in focus

Learning Can Be Fun

In Focus is a section of customized content that you'll find quarterly in *TD*. ATD members can select their topic of choice—learning technologies, instructional design, measurement and evaluation, or training delivery—at https://emailprofile .td.org/my#tdmag.

ALSO IN THIS SECTION
69 Open the Door on Learning Management Systems
By Brian Carlson
Choosing the right underlying technology for your LMS can ensure a future-proof training program.

Transition to a gamification culture in four steps.

BY KELLI MACIVER

*G*amification—is it a catchy buzzword, a current trend, or a learning strategy that is here to stay?

While the answer is unclear, I do know that talent development professionals have struggled with individuals' continued engagement with online learning. Our strategy has been to use heavily built-out e-learning courses that take people about 30 minutes to an hour to complete. There is no reward when they finish, other than checking a box on their compliance record.

Most of us have mandatory training. What an exciting carrot we dangle: "Hey, you have to take this." But we also have nonmandatory learning available, such as some of our top performers sharing their wisdom, motivational videos on mindset and growth, even a CEO speaking directly to new hires. But after our learners have checked that compliance box, they're gone.

Learners do not want to come back to the learning platform, even if we have shown it will increase their productivity. That's not a winning learning strategy. Lengthy e-learning courses are losing the hearts and minds of our learner base, mostly Millennials with a strong oncoming of Gen Z. Enter gamification.

Gamification is the application of game playing (like point scoring and competition with others) to areas of activity, in our case, learning. I remember during my childhood when I could sit in front of an Atari 2600 and play *Space Invaders* for hours. The element of competition to beat my previous score kept me locked to that console for much longer than my mother liked. And as I grew up, I upgraded to a Sega Genesis, because it was the newest game console on the block. Regardless of the game system, the element of gaming always kept me coming back. And now, games on our phones—think of *Angry Birds* or *Candy Crush*—are a part of everyday life. They are everywhere.

Why can't we apply that fun atmosphere to something that isn't always as fun? In a nutshell, gamification makes learning more enjoyable. And that's exactly what we need to increase learner engagement.

At Cydcor, the L&D team developed four steps to help us effectively shift from a low-engagement learning strategy to the beginnings of implementing gamification in our learning culture. For the record, we aren't gamification experts. We're learning as we go and making a ton of mistakes. That's one of the best ways to learn. Our goal is to change the learning engagement level at our company, and we are betting that gamification is the answer. If you find yourself in a similar need to increase engagement and retention through gamification, these four steps may give you a head start.

⭐ Step 1: Admit you have a problem

Cydcor is an outsourced sales company that helps clients acquire and retain customers. Its network of independent, professional sales representatives sells products and services to more than 5,000 new customers each business day. And a large percentage of the sales reps are Millennials. For them to sell clients' products and services, they need to complete mandatory compliance training learning about those products and services as well as the company's systems. This training is 100 percent asynchronous e-learning, and after answering a series of knowledge check questions correctly, they are granted access to the sales portal.

Our L&D team started by recognizing that our learning wasn't working for our target audience, and we were forcing engagement with our learning. By that, individuals could not sell on the platform until they completed the mandatory training. Would the world end if they didn't take this mandatory training? No, the system is so intuitive that, just like most order-placement websites, they could figure it out and it wouldn't let them pass go without entering correct information.

Forcing engagement is not a great way to get Millennials to learn. We saw that our return rate after learners completed mandatory training was just 9 percent. In other words, if 100 people took mandatory

training, only nine came back to consume any of our nonmandatory training. If we wanted to make any impact on the organization, we needed to raise that number. And being able to measure it and recognize it as a problem was our first step.

How is engagement with your online learning? Do you have a way to measure it that is meaningful to your organization? If you aren't sure of either of those, it's OK. Recognize you may have an issue and get to work on fixing it.

Step 2: Get educated

The L&D team had never heard of gamification. So, we googled it and did research to bring ourselves up to speed. A 2014 Talent LMS survey found that:

- Eighty-seven percent of employees agree that gamification makes them more productive.
- Eighty-five percent of employees would spend more time on software that was gamified.
- Ninety percent of employees over 45 years old agree that gamification would help them get better results at work.

If you are going to be the champion of gamification in your organization, you must be able to speak to it. With nine people, our L&D department, like many, is small but mighty. We spread out and learned as much as we could about gamification. I became certified as a Gamification Apprentice by Sententia Gamification. And the team read books like *Business Gamification for Dummies* by Kris Duggan and Kate Shoup and *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction: Game-Based Methods and Strategies for Training and Education* by Karl M. Kapp

As much research as we did or as many classes as we took, we had never implemented a gamification strategy. In our gut, we felt this could be a game changer. If we could get learners engaged with our content, it could really affect our bottom line. So, we needed to do this right.

