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17 Research agenda with empirical results of using humour strategically in business

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Abstract

The aim of this project was to create a preliminary theoretical framework of how to utilize humour strategically in organizations with the aim of creating new business opportunities. The present multidisciplinary discussion paper will identify research gaps and combine viewpoints of international business management, international business communication, marketing and education in a novel way. It appears that in previous literature on humour in a business context, discussions have taken place in different 'silos' and as a result, the connections between different research fields have been scarce. Consequently, a more comprehensive understanding of the significance of humour in business innovations is necessary. Firstly, we are proposing a framework and a research agenda for exploring different strategic ways of using humour in companies. Secondly, in the Hurmos-project we have already collected empirical evidence based on this framework, and some preliminary results are also presented. Hence, the potential, as well as the limits and risks of humour in business have been examined in terms of both internal and external corporate communication. We have focused on such research aspects as corporate storytelling, corporate and employer branding, and work engagement. Peer group mentoring has been used as one tool for collecting relevant narratives from companies. Additionally, we have explored innovation communication, in particular how humour can be applied as a strategic tool in new business development both in facilitating creative Research, Development and Innovation (R&D&I) work environments, and in incorporating humour into product and service innovation in practice. Our empirical results will provide a much needed more comprehensive view of the role of humour as a strategic tool in corporate communication and business innovation. The results also provide a point of

departure for further research. Besides academia, results and generated know-how will be of interest to managers of large corporations as well as start-up companies.

17.1 Introduction

It appears that the potential of humour to create fun at work or to utilize it both in internal and external business practices is not yet fully recognized or harnessed in business. Concerning the activities within firms, the work and business environment have undergone major changes in recent years as attitude and approach to work have changed dramatically: lifelong employment contracts are rare, and employees' expectations of doing work are quite different from those of previous generations. Enjoying work and having fun are examples of the current expectations as especially the younger generations value these aspects in their work (Romero and Pescosolido, 2008). In this, the role of humour becomes pronounced: it acts as a kind of glue in social interaction; it enhances the happiness and creativity of any work community as well as enables new perspectives in business potentials. At best, this can be extended outside the firm, as humour becomes embedded in the products, and/or humorous communication can attract customers that increasingly value entertaining and relaxing features in the firm offerings (e.g., Cao & Shi, 2013). In fact, considering the offerings of the firm and the ways in which they are promoted in the markets, humour can be a powerful tool.

With the potential for being a useful tool, phenomena such as humour – not conventionally considered a relevant part of 'serious' business and management – are now seen in a new light, and opportunities for business are searched from new sources. As a result, there is a growing need for new, more people-oriented tools to assist companies with their development of business solutions. Yet, quite a few aspects have gone unheeded in academia; in other words, little reliable knowledge is provided for companies trying to tackle these issues. HURMOS (Developing Humour as a Strategic Tool for Creating Innovative Business) is a Tekes founded ongoing joint project (University of Oulu and Oulu University of Applied Sciences) exploring possible solutions and tools incorporating the aspect of humour as a facilitator in the creation of new, innovative business ideas for the growth and internationalization of businesses. In particular, the main research question of this

project has been how humour can be used strategically as a tool in creating innovative, value generating business environments and business opportunities for organizations. The project has had nine Finnish companies/organizations from various fields actively involved in the project.

The project exploring the possibilities and potential of humour in business practices through applying both qualitative and quantitative research methods has already yielded a wide range of results within the compiled framework. Firstly, the potential as well as the limits and risks of the use of humour in business communication have been studied regarding internal and external corporate communication from the viewpoints of innovations, innovativeness, employee engagement and brand building. In addition, we have addressed humour in marketing communications, advertising and company storytelling culture. Secondly, in the course of the project we have resorted to for example the tools of service design and peer group mentoring to promote the awareness of humour as a valuable tool in business.

