoid.

Even though humour is central to workplace experience, theory in regards to workplace culture and humour is under-examined. Books on management and organisations purporting to examine workplace culture have paid very little attention to workplace humour (Collins, 2000). The research that has been undertaken suggests a positive connection between productivity and laughter of employees in the workplace. This is achieved through humour that creates and enhances group cohesion and solidarity which can be beneficial for organisations. However, actual proof that humour improves performance is difficult to find (Barsoux, 1993, Collins, 2000, Duncan & Feisal, 1990). Collinson's (2002) studies show that humour can create a sense of belonging and can be used as a tool to assist with managerial control. Conversely, humour can be a negative part of the culture and can create divisions in groups of subordinates. Much of the research on shared laughter and cohesion from the sharing of humour has been done with groups in the workplace.

Groups

Although humour is uniquely individual it also impacts on group factors and dynamics (Duncan, 1982). There is always humour in some form when a group of people assemble to accomplish a task. Group tasks form part of group conversations that eventually dominate the group humour. Most groups appear to use humour to protect themselves from outsiders and to create a collective identity (Grugulis, 2002). Much of the literature regarding humour at work has been conducted inside small groups of work colleagues rather than investigating workplaces in their entirety. This literature has focussed on quite specific aspects of humour in the small group context. For example, Terrion & Ashforth (2002) looked at humour that insults or is a 'put-down' in a temporary group. From this study they make inferences about status, group inclusion and the role of jocular insults. Duncan & Feisal (1990) looked at the

personalities of those that initiate jokes versus those that are the butt and have developed management categories to describe these types.

In their five year study of 25 work groups Duncan & Feisal (1990) investigated who was the most likely to initiate jokes about others as well as those likely to be the butt of jokes. They studied the personalities and behaviour of members that were 'over-chosen' or 'over-rejected' for clues about humour and relationships at work. The final focus group comprised two managers and two non-managers and revealed four stereotypical categories. The 'arrogant executive' holds authority but is socially isolated and is the least likely to be involved in joking situations. This type of executive is often used as the butt of jokes usually 'behind his or her back'. The 'benign bureaucrat', although having formal authority is perceived as powerless, freely joked with, and is the butt of jokes to his or her face. The 'solid citizen' is a preferred leader with no formal authority, has joking privileges with the entire group and people want to be joked about by this person. Finally, the 'novice', a younger member or new staff member, is often the audience for jokes but it is considered bad taste to make this person the butt of jokes and this person does not usually make jokes about other members. Once novices become the butt of jokes it can be seen as a sign of acceptance by the work group (Duncan & Feisal 1990, Barsoux, 1993). The research concluded that joking makes work more meaningful and group interaction can be determined through humour and joking patterns.

Humour can be used to let group members know that they belong (Duncan et al, 1990). Being the butt of jokes is not necessarily a negative experience and can signify inclusion in a group. Put-down humour does not target less-liked people; rather less popular people are not likely to be targets for humour. Putdowns that target the more popular group members elicit the most laughter and high status people are 'safe' targets to laugh at in a group. Joking can reflect an individual's status in relation to a group, emphasise belonging and facilitate relationships (Terrion & Ashforth, 2002.) Put-down humour studied in workgroup contexts is seen as integrative and inclusive, and responsible for creating "fellow feeling" (McGhee, 1979, p.27). The joking insult can reflect genuine friendship and acceptance in a group rather than making an underhand point. Many of these joking insults reflect collective experiences and only those who are in the group, the insiders, understand the significance and humour. This

adds to the group solidarity and satisfaction stemming from being an 'insider' (Kivy, 2003). The opposite can also be true when humour is used for less positive purposes. Humour can have a malicious function inside groups that does not provide social cohesion but can be disintegrative, reinforcing workplace division, power differences, and tensions (Collinson, 2002). Jokes that may consolidate and unite a group also have the effect of clarifying those that are excluded from the group, that is, those that do not 'get' the joke. The laughter separates the 'insiders' from the 'outsiders' and humour in this instance becomes a divisive force by emphasising those that are excluded or rejected (Kivy, 2003, Ziv, 1984). Group humour therefore can be both inclusive and exclusive. "Bonding versus biting" summarises two of the opposing perspectives of humour used in workgroups (Terrion & Ashforth, 2002, p. 60). Groups are multifaceted and humour is a part of each of the many variables that make up group life (Ziv, 1984). Many of these facets provide opportunities for humour to fail or offend group members and these constitute some of the workplace issues discussed next.

Issues

The ambiguity of humour is such that what may be considered a joke to one person could be construed as inappropriate and offensive to another. Joking can raise issues for managers by impacting on civil and human rights (Smeltzer & Leap, 1988). Humour at work may fail by being found offensive rather than funny and this can occur if the humour is considered to be inappropriate to the circumstances in which it occurs, even if it is obviously a joke. Variables that contribute to a joke being found offensive concern the structure of the joke as a representation of the outside world, the relationship between the participants, and the occasion or situation in which the joke occurs (Palmer, 1994). Gender and ethnicity are two of the most common areas for humour to backfire or cause offence. Smeltzer and Leap's (1988) study asked workgroups to evaluate neutral, racist and sexist jokes in work settings. Findings showed that:

> Whites and females considered racist and sexist jokes more inappropriate than blacks and males. Inexperienced employees considered all joking behaviour at work to be less appropriate than experienced employees (p. 295).

The findings from this study have implications for organisations and are discussed further below.

Gender

Gender differences are apparent in humour styles, delivery, content and appreciation. Men assess each other on their sense of humour and male humour can often be sexually explicit. Sex is one subject that is often made the point of jokes as it is of vigorous interest to people although men show more preference for sexual humour (Duncan et al, 1990, Eastman, 1936). It is suggested that some male managers use humour as a form of control and even use aggressive sexual humour in both formal and informal settings. Mulkay, (1988) contends that using humour allows the 'unadulterated' expression of sexist views, as when speaking humorously people are not fully responsible for what they are saying. This can lead to women in organisations viewing humour suspiciously as it can provide a cover for discrimination and male dominance. There appears to be a link between managerial humour, gender and power relations (Barsoux, 1993, Collinson, 2002, Duncan et al, 1990).

Smeltzer and Leap's (1988) study found that women were more likely to be offended by both racist and sexist jokes. The results indicated that a sexist joke told in mixed company would be more acceptable to males than females. There is evidence that appropriateness may be determined by who tells the joke, thus women are more likely to tell a sexist joke in female only company. Smeltzer and Leap (1988) assert that the source of a joke may be a critical factor overlooked in their research and that future research should investigate this variable more fully. Holmes, Marra & Burns (2001) challenged stereotypes suggesting that women produced less humour than men in the workplace and instead found that they produced more humour than their male counterparts. Their study suggested that humour was a key factor in women's identity at work and that women encourage more collaboration in workplace humour.

Women are less likely to participate in slapstick, horseplay or verbal insults and tend to avoid the more aggressive and competitive forms of humour. Women do not tend to use humour to belittle and humiliate others or to enhance their own status. These uses

of humour are more prevalent among men (Apte, 1985). Men, however, are more offended when absent friends are the target of 'put-down' humour. Zillman & Stocking (1976) suggest that this is a violation of unwritten codes of male behaviour, even if done in fun. This research perspective supports the position taken by Hobbes (1640), that men do not enjoy being 'triumphed' over in the form of laughter and therefore do not like seeing this happen to a fellow man. These researchers also argue that females take putdowns in their stride in contrast to males who do not laugh easily at their own expense and are therefore also upset when a friend is humorously maligned. This is backed up by Cantor (1976) stating that although reasons have yet to be understood, it is apparent that the gender of the target of humour is an important determinant of the response and in general people prefer to see a female as this target than a male. Themes and preferences in humorous interchange reflect an enormous variety of relationships between gender and humour. It is difficult to establish a single functional link between gender and humour as meanings taken from jokes can be ambiguous and appeal to different values regarding gender (Duncan et al, 1990, Palmer 1994).

There are increasing issues for management between the interplay of gender and humour and this has resulted in lawsuits. Men sometimes view harassing actions and comments as 'just a joke' and women that complain about these are seen to be lacking in a sense of humour and may attract ridicule from colleagues. These sexual innuendos can reinforce power relations (Barsoux, 1993, Collinson, 2002). Barsoux (1993) suggests that women in an all-male group "disrupt relations" and "complicate interaction" by "inhibiting sexist banter or horseplay" (p 117). Although employees can be "too sensitive" about jokes at work, Brookers Ltd. (2003) cautions employers against relying on assumptions of humorous intent in workplace disputes. Individuals accused of harassment often excuse themselves under the premise 'it was just a joke' and it is difficult to draw the line between joking behaviour and harassment (Duncan et al, 1990). Often the line between harmless fun and harassment is crossed with jokes and banter.

A New Zealand Employment court case provides an example of so-called 'harmless fun' and joking crossing the line into the realm of sexual harassment and offence. The case Fulton v Chiat Day Mojo Limited ([1992] 2 ERNZ 38, 42), relates circumstances

where Ms Fulton, (the grievant) was working as a receptionist. She had been warned that some of her colleagues were 'offbeat' and used bad language before she accepted the job. Upon taking up the job, Ms Fulton was tricked by her new co-workers into repeating "phonetic obscenities" over a public address system, being asked to page "Ben Doon and Phil McCracken" and "Mike Hunt". The grievant when asked why she was in the job if she couldn't take a joke, felt forced to resign. She subsequently sued the employers for constructive dismissal. She won her case and although the employment tribunal acknowledged that new workers are often subject to practical jokes and should not be "overly sensitive", the joke played upon Ms Fulton was considered to be sexual harassment. The phrases that she was tricked into using were untypical of her usual behaviour, her fellow workers had laughed at her expense and this was considered detrimental to her job satisfaction and employment. Ms Fulton was awarded compensation and costs.

Conversely in Ortega v Wilson (1999) there was a complaint taken against the grievant's employer concerning a workplace in which sexual innuendo and banter was rife and many crude and sexual jokes were made as a normal part of the café scene. In this case the grievant was considered to have been mutually involved in the humour and the complainant "gave as good as he got". It was considered that the joking was not unwelcome or offensive and that the general context of the joking was appropriate and accepted by the grievant. The grievant was older, considered to have greater life experience and a power imbalance was not created (Ortega v Wilson & Anor t/a El Diablo and/or Deluxe Expresso Bar, 1999).

Litigation such as this can offer a framework for organisations to establish policies or norms of humorous behaviour in the workplace. Although some case law is found in the literature it is rare, and further analysis of rulings may be another research avenue for those interested in the adverse effects of humour. There is mounting concern over sexual jokes and parodies that are emailed to employees and colleagues and these have the potential to provide grounds for sexual harassment litigation and are already creating hostile work environments (Panko & Glenn Beh, 2002). The cases cited above were gender based but humour that targets particular ethnic groups is also a contentious area.

Ethnicity

Ethnic humour has similarities to gender humour and supports a superiority theory viewpoint. Ethnic jokes may be told as the joke teller feels superior to that particular ethnic group or may be attempting to feel superior to a group by which he or she feels threatened. Apte (1985) offers an anthropological definition of this type of humour, stating that "fun is made of the perceived behaviour, customs, personality, or any other traits of a group or its members by virtue of their specific sociocultural identity" (p. 108). The most common types of ethnic jokes identify people of a particular ethnic group and portray them in a disparaging way that implies that they are stupid, unclean or ignorant. These types of jokes are based on stereotypes of the target group, as stereotypes provide a ready-made framework that offers an over-generalisation and ignores individual differences (Apte, 1985). Ethnic jokes can be used to reinforce stereotypes and create prejudice. Often the same jokes are re-used to target different ethnic groups, the subject being interchanged to meet the needs of the jokester. The same joke used to portray Maori as criminals here in New Zealand may be employed to insult the Polish in America or the English in France. In a recently received email, a joking story was narrated of how the McClaren formula one team was replacing their pit crews with Maori crews (full version in Appendix E). Apparently their pit crews change the wheels and strip the car down in eight seconds using high–tech equipment. The joke states that the Maori crews, using only basic equipment, can remove the wheels and strip the car in just six seconds, sell the car back to the McLaren team and only require a dozen beers in payment. This joke relies on stereotypes of a particular ethnic group that state that they are inclined to criminal behaviour and more fond of beer than anything else. Hardly a vehicle for harmonious race relations! There is however some evidence that suggests that if a joke such as this is told by a member of the target group then it may be laughed at and accepted (Smeltzer & Leap, 1988). Humour that is targeted at characteristics of different groups on the basis of ethnicity or other specific characteristics springs from the natural aggressive and competitive impulses of humans. Couched in a humour frame, the hostility inherent becomes play and a symbolic form of winning and superiority. Aggression is often hidden in this play format and presented as just a joke, although the victim is the group that is laughed at (Gruner, 1997).

Ethnic humour can also be used in a positive way to offset stereotyping of groups and make them better understood and appreciated. This type of humour can even compliment the ethnic group at which it is directed (La Fave & Mannell, 1976). It can highlight an ethnic group's differentiation, distinctiveness and cultural features. An ethnic joke told within the relevant group can strengthen group morale and enhance their sense of identity, while actually increasing group cohesiveness (La Fave & Mannell, 1976, Zijderveld, 1983). Ethnic humour can be used by the actual group being maligned, in a self-disparaging way to mock stereotypes held about the group, and disassociate themselves from the insults (Apte, 1985, Winick, 1976). It may be a case of the group saying it about themselves to offset and weaken the impact when others say it. Research has shown that jokes that disparage certain groups are accepted when told by a member of that group (Smeltzer & Leap, 1988). In New Zealand this was illustrated by the popular comedian Billy T James (a Maori) giggling as he told jokes that stereotyped and insulted Maori. He also got away with teasing the non-Maori portion of the population and humorously suggests here that the whole nation would have been Maori if it hadn't been for New Zealand being settled by the English: "If it wasn't for the Poms you'd all be the same colour as me, mate!" (www.wordworx.co.nz/billt.html). He was allowed and encouraged to do this by the general populace because he was of Maori heritage himself and was so gleefully amusing and self-mocking that he avoided being offensive. "There seems to be a certain degree of delight in ridiculing ourselves" (Duncan et al, 1990, p. 273). The late Billy T created humour that appeared to be enjoyed by both major New Zealand ethnic groups, becoming a uniting factor rather than a divisive one.

Evidence neither confirms nor negates the idea that ethnic humour serves prejudice and although there are jokes at the expense of some groups, there are arguments that pose a humanitarian function of ethnic humour (La Fave & Mannell, 1976). Cultural differences can be important in the sharing of humour at work and there is the danger of humour backfiring when people are not of the same culture. Managers need to manage this cultural diversity and ensure that humour does not become the context where cultural differences are exploited and abused (Barsoux, 1993). Where once, ethnic humour at work was a mainly verbal phenomenon, there are new options for controversial humour to be circulated. Changing workplaces are providing new

challenges to managing people and humour. Resistance, organisational misbehaviour and humour are evolving in response to new communication options offered at work.

Technological humour and organisational misbehaviour

New technologies provide different opportunities for the circulation of humour. Some managers fear cyber-humour can distract from work responsibilities and there is concern over potentially offensive jokes being communicated via email. Obscene and offensive material may result in cases of sexual, ethnic or racial harassment being taken against the company. Email is a written form of communication and can thus provide a lasting record for use in legal cases. Formalised email and internet policies are becoming more prevalent as are surveillance software, audits and monitoring. Panko & Glenn Beh (2002) believe that employers that allow their employees internet and email access need to develop policies and practices that limit and restrict inappropriate or offensive material from entering the workplace. Offensive material can cause a hostile work environment. Internet humour is a potential area for censorship and conflict in the workplace and this phenomenon is one of a host of new workplace issues created by new technology and enjoyed as part of new, 'fun' workplace activities (Collinson, 2002).

New terms are being coined to describe new phenomena associated with technology advancements. 'Cyberloafing' (Lim, 2002) refers to the misuse of new technology by individuals in organisations, when they use their work internet connection to 'play' or 'misbehave'. One of the ways that employees have taken up new technology is to appear hard at work while enjoying the "world's biggest playground" (Lim, 2002, p.676). This is an area in need of more research as it has developed so quickly and email and internet use is so prevalent in organisations. New Zealand organisations are keen technology adopters and in 2001, 88% of New Zealand businesses regularly used a computer and 4 out of 5 businesses used the internet (www.stats.govt.nz). BBC online (www.nua.com) quotes losses of (GBP) 1.5 billion per annum due to employees using the internet for their own amusement. Ackroyd and Thompson's (1999) research on organisational misbehaviour considers that due to significant current organisational change, the form and content of misbehaviour is changing inside organisations. Joking is very common in organisations and new technology has provided a new playground for the sharing of jokes and humour but the content of

these can cause offence and workplace conflict. It may even be advisable for managers to create policies and practices to limit and restrict inappropriate material from entering the workplace electronically, be it supposedly humorous or otherwise. (Panko & Glenn Beh, 2002). Humour associated with technological progress is a new, fast developing phenomenon and has the potential to provide keen researchers with new and intriguing investigative challenges.

Future research and project justification

Organisations contain people that need and use humour for a myriad of conscious and unconscious functions in their working day. Humour is ambiguous making it a handy tool that can be useful in the workplace. This ambiguity results in participants in humorous events, not knowing whether a joke is just a bit of fun or if the play format disguises a deeper message. Sometimes the messages contained in humour are not even obvious to the person making the joke and reveal a true thought or feeling only in retrospective analysis. Sometimes humour is simple and just plain fun or a 'boredom-buster'. It is this uncertainty that makes humour such an interesting topic for research but also an elusive and complicated topic to study. Zijderveld, (1983) suggests that humour is under-researched due to its trivial, superficial and spurious nature. He asserts that the lack of research is a mistake as humour is a highly complex and ambiguous construct and that play has a very serious nature that is usually underestimated. As humour is often playful it too is underestimated. He contends that sociological research can "do justice to both the playfulness and profundity of humour" (p. 6).

Chapman and Foot (1976) state that there is comparatively little research in the area of humour and laughter, theorists are divided over causes and functions, and there is little consensus of terminology. Few researchers have related humour research to management and leadership. Humour could even be developed as a tool that managers can employ to achieve results, however the personal differences inherent in humour appreciation may make it a risky tool to achieve workplace objectives. Organisational environments are changing and demanding more creativity and originality from their members, creating the opportunity to use more humour. There are many variables involved in humour but knowledge is limited. Suggested research questions are; can

humour be used as a tool to enhance the managerial process? Can most managers use humour or should this be left to those considered naturally funny? What conditions most favour the use of humour? When is humour appropriate? What types of people react positively or negatively to humour? What types of humour is the most effective? What type of humour upsets people? (Malone, 2001).

Humour and management in modern workplaces is not thoroughly investigated. It is therefore a relatively new and exciting area that provides a mixture of research opportunities that offer great potential for understanding the behaviour of people in organisations. "The study of humor in relation to management has never really gotten started" (Duncan et al, 1990, p.255). Humour research is a developing field and theories and methods need to be found to examine this complex phenomenon.

> Not only is humor research novel and intrinsically interesting, but many of the organizational barriers that have plagued management research (e.g. management's fear of revealing proprietary information, concerns that longitudinal studies will cause disruptions in the workplace) may not pose major problems for those interested in humor (Duncan et al, 1990, p. 275).

There are many untapped research opportunities in the fields of management and humour. Duncan (1982) suggests a research agenda in the area of humour at work that encompasses socioeconomic and educational differences in the use of humour as well as the 'high status monopoly' where humour is dominated by the higher status participants such as senior managers. He also suggests more research on group dynamics, characteristics and humour. Rodrigues and Collinson (1995) highlight the "under-researched relationship between workplace humour and resistance" (p. 739). Researchers agree that humour and jokes are found in all organisations and that the importance of humour at work has been understated and neglected (Barsoux, 1993, Collins, 2000, Duncan & Feisal, 1990). Changes are apparent in the mediums used to circulate humour in response to technological progress and litigation processes are struggling to keep up with changes. Research findings may have practical applications for managers in regards to policies and practices that ensure that humour does not cross the line into illegal harassment.

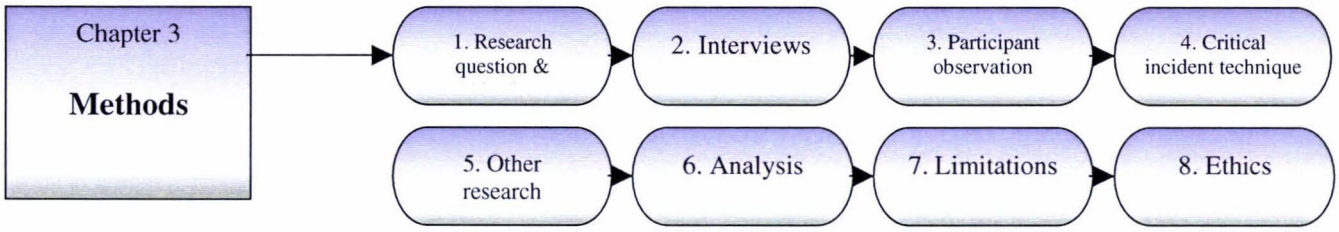
Joking behaviour is pervasive in organisations and offers insights into management and organisational behaviour. Through studying the literature, it is becoming apparent that studying humour in its many forms in modern organisations may lead to insights into organisational behaviour, group dynamics, organisational culture, contemporary issues, change management, technology policies, resistance and organisational misbehaviour. 'Reining in' this topic for the purposes of research is one of the biggest challenges of all, and defining the aspect of humour, the context and the objectives has sometimes been a matter of working backwards and first deciding what the project is *not*.

This research is not a linguistic study, though linguistic elements are sure to emerge. The research is not a physiological study of wellness and mental well-being, though implications for workplace health may also be found. This research is not about psychology and underlying unconscious desires and expressions although, once again, aspects of this are likely to be stumbled upon. This project is about the *use* of humour at work, employing a functional perspective that explores how people use humour and seek to use humour, how they think they use humour and what consequences arise from this use. It is about what is observable and self-reportable by people involved in using or experiencing humour, and by the researcher (myself) adding an informed perspective to information told, observed events, dialogue heard, and significant incidents that may occur. It is a realistic, participative and organisational account that seeks to make comments and comparisons about obvious and underlying uses and needs for humour at work.

In this research the key question under investigation will be regarding the function of humour in the workplace and associated issues. The research will explore cases where humour goes wrong and causes problems, and endeavour to find reasons for humour abuse and misuse. Humour use impacts on employment relations and indeed has been the reason for litigation and examples of this will be sought. "The growing legal and financial implications of oppressive joking relations underscore the need for much greater attention to the management of humour and the humour of management" (Collinson, 2002, p.279).

Much of the literature for this review has been collected from publications in the 1970s and1980s, when humour became a popular research topic. However, although many of the researchers from this time outlined the need for much more research in this area, there is still not a lot of follow-up apparent in the new century and the topic of humour at work is still under-researched. This is one of the few points that humour theorists agree upon. There are many avenues to explore and investigate and even more opening up, due to changes caused by the fast-paced change in technology and modern work environments. The fast changing working environment adds pressure to understand people in these environments, their responses and their well-being in order to manage them effectively and get the best results for both them and the organisation. Humour appears to have relevance and implications for the study of organisational behaviour and managerial effectiveness and may give both fascinating and useful insights into many aspects of workplace interaction.

> Humour analysis broadens our capacity to study the everyday world of organizations and enhances our appreciation of members' experiences in terms of emotional and aesthetic, as well as cognitive, dimensions. While we may not be able to fully interpret paradox and ambiguity on the basis of humorous remarks alone, humour analysis adds unique interpretive richness to the project of studying organizations (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993, p.520).



Finding the fun: Methods

The main goal of this project was to answer a specific research question about the use of humour in interactions between members of organisations. One main research question and five key objectives provided the basis for investigation, and served as the backbone of the research design.

Research question

The key research question addressed the *function* of humour in the workplace. Is humour used as a tool or strategy by people in organisations?

Research objectives

1. To investigate the function of humour within IT organisations
2. To determine the different factors affecting the use of workplace humour.
3. To describe the contexts in which humour occurred.
4. To observe and question the effects and outcomes of using humour.
5. To determine if humour can produce negative outcomes

This research can be defined as primarily 'qualitative' in its approach. Humour is a construct which is influenced by people's attitudes, perceptions and feelings, and it is difficult to actually measure and quantify. Consequently, this project does not attempt to collect quantitative data nor does it overly concentrate on statistical analysis and significance. Instead, it utilises a variety of methods that yield 'rich' accounts of

participants' experiences, and exposes the 'essence' and 'ambience' of the interactions. Berg (1998) used these descriptions when discussing the process of qualitative research and its concern with the 'quality' of experiences. He described this research method as "the what, how, when and where of a thing- its essence and ambience" (p. 2). Berg (1998) also contended that studying human activity in a precise and arithmetical manner may result in conclusions that do not reflect reality. Thus, a qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate for this study.

Qualitative research methods can be both rigorous and systematic, but there is much debate between qualitative and quantitative researchers as to the validity and relevance of each approach. This academic debate, however, rages beyond the scope of this description of methods. Both viewpoints were acknowledged and considered, with a mainly qualitative approach being chosen as more suitable for the purposes of this investigation, although future work could employ facets from both styles.

Mixing the methods

A mixed methodology approach was utilised to investigate the use of humour in three different Information Technology (IT), sales-based organisations. This approach comprised the techniques of semi-structured interviews alongside participant observation. Critical Incident Technique was also employed to find and explore significant incidents during the data collection. From the many incidents collected three were explored in depth and analysed in regards to the apparent themes that they reflected.

According to Denzin & Lincoln (2000) using multiple data collection methods is known as 'triangulation', which provides convergent evidence and strengthens research findings. Triangulation of methods reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the studied phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In using these different methods of data collection, it was intended that 'triangulation' would be part of the research design, with each method adding value and a differing perspective to the overall picture. The intention in using a mixed methodology design was that data gathering techniques would complement each other, and that this would compensate for any weaknesses arising from using a single method (Lee, 1999). By combining

several ways of examining phenomena, a more substantial and realistic overview is presented and results in more complete theoretical concepts (Berg, 1998). Figure 3 (below) shows the triangulation of the three methods and illustrates the triangle formed by the three data collection methods. A second triangle is formed as these three methods are amalgamated in the analysis processes, resulting in a rich picture that has implications for future research and management in the IT organisations.

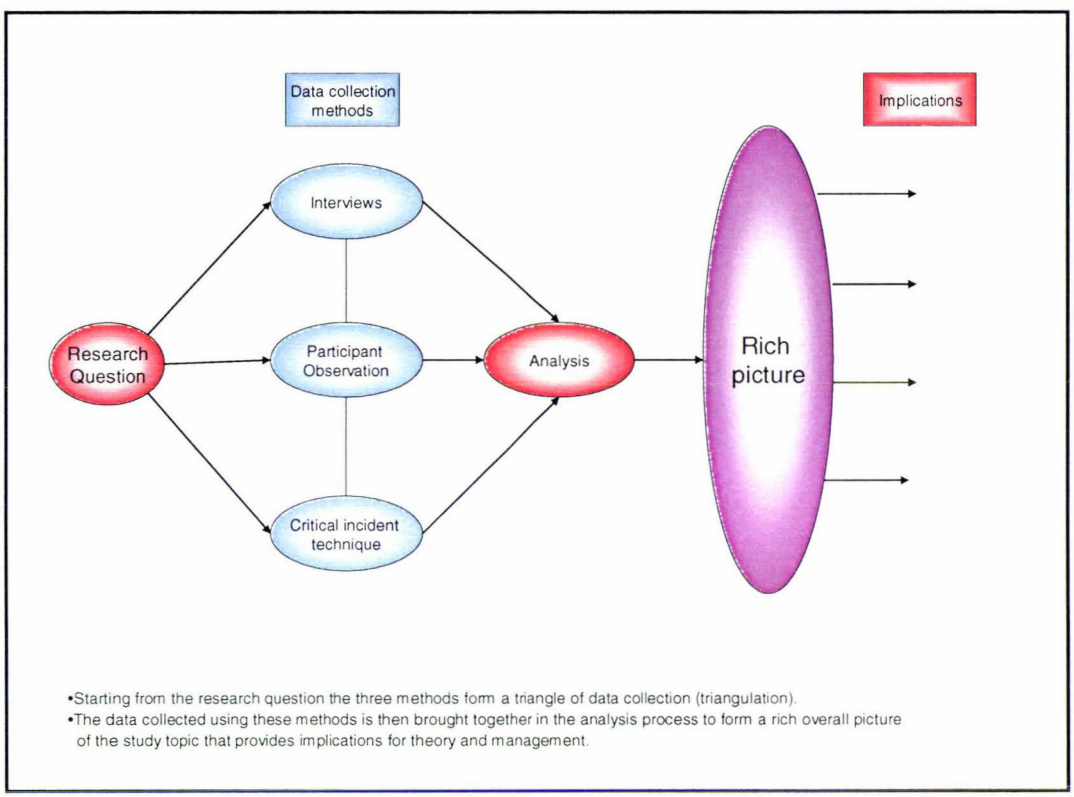


Figure 3: Triangulation of methods

Why IT?

The decision was made to focus on one industry rather than three different ones, in order to give the opportunity to compare and contrast differences and similarities in the humour uses. If several different industries had been used the differences may have reflected industry-specific differences. Limiting the study to one industry sector removes this potential confounding factor. This bigger picture comprising humour differences among different industries was considered to be a much larger project and a potential area for future research.

The IT industry was targeted due to personal experience and background in this industry. The perception had been formed of organisations in this environment as being lively, with fun-loving cultures offering the potential for a wide variety of humorous behaviour. Prager (1999) has identified this IT culture as being different than non-IT environments. Leinfuss (1999) agrees that IT companies seek different types of employees and thus have a different organisational culture.

Bryman (1988) suggests that access is one of the main problems of organisational research so personal contacts were used to gain permission to study these organisations. Initially six organisations were approached in the hope of gaining access to three and this 50% affirmative response was encouraging. Two of the three organisations that declined to participate indicated that this was due to current business imperatives and suggested that they might open to future research initiatives. One of the Managing Directors has kept in contact with developments in the project and has voluntarily contributed articles and information that he felt were relevant. The topic of humour appeared to be enticing and of interest to all of the organisations approached and perceived as non-threatening to organisations while also offering useful insights to current managers.

The work contexts observed included formal meetings, electronic communication and informal liaisons between staff. Management in the organisations showed particular interest in email humour, and it should be noted that this area could have the potential for workplace issues.

> In the contemporary workplace, there is growing managerial interest in controlling and regulating employee internet use. While jokes have always been passed around offices and factories, new technologies are a convenient means for their circulation (Collinson, 2002, p.274).

Background information

The three organisations studied were all IT companies with a sales-based focus, and all were located in the greater Auckland area. Two were of similar size with approximately fifteen full–time staff, (AlphaTech & CompuStar) and the other

comprised 45 full-time staff (BytesBiz). Of the two smaller organisations, CompuStar was locally and independently owned and operated and AlphaTech was part of a global corporation. BytesBiz was also part of a global corporation, although originally it had been part of an independent Australian company that had been purchased by a larger corporate in recent years. BytesBiz and CompuStar employed part-time and casual staff as the needs arose and AlphaTech often had organisational members from other countries visiting and working at the New Zealand branch on assignments. AlphaTech and BytesBiz had small branches based in Wellington with BytesBiz also having a small Christchurch contingent. Due to constraints such as time, availability and finance it was not possible to conduct the study across these smaller subsets of the Auckland organisations. Therefore these results present the findings of the core branches studied.

The core business activities of each organisation were to sell and distribute hardware and software computer and internet products. Further description of business activities would result in possible identification of these companies and therefore this short generic description, although not outlining the full complexities of the companies' business tasks, will have to suffice for this background outline.

Once organisations had agreed to become involved with the project and start dates confirmed, it was necessary to refine and develop the three methods that comprised the data collection triangle (interviews, participant observation and critical incident technique).

Interviews

Berg (1998) calls interviews "conversations with a purpose" (p. 57) and using interviews appeared to be a comfortable and relevant tool for this project. These interviews occurred at times that were suitable for the participant. Sometimes these were booked in advance to avoid clashes with workplace appointments, and other times a willing respondent just turned up ready to talk.

The interviews were semi-structured and the questions were intended to provide a 'springboard' to further discussion on events that appeared relevant to either the participant or the researcher. The rationale was that the researcher's perspective does affect the questions asked, but giving respondents the opportunity to extend their responses into areas that they deemed relevant gave a fuller perspective to the investigation offsetting some of the researcher perspective inherent in writing questions. Following a structured sequence of questions gave continuity to the research, as the participants were all asked the same questions in the same order. However there was opportunity for significant responses to be further developed and for the participants to add extra information as it occurred to them, which provided more depth to the data. Research can focus on what is *not* asked as much as that which is, and it therefore seemed important to allow for this in the interview design. There was also the opportunity for the respondent to add any further questions and responses that he or she felt the interview had neglected to investigate. A copy of the question format is provided in Appendix A.

When using interviews there is the potential problem that responses could be subject to 'social desirability' bias, where the interviewee is keen to 'please' the interviewer and be seen in a favourable way. This desire to please can have ruinous effects on the research and the researcher must do something about it (Simon, 1969). Social desirability effects can result in questions being answered in a manner that is perceived as desirable rather than reflecting the true feelings and attitudes of the subject. "The question of social desirability in self-reports has been a major concern for researchers and practitioners…investigators have sought ways to assess social desirability and, if necessary, control for associated distortions in participant' self-reports" (Stöber, Dette & Musch, 2002, p. 370). To offset this potential issue, participant observation was also conducted inside the three organisations.

