

IN THEORY

Does Gamified Training Get Results?

Yes—under certain conditions.



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Emerging Insights

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CORPORATE TRAINING ISN'T all fun and games, but maybe it should be. Most of us have (often grudgingly) used corporate learning systems. We skim through the 50-slide PowerPoint decks hoping to correctly guess enough answers to pass so that we can get back to our “real work.” Anything we learn may be forgotten by the time we receive our certificate of completion. But a new study shows that gamified training done right—lessons conducted carefully and over time, incorporating elements such as progression through challenges and levels, instant feedback, points, and competition—can significantly improve employee performance.

The research took place at the professional services firm KPMG. “Leaders

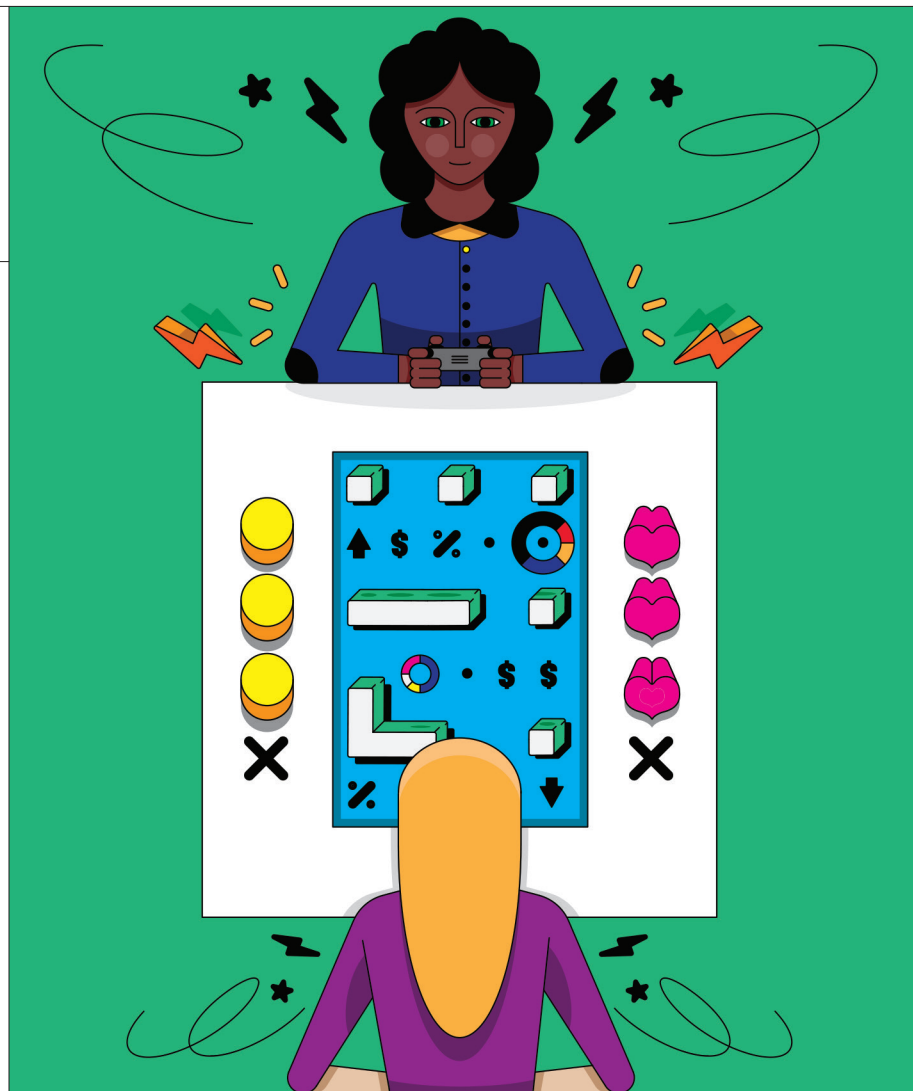


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had developed a gamified training tool for their employees, but they didn't want to just roll it out and wonder whether it worked," explains Ryan Buell, a professor at Harvard Business School and a coauthor of the study. "They were committed to rigorously testing the effects."

The study was conducted among client-facing employees in 24 offices participating in the training, which was rolled out at various times in a randomized order. Called KPMG Globberunner, the training was meant to deepen employees' awareness and understanding of the firm's products and services so that they could better identify business opportunities. Employees designed a character for themselves and "raced around the world" answering questions about the firm's offerings. A correct answer earned travel points that enabled players to progress. Employees could also complete mini-game challenges to earn additional points and unlock new levels. Participation was optional and open-ended; employees could engage with the platform as frequently and for as long as they liked.

To determine the training's effects, if any, on each office's performance, the researchers analyzed five measures on a monthly basis over 29 months: fees collected, the number of clients served, total business opportunities generated, opportunities generated from existing clients, and opportunities from new clients. To measure each office's use of the training, they looked at how much time employees spent playing Globberunner and the number of questions they answered. To assess employees' engagement with their jobs, they calculated



the share of people in each office who logged on to the platform at least once (indicating an interest in furthering their skills to help meet KPMG's goals) and how quickly they did so once the platform was available. Finally, they analyzed whether and how much leaders in each office played the game.

