Work is not a game

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As a very modern manager and reader of RTM, you know that your business teams would benefit from more diverse, timely, and expert knowledge than they could possibly have internally (Spencer 2013). So you’ve tried using social media methods (either within the company or outside of it, or both), but frankly, not that many people seem to care. There’s a flurry of activity after each email announcement of a new challenge, but it dies out quickly. You’ve heard about gamification, a fast and easy way to get more involvement that seems too good to be true. But what is it? How can you use it? Should you?

Gamification is the application of some of the attributes of video games (points, badges, and leaderboards) to a voluntary business process to encourage participation. When done thoughtfully and in moderation, it may be helpful. However, it is not a substitute for real, sustainable motivation—and in some cases, it may actually be demotivating. Done poorly or without thought, gamification can promote selfish and competitive behavior over cooperation and generate antipathy or perceptions of unfairness among the low-participating majority. And overdone, the game motivators may distract from the real business purpose of the project and drive unwanted behavior.

The Immutable Pattern of Voluntary Participation

Because gamification is intended to increase participation, it’s important to note at the outset the completely different signatures of mandatory versus voluntary participation. In a traditional, appointed business team, we generally expect everyone to contribute comparably, each according to his or her relevant knowledge: there should be no total slackers, and neither should one or two individuals dominate. However, voluntary online forums have an entirely different signature—a long tail of participation, in which a few people contribute many times and a very large number contribute just once or twice or not at all. This holds true whenever participation is voluntary, in every industry, at every scale (Spencer and Woods 2010; Spencer 2012).

The important thing to note is that this long-tail pattern is normal and universal. About 75 percent of content in such a forum will come from those who contribute just one, two, or three times. There is nothing wrong with this pattern, and people are not being lazy: in fact they’re exercising a choice over where to spend their limited time and attention. In other words, participation in voluntary forums can’t be judged by the same standards
applied to conscripted teams. The pattern is intrinsic, and it doesn’t matter if the motivation is altruistic or tangible: note that participation in Innocentive, whose challenges have typical payouts in the thousands of dollars, has the same long-tail form as altruistic challenges (Spencer 2012). This pattern will not be changed by gamification.

Motivation, Demotivation, and Engagement

In the century since Frederick Taylor, Henry Ford, and Alfred Sloan invented the modern corporation, there has been an active research-driven literature about motivation at work; researchers have generated considerable consensus around what motivates us. Herzberg (1987) and the huge Gallup studies on engagement (see Buckingham and Coffman 1999; Coffman and Gonzales-Molina 2002) capture the key points:

• Motivating factors and demotivating factors are different from each other. For knowledge workers, for instance, money is not a strong motivator but, if it is perceived to be given unfairly, it can be a strong demotivator.

• Perceived unfairness in policies and procedures is strongly demotivating. While fairness (or its lack) is not part of traditional economics models, it is recognized as a powerful force that may override economics in decision making (Kahneman 2011, 308).

• The strongest motivator for knowledge workers is the belief that one’s contributions matter, that they make a difference and serve a useful purpose.

Daniel Pink’s (2009) comprehensive review of motivation reinforces this, concluding that rote work may be motivated by tangible rewards but knowledge work is driven by the desire for autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Teresa Amabile’s studies of creativity find that explicit rewards are often demotivating, while real motivation arises from intrinsic factors like curiosity, satisfaction, and positive challenge.

The trappings of gamification – overlaying work with a competitive process measured by badges and leaderboards – is notably absent from this literature. One cannot claim that it is absent because it is a new concept; competitive sports, war, and professional armies (all with plenty of badges and trophies) have been part of human culture for thousands of years. Therefore, either the trappings of games have never been tried in business (which seems unlikely), or this absence from a huge body of research suggests that when it’s been tried, it has not been useful or sustained.
In addition to this notable absence there are clear arguments against gamification—or at least for considerable caution in applying it:

- It promotes competition and individual achievement while complex business problems need cooperation and rare knowledge (Spencer 2013). This is the single major reason why gamification is a risky approach: it drives behavior opposite to what nearly every business sponsor would want. Perhaps you can design a system that truly rewards cooperative behavior, but this adds complexity, and gamification’s simplicity is one of the attractions in the first place.

- It breeds perceptions of unfairness and selfishness. Most content in voluntary systems comes from people who participate only a handful of times. They might be happy to try to help with the business project, but also know that they have no chance to climb the leaderboard or get a badge. They may feel that the top badge earners are devoting time to the game itself rather than to their jobs or even the actual goal of the gamified project. False badges and awards are powerfully demotivating to everyone (Deming 2000, 275). Because these low-participating people are the vast majority, the source of most content, and arguably the better problem solvers (those introverts), it is extremely risky to demotivate them. If this happens, it is very difficult to diagnose or repair because they go silent: they will simply ignore future announcements.

A related problem is that there are often individuals who participate a great deal solely to promote the process itself. It is a best practice to have the business sponsor and innovation program team add encouraging comments throughout a challenge (Dahl et al. 2011). This behavior tends to put them at the tops of leaderboards, which others may see as unfair or cliquey.

- People are different and many will not respond to gamification. There is good experimental literature (Croson and Gneezy 2009; Niederle and Vesterlund 2013) that given a choice, women are two-fold less likely than men to participate in a competitive situation. Susan Cain’s recent book Quiet points out that introverts, who derive their energy from thought and solitude and tend to shun the limelight, are more innovative and better problem solvers than their extroverted counterparts who derive energy from social approval. Women constitute half the workforce (BLS Reports 2013) and introverts one-third to one-half of the population (Cain 2012). This suggests that gamification is most effective with extroverted men, that third of your audience whom you probably already engage.
Conclusions

If gamification fits with your culture, if you understand its risks and the limits of its rewards, and if you understand whom you’re likely to reach with it, it may be worth trying. Don’t, however, expect it to change the established patterns of forum participation, and don’t expect it to deliver a diverse set of participants. Do experiment; no two business cultures are quite the same. But do so in a way that’s reversible and be alert to any of the pitfalls that may arise.

Finally, gamification cannot and should not substitute for truly interesting, important, and challenging business content. Launching an online challenge without a clear and serious problem to solve will trivialize the entire program and can irreversibly degrade an entire innovation program. Gamification may augment a good program, but it cannot fix ill-conceived or low-value challenges.

References