Participant observation

Observing *actual* behaviour alongside responses to questions helps to overcome 'social desirability effect' and provide a truer picture of what is occurring at work. Observation however, has its own difficulties and is also subject to its own biases. The observed phenomena can reflect the researcher's perception of the event and thus

submit to the cognitive and emotional facets that have shaped the researcher's own attitudes and feelings. The researcher's attitudes and feelings become part of the study as he or she becomes part of the interactions and events in the studied setting. Angrosino & Mays de Perez (2000) summarise this stating, "the interaction of researcher and subjects of study can change behaviours in ways that would not have occurred in the absence of such interaction" (p. 676). However Berg, (1998) although agreeing that this does happen, argues that the effect is short-lived and that subjects soon revert to normal and routine behaviour. Berg (1998) suggests that the researcher aims to achieve invisibility inside the organisation by one of six different methods. One such method is by "symbolic attachment" (p 134) whereby the researcher participates in the everyday routines of the ordinary inhabitants and thus becoming a part of the working team leads to 'erosion of visibility' and the researcher becomes less of a focal point and intrusion. It allows normal behaviour to continue.

'Participant observation' was the preferred observation technique, because acting and behaving in a similar fashion to the organisational members enhanced the ability to become 'one of the team'. Becoming similar to organisational members was part of the research design in order to offset behavioural effects that may occur when people are aware that they are being observed. Researcher integration as 'one of the team' made people less aware that they were being observed and reflected natural, everyday behaviour patterns. To achieve this, some small helpful organisational tasks were undertaken, such as signing for courier packages and letting guests in the security-locked front doors.

An observation journal was kept, with the focus on incidents where organisational members actually used humour as a tool or strategy. Observations were also made regarding naturally occurring, spontaneous humour. As well as this, notes were taken on forms of humour displayed around the organisation and some informal questions were asked regarding any displayed humour. Emails were collected in an informal manner when staff chose to send or share them, and questions regarding email and the use of this technology in relation to humour were addressed in the interviews. Examples of emails sent are included in the Appendices (E, F, H & I). An 'ad hoc' approach was adopted inside the organisations to fit in with participants' work schedules, responding to their contributions when they were able to offer input.

By combining both the observation and the interviews it was intended that the results reflected a balanced picture that comprised both the researchers and participants' perceptions of humour at work.

An assumption was made throughout the research that actions and interactions had meaning for the participants. Feldman, (1995) states that "both following norms and deviating from them are meaningful acts" (p. 21). Norms were investigated in the research through the interviews, observations and the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). CIT was a particularly useful tool for establishing times when members deviated from the norms and it assisted in constructing meaning from these deviations.

Researcher effect

Although it was intended that becoming a participant observer would negate behavioural effects due to the research process it was not, and is not possible to entirely eradicate researcher effect on the results. Just the fact of being in the organisation does change everyday behaviour as the researcher is another and different person in the daily interactions which does therefore change them. As a pseudo organisational member for the study I laughed along with others and therefore had an effect on the humour in these companies. I allowed myself this laughter rather than taking a detached stance because (as discussed above) my aim was to become as much a part of the company as possible. Therefore it is possible that my presence has affected the results but this researcher effect is usually a factor of participant observation and is recognised and considered when discussing results.

Angrosino & Mays de Perez (2000) argue that the realities of modern research allows for immersion in the project under study in order to develop an insider's perspective. They contend that careful researchers strive not to alter interactions during the experience and suggest that biases arising from researcher effect on the study can be offset by systematic observation processes. The processes used in this project are defined as 'focused observations' (Simon, 1969) gleaning insight into the 'native' experience by concentrating on well-defined group activities (such as joking and teasing). The interviews and observations are the tools that develop these insights.

In particular, researcher gender had an effect on the results because the researcher (female) was not fully included in all aspects of male humour due to masculine culture and behaviours that precluded sharing certain types of humour with females. Fontana & Frey (2000) assert that the gender of the researcher and the respondents does make a difference, due to research occurring "within the cultural boundaries of a paternalistic social system in which masculine identities are differentiated from feminine ones" (p. 658). As much of the humour was gender-neutral this effect was only intermittently influential but the male respondents admitted that there was humour that they only shared with other males and not their female colleagues. This male humour was not generally made available to the researcher but was shared on a few isolated occasions. The places in the research where gender differences became apparent have been identified (where possible) and a limitation of perspective admitted and pointed out. Gender differences in humour offer potential research opportunities and may need to be further investigated with mixed gender research teams to offset limitations created by a single researcher giving only one gender's perspective. Holmes, Marra & Burns, (2001) also point to the gap in gender research relating to workplace humour and state the need for further research.

Critical Incident Technique

The third method in the triangle, 'Critical Incident Technique' (CIT), is a research method formulated as a speedy technique to gather and analyse data and is a useful tool to use alongside other methods to generate rich data. This method is 'behaviour-centred' and was "developed by Flanagan (1954) to identify behaviours characteristic of effective and ineffective job performance" (Gundry & Rousseau, 1994, p. 1065). CIT is a powerful tool and a data collection process that captures signs, symbols and themes that make up participants social reality (Query, Kreps, Arneson & Caso 2001). It is a research strategy that involves identifying, explaining and giving feedback on "contextually rich personal narrative that encompasses successful and unsuccessful organizational responses" (Query et al 2001).

The incidents that are observed and analysed are not necessarily dramatic or obvious, but are incidents that are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures in

organisational practice. Critical incident technique provides an interpretation of an event's significance, and is often a repeatable experience that is likely to be a typical reflection of the culture in a workplace. The incidents must occur where the purpose or intent seem clear to the observer and consequences are definite. CIT allows researchers to access participant's experience of extreme behaviour within the context that the incident happened (Query et al 2001). This contextual element has been identified as important in the study of humour (Holmes & Stubbes, 2003) and CIT allows the context to be described and/or observed during the data collection process. The incident comprises a complete observable activity that permits inferences and predictions to be made. This technique analyses memorable experiences and can be used to evaluate and identify ways of improving practices (Angelides, 2001, Radford, 1996).

Using CIT involves five key steps that begin with identifying an activity (1) and then developing data collection standards (2). The data is collected (3) and then analysed and classified (4). The final step (5) involves the interpretation of the data. The behaviour used in CIT is described in narrative or story format (Query et al 2001). In this study the activity identified was funny events or legends (step 1) and the data standards came from the consistent questions regarding these events in the interviews and data was collected in these interviews (steps 2 & 3). The incidents were analysed, classified, interpreted and presented in a table in the discussion (steps 4 & 5). This is included in Chapter Three as part of the results and discussion (see Table 2, p. 123).

The technique has been used in many research areas particularly in the health industry (Narayanasamy & Owens, 2001). There are limitations due to it being primarily a self-report mechanism and it can be subject to social desirability biases (Query et al 2001). Being part of the triangle of methods used in this research project may assist in off-setting these limiting effects.

The rationale behind using this technique in the research was that it would assist in triangulation of results, improve the richness of the data through anecdotal depth, assist in analysis of observed significant incidents and be a part of the 'quid pro quo' with the organisations in the study. As a form of reciprocity it was arranged with the participating organisations that in exchange for research access, a report would be

written at the conclusion of the data analysis. The report would comment upon some specific aspect of humour use that was of relevance to the management. For example, one organisation was keen to have the report discuss the need for policies regarding humorous email, while another was interested in humour in regards to their organisational culture. Critical Incident Technique then allowed a few particular incidents to be analysed and used to assist the organisation to improve in relation to practices in these specific areas, and appropriate recommendations were included in the reports (Appendices B, C & D). "The critical incident technique draws upon observations of direct experiences ... participants' observations of their own experiences are used to promote reflection-in-action" (Small & Cullen, 1995, p.695).

Methods used in earlier research

Support for the methods used came from analysis of the literature in this field. Grugulis (2002) examined humour in three private sector organisations using participant observation, and supported her views with interviews to elicit 'rich' data and explore themes that were not part of the original research design. Terrion & Ashforth (2002) used observation and semi-structured interviews to study a six week long executive programme for insights into put-down humour and groups, and Hatch & Ehrlich (1993) used both techniques in their investigation of an engineering management team's humour. Even as far back as 1957, Bradney became a staff member of a London department store in order to achieve total immersion and research joking relationships at work. These appeared to be both common and appropriate methods to investigate the topic and collect 'rich' data and diverse perspectives that reflect current humour use in the workplace. The methods chosen for this study also accounted for the possibility of finding new avenues that may not have been included in the research design. A researcher can bring together disparate observations through immersion in the research arena, and can create a holistic reflection of the culture or society being examined (Stewart, 1998).

Analysis

As is common in descriptive research, the main analysis method used in this project was content analysis. Broadly defined, this is a technique used to make inferences

through systematic and objective identification of specific features and characteristics in the data. The 'criteria of selection' used in this analysis process must be established at the start of the analysis and should be sufficiently broad to account for multiple variations. It should reflect messages from the text and use original wording where possible to provide consistency and rigour. The purpose of these conditions is that other researchers analysing the same data could obtain similar results. Content analysis looks for frequency of words, themes, characters, paragraphs, items, concepts or semantics or combinations of these (Berg, 1998).

Within the framework of content analysis are many different methods that can be used to induce meaning from the data gathered. A technique used in this work is a 'free list'. This refers to a list compiled of all the respondents' replies to an open question and looks at the frequency of certain words and phrases. In the interviews, participants were asked to describe their own sense of humour. The multi-varied replies were all listed then analysed for common phrases and words used. Word counts can be useful to discover patterns of ideas and it is even possible to formulate matrices or tables from these types of counts. Themes were identified from the transcripts and coded categories created for these themes and trends. A coding book was developed that reduced the breadth of the responses into manageable categories for comparison, but exemplars of real text were kept and included in the results wherever possible. The results code book was created as the research progressed. After finishing collection in the first organisation, it was possible to establish some categories of response, code them, and then continue adding to these lists as more data was collected from the second and third organisations. Where necessary the categories were expanded if a new theme or concept was identified (Ryan & Russell Bernard, 2000).

These types of analytical methods have been used by other humour researchers such as Holmes et al (2001) using contextual and linguistic clues to identify instances of humour in the workplace. The culmination of this data collection and analysis has resulted in rich and varied findings that are presented and discussed in the following chapters.

In the CIT analysis, incidents were recorded using respondents' descriptions and then a table was created using all of these incidents (Table 2, p. 123). The table presented the incidents and common contextual and functional aspects were identified. From this collection of incidents three incidents were selected due to their significance to the organisations and their perceived potential to create organisational issues. These three were then further analysed and new literature was explored in relation to themes discovered in these events. For example, in the initiation-based events, literature regarding hazing activities was sought. The literature consulted in this analytical phase of the research deviated from that considered in the literature review concerning humour studies and research. These differing directions were a direct result of research findings and analytical exploration. This reflects the on-going and circular processes inherent in research and the different directions one is compelled to travel in response to unexpected findings. The journey of humour exploration deviated down some interesting and unexpected paths and the research design had been formulated to be suitably fluid to allow these divergent directions. These diversions were followed in the analysis phase of the project and particularly in the CIT analysis where diversion from norms became more apparent.

Limitations

The data collection techniques collude to give a totally qualitative representation of the function of humour in the workplace. It is anecdotal, self-reported (using interviews) and subject to researcher bias in the observation collection and critical incident analysis. These biases are a part of all researcher–focused projects and are recognised as inherent in qualitative research but genuine effort was made to offset these limitations. They are counterbalanced by the amalgamation of multiple perspectives, resulting in a broad and rich picture of the function of humour in three New Zealand IT companies. Hari Das (1983) describes qualitative research as a "potpourri of interpretive techniques" (p. 303) and diversity of interpretation has been sought in this project. The limitations and bias effects in a project such as this are compensated for by the depth and richness that descriptive qualitative research adds to the common body of knowledge. Subjects such as humour are not effectively studied in empirical laboratory conditions and must be viewed in the context in which they

occur to reflect actual real-life scenarios. Stangor, (1998), describes the advantages of descriptive research:

> One advantage of descriptive research is that it attempts to capture the complexity of everyday behavior. For instance, surveys capture the thoughts of a large population of people, and naturalistic observation is designed to study the behavior of people or animals as it occurs naturally. Thus descriptive research is used to provide a relatively complete understanding of what is currently happening (p12).

The aforementioned gender implications are an admitted limitation of this project due to a sole researcher conducting the data collection and the effects that her gender may have had in limiting collecting samples of humour that was male-oriented. Some examples of this type of humour were observed and give a limited picture of such 'male' humour.

Unexpected things happen while conducting research and they can affect data collection and results. The research methods had been developed and justified before beginning the project but some unforeseen 'ad hoc' data collection became part of the project. For example, outside of the interviews, organisational members approached me and volunteered insights and information about humour in their company. In one company they offered a written account of events, incidents and funny quips and sayings that they had written down on a case-by-case basis. Even though unplanned such offerings added to the overall rich picture that was being sought and were gratefully accepted and incorporated in to the relevant findings. They are acknowledged and admitted here and rather than a limitation form an extension and enhancement of the planned methods.

Gaining an insider perspective and richness of experiences was achieved but the limitations that are inherent in working this way are admitted and recognised. The study presents a result that is limited to three New Zealand IT companies. It is recognised that these findings may not be generalisable to other industry sectors or even other worldwide IT companies. However, the findings have specific implications for each of these companies, (presented in their individual reports) and may have

implications and uses for other similar local organisations. This data collection may serve as a blueprint or pilot for further investigation on a larger scale.

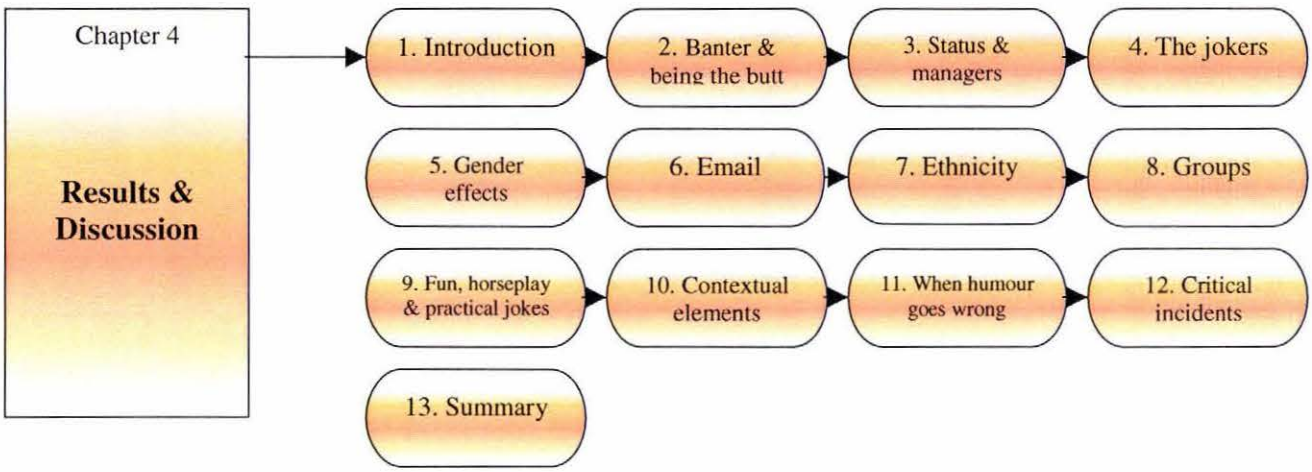
Ethics

The research proposal was analysed in regards to ethical requirements stipulated by Massey University Ethics Committee (MUHEC) (www.massey.ac.nz/). The checklist was completed and submitted to the committee and approval was given to continue with the research in a letter dated 4 April, 2003 (Appendix Q). Following the ethical guidelines required by Massey an information sheet was produced to inform participants of the objectives of the study, their rights as participants, project procedures and to advise project contact processes (Appendix P). A consent form was created in accordance with Massey University recommendations and each participant signed this before being interviewed (Appendix O).

As well as these formal requirements, arrival at each organisation was timed to coincide with a full staff meeting. At this meeting the project was described and outlined (by the researcher) and care was taken to reassure workers that participation was voluntary at all times. As some of the data collection involved observation, workers were advised that if at any time they were uncomfortable with the researcher's presence in their work area, they had the right to make this known and that area would not be observed. Contact details were supplied so that any organisational members could approach the researcher in private to discuss any concerns with aspects of the project. It was also stated that should any persons feel uncomfortable with activities observed by the researcher after the fact, that notes would be deleted or amended to exclude observations. Staff members were encouraged to seek the researcher over any discomfort or problems arising from her presence and all contact was treated with the utmost confidentiality. Interviews were only conducted among those willing to participate and no details were shared with managerial staff or any other persons. Participants were given contact details and a date by which they were able to revoke their contribution to the research, but no-one chose to do this. Workers were reassured that confidentiality was a key objective and that no identifying information would be disclosed and the organisation as a whole

would remain anonymous. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants was respected at all times during and after the research process and the editing assistant for this research also signed a confidentiality agreement.

No managerial or researcher pressure was brought to bear on any staff members to participate in interviews, although there was some peer encouragement to participate and much of this was done in a joking, teasing way that befitted the study topic. At no time during the project did any staff members express any problems or discomfort with either the observations or interviews. The subject under study appeared to be one that organisational members were comfortable and enthusiastic about sharing. Ethical behaviour was an imperative for the researcher, due to personal morals and also being known by several people in these organisations and the likelihood of future dealings with them. It was also a key objective to represent Massey University in an ethical and professional manner. Future research is planned in this topic and it is hoped that ethical and considerate behaviour will be remembered and called in to consideration for future projects in these and other organisations.



The Multiple Functions of Humour: Discussion and Results

Introduction

This chapter combines the discussion and results, presents the findings of the research, outlines how they were reached and discusses implications for using humour in the workplace in these IT companies. It also compares the *actual* findings from this project with the research explored in the literature review and highlights where these findings support the literature as well as where they contradict or differ from other researchers' results.

The key finding presented in the discussion is the answer to the research question posed in the methods section. The question of whether people use humour as a tool or strategy is answered with an emphatic "yes". However, although emphatic, a simple "yes' does not cover the complexity of the use of humour and although these findings show that humour has a function at work it was also apparent that humour has *many* functions that sometimes operate simultaneously. The various functions were both immediately obvious and latent, depending on the situation. Some less obvious functions were only revealed in reflection and analysis. The Critical Incident analysis

was a useful tool for revealing some of the less obvious functions of humour and many of the incidents were described by several different participants. The immediately obvious functions of humour were identified by interview respondents but after further questioning and analysis different functions were apparent to both the researcher and the respondents. For example in the 'Horseplay up High' incident (Critical Incident Three, p.137) the immediate function of teasing and practical joking were obvious but on further discussion with the respondent it became apparent that there were elements of an initiation test and hazing in this joke. This is explored more fully in the Critical Incidents section (p.121).

The functions of humour in these companies are identified as they arise in the sections throughout the discussion and a summary of these is presented in a table of functions (Table 3) in the Conclusions (p.142).

All of the responses from the interview participants were listed and collated in a results book. A 'free list' was developed that listed every response to each question. This list was then analysed and responses that were the same were collated. Responses that were similar were likewise grouped together and themes were identified from these groups of responses. These common themes form the sections of this discussion and are presented in hierarchical order, starting with the most prevalent themes and those that appeared to have the most significance to the function of humour at work in these organisations.

Fictitious names are used for organisational participants in order to protect their privacy and anonymity. Likewise three purely fictitious names have been assigned to each of the participating companies. These companies are known as AlphaTech, BytesBiz and CompuStar for the purposes of this discussion.

Banter and being the butt of jokes.

"Taking the piss"

Although humour proved to be multi-functional inside these three workplaces, one key function emerged strongly from both the interviews and the observations. Thirty-eight of the 39 interviewees identified 'banter' as the most prevalent type of humour

in their workplace. This was identified as a key theme after analysing responses to the interview question asking "what type of humour is immediately apparent in your organisation?" Although not all respondents used the same phrases similar ones were used such as "taking the piss", "slagging off each other" and "insulting each other" and these replies were collated into the theme 'banter'. "Taking the piss" was the most commonly used of the phrases describing banter and is a colloquial expression for teasing someone. This expression was considered as a potential title for this thesis but was rejected due to the profanity ("piss") posing a potential risk of offence for some readers. The phrase "taking the piss" was used in 24 out of the 39 interviews conducted. This phrase was used more prevalently in two of the three organisations (AlphaTech & BytesBiz) and only used twice in interviews from CompuStar members although a milder version "taking the Mickey" was used by three people in this company. Another commonly used term in regards to humour was "give as good as you get" referring to teasing and banter, implying that if you are teased you must retaliate with an equally insulting jibe.

The respondents' identification of banter as the key use of humour in these three companies was supported by the observations. Many instances of jocular abuse and banter are recorded in the researcher's notebooks and the following example was observed and recorded at a Monday morning staff meeting:

> *As people start to trickle in to the boardroom for the Monday staff meeting Mac[1] quips to his colleagues "leave the big chairs for the important people" and promptly sits in one. The banter continues with Len teased for still eating his breakfast, general jokes about the rugby test in the weekend (England vs. Maori) and Mac (Englishman) describes to all how he draped his naked body in the union jack flag for the whole weekend. This prompts guffaws and comments that this would be a dreadful sight. (Researchers notebook, 9.6.03)*

On another (observed) occasion, when staff celebrated a colleagues birthday, the 'birthday boy' was teased about turning 40 and told that he now 'officially' looked

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[1] Code names used for privacy reasons

like his dad and that the worst place that he could be on his 40th birthday was at work because of all the teasing he would get.

Workplace 'banter' emerged as the most prevalent form of humour used at work. It was on-going and used in nearly every workplace situation. This backs up Holmes & Stubbes (2003) statement that in some work groups "jocular abuse seems to be a continuous source of entertainment" (p.117). The use of humour to tease and jokingly insult others was a key finding in this study and it was consistently identified as the main form of humour used in these companies. The colloquial term "taking the piss" may be specific to New Zealand organisations and was used to refer to day-to-day banter and joking insults. It appeared to have benign connotations of fun and enjoyment rather than more offensive meanings. The humorous jesting in these organisations was, similar to that described by Ackroyd and Thompson (1999), "an almost continuous accompaniment of the serious talk undertaken" (p. 103). The findings in this study agree with those of Santovec (2001) that most humour at work happens spontaneously in conversations with people.

Status was a variable relating to banter because teasing was enjoyed more by lower level workers and less by senior level managers. Levine (1976) states that "peers have the most fun by trading inter-group jibes" (p. 173) and Holmes & Stubbes (2003) suggest that joking insults occur between those who know each other well and these are signs of solidarity and group membership. In these companies the managers were removed from much of the banter and jibes. Physical boundaries such as having a separate office removed them from many humorous exchanges as did non-physical boundaries such as status and role expectations. Therefore observing exchanges of banter indicated which individuals were in peer groups and which were not. It was possible to identify managers and new organisational members by their lower involvement in the on-going banter. Status influences on humour were so important that it is further discussed in the next section (p. 72).

Joking insults were not exchanged among those that did not know each other well and new organisational members were not insulted until they had become part of the team. Each of the three companies had a recently recruited staff member and all of these new recruits consented to an interview. A new organisational member at CompuStar

related a question that she overheard about herself, from one long time staff member to another: "How soon can we start hassling the new girl?" (Suzie, 4/7/03). Suzie explained that this comment pleased her because it signified to her that she was becoming accepted and that the "hassling" referred to, meant that co-workers would be teasing her soon, showing greater acceptance into the workgroup. Insults and teasing of newcomers were tentative at first, as jokers assessed how new members 'take a joke'. Interviewees suggested that when newcomers are fully insulted like other group members, they feel accepted into the group. Some people never achieved this acceptance and were not (jokingly) insulted which signified that they were not part of the group. In AlphaTech, the socialisation period was hastened by the alcohol-fuelled initiation rite that allowed new staff members to become part of the team more quickly through the sharing of a drinking 'test' (Critical Incident Two, p. 135). Banter and teasing accompanied this test and increased in the days following the rite. Those that had completed the rite were teased about their performance, shared the bonds of other 'graduates' and became included in more workplace banter. While I was inside this organisation the newest recruit completed the 'test' and was happy to recount his 'heroic' performance of the task to colleagues (and myself) and accepted the accompanying jokes, congratulations and teasing. Workplace banter in these companies had the functions of defining those that were part of the group from those that were excluded or not yet socialised.

The seriousness of topics included in workplace meetings could be ascertained by the lack of banter. It was unusual when banter was absent which therefore indicated very formal or serious circumstances. People appeared to judge these times effectively and knew when to desist from using banter. These banter-free situations were rare but were observed within some meetings. A very serious meeting occurred inside AlphaTech during the research time, but due to the sensitive business issues discussed I was not permitted to attend. Employees recounted the meeting in retrospect and narrated the details of the tense atmosphere and lack of joking while serious issues were discussed. They were very aware that the lack of their usual banter meant that this was a very important matter and that humour was not appropriate. However, towards the end of the session one braver colleague made a witty and lightly funny remark and everyone "fell about laughing". From this recount it appeared that humour had relieved the build up of tension and was used, carefully and cleverly as a relief

strategy when the serious topics had been addressed. The description "fell about laughing" implied that participants had laughed extremely heartily and they suggested that this was more enthusiastic than the joke had merited. As discussed by Wilson (1979) and Freud (1905), people laugh when something alarming is removed and this laughter is an outlet for emotions that have built up. This hearty laughter at a mildly funny joke strengthened the identification of *relief* as a function of humour in this workplace instance.

Banter was both spontaneous and planned. Much of it arose spontaneously in reaction to comments made or events enacted. It was planned when colleagues plotted together to tease another colleague. Planned banter demonstrated a functional use of humour as the teasing was deliberately staged in order to provoke a reaction and provide entertainment and fun for all present. For example colleagues plotted together saying, "Let's wind Bruce up about the game" when their colleague's favourite rugby team had lost a match. Even spontaneous banter sometimes had a functional purpose of highlighting annoyance (in an acceptable way), or making a point about on-going issues. In BytesBiz on-going quips about who should sit in the large comfortable chairs at meetings were observed. On one Monday morning Mac instructed a colleague to remove herself so he could sit in one of these chairs because they were "winners' chairs!" The remark was said in a joking ebullient way but made the point that he had been recently successful at business tasks and she had not.

A person approaching a group was often teased as a welcome into the group; the 'tease' came before the purpose of approaching the group was clear and formed an entry protocol. Such individuals sometimes approached a group with a cheeky comment first and the same entry protocol operated in reverse, when the group welcomed an entrant with a jibe. For example a male employee approached a group of colleagues wearing a more colourful shirt than usual (for him) and was greeted with the comment "I see its gay shirt day" (Bruce, 11/6/03) promoting laughter among the assembled group. On another occasion Alf entered a group with the (apparent) joke "you're a bitch!" (20/5/03) to his colleague. His entry line demonstrated his usual method of entering a group with a joke, and lively banter and debate followed. The entry line insulting his co-worker also constituted an example of the multi-functional nature of humour. It was a provocative way of entering the group discussion that

promoted laughter, but as the discussion progressed (observed from a discreet distance) it emerged that he was upset with his colleague Kara because she had not given him tickets to a company-run movie premiere. The "bitch" barb was provocative, made everyone in the group laugh, got their attention at his entrance, but also contained the point that he was annoyed. This technique of entering or leaving a group with a joke was observed on many different occasions but was used more often and more outrageously by the company 'jokers' discussed in a later section (p.80). These interchanges were also observed when people left the group to return to work and a 'parting shot' was common. When Alf left this group he left with the parting shot, "Karl came through for me (with tickets) but you're still a bitch!" Once again everyone laughed and no offence appeared to be taken and the so-called 'bitch' laughed as heartily as the others. These group norms were observed among peers and were only obvious to a milder extent if managers approached the group as more uncertainty greeted the purpose of his or her arrival. If a manager approached the group informally, he /she was more likely to use the humorous 'entry mode'.

Banter was often used to break up the day and add relief to boredom. After a quiet working patch, staff members suddenly thought of an inflammatory mark to make to a colleague and another round of banter began. Banter was used to re-establish connections when staff members had been out of the office for a while, cheeky remarks would be exchanged and camaraderie re-established. For example, two (physically short) female employees walked through a work area that they had not visited for some time and a very tall staff member began singing the "Hi Ho" song from *Snow White and the Seven dwarfs*. On the next occasion when the same workers came by (accompanied by this short researcher) the teasing comment was made "here's a whole army of short people" (Rick, 12/6/03). Responses in kind were made, a laugh shared and good natured working relationships re-established.

From these incidents it is also obvious that physical characteristics were highlighted and used in teasing and much of the banter observed was of this nature. Extremes of size were key targets, as well as clothing choices and changes of hairstyle. All observed incidents of such banter were tolerated with amusement and no specific cases where offence was taken were observed or reported, apart from the generic "they go too far sometimes" (Anne, 26/6/03) in reference to the company jokers.

Surprisingly, banter was also exchanged in regards to people's racial backgrounds and teasing insults regarding individual's ethnic groups were rife. For example, Samoan staff members at BytesBiz were referred to as "FOBs" (fresh off the boat) and their rejoinders involved calling colleagues "fat white boy" and "pom" among other insults. When questioned whether or not people took offence at these racial remarks all laughed and said that everyone "gave as good as they got" and it was fun to tease each other so. From my researcher's perspective and observation of these exchanges, it seemed as if the function of these types of banter was in highlighting and celebrating individual differences and diversity in this workplace. This racial banter was observed and recounted in all three companies but was more prevalent in BytesBiz that had the greatest ethnic diversity among its employees. This finding was extremely surprising as my expectation had been that humour would be more cautious and 'politically correct' in today's potentially litigious workplaces. Levine (1976) identifies that joking is one way that taboo subjects can be broached. This study agrees with such an assertion and adds that these so-called 'taboos' are even enjoyed and celebrated in these workplaces. Gender and age differences were treated in the same teasing manner.

Ullian (1976) contends that in banter the target of the joke is aware of the message but the humorous form makes it inappropriate to respond seriously because the joker can claim that it's 'just a joke". In research on banter, he discovered that people initiate and make jokes approximately the same amount as they are joked with and teased. Therefore the oft-quoted "I give as good as I get" by the IT respondents is probably quite accurate. One interview question asked respondents to identify who was teased the most at work and why were they teased. The responses were varied but two factors emerged. The same people that were identified as the jokers (p.80) were also identified as being those that were teased the most, adding support to Ullian's (1976) argument that people are teased a similar amount to the teasing they do of others. This was further supported in the observations as the jokers names were continually recorded as both 'teaser' and as the target of teasing.

Respondents commonly replied to the question about teasing by identifying themselves as the most teased employee. They considered this a positive phenomenon and it was claimed by over a third of these respondents. This seemed to add weight to

the argument that humour defines inclusion in a group or work setting (Duncan et al, 1990, McGhee, 1979, Terrion & Ashforth, 2002). By identifying themselves as targets of teasing, respondents were indicating that they were accepted and included by their colleagues. Another theme that emerged from the interview responses was that those who were teased were able to "take it". No newcomers were named in the list of those frequently teased, adding further evidence to the earlier assertion that new people are exempt from teasing until they are socialised and accepted.

There were no official rules and boundaries in teasing, but boundaries were governed by individuals' knowledge of each other and this defined which 'teases' were used with different individuals. For instance, some people were not teased about being overweight, (due to perceived sensitivity) while with others it was considered acceptable to make 'fat' jokes, usually because they initiated these jokes about themselves. One company joker referred to himself as "fat boy" and colleagues then felt free to use this description to or about him. Generally, co-workers seemed aware of each others' sensitivities and boundaries. This highlights the rationale behind limiting teasing of new people until co-workers determine and establish what is and isn't acceptable for this person to be teased about. Their reactions and responses are (unofficially) monitored as others work out what they will accept as funny.

Being the butt of the joke

Most people keenly admitted to being the 'butt' of jokes at work sometimes. Interview participants were asked to describe incidents when they had been the butt of the joke at work. The majority of people, 33 of those interviewed, professed to have been the 'butt' of jokes at work and to have been teased by colleagues. Staff members stated that being the butt of jokes was a "good thing" as it signified inclusion in the group. The most common reason to be made the butt of a joke was to make a mistake or do something considered silly by their colleagues. It was 'obligatory' to make a colleague the butt of jokes when they said or did something silly, made a mistake or even achieved a significant success. For example, Karl at AlphaTech was the butt of on-going jokes as one time on a company team-building trip he had got drunk in a spa pool and urinated in it. This was constantly brought up in teasing and on his birthday a spa pool picture was posted on the walls of his office with "don't even think about it!" written underneath. One misadventure was

constantly re-used to make him the butt of jokes. The spa pool story was recounted by Karl in his interview as well as by two other staff members. The picture on the wall was observed and noted and the story repeated by a third colleague on this occasion.

Just over half of the respondents agreed that being the butt of jokes was a normal part of their work life. Personal characteristics such as size, age or personality were also fodder for joke-making, as were the support and interest in different sports teams (particularly rugby teams, as data was collected during the New Zealand winter rugby season). Support for certain sports teams was the theme of much teasing as geographic origins were revealed in sports support. Those organisational members from the South Island were constantly teased and a fondness for sheep alluded to and emphasised. A story was narrated in the interviews, laughingly recalling that on a company-organised weekend trip, a blow up sheep was snuck into a Southerner's bed.