17.2 Starting points and gaps in research

The fact is that humour as a phenomenon is challenging: it is universal, yet person-specific and, simultaneously, it is time and place-specific (Gulas & Weinberger, 2006). Personal temperament, age and gender indeed affect how different types of humour are understood (Ruch et al., 1990; Ruch et al., 1996; Martin et al., 2003). In addition, humour is a culture-dependent phenomenon. Although there are several studies for example in advertising context, identifying global and culture-specific features of humour (Fugate, 1998; Alden et al., 1993; Alden and Martin, 1995; McGullough and Taylor, 1993), Biswas et al. (1992) share the common wisdom that humorous advertisements used in one country do not work similarly in another country. With all these different aspects, humour and humour-generated positive emotions provide a topic of multidisciplinary interest and, indeed, humour has attracted the attention of scholars from several academic disciplines such as anthropology, communication, education, linguistics, literature, medicine, philosophy, psychology, sociology (e.g. Veatch, 1998). Even researchers operating in the field of business have been facinated by humour research, and they have examined the phenomenon at various organizational levels and in various contexts including management, business communication, advertising and employer branding (Duncan, 1982; Oikarinen, 2013; Oikarinen & Saraniemi, 2012; Romero

and Pescosolido, 2008; Tähtinen and Blois, 2011; Vuorela, 2005; Weinberger and Gulas, 1992).

Nonetheless, despite all the interest in humour research, the business potential involving humour as an element in creating new business opportunities is as yet not fully recognized. It seems that even if the role of emotions and feelings for business relationships is acknowledged (Tähtinen & Blois, 2011), the research still remains scarce. Previous literature tells little about how humour can be utilized to solve difficult aspects of business relations within and between organizations and across cultural boundaries. In addition, corporate communication holds quite a few aspects where the people-centric approach remains quite vague. There is an illusion in marketing literature that we know everything about the use of humour; however, the knowledge is mainly focused on how humour works in advertising context, and the role of humour in branding literature seems to be lacking so far, and this offers one research gap for the ongoing project. Furthermore, earlier research where humour is incorporated has covered the work climate for new product development, but the role of humour in research has typically been limited (e.g Danneels, 2008; Isaksen & Ekvall, 2010). From design perspective, literature related to humorous design principles has also been rare (e.g. Cao & Shi, 2013; Yu & Nam, 2014). Moreover, the scarce literature on humorous products is often related, for example, to services marketing (e.g. van Dolen et al., 2008), meaning that there is room for further examination especially within the field of innovation.

When it comes to international operations environments and their connections to innovative activities, literature in international business has focused on considering country conditions, e.g. knowledge acquisition in host countries, and in the field of international economics, the discussion has concentrated on knowledge flows from multinational companies to organizations residing in host country. Thus, they have used a lens that does not really take into account firm-specific factors, let alone the role of emotions (Alcácer & Chung, 2007; Faria & Sofka, 2010). International Entrepreneurship literature and literature on Born Globals, for example, have tried to understand what enables small firms to become active in international markets, but the examination has been more about the patterns of internationalization than organizational characteristics (Gassmann & Keupp 2007). Yet, the role of entrepreneurs for internationalization has been acknowledged, and sometimes the (personal) characteristics of entrepreneurs have been taken under scrutiny. However, in most cases, the discussion has delved around international experience,

attitude, orientation, network, and personal life experiences like foreign education or work experience, travel, foreign birth, knowledge of foreign languages, and other such features rather than their ability to affect emotions or utilize humour (Zuccella et al., 2007). In other words, the role of factors such as humour has not been addressed. Yet, we believe that if humour could be actively promoted and utilized, managing also international business activities could be carried out in a manner that yields competitive advantages, and this offers yet another research gap to be addressed.

Practical examples (selling Putous-format to China, success of Ismo Leikola in international arenas, Angry Birds, etc.) suggest that there is potential in Finnish organizations for utilizing humour in business. Yet, Finnish companies seem to be far behind the global tendency when it comes to enjoying work and utilizing humour as part of business practices. Hence, by addressing the research gaps outlined above, Hurmos project aims to develop humour-related understanding and expertise especially for the benefit of Finnish companies.

