Gamification and Human Resources: an overview

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What is gamification?

Gamification is the process of applying game design theories to everyday situations, including business. Gamification has been defined as "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (Deterding et al, 2011). Kevin Werbach (2013) of University of Pennsylvania defines gamification as "using design techniques from games in a business context or some other non-game context". The concept is simple: redesign everyday routines and tasks - in everything from employee training and recruiting to product testing and sales force management - to be more game-like and interactive, ultimately enhancing work experiences to be more engaging, fulfilling, fun and productive. Werbach stresses that gamification is "more than just rewards and points" but thinking about the engagement and motivation of people in a "gameful way". This is with a view to engaging people and directing their behaviours towards business objectives. Indeed Brian Burke (2014a) sees is as a way to motivate people to achieve "extraordinary things".

Gamification has often been used interchangeable with the concepts of "serious games". Here it is important to make a distinction. "Serious games" are games created for a non-entertainment purpose (for example learning and the development of skills) whereas "gamification" is the use of game elements and mechanics in non-game contexts. Here, we are considering the non-game context as the Human Resource Management context.

Concepts of gamification within business have been used for many years. As an example game-concepts have been used in the early 1900s with companies offering free gifts with multiple product purchases. The idea of "gamification", used in the way we are proposing here (i.e. the use of game design concepts in non-game environments) started to come to prominence around 2009 and 2010. We are starting to see gamification play a growing part in the modern business environment. In 2013 gamification was described as the "hottest business buzz-word" (McCormick, 2013). No longer just a buzzword: the gamification market is forecast to be worth $5.5 billion annually by 2018, according to MarketsandMarkets.

Yet, Clancy in 2014 suggested that it "looks like that whole 'gamification' thing is over". Why was that? Similar to cited notions of potential failure rates of change management more generally, Burke (2014a, p6) opines that "Gamification has tremendous potential, but right now most companies aren't getting it right" which is potentially why Gartner located Gamification in the "trough of disillusionment"

in their most recent Hype Cycle of Emerging Technologies in 2014. By understanding more about gamification organisations are more likely to achieve their objectives.

There is evidence of gamification concepts being utilised in such diverse contexts as retail, education, health and wellbeing. Already SAP uses games to educate its employees on sustainability, Unilever uses games for training, Hays uses it for hiring recruiters and the Khan Academy uses it for online education. Organisations that use gamification see better outcomes such as performance, engagement and retention, according to the Aberdeen Group (2013).

We consider that gamification is a concept that offers significant opportunities for HR professionals to demonstrate added value to businesses in numerous ways, some of which will be explained later in this overview.

Gamification theories

The concept of gamification is based on, and links with, a range of theories including those of behavioural economics, human psychology, learning and development, motivation, fun, performance, communication, team-working, problem-solving, risk-taking, decision-making, job design, trust and flow. Designed well, gamification of real world objectives can connect with untapped player potential to increase performance and engage employees in ways that can create an exponential win:win for employees and organisations.

Why use gamification in HR?

Gamification is not about virtually recreating an immersive experience, it is about using game elements and mechanics to help an organisation to achieve employee engagement and other organisational objectives. It is about designing HR and other processes utilising ideas of best practice from a range of fields – fun and motivation in particular. Furthermore, with increasing pressure for HR to add value the use of gamification in HR might also provide one way for organisations to measure that contribution. Gamification of HR is about being business-oriented, gearing activities toward the achievement of both player and business objectives and goals. With gamification you are encouraging people to do more of what you want them to do and also get better at it (whatever "it" may be within your business).

How can gamification be used in HR?

There are numerous ways in which game concepts can be used in HR. As examples, gamification can be used in HR to attract, induct, train (learn) and develop, engage and retain employees. The opportunities for the application of gamification to HR extend far beyond those we mention here. As well as HR professionals understanding gamification to actively create gamification strategies themselves, developing such an understanding will also be important for these professionals to enable them to manage others (including external agencies) who create and run gamification platforms on their behalf.

