

GETTING GAMIFICATION RIGHT

22 BEST PRACTICES

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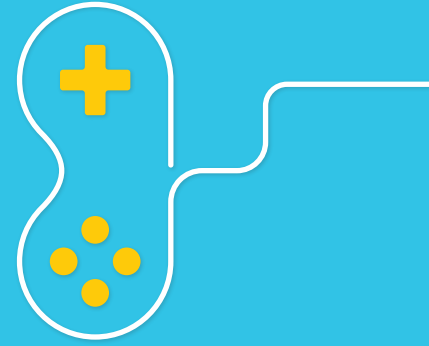
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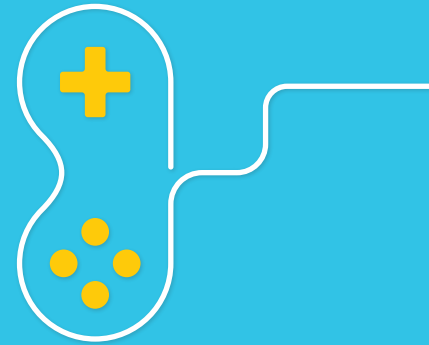
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Best Practices



Gamification burst onto the scene several years ago, capturing the imagination and attention of many in the learning and development field. Sensing a hot new trend, designers scrambled to add gamified elements to learning platforms, and pioneering companies rushed to implement the new strategy in the workplace.

Today, many different enterprises across a wide swath of industries have embraced gamification and are leveraging it with varying degrees of success. Since designing and launching an effective gamification program often represents a significant investment of time and money, designers and firms are both committed to getting it right. In this eBook, L&D professionals and respected industry leaders share 22 best practices.

1. Clearly identify goals before diving in

Often, a company will embark upon a gamification strategy without giving serious consideration to what it wants to accomplish. Before jumping aboard the game train, industry expert [Karl Kapp](#) recommends thinking carefully about the desired outcomes.

"If success is not defined before the initiative, it is hard to know if, or when, success is achieved," he writes in [ATD's Learning Technologies Blog](#).

The definition of success will vary among organizations, and even among divisions within the same organization. For this reason, it is crucial for stakeholders to agree in advance on how they will evaluate their gamification initiatives. Will an initiative be considered a success if it attracts the attention of a certain percentage of the workforce or engages a defined number of users? Must it demonstrate measurable business results? Take the time to thoroughly examine this before diving in.

2. Tie gamification to business needs

Kapp believes that, like all training and learning initiatives, gamification should be tied directly to business needs. "You need to make sure that you are legitimately moving the needle on business needs and not just using gamification as a crutch to support content that is meaningless to the organization or individual," he writes.

While games may present entertaining diversions for employees, the primary purpose for introducing them in the workplace should be to drive positive change. L&D executives should consider the types of behavioral change they want to elicit within their organizations and then leverage gamification to help achieve those goals.

In addition to being fun, gamification yields valuable data. This information should also correspond to business needs. Experts advise corporate learning professionals to establish clear metrics to help them effectively collect, measure, and analyze the data garnered through their gamification initiatives.

3. Understand the psychology

One reason gamification is respected as a learning strategy is that it is rooted in principles of cognitive psychology, particularly spaced retrieval and retrieval practice. B. Price Kerfoot, MD, an associate professor of surgery at Harvard Medical School and research scientist, [tells CLO Advisor](#): “The [spacing effect](#) refers to the finding that information, when delivered in small chunks that are repeated over spaced intervals of time, can significantly improve the acquisition and retention of knowledge.” He goes on to add, “The [testing effect](#) (termed ‘retrieval practice’ in the research literature) refers to the finding that information presented in a test format causes the information to become encoded in such a way that long-term retention dramatically improves.” Gamification harnesses the power of both.

In the interview, Kerfoot explains how [Qstream](#), a vendor specializing in sales productivity solutions, designs online education around the spacing and testing effects, adding game mechanics and an adaptive algorithm to stimulate personalized learning. Kerfoot, who serves on the Qstream board of directors, has overseen more than 20 clinical trials that demonstrate how the company’s methodology “can significantly improve long-term learning and drive behavioral change,” he says.

4. Keep the game design simple

Complexity is an enemy when developing gamification platforms. Instructional designers should consciously keep all game mechanics simple. The process of scoring and winning should be transparent, and every action should be clearly linked to an outcome.

To avoid frustration, make sure learners are aware of what they need to do in order to advance in a game. If possible, provide a tutorial level or link to assist confused learners. This will help assure that they stay in the game. In addition, make sure that players can easily check their scores or positions.

5. Leaderboards play an important role

Leaderboards bestow a sense of status and allow users to compare themselves to other players. This can motivate players because people like to be recognized for their achievements.

