



WEEKEND WORKOUT » TEAM BUILDING

Kira Vermond dissects the latest workplace and career trends

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High jinks at work can work for morale

Don't get Mark Rouse, vice-president of marketing services for IQ Partners Inc. in Toronto, started about the glut of workplace practical jokes of which he's been the victim.

Co-workers have turned off the lights while he's been in the washroom, slathered hand lotion all over his phone ear-piece, and even stuck a piece of chicken in his jacket pocket so Mr. Rouse's dog would tear the garment apart once he got home.

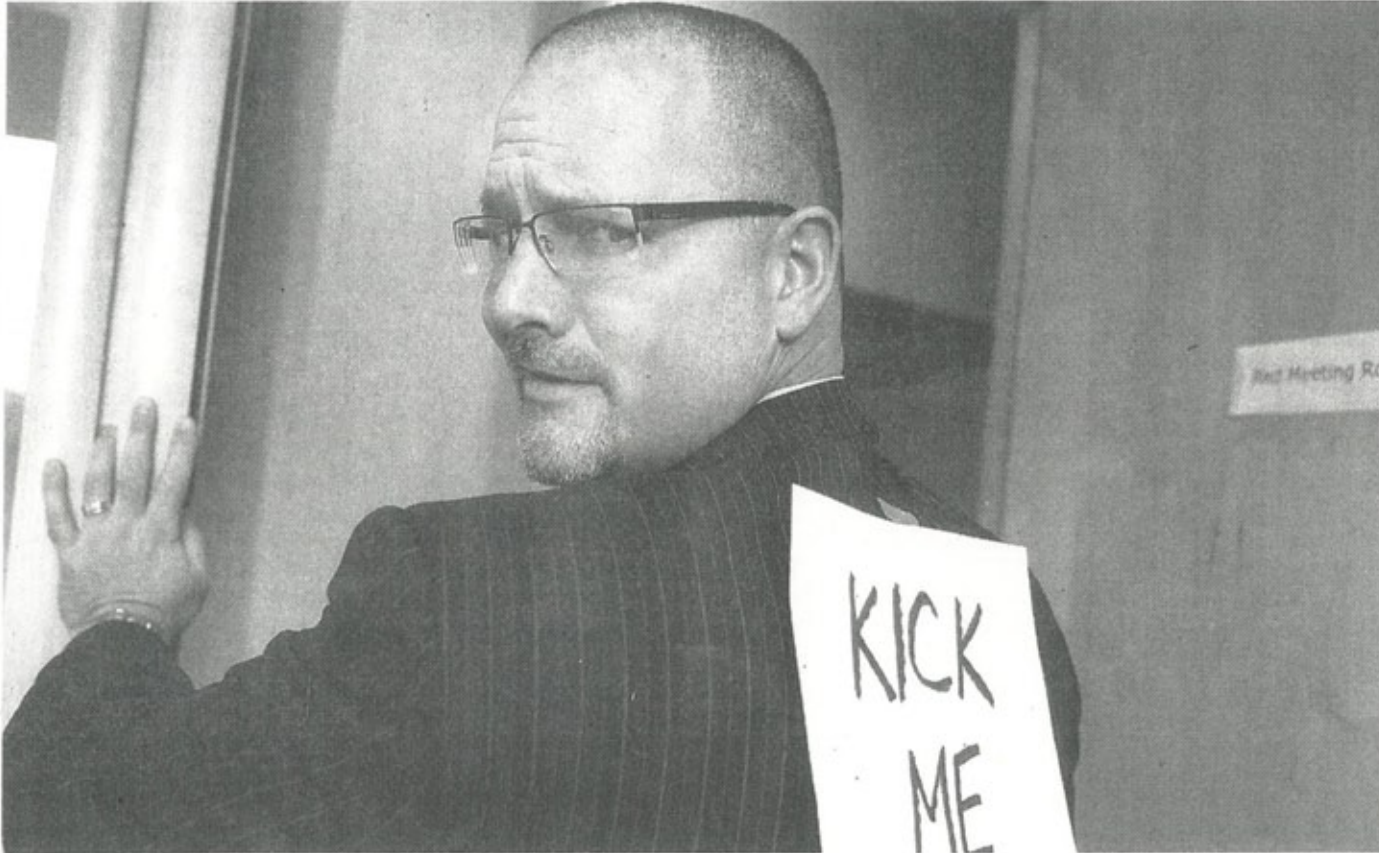
Still, he gives as good as he gets. Take the "chair swivel incident" of a few years back when Mr. Rouse snuck into his former workplace before dawn to crank employees' seats to their lowest setting.