Attract

Many organisations are looking for innovative employees. Yet fewer organisations have designed recruitment and selection processes to find and select such people. Gamification of recruitment and selection with "quests" and challenges may be an ideal way in which you can identify, appeal to and acquire the talent you are seeking e.g. the identification of programming skills through competitions on the TopCoder community website (see www.topcoder.com). Such leading- edge recruitment and selection processes may also provide a valued contribution in terms of fit with your organisation's strategic intentions and employer brand.

Induction

Game elements can be very effective for getting people on board quickly with what they need to be doing by giving early guidance and feedback. The use of game elements can encourage learning in small steps to develop competence and eventual mastery of concepts by mapping out learning pathways and giving feedback on progress. Using game-concepts in induction processes you are more likely to be able to get people on board and being productive and in a more enjoyable way for the new starter.

Learning and development

The use of games concepts to facilitate learning and development moves us away from generally outdated ideas of knowledge amassing to notions of challenging the bounds of employees' capabilities and capacities for learning. Gamification of learning and development can help support an employee on their journey to mastery. Considerately designed, gamification can help an employee to develop their competence and allow risk taking and failure within a safe context. Examples of learning and training that are already very successfully using concepts of gamification include Health and Safety training, leadership development (e.g. Deloitte Leadership Academy).

Engaging

Gamification may provide ways to engage employees is ways not previously seen. "Games create an emotionally compelling context for the player and build on nostalgia, curiosity, visual appeal and employees' interest. They connect with the player emotionally and are an invitation into a world that is to be learned" (CIPD, 2012a). Utilising these concepts within the internal organisational environment may enhance engagement by appealing to the employees' sense of fun (which can take various forms – e.g. see Lazzaro, 2004). A simple example of a game-like tool aimed at getting people to further engage in a concept is the use of the profile completeness tool on LinkedIn. Within an organisational business environment it might be about the application of game elements (e.g. points for cross-departmental project teams) to encourage team-working and collaboration assuming those are key business imperatives.

Retaining

Gamification may aid retention of employees through the encouragement of engagement in activity that the employee considers to be meaningful (at least at that particular time). According to Burke (2014b) the key to sustainable gamification is to architect behaviour change "primarily with intrinsic rewards rather than extrinsic rewards - that we are able to sustain momentum by ensuring that, as people engage in a game, the challenge matches the skill level and we are able to provide people with meaningful incentives". This means understanding what meaningful intrinsic incentives are for those employees who are playing as opposed to more standardised traditional extrinsic rewards (for example cash prizes). While in gamification you are trying to focus on the intrinsic motivators for the longer term, that does not mean there is no place for extrinsic motivators. Extrinsic motivators, for example, are very good in the short term for getting people introduced to, and on-board with, the desired concept. Meaningfulness might mean the application of game-concepts for the completion of more routine, but essential, administrative tasks such as points and leader-boards for speedy chargeable time reporting for consultants. It could also mean gamification of a more transparent career development process with virtual mentoring and badges for activity completion and progression. On a more personal level, for some employees, a more meaningful longer term goal may relate to their own health and well-being (e.g. Mindbloom's Life Game).

The importance of design

It is the design of the gameful approaches that makes the game and the learning "meaningful" (CIPD, 2012a). Like many areas of HR the idea is only as good as its implementation. To introduce game concepts within an organisation, as HR we need to be aware of good game design. That does not necessarily mean the technical programming but understanding of game concepts. Bersin (2012) proposed that 'gamification' is built on six dimensions: progression, achievement and rewards, cascading information, countdown, levels and quest. We consider there to be 9Ps of gamification design as follows.

