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Games at work may be good for you

Playing simple computer games at the office could improve productivity and job satisfaction, research suggests.

Scientists from the University of Utrecht have studied the effects of game playing on 60 employees in a Dutch insurance firm.

No Doom or Half-Life for you

The team measured changes in work and job attitudes and found that game players felt better about their job.

Many big companies ban games which come as standard on many computers, saying they are just a waste of workers' time.

All work and no play?

But, says research leader Professor Jeffrey Goldstein, there has been little research to show how playing games might positively change employee productivity, job satisfaction or reduce absenteeism.

After a long search for a company which would agree to host their experiment, the research team randomly split workers from five departments into groups.

Some were allowed to play simple Windows games like Solitaire and Minesweeper, while other "control" groups were denied the chance.

"We told them from now on for the next month you are allowed to play games for up to one hour a day, and you can choose when you want to play," Professor Goldstein told BBC News Online.

The game players kept logs of their playing habits and feelings, and were asked how they used their game playing during their working day.

The results were measured against how they felt about the work they do and their job.

Solitaire: Addictive and useful?

"The groups that played games showed improvement on both of these measures," says Professor Goldstein.

The results suggest that, instead of games being a waste of time at work, they might help personal productivity and make people feel better about their jobs.

A round of Solitaire could be used as a strategy to break up the day and help people work more effectively because it gives their brain a break from complex work tasks.

"I compare games with a coffee break. If you are like me, you use them in strategic, functional, useful way," Professor Goldstein says.

Also being free to play games within certain limits, and having more choice over how they spend their work day, could contribute to job satisfaction.

Professor Goldstein says the research is at a very early stage and any findings are purely preliminary. He says he is intending to do a much larger-scale study, using more complicated games which involve strategy decisions or role playing.

"I can imagine different games would have different effects," he says.

"If you made a competitive league table, for example, and your business was competitive, like sales, you might want to increase competition in this way."

More significantly, if the results show games can make people happier in their work, it could impact the amount of absenteeism in the workplace.

Brain power

Simple computer games like Solitaire and Minesweeper have social advantages because they are fun, they provide distraction, involvement, and elements of competition against yourself and others, he says.

"People even talk about their games over coffee or on the bus," says Professor Goldstein.

Some of the Professor's previous research involved elderly residents of a women's nursing home.

After playing computer games for some time, there was evidence suggesting their cognitive skills and general sense of well-being were significantly improved.

Professor Goldstein and his team presented their most recent findings at the first ever Digital Games Research Association conference, Level Up, in the Netherlands.

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