



Serious Fun – How HR Can Up the Game

By Larry Mohl, Jubi, Inc.

Gamification – it seems like all of a sudden this word is being used everywhere. Are you one of the people that has jumped into the journey of gamification, or are you one of equally numerous people taking a more cautious view? What is gamification and why has it hit the radar now? Is it all about playing games or is there something more substantial going on? Is gamification here to stay, or is it another “buzz” soon to meet its end? Can I afford gamification? Is it serious enough for serious people and serious problems?

If you have been working on a gamification project, thinking about getting started, or just hearing the term for the first time, my hope is that this article will help demystify the topic and develop your gamification acumen.

What's the Game?

Think for a moment about a game you love to play. For example, I am a huge tennis fan. I love to play league tennis, watch professional tournaments, review instructional videos, and check out all the gear I could spend my money on. The question I've often asked myself is, “What is it about the game of tennis that keeps me so engaged?”

Tennis has all the basic characteristics, or “game mechanics,” that make the activity of whacking that little yellow ball so engaging. There is a point and scoring system with a set of rules. There are leagues with competition at different levels of skill. Each league has team and individual leaderboards that drive a great deal of healthy competition. There is team camaraderie, social connection, and admiration for the winning team and, each time I play, I receive immediate feedback that I can use to adjust and develop my game.

Finally, it's just plain fun!

Now, just imagine that the game of tennis consisted of nothing more than the activity of hitting the ball against a wall. If all the game mechanics were stripped away, would it still be a game? The answer is no. It would be an activity for sure, but probably not an activity that most people would devote time and energy to.

A more technical definition of gamification is as follows: “Gamification is the use of game mechanics and design elements in a non-game application to drive high levels of engagement and achieve a targeted business outcome.” Gamification challenges us to answer the question of how we can use the characteristics of games (points, rewards, fun, surprise, etc.) to increase engagement in activities or behaviors that we want people to perform for the purpose of achieving a specific result.

Gamification is really not about playing games. Rather, first and foremost, gamification is about engagement. Marketers, sales leaders, learning leaders, and human resources professionals, are all starting to look towards gamification to solve one of the most annoying and pervasive problems they face: “I built it and they did not stay.” Whether it's a customer facing website, CRM tool, or learning course, the ability to motivate people to engage and act remains a thorny and expensive problem.

The other significant opportunity in the use of gamification remains largely invisible to the user, but is of primary importance to gamification application providers – data – lots and lots of data. Data captured in real-time from gamification users is a powerful tool that can be analyzed and put to work to significantly improve user engagement and shape behavior.

Why Play Now?

The first trend is the largest demographic shift in the history of the U.S. workforce involving incoming millennial workers and outgoing baby boomers. Currently, over 10,000 baby boomers are retiring every single day and the millennial population has grown rapidly to over 37 percent of the workforce.

According to studies by Gallup,¹ over 47 percent of millennial workers report that they are disengaged at work. According to generational researchers such as Tamara Erickson,² millennial workers define “engagement” as an environment that provides challenge, continuous development, embedded technology, frequent rewards, social connection, and a sense of purpose beyond a paycheck. Well-designed gamification solutions have the

promise to address many of these demands and can be used to declare war on disengagement.

The second trend is the growth of mobile gaming and social technologies. Over one billion people play electronic games, and the fastest growing segment is the tablet and hand-held markets. By most accounts, over half of the world's population is using some form of social technology. This growth is clearly driving gamification into commonplace, everyday use.

In addition, companies are making it more and more possible for employees to bring your own device (BYOD) to work. The line between the experience that people have as consumers on their personal smartphones and what they expect from their employer is quickly blurring. This blurring is driving a demand for consumer-centric applications in the corporate context, and gamification easily fits the bill.

As an industry, M2 Research³ estimates that gamification will soon go north of US\$2.8 billion in market spending. Gartner Inc.⁴ predicts that by 2015, 40 percent of Forbes Global 1000 organizations will use gamification as the primary mechanism to transform business operations. It would seem that gamification, while in its early days, is here to stay.

Play at Work?

If you look at your current workplace through the lens of gamification, you will see aspects of it everywhere. There are scoreboards and scorecards, salesperson and employee-of-the-month contests, and employee-health-team challenges, to name a few. Labeling these as examples of gamification allows us to build gamification applications as a discipline, study how they are working, and improve their impact.

For HR professionals, gamification provides a new arsenal of engagement tools and techniques that are built on past and present discoveries in areas such as neuroscience, cognitive science, behavioral economics and motivation theory. When you ask people what gamification means to them, the answers you receive span a wide range of applications. In order to provide some framing, I have developed the Gamification Continuum Model depicted in Figure 1. When we apply this model to core HR practices, an interesting picture begins to emerge.

