

# Our brains are wired to behave better when we have fun, but it takes much more than loud ‘Beer Fridays’

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One of my most frequent responses to those ‘Beer Fridays’ at work was to honestly tell my colleagues (amazing, fun people, most of them) was that I was paid to be with them only till 7 pm on Friday. It was a joke, of course, but I have always been extremely clear in my head that starting Friday evening, I focus entirely on my personal life and people outside of work.



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Don't get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with the [camaraderie](#) that comes from these unhinged drinking, bowling, eating, or travelling sessions, but I always had a nagging feeling that in the larger scheme of things, all they achieve is short-term gratification. So I went out and ‘collected some science’ to see if I was right at all about this. As it turns out, [real employee engagement is a little more hard work](#). It is a long and arduous process of unlearning most of our conditioning and starting from scratch.

[According to Paul Zak](#), who measured brain activity of people at work to figure out what made work enjoyable, the two essential ingredients that went into it were trust and purpose. A little voice in my head says that leaders as well as employees probably find it more convenient to spend their energy and money reserves on frivolity than build a culture of trust and purpose. It's only human.

## Employees show more empathy at work when they are trusted

Zak's neuromanagement studies showed evidence that when people are trusted, their brains produced oxytocin, a neurochemical that motivates people to engage with others and increases the sense of empathy. It is responsible for helping people understand what others need from them. People with higher oxytocin levels are more productive, solve problems efficiently, and enjoy what they do.

## It takes purpose to make employees happy and companies thrive

This purpose, again, is slightly different from creating award-winning videos and taking home certificates with big labels after annual company dinners. Awards are great; they recognise good talent, hard work, and creativity. Or at least that is what they were meant to do, in their purest, most original form. But at best, they are *goals*. Real purpose comes from realising you are making the world a better place, in whatever little way you can. Take India's exploding pool of [stand up comics](#) for instance – a 'frivolous' job if there ever was one if we were to go by certain parameters. Even as they crack silly jokes that offend people they were not intended for, somewhere deep down, a lot of their work is about bringing truth to the forefront, giving voices to 'normal' people and the things *they* care about. That seems to be a real purpose, at least from an outsider's point of view.

Several management gurus, including W Edward Deming, have dived deep into the notion that the only reason companies exist is because they make the world a little better, a little more open, or a little more convenient. And Zak's studies again prove this right. [According to him](#), when an employee [understands the company's bigger purpose](#) and not just the day-to-day transactional purpose, and works on it as part of his job, it acts as a stimulus to oxytocin.

## **So where does that leave us?**

A large percentage of employees and leaders who form the workforce today are college graduates who, at some point, would have come across Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which puts self-actualisation at the very top. But organisations do very little to build this culture of self-actualisation through empowered, truly happy and satisfied employees.

Organisations are rarely able to trust their employees enough to just *let them be*, and know that they will do the right thing. Employees are expected to be adults despite constant, incessant infantilising. We make rules, about the clothes they must wear, the time they should swipe themselves in, and the fonts and colours they must use in often pointlessly frivolous PowerPoint decks. We focus so much on things that matter little, but leave a large gap in understanding how human brains really work and give employees enough trust, opportunities, and exposure to a larger purpose beyond new capabilities and higher billings.

An argument to this is that we must find our own purpose at work. I have been an advocate of this for a large part of my career too. In fact I still am. But like most relationships, this is a two-way street. Not everyone is wired similarly as far as this proactive approach to one's own creative and professional satisfaction is concerned. If organisations don't [make space for unique individuals](#) (know that it truly takes all kinds) and give them the trust and purpose they need to deliver to the best of their ability, our 'Beer Friday' culture of 'fun@work' will only achieve so much.