In a 2013 eLearning Guild white paper titled [Gamification, Games, and Learning: What Managers and Practitioners Need to Know](#), industry expert Brenda Enders discusses the value of leaderboards. She advises firms to “make sure the leaderboard displays the behaviors and activities that are most important to reaching your learning program’s goals.”

According to Enders, a leaderboard should be simple, allowing players to quickly determine their ranking. It should boast a search function that permits users to easily find other players.

Ideally, the leaderboard should refresh immediately. If not, firms should clearly communicate the updating frequency. Clearing the leaderboard on a weekly or monthly basis allows all players to start anew and mitigates the problem of one individual dominating the board for long periods of time. Some companies utilize a series of leaderboards, such as regional or team leaderboards, in addition to individual ones.

6. But beware of leaderboard limitations

While leaderboards can be motivating, they can also be demotivating. Those who dislike competition may find the concept of a leaderboard off-putting or intimidating, and those ranked near the bottom of a leaderboard can become discouraged or demoralized.

[Bunchball](#), a vendor that helps companies launch gamification solutions, has some suggestions to improve leaderboards. In a white paper titled *Winning with Gamification: Tips from the Expert's Playbook*, Bunchball recommends structuring the leaderboard by department or territory in order to allow individuals to contribute to company goals as part of a team.

"When you get users to compete and collaborate as part of something bigger, it increases the stakes, adds another level of accountability, and is a dynamic motivator," they write. "In a best-practice implementation, a user's individual achievement should be rolled up under the group or team's success and highlighted in inter- and intragroup leaderboards and newsfeeds."

Another issue is that certain employees may be reluctant to publicly broadcast their personal successes or failures on a leaderboard. To encourage greater participation among individuals who dislike the notion of having their actual name displayed on a leaderboard, assign numbers or allow employees to devise code names.

7. Permit personalization

Shy employees are not the only ones who may gravitate toward code names. Many employees today enjoy putting a personal stamp on their virtual selves. Companies are advised to allow workers to develop and embellish digital personas.

[Growth Engineering](#) is a UK-based vendor that embraces a superhero theme. Managing director Juliette Denny notes that permitting learners to create their own avatars or digital characters engages users and encourages them to personalize their experience. It also provides the anonymity that some workers crave.

8. Encourage the freedom to fail

In most corporate situations, failure is frowned upon. Yet with game-based learning, failure is viewed favorably. Repeatedly failing at a game allows a player to continually review information and reinforce their knowledge. This can motivate them to rethink existing methodologies, re-evaluate their approach, and attempt a new or different approach.

In an [article for *Learning Solutions Magazine*](#), Kapil Bhasin recommends that game designers elevate "freedom to fail" interactions in their games. When a learner fails on the first attempt, he advises providing positive instructional feedback and the opportunity to try again. After all, the goal is for a user to master the content, and failure should be part of the game.

9. Build in continuous feedback

When creating a game, instructional designers should provide players with continuous feedback and the message that they are heading in the correct direction. In their book *Gamification by Design: Implementing Game Mechanics in Web and Mobile Apps*, Gabe Zichermann and Christopher Cunningham offer some useful suggestions for developers.

They recommend breaking the story arc into small, achievable units by employing game levels or other progress mechanics. They suggest using progress indicators, in the form of a progress bar or other percentage-completion indicator, to show learners how far along they are in each task.

When learners earn awards or badges, Zichermann and Cunningham advise alerting them (and perhaps others) of the accomplishment—in real time. Finally, they maintain that it is important to reward mastery of the material, as opposed to memorization of it.

10. Add elements to delight or surprise users

Players become disengaged when a game gets repetitious. Prevent boredom by varying the length, difficulty, and completion time of the challenges. Time constraints can generate a sense of urgency and encourage immediacy.

To keep players coming back, add unexpected elements to the game design. According to Zichermann and Cunningham, this could come in the form of unannounced rewards, or the ability to gift points to other players.

[Yu-kai Chou](#), a California-based gamification thought leader and consultant, recommends adding gamified elements to training programs that have grown stale, such as compliance initiatives.

“A lot of training programs are pretty predictable,” he says. “Some people feel like they have done sexual harassment training over and over for 20 years. There might be new content that is valuable, but they will miss it because they assume it is the same thing. Gamification can add an element of curiosity and surprise.”

11. Distinguish between levels and badges

It is easy to lump levels and badges together; however, there are some key differences instructional designers should be aware of when creating gamified platforms.

Levels define the learning journey and are ideal for building a training curriculum. The learner must complete one level in order to unlock content and advance to a higher level. Begin with short, easy levels in order to encourage widespread participation and buy-in. Guide learners through content by linking levels to specific learning objectives.

Badges can acknowledge nonlinear progress. Users can earn them by logging in on a certain day of the week, for example, or playing for a specific amount of time; badges can be awarded to players who accumulate a certain number of points, successfully move through a particular program, or achieve a defined objective. They can be issued in groups, in order to motivate players to collect the whole series. People like to amass badges and are often proud of their collections. For this reason, provide a virtual space where learners can display their hard-earned badges.