Analysis showed that the training helped increase fees collected by participating offices by more than 25%. The number of clients rose by up to 16%, and opportunities from new clients rose by as much as 22%. The more that employees played Globberunner, the more likely they were to improve performance in their jobs. Offices whose employees showed

a higher willingness to train increased fees collected by 16% more than others. Offices in which employees were more engaged with their jobs to begin with increased total business opportunities by 8% more, opportunities from existing clients by 10% more, and opportunities from new clients by 7% more.

Leader engagement with the training was also important. The more office leaders who registered to use the platform, the higher the employee sign-up rate. And that improved results. Offices whose leaders participated more than others increased fees collected by 19% more and grew the number of clients served by 7% more.



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The researchers offer three recommendations for using gamified training to improve employee performance.

Communicate enthusiasm to managers and employees. Before adopting gamified training, organizations should stress the importance of manager participation. Leaders who visibly play while in the office are more likely to boost employee participation and business results. “Prior research on digital gamified training platforms tells us that they can be seen as a distraction,” says Tatiana Sandino, a professor at Harvard Business School and a coauthor of the study. “But if the leader jumps in and signs on to the platform, it gives employees license to sign on as well.” It also encourages employees to see the training as more important than they otherwise might.

Employees should feel comfortable using the training at their desks during office hours, free from concerns that others might think they are goofing off. “The fact that it’s fun may make it seem less permissible,” Buell says. “Do I really get to play at work? The leader is modeling that not only is it OK to play; playing is a good thing.” In other words, playing should be viewed as a legitimate part of work, not as a break from it.

Measure outcomes officewide. Performance improvements at KPMG were greater in offices where many of the employees were already engaged with their jobs. But the firm’s results also suggest that organizations will see some level of improvement from everyone. “The time spent on training and the number of questions answered boosted performance even among employees

who had low engagement with their jobs, and regardless of whether their leaders used the training,” says Wei Cai, an assistant professor at Columbia Business School and another coauthor of the study.

However, those workers’ results probably won’t be as robust or obvious as improvements among more-engaged employees; such trainings aren’t a panacea for poor engagement. So organizations should set officewide performance goals rather than define success by how much the least-engaged employees improve.

Be patient. Don’t expect same-day or even same-week results. Most of the performance boosts at KPMG took hold in the second or third quarter after the training was introduced, and they gradually increased thereafter. This cumulative effect will most likely continue as employees improve their mastery of the lessons and their knowledge of the firm’s offerings. “When organizations implement this kind of system, they need to give it time,” Sandino says. “People may not be able to immediately apply all their new knowledge.”

KPMG’s employees continue to use and benefit from the training platform. Even though the study ended more than 18 months ago, “We continued to track their performance,” says Cai. “And we saw that the benefits persist long after the rollout.” ☺

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH “*Learning or Playing? The Effect of Gamified Training on Performance*,” by Ryan W. Buell, Wei Cai, and Tatiana Sandino (working paper)

IN PRACTICE

“Rote Training Is Boring—but Games Are the Opposite of Boring”

Christian Gossan, a director at the advisory firm KPMG Australia, led the creation of the gamified training platform described in the accompanying article. He recently spoke with HBR about KPMG’s experience with this learning approach. Edited excerpts of the conversation follow.

What problem was gamified training meant to solve?

We have numerous service lines, so we needed to deepen employees’ understanding of all our offerings and capabilities. Rote training is boring—but games are the opposite of boring. And their interactive nature means that people can’t just click through to completion. We started with a pilot for employees in our Australian offices. Australians are mad for sport, so we used an athletics-themed platform. When we decided to go global with the approach, we made a more universally appealing one called KPMG Globerunner, which is now used by employees in 100

countries. People race around the world by answering questions and completing challenges, and each year the top 10 scorers in every country participate in a global tournament. The impact on sales has been substantial, and we believe Globberunner has helped with employee engagement too.

What does a KPMG game look like?

Well, it's never going to be confused with *Grand Theft Auto*! But we knew that the digital trainings couldn't look amateurish if we wanted people to take them seriously, so we used expert developers. We stayed away from animated graphics, which quickly become dated. You can focus too much on glossy design and mechanics, though. You also need to ensure the participation of users.

How do you persuade employees to play?

First, make sure the experience is fun! Most employees—83% of them—say they enjoy playing Globberunner. Second, emphasize that it's a time-efficient way for people to improve in their roles. Third, be aware of cultural considerations. For instance, gambling elements of any kind are prohibited in some countries. Finally, avoid a male bias, which is a real risk with game design. We always include female designers.

How can leaders help?

It's important that they are seen engaging with the trainings themselves. Otherwise, junior employees might worry about being perceived as shirking if they play while at work. Some of our CEOs have personally

rolled out the platforms in their member firms, and that's led to some great interactions between our youngest employees and our most-senior ones.

Is there any risk of abuse?

You do need to monitor for that. Each year a small number of employees—about 1 in 10,000—become compulsive users, and for their sake as well as the firm's, we need to intervene.

Do you have any “cheat codes” for organizations that want to try gamified training?

Collect data on people's play so that you can improve the user experience. Don't make the training only about the firm; think about the why, not just the what. We've modified Globberunner to include content about purpose—things that relate not just to our service offerings but also to the value they bring to clients, along

with elements to help our people discover their personal purpose. And don't be afraid to expand. We have another gamified training that educates employees about specific clients and prospects. We often include it in proposals to prospects to demonstrate our commitment should they sign with us. Twenty years ago it would have been hard to imagine that a game-like experience could help us win business—but here we are. ☺



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