Personal characteristics were consistently targeted as fodder for jokes- particularly extremes of size or age. BytesBiz had two staff members over 60 (one of these being 74), and they often made jokes about their own age or were teased about age by colleagues. Short people were teased by tall and vice versa and even being overweight was a target for banter. People reduced the impact of teasing by disparaging their own physical characteristics before others could, and simultaneously indicated to colleagues that they would accept teasing about this characteristic. It appeared that demographic differences such as age, gender, geographic origins and ethnicity were highlighted and making them the butt of jokes demonstrated acceptance of these differences.

All of the senior managers admitted that they had been the butt of jokes at work occasionally. Senior managers from two of the companies conceded that sometimes they made themselves the butt of a joke because they were not teased as often as others. This self-deprecatory style was used to make them appear more fallible and approachable to subordinates. These managers were keen to be 'one of the gang' and less concerned about status, although this was a discretionary desire. In the flat hierarchies in these companies it was important for managers to be one of the team to a certain extent, therefore if they hadn't been the object of amicable derision for a while they orchestrated situations that presented themselves in an amusing light open

to teasing. This suggests a very good understanding of how humour works in their organisations and shows a functional and deliberate use of humour by managers. This self-deprecatory effect was reported in the interviews rather than observed. An office interaction was observed where staff members made their senior manager the butt of a joke by responding in a humorous and incongruous way to a serious work request.

> *The general manager of the company asks subordinates in the general office area to complete some particular work tasks. The request is made in a serious, firm, and polite manner. The joking response from one sub-ordinate is that they 'might' do it if they feel like it. The manager looks startled at first and then laughs as he realises he is being teased. Everyone laughs and the serious mood changes. A lively discussion about sports replaces the serious work request. On this occasion the manager has been distracted from the focus on business activities by his employees' humour use (Researchers notebook, 13.06.03).*

This exchange exemplifies a situation where the manager was teased and the butt of the joke, but also again shows the multi-functionality of humour. The sarcastic reply that the workers would only complete the tasks if they felt like it, may have been a form of resistance. Gabriel (1999) and Rodrigues & Collinson (1995) suggest that a joke can be an outlet to express risky ideas. These workers did not really have a choice about completing the activities and humour was used to portray the pretence that they would do the work only if *they* wanted to. The employees may have been testing the 'risky' idea that the group might not obey this directive. The joke format protected the joker and his colleagues from any negative reaction from their manager. Holmes & Stubbe (2003) suggest that using a joke to challenge a managerial directive gives an element of safety to the worker as the joke format can prevent a negative reaction. They also pose that the manager cannot react adversely to this challenge without losing face. The joke also 'lightened up' the atmosphere and having a laugh with their manager temporarily distracted him from business activities allowing everyone in the area a break and relief from work. The joker in the situation included the group in the joke (using "we" rather than "I") and acted as a spokesperson. The inclusive "we" and the shared laughter created camaraderie and good feeling in the group and one joke appeared to have served several workplace functions.

Summary of banter and being the butt

Being the butt of jokes is an important organisational factor. Organisational members agreed that being the 'butt' was a positive factor and stated that being adept at trading banter and teasing was a desirable ability. Not being the butt of jokes was rarely admitted to and appeared to indicate socialisation problems. *Not* teasing cohorts was used as a form of exclusion and most organisational members were the butt at some stage. One significant exception to this was both observed and recounted and is further analysed in Critical Incident One (p. 127). The exception reflects an organisational situation where humour had failed and caused a major problem. This problem and the resulting conflict were highlighted by a colleague's exclusion from humour and this person was not teased by co-workers.

Although most teasing was light-hearted and good natured and all enjoyed being the butt of jokes at times, this targeting of individuals was used to reflect social status within the various groups. Those that were teased the most also appeared to be the most popular and well-liked. Those that were disliked, quiet, newcomers or in senior managerial roles were rarely the butt of jokes. Therefore it was possible to glean an organisational picture of social status through observation of those teased and those not teased. Making others and oneself the butt of jokes reflected functions of humour that created harmony and strengthened group bonds, showed resistance to directives, provided relief from work, defined group membership and added fun to the working day.

Status effects and humour used by managers

Respondents in the interviews were asked about their organisational role and their status in the organisational hierarchy. The literature had suggested that status would have an important impact on the use of humour (Duncan, 1982, Ziv, 1984) therefore questions were asked regarding respondents' perception of their place in the hierarchy. Answering the 'role' question was relatively straightforward for participants as this had (usually) been defined for them by the organisation, although it was interesting to note that several respondents had two or three components to their role and had difficulty giving just one description. The function that they

considered the most important was accepted as the primary role and these roles are displayed in Table 1 (below).

Table 1: Respondent's Roles

Managing Director	2
2nd in charge	1
Account manager	5
Business development manager	2
Product manager	4
Office manager	1
In-house sales people	3
Operations manager	1
Marketing manager	2
Accountant	2
Accounts clerk	2
Purchasing assistant	2
Warehouse worker	3
Technician/ Systems engineer	3
Receptionist/Administrator	3
Production worker	3

Flat hierarchies

When asked to describe their hierarchical status participants required time to consider this question. Overall, most participants agreed that these organisations all operated under fairly flat hierarchies. The two main levels consisted of a top level of senior management and the lower tier comprised all other employees. Senior managers were those with roles such as Managing Director or 'second in charge'. All of the other workers classified themselves at the same level although many of these same level workers had the word 'manager' as part of their role description. Many of these 'managers' described themselves as "lowly" in response to the hierarchical question. A lot of humour was used in response to this question and there was an element of self-disparagement in the responses as if people were uncomfortable with status questions. One such response came from a person with an account manager role who described himself as "one of the minions, a pleb out there to do shit" (Zac, 30/5/03) and another response was "I'm just a worm" (Brian, 1/7/03). These replies were given with a laugh. Status questions appeared to make lower level respondents

uncomfortable and this was disguised with humour as illustrated above. This perceived discomfort was only observed at the second tier of the hierarchy. The IT industry is known for its traditional lack of hierarchy (Prager, 1999) and the responses indicated that any hierarchy made lower level workers uncomfortable. However, those in the senior management level were straightforward about their own status, comfortable with their position and keen to reinforce the idea of the lack of hierarchy in their organisation. One such straightforward reply from a managing director was "I'm the boss but we have a flat hierarchy" (Jake, 11/6/03). This section of the interview provoked interesting responses framed in humour and may be worthy of more specific research in the future.

Status effects on humour

It was expected that significant status effects would be observed and reported in regards to the humour used in organisations. However this research took place inside IT companies with flat hierarchies and status differences were not significant. It was observed that humour styles did change and were freer among peers when senior managers were absent. This was most obvious in the CompuStar organisation and may be linked to the differences in organisational culture noted in this company. Observations showed that in this company there was generally less incidences of humour, less autonomy and a quieter but more structured organisational climate prevailed. In contrast, people in the other two companies joked more freely with, and about, managers and operated with more autonomy and less structure. Although hierarchy was flat, some differences in humour use were noted between managers and subordinates, but not to the extent that previous studies have indicated. It is possible that prior research was conducted mainly in companies such as those in North America that had more hierarchical levels and stronger status effects.

A key observation noted repeatedly in meetings, was that the humour was initiated by the subordinate attendees rather than the senior managers. Today's workplaces and litigation-oriented organisations seem to have made managers wary and humour is an obviously identified area that can lead to offence and issues. Therefore the finding in this study was that higher status was an *inhibiting* factor in humour use, the higher the status the more cautious and less 'free' with humour use individuals appeared to be.

Lower status people used humour to make points, offer resistance to directives and using humour freed them from being called to account for insubordination. However, managers did not enjoy the same freedom of use and were much more careful. Lower level people were able to use humour as an outlet for their frustrations where managers had to be controlled and business-like and were at risk of losing respect due to humour use. Senior managers however, did feel free to respond to humour initiated by others but initiated much less themselves. This is an area where more extensive and focussed research may have some interesting findings for New Zealand companies.

Respondents in the interviews supported the observational findings and managers and subordinates both stated that senior managers could not "get away" with using the same humour as their subordinates. The risks of humour use were higher with higher status. The effects of status upon humour use in this study did not back up the findings in earlier research that suggested that high status individuals in organisations are freer to joke more than lower status workers (Coser, 1960, Duncan, 1982).

Duncan's (1982) research suggests that a 'joking monopoly' allows a manager to joke about subordinates without allowing reciprocity. This was *not* found in this IT research; in fact the opposite effect was discovered. The senior IT managers were much more wary of using humour than prior research suggested that they would be. From the observation and interview data it was apparent that managers used less humour on a day-to-day basis than their subordinates. Although these managers sometimes made themselves the butt of jokes to become included in general banter, they also felt inhibited about initiating jokes and stated that this was because of the risk of offending subordinates and colleagues. A few local factors may help explain this.

New Zealand culture has traditionally been classless and unconcerned with status and the oft-quoted, 'tall poppy' syndrome could be operating in workplaces. This occurs when people that achieve recognition or status in any arena are 'put down' or 'put in their place'. New Zealand managers accustomed to this ethos may be cautious about status-related behaviour to avoid this backlash. Therefore it could be suggested that the caution apparent in these managers' humour reflects an unwillingness to use their

positional status for any comments or behaviour that could derogate those at a lower level. This could be a phenomenon of the New Zealand workplace due to our smaller businesses and classless society being reflected in non-hierarchical workplaces. Murphy (1999) discussing Hofstede's (1989) culture dimensions, agrees that New Zealand organisations operate under low 'power distance' conditions. This means that New Zealand (and Australian) workplaces do not strongly accept or expect power to be distributed unequally and that New Zealanders value democratic processes. He argues that this leads to decentralised management structures and suggests that managers trust their subordinates to perform. Employees in this type of workplace view their superiors as similar to them and as accessible. In the IT organisations managers were very accessible to workers. CompuStar even had their Managing Directors working in the same open plan spaces and AlphaTech had plans to implement this arrangement. This appeared to be the way that status relationships operated in all of these IT organisations, and managers were accessible and trusted their empowered subordinates to make decisions and operate independently.

It could also be an industry-related effect as flat hierarchies are a feature of the IT industry in general. Referring to the climate in the IT industry Prager (1999) states that "IT professionals create their own values and hierarchies" (p. 12) The fast pace of this highly competitive industry means that decisions need to be made by the people on the spot, often quickly, and levels of hierarchy would slow this process down. As one IT manager succinctly summarized "It's a race!" (Wayne, 13/6/03).

Funny managers

There were three interview questions relating to managerial use of humour and participants were asked if their managers used humour when dealing with them, whether they enjoyed this humour use and if they would prefer their manager to use more or less humour. Most respondents affirmed that their managers used some humour in their dealings with them (28 respondents). There was an approximately even representation of those that stated that their manager used the right amount of humour and those that would prefer their manager to use more. Respondents stated that managerial use of humour softened their message or directive, broke down

barriers which made them more "human" and eased communication. Duncan & Feisal (2001), found no evidence that managers should remove themselves from joking patterns at work and suggest that a well-placed self-disparaging joke can help to show that he or she is real as was emphasized by the subordinates in this study, "If my manager used humour it would loosen him up and make me feel more at ease and allow me to see the real person" (Alf, 19/5/03).

Subordinate respondents also asserted that managers were not *expected* to be amusing and needed to maintain a business-like focus and perspective. It was suggested that if managers used too much humour they would lose respect and also risked causing offence. "Managers' humour can be misinterpreted as a personal attack, they are expected to drive the business not to be funny…people don't expect them to be funny" (Anne, 26/6/03).

Several managers were interviewed in this study and two of these were Managing Directors of CompuStar and BytesBiz, while a third was the 'second in charge' of AlphaTech. The managers interviewed indicated that they were extremely cautious in their use of humour, and stated that there was an element of fear and risk involved in using humour with subordinates. They professed to be very mindful of the ability to offend subordinates with misplaced or misguided humour. These managers were aware of the potential damage to their status and authority if humour went wrong and considered using humour to be a risky strategy that they could not afford to get wrong. They used general 'safe' forms of humour (such as jokes about the rugby) and remained wary of the context in which any jokes might occur. As well as being emphasised in the interviews this careful use of humour was also observed while in the organisations. The research notebooks recording humorous exchanges have far fewer incidents of humour initiated by managers than by other organisational members. Duncan, (1982) contends that managers should use humour cautiously and only after mutual respect has been developed between managers and subordinates. The managers in this study agreed and stated that they were cautious of using humour in their dealings particularly with newer subordinates. Using humour constituted a risk if they used it misguidedly. As well as the risk of offending workers managers were aware that poorly used humour could also affect their status and authority. "Maybe managers cannot afford the risks of the unpredictable double-edged tool

called humor" (Malone, 2001, p.359). The managing director at BytesBiz supports Malone's (2001) statement with his personal experience, "I have learned to be careful with humour as it can be an affront to my staff, can hurt feelings and damage my standing if it is inappropriate" (Jake, 11/5/03).

A business-like approach and focus seemed to be more important for managers both by the subordinates and the managers in the study. Although pleasant, being amusing was not seen as a necessary competency for managers. "Humour used by managers is good as long as it is not overdone and as long as it doesn't obscure their position or point" (Karl 28/5/03).

In regards to self-disparaging humour, these IT managers backed up research findings that point to the non-use of this humour technique by high-status people with too much to lose (Zillman & Stocking, 1976). The IT managers only used self-disparaging humour sparingly and judiciously one manager remarking "I make a joke about myself when it's obvious to others that I have stuffed up" (Jake, 11/5/03). As was found with lower level workers, managers also hid their mistakes or poor performance behind humour, especially when it is seen by others.

Ackroyd & Thompson (1999) suggest that groups at different status levels in organisations share jokes among their own group and this forms a demarcation. The findings in this research did point to a demarcation between managers and subordinates in humour. However, due to the size of these organisations (relatively small) and the flat hierarchies, this effect was small. Managers did not have the luxury of a 'group' to share humour among, and were slightly removed from the general humour of the workers, so it appeared that working life could be somewhat dull and lonely at times for them. It was apparent from the observations that there were times and situations when these managers left their office space to wander among staff and share some humour and banter with the general group, but serious business activities always took precedence over having fun with colleagues. Managers had many interactions with colleagues away from their immediate organisation and may have offset this lower level of involvement in humour with their own staff, by enjoying humour among peers in these off-site settings.

Humour initiated by managers was usually mild and generic in content. Knowing their subordinates' interests helps them to use humour and one example was observed and recounted in the interviews where a senior manager teased a subordinate staff member about his favourite rugby team losing in the previous weekend. Rugby appeared to be a safe topic to joke about with lower level staff members and a few rugby jokes were observed between managers and employees taking the form of teasing the subordinate that his or her favoured team was not as good as the manager's favourite.

A notable exception to cautious use of humour by managers this was found in the AlphaTech organisation that practiced an alcohol-based initiation rite, encouraged by the CEO (discussed in Critical Incident Two, p. 135). This CEO actively encouraged new staff members to drink a large amount of alcohol among his or her colleagues and enjoyed witnessing the ensuing drunken behaviour. Perhaps significantly, this CEO has since been replaced and the new CEO is reviewing this practice as a result of the report written for AlphaTech as part of this research (Appendix B).

Summary of status and managers' humour

It appears that managers understand the implications and function of using humour at work and are thus cautious in their own use of humour. They believe that the potential negative effects of their humour backfiring outweigh the positive benefits of its use. However subordinates enjoy skilful managerial humour and it makes the manager more approachable and humanizes them. It would seem that the implications for managers are that humour used well and skillfully can be a valuable tool. A functional and practical use of humour for managers is selecting non-offensive, generic topics to joke with subordinates about and put employees at their ease. If this is a difficult skill for managers to develop, then the current strategy used by these IT managers of *not* using humour is possibly the safest approach, even if not the most fun. Managers that do not initiate humour can still respond to and enjoy humour created by subordinates and the next section explores the use of humour by those organisational characters that are considered the 'jokers'.

The jokers

Within each of the three organisations staff members consistently identified the same people as being the company 'jokers'. Each of the three organisations had two key jokers and they were all male. These were identified by their colleagues' response in the interviews, to questions asking who the jokers were and why they were the jokers. Reasons given to as to why they were the jokers were based around their personality traits, which were identified as "extroverted, bubbly, loud, excitable and fun-loving". They were also credited with being "sharp" and "witty", described as the "class clown" and were typified as keen to draw attention to themselves. These jokers also identified themselves as the "funny guys" and knew that others ascribed this role to them. They enjoyed their position as the joker and described a desire to be thought well of by their colleagues. The skill that they had in this area was described by their colleagues as being "natural" and they had an instinct for being amusing without being offensive (for the most part). In general, work colleagues wanted to be noticed by these jokers and included in their fun. It was noted that occasionally these people could go 'too far' or instigate too much humour.

Even if these jokers had not been consistently identified by their colleagues I would have identified them from the observation part of the study, as their names appeared constantly in the notes with descriptions of situations and funny events they created and their (sometimes) ceaseless banter. They were also the instigators of many of the critical incidents presented in Table 2 (p. 123). The 'jokers' were obvious as they were louder than others, funnier, more outrageous and very popular. They stood out from their colleagues and much of the workplace humour revolved around them. Colleagues deemed their antics to be funny and supported this claim by their hearty laughter and as a participant observer I freely joined this laughter and agreed with the organisational members that these clowns were funny.

The terms 'joker', 'clown' and 'fool' are used in the literature to refer to those that are involved in initiating humour (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999, Duncan et al, 1990, Kahn, 1989). The terms are used interchangeably in the literature and were used interchangeably by interview participants, therefore this approach is emulated in this discussion. These terms are used to refer to those inside the three organisations that

were identified by colleagues (and the researcher) as being the 'funny ones'. All three organisations had jokers and they played an important role and had a special function at work.

Jokers are 'allowed' to say and do things that others consider 'over the top' or too outrageous, they 'get away' with more than other organisational members. They are either self-appointed or informally appointed by their peers to speak for all and they make jokes and barbed points that others are not brave enough to do. Ackroyd & Thomson (1999) suggest that clowns become a hero to colleagues by challenging authority and do not want preferment from managers. It seemed that the jokers had the task of being the workers representative and were the ones expected to deliver witty remarks in response to managerial directives and activities. This expectation was observed before and after meetings when colleagues congregated around the jokers to hear their remarks on the meeting events. Before one meeting I observed one joker telling colleagues "hurry up or you'll have to sit by the boss!" (Mac, 16/6/03) implying that this would be an unpleasant experience. After another meeting one of the jokers accused a colleague that had agreed with a managerial suggestion, of "sucking up" (Jack, 18/7/03). Many of the jokes made by the jokers were derogatory of managers but were accepted by colleagues as "just a joke". Kets de Vries (1990) states that the 'fool' "can do the unthinkable, "trespassing on otherwise forbidden territory and satirising leaders and followers. Through his actions, he provides a vicarious outlet for the most basic antisocial feelings" (p.760). Jokers appeared to use their humour to express group feelings, deride managers and reinforce bonds between subordinate group members.

Ackroyd & Thompson (1999) suggest that clowning is very unpopular with management as it wastes time and resources and distracts people from work tasks. They argue that clowns blight their own promotional chances. None of the IT jokers were in senior management roles which implied that the joker role was not complimentary with these positions, or that senior managers drop this behaviour in their higher level roles. Managers in this study were reasonably tolerant of clowning behaviour, and saw it as a way to offset pressure that staff worked under. When asked about the jokers, a senior manager at BytesBiz said;

> "They are the 'glue' of the organisation and 95% of the time they are good for the company. The other 5% they overstep the mark and someone gets hurt. Overall the good outweighs the bad" (Jake, 11/6/03).

They also appeared cognizant of the fact that jokers fulfilled a relief function at work and offered relief from business pressure. However, senior managers commented that self-disparaging humour such as making jokes about one's poor performance was not always positive, because it implied that the subordinate found this unimportant and the humour was used to hide the failure. "Humour can be used a shield" (Ben, 20/6/03). Zillman & Stocking, (1976) suggest that the joke becomes a defensive measure that deprives others of the chance to make a putdown or criticism. From observations in meetings it was noted that the jokers in this study were skilled at deflecting criticism of themselves with a clever quip which distracted managers from the point. It was also observed that on several occasions the point was not further discussed when the laughter stopped therefore this deflection function of humour was successful in these situations.

Much of the humour instigated by the jokers was self-disparaging such as one joker who described himself as "fat boy". Making themselves the target of jokes mitigated the teasing that they gave others. By giving others the chance to laugh at them they gained more license to tease others further. Jokes at their own expense 'balanced' the scorecard. Zillman & Stocking (1976) agree that as well as eliciting enjoyment, self disparaging humour places the joker in a more positive light however their studies show that this type of humour does also make the joker appears "less secure, less witty, and less intelligent" (p. 157). This was backed up in the IT research by respondents' assertion that the jokers would be difficult to respect and take seriously in management positions; "Jokers can go too far and cross the line…managers need to stay on a different level and so can't be constantly cracking jokes" (Kara, 12/5/03).

There are gender implications in these findings as all six of the identified jokers were male. In this research more humour was instigated by male workers and in particular the jokers. This finding contravenes arguments made by Holmes, Marra & Burns (2001) that women produced more humour in work meetings than had previously been recognised. Their (2001) study suggested that women instigated as much and

even more humour as their male counterparts. It is possible that the IT industry was traditionally a male bastion and women are relative newcomers into this environment therefore some male stereotypes and ascendency may still be present. Also this study was conducted over three organisations and the Holmes et al (2001) research was much broader and may offer a more general finding. Therefore these three IT companies may not be representative of general workplaces and the male dominance of the joker roles in these companies may be atypical. The IT companies studied were all male-led and this may have impacted on the prevalence of male jokers as employees were recruited by other males.

Observation showed that women in the IT study were equally *involved* in the humour but more humour was *instigated* by the six male jokers than any others. Zillman & Stocking's (1976) study found that self-disparaging humour was found to be funnier by women than men and this was also apparent in this IT study. The women enjoyed and discussed such joking incidents more than the men, in particular jokes where the jokers made fun of themselves as in the 'tummy banging' incident described below. Women in the company were keen to make sure that I saw a 'tummy bang' (this was a sporadic occurrence) and had described it to me and told me it was funny before I actually saw it occur. No males had described this event in the interviews or in informal conversations suggesting that they did not consider as funny as their female counterparts. The jokers involved in this did tell me that "the girls are always asking us to do it again" (Mac & Joe, 16/6/03).

> *BytesBiz 4.45 Friday afternoon: two of the company jokers do a "tummy bang" – they run into the middle of the open plan area, shouting "tummy bang" to alert all present, pull up their business shirts and bang their respective (rounded) stomachs together. They follow this up with some crawling under desks and then threaten to play "all boy nudie leapfrog". All present laugh, insult them and egg them on. I laugh along with everyone else- it is very funny (Researcher's notebook, 13/06/03).*

As illustrated above, jokers drew attention to themselves and were seen as extroverted, quick-witted, intelligent and not afraid to be the fool. Bradney (1957), in her study inside a London department store found that those who joked readily were

much more popular with their colleagues. This was true in the IT organisations; the jokers were popular with their peers. They enjoyed their informal role and one such character stated "I want everyone to like me" (Zac, 28/5/03) implying a functional use of humour by these individuals in respect to their workplace relationships. His frequent and lively use of humour did lead to his colleagues liking him and several made comments in the interviews saying that he was a "great guy", and "fun to have around". Most people enjoyed being around these jokers and were glad of the humour that they created. The jokers seemed to be people that were keen to show their identity to others and humour was the way that they achieved this. One joker remarked, "You share a lot of yourself in joking" (Mac, 16/6/03).

The jokers interviewed had an inclusive perspective- they used their humour to target as many people as possible so that they felt part of the group. "I encourage people to laugh even those you wouldn't think would enjoy it. I try to involve everyone around so I wander around a lot. Everyone without exception gets ragged or ribbed" (Mac, 16/6/03). However the inverse also applied, jokers quite deliberately excluded some individuals from the humour and examples of this were observed and described in the interviews. The most serious of these led to severe organisational conflict and is fully discussed in Critical Incident One (p.127). Jokers charged themselves with the task of cheering other staff members when they were unhappy or tense and had a good understanding of people and their personalities. They were able to change the style of joke shared with different individuals. It was usually these designated 'clowns' that decided when work was too dull and boring and so created a situation or incident just for the sake of a 'laugh'. Many of their pranks were pre-prepared to target a particular person or highlight an event but also many of their antics occurred spontaneously in reaction to workplace events.

Fine (1976) contends that jokers or 'clowns' attempt to outdo each other by becoming more and more outrageous. Social norms are allowed to be broken as they behave in ways that others are not permitted to and their behaviour relieves pressure for the group. Observations backed up this contention; the jokers provided a necessary function for all and got away with more outrageous behaviour than was really appropriate at work, as exemplified by the 'tummy bang' incident above. The same joker also announced that the following week there would be "bikini Tuesday and all

females must dress accordingly" (Mac, 13/6/03). This sexist comment with sexual undertones may have resulted in workplace issues if uttered by other male employees but the joker 'got away with it' and all of the women present laughed and many responded with a retaliatory jibe. Workers were aware that many jokes were outrageous but concede that different rules applied for the jokers. These words from one joker summarise this;

> "I can't afford to be too 'PC" (politically correct). Some of the stuff I do is a bit borderline but I'm not perverted or lusting after anyone and usually it's not taken the wrong way. Sometimes I say things for shock value" (Mac, 16/6/03).

The negative side of the 'joker' role was that colleagues did state that on occasion these people got it wrong and used inappropriate humour, or went too far. There was the suggestion that they used too much humour at times. "Some days it's a zoo in here!" (Brenda, 12/6/03). In all three companies several staff members did mention that the humour could be distracting and there was too much sometimes. They suggested humour could be a distraction from the more important business activities.

The more outrageous joker behaviour was observed in only two of the three companies (AlphaTech & BytesBiz). At CompuStar the humour was more careful and although the jokers were lively and funny, potentially offensive jokes such as those described above were not observed here. The jokers' behaviour at CompuStar appeared to reflect elements of the different culture evident in this company and discussed in a subsequent section.

Joker's summary

The joker fulfils an important function at work, challenging authority on behalf of self and others, providing relief from tension and breaking up boredom. The jokers can do and say things that others may not be able to. The joker is popular but this liking by others may come at the expense of advancement opportunities for him or herself. The joker reveals more of his personality than do other organisational members.

In most of the literature regarding jokers, clowns and fools, the male pronoun was used indicating that these characters are usually conceptualised as male. In this research the six identified jokers were all male and the impact of gender emerged as an important factor affecting humour use and function. The subject of gender and humour at work is an area that has rich potential for more extensive research and the gender implications in this study are discussed next.

Gender effects on humour

Gender effects were complex and difficult factors to study and analyse. The first key effect was that my gender had an effect on the study. Being female gave me excellent entry into humour shared by the women in the organisations but had the opposite effect when it came to accessing some male humour. Of course much of the humour shared was equally accessible and gender neutral, so this limiting effect was only in regards to some specifically male-oriented humour that may have been of a sexual or sexist nature. Men in the interviews indicated that this type of humour was only shared with other males.

Respondents in the interviews were evenly divided into males and females however this balance was not a true reflection of the gender balance in these organisations. Although the staff at BytesBiz was comprised of an even amount of women and men, the management team had more male representation (62.5%) and the key managerial roles were held by men, with only one woman leading a workplace functional division. The other two companies (AlphaTech & CompuStar) both had predominantly male staff, however the second in charge at AlphaTech was a woman. The IT industry has traditionally been more male-oriented which could explain this gender imbalance.

Gender differences were apparent in humour at these organisations. Some humour was only shared among members of the same gender and some of the male humour was not accessible to me due to this gender difference. This type of humour was referred to in the interviews, and both male and female respondents asserted that some humour was "just for the boys/girls". As a female (rather than the researcher), I was

included in a session that occurred spontaneously in one organisation after the previous night's company function (also attended). A group of women gathered, and shared jokes and banter about clothes worn to the event, men and their behaviour, alcohol consumed and speculation on hangovers experienced. Some of the humour was sexist but none was sexual in nature. People (mainly men) that had been drunk at the event were derogated. No male colleagues were derided in this session but customers and guests were the target of jokes. One male colleague was present nearby during this 'girl session' and he kept very quiet although he could overhear the conversation, and a few teasing insults were thrown at him. The conversation constituted a bonding activity through shared experience and humour was a key part of the process.

Much self-disparaging humour was used in this exchange among women, more than was normally obvious in mixed office interactions, therefore it was assumed to be a factor in inter-female humour. Recording the exchange as it occurred would have inhibited the interaction as people would have remembered that they were being observed and possibly behaved differently, therefore it was written up immediately after the event. This offers a reflection of research challenges in undertaking this type of participant research.

Another such session was attended in BytesBiz where a sales representative arrived to sell men's business shirts. The group that congregated to browse and admire was all women buying for partners. A few male colleagues ventured into the area but promptly left perhaps indicating that groups of one gender laughing and joking together can be intimidating for members of the opposite gender at work. Humour was used by the group to signify who was 'in' and who was excluded, in both of these scenarios as the jokes were only shared among women. In both of these sessions the main difference from other workplace humour was that it was initiated by the females, where generally in these companies, humour was instigated by the male jokers. These female sessions support findings by Holmes et al (2001) that women instigated as much, if not more, humour than male counterparts (in workplace meetings) but simultaneously contradict the earlier finding in this research that males instigate more humour at these IT companies. The all-female humour was only observed in particular situations and the Holmes et al (2001) findings were limited to meeting

situations, therefore context and situational elements may be factors in humour created and initiated by female employees. Further research may be useful to determine such conclusions.

Although able to participate in the female joking sessions, my female gender precluded me from being included in similar sessions with male workers. There were exceptions to this in two of the organisations in regards to the (male) jokers that operated in each (AlphaTech & BytesBiz). These characters seemed more willing to share all kinds of humour, whether socially 'appropriate' or not, and from these characters only were some of the more profane and ribald 'male' jokes heard (Due to extreme profanity the example is included in Appendix F, Researcher's notebook, 6/5/03). The joke was told by Zac (company joker) to a male colleague, but both were aware that I was observing and checked my reaction after the joke was told. It contained profanity, sexual and bestiality components and no such jokes were heard from any female organisational members.

It is possible that as the appointed 'jokers' of the company these individuals felt more freedom to use potentially offensive forms of humour or they may have decided that the usual male/female norms did not apply to them. The 'clowns' operated under different rules and other work members were more discreet in the content of their jokes. Individuals used to being the 'joker' are expected and permitted to be more shocking, and in these instances an intention to shock was perceived. It may have comprised a 'test' to gauge the limits of the research agenda and researcher tolerance. Perhaps significantly, after observing my reaction to this joke (I laughed), another similar joke (containing less profanity) was shared with me by one of these men soon afterwards. It was an email version which he read aloud and a written transcription is included in Appendix G. There is also the possibility that as a 'humour' researcher these jokers perceived that I would not be shocked by the more risqué humour. The joke may have been told specifically to 'feature' in the research and could be an example of the researcher presence affecting the research content, as described in the methods section. It was mainly the male 'jokers' that shared these profane and sexual jokes and this supports previous research views that men prefer sexual humour (Duncan et al, 1990, Eastman, 1936).

Gender summary

My gender may have influenced both my perception of the humour and the forms of humour that was accessible to me during the study. Being the sole researcher and female may have meant that a genuine picture of male humour was not fully shared although some examples were gathered. Future research may need to employ mixed gender teams to examine workplace gender differences and similarities in male and female humour.

Email

All participants admitted to enjoying amusing email at work and recognised that email was a popular medium for the dispersal of humour and fun at work. Interview questions showed that family, friends and colleagues were the three main sources for receiving and sending humorous email, with an even distribution in each category. A wide variety of types of email humour were received and sent, comprising sexual and pornographic content, gender-based jokes, racial and political jokes, and gentle, warmly amusing stories and pictures (Examples are included in Appendices E, G, H & I). Most people forwarded humorous email to others that they considered would find it funny, with only two respondents asserting that they never forwarded funny email. All respondents admitted to receiving large amounts of amusing email but many were deleted unread due to time constraints. More people were willing to enjoy visual jokes rather than reading long written jokes that required more time and effort to enjoy. Only one respondent admitted to forwarding jokes to everyone on her email list, all others were selective regarding which jokes they sent to which people.

Only one organisation (BytesBiz) had an official policy governing the use of humour and email although it had never been enforced. A copy of this policy is included in Appendix N. All three organisations had the ability to conduct surveillance of incoming and outgoing email but according to managers this capacity had not been exercised although employees were aware of the organisation's ability to do this. In locally owned CompuStar, the smallest of the three companies, employees expressed concern over using the company's bandwidth capacity to send large files and therefore several of these respondents stated that they were careful about sending files

that were merely humorous as it could compromise the company's electronic business functioning. This was not raised in the other two organisations as a concern. At AlphaTech and BytesBiz staff sent many large email files containing jokes that had sound, movement and text. One such example was a colourful multi-page file about friendship. It is described below:

> *I asked God for a flower and he sent me a garden (pictures of flowers moving in the breeze), I asked God for some water and he sent me an ocean (moving ocean graphics), I asked God for a friend and he sent me you. At the punch line "and he sent me you" a picture of a large ape fills the screen accompanied by a sound track of raucous laughter that continues for several minutes. (Researcher's notebook, 19/06/03)*

This joke had been sent to most staff at BytesBiz and many of the female members had enjoyed it and found it funny where their male counterparts had considered it a "bit tame". It was a widely circulated joke as it did not contain offensive material but it did use a lot of bandwidth as it incorporated sound and movement.

