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## Playing Games at Work

*HR leaders who want to add "gamification" techniques to their programs need to begin by focusing on their objectives, which are usually based on company goals. One key to using it effectively is to put layers on top of what already exists.*

By Carol Harnett



I love to play games -- something that continues to surprise my mom. She thought I outgrew this fascination.

As a child, when I wasn't swimming, cycling or playing kickball, I sought out board-game partners. I knew Mom was good for one -- maybe two -- games of Candy Land or Chutes and Ladders before calling it quits. But my next-door neighbors challenged themselves with games of all kinds and adopted me into their circle.

My dad engaged in gaming when my sister and I convinced him to buy an Atari 2600 game console. He was a good Pac-Man opponent, much to my mom's chagrin.

Today, my gaming needs are met by playing Plants vs. Zombies with my 5- and 8-year old nephews, as well as through the more-than-300 benefits and health-related websites and mobile applications I've tested for developers.

HR executives are becoming interested in game playing -- or what is being called "**gamification**" -- according to [Vlad Gyster](#) -- as a way to enable employee behaviors that improve human capital.

HR leaders who apply game techniques are largely using them in employee benefits and wellness communications, but opportunities also exist to address company-revenue-impacting behaviors, such as safety and key business-operations activities.

Gyster is the CEO and co-founder of Boston-based [H Engage](#) -- a company that helps HR leaders involve their workers in initiatives by using social-networking science, mobile technologies and game mechanics.

Adam Wootton, director of social media and games at Towers Watson, says gamification is picking up speed because people are spending more time playing

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games. [Wootton](#) indicates the average person plays eight hours of games a month -- a number that nearly coincides with the [average number of hours a Facebook user spends](#) on the social-networking site every 30 days.

[Chris Wasden](#), PricewaterhouseCoopers' global healthcare-innovation leader, says employees' personal behaviors are driving employers toward a more active approach to technology -- something companies resisted in the past.

One way to consider the use of social and gamification techniques in HR is to appreciate how Gyster views his company.

"When we started H Engage, we realized that apps and games are tactics," he says, "and that we were actually a data company, which created engagement records about how people consumed a message or [took some kind of action]."

Once Gyster understood his company was a data repository, he was able to discern how to socialize and gamify the whole HR system.

The first place HR leaders -- who want to add game techniques to their programs -- need to begin is to focus on their objectives, which are usually based on company goals. For example, the organization may want to maintain or drive down healthcare costs.

From there, an analysis of company data leads to an understanding of the main drivers of cost, the behaviors the company wants to incentivize, and the measures for success.

The application of game mechanics then becomes based more on HR priorities, than communication vehicles.

One key to employing gamification is to put layers on top of what already exists. If print materials work as part of HR's communication strategy, then an employer can use game mechanics to make it more interactive. For example, an employee can text information from the material and earn points or win a prize.

"An employee-engagement app can include print, texting, online sites or mobile apps," Gyster says. "I love apps but there are more basic things an employer can do before driving employees there."

Wootton believes games delivered through apps can be an effective approach to socialization and behavior change. He also believes that successful games often abide by three parameters: they keep score, declare a winner and allow the player to have fun.

Gyster adds that games designed to foster behavior change don't always have to produce a winner. Instead, these games can deliver behavioral momentum and "give you a little moment of delight."

Wasden, whose team at PwC has evaluated more than 150 health-related apps, believes there are six principles associated with an effective mobile application.

1. The app integrates with the user's lifestyle and workflow.
2. It is interoperable with other systems such as accelerometers, and wireless scales and blood-pressure cuffs.
3. The user receives intelligent information -- based upon the recorded

data -- that suggests behaviors to maintain or change.

4. The app's socialization feature goes beyond Twitter and Facebook posts. It allows the user to share information with people of his or her choosing, including spouse, family and friends.
5. The app measures outcomes that are important to the user.
6. The app is engaging and brings the user back again and again.

My colleague and friend, [Fran Melmed](#) -- an employee-workplace-wellness consultant at Philadelphia-based Context Communication Consulting -- recently unveiled an employee-targeted health app called [Hotseat](#) to strong early reviews. Melmed designed the app to respond to a growing phenomenon called the "[sitting disease](#)," where too much time spent seated increases mortality risk -- regardless of the amount of time spent doing leisure-time physical activity.

Hotseat works with an employee's iPhone calendar feature to slot in two-minute sit-free breaks throughout the day. Employees can also engage in single, multiplayer or cooperative games. Activity summaries are available for employers on an aggregate level and employees on an individual basis.

HR executives who want a low-risk way to test a health app with their employees can apply to be part of the [Hotseat pilot](#).

For me, I derive a great sense of satisfaction as I watch employers discover the power of game playing in motivating employees to absorb content and take action.

Now, if I could just get my mother to play along with me.

*Carol Harnett is a widely respected consultant, speaker, writer and trendspotter in the fields of employee benefits, health and productivity management, health and performance innovation, and value-based health. Follow her on Twitter via [@carolharnett](#) and on her video blog, [The Work.Love.Play.Daily](#).*

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