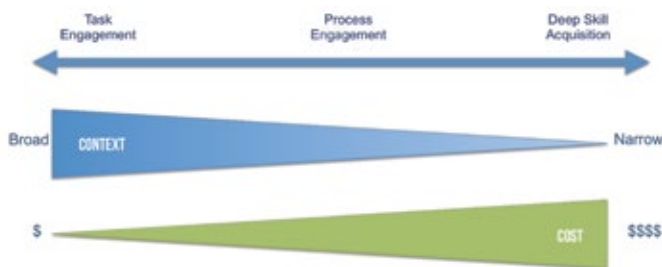


Figure 1. Gamification Continuum Model.

At the far left of the continuum, we see gamification that primarily drives task engagement in a broad context,

which means that simple game mechanics can be used in many ways. The cost to gain the benefit can be relatively low. Examples of applications at this end of the continuum include the use of points, badges, and leaderboards to engage users in tasks such as company health challenges, e.g., walking, losing weight, and compliance, e.g., sales CRM data entry, completing required training. The technology used to deploy these applications can be as simple as pen and paper, or involve more complex technology including gamification engines that present simple mechanics in response to clicks on a website. If your goal is to turn tasks into a “game” without spending a lot of money, there are many options at this end of the spectrum.

In the middle of the continuum is gamification that drives process engagement in a more specific context. These applications build on task-based applications by adding some form of game type metaphor, e.g., board game, card game, along with missions and levels delivered through a website. Graphical treatments can greatly vary, leading to a wide variation in cost to develop and deploy. Gamification at this point of the continuum is being utilized for recruiting, onboarding, innovation and learning processes.

At the far right of the continuum, we find expensive applications built for a very specific context and used to drive the acquisition of mission-critical skills in high-reliability industries. Examples of this form of gamification include high-fidelity patient simulators in health care, flight simulators for pilot training, and well-drilling practice environments in off-shore oil exploration, to name a few. A lower cost variation of this type of gamification includes business computer and board simulation games aimed at teaching specific concepts and decision factors.

Now that we have a frame of reference, let's take a look at some of the most popular ways HR professionals are using gamification to drive engagement and shape behavior in the work place.

Recruiting

Marriott Hotels developed a hotel-themed, online experience similar to Farmville, in which players must juggle all the responsibilities of a hotel kitchen manager. Users learn about the industry and earn virtual rewards that enhance the image of the hotel industry in their eyes. Marriott targets this application primarily to attract talent in emerging markets outside the U.S. where the hospitality industry is less established.

Onboarding

Gamifying the onboarding process is one of the most popular applications of gamification that exists in the workplace today. In many companies, onboarding is a well-defined process with a beginning, middle and end. To be successfully onboarded, employees need to digest a significant amount of information, build relationships, and begin to navigate the organization. To gamify this process, the information and activities can be “chunked and sequenced” so that employees earn points and badges

as they work their way through the process. Other game mechanics, such as missions and levels, can be used to further organize the process and add a sense of progressive achievement.

Social Rewards

In many companies, it is commonplace to have a system by which managers can recognize their associates, and associates can recognize each other. In some organizations, software platforms have been used to make it easier for managers to send a recognition item to an employee that has an associated point value. The recognition recipient can then redeem their accumulated points for merchandise from an online store. More recently, this basic idea has been combined and expanded using social technologies and simple game mechanics to increase the quality and flow of recognition across organizations.

Learning and Performance Improvement

Learning and performance improvement professionals have been using aspects of games and game mechanics as a staple of their instructional design and delivery practice for generations. Recently, the opportunity has become possible to use game mechanics in new and innovative ways to drive learning. One goal of learning gamification is to improve engagement and the completion of online learning. Currently, learning leaders use online learning to reach large populations. However, the drop-out rate is alarmingly high, resulting in wasted money and time. Another goal is to help close the “learning-doing gap.” Unfortunately, much of the learning that is delivered online and in the classroom is not transferred to the workplace. Gamification can play a key role in closing this gap.

Employee Health and Wellness

As we have become more aware of the negative impact bad health has on our society, health care system and company benefits cost, it is no surprise that the gamification of health and wellness has become one of the fastest areas of growth in the overall gamification market. Corporate walking, weight loss, BMI reduction, and healthy eating competitions are taking companies by storm. This general trend among companies and consumers has resulted in a hyper-competitive, wearable device market with suppliers competing for your “share of wrist.” Free smart-phone apps with embedded gamification mechanics are making it much easier for you and your company to get on the healthy living bandwagon.

Game On?