17.3 Conceptual framework

Humour

There are three main theories addressing humour as a mechanism: the cognitive-perceptual, superiority, and relief theories (e.g., Gulas & Weinberger, 2006; Vuorela, 2005; Graham, 1995). Cognitive-perceptual approach is related to incongruity and incongruity resolution theories: surprise or inconsistency alone can be enough to achieve humour, but incongruity-resolution demands processing and resolving discrepant information to drive humour (Spotts et al., 1997). Second, superiority theories are interested in the social functions of humour: according to this view, there are a winner and a loser in humorous situations, and the disparagement nature of humour is emphasized. Disparagement humour does not exist alone, but it demands the existence of incongruity and also possibly relief. The third type, relief (arousal-safety) theories have in common that there is a physiological relief as a result of humour. Similarly to incongruity resolution debate, the question is if arousal alone is able to cause enjoyment, or whether arousal-relief is needed (Gulas and Weinberger, 2006, 26–31).

In this project, we have adopted the universal view related to the immediate effects of humour: the perception of something as funny is a result of a deviation from what is expected (Alden & Hoyer, 1993; Alden et al., 1993). This can occur many ways, which has been observed also in attemps to create humour typologies (Catanescu & Tom, 2001; Spotts et al., 1997; Weinberger & Spotts, 1989;). For example, Reick's practitioner-oriented system classifies humour into five types: exaggeration, pun, put-down, silliness and surprise (see Catanescu & Tom, 2001). Catanescu and Tom (2001) have also considered the personification type of humour as one that "attributes human characteristics to animals, plants and objects". In Finnish management context, Vuorela (2005) has identified irony to be relevant in internal sales team meetings.

Humour in Corporate Communication

The role of humour has been investigated to some extent both in internal and external corporate communication (McIlheran, 2006; Oikarinen and Saraniemi, 2012). Brand identity and image are often defined as the internal and external parts of the brand (Nandan, 2005), marketing communications being the link between them (Witt & Rode, 2005). In brand building, a brand image is seen as originating from a company's internal qualities, such as corporate identity, and strengths (Kapferer, 2008), but still defined and created by stakeholders in the market (Mäläskä, Saraniemi & Tähtinen, 2011). A strong and authentic identity is a basis for successful brand building (Burmann et al., 2009), increasing also togetherness among persons in the organization (Aaker, 2002). As humour may have an interesting potential in this, the depicted stream of literature provides one point of departure for the Hurmos project.

Corporate communication and brand discussion cover the research topics in different ways. First, in marketing communications, and particularly in advertising research, humour is traditionally identified as a central tool for creating advertising appeal (Voss, 2009). Another perspective has been how humour can create strong corporate and particularly employer brand– and thereby affect value creation and value perceptions. Still, the role and meaning of it in the creation of corporate and employer brand is not yet studied extensively. Inside the organization, so far, it has been established that employees experiencing fun in the workplace are more satisfied in their job (Karl & Peluchette, 2006). Tews et al (2012) have demonstrated that workplace fun is even stronger predictor of applicant attraction

than for example, opportunities for advancement and compensation, which is indeed important knowledge for recruiters seeking capable job applicants. However, it is another issue whether the value proposition related to humour and fun climate is realized when new generations enter the traditional work environments. It can be argued, that humour is not enough when used only as a communication tool; rather, it should also be embedded into the organizational culture and be part of the fun climate when the aim of the company is to start building a strong corporate and employer brand.

The corporate communication approach involves identifying boundary issues related to the use of humour; finding out where the limitations lie. There are risks in using humour in business communication and practices. Indeed, one of the risks and limitations related to humour usage in international business is that humour is a culture-bound phenomenon, (Rogerson-Revell, 2007). As any other concept rooted in cultural elements, humour in international businesses should therefore be managed from several reference points.

