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A gaffe a minute

Films, TV shows portray workplaces as theaters of the absurd. But could you be the Employee of the Month?

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The alarm clock buzzes and you fall into program mode: Drive to work, clock in, clock out. Do it all again the next day.

Stick to the routine, get some buddies at work, don't upset the boss too much and you can "skate along," just like Dane Cook in the **Lions Gate** film "Employee of the Month," released on DVD last week.

The spiritless conformity drags on until, one day, a beautiful blond (Jessica Simpson) joins the staff. Suddenly, slacker boy shows up on time and strives to earn points with the boss.

Sound like your workplace? It's an exaggeration, of course, but movies and television shows can be a humorous outlet for bored employees who feel stuck in a workplace with too many similarities to the Hollywood versions.

The 1999 satire "Office Space" resonated with victims of the dot-com bust.

NBC's "The Office" is a hit, with Steve Carell as Michael Scott, the boss who wants to be everybody's friend but unintentionally offends employees with racist, sexist and ageist remarks. Even if you've never been to mandatory sexual harassment training, it's hilarious.

The kernel of truth makes the shows so funny. It's healthy to laugh at our foibles, experts say, especially in an era of outsourcing, discontent and job insecurity.

"Employee of the Month" pokes fun at recognition programs that are well-intended but can easily backfire. Something meant to salute and inspire good work can become fierce competition with one winner and scores of losers.

We talked to three human resource experts in Orange County about the shows that spoof our weirdness at work. They shared their insights on workplace goofiness, morale and employee recognition.

DRIVE-THROUGH FIRING

The wackiness of work gets scary when you see the absurd playing out in your own life.

Aggie Kobrin, an entrepreneur who once worked as a manager for a staffing company, will never forget the day she had her three children in the car and told them: "Be quiet. I need to call someone and fire them." She made the call, proceeded driving and headed home. Then her son shook her from her stupor: "Do you know what you just did? You fired someone while driving through a McDonald's?"

"I realized how insensitive I had become," said Kobrin, who now runs **Conference & Expo Connections**, Irvine. "When I got home, I called the woman back and talked for about an hour and assured her that we would find her another job.

"People in human resources deal with problems all day long, like firing people. Sometimes you have to desensitize just to get through it."

Kobrin approves of employee recognition programs. A \$25 expense for lunch and movie tickets can create a huge amount of pride and a sense of "belonging" at the workplace.

"Work is a pretty miserable place for most people," Kobrin said. "Those polls say up to 80 percent are unhappy at work. So it truly helps to laugh.

"I've seen a lot of temps love a job, not because of the work they were doing, but because they had fun and morale was high."

QUIRKS, ETC.

Linda Rudolph, human resources director for **NDS**, a technology company in Costa Mesa, chuckles on many Thursday nights as "The Office" mimics offices she has seen over the years.

"It strikes all too close to home," she said. "No matter the great talents people have, they have quirks.

"Our CEO (Abe Peled) has a habit of saying 'etc.' when he gives his talks, and a lot of people poke fun at it, with him in the room. We all laugh. It's healthy to have the courage and presence of mind to laugh at each other and ourselves – without being hurtful in any way – and come back together as a team."

NDS runs a global recognition program for its 200 employees, with annual awards for anyone who has done something extraordinary. Some years, there have been four winners; some years, there are 10. A trophy and the \$2,500 top prize is presented in front of their peers.

"It's like an MVP for a sports team that year," Rudolph said. "People take a great deal of pride in it and display it on their desk. And then other people ask, 'What's the criteria? How is it selected?' They see that they could achieve it, too."

"I see a lot of pats on the back even if they didn't win. Their team won and that means the boss knows what they're doing here."

CHEAP PERKS

Audrienne Adams Lee, with a decade of human resource experience, said recognition programs work if employees actually have to earn the prize. The award is more powerful when the company chief honors the employee in front of their peers and spouse.

The trouble is many executives and entrepreneurs are so busy with their varied duties that they don't think about something as basic as employee recognition, said Adams Lee, president of **HR Network**. The Garden Grove company provides HR services for small and mid-size companies.

"People go to work for the pay, but they stay in the job for the relationships, the contribution they make, the sense of delivering value," Adams Lee said. "But a lot of managers don't know their employees well enough to know what matters to them. If they take care of an elderly parent, if religion is very important, pay attention to that."

Health insurance is an expensive benefit, but many other perks are not: potlucks, casual Fridays, a surprise half-day off leading into a holiday (when production tends to be low anyway).

Many people ask for training days. A \$99 course might not change what they do significantly, but "they'll know that you believe in them enough to make that investment," Adams Lee said. That \$99 can earn great loyalty and save thousands in turnover costs.

Adams Lee tries to walk the talk. HR Networks' annual planning meeting will be at a spa. The meeting room is reserved for six hours, with massages scheduled afterward for all eight employees.

"We work so many hours. If you're not enjoying what you do, it's an incredible waste," she said. "We need humor in the workplace."

And if you can't find it there, try a little Hollywood exaggeration.

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'THE OFFICE': Angela Kinsey as Angela, Kate Flannery as Meredith, Steve Carell as Michael Scott, Phyllis Smith as Phyllis and Jenna Fischer as Pam Beesley star in the series.

PAUL DRINKWATER, NBC UNIVERSAL