Hard work isn’t always fun by Esther J. Cepeda for The Mercury News, 12/21/13

With the exception of human resources professionals and corporate executives who publicly bemoan a general lack of work ethic as their main obstacle to filling vacant positions, you rarely hear about hard work anymore. As far as I can tell, it's too infrequently held up as intrinsic to the American character or as a value to be aspired to.

From public schools that beat the drum of student "engagement" with fun activities but rarely talk about working hard and performing under pressure, to workplaces that believe they have to entertain their employees into productivity, our society seems to think that fun is always necessary for getting through life.

But I’ve noticed some pushback recently against the absurdities of a philosophy that posits that fun, personal fulfillment and self-esteem are the top goals of any endeavor.

Writing for Slate magazine, New America Foundation fellow Konstantin Kakaes responded to a starry-eyed editorial in The New York Times about how school math doesn't have to be "boring." "Anyone with an understanding of what math actually is believes it must sometimes be boring,” Kakaes wrote.

Learning is work, after all. And some learning, no matter how rewarding, is difficult. To observe that some advanced math concepts cannot be fun-ified seems beyond rebuke, but the many acolytes of the "Learning Is and Must Always Be Fun!" school of thought try hard to keep such common sense from gaining traction.

As one miffed reader responded to Kakaes, "I teach, and my approach is very child-centered. There is ALWAYS something you as a teacher can do to make the material engaging, and telling your students to ‘deal with it’ as the caption of the photo suggests is a huge cop-out and a missed opportunity."

A few days later on the Times' op-ed pages, author Oliver Burkeman pleaded with readers to forget the idea of workplace fun being a job requirement. His was a scathing takedown of corporate gamification, workplace indulgence culture and the "Head of Fungineering, or Chief Cheerfulness Ninja, or Vice President of Wow."

Citing studies finding that fun doesn't always guarantee workplace harmony or productivity, and that forced glee can have the opposite effect on workers, Burkeman begs for understanding of his nuanced position:

"Lest my curmudgeonliness be mistaken for misanthropy, let’s be clear: There's nothing wrong with happiness at work. Enjoyable jobs are surely preferable to boring or unpleasant ones; moreover, studies suggest that happy employees are more productive ones. But it doesn't follow that the path to this desirable state of affairs is through deliberate efforts, on the part of managers, to try to generate fun. Indeed, there's evidence that this approach -- which has been labeled, suitably appallingly, 'fungineering' -- might have precisely the opposite effect, making people
miserable and thus reaffirming one of the oldest observations about happiness: When you try too hard to obtain it, you’re almost guaranteed to fail."

I wouldn’t be crowing quite so divinely about the hopefully soon demise of society’s fun fanatics and their trick bags of games, incentives, token economies and rewards to make hard work palatable if I didn’t see a slight glimmer of hope.

As it turns out, Millennials -- aka Generation Ys, the generation that has grown up ensconced in our everyone-gets-a-trophy culture -- are learning first hand that in the real world of business, some peers value performance above all else.

According to The Wall Street Journal, in the hard-knuckled world of startups -- in which companies are known for their chalk walls, balance ball chairs, foosball tables, and free booze and meals -- workers who don’t perform are dropped very quickly.

"New companies let nearly 25 percent of their employees go in the lead-up to their first birthday," the Journal reported. "Startup managers say they try to let underperformers or poor fits go within their first three months, but some hires don’t last even that long."

Whether for lacking skills, not having enough "hustle" or failing to keep pace, employees who don’t last at startups will quickly find themselves with new opportunities to evaluate whether they worked hard enough to succeed at their job -- and whether to work harder at the next gig. After all, there’s great enjoyment to be had from accomplishments born of hard work and determination.

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**Possible response options:**

- Is there a benefit to hard work? Explain.
- Do you agree or disagree with this statement: Learning is and must always be fun? Explain.