Email is becoming one of the most common ways to distribute and enjoy humour at work. One of the three organisations (BytesBiz) had implemented policies to cover the use of email at work in regards to humour. The other two had not identified this need and preferred to trust the discretion of staff. BytesBiz was the largest of the three companies and may have needed formalised written rules to make directives known to all. The policies stated that workers sending offensive material by email would be subject to disciplinary action (Appendix N). Defining what was offensive was the difficult part of the policy statement as different people are offended by different things, but an attempt was made and a warning to respect the fact that different people do not find the same material funny. The policy did not have a huge effect on staff as racial, sexual and potentially offensive emails were still circulated and some were even sent to the researcher as examples (Appendix H). However staff were aware of the policies and it had the effect of making them more cautious about which emails they sent to others inside the organisation. The main effect was that very few humorous emails were sent to senior managers to guard against any repercussions. A contradiction was immediately evident inside this organisation as the policy regarding

sending offensive email did not include displaying potentially offensive material in the workplace and examples of profanity, many sourced from the internet and emails, were observed in displays around the company (see Appendices K, L, & M).

Email in all three companies was governed by norms of propriety rather than workplace policy and people took individual responsibility for sending emails on to others. In all three workplaces staff members had an awareness of their colleagues and their personal values. It was this knowledge of co-workers beliefs that governed which emails were sent to which recipients. "I select the good ones for the right people" (Naomi, 4/7/03).

Gender differences sometimes affected which emails were sent to colleagues. Male staff members asserted that there were jokes that they would only share with certain male colleagues and female respondents asserted likewise, some emails were "just for the girls" (Zelda, 19/5/03). "There are many types I wouldn't forward, such as sexist jokes, it's a male thing and I am careful not to offend" (Hector, 5/5/03). This differentiation was particularly obvious in regards to sexual humour and the researcher was included in this selection process, receiving more sexual jokes from female staff members. An example of one such sexual joke, shared by a female participant, is included as Appendix H. A few milder sexual jokes were shared with the researcher by male workers (Appendix G) but it was suggested that more overtly sexual jokes were only shared with the other men. Several respondents admitted to having a "guys" or "girls" email list that they sent sexist or sexual jokes to. Therefore it appeared that people in these companies were very aware of gender differences in humour use and appreciation and changed their behaviour in email use to accommodate these differences.

Visual humour was the most popular form of email humour as it was immediate and did not require much time or effort to enjoy. Many longer, written forms of humour were deleted unread if staff were too busy, therefore email humour was an 'optional extra' in the workplace. It was enjoyed if there is time but rejected when business initiatives took precedence. People had developed systems to deal with email humour such as creating a file to save those that they were too busy to read or that they may wish to send to someone else at a more convenient time.

Several respondents described how they would take a break during the day and read and forward funny email to friends or family. Humorous email offered an opportunity to connect with family and friends throughout the working day and sending a joke to a loved one was a quick way of making contact and sharing an enjoyable experience.

Respondents complained that often there was too much email and that the same jokes and current 'fun' files were repeatedly sent by many different people, resulting in having to delete the same content several times. However, most people set up a system to deal with humorous email and were not keen to see email humour disappear from their work environment.

Collinson, (2002) identified email as a potential area for censorship and conflict at work and argued that monitoring cyber-humour, although found intrusive by employees, is essential to protect those who may find some content offensive or degrading. Many of the IT respondents admitted that they had been sent 'offensive' or unpleasant email at some time, (supposedly as humour), but that they had dealt with it in their own way, either deleting the offending item or sending an admonishment to the sender if they felt particularly aggrieved. Most respondents preferred to simply delete offensive email because in the words of one woman "everyone has different levels of what they will accept. It ruins the atmosphere and you automatically exclude yourself if you make a fuss" (Anne, 26/6/03). Contrary to Collinson's (2002) call for regulation, people in this study preferred personal autonomy for dealing with email and humour rather than wanting this phenomenon to be officially regulated by management. Surveillance and regulation of email correspondence was considered intrusive and a violation of privacy even though workers received jokes during work time and using work resources. AlphaTech and CompuStar managers also stated their reluctance to regulate as they preferred to trust their employees' discretion. Generally this area of workplace humour was well managed by workers themselves and there is unlikely to be any further action or policies unless it becomes necessary through upset staff members.

Email summary

In these three organisations email humour was operating relatively harmoniously, providing workers with a break in their day and maintaining a friendly contact with friends and family outside the organisation. Norms governing appropriate use of humour were working well in AlphaTech and CompuStar and these workers did not want regulation. The policy implemented at BytesBiz was fairly recent and it is too early to conclude whether or not it has been effective. Email humour had several functions in these organisations, such as including people in a group, keeping in touch, and providing a break or relief in the working day.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity factors in these three companies did not play a very large part in the humour that was used. Therefore this section has been included later in the discussion and is comparatively short. In regards to ethnicity the people in the study formed a fairly homogeneous sample of predominantly European heritage with a small number of Asian, Maori and Samoan respondents. The largest company, BytesBiz also had the greatest range of ethnic diversity and correspondingly more ethnically targeted jokes were observed in this organisation.

The findings regarding ethnicity came from both the interviews and the observations. No specific questions were asked regarding ethnic humour but it emerged in response to other questions such as being the butt of the joke and questions about the 'jokers' and their use of humour. No ethnic humour emerged in the critical incidents described by respondents. In this study only one format was apparent regarding jokes based on ethnicity. Ethnic jibes were only used as part of the banter exchanged face-to-face among colleagues. This involved calling each other names such as "pom", "black" or "FOB" (fresh off the boat). No actual jokes were exchanged in a traditional joke format and no racial jokes were sent via email while the study was being conducted. Interviewees cited racial humour as a type of humour which they would find offensive, yet from observation and interview responses, banter and quips about racial origins were acceptable in these workplaces. The exchanged quips did not appear to denigrate racial groups or offer stereotypical classification. They seemed to serve the purpose of highlighting that colleagues were different and that these differences were

enjoyed and accepted. Perhaps the open face-to-face component played a part in the acceptance of these interchanges and respondents knew how far they could go with each other. One Samoan respondent, discussing the teasing she endured from the company joker said;

> "He calls me fat and black and FOB (fresh off the boat). Then he tells me I can't be angry and I have to forgive him because I'm a Christian. I make English jokes about him and call him 'fat boy'. Everyone laughs" (Fale, 18/6/03).

This ethnic based teasing, although not a strong finding was a surprising one. My perception before entering these organisations was that people would take extreme care with racial differences and that these would not be mentioned or highlighted. The opposite seemed to be true particularly in the BytesBiz company and also to a lesser extent in the other two (perhaps due to the fact that they had less racial diversity). La Fave & Mannell, (1976) suggested that ethnic humour can be used in a positive way and that this offsets stereotyping and even compliments the group targeted. They found that there was no evidence supporting the idea that ethnic humour supports prejudice and conversely no evidence that it does not. They suggest that there is a humanitarian function of ethnic humour. This appeared to be the case in these IT companies and the people in this study appeared very comfortable with their ethnic differences, pointed them out in their daily banter and when questioned said that they enjoyed this banter and did not find it offensive. In discussing this type of humour several respondents once again used the phrase "I give as good as I get!"

It is possible that the people from the minority groups that were teased felt powerless to complain about this humour but the strong perception was that the exchanges were genuinely good-natured and enjoyed by all. Once again it also appeared that the jokers got away with more of this type of banter than other employees that were a little more cautious in their quips. La Fave & Mannell (1976) suggest that extreme racial insults are not encoded or decoded literally and that an extreme insult is less insulting than a mild insult as it is "cognitively restructured" as 'only a joke'. A pseudo insult is then transferred into a disguised compliment as the joker thinks the target is a good sport that can take a joke. This did appear to be the case inside BytesBiz. Some similar (but

milder) racial banter was described in the other two organisations and as similar jokes were made regarding age and gender it appears that humour is one way of addressing and highlighting demographic diversity inside these organisations. This was an unexpected finding as caution and extreme sensitivity was anticipated in racial, gender and age matters. It seemed that if humour was used these potential areas of conflict were diluted and explored without causing offence and this pointed to another useful function of humour at work, that of uniting those who are demographically different in work groups.

Not all organisational members made these potentially contentious remarks to each other. Personality and ability to use humour appeared to govern the types used and only those more 'able' use these more risky forms. Also the form of the joke was relevant as the racist humour in these organisations was only shared in face-to-face banter and not in email jokes or retelling stories in joke format.

Ethnicity summary

This was an intriguing and ambiguous area of humour, respondents stating that racial humour was offensive on one hand, but openly teasing each other about their ethnicity on the other. To make any conclusive statements about this phenomenon more research needs to be undertaken with a larger sample and inside different types of organisations.

Groups

Groups were a key component of life in these organisations. These were created informally by like-minded individuals bound in friendship and common interests or formally by the organisation itself as a part of the structure or operational divisions. All three organisations had divisions and groups and these were primarily determined by the tasks undertaken. Individuals in the study were part of several work-based groups simultaneously, such as their work team and a social group. These groups bound themselves together and humour was a big part of the binding and bonding process. The participants teased and jokingly insulted each other as they established operating boundaries and values similarities. As one respondent articulated,

> "You work among people that you may not ordinarily choose to be with, may have nothing in common and may not know in any way. Often the only thing you have in common is the person that pays you. Therefore you must find a way of connecting with these people and humour is a way of doing this" (Mac, 25/6/03).

Lundberg (1969) defines the social function of joking suggesting that joking defines and redefines social grouping and reinforces the status and ranking inside groups and between groups. In the organisations studied the groups were often defined by task similarities and proximity. The tasks required often required disparate individuals to work closely together. Humour was a tool used by these different individuals to explore differences and similarities and form bonds and camaraderie. From the observations it was noted that people who sat near each other interacted, shared more humour and formed group bonds and norms. They also shared each others difficulties and disappointments. Jokes and banter were directed at members of other groups or teams and inter-group rivalry and banter was observed. Jokes at the expense of other teams strengthened the intra-group bonds and glee and gloating was observed when one group got the better of another in verbal jousting.

Humour offered a safe way of finding out about others. Group members often shared humour regarding past events and in-group humour developed relating to these shared experiences. In BytesBiz an informal group called the Red Team was comprised of a select group of six that sat close to each other and enjoyed similar jokes and fun. This group socialised out of work hours and sometimes invited a few other selected workmates to join them. The key defining factor of membership in this group was the humour used and both of the company jokers were in this 'team'. Many of the jokes used by people in the Red team were only relevant to those in the team and were not understood by others. The team had many on-going jokes that others were excluded from, but they also chose to share some of these jokes with the entire work division on some occasions. I was unable to closely observe this team; however this team behaviour was described in the interviews by a few staff members outside the team and two inside it.

Joking insults inside groups, also called 'put-down humour' can be recognition of individual attributes and each others individuality as well as a sign of inclusion in the group (Terrion & Ashforth, 2002). In their 2002 study these researchers found that the 'put-downs' that elicited the most laughter were those that "targeted popular and well-respected group members" (p. 72) and in this IT study it was also observed that work groups were keen to tease popular members such as the jokers. These types of people were what Terrion & Ashforth 2002 called, 'safe' targets to laugh at. 'Put-downs' and joking insults are part of group bonds and trust and imply that group members' relationships are strong enough that they can say anything about each other (Terrion & Ashforth, 2002). In two of the organisations, (AlphaTech and BytesBiz) group members freely insulted each other (in jest) but in CompuStar colleagues were more cautious with humour use. The managers' styles in this third organisation were also more careful and it appeared that managerial style also had an impact on the humour used by the people in the company.

Although there may be normative pressure in groups to laugh at the same things, this shared laughter is more important to the group than the actual stimulus for laughter, (Terrion & Ashforth 2002) and such shared mirth appears to have the function of binding the group. Knowing the jokes, signified inclusion in the 'in-group' and humour was used to exclude others from a group. New entrants into work groups were excluded from this humour at first until they built a store of their own experiences with the group. New group members were not teased very much at first and after time, when they were teased it was a sign of inclusion in the group. In this research two new organisational members commented, "I'm not teased much because I'm still fitting in" (Hannah, 4/7/03) and "I'm really cautious about using humour myself because I'm the new guy" (Hector, 6/5/03).

Terrion & Ashforth (2002) identified rules for put down humour inside groups and one of these rules was that certain people should not be the target of jokes. These were people with particular characteristics (such as physical attributes), loners, new people or disliked people. This became a factor inside BytesBiz where a new staff member created conflict in her work group complaining that the humour that they used was inappropriate for work (Critical Incident One, p. 127). This member quickly became disliked and no 'put-down' humour was directed at her, resulting in her

alienation from the group and she never became accepted in the team. This previously cohesive group felt a threat from the new entrant and closed ranks to exclude her from the humour, as this had been the area of conflict. Task assistance was maintained, because performance for the team as important, therefore humour was used as the tool for exclusion.

Humour was useful in requesting help from people in different teams or divisions and respondents stated that they would use humour when making such a request. This was a successful strategy as according to one respondent: "I have a relationship with those I have shared a laugh with and therefore when these people ask me for help I am keener to help them. Humour 'greases' the interaction and makes it more pleasant" (Vicki, 24/6/03).

Groups' summary

The key function of humour in groups was perceived to be defining who was in the group and who was not. Humour was a tool used to signify inclusion or exclusion and groups developed their own jokes and shared humour. Humour was also used to establish the group's identity and each work group had different shared jokes and experiences that bound them as a group. Humour smoothed interactions when people had to ask for help from those in different groups or divisions.

Fun, horseplay and practical jokes

Although banter was the most prevalent form of workplace humour identified in these companies some other key types of humour also emerged and are presented in this section. These are fun, play, horseplay and practical jokes. Most of the data regarding these types of humour emerged from the interviews (85%) and a smaller amount was gleaned from the observation part of the study (15%). Respondents recounted examples of these types of humour in regards to the questions asking them to describe a funny workplace incident and to describe any company legends of which they were aware. Many of the same stories within each organisation were described by several participants giving a fuller and richer account of each incident. Many participants described more than one incident and much laughter was invoked during the retelling (from both the narrator and the researcher). These incidents have been collated and

tabled (Table 2, p. 123) and further analysed in the Critical Incidents section. The 15 % of observed incidents were also described by some participants giving a multiple-perspective to parts of the study as was planned in the research design. Interviewees were also asked about fun days or events at work and whether they would like to see more (or less) fun activities.

Fun at work

When asked about the amount of fun in their workplaces the participants were evenly divided over between those wanting more fun and those quite satisfied with the amount that occurred. No-one said that they would like less fun at work but ten respondents admitted that they did not want fun organised for them by the company as "fun by committee just does not work" (Mac, 16/6/03). These people preferred fun to occur in a spontaneous way. Ironically, in BytesBiz where the highest amounts of fun activities were observed and described in interviews, the highest number of respondents said they would prefer to see more fun and humour at work. Correspondingly, at CompuStar where the least amount of fun was observed and described, just over 50% of respondents thought that there was enough fun at work while less than half wished to see more fun activities. Staff at CompuStar connected the amount of fun at work inversely to the rate and intensity of business activities, the busier that they were the less humour that occurred and vice versa. Fun days were enjoyed by most respondents in these companies (31) as long as they did not become too artificial or contrived and most people agreed that they would participate in company-organised fun initiatives at work as long as it did not use their personal time.

Fun emerged as a category of humour inside these organisations. Respondents used the terms humour and fun interchangeably which reflected the approach taken in this research. However, there were some perceived subtle differences. The term 'fun' was used in reference to physical humour such as clowning or actual *events,* rather than verbal banter and wit. Fun at work was cited in reference to dress-up theme days or occurrences that were just to be enjoyed for the sake of fun. It incorporated nonsense humour such as *Barry the Singing Sock* invented by the joker at BytesBiz to add silliness and play into the workplace. At random times Barry was brought out and recited messages, spoke nonsense or (as his name suggested), sang funny songs.

According to Dandridge (1986) fun is associated with play which he defines as a "freely chosen activity, something we do because we *want* to rather than *have* to" (p. 161, emphasis in original). 'Play' is for mere enjoyment rather than having the productive goal that 'work' does and Dandridge (1986) believes that organisations which encourage play get functional benefits in the form of organisational unity and renewed vitality from employees. *Barry the Singing Sock* is a type of play or game at BytesBiz that generates excitement and humour. Burawoy (1979) defined such workplace games as "making out" and Roy (1958) called these sorts of antics "banana time", referring to a manufacturing plant where workers would call "banana time" and run to steal a banana from a particular person's lunch box. Burawoy (1979) explained these activities saying that people play games at work to pass time more quickly, make work more interesting and to create culture in the workplace environment. *Barry the Singing Sock* appeared to fulfil all of these functions at BytesBiz and the laughter invoked at his performances gave people a break, united them, and was another component of their fun culture, binding the participants in laughter. In a similar way, At AlphaTech employees kept a supply of 'Koosh'[2] balls to throw at each other, collections of toys were displayed, mini-scooters were ridden around the office sporadically and their own forms of 'banana time' were obvious. No such games were observed or recounted at the CompuStar company. It appeared that fun and games at work were linked to the prevailing organisational culture which was more fun-oriented in the two former companies.

Fun days have involved dressing up and AlphaTech has an annual fancy hat day in November to celebrate the Melbourne cup and a senior manager's birthday. Although respondents stated that they liked fun to be spontaneous rather than organised most people agreed that they enjoyed events designed to promote fun and would like to see more in their workplaces. Some respondents admitted to starting something 'silly' at work (such as throwing something) merely to introduce fun and relieve boredom from work tasks. Respondents identified that fun had the function of 'relief' from boredom, stress and tension. Fun was considered benign and healthy at work and was related by participants to organisational culture. It could be whimsical and nonsensical and

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[2] Brand name of soft spiky balls sold in toy outlets

occurred just for its own sake on occasion, and having a 'fun culture' made an organisation a "good place to work". Several respondents strongly asserted that if this component of their organisation was missing, it would influence their desire to leave the company. Therefore there are implications regarding fun and organisational culture for these companies. These IT employees expected a fun component in their workplace and may not remain if this is component disappears. This may not be true outside of the IT industry, as there is evidence that IT professionals have a different style than other professionals and that a fun culture is part of the IT workplace (Baym, 2003 Leinfuss, 1999, Prager, 1999). However, this fun IT culture was only observed in two out of the three companies so there may be several other influences that create fun cultures, such as managerial style, and more research may be needed to discover these factors.

Horseplay and practical jokes

A distinction has been made between fun and horseplay after analysing incidents of both types of humour in these companies. In contrast to fun discussed above, horseplay at work seemed to involve slightly different connotations and components. Davis & Jennings (1989) define horseplay as "rude, boisterous play" (p. 248) and contend that it can involve the high risk of serious injury or property damage. Where 'fun' seemed to be whimsical and benign, horseplay appeared more dangerous and had underlying messages. Horseplay had physical components and underlying themes not always present in fun.

Some harmless horseplay was observed in both AlphaTech and BytesBiz and many more incidents were recounted in the interviews. Incidents such as crawling under the desks and talking to the occupants from the floor were observed as well as an employee picking up and shaking the drink dispensing machine on another occasion. One of the potentially more harmful incidents was retold by one of the participants (the target) and has been further analysed in Critical Incident Three (p. 137). In this critical incident a young woman was tied to a forklift and left up high. This might have been construed as 'fun', however the young woman was afraid of heights and the participants knew this. It became a type of 'test' to see how she would handle the prank and it could have had serious consequences. The young woman may have

complained, an accident resulting in injury or worse might have occurred, or management may have found out and disciplined all of those involved.

There was the potential for several negative outcomes and this negative aspect appeared to be present in incidents defined as 'horseplay' and missing in those described as 'fun'. This incident comprised a type of 'initiation rite' as the young woman had not been at the company long. It appeared to be an isolated incident that has not been enacted upon other new staff members and was also related to this woman's relationship with the warehouse workers involved. The underlying themes in incidents such as these differentiate them from 'fun' however the retelling still invoked much laughter and elements of pride. The story was offered in response to the question about humorous incidents and was considered to be funny by the participants including the woman who was hoisted.

Practical jokes can be either fun or horseplay. Some have the elements discussed above, such as dangerous or even illegal components and many would be forbidden by management if they were aware of them. Some jokes can be part of an initiation test to see how newer members react whereas others are just harmless fun. Many practical jokes are enacted in a group situation and comprise acts of bravado that would not be attempted by lone individuals. Stealing a penguin from a theme park during a company conference function is one such example recounted in this study. This practical joke has since achieved 'legend' status in the organisation and it is unlikely that any single individual would have undertaken this theft alone. Practical jokes require several participants and group encouragement at work. Practical jokes can be warm and nurturing of colleagues such as the group of workers in BytesBiz that spent several weeks making hundreds of origami (paper) birds that they then hung in a colleague's office while she was out. This joke was well-received, harmless and made the recipient feel appreciated and nurtured. This prank was planned as a practical joke, just for a laugh, but had positive outcomes for group bonding that the creators had not fully anticipated. The birds are still hanging in the office. Having a practical joke played on oneself can make recipients feel included and liked by peers. Equally they can be considered annoying and distracting and individual reactions were varied. Most practical jokes described in this study were taken in good spirits

and considered funny. There are implications for the companies in the incidents that contained unlawful or dangerous components.

Contextual elements of humour

Holmes & Stubbes (2003) assert that most workplace humour is "context-bound" and that utterances or events that cause hilarity and mirth among group members may not be particularly amusing to outsiders. Humour is dependant on its context and often can not be recounted or enjoyed by those that were not there (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993) and it is this contextual element that gives humour importance in the area of organisational behaviour. Humour was studied inside these companies to elicit an in-depth picture of function and meaning and many different workplace situations including typical daily situations, were studied. Organisational culture was considered as part of the contextual picture, as were meetings, off-site events and the company environment. Observations provided much of the data on the contextual elements regarding culture, the workplace environment and meetings. Generic staff meetings (usually held Monday mornings) were attended and observations conducted and recorded. This observational data was supported by the interviews and some questions were asked about when and where humour occurs as well as asking participants in which situations humour was either helpful or unhelpful. Data regarding off-site events was primarily recounted by interviewees but one company function was attended at AlphaTech giving a fuller picture of such events.

Culture

Although no specific questions were asked about culture, humour was identified as part of the workplace culture in the responses to other questions and in the final open question where respondents had the opportunity to add anything further. The use of humour at work was connected with a happy and positive culture. We "work hard-play hard" was repeated by several people in all three companies. Humour was rated as a very important element of the work environment by most people. When identifying humour as part of organisational culture the words of one respondent reflected a common theme in the interview responses, "Humour is a cultural thing and provides the 'grease in the machine' of our corporate culture" (Kara, 7/5/03).

Adjusting to the humour was seen as an important part of the socialisation process that happened when joining the company and one respondent admitted that it took her three months to adjust to the humour in her organisation, but also identified that the ability to have fun at work was a major reason for her to work in this company. A case where this socialisation and assimilation into the culture and workplace humour went awry and caused conflict is presented as Critical Incident One (p. 127) and socialisation issues are further investigated.

Alcohol was clearly a factor of the culture in two of the three organisations (AlphaTech & BytesBiz) and respondents consistently linked alcohol consumption with the fun and play components of their workplace culture. Although it was referred to in CompuStar, alcohol did not comprise such a major part of the cultural environment as it did in the other two companies. A link was made between humour and alcohol by 31 of the 39 participants over the three companies but less of these responses came from CompuStar respondents. Although there were no specific questions regarding alcohol there were 56 direct (unsolicited) references to this throughout the interview responses. The eight respondents that did not refer to alcohol as a part of workplace humour included the two Managing Directors that were interviewed. This humour-alcohol link appeared to form an integral part of the culture in two of these companies and could also suggest that alcohol is a part of the culture in the local IT industry. In the words of one respondent "There is more alcohol in the IT industry than any other industry I know" (Amy, 17/6/03).

Ames, Grube & Moore (2000) suggest that alcohol behaviour in workplaces is affected by the organisational culture and that this influences norms and patterns of employee drinking at work. Workplace drinking patterns were also affected by the employees' perceptions of social availability of alcohol at work. From both the observations and interviews in this study, the employees' perceptions of alcohol at work showed that it was an important factor and freely available. Many after-hours functions occur in the local IT industry and staff are often required to attend as part of their job expectations. Alcohol is always available at these events and staff are free to enjoy this 'perk' while still officially working. Alcohol and the associated relaxation and enjoyment bring the play-hard part of the dichotomy into the work-hard ethos.

Enjoying a few drinks with clients, vendors and colleagues in a semi-formal work setting was a common situation where working hard and playing hard had blurred boundaries and became part of the same context.

BytesBiz had a large fridge at their premises well-stocked with all kinds of alcohol (and soft drinks). This was freely available to staff members and the fridge was not locked. The consumption of these beverages was governed by cultural norms rather than official rules and respondents agreed that no-one abused this privilege. From observation it was noted that employees began talking about "beer o'clock" (4 o'clock) on Friday afternoons and that was considered the appropriate time to have a drink. All staff members appeared to abide by this social norm. Many of those that chose to have an alcoholic drink took it back to their desk and continued working if they still had tasks to complete. Some employees drank, jested and played while others in the same area drank and finished tasks, and others just worked. This reflected once again the work hard-play hard dichotomy in operation.

Humour is a part of organisational culture that is unique and can help define the organisation. Understanding joking patterns can give an appreciation and insight to the culture in an organisation (Fine, 1976). It also can reflect organisational values and norms. "Shared humour emphasises common ground and shared norms" (Holmes & Stubbes, 2003). In BytesBiz where a variety of profane and sexual humour was openly displayed, there was little censorship by managers regarding what individuals displayed in their work areas. This was governed by group norms and these displays and lack of official censorship reflected the autonomy that was a part of this company's culture. The lively and raucous banter (often profane) also reflected this autonomy and lack of regulation in their humorous activities. It seemed that people expected to work without structured managerial direction and required to make important business decisions autonomously must also decide their own norms of behaviour in regards to humour use. This was also found in AlphaTech regarding daily humour use. It may be problematic for these companies to expect autonomous task performance while regulating facets of everyday behaviour such as joke sharing. Staff at CompuStar were less autonomous than those at AlphaTech and BytesBiz as there were less sales people and more office-bound workers. CompuStar had far lower levels of profanity and ribald humour and from observation and interview responses it

appeared that the managers' cautious and business-like behaviour was emulated by the staff in this organisation. One long term staff member stated "Dan and Pete would never say anything insensitive or hurtful; they are very gentle and careful" (Margaret, 4/7/03). This perception was reinforced when observing a CompuStar staff work gathering that the managers did not attend, and the humour styles were less restrained and more teasing and joking insults took place. Some mild profanity was used but the humour style was still much more 'careful' than at the other two companies. There seemed to be a link between managerial style and norms of humour use by employees.

The slogan "work hard-play hard', quoted by staff in all three companies created the perception that these high-performing, independent people would indulge in lively and extravagant forms of fun and humour as the 'play hard' part of the motto. This perception was supported by both the observations and interviews and more research may discover if this is a key ethos of the IT industry or peculiar to these three companies. The fact that it was a part of the culture in all three does lend weight to the argument that it is part of the New Zealand IT industry culture and suggests that lively play and fun could be found in other New Zealand IT companies but to varying degrees. These degrees may be determined by managerial styles and the workplace independence and autonomy of employees. Overseas research has suggested a similar finding in North American IT organisations. Hudson (2001) in her narrative regarding fun at work refers to Silicon Valley IT companies as having "wild and crazy cultures, with pillow fights around the foosball table the order of the day" (p.45). She asserts that these fun companies still manage robust business performances while maintaining these fun cultures. Santovec (2001) agrees and also uses the work -hard, play-hard slogan in regards to workplace fun. Deal & Kennedy (1982) identify the work hard/ play hard dichotomy as a type of corporate culture. They suggest a need for play and fun inside corporate cultures to release tension and assist innovation and suggest that the fun element creates a strong corporate culture.

Culture summary

The amount and quality of humour in all of these organisations reflected their lively and vibrant organisational cultures and in turn these cultures may reflect norms in the

IT industry. All three companies were non-hierarchical and staff were empowered to make decisions and expected to operate autonomously with a strong results focus. This task autonomy also affected the fun and humour component at work for these empowered workers because they defined what humour was appropriate inside their own workplaces. Alcohol appeared to be a factor of the culture and humorous events in these companies. The norms of humour behaviour in these companies may be different from those found in other industries and professions.

After-hours events

All of the organisations in the study offered social opportunities to the staff outside of work times and these activities were funded by the organisations. These activities included evenings out for dinner, team building activities and drinks or other activities that united staff and built team bonds. These were considered important by staff and managers and purported to be enjoyed by most. Unless the event was customer focussed, these extra-curricular activities were optional and well-attended by employees. Those that chose not to attend were teased after the event and their reasons speculated upon in a light-hearted way.

Most of the data collected regarding after-hours events was recounted in the interviews but one after-hours activity was attended as part of the research and observations made. It was an anniversary occasion for one of the AlphaTech company. It was a formal black-tie affair held in AlphaTech's premises which were reorganised for the event. Although staff were encouraged to enjoy the occasion there were also prior reminders, (softened by the use of humour) not to get drunk, and to behave appropriately. A joke was made when giving these directives that it was inappropriate to offer Tequila 'shots' to the Prime Minister who would be attending the event. Even though delivered in a light-hearted, joking fashion, staff realised the serious message and abided by these rules, although several of their customers drank too much alcohol and behaved in ways that were retold by the organisation for some time afterwards. On the day after the event stories and anecdotes were recounted for amusement and entertainment.

At most of these gatherings alcohol was supplied by the company and considered to be an important factor to 'grease' the social interaction. It appeared to be an

expectation in the local IT industry that after-hours events have alcohol supplied. Alcohol helped people relax together and enjoy these work sessions but also had some other results and implications. Respondents stated that supplying alcohol meant that customers relaxed and a better bond was formed in this relaxation. As part of this relaxed situation humour was shared and people got to know different facets of each others' characters. However, there were certainly times where the 'social lubricant' was over-used and these situations had the potential for relations to become strained. There were many stories and events recounted where both customers and staff members had drunk excessively and wild and amusing events had occurred. These 'party' events were governed by behavioural norms rather than official policies although reminders were given about propriety standards before the event that I attended. The entity providing the hospitality, AlphaTech wished to keep the party under control and therefore host staff were warned at a meeting, not to get totally inebriated. It seemed acceptable (and even anticipated) for customers to have too much to drink and behave raucously. This did happen at the function attended and many invited guests were quite inebriated by the end of the evening. One such guest made a complete mess of the men's bathroom and was the subject of gossip and joking derision for some time after the party. Ames et al (2000) suggest that "deviant drinking" at work is associated with job conditions involving high mobility during work hours and absence of social regulation at work. High mobility and social regulation factors were apparent in the lives of the IT employees from all three companies, to differing extents. Many of the guests were predominantly from IT organisations and also operated under similar work conditions, therefore this "deviant drinking" identified by Ames et al (2000) may be a factor of the local IT industry but more research is needed to support such a claim.

At the AlphaTech event I attended no host staff members were identified as drunk although most enjoyed a few alcoholic drinks. In interviews both AlphaTech and BytesBiz staff emphasised that they typically drank more alcohol at events conducted among their own colleagues and with no customers present. Alcohol consumption and after-hours events were fodder for much banter and joking in retrospect and appeared to be an integral part of life in the local IT industry as respondents admitted that the same behaviour occurred in prior IT jobs with different companies. An 'after-match' session took place (informally) in the AlphaTech office the day after the anniversary

event and guests' behaviour and states of inebriation were discussed and joked about. Becoming drunk and behaving raucously is not particularly 'frowned upon' in these companies and even assumes 'legendary' status in hindsight if the behaviour is very extreme. Being teased about being drunk is a normal phenomenon and a good source of amusement at work in these companies. Similar events were recounted in both the other companies and many of these are described in Table 2 (p.123). Similarly respondents admitted to alcohol and "party-hard" behaviour in previous jobs and at functions by other companies. All three organisations and their vendors and customers regularly hosted such events and alcohol-related behaviours and incidents were a normal occurrence.

CompuStar was less involved in these alcohol-based activities and this appeared to be because of different managerial styles. CompuStar recounted less of these types of tales as they appeared to be a more conservative company and owner-operated by two more mild-mannered owners. It is possible that the owners were less approving of these types of 'high jinks' and that this attitude was informally transferred to staff resulting in less of an alcohol-culture than the other two organisations. There is also the possibility that the workers at this organisation were less inclined to reveal this type of information as they did not have a prior industry relationship with the researcher and therefore could have been more guarded in their responses. This issue of researcher effect is a possible influence in the research and has been discussed in the methods section (p.52).

After-hours summary

After hours events and parties were a key component of organisational culture for these IT companies but to a lesser extent in CompuStar perhaps due to a different leadership style. Alcohol was usually provided at these functions and was freely available, leading to some extreme and outrageous behaviour that was a source for amusement and jokes to employees. Alcohol-related behaviour could be related to work conditions such as high mobility and lower social regulation and linked with the 'play hard' ethos identified as part of the corporate culture in these companies. As alcohol was consumed humour changed and became more raucous and less inhibited, and the associated 'amusing' behaviour formed the legends that perpetuated the 'fun culture' label in this industry.

