



## *Work Smart Live Smart*

### **Adding A Little Fun To The Workplace Office Toys And Stress**

**Interview With Lisa Yeung – Canoe Staff**  
[http://www.canoe.ca/LifewiseWork01/0421\\_toys-can.html](http://www.canoe.ca/LifewiseWork01/0421_toys-can.html)

**With Beverly Beuermann-King,  
CSP, Stress and Wellness Specialist**

Harold Chizick is living a kid's dream. As director of public relations for Spin Master Toys (the company that brought us the Earth Buddy and Devil Sticks), his job is all about toys. He promotes toys. He works with toys. He works with people who work with toys. And when he's not working, he gets to play...with toys.

"All of our offices have toys on our desks," he says. "I've often been seen around the office with a Flick Trix (finger bike) on my finger spinning it around."

While the Spin Master folk live, eat and breathe toys at work, they're definitely not the only company that has toys in their offices. In the age of the cubicle, office toys occupy just as much desk space as photos of the dog and kids. Grownups, it seems, are bringing fun to work, and they don't care if anyone tells on them.

What kind of toys can be found in the workplace? Everything from Beanie Babies to Austin Powers action figures, to even the classic Slinky or dartboard (coworker's picture not included). And don't worry about hiding your Mini-Me doll just as the CEO strolls by, because some experts say that having a little fun at work can actually be good for both you and the company.

"A lot of us suffer from what I call 'terminal seriousness,'" says Beverly Beuermann-King, an education and development consultant for the Canadian Mental Health Association in Toronto. She conducts wellness workshops to teach people how to foster a healthier, more productive work environment. Terminal seriousness, she says, can hamper communication, problem solving and teamwork. Taking some "playtime" can help relieve stress.

"When we take a break, it helps us to increase our productivity and our creativity," Beuermann-King says. She also says that toys can help relieve stress by encouraging laughter, which releases endorphins, stimulates circulation and relieves tension in the back and chest. Toys such as stress balls also relieve tension in our hands and forearms, and tactile or textured toys can help stimulate the creative side of the brain. All of which can be helpful when we're faced with challenges at work.

"Our life was meant to have a rhythm," Beuermann-King says. We deal with a stressful situation, we come down to a normal state...Toys can help us come back down to a normal state so that we can prepare for the next problem or issue that we need to deal with."

Toys can help create happier workers in other ways. According to Dr. Jennifer Veitch, research officer for the Indoor Environment Research Program at the National Research Council of Canada in Ottawa, personalizing one's workspace helps people feel better about their work environment, whether it's done using photos, artwork, knick-knacks or even toys. In fact, Veitch says that personalization may benefit both individual employees and the company as a whole.

"It fosters greater satisfaction with the physical work environment, which in turn contributes to the well-being of organizations in terms of morale, absenteeism, turnover and the like," says Veitch. "Organizations that permit more personalization report better organizational well-being than those with stricter policies."

While a few toys in the workplace can be good for us, it's probably not a good idea to bring in your entire collection of Tonka trucks. Beuermann-King warns that people who tend to procrastinate may find toys to be too much of a distraction, and should exercise some restraint with their playtime. "You still have to get some work done," she says. As far as what types of toys are appropriate to bring to work, she says that anything goes, as long as it doesn't offend others or make them feel uncomfortable. "Whatever makes you laugh, whatever makes you feel kind of good is appropriate," she says.

Dominic Riverso, owner and manager of Science City in Toronto, says he gets lots of grownups at his Bloor Street store who purchase office toys that run the whole gamut, but that the toys generally fall into three different categories. Gyroscopes, Newton's balance balls and perpetual motion mobiles are toys that express activity. "[They] serve to lend an air of, not necessarily importance, but a special quality," Riverso says. "It looks like something is happening." He says that prop companies will often use these toys when dressing office sets.

Other toys tend to caricaturize the buyer, like Bendos, which are bendable figurines that come in hundreds of different characters, like Cliff the hang-glider or Rainbow the flower-child. And of course, there's the ever-popular stress ball, which is the category of toys that Riverso says "politely express anxiety in the office."

One resourceful musician in Vancouver has found a way to capitalize on his own work anxiety. Steve Marshall was working in office one day back in 1995 when his computer froze. He got so frustrated that he wanted to take a hammer to it. Then he had a brainstorm. "I thought, 'Computer hammers!'" he says. "I said to my wife, 'I'm going to sell computer hammers!'" After shelving the idea for a few years, Marshall put his plan into action, and the Computer Hammer was born. The 20-inch inflatable PVC hammer has received worldwide media attention, and Marshall has sold 5000 through his Web site since last October. He says that the toy helps people relieve their frustrations in a safe and silly way.

"It's a joke, it's fun," he says. "You get to beat on [things] and feel a little better. You don't hurt your computer." Because after all, it's all fun and games until somebody loses an iMac.

Stress and wellness specialist, **Beverly Beuermann-King** translates current research and best practices information into a realistic, accessible and practical approach through her dynamic stress and wellness workshops, on-line articles, e-newsletters and media interviews and through a collaboration called *Awakening The Workplace*. Visit [www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com](http://www.WorkSmartLiveSmart.com) for more on Beverly and her wellness work.

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