Apart from cultural differences, there are many contexts were the use of humour can be risky. For example, humour has potentially negative effects when used in advertising products with high technology image (Fugate, 1998; McCullough & Taylor, 1993, Scott et al., 1990;). Personal temperament, age and gender, jargon, and other such factors affect the way how different types of humour are understood (Martin et al. 2003; Ruch et al 1990; Ruch et al. 1996;), and therefore careful segmentation-related humour usage is a critical issue. It is important to know the target groups and how they are likely to respond to humorous messages. In addition, humour is quite innate and thus, it is hard to change personal characteristics or temperament which mainly define individual's ability to produce or understand humour. However, the less serious attitude at individual level is something which can be learned. Due to the acknowledged risks, it is crucial to understand where the limits and boundaries of using humour are. Then companies are able to manage their credibility and reputation as serious business actors.

As a final point here, existing knowledge on corporate communication (both internal and external) also reflects new forms of communication and in these humour may become central. Digital and social media have become everyday communication channels between people. These media are not only used for communication, but they are also environments for creating new business

opportunities. Social media is full of entertainment, and humour there is a visible part of natural interaction between people. In online environment, humour is understood as the most common advertising appeal for viral advertisements (Porter & Golan, 2006; Golan & Zaidner, 2008), but achieving word-of-mouth is only one aspect of the digital environment, which is also a global environment for making international business and an essential part of business, not a separate value itself (e.g. e-services, e-stores, virtual worlds).

17.4 Objects and research questions

In sum, the primary objective of this project has been to incorporate the use of humour into business and communication culture in a manner that promotes new, efficient business practices, and improves competitive situation and development possibilities for Finnish firms operating in different industries and contexts. This is achieved through increased humour awareness and competence in Finnish companies. In particular, the purpose is to find out to what extent the use of humour can be incorporated into business models; how humour can create value to customers and, directly and as a product of increased customer value, to companies serving those customers. The three different perspectives of Hurmos project are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Priorities in the present humour-based research.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the project particularly aims to develop firm-specific business potential for using humour in organizations. This more general approach towards humour is scrutinized more closely with regard two specific areas, as the project discusses the use of humour in both internal and external corporate communication as well as in product and service development. The reason why these specific areas have been selected as targets is, first, that value can be found in the offerings of the firms, and the ways in which those are produced are therefore of essence; and, second, how value is perceived, is to a notable part dependent on how it is communicated. In other words, the ability to affect emotions of employees, customers, and partners may be quite decisive. A more detailed description of the project specifications can be found in Figure 2.
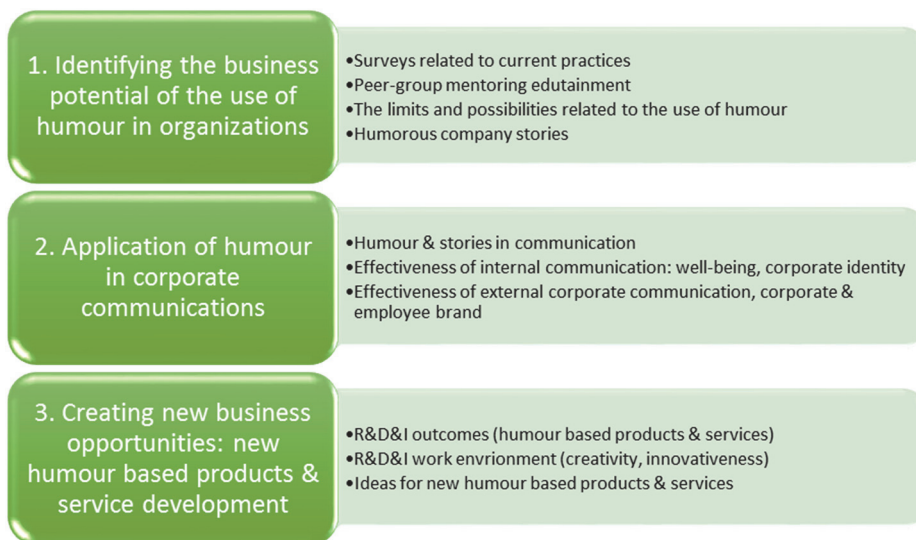
Figure 2. Outline of the Hurmos project.