Part of educating ourselves meant recruiting some talent who has already walked this path. There was no question we would benefit from recruiting a consultant who had experience with this. The consultant we found brought the needed experience and credibility to this new strategy to move us to step 3. Flash forward a few months, as we progressed through this process, our need for prior experience became so evident that we brought the consultant on full time to execute on the strategy.

Step 3: Get executive buy-in

Our strategy was focused on increasing engagement with our learning base. Gamification was our big headline, but there were other important factors to support this. One was pitching gamification to our executives and demonstrating that the return would outweigh the investment.

- Microlearning: We have long e-learning courses where everything is packaged all together in a SCORM file. It's difficult for learners to zero in on the one piece of knowledge they need at the time they need it. We suggested unpacking those modules and breaking them into small chunks of microlearning.
- Searchability: By converting our training to microlearning, we would be able to implement a search functionality so learners could type in the topic they want to learn about and it would appear before them on the screen.
- Gamification: What would drive a sales force comprised of Millennials to revisit a learning platform repeatedly? The pure joy of learning? Well, that wasn't happening. But games, points, leaderboards, and competition were our bet to drive repeat visits.

Gamification makes learning more enjoyable. And that's exactly what we need to increase learner engagement.

- The platform itself: Our existing learning management system wouldn't allow us to execute on those three elements, so we needed to find a new LMS or build upon our existing one to give us this functionality. And this is where the big ask was, because a new platform meant spending money. We looked far and wide for two components: low implementation cost and a similar yearly licensing fee.

One individual, department, or division wouldn't change the entire course of our learning future—we needed the entire executive team to buy into this vision. With a compelling case that, in theory, would increase key performance indicators through learning, we shopped this gamification strategy to the executive team individually.

Why not just gather them all in a room and present our brilliant strategy? First, we already established that we didn't have all of the answers. We needed the valuable input from people who think differently and will ask tough questions. The goal was not only getting their buy-in but making sure our strategy was sound and that we were covering all bases before charging forward.

These individual meetings enabled us to uncover any concerns or fears the executive team had, which were mostly around changing behavior and increased cost. This gave us an opportunity to hear the concerns early and work through them thoughtfully. This way, when we presented a change in strategy to the full team, each of them had already seen this information a few times. There were no surprises—and they contributed. This was now a team effort.

It may not be a quick and easy process. For us, this took about a year. And you may encounter resistance. But to make a change this significant, it is vital to have the entire team at the top singing the gamification song with you.

⭐ Step 4: Test it out

It's all been theory up until this point. Like any good scientist, now we needed to attempt to prove it. We created a proof of concept in a small group within our learner base. We worked with a company that provided gamification software and created an experiment that tested our theory: Gamification increases learner engagement. Here's how we approached this:

- Our proof of concept consisted of a small sample of our learning focused on sales fundamentals; instead of cumbersome e-learning courses, we broke everything into microlearning videos.
- We selected around 50 top-performing sales reps in top-performing offices to serve as our learners.
- We invited them to participate by mailing them a top secret envelope with an exclusive invitation; they were now part of an elite group.
- The proof of concept ran for a finite amount of time. In our case, we needed two weeks to test our theory.
- We started the proof of concept without a lot of fanfare, but on the fourth day announced something simple—a prize. After the announcement, engagement went into hyperdrive.
- We also introduced hidden points. As users completed the learning, they discovered that they could earn additional points by sharing their knowledge and uploading user-generated content into the system.
- On the final day, a surprise announcement of a new learning quest drove the highest level of engagement. New learning—asking them to come back with no incentive other than points—drove the highest level of engagement in the entire proof of concept.

We have some initial proof that, in our organization, gamification increases learner engagement. Something as simple as earning points is driving the behavior we want. And we wouldn't have gotten here if we didn't measure and recognize that we had an engagement problem in the first place.

⭐ Lessons learned

Consider these lessons we learned along the way, so you don't have to discover them the hard way.

- Changing behavior requires early buy-in from key stakeholders.
- As you dig into implementation scope with a new LMS, costs can increase and require you to go back to the drawing board to stay within your budget.
- Converting an existing curriculum that is in SCORM format takes longer than we thought. We have about four hours of total learning in SCORM, and it will take about six months to convert it all to microlearning.

Learning and making mistakes along the way is important for growth. We are at the beginning of this journey. We have merely turned the wheel on the ship that is our learning strategy. Our trajectory has changed, and we're charting a new course that we haven't sailed yet. I fully expect as we embark on our new gamification strategy, there will be loads of learning along the way.

Kelli MacIver is the director of L&D at Cydcor; kmaciver@cydcor.com.

td

talent development

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!