

The Gamification of Corporate Training

When you teach graduate courses, you learn quickly that research tests are never popular. Assigned 10 challenging questions that required hours in the library, my students rebelled. Some left questions blank or asked for extensions. Others didn't bother to hand in anything at all. The course evaluations were rotten.

Then I came up with the idea to create a high-tech, gamified version of the test: an interactive treasure hunt on smartphones. Students still hit the library stacks, but now it was to find a

specific volume with a sheet secreted away. Scanning a barcode could direct them to the next question, which might require them to text a photo of a 300-year-old cookbook, convert to a PDF an obscure 1927 article in the *New Yorker*, or listen to a speech by Amelia Earhart and fill in the missing words.

Turns out, gamification works great on students. And apparently employees like it just as much. Companies that train large volumes of staff are rushing to use games, in a variety of forms. The goal is the same: turn a boring, repetitive and difficult series of tasks into an enjoyable, interesting activity that gets better results. Games provide intrinsic motivation—that is, people play them because they want to—as opposed to bribing someone with a raise (an extrinsic motivation).

The so-called serious games business, spurred on by corporate training, is booming. According

to one study, the serious-games industry will reach \$5.4 billion by 2020. Indeed, the Entertainment Software Association found that 70 percent of major employers use interactive software and games for training. Such games are used to motivate employees to acquire new skills, train factory and warehouse workers in safety, incent employees to help improve massively complex software products and nudge managers into completing training programs in the first place.

Cisco, for example, has developed a simulation program called myPlanNet, in which players become CEOs of service providers, while Canon's repair technicians learn their trade, in part, by dragging and dropping components into their proper places on a virtual copier. FedEx, as well as virtually every airline, depends on simulators to train pilots. Not to be outdone, UPS uses a

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simulator with game-like features to train drivers. One “sim” even mimics the experience of walking on ice.

The motives for all this training are fairly simple. In an age with so many complex regulations and detailed tasks, training matters more than ever before.

applied the training to the job. According to Korn Ferry Hay Group benchmarks, only 63 percent of employees believe that the training they receive helps them perform in their current roles, and just over half of employees (51 percent) believe that the training they receive helps them

dopamine, a hormone in the brain that encourages us to explore and try new things. Since we like the feeling we get when our brains are awash in it, we’ll do whatever it takes to get more of it.

Video and computer games, as well as slot machines, are particularly good dopamine

than those who do not. They can also improve levels of competence.

Perhaps most important, games appeal to the fastest-growing segment of the working-age population—millennials, who grew up on a steady diet of video games.

Of course, gamification has limits. You

A game is a structured experience providing clear goals, a set of rules that induce players to overcome challenges.

It doesn’t take much for ill-trained employees to set operations back. Plus, all these games have a surprisingly great effect on morale. One survey found that a whopping 92 percent of employees are more loyal to companies that have invested in their training.

Certainly, companies need to improve how they do it. A 24X7 Learning survey found that only 12 percent of learners

qualify for a better job.

This is where gamification can help, because a game is, at its root, a structured experience providing clear goals, a set of rules that induce players or participants to overcome challenges, and instantaneous feedback. Because they offer clearly articulated rewards for each point players score and new level they achieve, they trigger the release of

generators. Video games, in fact, uncork almost double the levels of dopamine experienced by humans at rest. It’s the same system that drives compulsive gamblers and cocaine addicts—without the downside. Research by the Office of Naval Research found that people who play video games process information faster and have superior reasoning and problem-solving skills

can’t gamify your way out of a crappy job. Somebody has to input numbers into a spreadsheet and work the customer-service help desk. Gamification can’t make a subpar employee a good one, nor can a poorly designed game help your bottom line. But it has been working in my classroom, and, as a growing number of companies are learning, it can also work for them. ●