Meetings

General staff and sales meetings were observed in these three companies during the duration of the study. Fewer meetings were observed inside CompuStar due to less time being spent inside this company. Overall 15 meetings were observed and notes recorded on each. Although there was predominantly serious business dialogue in meetings, a very large amount of continuous humour was observed. It permeated nearly every discussion in the IT company meetings and took the form of the previously discussed banter and jocular insults. This was also backed-up by responses in interviews where meetings were described as "boring and pointless" and therefore respondents suggested that humour was used to enliven them. Meetings often began with informal humour about personal lives and past events before settling to serious discussion. In the meeting situation most people laughed at comments made that were intended to amuse. Jokes appeared to be appropriate for the setting and no examples of inappropriate humour were observed in these meetings. No racist or sexual humour was noted or observed in meeting situations, although some gentle and cautious sexist humour was used between men and women on several occasions. For example, after remarking that the men always ran the audio-visual equipment and then taking control of the equipment in one meeting Kara was called "evil, remote-control woman" by a male colleague (Alf, 12/5/03).

Humour was used defensively by individuals in meetings when they were called upon to publicly account for performance. Jokes were used to deliver the message that a sale had been lost or a task not completed. This observation provides an example of such a situation:

> *Staff are reporting on their sales forecasts and actual achievements for the past week. Zac did not have a good sales week and spends some time giving the reasons for this. The CEO looks stern and concerned. He reiterates the sales number that Zac had forecast and the much lower number that was reached. Zac quips "Oh well, I'm revising next week's forecast to zero sales! Everyone laughs and the meeting moves on to the next topic (Researcher's notebook, 25/05/03).*

The joke protected Zac as joking can provide 'armoury' that distances people from their emotions (Barsoux, 1993, Cheatwood, 1983, Grugulis, 2002) and Zac was possibly embarrassed or upset about being publicly called to task for his low sales performance. The joke also provided a 'distraction' function as following the laughter the CEO began discussing the next topic and Zac's performance was not further discussed. In another similar situation a salesman called to account for not landing a big order quipped to his boss "I've only got very small testicles, Frank!" (Alf, 12/5/03). Everyone, in the meeting including the CEO laughed at this comment. Once again the topic was changed and it appeared that humour could distract workplace focus from unpleasant or uncomfortable subjects. As found by Holmes & Stubbe (2003) the employees were also able to save face by making these jokes about themselves.

The banter and 'taking the piss' already discussed was also very prevalent in workplace meetings and operated continuously throughout these meetings. At the start of meetings as people came together and re-established connections with each other much humour was used in these interchanges. Workers teased each other about any changes of appearance and enquired about each others home lives. For example a female colleague announce to the assembled Monday morning group, "Look, Sally has new hair-isn't it sexy!" (Zelda, 12/5/03). Humour was a polite way of asking questions about each other or sharing interesting information with the group.

Throughout the meeting, humour use changed, and was used to respond to managerial criticisms or directives or used by all to 'soften' some messages and directives. Agreeing with arguments by Holmes & Stubbes (2003), observation in this study showed that the softening of messages by using humour was done more often between equals rather than in exchanges between bosses to subordinates. In one meeting a colleague when instructing the others on a technical matter joked. "Listen very carefully I shall say this only once...even you can do this Karl!" (Alf, 5/5/03). Humour was also used to offset awkward silences when trying to get equipment such as audio-visual equipment to run smoothly. Humour smoothed over the awkward bits in meetings.

Meetings summary

Humour used in meetings was guarded but lively and no examples of inappropriate or offensive jokes were observed. Humour was used to admit to or mitigate, less than exemplary performance, with a self-deprecating joke often made. Using humour distracted others from the serious matter under discussion and sometimes these topics were not revisited. Humour relieved employee boredom and frustration in meetings. Humour was also used when discussions became tense as a relief from this tension and to lighten the atmosphere and staff members were aware of deliberately using humour this way. Humour had several functions in meetings, it provided the social lubricant that connected different topics, smoothed interactions, re-established bonds and allowed employees to save face when they were challenged in some way.

The workplace environment

Data regarding the workplace environment was collected from the observational part of the study. I wandered around inside the organisations and made notes describing any displays that had humorous components or appeared to have been displayed with the intention to amuse. These sorts of displays were only found in the BytesBiz organisation. The other two companies had had streamlined, business-like work habitats and displays of humour were only observed or particular occasions such as someone's birthday. There was little evidence of humour on general display in either CompuStar or AlphaTech; white walls with tasteful works of art provided a cool and soothing environment. In stark contrast to this was the BytesBiz environment that, with the exception of an unadorned reception area, was a 'hotch-potch' of artefacts, posters, photographs, cartoons, funny pictures, rude messages, funny comments, toys and information signs that had amusing comments added to them.

This aspect of the study provided the biggest contrast between the companies as the humour displayed at BytesBiz was so prevalent in contrast with the (almost) complete lack of such displays at the other two companies. The humour displayed at BytesBiz was varied, found in nearly every section of the company and used profanity in many cases (Examples of this humour are presented in Appendices J, K, L, & M). This organisation was the one where the largest amount of humorous events and practical

jokes was observed and the organisation that appeared to have the biggest component of humour as part of their culture. An example of a joke displayed on the wall was recorded:

> *Another month ends*
> *All targets met*
> *All systems working*
> *All customers satisfied*
> *All staff eager and enthusiastic*
> *All pigs fed and ready to fly (Researcher's notebook, 09/06/03)*

BytesBiz with its many displays of humour was the place where the most humour occurred (from observation and interview accounts) and also this company had the largest amounts of incidents and events to retell. From observing the displays an assumption was made that the displayed humour reflected the culture of the organisation. The prevalence of these displays indicated that humour was a large part of this organisation's culture. Correspondingly, this was also the organisation that had a significant issue and problem created by humour and the only organisation that had implemented policies regarding email humour.

There appeared to be an anomaly inside this organisation as there was official policy warning staff against sending potentially offensive email to each other, yet no regulation regarding the content of cartoons and jokes openly displayed in work areas. According to BytesBiz staff members, many of these cartoons and jokes had come from emails or internet sources. After discussing this with the General Manager, he admitted that the email policy arose out of the fear of litigation that could ensue as email gives a permanent written record of offensive material which can be used in lawsuits. Conversely, he was also concerned about over-regulating his employees and felt that the displays were personal expressions of what employees found funny. It appeared that most people in this organisation found similar material amusing. The potentially offensive displays were contained within employees' personal workspace and could be avoided by those who did not wish to read them. No such displays were observed in senior managers' offices. This 'laissez faire' approach to potentially offensive humour and profanity did result in a serious case of offence and disharmony and is fully described in the critical incidents section (p. 127). BytesBiz was the

largest organisation studied and therefore the wider range of people meant that there was more potential for a wider variety of humour and for some of this humour to backfire and cause conflict. Humour may have to be more regulated in larger firms as there is more potential for problems due to a larger amount of people and diversity of styles, backgrounds, races and ages.

The displays of humour appeared to reflect identity and individuality of the person who displayed the joke. It was apparent that company members that were considered to be the jokers had more of these displays and also displayed the more contentious, risqué and profane examples of jokes. This observation supports the earlier contention in this research that the jokers were 'allowed' to use more outrageous forms of humour. People at BytesBiz used their humorous displays to share their individual humour with their workmates. There may have been more need for this individual expression inside the bigger organisation with its larger groups. It was also noted that in this organisation there were more office-bound people that did not leave the organisation to complete tasks. Therefore these displays may have served the function of alleviating boredom and individualising the environment for those who spent most of their time there. The displays stimulated interaction and discussion as new entrants or visitors commented or asked questions about them (as happened in the research for this study) and the retelling of their background provided another opportunity to enjoy the humour. People in this organisation had altered each others displays by adding cheeky comments or extra information. Some of the displayed humour represented shared in-group experiences such as the cartoon that had a staff members name added, which reflected a group joke about his stomach (Appendix J, name removed). Some of the humour on display used profanity or vulgarity and had the potential to be considered offensive. As these displays were only found inside one of the organisations more research may be required to investigate more fully the meanings, prevalence and functions behind such displays.

Time of day

Time was a contextual element in the sharing of humour. Many interview respondents identified that more humour occurred on Friday afternoons than at any other time and this was backed up by observing the increase of humorous exchanges at this time. On

Friday afternoon people appeared to begin to look forward to the weekend, started to relax and in this relaxed state began to tease and joke more than usual. This was also when the jokers let 'loose' and performed some of their more outrageous antics, such as the tummy bang described earlier (p.83).

Another time effect was identified from the observation study. Observational notes were both dated and timed and a pattern was identified from these. At approximately three o'clock on most days at people would raise their heads from their computer screen, look around and start some sort of humour exchange. This effect was only noted in the observations as people seemed unaware that this pattern occurred on most days and did not mention it in the interviews. Examples of these exchanges involved: calling out an insult to a colleague and beginning a round of banter, throwing a ball or toy at someone else busy working, or riding a mini-scooter around the office and stopping to chat with colleagues. One organisational team had an on-going crossword drawn on a whiteboard and those who could take a break would meet at approximately 3pm to try and complete this puzzle. The time was not stated or formalised by the team, it was just the time that colleagues perhaps in need of a break, drifted in to participate. These 'playtimes' seemed to support Roy's (1958) concept of 'banana time' when at a certain time of day employees would steal a banana from one targeted colleague resulting in jokes and laughter. This indicates a 'relief' function of humour and it seemed to be used to alleviate boredom and to provide a break. The humour only lasted a short while (5-10 minutes) and then people continued with their tasks. It was only noted in the open-plan work areas where people had colleagues to interact with, however other colleagues that worked in separate offices, hearing the laughter would sometimes wander over and join in. In these hard-working companies with no break times perhaps these ad hoc 'humour breaks' take the place of the old-fashioned 'tea break' of past days.

More research may be needed to explore this time effect on humour and organisational behaviour as it appeared to have a small but significant effect in the working day for these employees.

When humour goes wrong

Taking offence

A pattern emerged in the interviews following respondents being asked what humour offended them. The initial response from most was that "nothing" or "very little" offended them. This was immediately qualified by stating one or more exceptions. It appeared that social desirability was a factor in responses to this question. People wanted to be seen as humorous and broad-minded but then realised that some humour was socially offensive. Even the exceptions seemed to have this bias as respondents qualified their non-offence response with 'politically correct' answers regarding racial or sexual humour. Not all of these responses seemed to 'ring true' to the researcher but respondents knew that these forms of humour were (theoretically) unacceptable at work. It would be interesting to follow this up with future research that attempted to differentiate 'correct' response from the true feelings. People appeared eager to portray their workplaces in a positive light and therefore reluctant to admit to the existence of offensive humour.

A major exception to reluctance in discussing offensive humour was uncovered in BytesBiz where a new staff member had been offended and outraged by the humour used by her colleagues on a daily basis. This incident was discussed by all those involved, but was only revealed further into the interview when rapport and comfort had been established with the researcher. Hostility towards this newcomer was covertly revealed by many respondents and humour had been the catalyst for inter-group conflict and offence. This newcomer was consistently named by her colleagues as being uninvolved in humour and not "fitting in". This non-fit identification was supported by the newcomers own words "I'm a square peg in a round hole" (Brenda, 10/6/03) and by observing the interactions of 'Brenda' and the people in her team. Observations showed that throughout the day the team laughed informally at many things and during these times, Brenda was observed working and not joining in the fun. Newcomers at the other two organisations were not identified this way by their colleagues and therefore it appeared that this problem at BytesBiz was significant (Critical Incident One, p.127).

Responses were freer in regard to email humour received and many admitted they had been offended by humour sent to them, particularly that which was sexually graphic or violent. The anonymity of discussing offensive email appeared to make respondents more comfortable discussing offensive humour. They were more reluctant to admit to offensive humour at work when related to the inter-personal organisational context, regarding colleagues. Offensive email could safely be discussed as coming from "out there in cyberspace" rather than possibly identifying colleagues and reflecting unfavourably on their organisation. Workers admitted that they preferred to deal with offensive emails in their own manner, either admonishing the sender or simply deleting offensive material. No-one admitted to having taken any official action regarding offensive emails sent to them.

The IT respondents identified context as a major factor in humour being offensive; the wrong joke in the wrong situation promoted offence, outrage, annoyance or embarrassment. Zijderveld (1983) argued that the *content* of a joke is less important than who tells it and in what situation. Context has emerged as a key variable in the use of humour at work in these IT companies. Twenty four of the interview respondents cited inappropriate context as being the primary reason for humour backfiring and causing issues.

Workers showed their awareness of what humour was appropriate for particular situations and were keen to see norms respected. For example an interview respondent recounted a difficult time in recent company history where some colleagues had been made redundant and the workplace was very tense at this time. In her words "We totally lost our sense of humour for a while and jokes just weren't appropriate" (Kara, 16/5/03). In this situation even the jokers were not 'permitted' to tease as this issue was too sensitive to be accompanied by humour. The lack of humour use served as an indicator of the gravity of the situation. Staff members appeared to be adept at identifying which situations could and could not be joked about and this was most obvious inside meetings where some subjects (such as party events) were topics for humour and banter while others (such as redundancy) were not and were treated very seriously.

Two thirds of the interview respondents identified humour as being a 'hindrance' at work when there was too much of it and it became a distraction from work activities and objectives. Humour was evident as a distraction device. In the example quoted earlier when Zac quipped that he would forecast zero sales in future (p. 110) it was observed that after the accompanying laughter had stopped, the issue (Zac's low sales), was not revisited and the joke had served the purpose of distracting the manager from his poor sales performance.

The third key area identified as a poor or offensive use of humour was using jokes to make critical or barbed comments, particularly those of a personal nature. Kahn, (1989) suggests that joking can be used to deliver unpleasant messages or criticism and that using humour lessens the chance of people being offended by this type of message. If people are upset by the message Kahn (1989) contends that the joker can deny the barbed point under the guise "only joking". This function of humour was recognised by these IT participants and generally disliked. They suggested that even when the joke format is used the barbed message is still delivered and trivialising it as "just a joke" did not negate the message. Participants in this study preferred criticism to be open and suggested that veiled messages delivered in a joke could be destructive and cause bad feeling. "Humour can be destructive when it is cynical or sarcastic and aimed at individuals" (Grant, 21/5/03). Joking barbs were considered a poor use of humour but respondents admitted that humour was used this way at work. Interview participants suggested that team building and bonding sessions improved positive uses of humour and decreased the negative and biting aspects.

Discussing offensive humour and humour that had 'gone wrong' was uncomfortable for respondents. They answered these questions less enthusiastically and considered their responses for longer. It is possible that many offensive humour incidents had occurred but that participants did not wish to reveal them. Humour was perceived as a positive construct with happy and fun elements that were willingly described by respondents but many of these people appeared reluctant to admit to a darker side. Social desirability elements may have contributed to this reluctance, people liked to be seen as a 'good sport', able to take a joke, and did not wish to identify negative uses of humour as it may have presented them in a humourless light. Admitting to offensive humour may also have disparaged colleagues and given a poor impression

of their company. This area may be one of interest in future research projects and other methods could be used such as a longer participant observation study enabling further insights into the darker side of humour use. The words of one company manager highlight the elusive and ambiguous nature of such humour: "If it offends me then it is not humour!" (Tony, 21/7/03).

Potential problems

The many different uses of humour in these organisations presented some interesting scenarios and potential issues for these companies. Respondents in all three organisations identified email as the key area that had the potential to be misused in regards to distributing humorous messages. One of the potential problems is that email could become a distraction from work tasks because people receive large amounts of jokes this way. There is also the potential for conflict and even litigation due to the ability to send and receive offensive material. Policies and practices should be developed to restrict inappropriate or offensive material from entering the workplace (Panko & Glenn Beh, 2002). The BytesBiz company, concerned about this potential for offence had developed policy threatening disciplinary action against those that sent offensive email material to co-workers (Appendix N). Formalised email and internet policies are becoming more prevalent as are surveillance software, audits and monitoring (Panko & Glenn Beh, 2002).

Some respondents admitted to using the internet for playing in work time and Lim (2002) calls this 'cyberloafing'. It was obvious from observations and other ad hoc comments that using the internet for humour and fun while at work was a factor in these IT workplaces. A vast amount of humour was shared via email and respondents would either forward this to each other or call out and invite others to come and look at funny stuff. Respondents at BytesBiz admitted that the displays of humour were primarily sourced from the internet or email missives and time had been spent changing photographs and pictures to provide amusement. For example at BytesBiz many staff photos had celebrity photos superimposed or displayed beside them to imply that this staff member looked like the celebrity. These celebrity photos had been sourced from the internet. Although not identified as a problem yet in these three companies there is the potential for 'cyberloafing' (Lim, 2002) to become an issue in

the future. It could also offer an interesting and useful research agenda for further study.

Racial insults observed in BytesBiz as part of the daily banter were apparently enjoyed by participants. They do however have the potential to misfire and cause workplace conflict. If this style of banter continues unchecked and new organisational members are recruited, they may take offence to the style used. This was also observed in regards to homophobic insults hurled at each other (by males) in the same organisation. This style of joking banter and profanity has already resulted in a major critical incident for this organisation and could eventually constitute grounds for litigious proceedings. "Racial, ethnic or sexist jokes create the potential for litigation" (Santovec, 2001, p.27). The difficulty in allowing this type of humour to continue is where is the line drawn between joking and harassment? However, Duncan et al (1990) suggest that these types of humour only become major issues when they are "shrouded in moderate hostility" (p. 269). The banter recounted and observed revealed an absence of such hostility and much cheerful laughter accompanied the telling therefore currently the banter did not appear to be causing offence. Disparaging jokes such as ethnic ones told in their own environment can actually strengthen group morale and identity but outsiders can not imitate these jokes (Zijderveld, 1983) therefore caution should be taken when new staff members join the organisations.

Zijderveld (1983), when discussing power and humour suggests that an oppressor (or manager in this study) that allows defiant humour and laughter and does not seek to repress it then is still in full command of a situation. As soon as he or she attempts to curb this humorous derision the grip on power starts to be lost. This style of non-regulation is obvious in these organisations and it would be difficult to bring in behavioural regulations in companies where individuals are expected to operate autonomously and make many business decisions unilaterally. Regulating joking behaviour could conflict with the styles of organisational empowerment observed in all three of these companies.

Summary of humour goes wrong

Overall humour is working well in each of these companies and harmonious working environments were observed. It is recognised that social desirability biases may have been operating and organisational workers may have been keen to present a happy and fun workplace as the norm. Equally likely, these companies are known for their lively and fun workplace cultures and a true picture of the every day harmony and jocularity may have been achieved. However humour is ambiguous and a joke to one person may be offensive to another therefore managers need to stay aware of the potential for issues caused by joking that may impact on civil and human rights of people in these companies (Smeltzer & Leap, 1988).

Many events and incidents were described in the interviews, some outrageous, contentious and even illegal, and these have been collated to form a critical incidents table in the next section (Table 2). After analysis, three of these incidents were identified as having either the potential for organisational problems (incidents one and three) or had already caused significant issues for the organisation (incident two). These are presented and discussed next and complete this chapter by illustrating the impact that humorous incidents can have in organisational life.

Critical incidents

Incidents and legends

Questions were asked of respondents regarding humorous events and 'legends' that they could recount. These were collated and analysed using a critical incident technique (CIT). The five key steps of this technique involved identifying an activity, which was asking respondents to describe incidents and legends in the interviews (step 1). Data collection standards were developed by structuring these questions and seeking descriptions and narratives in the respondents own words (step 2).This data was then collected from respondents in all three organisations (step 3). The responses were analysed and classified and a table created (Table 2) showing the responses (step 4). The final step (5) involved the interpretation of the data (Query et al 2001). The 'incident' is described in narrative or story format and CIT allows the researcher to access a participant's experience within the context that the incident happened (Query

et al 2001). This contextual element has been identified as important in the study of humour (Holmes & Stubbes, 2003).

Some of these incidents were significant, potentially litigious events while others were milder day-to day happenings. The incidents have been presented in Table 2 and all were incidents that were recounted during the interviews and therefore deemed to be of significance to these organisational members. Some of the incidents were on-going and were also observed in the research process. Table 2 also presents the context in which each incident occurred and the perceived function of the humour used. As a significant number of the incidents appeared to have involved the drinking of alcohol the fourth column of the table identifies whether or not it was a factor of the humorous event. Three major incidents that appeared to have significant implications for the organisations are taken from this list and explored in depth at the end of his section (p. 127-139).

Table 2: Critical incidents

Incidents/Legends[3]	Context	Function	Alcohol	Org.
1. Employee lost job	Day-to-day event	B	no	B
2. Initiation 10 shots	Initiation rite offsite	Pl, I	yes	A
3. Tied to forklift	Day-to-day event	PJ, Sp, I	no	B
4. Small person, big chair	Day-to-day event	PJ, Pl	no	B
5. Lying under desks	Day-to-day event	PJ, Sp	no	B
6. Banging tummies	Day-to-day event	PJ, Sp	no	B
7. Singing at meeting	Day-to-day event	PJ, Pl, I	no	B
8. Stolen Easter egg	On-going joke	PJ, Pl	no	B
9. Gloves on face	Day-to-day event	PJ, Pl, I	no	B
10. Hi Ho–short people	Day-to-day event	Sp, B	no	B
11. Not allowed out	Team build, offsite	Sp, B	yes	C
12. Count the screws	Extra work task	PJ, Pl, I	no	C
13. Shouting at tourists	Team build, offsite	Sp	no	A
14. Anniversary party	After hours, at work	C, Pl	yes	A
15. Presenter with hangover	Day-to-day event	Sp, B	yes	A
16. Blow-up sheep in bed	Team build, offsite	PJ, Pl	yes	B
17. Person in bike basket	Team build, offsite	PJ, Sp	yes	B
18. Dropped in the pool	ACC-offsite	PJ, Sp	yes	B
19. Barry the singing sock	On-going joke	PJ, Pl	no	B
20. Stolen penguin	ACC-offsite	PJ, Sp	yes	B
21. Business cards to girls	ACC-offsite	PJ, Pl	yes	B
22. 70th birthday party	Comp. celebration	C, Pl	yes	B
23. Nude sandwich	ACC-offsite	PJ, Sp	yes	B
24. Helping sheep give birth	Team build, offsite	Sp	no	B
25. Kissing the CEO	ACC-offsite	PJ, Sp	yes	B
26. Tennis balls down trousers	Day-to-day event	PJ, Sp	no	B
27. Keyboard key change	Day-to-day event	PJ, Pl, I	no	B
28. Sellotape over phone	Day-to-day event	PJ, Pl, I	no	B
29. Paper birds from ceiling	Day-to-day event	PJ, Pl	no	B
30. Bottle spirits drunk	Team build, offsite	Sp, bond	yes	A
31. Group lunch	Social offsite	Sp, relief	yes	A
32. Pool game	Social offsite	Pl, relief	yes	A
33. Quote book	Social offsite	bonding	yes	C
34. Sex in toilet	Day-to-day event	Pl, record	no	A
35. Drunk in spa pool	Social offsite	C, Sp	yes	B
36. Spa pool poster	Follow-up joke	PJ, Pl	no	A

Function:
C Official company celebration
PJ Practical joke
Pl Planned
Sp Spontaneous
I Initiation joke
B Banter

Context
ACC Annual Company Conference

A = AlphaTech
B = BytesBiz
C = CompuStar

[3] Incidents described more fully below

Incidents in full (from Table 2)

1. A new employee's contract was not renewed due to her disgust with humour used by her colleagues.

2. New staff members were taken out and encouraged to drink 10 shot glasses of alcohol.

3. A new staff member was tied to the warehouse forklift and hoisted in the air.

4. A staff member that was physically very tall and large had a specially made chair and desk. A scene was set up at his work station using very large objects, (such as bottles of drink) and then a very small staff member was induced to sit in the area and have her photo taken in 'giant-land'.

5. 'Jokers' crawled around the floor until they were lying under people's desks and talked and laughed with them.

6. 'Jokers' that had large stomachs suddenly called out "tummy bang" ran into the middle of work area, lifted shirts and banged stomachs together. Repeated on several occasions.

7. A new staff member was told that it was customary to stand on her chair and sing to the rest of the staff at the conclusion of her first staff meeting, she did this.

8. Staff members were given large Easter eggs by management, left on their desks for them. A small group stole another members egg, set up an email address for it and proceeded to regularly send her emails (eg "mummy I've been kidnapped") from the 'egg' for several weeks afterwards. The prank culminated in the egg owner being sent a fluffy chicken.

9. A new staff member had her face stroked by a 'joker' wearing surgical gloves while she was speaking on the phone to a customer.

10. When more than one of the shorter staff members entered another work area jokers in that area began singing the "Hi Ho" theme from Snow White and the seven dwarfs.

11. A staff member was not permitted to attend a social work function by his partner who used to work for the company. Much teasing and banter followed.

12. New staff members were told at the annual stock take that their job was to count all of the screws used to assemble computers.

13. A staff member trying to help some Spanish tourists began shouting loudly and waving his arms trying to be understood.

14. Anniversary party held at work premises to celebrate 10 years operation in NZ.

15. A staff member that was hung-over gave a presentation to a group while lying supine on the floor.

16. A blow-up sheep was put in the bed of a staff member that originated from the South Island.

17. A small person was placed into a bike basket and ridden around by a very large person.

18. A manager was held over the pool, fully clothed and dropped in.

19. A sock (Barry) was used as a puppet to sing and speak to other work mates.

20. A plaster penguin was stolen from a theme park by a group of staff members during a conference function.

21. A male colleague's business cards were distributed to young females with a suggestion that they should ring him.

22. A party was held to celebrate the oldest staff member's 70th birthday.

23. Two male staff members removed their clothes and squashed a female colleague between them while shouting "nude sandwich".

24. A whole work group stopped their bus by the side of the road and some staff members assisted a sheep that was struggling to give birth.

25. A male staff member that won an award at the ACC, gave the (male) CEO a big kiss on the mouth.

26. 'Jokers' put tennis balls down their trousers and approached other staff members showing them off and making suggestive comments.

27. Keys from other staff members keyboards had their places exchanged.

28. The mouthpiece of colleague's telephone was taped over with invisible tape.

29. Several staff members made dozens of origami birds and hung them in a colleague's office while she was absent.

30. The CEO accepted a bet to drink a full bottle of spirits by himself.

31. A group had a long lunch to relieve tension.

32. Staff members enjoyed a game of pool together after work.

33. A book was used to record funny events and sayings at work.

34. On a staff social occasion, a couple was observed having sex in the toilets.

35. Staff member very drunk, urinated in spa pool.

36. On the above-mentioned person's birthday a poster was made with a spa pool picture and pinned up in the office saying "don't even think about it".

Explanation of Table 2

As shown in Table 2, 36 different incidents were described by interview participants. About one sixth of the incidents were also observed while in these companies but primarily the data was collected from the interview component of the data collection. Several of these incidents had elements that could be considered outrageous while others were small everyday occurrences. The column denoting the presence of alcohol in the incidents shows that in 19 of the 36 incidents alcohol was a factor. This implies that alcohol was a significant part of the culture in these organisations and that it contributes to the contextual factors in many incidents which made amusing and incongruous behaviour more likely. Alcohol in the workplace has been discussed earlier in this section (p. 104).

About half of the incidents were planned and the other half occurred spontaneously. Twenty one incidents were practical jokes that had been played on colleagues. There was also an even division between incidents that occurred in the workplace and those that were work events but occurred at an off-site venue. The implications are that many practical jokes occur in these IT workplaces but when analysing the organisational column it is apparent that 18 of the 21 practical jokes came from one organisation (BytesBiz). Therefore the results in Table 2 may actually suggest that practical jokes are a key part of the culture inside BytesBiz and less important to employees in AlphaTech and CompuStar respectively. Seven incidents were 'initiation' activities that appeared to 'test' newcomers in some way and all three organisations had at least one such event. 'Testing' a new organisational member has also been described as "hazing" (Josefowitz& Gadon, 1989) and is further discussed in Critical Incident Two (p.135).

The table identifies the organisations in which these incidents occurred and led to the finding that the highest number of incidents occurred in BytesBiz (24) and the lowest

in CompuStar (3). This supports assertions throughout the research that BytesBiz was the company with the highest amounts of humour and this could be partly attributed to their larger personnel numbers but also appeared to be linked to their organisational culture, autonomous work practices and the lively 'jokers' that work in this company.

Examination of the content of these incidents showed some contentious forms of behaviour that had the potential for offence and even legal repercussions. Stealing a mascot from a theme park could have been embarrassing for the company and resulted in prosecution and fines. The 'nude sandwich' incident could have been grounds for sexual harassment claims but this was laughingly retold by the young woman comprising the 'filling'. She described it as a "good joke" (Amy, 16/6/03) and rationalised it as the sort of alcohol-induced behaviour that is expected at conferences. All of the participants in these riskier jokes had consumed alcohol to different extents. Peers appear to include like-minded colleagues in their jokes, that are not likely to be offended and who will participate happily in more risky forms of humour. More risky and outrageous humour occurred at off-site work events when alcohol is part of the context. Only one of these incidents resulted in negative or disciplinary outcomes for those involved and all (except Critical Incident One, p.127) were recounted with accompanying laughter or smiling. It is possible that some incidents with negative outcomes were not revealed by respondents due to potential repercussions.

Three of the above events have been further analysed in the sections below. The critical incident with an obvious negative outcome is discussed first as it was the incident that resulted in serious negative consequences arising from humorous differences.

Person-organisation fit (Critical Incident One)

This narrative comes from the amalgamation of data collected in interviews from six different staff members at BytesBiz and their accounts of the incident, or series of incidents, that comprise this case. Some aspects of the on-going situation were also observed and once the incident had emerged as a 'critical incident' in this research some follow-up questions and discussions were conducted. These accounts were from

the major participants involved in the incident, including the two senior level managers that made the original hiring and then subsequent firing decisions.

At BytesBiz this significant 'critical incident' occurred and resulted in a staff member leaving the company because her three month probationary contract was not made permanent by the company. The employee, 'Brenda'[4] joined the organisation to work in an office-based role that provided sales support to customers. Her responsibilities included answering customer queries on the phone and providing assistance in the sales process. Brenda was in her mid-forties while those around her were in their twenties and thirties and she came from a very different work background. She was more accustomed to formal workplace protocols and a hierarchical structure. BytesBiz had a very flat structure with only two layers of hierarchy, and employees were empowered and accustomed to working autonomously. Results were more important to this organization than following strict guidelines and protocols.

Brenda joined the team and immediately took offence at the style of communication used among peers and with some customers. She was particularly shocked by the humorous interchanges. Staff interacted in a very flippant way to each other and with some of their better-known customers and humour was used in a semi-abusive, bantering way. Profanity and teasing were everyday occurrences in this environment. For example, Brenda overheard the staff member that was responsible for her training and initiation (Cathy) [5] telling a complaining customer that he was just being a "wanker" today and then Cathy laughed uproariously (as apparently did the customer). Brenda took extreme exception to this incident and chided her colleague about her unsuitable behaviour with the customer. Cathy, who had been working in the team for over three years, was extremely angry and offended by Brenda's admonishment.

The usual ribbing, 'taking the piss' and profanity continued, until the team soon realised that Brenda was uncomfortable with this style. As a result of this they did not direct any of these potentially offensive remarks towards her. Still Brenda was

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[4] Name changed for privacy reasons
[5] Name changed for privacy reasons

unhappy with the humour and banter around her and by the end of her first week in the job was making reference to the Human Rights Act and implying that she would seek litigious remedies to their behaviour. The conflict was quickly brought to the attention of the managers who had separate chats with Brenda and the other team members. The team agreed to tone down their usual lively and ribald banter and Brenda said she would try to get used to the different styles.

Alas things did not improve and the team started to resent that their cheerful, 'politically incorrect' joking atmosphere was changed. Brenda still felt that even the toned-down style was inappropriate for a workplace, the battle raged and further talks with managers ensued. Team members became resentful and Brenda said she could not work in this way. Managers tried putting up a cubicle wall between the two main protagonists, (Brenda and Cathy) where previously they were facing each other in a very open style. This they felt would allow Cathy to interact with her customers in the style that suited her and Brenda could do likewise without being offended. General banter among the team continued but people adopted a different style when dealing with Brenda. The 'wall' achieved its purpose until Brenda complained of feeling alienated and asked for it to be removed. Meanwhile Cathy, upset by the whole incident, informed managers that she was planning to resign! Managers moved quickly to ensure that Cathy would stay, and even offered her a bonus to do so. After several weeks and several different managerial efforts at integration, it was decided that Brenda did not fit into this work team and she was advised that her temporary contract would not be extended to a permanent one. She has since, very unhappily, left the company. Before her departure, Brenda described her position in this work environment as "a square peg in a round hole". Cathy has stayed and the normal modus operandi has resumed. Managers have planned in future to hire someone that fits into the team rather than a purely skills-based appointment as in this instance.

In the research, this incident was the saddest and most distressing example of humour going wrong, as it lead to Brenda losing her job. This problem was on-going during the research process and upon initial analysis it appeared as if a difference in humour appreciation and styles was the key to this problem. However humour may have highlighted the issue rather than fully explained it, and further analysis has been conducted into this incident.

Theories of 'person-organisation (PO) fit' have been explored and there appeared to have been major differences of perceptions, both by the organisation and by Brenda at the selection phase of her recruitment. Kristof (1996) offers a broad definition of PO fit as being "the compatibility between individuals and organizations" (p. 2). In her interview Brenda suggested that she had sought an organisation that 'cared' for its workers and wanted a company that had values similar to her own. Seeking an organisation with similar values (by an individual) or seeking an employee that is similar to others in the organisation is called 'supplementary fit'. Supplementary fit occurs when a person adds to an organisation by possessing characteristics that are similar to those already working in the company (Kristof, 1996). Brenda gained her perceptions of the organisational culture from an article that had listed the company among the top 20 New Zealand companies to work for (Hirschberg, 2003). She was looking for an organisation that matched her personal values and was shocked when the humorous exchanges in her workplace did not fit her ideals and values. However Van Vianen (2000) suggests that individuals cannot predict organisational culture.