In addition to predicting a high rate of growth in gamification, Gartner also predicts that at least 70 percent of gamified applications will fail to produce the intended outcomes due to “poor design.” What Gartner is talking about is one of the great myths of gamification, which says that all you need to do is add points and badges to the tasks you want users to perform and presto...the tasks get done!

Like most things that may seem simple at first glance, there is significantly more going on behind the scenes in effective, well-designed gamification than first meets the eye.

Figure 2 depicts a high-level process I have developed to help you think through your gamification project and improve your outcomes.



Figure 2. Gamification Design Process.

The issue with many gamification attempts is that designers tend to jump straight from their desired business goals to the selection of game mechanics without going through the intermediate steps required to more specifically define outcomes and understand their audience. Let’s take a quick walk through the process.

Business Goals

Business goals should clearly define the operational success measures you aspire to. People-centric examples include higher employee retention and engagement, higher quality of hire, improved customer satisfaction, and increased net promoter scores.

Behavior Outcomes

In this step, the objective is to define the primary target group(s) you are attempting to influence and what it is you need them to know and do as a result of being “gamified.” Examples might include such behaviors as completing registration for employee benefits on time, contributing ideas to the suggestion box, performing work to a specific standard, and completing and applying lessons from e-learning courses.

Engagement and Motivation Drivers

To help surface the drivers of engagement and motivation in the behaviors you desire, ask the question, “What do our people care about?” By finding out what is important to those in your target audience, you will surface important factors that may warrant consideration as you design and deploy your application.

Target Corporation recently developed an interesting gamification application aimed at improving customer satisfaction at the check-out line. The application displayed a green or red indicator to the cashier on their screen based on whether or not they had met or missed a pre-defined speed standard. When the application was initially deployed, many employees were unhappy,

citing that it felt like they were receiving a customer-by-customer performance review. Further investigation by the application developers revealed that the cashiers favored getting customers checked out quickly, but the feeling of being scored in this way was demotivating. The application was adjusted by adding the ability for cashiers to compete against themselves, to beat their personal best and “level up” based on their performance over time. This approach garnered more cashier engagement and, therefore, better results.

The heart of gamification lies in truly understanding the motivations of your target population and then using the appropriate game mechanics to trigger those motivations. Motivation comes in two forms – intrinsic and extrinsic – and the most successful applications trigger both. Figure 3 shows some of the common motivators that gamification applications seek to leverage.

Intrinsic	Extrinsic
Autonomy	Social Connections
Mastery	Status
Fun	Fame
Meaning	Tangible Awards
Altruism	Money

Figure 3. Motivation Types.

Game Model and Mechanics

Once the engagement and motivation drivers of the target audience are better understood, you can select an appropriate game model and the game mechanics needed for your application. As I have discussed, gamification is really not about playing games. However, in order to build in the “fun factor,” our brains need a frame of reference from games we are familiar with. Looking at popular board games, video games, and TV game shows provides inspiration for the selection of a game model you can build upon.

The most basic forms of game mechanics are points, badges, levels and leaderboards. With these simple mechanics in place, you can turn just about any activity into a game. But, don’t just stop there! Think about how else you can crank up the engagement factor. There are many more game mechanics available to you. While a full discussion of these mechanics is beyond the scope of this article, a good list can be found at <http://techcrunch.com/2010/08/25/scvngr-game-mechanics/>.

You Got Game?

The next move in the game is yours. Take a closer look at whether gamification can add engagement value to one of your initiatives. If you feel it can, continue to learn more. Go for it! I promise you that it will be serious fun!

Endnotes

- 1 Gallup Engagement Study, 2012.
- 2 Tamara Erickson, Article for RSA Fellowship, Summer 2012.
- 3 M2 Research, Gamification in 2012 Market Update.
- 4 Brian Burke, “The Gamification of Business,” Forbes Magazine, 2013.

About the Author



Larry Mohl is a founder and the CEO of Jubi, Inc., which combines the fun of gamification, the power of social networks, and The Science of Inspiration,™ to ignite and sustain meaningful employee engagement in learning and performance improvement. After starting his career as an engineer at Motorola, Inc., he became an early leader in corporate social networking by pioneering “communities of practice” as the head of Knowledge Management at Motorola University. He has pioneered innovative approaches to leadership development, knowledge communities, and integrated talent management. Mohl is the co-author of the *The Wall Street Journal* best-selling book *Networking is Dead: Making Connections that Matter*, and has contributed to leading magazines. He holds a faculty appointment at the Georgia State University J. Mack Robinson College of Business, three international patents, and is an award-winning professional musician and composer. His innovative work to use music as a tool in business helps corporations inspire higher levels of engagement, commitment and brand advocacy. He can be reached at larry@getjubi.com.