"At nine o'clock there were about 50 people with their chins resting on their desks reaching up to type. That was one of my happiest mornings ever," he says, sounding delighted.

Mr. Rouse is far from the only Canadian employee who enjoys a good gag at work. According to a 2008 poll by workopolis.com, 46 per cent of Canadians report that pranks are accepted or encouraged in their workplace, and 45 per cent say humour at work is used to alleviate pressure and control stress. But do all of those aluminum foil-wrapped offices help employees kick back, particularly in these dour economic times, or if taken too far, are they no laughing matter?

WHY DO IT?

If no one gets offended, hurt or picked on, jokes in the workplace are fun. Proponents say employees come together and engage in a little informal team building. Practical jokes also break up the monotony of the workday. "It does develop a sense of camaraderie and engagement. There's a certain amount of healthy competition to it as well," Mr. Rouse says.



Workplace pranks 'develop a sense of camaraderie and engagement,' says Mark Rouse of IQ Partners in Toronto. TIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Gotcha!

The secret to a good prank is to look innocent and have an alibi. Never pull a prank that you couldn't handle if it was played on you. Here are a few (fame) of office jokes to try:

CHANGE YOUR CLOTHES: Tell everyone, but your target, to bring a couple of changes of clothes to work. Then walk by your target with a different set of clothes on every time. Works better on women.

CHANGE THE LOCATION: If you have a co-worker who is extremely picky about the placement of work materials, adjust them ever so slightly every day. Sit back and watch the fun.

» Source: www.discoverfun.com

WHEN IT GOES BAD

The problem, of course, is that not everyone plays fair. Montreal workplace consultant Cheryl Stein, president of Stein Consulting & Coaching, remembers a case of a new employee who couldn't figure out why his computer kept sending gibberish e-mails to the company's CEO. He was even asked to speak to the bigwig to explain himself.

His new co-workers were behind the high jinks.

"We talk about this and it sounds really funny. But imagine how that poor guy felt on his first day of work," she says.

THE RULES

Even humour requires setting some boundaries, Ms. Stein says. For starters, bosses shouldn't play jokes on their

subordinates unless the corporate culture is super-relaxed and the hierarchy flat.

"When you're in a position of power, it's your obligation to make people in your company feel secure, safe and comfortable coming into work every day," she says.

Rule No. 2: Don't pick on one person - or at least give him the opportunity to get you back. One-sided pranks are no fun. It's also important to think about who you include in the joke, and who gets excluded too, Mr. Rouse says.

"The problem is if you do exclude someone, they might feel like they're not part of the inner circle," he says.

And if a joke goes too far or blows up? Own up to the mistake and keep a low profile for a while. In short, rethink glu-

ing anyone's mouse to their desktop for now.

MAKE IT OBVIOUS

It's important that a practical joke isn't too subtle, either. At least that's what Ed Bebee, creative director for IronStrikesIron Creative Communications Inc. in Toronto, discovered a few years ago after programming a fake error message to pop up on his computer. He did the deed right before leaving his job.

Unfortunately, when the new designer saw the bogus error that read, "WARNING! The silicon chip has cracked and is leaking radiation. Please evacuate the room immediately," he took the message seriously and pushed himself away from his desk before bolting from the office without explanation.

THE UPSIDE

"If you have the ability to take a few minutes and have a good laugh, it really takes the stress level down and has a positive impact on productivity."

Mark Rouse, VP of the marketing services practice for IQ Partners Inc. in Toronto

THE DOWNSIDE

"There's a high potential for embarrassment. Everybody takes jokes differently... You just never know how someone is going to react."

Alexandra Levit, author of *They Don't Teach Corporate in College: A Twenty-Something's Guide to the Business World*

"I thought it would be obvious that it was a joke so I was surprised that it got that kind of reaction," Mr. Bebee admits.

YOUR IMAGE

Perhaps one of the biggest drawbacks of being known as the office jokester comes down to image. Rigging the boss's chair to drop suddenly during a staff meeting is fun, but it's not always the best way to land a promotion.

"People get labelled. Co-workers say, 'Oh, he's the office prankster. He's the crazy one.' Then what happens?" Ms. Stein asks. "When it comes time to choose the guy to move up in the company, they're looking at him and saying, 'He's just not serious enough.'"

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