BytesBiz hired Brenda under pressure of too much work and not enough workers and broke their own recruitment rule; "we hire for attitude and train for skills" (BytesBiz Company Manual, p. 5). It was perceived that Brenda could meet task demands quickly and without much training which proved to be an accurate perception. The manager involved in the selection could see that Brenda was not the usual supplementary fit sought in selection. He observed that she had personality aspects not already in the organisation therefore justified her selection as a "complementary fit" (Jake, 18/6/03). Complementary fit is when a person brings characteristics and attributes to the work environments that are not already there (Kristof, 1996). A 'misfit' was developed in the selection process due to these differing perceptions of PO fit. Brenda saw herself as similar to others in the organisation while management recognised that she was different. Managers at BytesBiz usually seek a supplementary fit with new recruits as this organisation has a strong culture and assimilation into this culture is an important part of working at BytesBiz.

Brenda had an impression of the 'youth' culture in the IT industry and presented herself in a manner that appeared to fit this perception. She had her hair styled into

many small braids with bright coloured beads during the selection process but removed this style for a more conservative style not long after her appointment. Other organisational members seemed to sense that this 'hip' style did not reflect her actual personality and it was referred to several times in the interviews by her colleagues. This may have been an example of impression management tactics in which an applicant attempts to present themselves in a manner that they perceive as acceptable to the organisation, rather than a true presentation of their actual personality (Kristof, 1996). This dramatic change in style contributed to the alienation of Brenda from her colleagues and coupled with her complaints about the style of insulting humour used (made in her first week of employment) the PO fit was not working out to be a good fit.

Brenda was 'thrown' into the organisation with little in the way of orientation or guidance and the problems began immediately. Her outrage at the humour used in the work team was the first indication of problems that had begun in a rushed selection process that deviated from the company's usual policy. Therefore humour may not have been the sole reason for this fit issue but it was the factor that made the problems apparent. Brenda's reaction to the profanity and ribald banter was only part of a complex problem that emerged in her first week.

Deal & Kennedy (1982), defined organisational culture as a "system of informal rules that spells out how people are to behave most of the time" (p. 15) and identified values, "the basic concepts and beliefs of organisation" (p. 14) as forming the heart of this culture. Values or perceived values became the area that the misfit was evident between Brenda and her colleagues and these values differences were emphasised by the humour used on a daily basis. The use of the term "wanker" as a joke to a customer shocked her into chiding the staff member that used it and who was responsible for training her. Zijderveld, (1983) states that humour can mark group boundaries and that various symbols and behaviours indicate a group's identity.

> Contemporary youth culture consists of various rather short-lived movements and cliques which develop their own lifestyles. The symbols of their group identity- jargon, gestures, clothes, musical tastes, jokes, etc- are often incomprehensible, and therefore irritating or shocking to outsiders (p.47).

It was obvious that Brenda had come from a more formal and structured work background and she stated that the constant humour was too noisy, profane and distracting.

Smeltzer & Leap, (1988) identified problems with inexperienced employees rating jokes as less appropriate than experienced employees. They warned that jokes could lead to issues during the socialisation process and that negative consequences may adversely affect the workplace climate. This was seen in BytesBiz as the joking was considered inappropriate by Brenda in her first week with the company. Vinton (1989) agrees that joking at first can lead to problems and suggests that newcomers to organisations can facilitate their socialisation by participating in the humour. Brenda alienated and offended right from the start, was not interested in participating in humour that she found offensive and inappropriate.

In reaction to her admonishments, the team excluded Brenda from their day-to-day humour and email jokes that they sent each other. This was replicated by others in the organisation and Brenda was the only staff member that received very little email humour. A vicious circle developed, as Brenda had complained about their humour the team excluded her from it, and Brenda then complained that she felt alienated. Criticising their group humour was very offensive to this work group as they had great pride in their lively and risqué banter. This was supported by observation notes describing how the people in this team constantly ensured that no funny events were overlooked and if any were missed they were keen to recount them for the research. Brenda was correct that the humour was loud and distracting and frequently inappropriate, but threatening to use the Human Rights tenets against them alienated the BytesBiz sales team even further.

Chapman & Gadfield, (1976) assert that humour reveals personality characteristics and communicates attitudes. Brenda's reaction revealed her attitude to swearing and rude humour and portrayed her more 'conservative' personality to the team. This labelled her as 'different' to her work group and resulted in her alienation and non-inclusion in other humour and fun.

> The cohesive force of joke-telling has a divisive, aggressive aspect. For as the group consolidates, in getting the joke, and in the aftermath, the laughter, it also separates itself from whoever is *not* the group. There cannot be insiders without outsiders…Laughter may be an enveloping hug for the insiders, but, I would argue, a threatening snarl to the outsiders: inwardly cohesive, outwardly divisive (Kivy, 2003, p.8, emphasis in original).

Time was a factor in this issue as Brenda did not take time to assimilate before complaining and making threats and this was ill-advised as staff seemed outraged that someone just beginning at the organisation was criticising their humour styles. As discussed earlier new organisational members are not made targets of jokes until they have assimilated, but it seems from this incident, that they are also not expected to criticise the existing culture at the start of their tenure. Socialisation theories suggest that people over time become more like their colleagues and organisation and assimilate the culture, and a complementary organisational fit can change in to a supplementary fit in time (Kristof, 1996). Goldstein (1976) found that response to jokes depends on an individual's familiarity with the group and upon the individual's attitude to the group. Familiarity was not established in this case and from her early experiences, Brenda developed a negative attitude to her colleagues' behaviour, particularly their humour. In her interview she commented "it's like working in the zoo!" In time Brenda may have been able to adapt or suggest behaviour changes to her co-workers but not as early as the first week. Time is always an issue in BytesBiz as the IT industry is fast-paced and decisions are made quickly to keep pace with the technological business environment. The decision to remove Brenda was made hastily and was expedient, however more thought, reflection and time could have benefited all in the issue.

A different analytical perspective may also have involved looking at this incident from a legal perspective in regards to sexual harassment. Did the profanity used in the humour around Brenda constitute sexual harassment? Researchers have identified a link between managerial humour, gender and power relations that can result in women viewing humour suspiciously as a form of discrimination and male dominance (Barsoux, 1993, Collinson, 2002, Duncan et al, 1990). However the humour around Brenda did not come from her actual manager and the first instance of offence came

from a female colleague, although much of the profane banter she subsequently encountered came from male 'jokers'. However none of these people had managerial power over Brenda and she was not unhappy with the way her manager dealt with her. Apte (1985) suggests that women are not as involved in aggressive humour and calling a customer a "wanker" could be defined as aggressive and thus may have made Brenda uncomfortable.

Brookers Ltd. (2003) discussing legal implications of joking at work do suggest that some employees can be "too sensitive" about jokes at work, but also argue that individuals accused of harassment often excuse themselves under the premise 'it was just a joke'. Duncan et al (1990) suggest that it is difficult to draw the line between joking behaviour and harassment and that the line between harmless fun and harassment can be crossed with jokes and banter.

In the New Zealand case (Fulton v Chiat Day Mojo Limited [1992] 2 ERNZ 38, 42) it was found that tricking a new female staff member into uttering unintentional obscenities at work constituted harassment as it was detrimental to her job satisfaction and enjoyment. It is possible that working among obscenities and profanity at BytesBiz could also have been considered detrimental to job satisfaction for Brenda and therefore a type of harassment. The argument may founder on the fact that the profanity experienced was not directed personally at Brenda and therefore did not constitute harassment. Further legal exploration would be necessary to form any conclusions but this is a risk for the organisation when profanity and obscenities are a factor in the workplace.

A mentor may have been useful to guide her through the early days exposed to the different culture in this company. Humour is important and personal to people and they react defensively when attacked on this concept. Brenda described her inclusion in this work team as "a square peg in a round hole" and knew that she did not fit. Her initial evaluation of the culture and values of this organisation was made in reaction to the profane humour that she witnessed and was precipitate as with time she came to glean an overall more balanced picture that showed areas of congruence with her own values. Sadly before she left the company she had come to enjoy some of the lively atmosphere and had changed her perception of the organisational values, expressing

pleasure that birthdays were celebrated and morning teas and lunches provided for staff. These activities were more aligned with the values congruence she had hoped to achieve in the organisation.

It is possible that Brenda could have pursued this issue legally and this may have had interesting results and consequences for the organisation. On subsequent discussions with managers, and following research analysis of the issue, I suggested that a second probationary contract may have been a more equitable solution. This would have given Brenda more time to assimilate, and other staff members more time to appreciate her different style and viewpoint. This was also recommended in the organisational report (Appendix C). Managers agreed that this may have been a suitable option and are regretful of the outcomes of this incident. They have assisted Brenda in her quest for another position elsewhere. This research has assisted the organisation in analysing a significant issue resulting from humour at work and presented options and suggestions for future actions. Policies of mentorship and orientation will be reviewed in regards to recruitment and selection. Humour styles have not been changed or reviewed.

Initiation rite (Critical Incident Two)

As in Incident One, this narrative comes from data collected from several AlphaTech members in their interviews and from observational notes made during the research process. The AlphaTech organisation practised an on-going initiation rite with new staff members. This involved the 'newbie' being taken out after work hours and encouraged to drink 10 'shot' glasses of alcohol, known in the company as "doing your shots". This was a particular favourite of the (now former) CEO and he enthusiastically encouraged the activity. The drinks were paid for by the company, and most people in the company had completed the ritual (with the exception of staff members that did not drink alcohol). Many stories of associated behaviour and performance were recounted in regard to this practice and when a session was up-coming much speculation was made as to how the person would fare. A certain amount of pride and bravado was apparent by those that had completed this rite. This initiation rite of drinking ten shots of alcohol has the status of being both a company legend and an industry one inside the local IT industry. As it was an

initiation rite its function was assumed to be that of bonding with colleagues and it does appear from discussions with staff members that it achieves this bond and results in new members feeling like part of the team on completion. It also appeared to comprise a 'test' for new recruits to AlphaTech.

A recent initiation saw two new members 'doing their shots' on the same occasion. Each new enactment of the rite gives prior participants the opportunity to relive their own turn and re-open old jokes and banter. Most staff members enjoyed recalling their own experience and laughingly described their physical condition and how others helped them (carrying them to a taxi for example) upon completion of the drinking. The assistance given by colleagues also appeared to foster group bonds and friendship.

Some respondents at this organisation did not refer to this rite at all but did affirm that they did not drink alcohol and so the assumption was made that they had not participated in the ritual 'shots'. In the report written for AlphaTech (Appendix B) it was suggested that members that chose not to complete this rite may never feel fully part of their work team and the rite is unacceptable for staff members that do not drink alcohol. It is possible that staff members felt pressure to complete this task and this pressure comes from the desire to be accepted into the organisational culture. This gives an alcohol-perspective to the culture in this company. Fine (1976) discusses the use of alcohol and humour stating that alcohol "helps to produce the large amount of joking by loosening restrictions on public behaviour" (p.136). This would appear to be the function of this rite, to encourage 'looser' behaviour than is seen daily in the office setting and thus let colleagues get to know the new staff member in a different way.

This type of activity can be compared with hazing rituals carried out in North American universities and military establishments. These have received negative reactions in the media and backlash in recent years due to the nature of these activities. On some occasions rituals have gone awry and resulted in physical damage or even death to participants. Josefowitz & Gadon (1989) suggest that hazing accomplishes several goals for a group as newcomers arouse anxiety in companies. The hazing establishes the seniority of existing group members and ensures that group

norms will be followed. They also suggest that group membership is more highly valued if it is difficult to earn and hazing rituals comprise a mastery test that must be completed for acceptance to occur.

Josefowitz & Gadon (1988) suggest that while hazing activities are commonplace in work groups they are often covert and not widely discussed. In opposition to this suggestion the rite practised at AlphaTech was not covert and was discussed freely and with pride by organisational members. Josefowitz & Gadon (1988) also suggest that newcomers should be made aware of initiation rituals so that they are prepared and this lessens stress and anxiety associated with them. This pattern operates at AlphaTech and the newcomers interviewed seemed to were eagerly await their chance to complete the task. The initiation was completed during the research period and when the two new members completed the rite, no harm befell anyone and much laughter and enjoyment ensued as a result. The event was discussed in the days following its occurrence providing much scope for banter and shared laughter.

It would therefore appear that hazing rituals are more threatening when covert and unspecified creating anxiety for newcomers. When the activity is known and openly discussed as in this case, it appears to achieve the bonding and camaraderie desired. Passing the 'shots' test did appear to please the newcomers and their group acceptance seemed highly valued. It is interesting to note that employee turnover at this organisation is low and it may be that activities such as this rite result in employees valuing their inclusion in this organisation and committing more fully to the organisational culture. More research is needed to make any such claims and links. As a result of this research and the follow-up report (Appendix B), AlphaTech asked me to return and present the humour findings to staff. They were particularly interested in analysis of the initiation rite which may be reviewed and rules made to protect those undergoing it to avoid possible issues and backlash.

Horseplay up high (Critical Incident Three)

Differing from the first two incidences, the final critical incident was described by only one of the BytesBiz participants during her interview as it comprised a more covert activity. It provides an example of 'horseplay' described earlier (p.101) and

illustrates another type of humour that occurs at work. In this incident, the staff member, after much teasing and banter from colleagues that worked in the warehouse section of the company, was tied to a forklift that was then hoisted high into the air. The young woman was afraid of heights and this constituted an ordeal for her but in the retelling she laughed heartily, was enthusiastic about the prank, and seemed proud at having been singled out for this joke. The incident occurred fairly early on in her employment with the company and she compared it to a type of initiation rite that ensured her acceptance. The woman in question worked in the accounts section of the company but often visited her warehouse colleagues.

This incident was a practical joke that had elements of an initiation rite as she was new to the company at the time. There are similarities regarding hazing implications to the AlphaTech incident described earlier. The prank appeared to be a 'test' to gauge her response; however, in contrast to the 'shots' initiation rite in Critical Incident Two, this was a covert activity that was unknown to organisational managers at the time.

This joke has not been repeated with other new organisational members and suggests that the elements of her joking and relaxed relationship with these team members played a part in enacting this joke upon her. This type of physical joke could be described as 'horseplay' and had the potential for some negative outcomes such as physical injury or property damage. "Horseplay in the workplace is frequently the result of employee attempts to be humorous- sometimes with disastrous results" (Duncan et al, 1990, p.274). The young woman's attitude since the joke has cemented her 'status' as a person that can take a joke and several other practical jokes have been played on this particular person. There are those that are more likely to be the target for jokes due to their personality and perceived ability to 'take a joke'. This woman admitted to being scared while on the forklift but still took the joke in good spirits. Industrial disciplinary action is usually successful against perpetrators of horseplay when it is disruptive, damages property or shows a malicious intent (Duncan et al, 1990, Halcomb Lewis, 2001). The actions in this joke are in violation of company safety rules and although the joke was retold to some colleagues care was taken not to retell it to managers in case of disciplinary action. Interestingly managers (unofficially) admitted that they know about the incident and have chosen not to

enquire too fully into the details. It did happen approximately two years ago therefore it is likely managers have only become aware of it a long time after the initial event. Further incidents such as this have the potential to bring physical harm to participants but the clandestine nature of their enactment makes it difficult for the organisation to safeguard against them other than maintaining the rules that are already in place as OSH requirements. These types of incidents are an undercover part of organisational humour and although this was the only one admitted to by respondents it is likely that more do occur.

Summary of critical incidents

The results presented reflect the findings from analysis of the data collected using the three methods of interviews, participant observation and critical incident technique and they provide a multi-perspective view. These events and incidents were described by several different organisational participants in the interviews and many of these incidents were also observed in the research process supporting the accounts narrated by the participants. Many of the incidents were explored from the participants view as well as the managerial perspective offering a richer overall picture.

As described some of the incidents had outcomes for the three companies but also potential outcomes and issues were highlighted where appropriate. The incidents reflect humour and the ways that it is used in these companies and functions of the humour in these incidents ranged from relief from boredom to initiation tests for new members and company celebrations. As seen in Table 2 (p. 123) several of the incidents appeared to have multiple functions and contextual elements were a key factor in their enactment.

Summary of Discussion and Results

This combined section exploring the research results and ensuing discussion has produced a lengthy chapter. The length reflects the complexity and depth in this research topic. Results and the discussion were combined to ensure that the full contextual picture was presented as part of the discussion, giving a richer treatment to each topic and reflecting the research objectives of this study.

As a sole researcher attempting to discover the functions of humour in these three workplaces, I was taken in several different directions simultaneously and the key finding was that humour in many situations has multiple functions at the same time. In these companies, the most important of these functions and humour uses was workplace banter and teasing which created bonds between colleagues and provided relief from work activities.

A key factor affecting humour use was status effects and humour was found to be used differently by the managers and their subordinates in this study. Each of the companies had individuals that initiated more humour than others and these people were consistently identified by their colleagues as the jokers and different rules appeared to operate for these people.

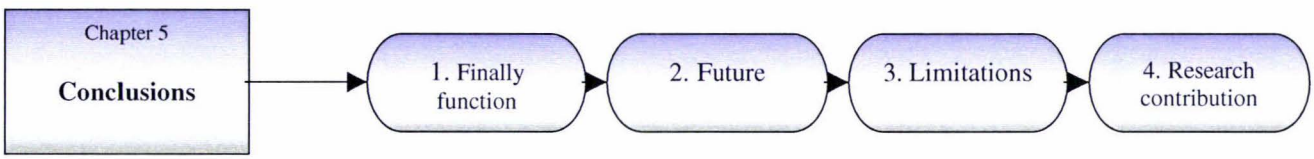
Gender and ethnicity were explored in relation to their impact on using humour at work and the conclusion reached that these topics required more research in their own rights due to their complexity and ambiguity.

Email was identified as a key medium for the sharing of humour and implications of this are beginning to emerge in these organisations. Contextual elements were an important factor in using humour in these companies and misjudging these factors did lead to humour having negative outcomes sometimes. The 36 critical incidents were collated and analysed and three of these explored in depth resulting in implications and some recommendations for the relevant IT companies.

This research has had some practical applications as two of the IT companies have taken further actions resulting from the reports written and future changes are planned in regards to some of the issues identified.

The discussion highlights the depth, ambiguity and complexity of using humour at work and the difficulties in collecting data that can mean different things to different people at the same time and in the same event or utterance. Humour was used by people in these companies as a handy 'tool' in their box of social and professional competencies.

Chapter Five



Humour happens: Conclusions

Finally function

I reflected upon the journey undertaken in this research to investigate whether people used humour as a tool in their workplace interactions. Writing the conclusion seemed to signify the end of this journey however it has become apparent that it may also be the beginning of new explorations into other aspects of the phenomena surrounding humour at work. Many other paths and roads have been revealed as potential research topics and a series of future research questions is presented in the next section (p.147).

The answer to the research question that asked whether people used humour as a tool in these workplaces was found to be a resounding "yes". This affirmative result identified that humour had many functions in these IT companies. The IT employees understood these functions quite well and employed humour to achieve many different objectives. The challenge in this study was identifying and categorising the many types of humour and working out which humorous events fulfilled a specific function or even more than one function. Many of the functions of humour were immediately obvious while others were underlying and found in further exploration and analysis of issues.

The functions of humour found in the three companies were:

Table 3: Functions of humour

1. Take the piss (banter)
2. Break the ice
3. Foster camaraderie
4. Create rapport
5. Re-establishing relationships after time apart
6. Show kindness
7. Break boredom
8. Take a break from hard work
9. Have fun and play
10. To get someone else to do something
11. Coping
12. Reflect the culture
13. Show identity and personality
14. Mask performance issues
15. Hide embarrassment
16. Resist directives
17. Expressing hostility
18. Deflect criticism
19. To make a criticism
20. Make a point
21. Define groups and teams
22. Initiate new people
23. Test others
24. Violate norms and propriety (shock)
25. More than one function at a time
26. Highlighting issues

Explanation of Table three

Twenty six different functions of humour in these three workplaces were found and are listed above. It is possible that there were further functions that were not observed and identified by either the researcher or respondents. Originally it was intended that these functions be classified as either positive or negative however upon reflection this proved to be a pointless task as this would have reflected only the researcher's perspective. The functions have been presented simply as those identified because there are many other elements involved in making a positive or negative distinction.

Contextual elements have arisen many times in this study as an important consideration of the humour used. Therefore, a positive use of humour may become a negative one in a different context and vice versa. These functions were also subject to the viewpoint of those using the humour and those affected by the humour. Examples in the discussion showed that managers found subordinates' use of humour to deflect criticism had a negative function as it trivialised the issue, while conversely subordinates found this a positive function as it allowed him (or her) to save face.

Therefore it is the main finding of this research that humour has many functions at work, often operating simultaneously, and these were used fairly judiciously by most people in the organisations studied, sometimes with negative or positive outcomes depending on the context and viewpoint of those involved. However these functions were not always clear and are subject to important factors such as the context and the individual using the humour.

Teasing and banter was the most common use of humour in these IT companies and demonstrated many of the bonding and camaraderie functions listed in Table Three. "Taking the piss" was part of the 'work hard-play hard' dichotomy that was part of their organisational culture. The phrase effectively encapsulated key ingredients of the organisational culture and humour in these companies. It stimulated much of the fun and laughter that was such a necessary component of their working lives to offset the intense business activities that were required.

Status effects suggested by previous researchers, that allow managers to make jokes with subordinates and prevent the subordinates from reciprocating, were *not* seen in this study. The inverse effect appeared to operate with status having an inhibiting effect on managers' use of humour. Therefore, status had an inverse effect on humour use by these participants; the higher the status the less humour was used.

Each company had its jokers and these individuals had high social status and were permitted different behaviour than their colleagues. Much of the risky or risqué humour with the potential to offend was created by these jokers.

Demographic differences such as ethnicity and gender had effects on the types of humour shared and presented opportunities for future research projects to fully investigate these complex factors.

These IT workers enjoyed humour that was slightly risky and risqué and did not wish their workplace to be sanitised and become totally 'politically correct'. All of these organisations took pride in their humour and wanted to appear to have a good amount of humour at work. The IT respondents took pride in their fun culture and this was perceived as healthy and positive, and people wanted to work inside these 'fun' environments. Fun appeared to be a healthy part of the workplace culture and was identified as a factor that affected turnover by respondents in these organisations.

Humour was used to define membership in groups inside these companies. Humour created group bonds and was used to exclude some individuals from the group. Groups developed 'in-jokes' only understood by members and these types of jokes highlighted the group's identity. Humour was used to approach members of other groups for requests for help. This study supports the assertion (O'Quin &Aranoff 1981) that humour is an effective influence tool equally used by both sexes.

Email was a popular medium for the sharing of humour with others both inside and outside the organisation. Email appeared to be well-managed by organisational members.

It is not possible to ensure that humour at work is always appropriate and suitable but these workers did a pretty good job of sorting out the right type for the occasion and leaving the more potentially offensive stuff to share with particularly selected people. Humour was an 'early-warning' system for highlighting areas where there were issues and problems at work. Jokes often preceded conflict and problems were covered with humour before they escalated and required some action. Offence did not occur very often but had serious consequences when it did happen as described in Critical Incident One (p.127). Workers did push the boundaries at times in particular at off-site events such as company conferences but there seemed to be an expectation and assumption that extreme forms of behaviour will occur at these events. Alcohol was a component of the 'work hard-play hard' culture at these workplaces and was a major

factor in behaviour norms being violated at company events as it relaxed the normal protocols and norms. In these offsite contexts more humorous activities occurred and provided the legends that were recounted for weeks, months and even years after the event.

Humour was used to give relief from tension, boredom and routine activities. In these workplaces humour was a grown-up version of 'playtime' and added pleasure, enjoyment, and opportunities for play and fun. The IT subjects felt that they actively used humour for different purposes and therefore saw humour as functional. Overall humour was positive and useful in these companies and an important part of the "work hard- play hard" slogan used by these lively, fun-loving IT professionals.

Future directions

Implications for organisations

Humour was important to these workers and therefore should be important to their managers. An ambiguous management strategy seemed to be required, incorporating 'managing' humour to avoid offence and danger while simultaneously leaving humour 'alone' to be governed by social norms and propriety. Managers had to balance a fine line between turning a 'blind eye' to some activities (that they suspected occurred) and ensuring that humour didn't physically endanger or emotionally offend employees. The hidden humour was as much a part of the culture as that which was openly enjoyed. Some of the covert activities assumed 'legend' status over time. These legends were an on-going part of the company culture frequently retold and added to even by workers that were not present at the original event.

Autonomous work equals autonomous humour and empowered employees expected to express humour in their own unique manner and mostly this was successfully governed by social norms. Therefore managers in these companies should not attempt to regulate humour as these employees would be insulted and it would contravene the work hard-play hard dichotomy that was obvious in the organisational culture and considered necessary to cope with high workplace demands. These employees

expected to enjoy a lively and fun workplace as a relief from the constant demands and pressure in their work.

One negative implication is that there was much potential for offence and for humour to go 'too far'. The three critical incidents discussed in depth, (p. 127- 139) illustrated this potential. The 'horseplay' incident had the potential for physical harm as did the initiation rite and this could also result in legal issues. The initiation rite involving excess alcohol had the potential to offend those unwilling to participate and make socialisation more difficult for such members. The PO fit incident (p.127) was a significant and actual example of humour that had caused offence and distress and led to an employee losing her job. Policies may be considered in these companies to address some of these issues that were raised as part of the study and outlined in the reports developed for the companies during the research process.

A common theme in the literature on humour is that it is very ambiguous. Findings in this study endorsed that assertion and suggested that workers and managers use this ambiguity very successfully to negotiate the pitfalls of organisational life and smooth the flow of workplace interaction.

Research

After some assimilation time in each organisation, people were extremely willing to discuss their humour and became comfortable about being observed in regards to humour. They were interested in the topic and often keen to supply anecdotes and bring my attention to any relevant incidents or remarks. They were also quite willing to share email, dependent on the content. They recognised functions of humour and were able to articulate these and discuss implications at work. However, many of the anecdotes and remarks had underlying message and connotations and revealed facets of participants that they might not have realised they were revealing.

Therefore, it is contended that humour is a multi-layer construct involving levels of meaning, those that are obvious and immediately apparent and deeper levels that appear on further analysis. For example a slightly barbed remark in a meeting is passed off by many as 'just a joke' yet others remember the remark, analyse it later and wonder "what did he/she mean by that?' The horseplay incident on the surface

was a practical joke but the young woman in the incident was fond of cheeky remarks to co-workers and had a manner that suggested bravado, therefore the incident seemed to comprise a 'test' to see if she was as 'tough' as she appeared. The 10 shot initiation rite, encouraged by the CEO was on the surface a 'laugh' but also a kind of test of 'machismo' with the males in particular expected to be able to complete the rite. Therefore, studying humour in organisational contexts may be a useful way to identify organisational issues and uncover unexplored facets of workplace cultures.

Many of the humorous incidents appeared to have multiple functions both obvious and latent. Some functions of humour were only recognised in retrospective reflection, and more research would be useful to further explore such hidden functions and may even require a multi-disciplinary study combining several perspectives.

Research questions

Many potential new research directions were highlighted by this study and a list of questions has been compiled that may be explored in future projects:

1. Does humour operate in similar ways in organisations that compete in different industries?
2. Is humour specific to the organisational context in which it occurs or are there universal elements in all companies? Would a broad industry study reveal many more functions of workplace humour?
3. Are status effects on humour different in other types of workplaces?
4. Are there organisational jokers in all companies and are they generally male?
5. How much are employees using email to 'play' at work and does this affect productivity?
6. What ethnic humour operates inside workplaces and what does it mean?
7. When does humour go wrong and what results does this have inside organisations?
8. What impact does gender have on workplace humour and are gender effects context-specific?
9. Why did this study contravene findings by Holmes et al (2001) that women instigated more humour than male counterparts in meetings?
10. What games do people play inside their workplaces? How do these relate to productivity and organisational culture?

11. How important is fun to employees and how can this be created and managed inside organisations?

Although currently operating harmoniously in these companies, email humour has been identified as an area where could have future negative impacts for organisations. This study outlined that humorous email is a significant factor in organisational life, and individual and organisational responses could be further investigated. As it is currently relatively unexplored, more research in this area could yield useful findings for academics and managers.

The Critical Incident Technique outlined many of the events and incidents that occurred inside these organisations. Many of these incidents had the potential for issues and even litigation as well as conflict and cultural impacts. Previous research has used many techniques to explore the construct of humour but no other examples of organisational humour research that employed a CIT were found in the literature search and this technique may be a useful method to further explore this elusive construct in the workplace.

Limitations

Identifying all the functions of humour was a complex task and the multi-functional nature of humour use made it an ambiguous and elusive topic at times. Identification of functions was subject to some inherent research bias such as researcher perspective and social desirability effects on participants. However these limitations were offset by the triangulation of the research methods, enabling a multi-perspective view of events and utterances to dictate the analysis phase of the data. Many events were described by several different respondents, observed by the researcher and in some cases further questions were asked, to arrive at a result reflecting consistently identified functions of humour.

In humour that was gender-based in content my gender (female) inhibited the collection of some data that was male-oriented and shared only with other males. Social norms regarding gender and humour prevented access to some (male) forms of humour therefore future research projects may need to employ mixed-gender teams of

researchers to offset this limitation. Although restricted from this type of humour a small amount was shared by some less-conventional individuals and gives some insights into this area of humour.

Many themes in this thesis emerged as complex topics in their own right and thus require more research to better understand their uses and implications in the workplace. For example, this study identified that humour related to ethnicity was only used in face-to-face banter and although some reasons for this were discussed, more research may reveal further reasons and facets of this phenomenon.

This study focussed on one specific industry (IT) and therefore the findings cannot be generalised to other organisational environments and it is likely that research based in different industries may demonstrate different uses and functions of humour. There were findings in this study that differed from results in prior research and these may be attributed to the New Zealand workplace environment or even more specifically to the IT workplace culture that has been identified as unique to this industry.

Finally, the topic of humour was too broad to be adequately covered by one local research initiative and the wide variety of findings and implications could not all be investigated in depth. Therefore future research may need to look at more specific variables and factors of the complex topic of humour use at work

Contribution

Although much literature and research was uncovered on the topic of humour it was from many different disciplines and only a small proportion of it was related to management and business contexts. There have been few managerial studies on humour and none that were found were specific to New Zealand. The one significant research initiative discovered relating to humour, was that of the team at Victoria University, Wellington, headed by Professor Janet Holmes. This team's exploration into humour is part of a wider study on language at work and has a linguistic focus. Therefore, my research with its managerial focus that explores functions of humour at work is unique, and I sincerely hope that it builds on, and augments the work of this academic team.

The topic of humour at work was found to be too ambiguous, complex and wide to be encapsulated by this sole researcher project. Therefore this research makes a contribution to the body of knowledge by identifying significant areas for future studies and may serve as a pilot for larger, multi-industry explorations using teams of researchers.

Humour may provide insights into organisations and management that can assist in the running of businesses in a happier manner, less likely to attract costly and morale-lowering litigation. The fast changing working environment, particularly in IT, increases the importance of understanding people in these environments, in order to manage them effectively and achieve positive outcomes for both them and the organisation. This study emphasised that humour is extremely important to people in these organisations and a part of their cultural identity. The importance of using humour in these companies and the variety of functions that it serves has implications for managing staff effectively to avoid conflict, litigation and to ensure harmonious environments and productive outcomes. This project may be a catalyst for other potential projects that take different aspects of the study further and develop them in different ways, particularly in regard to technology, legal areas, resistance and workplace misbehaviour.

The research contributed actual value to two of these companies. Reports specific to each company were written as part of this study to highlight significant issues and uses of humour and the implication of these uses. These were completed sequentially as the data was collected and analysed from each company. The first was completed in August 2003, and the final report in mid- October 2003. Two of the companies provided positive feedback from the reports and verbally confirmed that further actions would ensue as a result of the findings and recommendations. AlphaTech invited me to return to their company and present the findings to a full staff meeting for discussion and questions. This was completed on September 8th 2003 and was a positive closure experience with this company and its employees. Therefore a contribution has been made to these organisations in the form of practical recommendations that may be implemented in the future. The General Manager from BytesBiz has stated that they will be reviewing selection and recruitment decisions as

well as considering implementing socialisation and orientation practices as suggested in the report. In a recent (4th November, 200) verbal communication he emphasised that he had been in discussions with a potential new employer for Brenda (Critical Incident One) and had outlined to this employer the mistakes that the company had made in regards to her placement at BytesBiz with its unique cultural environment. The potential employer stated that their company's culture was more formal and structured and both managers agreed that Brenda may fit in well and add value in this position. A positive outcome appears to have occurred and the BytesBiz manager admitted that the report emphasised the extent of the issue in this case and has been useful to the company.

Many of the interview participants stated that they had enjoyed discussing humour and that this has been a positive research experience for them. This may assist in access for me in future research initiatives and for other organisational researchers. Two of the Companies that declined involvement in this project, expressed interest in future research therefore this project may have opened some doors between local IT companies and academic initiatives for the future.

This was an important topic to those that participated in the study and therefore it is my hope that it is important to managers and academics for future development. The voices of these people are reflected throughout this work as they tell their stories and experiences allowing us to share humour in their everyday working lives. They used humour in many ways to manage their difficult and stressful working days, and in the words of the popular cliché used by many of them regarding their humour at work, "if you don't laugh you'll cry!"

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Appendices

Disclaimer:

Please be advised that the following appendices contain some examples of workplace humour that contain profanity and/ or sexual and racist content. This material is included to illustrate actual organisational examples of humour collected in this research project. It is linked to paragraphs in the discussion and thus exemplifies points. It is not included to merely shock or titillate but please be advised that some content may offend. Should the reader not wish to be exposed to such material it is advised that appendices F, G, H, K, L and M are avoided.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

What is your role in the organization?

