WORKPLACE
FUN AND GAMES
MOTIVATE
EMPLOYEES
A fast-growing tactic for human resources, gamification may be a game-changer.

Walk by employees’ desks and see them playing a game on their computer? Not a good thing. But using game thinking and game dynamics to improve skills, change behaviors and promote learning are good things.

Workplace gamification is changing the way human resources tackles typical tasks like recruitment, talent management and performance improvement. Its application to improving the health of the employees — and reducing benefits costs — has had its successes, and gamification is being used to help employees strengthen their financial wellness.

The use of gamification systems in the workplace is expected to grow rapidly during the next few years. According to Gartner Research,

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more than 1,400 global organizations deployed gamification applications in 2014 for employee performance, health care, marketing and training.

Companies now are using gamification techniques to provide a more engaging and meaningful workplace to motivate employees in order to meet business objectives. According to the 2013 Gallup report “State of the American Workplace,” nearly 70 percent of the American workforce is not engaged.

Is gamification the new device in the corporate toolbox? Decidedly. Does it always work? Not necessarily. In fact, Gartner predicts that 80 percent of gamified systems will fail to meet business objectives in 2014 because of poor design.

Certainly, gamification is a widespread response to learning, skills development, onboarding and behavior change. A 2013 IBM survey, “The Upwardly Mobile Enterprise,” revealed the explosive development and adoption of personal devices — smartphones, tablets and “wearable” technology. This, coupled with a much more experimental attitude from employers, indicates that gamification most likely will dominate the workplace for decades to come, increasing productivity and the well-being of employees. The Aberdeen Group reports that gamification is a successful approach: Organizations with gamification in place have improved general employee engagement by 48 percent and reduced turnover by 36 percent.

But for gamification to have legs, it needs to be grounded in a basic understanding of how people behave and are motivated to change. Designing a successful gamified system is not obvious or easy, because people are complex. Implementing such a system usually involves testing a segment of the population then making adjustments after several iterations before rolling it out to the entire targeted population. Once up and running, the system may need frequent monitoring and tweaking.

**Motivation: Inside-Out, Outside-In**

Motivation is a tricky thing. What triggers a desire to change behavior can come from friends (“You have to try this!”), family (“You really need to quit smoking!”), social milieu (“Come on in, the water’s fine!”) and, of course, personal interest (“Touch my toes? I can’t even see them!”). But a kick-start won’t always result in the changes you want. If you’re not interested in, say, hockey, you’re not likely to be motivated to learn to play; changing unhealthful habits is easy to start, but hard to keep up. The barriers to learning new ways of working or living often are formidable.

Game designers recognize these challenges and their response is to offer “outcomes,” which range from cash prizes (positive rewards) to penalties (negative outcomes). They act as carrots and sticks, bribes and punishments. The bribes usually have a better track record, but as Carnegie Mellon University Professor Jesse Schell says, “If you bribe someone to do something, they always come to hate that thing.”

The reason for that is simple. Badges, rankings, points, gifts and other prizes are rewards that come from outside — they’re called extrinsic motivators. If the point of a gamified system is to collect these rewards, sooner or later the users will focus on getting those rewards, which will crowd out intrinsic motivation. The result is that you can become less motivated than when you started. In the business setting, these kinds of rewards aren’t the “magic bullet” to making behavior change happen.

The other kind of motivation comes from within, driven by interest or enjoyment of the task itself, without the external pressure and desire for rewards. With this intrinsic motivation, players believe the results they get are under their own control, are interested in mastering the behavior and see that the skill levels of the gamified system are attainable. Intrinsic motivation is powerful
because it satisfies several universal needs of human nature, including a sense of achievement, social interaction with other people and a desire for a higher purpose or making a difference. Some examples of intrinsic motivation are obvious: Solving crossword puzzles, playing tennis, taking a walk or having dinner with friends. Some intrinsic motivators are not obvious: Successfully handling a difficult work assignment, delivering a great client presentation or successfully completing an online course on your favorite hobby.