As the Hurmos project is presently ongoing and is at its completion phase, quite a few of the activities have already been carried out. Along with experiences on peer-group mentoring and service design, some preliminary research results can also be presented concerning the use of humour in organizations. Pilot survey among the case organizations of the project was conducted, and it has already yielded some research findings as for the possibilities and limits of the use of humour. Application of humour has also been explored in various studies conducted during the project; in particular, the use of humour in recruitment has been in focus.

The main research question of this project is how humour can be used strategically as a tool in creating innovative, value generating business environments and business opportunities in the international operations environment. Under the umbrella of the general questions, the goal of the project is achieved through answering three sub-questions:

1. How can humour be used in different business environments to create value for the organization?
2. How is humour applied in internal and external corporate communications?

3. How is humour applied in internal R&D&I work environment and in external R&D&I?

17.5 Research methods and data

The project has applied multiple research approaches. The corpus collected during the project involve both qualitative and quantitative data of various kinds. Considering that research in general with this type of overarching approach is notably rare and challenging, we started from a relatively simple, more controlled research setting of Finnish culture and Finnish firms. This allowed us to first identify relevant components, and then evaluate how they change in different contexts. .

Considering the first sub-research question, peer-group mentoring groups were created with the aim to identify, explore and develop company specific tools of humour. Apart from a method to collect data in a form of visual and audit recordings, peer-group mentoring was a way of spreading experiences on the use of humour and had a role in utilizing humour in companies. Peer-group mentoring was conducted in LeaForum laboratory (http://leaforum.fi/facilities/leaf/) which enables both visual and audit data collection. There are, for example, the following typical elements related to peer-group mentoring:

1. Group work with an emphasis on shared expertise between mentors and mentees.
2. Creative communality with a potential to have fun, be inspired and break down boundaries.
3. Mentoring as a goal-oriented process requiring self-regulation and commitment.
4. Development of company profiling and productization of know-how in mentoring.

Also, survey data have been collected so as to gain a wider view on the use of humour. The project has provided a chance to identify and test the usefulness and validity of humour-related measures, both subjective, and more objective ones. There are different measures for humour, in organizational and especially in leadership literature (e.g Kahn, 1989; Priest & Swain, 2002) which offers potential for innovation management also. The project has identified, adopted and modified relevant measures to be employed in the research of the project. In the first stage,

quantitative pilot surveys were targeted at employees of the project companies in order to achieve an updated understanding of the current practices related to the use of humour in communication as well as in R&D&I in the companies, as well as the performance indicators related to these. This scale survey with multiple respondents within different firms served as a basis for a wider survey among Finnish exporting firms.

For answering the second sub-research question on corporate communication, humorous case company stories were gathered through e.g. peer-group mentoring. These stories will be studied by employing tools from e.g. narratology, discourse analysis and semantics. Moreover, humorous messages in specified contexts (e.g. recruitment advertising, social media) have been employed for research purposes during the course of this project. The limitations of appropriate use of humour in external corporate communication has also been tested experimentally (Lynn and Lynn, 2003).

Finally, for the third sub-research question focusing on business opportunities related to R&D&I, data are based on applying qualitative methods and collecting data in company specific workshops where ideas for humour-based new services and products have been co-created, utilizing also service design thinking. The work has involved exploration, creation and reflection processes. This qualitative data will be analysed with the aim of transferring the good practices from one industry to another. The effects of humour on creativeness, work climate and innovativeness have been investigated and measured with the help of the surveys. Case study research methodology has also been employed not only within the research group but also in various theses compiled by students of the two participating institutions. The applied research methods have enabled the collections of versatile data through a wide range of methods to be used for their collection and well as analysis. This type of multi-method approach is ambitious, and it has the benefit of allowing the examination of the use of humour from multiple angles and acknowledging different situations where it could be used. The role of experiences and emotions in business is strengthening in general (Tähtinen & Blois, 2011) and the rational logic does not work alone anymore in business, and this needs to be taken into account in organizations.