- **Purpose** – What is the purpose? What is the organisation trying to achieve and how can the application of game elements facilitate this achievement? How will there be alignment of player and business objectives and a contribution to bottom-line business results? In game terms what is the "quest", the goals, the rules, the challenges etc?
- **Personal motivation** – How can you tap into players' intrinsic motivators in order to make it meaningful? This may include design of game rewards and recognition such as points, badges, leader-boards and other incentives e.g. Badgeville for Yammer.
- **Performance** – What is successful performance e.g. are you aiming for behaviour change, skill development, performance management mastery? How will you give people feedback on their performance so that they know how well they are doing?
- **Progression** – How can you ensure an appropriate level of challenge (e.g. progression up levels potentially unlocking different "abilities" and content) for the purpose, the player and their potential?
- **Participation** – How can you engage employees in both the shorter and longer term? How can you maximise employee participation? A key aspect is making it fun. How can you make it fun for employees? In the terms of Nicole Lazzaro (2015) there are four keys which each unlock different emotions: Hard Fun (Fiero – in the moment personal triumph over adversity), Easy Fun (Curiosity), Serious Fun (Relaxation and excitement) and People Fun (Amusement). Lazzaro (2015) suggests that the most popular games appeal to at least three of these four types of fun.
- **Partnerships** – Do you need to design in mechanisms for collaboration and partnership working? Are sharing, team-working, mentoring and network development concepts that need to be designed into the game? Is a level of competition between players encouraged?
- **Potential** – How can you unlock employee potential e.g. performance, imagination, creativity and innovation? Can you design a structure where people can have the freedom to think outside the box, to create and innovate? Take a look at the game Minecraft for inspiration.
- **Player** - Do the players play as themselves? Can they play as other roles and avatars? Is the element of role playing encouraged? What are the demographics of your players and what motivates them to play? In terms of Andrzej Marczewski's (2014) User Types Hexad, are they Philanthropists, Disruptors, Free Spirits, Achievers, Players or Socialisers?
- **Politics –** Does gamification fit with the culture of the organisation? Is it supported by the leaders and stakeholders? Is the game compliant with legislation? Can you facilitate gamification being embedded within the organisation?

Some key considerations

A "step too far" or a "fad"

The term "gamification" itself may suggest that the concept is light-hearted at best and, at the other end, a fleeting or irrelevant fad. The current focus on gamification has been considered to be driven by "novelty and hype" (Burke, 2014b). For HR professionals, therefore, introducing this concept to an organisation or business may be a challenge or a "step too far". Understanding how the underpinning philosophies of gamification fit (or do not fit) with the organisation's unique business context will be important for HR professionals in understanding if it can be successfully embraced for employee and business advantage. It is not about "games" per se – it is about engaging and motivating people.

Inclusion/exclusion

It has been suggested by some that gamification will only appeal to certain personality types and so the concept could be organisationally divisive. Moreno-Ger et al (2009), however, suggest that game concepts (related to learning anyhow) actually encourage more individualised and tailored environments. This would suggest that the gamification could lead to more inclusivity rather than exclusivity - again it comes down to design.

Raising awareness

There appears to be rising awareness and understanding of the potential of gamification in HR. As applied to learning, for example, the CIPD's 2012 Learning and Training and Development survey (CIPD, 2012b) showed while approximately 12% of respondents had awareness of game-based learning and utilised it, 20% were aware but did not use it, 27% were aware but did not understand it, 39% were not aware of the concept and a further 2% did not see it as relevant. By the 2013 survey (CIPD, 2013), the concept of games was embedded within the survey as a potential method of e-learning supporting learning and talent development. Now, gamification is included within "emerging learning methods" on their publication on Learning Methods (CIPD, 2014). Whether or not game concepts are utilised within your business, for HR professionals having a general awareness of gamification can only be another string to the bow in the HR professional's toolkit.

Summary view

We believe that that gamification is much more than just a fad – that it can be a key part of an organisation's Strategic Human Resource Management approach. While gamification of HR may be in its early stages, an understanding of the opportunities that it offers can only be an advantage for HR professionals.

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January 2015