To whom do you report?

Describe your status in the managerial hierarchy of this organization?

Which ethnic group do you consider yourself to belong to?

Which age group do you belong to?

15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 and over
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Sex

-male ☐

-female ☐

What is your highest level of Education?

Any other personal information you wish to share that may be relevant?

Describe your own sense of humour

What type of humour offends you?

What type of humour pleases you?

Have you ever felt as if you were the butt of the joke at work" when? (Describe)

Describe a humorous incident at work? Why did you find this funny?

In what situations does humour help in your workplace?

In what situations does humour hinder communication or fail in your workplace?

What type of humour is immediately apparent in the organisation?

What other forms of humour have you seen or been a part of?

Who are the jokers, the creators of amusement? Why do you think they are?

Who is not involved in humorous happenings?

Who is teased the most? Why do you think they are?

Is anyone left out of the humour? Why?

Does your manager use humour in your dealings with him/her?

Do you enjoy this humour? Why or why not?

Would you prefer your manager (subordinate) to be more or less humorous? Why?

Do you feel that humour is deliberately used in any work situations? For what purpose?

When does humour most often occur spontaneously?

Are there any humorous 'legends' retold by staff?

Would you like to see more or less humour in your workplace?

Any suggestions you have for adding (removing) humour or making work more (less) fun?

Would you participate in work-organised fun days? E.g. 'silly hat day'

What email humour do you receive? (types, source, your reaction)

What do you do with the email jokes that you receive?

Are there any other questions or points that you feel should have been covered in this interview?

Any further comments that you would like to add.

Thank you for your participation in this interview.

Appendix B

Report for AlphaTech

Executive Summary

This report has been written to provide AlphaTech New Zealand with a researcher's perspective of the use of humour in the organisation. Research was undertaken in May 2003, by Barbara Plester as part of a Masters thesis investigating humour in the workplace. AlphaTech is one of three IT organisations that agreed to participate in the research. This report, written solely for AlphaTech reflects my analysis of the humour and communication at AlphaTech. It does not employ comparative analysis between the three IT organisations that will comprise the final thesis.

The main finding of the report is that humour at AlphaTech is used in a functional manner that relieves tension at work as well as forming bonds and camaraderie between staff members and customers. The culture at AlphaTech was found to be very fun-loving, healthy and inclusive and humour is used to maintain and foster this culture. There are some concerns outlined regarding humour and alcohol and recommendations have been offered to deal with these concerns.

The limitations of the report are that the research only pertains to the Auckland branch of AlphaTech. It would have been enlightening to also conduct this research with the Wellington branch to give an overview of the New Zealand operation, however time and logistical constraints prevented this fuller research being conducted.

The people at AlphaTech that participated in the research demonstrated a great amount of support, goodwill and courage to have their everyday work lives scrutinised. I wish to sincerely thank them for their time, insightful contributions and honest appraisal of their individual and collective appreciation of humour at work. The 'AlphaTech' experience was both wonderfully interesting from a research point of view, as well as being refreshingly enjoyable from a personal stance. Thank you all.

"Work Hard – Play Hard"

A report on the use of humour at AlphaTech NZ

Written by Barbara Plester. Research conducted at AlphaTech NZ 2003, as part of Masters of Management Thesis on "Humour in the Workplace".

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Background

AlphaTech New Zealand recently celebrated its tenth anniversary of operation in New Zealand. A lavish black tie party was organized at their Auckland premises and was attended by the New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark. Best wishes were also sent via a video recording from [redacted] the founding father of AlphaTech globally.

Around this time I entered AlphaTech to conduct research and reflect on humour in this workplace, with emphasis on communication styles at AlphaTech NZ. It was my understanding that AlphaTech had previously been working to improve communication and affiliation throughout the New Zealand branches of the company, based in Auckland and Wellington.

This report discusses findings from the research conducted, outlines the methodology used in the research, and identifies areas that humour works well for the goals of AlphaTech as well as areas where there are concerns or the potential for problems. The key finding of the research is that humour is a very important component of communication at AlphaTech and is used deliberately in a functional way, as well as occurring naturally and spontaneously on a daily basis.

Staff at the Auckland branch of AlphaTech participated fully in the study and I wish to thank them for their time and insightful input. A limitation of the report is that the study only pertains to the Auckland branch as it was not possible to find a suitable time to replicate the research in the Wellington branch although willingness and enthusiasm for this was high. This may provide initiative for a future follow-up.

2. Discussion

2.1 Methodology

Three methods were used to investigate the use of humour at AlphaTech, participant observation, critical incident technique (CIT) and semi-structured interviews. Mixed methodology design results in data gathering techniques that "complement each other and compensate for the weaknesses in a single strategy" (Lee, 1999, p.14).

Semi-structured interviews were held with all willing organisational members in order to gain insights into their perception of how humour operates and is used in the organisation. Simultaneously, participant observation was conducted, observing people carrying out their day-to-day work and activities at AlphaTech. This included meetings, phone calls, and general interaction. The aim was to become as much a part of the organisation as possible in order to observe people functioning in their normal everyday manner. AlphaTech management were extremely supportive in allowing this method, and allowed me to sit at spare desks in the general open-plan work area and even supplied me with a door pass to come and go freely as a staff member. The depth of support from the staff members not only made for an extremely pleasant research experience but also allowed me to achieve this participant observation objective of the research design, implemented in order to triangulate results.

The semi-structured interviews included both open-ended and closed questions. Some questions provided the opportunities to elicit 'rich' data expressed in the respondents own words and style, while the closed questions provided a range of options to select from or a short reply. The closed questions were intended to provide mainly quantitative data in demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, age and gender.

CIT involved asking respondents about events or incidents that they considered funny and retelling these in their own words. Such events were analysed and compared with those retold by members of the other organisations in the study. Three such incidents were further explored and one of these (originating from AlphaTech) is discussed further below.

2.2 Research Findings

Of the fourteen people aged between twenty and forty-nine years, interviewed at AlphaTech Auckland, five are female and nine male. Six people had a University degree or higher tertiary qualification; the remaining eight had school or work-based qualifications. Ethnicity was predominantly European, with very little cultural diversity apparent. In general, the staff members appeared not to be threatened by the presence of a researcher and were comfortable being observed. It was obvious that this relaxation of attitude became more pronounced the longer that I was inside the organisation and I undertook some small helpful organisational tasks, such as letting couriers in with packages, to assimilate myself further as part of AlphaTech. By the end of my time here I felt like part of the team and felt real reluctance to leave the people with whom I had become familiar and friendly.

There is much humour apparent at AlphaTech, particularly during meetings and in situations where all or most of the staff are gathered together. As this is a sales-based organisation many of the staff are out of the office visiting clients for much of the day. The times when they come together are special and infrequent and result in many humorous interchanges. Humour plays a big part in re-establishing the relationships between staff members and is used to couch pertinent questions about performance and general well-being. Humour provides diversions for the staff that may have been on their own for much of the day or involved in serious customer negotiations. Humour refreshes interactions, smoothes the way to reconnecting and is a welcome refresher when staff are together. Monday morning meetings when staff meet to discuss the serious business for the up-coming week are a great source of humour as people share their weekend activities and tease each other as well as reconnecting with each other for the upcoming week.

The most apparent and prevalent form of humour at AlphaTech is the banter between staff members referred to by most as "taking the piss". This colloquial term was the most oft-used phrase by staff members when asked about humour at AlphaTech. Any interesting or unfortunate incidents become fodder for staff to tease each other about and they are quick to 'take the piss' when someone makes a mistake or does something silly or untoward. This form of humour appeared to be the type most

enjoyed by AlphaTech staff and was used as a way to relieve tension and/or boredom. It was also seen to be 'inclusive'. In 'taking the piss' out of someone they are being included in the culture and humour of the organisation. All staff commented that if they were not teased in this way they would not feel included. Obviously some people were more teased than others and new staff members were not teased as much but this gradually increased as they began to fit in and become accepted. Staff felt that humour used at work was a form of friendship and acceptance. People were not often nor easily offended by humour at work, but there was a consensus that humour was unacceptable when used as a personal attack or dig at someone. It was commented that people that work together have no choice about their colleagues and can have very little besides work in common. Humour therefore, is a tool that is used and shared to form bonds and relationships between both disparate and like-minded individuals. Most staff members strongly dislike when humour is used to conceal an unpleasant 'aimed' message or to disguise a personal attack on someone and there is a strong recognition of the need for humour to be positive and nurturing rather than sarcastic and biting.

2.3 Organisational Culture

Organisational culture is very important to the staff at AlphaTech and as a group they pride themselves on their professionalism and hard work. The most common description of the company culture is "work hard, play hard". There are not always obvious boundaries between work and play, as staff are expected to spend many hours after the work day socialising with customers at off-site functions. While these events are a part of the work expectation, they are also seen as enjoyable by the staff and many fun activities are part of this work-socialisation. Alcohol consumption is an important part of this socialising and indeed a part of the culture at AlphaTech. It is seen as the lubricating grease that can allow a breakdown of the more formal barriers present in the nine to five work environment. Staff reflected that when alcohol is offered people relax more and form friendlier bonds. As more alcohol is imbibed, barriers relax and shared humour in this context is quite different than the humour used in the office environment. It becomes less guarded and often a little more risqué, although staff are ever-conscious of not over-stepping the bounds of propriety as they are still working with customers. Sometimes these norms of behaviour are breached but this is likely to be by customers themselves usually when too much alcohol is

consumed. After-hours functions run by or attended by AlphaTech staff members usually include alcohol being served, and alcohol is frequently referred to in regard to humour. There appears to be a direct link between alcohol consumption and humour occurrence for the staff and both allow people to relax and evade stress situations for a while.

Alcohol also features in a staff initiation rite that is undertaken by new staff members, encouraged by the (now former) CEO. This incident features in the critical incidents section of the finished thesis. They are challenged to drink ten 'shots', (ten glasses of spirits) of their choice on their first night out with colleagues. This rite is a great source of amusement and interest to those who have already 'passed' and there is much interest in the new person's handling of this amount of alcohol. There is acceptance of the fact that some new members do not choose to do this due to personal choices regarding alcohol, but it seems to be an important acceptance rite and could be compared to university-style hazing common in North America. This activity, though the source of much jest and humour, does have the potential for problems at AlphaTech. Those choosing not to accept the challenge may never feel fully accepted and people may feel pressured to complete this activity. There is also the potential risk of physical harm to individuals completing this task which could have unpleasant repercussions on the professional image of AlphaTech. Conversely, among colleagues and customers in the IT industry this rite does convey a legend-like status upon the company and staff, and reinforces their 'work hard-play hard' ethos. There are positive aspects to having a distinctive initiation rite. It can be welcoming to new staff members and can assist in significantly lowering barriers between old and new members. Such a rite can result in new staff members feeling like part of the team more speedily and with a stronger bond, than it may take in a more traditional assimilation. In today's 'politically correct' workplace climates many such 'fun' activities are abandoned by workplaces worried about potential litigation and it seems unfortunate to see many of these practices dismissed and more sanitised workplaces emerge with a correspondingly safe but dull culture. It is a measure of the confidence of this organisation that such a potentially contentious practice still exists. As this was a particular peccadillo of the former CEO it is possible that this rite will change or be phased out by the incoming CEO and new rites may evolve. Should the practice remain it may be advisable to ensure that it is well supervised, that people do not feel

pressured to participate and that there are designated individuals appointed to see the 'newbie' safely home afterwards. The 'shots' ritual does fit with the informal ethos of 'work hard, play hard'. The staff already have an informal code of looking after each other and this may need to be reinforced in all situations involving alcohol to ensure everyone's safety and well-being.

As appears to be the case in other IT companies, many of the legends at AlphaTech are based on actions that have occurred when staff members or customers have drunk too much alcohol and then behaved in different or unusual ways. This behaviour has prompted many stories and recalled humour. As people's mistakes are a great source of humour at AlphaTech, situations where alcohol is present adds to the potential for mistakes to occur, and fuels the opportunity to tease and 'take the piss' out of co-workers. AlphaTech management are careful when important functions are being planned, to remind staff to limit alcohol intake until later in the evening when important guests and customers have departed or have drunk significant amounts themselves. Staff members are punctilious in abiding by this behavioural norm.

Enjoyable and humorous incidents that were recounted by respondents generally had occurred at offsite gatherings and social work-based occasions. Many of these legends involved situations where someone had had too much to drink and behaved in an amusing or unorthodox manner. The recounting of such stories was an enjoyable experience for respondents as they relived fun times and they indicated that bonds were formed and strengthened in these situations. An informal record is kept by some staff members in the 'quote book', and amusing stories are written down as well as clever, witty or silly quotes made at various times. Staff members were happy for me to read this log and many of the incidents recorded were once again events at off-site events, as well as amusing day-to-day incidents at AlphaTech. Many of the comments recorded contained sexual innuendo and a slightly more ribald tone than was observed in everyday discourse at AlphaTech, probably due to the different situations, locations and the addition of alcohol and perhaps the absence of a research initiative.

The culture at AlphaTech is unique, fun and enjoyed by staff members, resulting in a group of people that enjoy their work and low staff turnover. The culture should be fostered and reinforced with a few cautionary measures already discussed in regards

to situations involving alcohol. It may even be desirable to promote the excellent culture more obviously with posters and publications that reflect and display the vibrant group that is AlphaTech NZ.

2.4 People

Although ethnically this is a fairly homogeneous workgroup there are some apparent cultural differences in humour appreciation. Some staff members display a particularly British sense of humour, enjoying British TV programmes and comedies, in contrast to those who enjoy more obvious or slapstick styles of humour. There are staff members that originate from both America and Britain and differences in appreciation of styles are apparent and contribute to the interesting differences among colleagues. It was suggested that the Australian branches of the company seemed to have a completely different sense of humour and there is difficulty sometimes sharing jokes and 'connecting' between branches as each group did not always 'get' the other's style of humour. This is also relevant in regard to the different personalities that make up the two New Zealand branches (Auckland and Wellington), suggesting that humour does have an 'in-group' element to it and that groups that work together develop a group humour that they share. This is often not appreciated or enjoyed by other workgroups within the same company. The implications of this for AlphaTech New Zealand could be that more time may need to be spent with both branches getting together to develop these bonds of connection, and past team-building initiatives appear to have been successful and popular among staff.

Although most staff members are judged by their colleagues as being humorous at some time or another there are individuals considered to be particularly funny overall. This identification is shared by two different individuals that are generally accepted to be the 'funny guys' by their colleagues. They are aware of this assigned role and enjoy this status in the organisation. Both see a real need for humour at work and enjoy sharing jokes and quips with their colleagues to make them feel good. It is generally felt that no-one at AlphaTech is left out of humour, but that it is situational and dependent on both proximity of workspaces as well as who is physically around when humour is happening. Though some individuals are considered quieter than others and less likely to instigate humour, there is a feeling of cohesion and

inclusiveness among this workgroup. Humour is a shared aspect that unites the group. It was noted that the CEO, due to role expectations, is less involved in humorous happenings than general staff members. Staff at AlphaTech feel that managers here use about the right amount of humour in their negotiations. Humour does not differ according to status due to the flat hierarchical structure in the organisation. There is a team environment of autonomously working individuals rather than layers of authority. Management and staff communication is mostly fairly informal and relaxed and this informality was observed in the research process. The informality between managers and staff members allows for humorous exchanges most of the time among all individuals. Most people agree that they deliberately use humour at various times in their working day, and often use it deliberately to 'break the ice' with customers and form friendly working relationships. Spontaneous humour occurs at any time in the day but is more likely when more people are around, in particular at the Monday morning meeting, (often the only time in the week that all the staff are together). Friday afternoon is also a likely time for humour to occur, as staff start to anticipate the weekend. It was observed that after a quiet spell of intense working in the early afternoon, often around three o'clock there is a sudden spontaneous burst of noise, laughter and general interaction, possibly when staff need a break or change in routine.

Staff at AlphaTech feel that the amount and quality of humour at work is about the right amount and are happy with the status quo- not wishing to see either more or less humour used. Many are keen on the idea of more fun days in the form of offsite events such as team building activities, and previous team building events were recounted with great enthusiasm. It was suggested that successes should be more celebrated in a fun way, for example a loud gong or something similar to announce good news.

Humour is identified by staff as functional in breaking the ice with new or unknown customers and staff members, and to relieve tension and stress particularly in meetings. It is also used to buoy spirits, promote camaraderie and relieve boredom. Humour is seen as being a hindrance to workplace communication when there is too much or it becomes distracting from the main point or focus of the interchange. Context and situation are recognised as important considerations for use of humour

and inappropriate use of humour is deemed by most to have a negative impact on work relations.

> In truth, humour in the workplace is rarely neutral, trivial or random. It is deployed for the achievement of quite specific purposes to do with self-preservation, getting things done or getting one's way (Barsoux, 1993, p. vii).

2.5 Email

There is no official policy regarding humour and email at AlphaTech and from observation and respondent interviews there seems to be no need to regulate this at this point in time. Staff members have a very good sense of what is and is not appropriate to email at work and all are extremely selective about which emails were sent to which recipients. Staff seem to have a good grasp of what their colleagues would find acceptable or offensive and maintain a healthy respect for these unstated, informal boundaries. There were very few admissions of having been offended by email sent by colleagues and if this had occurred it was dealt with immediately and forthrightly between the participants. The email boundaries are governed by norms of propriety and no-one minds pushing these a little if something is very funny but everyone is aware of limits and wary of sending anything too pornographic, racist, sexist or violent. People send email files to colleagues depending on their understanding of that person's values and beliefs. There is evidence that males send some things only to other men and females likewise send some communications "just for the girls". Generally most people don't have enough time to read all the funny emails that they are sent and many get deleted unread. Visual humour is more popular in emails as it doesn't involve having to read long tracts of prose. Particularly amusing emails see staff calling out to each other or even visiting each others' desks to enjoy the laugh together. Many people keep a 'joke file and store favourites in there to send to friends, family or colleagues when they have time in their day.

3. Conclusion

Staff members at AlphaTech appear to be a happy and cohesive group and are supportive of each other. Humour is appropriate and positive. Staff are aware of boundaries and individual values and taboos. Email is handled very responsibly by staff and there appears to be no need for official regulation. Functions with alcohol contribute to the company culture and adds 'social grease' to customer occasions. There could be cause for concern over the company rite of drinking 10 shots on arrival, as this could be considered a form of 'hazing'. Although no-one is forced to complete this task, the social pressure could lead to feelings of not being accepted by those that don't. In encouraging individuals to consume such a large amount of alcohol, there is the potential for a backlash against the company in future. This rite has also achieved 'legend' status both within the company and in the larger environment of the IT industry and is an effective bonding ritual for new members. Modifying it or managing it carefully may be advisable and reinforcing the norm of 'looking after your mates' is recommended.

Humour works well at AlphaTech to relieve tension and conflict. It can sometimes be used to mask real issues or used as a shield to hide from criticism, but does also soften hard messages and lighten tense atmospheres. The perspective derived from this research is that the AlphaTech staff is a very professional responsive team, aware of boundaries and of the effects of using humour. They use it effectively to their advantage and use it as an inclusive tool to build camaraderie and team spirit. Humour is used as a release from tension, boredom and frustration and as a salve after dealing with difficult customers. Humour and fun are healthy, positive tools in this organisation and norms of professionalism and propriety govern their use rather than official rules and policies. As a researcher it was a privilege and a pleasure to work inside this organisation and I sincerely thank them for this opportunity as well as wishing them all the best for their future business progress.

4. Recommendations

4.1 The status quo should be preserved as this is a positive and cohesive company culture.

4.2 The initiation rite of drinking ten shots of alcohol could be reviewed and carefully managed to avoid potential problems and backlash. Looking after participants in this ritual needs to be reinforced.

4.3 Morale-building initiatives such as team building should be continued and fostered.

4.4 The company culture could be further promoted with more sharing of the quote book, more photo boards, and even posters proclaiming who AlphaTech is and mission and values statements.

4.5 Fun days (such as the Melbourne Cup day) are enjoyed and more such days could be organised.

4.6 Keep smiling and laughing at work, everyone needs it.

4.7 Humour and email use do not need to be regulated as staff act responsibly already.

4.8 Staff and management should be congratulated on creating and maintaining this healthy happy workplace and care should be taken to continue fostering this culture. AlphaTech people do indeed 'work hard' and need to offset this with the 'play hard' part of the ethos.

5. References

Barsoux, J. (1993). *Funny Business. Humour, management and business culture*. Cassell: London

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Appendix C

Report for BytesBiz

Executive Summary

This report has been written to provide BytesBiz New Zealand with a researcher's perspective of the use of humour in the organisation. Research was undertaken in May 2003, by Barbara Plester as part of a Masters thesis investigating humour in the workplace. BytesBiz is one of three IT organisations that agreed to participate in the research. This report, written solely for BytesBiz reflects my analysis of the humour and communication at BytesBiz. It does not employ comparative analysis between the three IT organisations that will comprise the final thesis.
The main finding of the report is that humour at BytesBiz is extremely important to the people that work in this organisation. It has many functions and key among these is that of relief offered form tension and stress in the workplace. Humour provides a break for staff members and relieves boredom with work tasks. Most of the time humour has positive outcomes and functions and it fosters camaraderie among team members. However, much of the humour is outrageous and profanity is frequently used. There is the potential for it to cause offence and conflict. An incident where this has already occurred is discussed in the report with recommendations for future management of such issues.

The report recommends maintaining the cohesive and fun culture that already prevails. It cautions against regulating humour with policies but at the same time boundaries of propriety and legality must be observed. This could be a difficult task at times but BytesBiz and its staff currently maintain a good balance between these imperatives. The people at BytesBiz work hard and need to balance this with the play hard side of the dichotomy oft-quoted by staff at BytesBiz.

The people at BytesBiz that participated in the research demonstrated a great amount of support, goodwill and courage to have their everyday work lives scrutinised. I wish to sincerely thank them for their time, insightful contributions and honest appraisal of their individual and collective appreciation of humour at work. The 'BytesBiz'

experience was both wonderfully interesting from a research point of view, as well as being refreshingly enjoyable from a personal stance. Thank you all.

"Work Hard – Play Hard"

A report on the use of humour at BytesBiz NZ

Written by Barbara Plester. Research conducted at BytesBiz NZ 2003, as part of Masters of Management Thesis on "Humour in the Workplace".

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Background

BytesBiz is part of an international company specialising in the distribution of both hardware and software computer products. The New Zealand branch comprises 45 people most of whom are based in Auckland with two staff members in Wellington and one in Christchurch. The Auckland branch operates mainly from [redacted] with premises in the city supplementing the operation. As is common in the Information technology (IT) industry the company operates a flat hierarchy with the two key levels being senior management and everyone else. Many workers have manager in their role description and staff members are expected to operate autonomously and make many decisions themselves. The company is divided into teams based on workplace functions that include accounts & administration, IT, operations and sales.

This report discusses findings from the research conducted, outlines the methodology used in the research, and identifies areas that humour works well for the goals of BytesBiz as well as areas where there are concerns or the potential for problems. The key finding of the research is that humour is a very important component of organisational culture at BytesBiz and is used deliberately in a functional way, as well as occurring naturally and spontaneously on a daily basis. A significant incident with negative workplace consequences was identified and analysed, and provides insight to the workplace culture at BytesBiz as well as suggesting different options for future incidents.

2. Discussion

2.1 Methodology

Three methods were used to investigate the use of humour at BytesBiz, participant observation, semi-structured interviews and critical incident technique. Mixed methodology design results in data gathering techniques that "complement each other and compensate for the weaknesses in a single strategy" (Lee, 1999, p.14).

Semi-structured interviews were held with all willing organisational members in order to gain insights into their perception of how humour operates and is used in the organisation. Simultaneously, participant observation was conducted, observing people carrying out their day-to-day work and activities at BytesBiz. This included meetings, phone calls, and general interaction. The aim was to become as much a part of the organisation as possible in order to observe people functioning in their normal everyday manner. BytesBiz management were extremely supportive in allowing this method, and allowed me to sit at spare desks and to use a vacant office for the interviews. The depth of support from the staff members not only made for an extremely pleasant research experience but also allowed me to achieve this participant observation objective of the research design, implemented in order to triangulate results.

The semi-structured interviews included both open-ended and closed questions. Some questions provided the opportunities to elicit 'rich' data expressed in the respondents own words and style, while the closed questions provided a range of options to select from or a short reply. The closed questions were intended to provide mainly quantitative data in demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, age and gender.

Two of the questions in the interviews pertained to funny incidents and legends at work. Using the critical incident technique (CIT) these were collated, analysed and presented in a table (1) in section 2.5. A large number of these incidents came from the participants at BytesBiz and one significant incident with serious negative consequences was further analysed in section 2.6.

2.2 Organisational Culture

A lively culture was immediately apparent in this company. The workplace environment was loud with much laughter frequently punctuating the work- based activities. Apart from a clear and streamlined reception area humorous material was openly displayed in most work areas inside BytesBiz. It became quickly obvious that humour and joking was very prevalent and important inside this organisation. Upon introducing myself and my study to staff, many jokes were made and the comments reflected that I would find a large amount of humour to experience and discuss. This did prove to be the case, and of the three organisations studied, humour was the most concentrated in this one. The humour that was enjoyed by staff appeared to be important to their coping in a very fast-paced working environment and the phrase "work hard-play hard" was used in reference to the use of humour at work. Another key phrase used by staff was that humour often focused on "taking the piss' out of each other. By this staff were referring to the abundant practice of teasing and using banter among colleagues. Joking insults were extremely common among people in the same team and equally between members of different work team as part of the friendly workplace rivalry observed. Most organisational members took pride in the lively and sometimes raucous and outrageous humour and were keen to bring my attention to any instances that may have occurred. Approximately half of the staff agreed to an interview and much insight was gained into the organizational culture. Several staff members asserted that the fun culture and atmosphere were a key part of the reason that they worked at BytesBiz.

The content of much of this banter and joking teasing was surprising. Many subjects that were seemingly sensitive issues were openly targeted for jokes and friendly insults. This was an unexpected finding as many comments appeared to have the potential to offend but were received with laughter and good grace. For example organisational members teased each other about their ethnicity and insults were traded using terms that may have been offensive, such as FOBs in regards to Samoan colleagues, "fat white boy" in return. Age, gender and physical characteristics such as size were also fodder for jocular abuse. Staff members laughed at these traded insults and freely discussed them in the interviews. People appeared to have a good understanding of each other's sensitivities and understood the boundaries in this banter. Different people were teased in different ways implying an understanding of

each others individual differences. As the researcher known to quite a few of these workers I was included in the teasing and was the subject of some short people jokes with a group of other workers. Many of these joking insults were potentially offensive but according to La Fave & Mannell (1976) extreme racial insults are not encoded or decoded literally and an extreme insult is less insulting than a mild insult as it is "cognitively restructured" as 'only a joke'. A pseudo insult is then transferred into a disguised compliment as the joker thinks the target is a good sport that can take a joke. Extreme insults are often less offensive than sly digs as due to their extremity the targets know that it is obviously a joke. A potential problem relating to this type of workplace humour is that new organisational members could possibly find this daunting and offensive at the beginning of their tenure. It was noted that new people are not usually teased until colleagues have established their personal styles and boundaries and whether or not they can 'take a joke'. However there is plenty of potential for this humour to go wrong and a major incident where this had occurred was both observed and discussed.

2.3 Person-organisation 'fit'

A significant 'critical incident' occurred and resulted in a staff member leaving the company because her three month probationary contract was not made permanent. Managers hired a person that had a different style than others in the organisation and thought that a complementary approach might enhance the abilities and knowledge in the sales team. The employee came from a very different work background and was more accustomed to formal workplace protocols and a hierarchical structure. This newcomer took offence at the style of communication used among peers and with some customers and was particularly shocked by the humorous interchanges. Profanity, teasing and 'taking the piss' were everyday occurrences in this environment.

Although potentially offensive remarks were not directed towards the new staff member she was shocked and outraged at this different style of interaction. The team tried to tone down their usual lively and ribald banter and the new person tried to get used to the different styles. Alas things did not improve and the team started to resent that their cheerful, 'politically incorrect' joking atmosphere was changed. The newcomer still felt that even the toned-down style was inappropriate for a workplace,

and further talks with managers ensued. General banter among the team continued but people adopted a different style when dealing with new worker who became increasingly alienated. After several weeks and several different managerial efforts at integration, it was decided that this new person did not 'fit' into this work team and she was advised that her temporary contract would not be extended to a permanent one. She has since, very unhappily, left the company. Before her departure, she described her position in this work environment as "a square peg in a round hole". Managers have planned in future to hire someone that fits into the team rather than a purely skills-based appointment as in this instance.

There were problems from both sides in this issue. The new member did not wait until she had settled in to the new environment before attacking her colleagues humour and working styles. Humour styles are profane and outrageous at times in this organisation and managers and staff need to be aware that individuals coming from other work environments can be shocked at the styles used inside this company. IT professionals are different to many other professionals and the industry has a unique youth-based, autonomous culture not found in many other work places (Prager, 1999, Leinfuss 1999). Therefore newcomers to BytesBiz may have to be gently assimilated until they understand the unique and zany culture. Orientation programmes may assist with this process. Assigning a mentor to new recruits may be another way to socialise new staff members and provide a support person to question regarding any potentially contentious or offensive events. As these socialisation practices were not offered to this newcomer it may have been useful for managers to have offered her a second probationary contract to give more time for her socialisation into BytesBiz as this environment had been such a shock on arrival. Future selection decisions may need to keep in mind that individuals need to cope in this lively culture as well as possess relevant task abilities.

2.4 Critical Incidents

A technique used in this research was critical incident technique (CIT). This involved collecting information on many different incidents described in respondents own words. This was particularly relevant at BytesBiz and participants were asked about funny events or legends that had happened at work. Of the three organisations BytesBiz respondents supplied the greatest number of incidents and legends and many

of these occurred at company-based functions and events. People enjoyed retelling the stories and many respondents recounted the same stories.

Table 1 presents the legends of BytesBiz, the context in which they occurred and whether or not alcohol was a factor in the incident. Many of these incidents were practical jokes planned and played on colleagues and BytesBiz was the only organisation in the study that had such a large amount of practical jokes to retell.

As appears to be the case in other IT companies, many of the legends at BytesBiz were based on actions that have occurred when staff members or customers have drunk too much alcohol and then behaved in different or unusual ways. This behaviour has prompted many stories and amusement among staff. As people's mistakes are a great source of humour at BytesBiz, situations where alcohol is present adds to the potential for mistakes to occur, and fuels the opportunity to tease and 'take the piss' out of co-workers.

Eighteen of the 24 incidents were practical jokes planned and created by workers and of the three companies studied BytesBiz was the only one with such a high number of these types of jokes. This could be attributed to the prevailing culture at BytesBiz and also to the individuals in the organisation. The 'jokers' at BytesBiz were unique and more actively involved in creating fun and humour. Approximately one third of the incidents had alcohol as a factor and a similar amount occurred at offsite events. It is evident that alcohol is usually supplied at offsite events and assists in some of the fun and events that occur. Some of these incidents (e.g. the penguin theft) although amusing and fun could have potentially negative outcomes for BytesBiz and care should be taken not to break laws or upset local communities.

Table 1: Critical Incidents

Incidents/Legends[1]	Context	Function	Alcohol
1. Employee lost job	Day-to-day event	B	no
2. Tied to forklift	Day-to-day event	PJ, Sp, I	no
3. Small person, big chair	Day-to-day event	PJ, Pl	no
4. Lying under desks	Day-to-day event	PJ, Sp	no
5. Banging tummies	Day-to-day event	PJ, Sp	no
6. Singing at meeting	Day-to-day event	PJ, Pl, I	no
7. Stolen Easter egg	On-going joke	PJ, Pl	no
8. Gloves on face	Day-to-day event	PJ, Pl, I	no
9. Hi Ho–short people	Day-to-day event	Sp, B	no
10. Blow-up sheep in bed	Team build, offsite	PJ, Pl	yes
11. Person in bike basket	Team build, offsite	PJ, Sp	yes
12. Dropped in the pool	ACC-offsite	PJ, Sp	yes
13. Barry the singing sock	On-going joke	PJ, Pl	no
14. Stolen penguin	ACC-offsite	PJ, Sp	yes
15. Business cards to girls	ACC-offsite	PJ, Pl	yes
16. 70th birthday party	Comp. celebration	C, Pl	yes
17. Nude sandwich	ACC-offsite	PJ, Sp	yes
18. Helping sheep give birth	Team build, offsite	Sp	no
19. Kissing the CEO	ACC-offsite	PJ, Sp	yes
20. Tennis balls down trousers	Day-to-day event	PJ, Sp	no
21. Keyboard key change	Day-to-day event	PJ, Pl, I	no
22. Sellotape over phone	Day-to-day event	PJ, Pl, I	no
23. Paper birds from ceiling	Day-to-day event	PJ, Pl	no
24. Drunk in spa pool	Social offsite	C, Sp	yes

Function:
C Official company celebration
PJ Practical joke
Pl Planned
Sp Spontaneous
I Initiation joke
B Banter

Context
ACC Annual Company Conference

A = AlphaTech
B = BytesBiz
C = CompuStar

[1] Incidents described more fully below

2.5 Email

There is official policy regarding humour and email at BytesBiz that states that disciplinary action may be taken by the company if staff members send email messages that are offensive to others. The policy specifically mentions humour and recommends that workers are aware that what one person finds amusing may be offensive to others. This policy has resulted in people being more cautious regarding what email they send to which recipient and has also resulted in less humorous emails being sent to managers in case of repercussions.