17.6 Preliminary project results

Even if there is a plenty of material still to be analysed, some results of the Hurmos project can already be presented. Based on the wide range of research endeavours described above, the results provide a multifaceted entirety with the element of humour in organizational context in common. Notwithstanding the diverse nature of results, the areas of research addressed during the project can be combined into a single figure presented below (Figure 3).
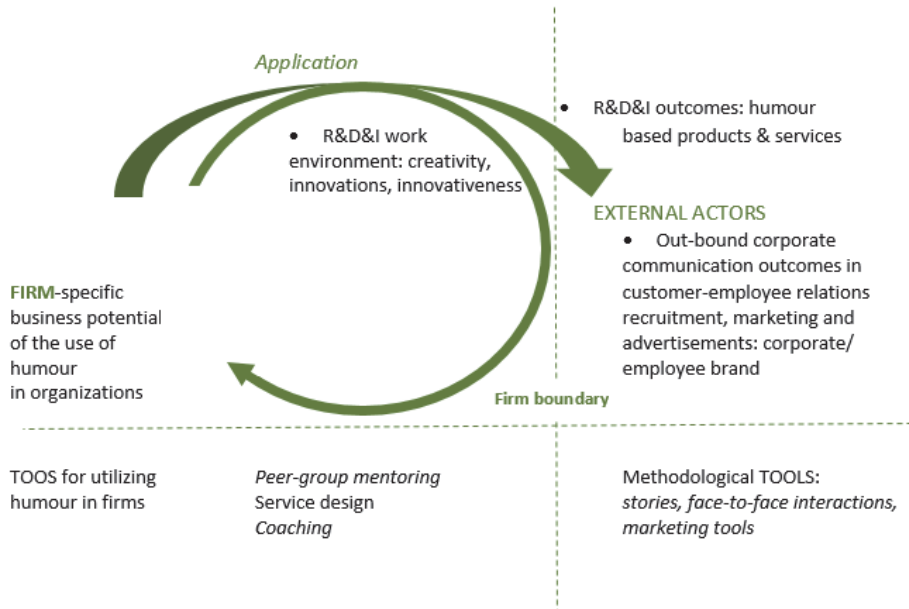

Figure 3. A framework for humour-based business innovation research.

Figure 3 above illustrates the connections between the aspects regarding which research has been conducted during the project. It needs to be noted that not all the collected material about all the aspects have been fully analysed as yet, and consequently, more project results are to be expected in the future. Next, some research results will be discussed in more detail. Of these results, a considerable proportion has already been published e.g. in journals and conferences, and the sources of the results are indicated in connection with the presentation of the findings.

With the pilot survey in the background, a study was conducted as for the connection of humour types with innovative behaviour and innovation output (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen et al. 2016a). Based on the findings, it appears that humour has a more substantial role in innovations within a company than in relations with external actors. Furthermore, affiliative, coping and reframing types of humour are related to positive outcomes when it comes to innovative behaviour and innovation output. However, aggressive humour seems to have a downright negative association. Similarly, a positive link between telling stories within an organization about the organization, and individual-level innovativeness was also suggested by another study (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen et al., 2017). Furthermore, playful attitude and atmosphere in general seem to be positively related to higher work engagement (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen et al., 2016b).

As for humour in services, in customer relations in particular, a study about the impact of an employee using jokes in face-to-face conversations revealed that humour actually reduced customer satisfaction (Söderlund et al., 2017). Even so, in another study customers hope for more humour in service encounters (Lehtovuori, 2016). Young newspaper readers also seem to expect articles to have a humorous tone (Ervasti, 2016). Furthermore, a study by Nevala and Häyrynen (2017) indicates that a happy and memorable amusement park experience involves e.g. diverse amusements with cheerful staff. The studies appear to yield mixed results and, indeed, the academic paper by Ahola et al. (2016) suggests a research agenda for determining the best practices for using humour in service development.

