Playing the Game:

GAMIFICATION AS TRAINING STRATEGY

by Jed W. Harris-Keith

It would not be a stretch to suggest that professional development workshops and newly-introduced strategies designed to improve employee performance in the workplace can be hit-or-miss endeavors. Employers know that to stay relevant in an increasingly competitive economy, it is of vital importance to ensure that both their companies and their workers stay up-to-date on the latest trends in their respective industries. In addition, while nobody is suggesting that the office should be a place of fun and excitement at all times for all people, there is little denying that the culture and atmosphere of a workplace setting can have a meaningful impact on how well an employee performs his or her assigned tasks. However, the reality is that many of the vessels devoted to imparting new information or driving employees to reach the pinnacles of their potential are flawed in the delivery or execution. To put it in blunt terms, unless the workers are at least somewhat engaged during their time at work, they will have mentally check-out of their surroundings.

Teachers in K-12 and higher education know this as a truth, as they are constantly competing with the distractions of modern media and technology such as cell phones and the Internet to keep the attention of students of all kinds and keep them focused on the task at hand. Teachers often have to wear the hats of both educator and entertainer to retain the attention of their audience. Employers in other industries are beginning to embrace that truth and are integrating gamification theory in their worker education strategies. It is estimated that by the year 2015 over 50% of business will utilize gamification.[1] The hope is that employees will be less reluctant to participate in yet another professional development seminar if they are having fun.

ASSEMBLING THE TEAM: WHAT IS GAMIFICATION?

The core of gamification works on the Mary Poppins theory; that is, a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down. In short, gamification is incorporating components that resemble games to activities that are traditionally thought to antithetical to games, such as school and work. According to TeachThought.com, gamification is not simply using games as a means to learning new ideas and concepts, but rather employing them to inculcate a spirit of competition and fun in the workplace.

Applying this to the office is not exactly different than what we already know from our experiences in school. In fact, the whole of education is rooted in gamification.

"Letter grades are a kind of gamification. Let's make a game of collecting the most valuable letters. Same with GPA, gold stars, student of the month, trophies, certificates. Perform this action in this game according to these rules and get this reward."[2]

And this is largely a true evaluation of how educators move students to perform the tasks required and to perform those tasks at an optimal level. Do A, get B. The idea behind employing gamification is that to add an extra motivating factor for someone to perform to their peak potential.

STICKS AND CARROTS: GAMIFICATION AS MOTIVATIONAL TOOL

However, and not to be crass, but is not the motivating factor in the workforce earning a paycheck? Do A (work), get B (money). It is true that a primary motivating factor of working is receiving a wage based on that work. Nevertheless, humans are not automatons who are necessarily comfortable performing the same task over and over endlessly without the need for some kind carrot other than being able to afford food and shelter as a motivational tool.

Professional development seminars and training meetings are areas of the workplace that are ripe for gamification to add variety to otherwise mundane tasks. As Dionna Odom of eLearning Mind explains, "Sure, your traditional boring compliance training might get the job done, but are your learners engaged and connected to the material? Probably not. That's where gamification comes into play."[3]

Odom goes on to explain why using gamification and fostering a sense of play can produce dramatic results in the workplace, all for the betterment of the business as a whole and for its constituent workers.

"An atmosphere of 'play' and competition can create a stronger team effort for all involved," Odom describes. "If marketing is competing against tech support to see who can complete the training and answer more questions correctly for points and achievements, suddenly both team spirit and friendly competition are injected into what is traditionally lackluster training sessions. Learners – no matter what department they're from – like the idea of achievement."[3]

In short, Odom contends, all people want to be able to show off what they know and that they are competent at what they do.

