

How 'gamification' can improve family education and engagement

BY HOLLY ISDALE

Julie Andrews, playing the title role in the film *Mary Poppins*, sang: *"In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun. You find the fun and, snap, the job's a game."* As parents have known for generations, projects that seem like fun get accomplished more quickly, and more people want to participate.

Our school and work lives can be compared to a grandly complex video game. We strive to complete a sequence of challenges or quests. When we "level up," we receive a passing grade or a job promotion. At the end of a series of challenges, we might garner a badge (a diploma) or a prize (a new title or a year-end bonus). This is perhaps an oversimplification, but games and rewards are heavily embedded in our social fabric and hard-wired into our psyche as a way to engage, motivate and teach.

Family businesses spend an extraordinary amount of time and capital (financial, human and intellectual) on skill building and education within the family system. Rising members of the family system must master many different skills. Some of these skills can be taught in a classroom or online, but others must be supplemented with experiential learning.

With families increasingly scattered across the globe, family leaders must find a way to entice all generations to work cohesively to further their common interests. Games, at their core, are among society's most powerful forms of communication and entertainment. Incorporating games into the educational process may be a way to increase engagement and foster community across generations and continents.

Researchers have found that three basic psychological needs can be met



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through games. First, there is the desire to seek control or gain mastery over a situation. We like to feel that we are succeeding and gaining competence. Next is the concept of "autonomy," or the desire for control over our actions. We don't like to be manipulated. Finally, there is the need for "relatedness." We want to matter to others and to contribute to society.

The power of games

The business world is aware of the psychological power of games. Companies have been adding games and prizes to their marketing and customer loyalty programs for years—consider S&H Green Stamps, prizes in Cracker Jack boxes and airline frequent-flyer programs. Today, game elements are increasingly being incorporated into workplace learning and internal employee functions.

The use of games—or, rather, the application of game elements to non-game contexts—has been referred to as the "gamification" of the workplace. In laymen's terms, this means using the elements we associate with games as motivational tools.

Points are a basic element of game design and can provide a context for measuring performance. Badges work to showcase larger accomplishments, such as completing a series of tasks or mastering a new skill. They are a visual reminder of our achievements. Leaderboards can awaken participants' competitive instincts or, in a team situation, can create a sense of community.

Technological enhancements

Game elements become even more powerful when augmented with technology. Incorporating real-time data analytics, mobile or cloud-based platforms, or social media elements can foster communication and a sense of play. Just as traditional games have been used for millennia to bring friends together, gaming in a virtual environment unites large groups of people.

Corporations have used digital games as a way to build and solidify brand loyalty for the last two decades, as the Internet became a more pervasive means of customer interaction. In fact, some social media firms are based entirely on game-playing to drive business revenues (think FourSquare).

Companies are now using games to motivate and engage employees, sometimes for learning initiatives but also to stimulate innovation and enhance teamwork.

The Gartner research firm estimated that some 70% of companies would use gamification techniques for at least one business process by 2014. Deloitte estimated that revenues from gamification initiatives would grow to more than \$2.8 billion by 2016. These methods are used in applications such as FitBit and Salesforce.com, as well as the badges and points on almost every social media platform.

The gamification of family education

Family enterprises are beginning to incorporate elements of games into their social media communication and family portals. “Gamifying” your family website does not need to be overly high-tech or very expensive in order to be effective. One family, for example, populated their dedicated private Facebook page with simple quizzes about current events related to the family’s operating business (such as news articles on deals within the industry and market trends affecting profitability), tracking responses using a leaderboard on the page.

Another family used a shared Evernote library, supplemented with emailed Survey Monkey questionnaires, as a way to share news articles and generate discussions among family members on topics of interest, especially leading up to shareholder weekends. At family reunions, the leading scorers on surveys and those publishing articles to the shared libraries were acknowledged for their participation and success through prizes and pins that they proudly displayed throughout the weekend. While a minor activity, this simple game enabled the younger generation to be recognized at a broader family function; provided a low-cost, yet fun, educational tool to encourage discussion about the impact of broader market forces on the operating business; and challenged other family members to begin engaging more in the online community that had developed. The families noticed that the content of the Facebook posts began to shift from chatty updates on family news to links to relevant articles. Essentially, they had “crowdsourced” their family educational effort across the entire family system.

Yet another family circulated Survey Monkey quizzes and news articles on their SharePoint sites, coupled with emailed leaderboards comparing participants’ performance on the quizzes and badges awarded for reading and commenting on news articles. They found that these innovations not only increased family participation broadly but also uncovered a desire for online learning. In response, they began enrolling family members in several Coursera and Khan Academy classes aimed at bolstering financial acumen. Over time, they developed a database of materials from these courses and posted it

on the family website. By tasking “rising leaders” with the job of maintaining the database (and reviewing the online content), they were able to provide leadership opportunities to family members who did not yet have enough experience to take on more “traditional” leadership roles in the family office and business.

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Other families have begun to explore the gamification of their family history or business information to educate and engage younger members. In essence, they are moving from an external piecemeal approach, using Survey Monkey quizzes and manual leaderboards, to exploring formal online educational tools. Families with very large shareholder groups are starting to work with software developers, like Bunchball and others in the gamification space, to create a more robust online educational programming tool incorporating quests and games.

Many financial advisers and consultants are moving to the gamification space as well, developing more robust suites of tools to engage younger family members. Reading pages of family history or poring through financial statements is certainly more fun when you are competing with cousins for points or prestige factors.

While there are several firms devoted to gamifying business processes, the application of this trend to the family business arena is still in its nascent stages. Proposals to add gamification elements to an existing database of family educational material can be pricey if proper parameters for the project are not given to the technology team but often are reasonable in the context of a shareholder budget. However, even adding basic gamification elements to the usual tools employed in consulting or family educational events can have a profound impact collaboration and engagement.

Perhaps your family should consider adding gamification elements to your annual family retreats and educational symposia. If you do, you may find that your cousins who are glued to their smartphones are not playing on their own—they’re comparing pieces of family memorabilia they found during the scavenger hunt or studying the family firm’s balance sheets. You never know where games may take you!

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