When it comes to the relations between organizations and employees, humour in recruitment is a theme addressed from multiple angles in the project. Firstly, possibilities are provided in the form of viral effects of humorous recruitment advertisements (Oikarinen & Söderlund, 2016). Secondly, humour in the context of recruitment advertisements has a more positive impact the more congruent it is with the message of the advertisement (Oikarinen, 2017). Thirdly, if humour is involved in recruitment advertisements, it provides firms with a cost-effective method to recruit employees as it offers candidates a chance to test their compatibility with the organization (Oikarinen & Sinisalo, 2017). Lastly, when approaching recruitment advertisements from the perspective of an employer brand, it appears the employer brand messages comprise instrumental and symbolic elements of content as well as communication including the use of humour in it (Oikarinen & Saraniemi, 2016).

Humour has also been explored in the contexts of peer-group mentoring, provocative coaching and service design workshops. In the peer-group mentoring workshops, representatives of the project organizations had the chance to meet and get acquainted with each other. Humour was involved when discussing humour in work communities, communication and customer service situations (Jokelainen, 2016). In the context of studying provocative coaching, the element of humour was deemed to be an important part of such coaching (Kukkonen & Lilleberg, 2016). Humour was also present in service design workshops and according to the preliminary analysis of the results, workshop facilitators can use humour as a tool in various stages of business development, e.g. in building a trustful and stimulating atmosphere (Ahola et al., 2017). Furthermore, industrial context does not seem to be the decisive factor in determining how funny, playful a service design workshop can be expected to be, e.g. atmosphere was ranked higher on humour scale in a company operating in an industrial sector than in a company offering amusement services (ibid.).

The project results reported above represent published results thus far. As the project is still going on, there are more results to come. Firstly, there is a survey conducted among Finnish companies, and there will be some results from it coming up later. Moreover, there is plenty of data recorded in peer-group mentoring and service design workshops organized with the project organizations, and that data needs to be studied; interesting viewpoints may be found when analyzing participants' communicative styles and their links to the use of humour.

17.7 Managerial implications

The research results produced during the course of the Hurmos project will have even more substantial implications once all the results of the project are available. Still, already at this point, something can be stated about them. The studies individually and together have at least offered interesting avenues for further research. Apart from this, observations can be made regarding the implications of the studies already conducted.

As for innovativeness and different types of humour, it can be said that acknowledging differences will assist managers to monitor and encourage the use of humour in interaction inside the organization as well as with its external actors

(Hurmelinna-Laukkanen et al., 2016b). Furthermore, entrepreneurs and managers have the potential for enhancing employees' work engagement through communicating and offering a platform for playfulness in the organization (Hurmelinna-Laukkanen et al., 2016b).

In terms of humour in service encounters, retail and service employees should be aware of the dangers concerning the use of humour with the customers; furthermore, they should be mindful of the aspects of the conversation that might affect the theme (Söderlund et al., 2017). Even if customers and clients, e.g. newspaper readers, expect humour to be embedded in services (Lehtovuori, 2016; Ervasti, 2016), customer service staff should be careful when applying humour in service encounters. More research in authentic contexts is required to further confirm the findings.

When it comes to the use of humour in business, it possesses potential albeit also challenges. Also small companies can utlize the possibilities of humour, e.g. in humorous recruitment advertisements. For instance, they can take advantages of the viral effects of job advertisements on the Internet (Oikarinen & Söderlund, 2016). With the help of humour, companies can also cost-effectively test the applicants' compatibility with the organizational values (Oikarinen & Sinisalo, 2017).

Humour was present in peer-group mentoring and service design workshops. It seems that engaging company staff in collaborative work in workshops could pose a challenge as people are busy and they need to be able to tolerate some degree of uncertainty in service design workshops. For facilitators it is a challenge to find relevant actors who would be prepared and motivated in a workshop. Moreover, company culture may have bearing on the success of the workshop and service innovation. To find common grounds for inclusive– and to avoid exclusive - humour in service innovation workshops is important; positive, visual and naturally occurring humour seem to have beneficial effects. (Ahola et al., 2017). Hence, this kind of humour could be taken advantage of in the service design of organizations.

These are some of the implications that can be expressed at this point. Later on, with a more comprehensive review of the project results, it will be possible to make even further conclusions about how humour can be used and utilized for the benefit

of various organizations. However, even at this point the research findings form an interesting, even if to some extent mixed set of observations.

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