This is one reason that many point to gamification as a technique for learning that crosses over the generational divide as being useful for teaching. While millennials and those from Generation X are familiar with using games and are, largely, digital natives, even baby boomers are familiar with game theory in some form, even if that is not what they call it. As such, generations across the spectrum can benefit from gamification by drawing on their own unique experiences and situational backgrounds.[4]

Gamification can work across the cultural divide as well, although businesses who wish to use game strategies in their workplace would do well to bear in mind that different cultures perceive work and why people strive to do well in their jobs in unique lights. For example, studies have pointed out that while workers in the Netherlands see the value of gamification, it perplexes some employees why rewards would be needed to coax someone into doing good work, as that is something they perceive as being naturally tied to do a job.[5]

The spirit of competition allows employees the opportunity to do just that, while at the same time commiserate with and grow closer to their coworkers. Ultimately, this will produce a climate of cooperation and an atmosphere of community in the workplace.

For businesses who want to incorporate gamification strategies in the workplace, there are several resources that can be found on the Internet. It might be difficult to wade through the glut of information, however, as there are many ideas of what gamification can be and what it should be. Kudos Badges (http://www.kudosbadges.com/) and Bunchball's Nitro (http://www.bunchball.com/products/nitro) offer useful gamification platforms that have been tested in the workforce. However, ultimately, the key is for a business to find what platform will be most useful to its employees and the company's success.

CONQUERING THE DRAGON: DOES GAMIFICATION WORK?

Employers considering implementing gamification techniques and strategies into the workplace might be wondering, and rightly so, if gamification is an actual feasible solution to any woes they might have in terms of employee bonding and productivity output. In short, does it work?

The prevailing research does seem to support that gamification does have its place in the workplace and, overall, produces the types of effects and outcomes that an employer would hope spring from such a gaming enterprise. Writing for Forbes Magazine, Rajat Paharia, founder and chief product officer of Bunchball, points to success with his company using gamification. Not only does the strategy work to move employees doing jobs that are, by their very nature, competitive, such as sales, but gamification also is useful in diagnosing design flaws in a business' overall model.[6]

In their literature review "Does Gamification Work? – A Literature Review of Empirical Studies on Gamification," the authors argue that gamification does, in general, produce the effects that the strategy tends to promote; that is, it increases work output and produces happier working environments. However, the author admit that other "confounding factors" might be at play in the results, namely the context in which the gamification is being employed and the inherent qualities of those workers taking part in the gamification.[1]

To be fair, that does make sense, as workers are likely motivated by and moved by their own particular dispositions, preferences and prejudices, and experiences that change their outlook on a day by day basis. Further, as the literature review suggests, not all learning experiences are suitable for gamification, either from a learning standpoint, a legal standpoint, or a sensitivity point-of-view. Moreover, the value of gamification is tied into the needs and makeup of the employees involved in the gamification. Gamification works best in cases where workers need more individualized feedback and that extra bit of motivation that can get them through the day. Further it tends to have better success with people who learn best through doing something rather than being lectured on a subject. Still, though, the current research points to the idea that gamification has its place in the workplace, but should be executed on a case-by-case basis.[7]

GAMIFICATION IN THE TEXTILE CARE INDUSTRY

Many gamification programs are geared towards business areas such as customer service or sales. It becomes more difficult to adapt them for the production environment, such as a laundry facility, but it can be done. For instance, it can be implemented in the training process of laundry floor employees or team meetings. Rewards programs can be used to recognize continuous days of work by a single employee with no call-offs. Leaderboards can be used to track plant production, such as pounds per day or rewash. If there are benchmarks to be improved upon, a leaderboard is an effective way to engage all personnel in the success of the facility. For an employee standing on the soil sort or finishing line day after day, tangible outcomes may become hard to grasp, and the repetitive nature of their work can cause a disconnect to the overall goals of the facility. Using gamification can reengage staff and make them personally invest in company success.

While gamification is not a new concept, the application to todays' work environment is being constantly reimagined. Utilizing gamification can garner lower error rates, improved employee production and lower turnover rates, and increased revenue. Used correctly, gamification is a win-win solution.

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