Staff members have a very good sense of what is and is not appropriate to email at work and all are extremely selective about which emails were sent to which recipients. Workers seem to have a good grasp of what their colleagues would find acceptable or offensive and maintain a healthy respect for these unstated, informal boundaries. There were very few admissions of having been offended by email sent by colleagues and if this had occurred it was dealt with immediately and forthrightly between the participants. The email boundaries are governed by norms of propriety and no-one minds pushing these a little if something is very funny but everyone is aware of limits and wary of sending anything too pornographic, racist, sexist or violent. People send email files to colleagues depending on their understanding of that person's values and beliefs. There is evidence that males send some things only to other men and females likewise send some communications "just for the girls".

Generally most people don't have enough time to read all the funny emails that they are sent and many get deleted unread. Visual humour is more popular in emails as it doesn't involve having to read long tracts of prose. Particularly amusing emails see staff calling out to each other or even visiting each others' desks to enjoy the laugh together. Many people keep a 'joke file and store favourites to send to friends, family or colleagues when they have time in their day.

2.6 Function

> In truth, humour in the workplace is rarely neutral, trivial or random. It is deployed for the achievement of quite specific purposes to do with self-preservation, getting things done or getting one's way (Barsoux, 1993, p. vii).

Humour is very important to staff at BytesBiz, it provides the balance to the hard work that all staff are engaged in. It is the 'play hard' component of the work hard play hard dichotomy apparent in all three of the IT companies studied. Humour is part of the coping mechanism used by the hard working staff that operates in the fast-paced technological environment. Staff at BytesBiz work autonomously and are expected to shoulder much responsibility treating their business tasks as they would a personal business. Therefore the humour is also autonomous and boundaries are set by those involved. Humour is not regulated in this workplace and although it does create problems at times this freedom is an important factor to staff at BytesBiz. People that are expected to work in an empowered and autonomous fashion must equally be permitted to interact, laugh, and create their own fun in an equally autonomous manner. Attempting to regulate humour would be offensive to many staff members and most of the time social norms of propriety operate and humour content is well-regulated naturally by those involved. However, managers may need to keep in mind that newcomers to such an environment may need some guidance and socialisation assistance if they are unfamiliar with such a fun culture.

It is probably preferable to workers in this environment that the occasional reminder about humour styles will suffice rather than extra policies and regulation. As a researcher I enjoyed the lively atmosphere and the ribald and zany styles of humour. Although humour could be occasionally profane and outrageous is was also equally kind and nurturing of others and humour was used to lift the spirits of colleagues. It was identified that too much humour occurs at times ("it's a zoo some days") but most staff members enjoyed the relief that humour provided in this fast-paced work environment.

3. Conclusion

Humour works well at BytesBiz to relieve tension and conflict. Sometimes the humour used can create conflict as outlined in the 'fit' incident, however this case was a significant exception and most staff enjoy the humour and fun at BytesBiz . Although humour at BytesBiz can be outrageous and distracting, the perspective derived from this research is that the BytesBiz staff is a very professional responsive team, aware of boundaries and of the effects of using humour. They use it effectively to their advantage and use it as an inclusive tool to build camaraderie and team spirit. Humour is used as a release from tension, boredom and frustration and as a salve after dealing with difficult customers. Humour and fun are healthy, positive tools in this organisation and norms of professionalism and propriety govern their use rather than official rules and policies. As a researcher it was a privilege and a pleasure to work inside this organisation and I sincerely thank them for this opportunity as well as wishing them all the best for their future business progress.

4. Recommendations

4.1 The status quo should be preserved as this is a positive and cohesive company culture.

4.2 Newcomers to BytesBiz may need some orientation and mentorship particularly in regard to the company culture.

4.3 Selection decisions should consider applicants fit with the prevailing strong company culture

4.4 Morale-building initiatives such as team building should be continued and fostered.

4.5 Fun days are enjoyed and more such days could be organised.

4.6 Keep smiling and laughing at work, everyone needs it.

4.7 On the surface the email policy is working but it is likely that potentially offensive email still circulates. Management need to remind staff periodically of the offence policy but also be aware that staff are responsible and careful about email sent to different recipient's.

4.8 Staff work autonomously and therefore must continue to make their own judgments about appropriate humour use. Reminders about potential issues that can stem from inappropriate humour may be needed from time to time.

4.9 Before key company events staff may require reminders regarding illegal or potentially offensive behaviour that can occur when alcohol is consumed. BytesBiz may need to restate the company position before such events.

4.10 Staff and management should be congratulated on creating and maintaining this healthy happy workplace and care should be taken to continue fostering

this culture. BytesBiz people do indeed 'work hard' and need to offset this with the 'play hard' part of the ethos.

5. References

Barsoux, J. (1993). *Funny Business. Humour, management and business culture.* Cassell: London

La Fave, L. & Mannell, R. (1976). Does ethnic humor serve prejudice? *Journal of Communication,* 26, (3), 116-123.

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Appendix D

Report for CompuStar

Executive Summary

This report has been written to provide CompuStar New Zealand with a researcher's perspective of the use of humour in the organisation. Research was undertaken in May 2003, by Barbara Plester as part of a Masters thesis investigating humour in the workplace. CompuStar is one of three IT organisations that agreed to participate in the research. This report, written solely for CompuStar reflects my analysis of the humour and communication at CompuStar. It does not employ comparative analysis between the three IT organisations that will comprise the final thesis.

The main finding of the report is that humour at CompuStar is used to provide relief from workplace tension. The form that this humour takes is largely banter and teasing among colleagues. Humour at CompuStar is governed by behavioural norms and the sensitive and calm style of the Managing Directors is reflected in the workplace culture and humour. Humour at CompuStar is primarily non-controversial and unlikely to cause workplace offence or conflict. The report recommends that this cohesive environment is maintained but that some additional fun days or events could be considered.

The people at CompuStar that participated in the research demonstrated a great amount of support, goodwill and courage to have their everyday work lives scrutinised. I wish to sincerely thank them for their time, insightful contributions and honest appraisal of their individual and collective appreciation of humour at work. The 'CompuStar' experience was both wonderfully interesting from a research point of view, as well as being refreshingly enjoyable from a personal stance. Thank you all.

"Work Hard - Play Hard"

A report on the use of humour at CompuStar NZ

Written by Barbara Plester. Research conducted at CompuStar NZ 2003, as part of Masters of Management Thesis on "Humour in the Workplace".

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Background

CompuStar is a North Shore based company that is wholly New Zealand owned and has been operating for 12 years. The key business activities are the manufacture and distribution of personal computers and other related technological products. The two owners work in the business among the staff and a very flat hierarchical structure was apparent.

This report discusses findings from the humour research conducted, outlines the methodology used in the research, and identifies areas that humour works well for the goals of CompuStar. In contrast to other companies in the study, no potential issues or problems were identified in regards to humour use inside CompuStar. The key finding in this report is that humour use inside CompuStar is gentle, appropriate and caring with little likelihood of causing offence and conflict at work. Humour use at CompuStar reflects the caring and sensitive management styles used in this organisation.

2. Discussion

2.1 Methodology

Three methods were used to investigate the use of humour at CompuStar participant observation, semi-structured interviews and critical incident technique. Mixed methodology design results in data gathering techniques that "complement each other and compensate for the weaknesses in a single strategy" (Lee, 1999, p.14).

Semi-structured interviews were held with all willing organisational members in order to gain insights into their perception of how humour operates and is used in the organisation. Simultaneously, participant observation was conducted, observing people carrying out their day-to-day work and activities at CompuStar. Information was collected regarding funny workplace incidents and legends and analysed using critical incident technique.

The semi-structured interviews included both open-ended and closed questions. Some questions provided the opportunities to elicit 'rich' data expressed in the respondents own words and style, while the closed questions provided a range of options to select from or a short reply. The closed questions were intended to provide mainly quantitative data in demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, age and gender.

2.2 People

The people at CompuStar were mainly of European origin although some ethnic diversity was apparent. Gender was predominately male and the ages of staff ranged from 19 years through to mid-forties. Staff numbered approximately 15 with some casual part-time staff used as well. Status effects were not observed in this company as the small staff and team operation made hierarchy unnecessary. The calm and gentle styles of the owners were reflected in the working styles of the staff and a very orderly, calm environment was observed. Although managers here are part of the team and hierarchy is very flat, humour styles did change slightly when managers were not present, becoming a bit louder and more teasing was noted. The managers' calm and gentle styles did affect staff behaviour and all professed to be happy working in this professional and caring environment. A united business focus was apparent and humour functioned as a pleasant aside that was enjoyed as a respite from business tasks.

2.3 Organisational Culture

A warm and inclusive culture was evident in this company with people showing caring and concern for their colleagues. The two leaders work in the same open plan area as the staff and their gentle management style is emulated by other workers. They adopt a kind and quiet manner when dealing with people and this style permeates the company. The company environment is clean and professional with no obvious forms of humour overtly displayed.

The phrase "work hard-play hard" was used by several respondents at CompuStar in regards to using humour at work. It was immediately obvious that the work hard part of the slogan was true and people at CompuStar appeared to be very professional and

hard working. Less apparent was the "play-hard" component and it is assumed that this is more relevant at company events and functions. As no such events were attended as part of the research the assumption was made that they are lively and fun events. One such evening event had recently occurred and was recounted by staff in the interviews with pleasure and enjoyment. From these accounts it appears that much lively interaction and banter was enjoyed at this occasion. Therefore, in such a professional working environment it appeared that fun and joking that was more active and raucous mainly took place at after hour's functions and that a gentler, calmer style of teasing and joking prevailed during work hours. This appeared to be a successful and desirable balance for the CompuStar staff and management.

People in this organisation were more cautious and guarded with their comments and careful in their humour use, unwilling to cause offence to others. Amongst this gentler more cautious style was plenty of light-hearted banter and teasing among those that knew each other well. Humour styles were appropriate for the work environment and no forms of potentially offensive humour were observed or recounted by staff members. Workers suggested that more humour occurs at off-site events when people are less busy and more relaxed. People work hard inside this organisation and humour takes a back seat to business imperatives but is enjoyed when workers have the time. As was found at all three IT companies in the study, banter was the most prevalent form of workplace humour and people enjoy teasing and "taking the piss" out of each other. At CompuStar this banter does not escalate into raucous and outrageous humour very often and remains within appropriate boundaries.

2.4 Function

Most staff members professed to enjoy working in this organisation and enjoyed a joke or a tease as part of the working day. Humour played a small but important role in business activities at CompuStar and the most common function of humour at CompuStar was to relieve tension and "lighten up" the workplace. For example, one staff member described making jokes and light-hearted comments to colleagues after dealing with a difficult customer. Her professionalism remained throughout the exchange with the customer but some humour was used afterwards as a form of 'relief'. Managers stressed that humour was not always appropriate when dealing with

customers as there was the risk of customers feeling that their concerns were not taken seriously. The highly professional staff prioritised their work activities and humour was an optional extra or used for relief when work tasks allowed. Fun was not a major part of the culture and appeared to be more prevalent when off site or after hours events occurred. Some staff activities were described such as Christmas and Easter events arranged as treats for the team.

Humour was used to show camaraderie and build bonds between colleagues at CompuStar. It was generally light-hearted, warm and appropriate. Other darker forms of humour were not revealed in the research process and it is assumed that they are either not a factor of life at CompuStar or that they are more covert and shared between like-minded individuals at suitable times. Generally respondents at CompuStar did not experience humour at work that was offensive to them but stated that they would be offended by racial or sexual humour or any jokes that "go too far". Several respondents stated firmly that "humour does not fail here".

Most people were included in the humour at CompuStar with some choosing to be less involved than others and workplace tasks or proximity had an effect on this. Most staff members were teased by their colleagues at some time and all enjoyed this stating that "I give as good as I get". Managers were described as calm, positive and sensitive and it was suggested that they were not expected to be 'funny' but were respected and taken seriously. This coincides with other findings from the research suggesting that managers do not use as much humour as subordinates and are not expected to do so.

Workers at CompuStar felt that humour was spontaneous and naturally occurred all the time at work but was less apparent when people were stressed or particularly busy. Although humour has a relief function at CompuStar it is not always used if people were distracted or overloaded.

2.5 Email

There is no official policy regarding humour and email at CompuStar and from observation and respondent interviews there seems to be no need to regulate this at this point in time. Staff members have a very good sense of what is and is not

appropriate to email at work and all are extremely selective about which emails were sent to which recipients. Staff seem to have a good grasp of what their colleagues would find acceptable or offensive and maintain a healthy respect for these unstated, informal boundaries. There were very few admissions of having been offended by email sent by colleagues and if this had occurred it was dealt with immediately and forthrightly between the participants. The email boundaries are governed by norms of propriety and no-one minds pushing these a little if something is very funny but everyone is aware of limits and wary of sending anything too pornographic, racist, sexist or violent. People send email files to colleagues depending on their understanding of that person's values and beliefs. There is evidence that males send some things only to other men and females likewise send some communications "just for the girls". Generally most people don't have enough time to read all the funny emails that they are sent and many get deleted unread. Visual humour is more popular in emails as it doesn't involve having to read long tracts of prose. Particularly amusing emails see staff calling out to each other or even visiting each others' desks to enjoy the laugh together. Many people keep a 'joke file and store favourites in there to send to friends, family or colleagues when they have time in their day.

Workers at CompuStar expressed concern over using company bandwidth for humorous email and many people stated that they would not send large files that would cause the system to become overloaded. This was the only company where staff expressed such a concern and there was a strong regard for business activities being more important than fun activities.

3. Conclusion

Humour works well at CompuStar to relieve tension and offer relief from stress. Humour is appropriate, warm and enjoyed by staff at CompuStar. Staff are careful about what humour is used and a caring and nurturing environment operates. . Humour is politically correct and unlikely to be used in an offensive way in this workplace. Email humour is particularly well-managed by organisational members with regard for bandwidth and business activities taking priority over fun and jokes. Email humour is not officially regulated or controlled but is well-governed by

workplace norms and priorities. Business focus is prioritized by all of the team members and humour is enjoyed in a gentle light-hearted way when business tasks allow. Teasing and banter are the most prevalent forms of humour followed by email. The perspective derived from this research is that the CompuStar staff form a very professional responsive team, aware of boundaries and of the effects of using humour. They use it effectively to their advantage and use it as an inclusive tool to build camaraderie and team spirit. Humour is used as a release from tension, boredom and frustration and as a salve after dealing with difficult customers. Humour and fun are healthy, positive tools in this organisation and norms of professionalism and propriety govern their use rather than official rules and policies. As a researcher it was a privilege and a pleasure to work inside this organisation and I sincerely thank them for this opportunity as well as wishing them all the best for their future business progress.

4. Recommendations

4.1 The status quo should be preserved as CompuStar has a positive and cohesive company culture.

4.2 Staff are careful in using humour and use appropriate humour for the workplace.

4.3 Morale-building initiatives such as team building should be continued and fostered.

4.4 Fun days are enjoyed and more such days could be organised.

4.5 Keep smiling and laughing at work, everyone needs it.

4.6 Humour and email use do not need to be regulated as staff act responsibly already.

4.7 Staff and management should be congratulated on creating and maintaining this healthy happy workplace and care should be taken to continue fostering this culture. CompuStar people do indeed 'work hard' and need to offset this with the 'play hard' part of the ethos.

5. References

Barsoux, J. (1993). *Funny Business. Humour, management and business culture*. Cassell: London

Lee, T.W. (1999). *Using qualitative methods in organizational research*. Sage Publications: California.

Appendix E

Email joke received 26/4/03. Example cited in Literature Review (p. 38)

BREAKING NEWS - Ferrari sack pit crew
Modena, Italy:

The Ferrari Formula 1 Team fired their entire pit crew yesterday. The announcement followed Ferrari's decision to take advantage of the New Zealand Government's "Work for the Dole" scheme - and to hire unemployed Maori youths.
The decision to hire them was brought on by a recent television documentary on how Maori youths were able to remove a set of car wheels in less than 6 seconds without proper equipment, whereas Ferrari's existing crew can only do it in 8 seconds with the aid of millions of dollars worth of high-tech gear.

This was thought to be an excellent yet bold move by Ferrari management. As most races are won and lost in the pits, Ferrari would have an advantage over every other F1 team.

However, Ferrari got more than they bargained for as, during the Maori pit crew's first practice session, not only were they able to change all four wheels and tyres in under 6 seconds, but within 12 seconds they had re-sprayed, re-badged, and sold the vehicle over to the McLaren Team for ten dozen of DB, an HQ Holden and a quick glimpse of Coulthard's bird in the shower.

Appendix F

Example of humour shared between males as cited in discussion (Chapter 4, p. 88)

I was sitting at my desk observing the workplace activity when Zac[2] (company joker) approached Hector at the next desk. Both men were aware that I could hear their exchange and was observing them and others. The following joke was made; both men laughed uproariously and then looked over to check my reaction (I laughed).

Zac: Gidday Hec, I see you have a lot of Sellotape there, is that for your budgie?

Hector: My budgie?

Zac: Yeah so when you fuck it, it doesn't explode!

(Researcher's notebook, 06/05/03)

[2] Names changed

Appendix G

Example of humour shared by a male respondent as cited in of discussion (Chapter 4, p.88)

Read to researcher by male respondent from email that respondent had received.

Dr. Dave had sex with one of his patients and he felt guilty afterwards. His inner voice (conscience) kept telling him "you're not supposed to have sex with patients. Then his other inner voice said "Dave forget it, you're single, it's ok, let it go". Conscience voice replied with "yeah all true, but Dave...you're a vet!"

(Researcher's notebook, 06/05/03)

Appendix H

Email joke forwarded by BytesBiz staff member, cited in Chapter 4, (p. 90)

Italian Love Story

An Italian man enters his favourite ritzy restaurant and while sitting at his regular table, he noticed a gorgeous woman sitting a table nearby….all alone. He calls the waiter over and asks for their most expensive bottle of Merlot to be sent over to her – knowing that if she accepts it, she is his.

The waiter gets the bottle and quickly sends it over to the girl, saying this is from the gentleman. She looks at the wine and decides to send a note over to the man.

The note reads: "for me to accept this bottle, you need to have a Mercedes in your garage, a million dollars in the bank, and 7 inches in your pants.

The man, after reading the note, sends one of his own back to her and it reads: "just so you know – I happen to have a Ferrari Testarosa, a BMW 850iL, and a Mercedes 560 SEL in my garage; plus I have over twenty million dollars in the bank. But, not even for a woman as beautiful as you, would I cut off 3 inches. Just send the bottle back".

Appendix I

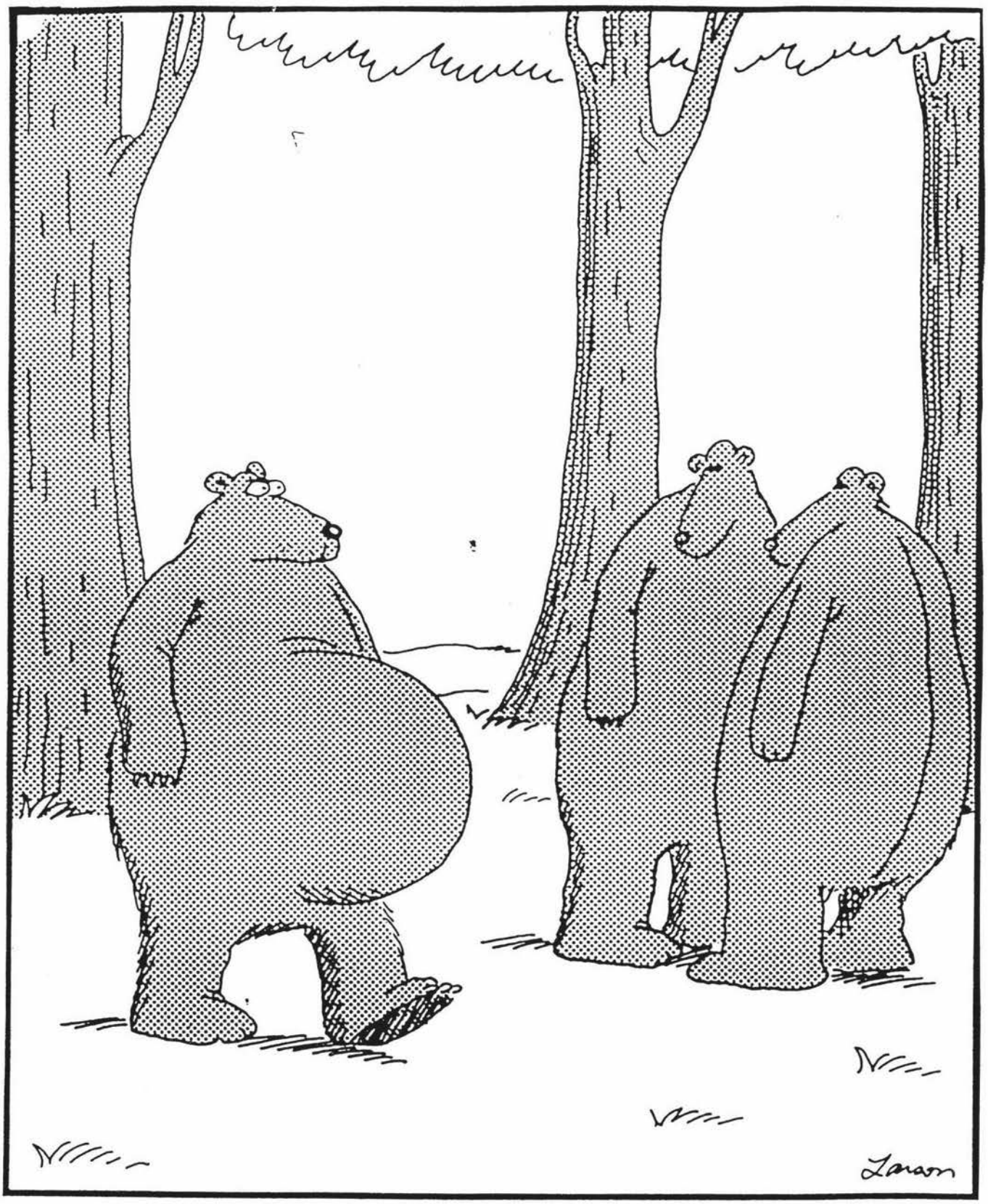
Email joke forwarded by BytesBiz staff member, cited in Chapter 4 (p. 89).

Women think they already know everything, but wait…..training courses are now available for women on the following subjects:

1. Silence, the Final Frontier: Where No Woman Has Gone Before
2. The Undiscovered Side of Banking: Making Deposits
3. Parties: Going Without New Outfits
4. Man Management: Minor Household Chores Can Wait Till After the Game
5. Bathroom Etiquette I: Men need space in the bathroom cabinet too
6. Bathroom Etiquette II: His razor is his
7. Communication Skills I: Tears- The last resort not the first
8. Communication Skills II: Thinking before speaking
9. Communication Skills III: Getting what you want without nagging
10. Driving a Car Safety: A skill you CAN acquire
11. Telephone Skills: How to hang up
12. Introduction to Parking
13. Advanced Parking: Backing into a space
14. Water Retention: Fact or Fat
15. Cooking I: Bringing back bacon, eggs and butter
16. Cooking II: Barn and Tofu are NOT for human consumption
17. Cooking III: How not to inflict your diets on other people
18. Compliments: Accepting them gracefully
19. PMS: "Poor Me Syndrome" Your problem….not his
20. Dancing: Why men don't like to
21. Classic Clothing: Wearing outfits you already have
22. Household Dust: A harmless natural occurrence only women notice
23. Integrating Your Laundry: Washing it all together
24. Oil and Gas: Your car needs both
25. TV Remotes: For men only
26. The Toilet: You can learn to leave the seat up

Appendix J

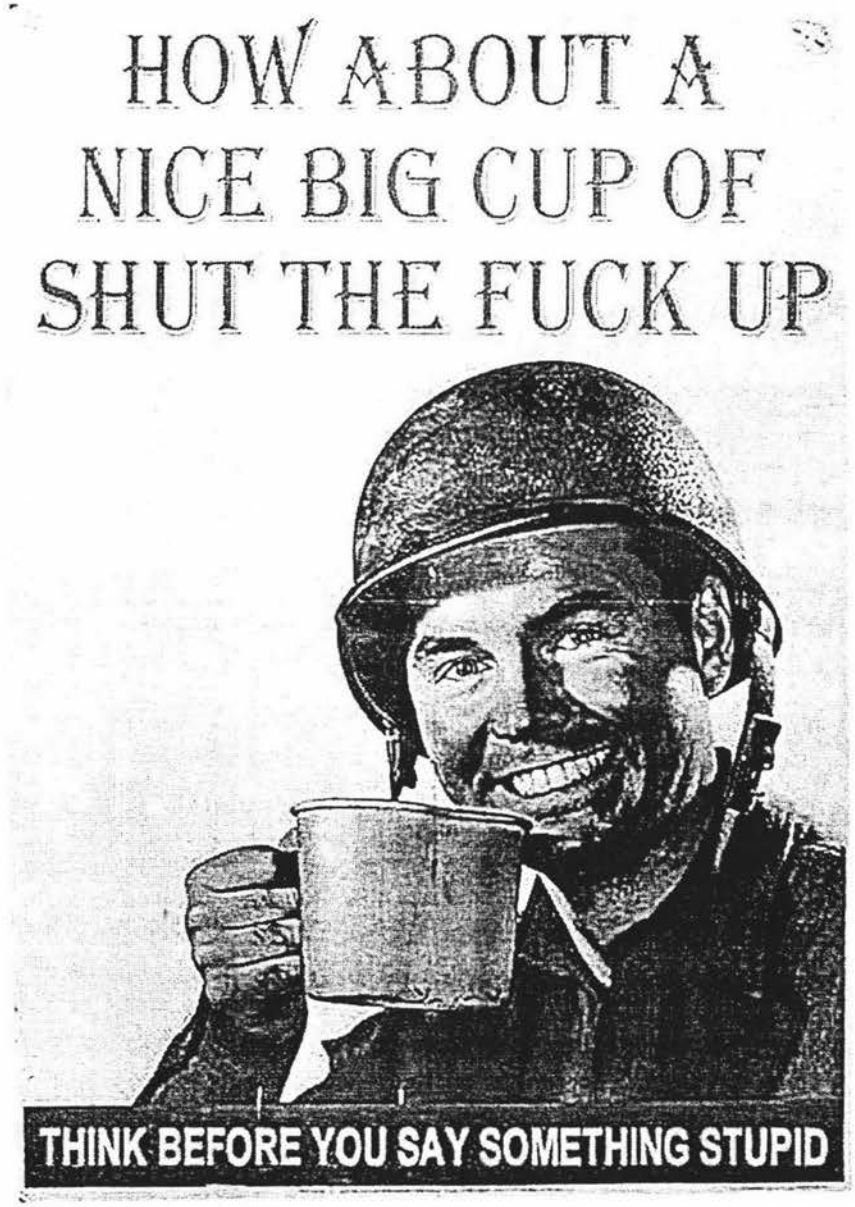
Example from wall in ByteBiz, cited in Chapter 4, (p.112 & 114)



Impolite as they were, the other bears could never help staring at [redacted] enormous deer gut.

Appendix K

Example from wall in ByteBiz, cited in Chapter 4, (p. 112)



Appendix L

Example from wall in ByteBiz, cited in Chapter 4, (p. 112)

Appendix M

Example from wall in BytesBiz, cited in Chapter 4, (p.112)

"The word around the office is that you have an attitude problem. ..."

Appendix N

BytesBiz company policy regarding electronic communication and humour. Retyped with name changed. Excerpt from larger policy document on electronic communication. As cited in Chapter 4, (p. 89).

Things that are forbidden in all cases

Storing, transmitting, downloading, processing or displaying offensive or obscene material, such as pornography, or "hate literature," is expressly forbidden.

BytesBiz regards as obscene any image (in any format) which contains full or partial nudity, which depicts acts of a sexual nature, or acts of a degrading or violent nature; material of this type will be deleted if it is found on company computers, and disciplinary action will be taken against the person responsible. Please be aware that routinely collected activity logs often reveal who is obtaining pornographic material from the Internet.

Humour is a very personal thing, and not everyone finds the same things funny: please be aware that what you think is funny may offend someone else deeply. Do not transmit jokes (or any other material) that contains sexual innuendo or obscenity. Material which might foster prejudice or hatred on the grounds of race, sex or sexual orientation or religion is not acceptable to BytesBiz and must not be stored or transmitted using company equipment or facilities.

Appendix O

Consent form signed by all interview respondents

Massey University
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

Department of Management & International Business - Albany Campus
Private Bag 102 904,
North Shore MSC,
Auckland,
New Zealand
Telephone: 64 9 441 8115
Facsimile: 64 9 441 8109

"Harnessing Humour: a cunning plan or managerial mayhem?"

CONSENT FORM

THIS CONSENT FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF FIVE (5) YEARS

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being audio taped.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: ..... **Date:** .....

Full Name - printed .....

Appendix P

Information sheet given to all participants

Massey University
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

Department of Management
& International Business -
Albany Campus
Private Bag 102 904,
North Shore MSC,
Auckland,
New Zealand
Telephone: 64 9 441 8115
Facsimile: 64 9 441 8109

INFORMATION SHEET

"Harnessing Humour: a cunning plan or managerial mayhem"

INFORMATION SHEET

- *Researcher :Barbara Plester 021 114 9018 barbiep@xtra.co.nz*
- *Supervisors : Dr. Mark Orams 443 9799 ext. 9575 m.b.orams@massey.ac.nz*
  Janet Sayers 443 9799 ext. 9215 j.g.sayers@massey.ac.nz

Summary of 'Humour' project

This research is being undertaken to better understand the use of humour in the workplace, and to discover if humour is being used as a communication tool in the workplace.

The use of humour will be investigated in three Information Technology (IT) organizations in different settings. These settings are: formal meetings, written communications, electronic communication and informal liaisons with staff. I will attempt to record the forms of humour that are enjoyed and appreciated by staff as well as times where the humour does not 'work' or offends someone.

It is intended that the organization as well as providing subjects for study, gains an insight to humour appreciation of their staff as well as times where humour offends some factions. A possible outcome is the formulation of staff policy referring to use of humour in formal work communication, policy concerning electronic forms of humour and humorous displays in the work environment

I will conduct semi-structured interviews of all willing organizational members to gain insights into their perception of how humour operates and is used in their organization. Alongside this I will also be involved in participant observation of people at work and their response to humour used. Significant humorous incidents will be recorded and where possible participants interviewed as to their perceptions and feelings of the humour used afterwards.

Participant Recruitment

- Recruitment of interview subjects shall be upon request of the researcher and with the participant's informed consent, subject to their availability and work commitments. Organisation members will be observed in their day-today work activities. Any persons wishing to exclude themselves from recorded observations may request this from the researcher at the initial meeting or informally at any point in the study.
- Any participant experiencing discomfort as a result of participation shall be referred to Massey counseling services

Project Procedures

- Data collected will be analysed to find patterns of behaviour in relation to humour in IT organizations. All data will be stored under locked conditions and will be kept for five years and then will be destroyed.
- A summary of findings will be presented to the participating organization in October 2003 or can be requested from the researcher from October 2003.
- No individual person or organisation shall be identified in the findings. No data pertaining to an individual or organisation shall be disclosed to any other person or group. Collected data will be stored under approved locked conditions.

Participant involvement

- Participants will be involved in interviews, critical incident technique and be under observation.
- Interviews will take approximately 30-40 minutes. Critical incident technique will involve 10 to 15 minutes after a noted incident. Observation will be on-going and will not require any time commitment from organisation members.

Participant's Rights

You have the right to:

- decline to participate;
- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study before September 1, 2003.
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- I also understand that I have the right to ask for the audio tape to be turned off at any time during the interview.

Support Processes

Project Contacts

You are invited to contact either Barbara Plester (researcher) and/or one of the named supervisors (contact details at top) if you have any questions about the project.

Committee Approval Statement

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, ALBANY. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Associate Professor Kerry P Chamberlain, Chair, Massey University Campus Human Ethics Committee: Albany, telephone 09 443 9700 x9078, email K.Chamberlain@massey.ac.nz.

Thank you for your time and participation in this study. Should you have any further issues, queries or concerns regarding this study please feel free to contact Barbara Plester using the provided details.

Appendix Q

MUHEC approval letter (working title changed in final thesis)

Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC)
Old Main Building, Turitea
Fax: 64 6 350 5622
http://www.massey.ac.nz/~muhec

Professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair
Telephone: 64 6 350 5249
Email: S.V.Rumball@massey.ac.nz

Miss Karen A Kahukoti, Secretary
Telephone: 64 6 350 5573
Email: K.A.Kahukoti@massey.ac.nz

Massey University

Private Bag 11 222,
Palmerston North,
New Zealand
Telephone: 64 6 356 9099

4 April 2003

Ms Barbara APlester
18 Tyrico Close
The Palms
Albany
AUCKLAND

Dear Barbara

Re: Harnessing humour: A cunning plan or managerial mayhem?

Thank you for the MUHEC Checklist and Section A of the MUHEC Application Form that was received on 4 April 2003 and will be noted by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee at their next meeting.

As specified in the Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants, persons who submit the MUHEC Checklist with every question answered with a 'no', together with Section A of the MUHEC Application Form (including a signed Declaration), do not require any further approval and may commence their research.

Yours sincerely

Professor Sylvia V Rumball, Chair
Massey University Human Ethics Committee

cc Dr Mark Orams
Management & International Business
ALBANY