Does this mean that a gamified system based on external rewards won’t work? It depends. Performing monotonous, repetitive tasks, such as stuffing envelopes, would be best rewarded by compensation. Intrinsic motivation probably would not work here unless the activity is for a charitable cause in which the individual feels a sense of affiliation. In other words, activities themselves are neither intrinsic nor extrinsic. It is the individual and the situation that determine whether the motivation is intrinsic or extrinsic.

Whether the motivation is extrinsic, intrinsic or a combination, feedback and engagement loops are an important element of a gamified system. Each time an activity or behavior is performed, feedback lets the individual know where he/she stands. And every time an individual successfully achieves a challenge, the brain secretes a neurotransmitter called dopamine. This results in pleasure and the desire to repeat the activity known as the dopamine release loop. Successful systems should include tasks and challenges that are neither too easy nor too hard, and provide lots of feedback along with a sense of fun.

The proper mix of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards is a blend of art and science and is critical to the success of any corporate initiative involving gamification.

Behavior Design
BJ Fogg, Ph.D., directs research and design at Stanford University’s Persuasive Technology Lab and is one of the first experimental psychologists to conduct research on how technology can promote behavior change. After years of research, he developed the Fogg Behavior Model to describe how and when a change in behavior occurs. The model’s equation is “B = M + A + T,” which shows that a behavior will occur in response to a trigger if motivation and ability are high enough. A trigger is a prompt for the individual to “Do it now!”

Research performed by Fogg concluded that as the individual’s ability to perform a task gets easier, the motivation required to act decreases. In addition, motivation and ability can trade off against each other. For example, an individual can do something really hard when motivation is high. But if motivation is low, the task or challenge needs to be very easy to perform. In any case, a trigger is needed and the timing is critical or the behavior will not occur (e.g., you may be motivated and able to exercise but forget to set your alarm clock). However, motivation is not static. It comes and goes in waves from low motivation to high motivation. According to Fogg, you want to trigger a difficult challenge when an individual’s motivation is high. But to have lasting change, you want to make the task as easy as possible at first so that motivation does not matter.

The Fogg Behavior Model is useful in designing engagement loops in a gamified system in which the individual goes from motivation to an action to feedback and back to motivation. Engagement loops are great techniques to increase motivation and level of difficulty in completing tasks so the individual achieves a sense of progress and mastery. The approach used in designing engagement loops will depend on how many times the task will be required and whether you are asking the individual to perform a new action, repeat an action or stop doing an action.

A well-designed gamified system will need to properly coordinate an individual’s motivation, ability and the timing of triggers to successfully change behavior.

A Longer-Term Strategy
The most successful strategies are those in which the player creates something that has long-lasting value to him or her. Extrinsic rewards serve only to capture the player’s interest; the nature of the gamified system itself should allow the player to create intrinsic value — from learning the simple enjoyment of the challenges
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What Makes a Successful Gamification Campaign

Unlike traditional schemes, such as frequent-flyer promotions, good gamified applications tend to motivate players to achieve their own objectives, and players participate voluntarily, according to Brian Burke, research vice president at Gartner Research.

“Force-marched gamification [where using the game is not optional], although it is done, has some inherent risks, and the best applications have a couple of different characteristics,” Burke said. “One is that the players themselves opt in to participation and the other — and this is really key — is that the gamified application focuses on enabling the players to achieve their objectives as opposed to treating people as puppets.

“When you look at successful gamification, those gamified applications are built around enabling the players to succeed and the incidental benefits are beneficial to whatever organization is the sponsor of that game,” he said.

Done well, he added, gamification taps into more powerful motivators, such as self-esteem and social capital rather than simple paybacks for participation.

Source: “Why Gamification Apps are Playing Out Badly for Business,” Toby Wolpe, ZDNet

Before deciding on whether implementing a gamified system would be effective, ask: “What really motivates my employees?” Is it all about receiving compensation or is there something beyond earning extrinsic rewards that motivate employees?

Kevin Werbach, a professor at The Wharton School and co-author of “For the Win,” said, “As long as the design is thought through properly, gamification will work and will just be seen as part of the modern executive’s toolkit. Eventually, gamification will be important to every part of business, even if it doesn’t transform all of them. If nothing else, it may make business more fun.”

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