12. Create an initial buzz

When launching a gamification program, it is crucial to get the word out and get employees on board. The company's marketing department can help create excitement. Promote the launch in the corporate newsletter, through social media, and with personalized email or text notifications.

Grab the attention of users who log in, curious to explore the new offering. "When learners first arrive on the platform, set a positive and exciting tone by welcoming them with a badge or reward," Denny suggests.

After the initial launch, actively solicit feedback from users. Reward players who provide it, even if the feedback is negative. Their input can yield valuable suggestions on how to improve or expand the existing program.

13. Monitor the system for abuse

It is an unfortunate yet inevitable truth: Weeks or months after the new gamification platform has been released, clever yet unscrupulous employees will uncover ways to cheat the system. To prevent this from happening, use the back-end dashboards to monitor the system. Flag and investigate anything that seems out of the ordinary—such as a learner who advances through levels at an unprecedented pace or rapidly collects every badge available.

The system should also be monitored to identify employees who are disengaged or seem to have lost interest after the launch. Stimulate engagement by offering incentives for them to return to the platform.

14. Extrinsic versus intrinsic

Gamification rewards learners for completing challenges and achieving designated goals. Extrinsic rewards generally come in the form of cash or merchandise. Firms that base their gamification platforms on extrinsic rewards should be aware that the prizes do not have to be large.

"It's amazing how motivating a \$10 gift card to the local coffee shop can be," says Kapp. He notes that rewards don't even have to have monetary value at all. Low-cost extrinsic rewards could include the opportunity to meet with a senior executive, or the use of a choice parking spot for a certain period of time.

Intrinsic rewards are internal—they drive individuals to take personal pride in their work and accomplishments. Chou urges learning executives to base gamification programs on intrinsic factors. "Corporations always focus on extrinsic motivation, such as passing and getting certificates. But intrinsic motivation is far more powerful when it comes to changing learner behavior," he says.

When intrinsic rewards are the primary focus, workers establish their own target goals and strive to achieve them. Prestige is a powerful and engaging motivator. An effective way to boost intrinsic motivation in the workplace is to encourage learners to become experts and reward them for demonstrating expertise. The benefit is twofold—it provides experts with the recognition they deserve, and it gives others access to their knowledge.

15. Different strokes for different folks

Gamers play for different reasons, and a good gamification solution accounts for this. [Andrzej Marczewski](#) is a UK-based gamification consultant, designer, and thought leader. His [Hexad Framework](#) is a system that classifies game-player personality types. This knowledge can help developers personalize their designs with game elements most likely to appeal to each player type.

According to Marczewski, gamers can be divided into the following categories, as summarized in a [CLO Advisor article](#):

- **Socializers** are motivated by relatedness. They want to interact with other players and create connections. They can be evangelists for a company-wide system, drawing more people to it. Game design elements that appeal to this group include guilds or teams, social networks, social comparison, social competition, and social discovery.
- **Free Spirits** are motivated by autonomy. These creative types want to express themselves and explore on their own within a system. Design elements that motivate them include nonlinear gameplay, Easter eggs, unlockable content, creativity tools, and customization.
- **Achievers** are motivated by mastery. They seek to progress within a system by completing tasks, tackling difficult challenges, or being the best. In games, they are drawn to epic challenges, certificates, learning new skills, quests, and levels of progression.
- **Players** are motivated by extrinsic rewards. They play in order to earn them, regardless of the content. They are motivated by game design elements such as points, prizes, leaderboards, badges, virtual economies, lotteries, or games of chance.
- **Philanthropists** are motivated by purpose. They are altruistic and give without expecting a reward. They respond to such game design elements as collection and trading, gifting, knowledge sharing, and administrative roles.
- **Disruptors** are motivated by change. They like to test a system's boundaries. Although this personality type is often perceived as negative, disruptors can actually improve systems. Game design elements that appeal to this group are innovation platforms, voting mechanisms, development tools, anonymity, and anarchic gameplay.

16. Be on point with points

Not everything in life is equal. Keep this in mind when assigning points to gamification actions.

"Always be mindful that points are supposed to mean something," Denny advises. "If you award 100 points for posting a comment on the social feed, and only 10 for completing a piece of compliance eLearning, you will undermine the importance of the training."

Although it is important to assign points in a fair and consistent manner, make sure that tasks that require herculean effort receive a compensatory amount of points.

17. Get social

Games tend to be social experiences. Exploit that by building a community around the company's gamified solution. Encourage users to exchange thoughts and experiences on a dedicated social platform where they can interact and acknowledge the achievements of their co-workers. This may include discussion groups or forums where a player can discuss how many zombies they slew in one game, or share a screenshot of the hidden object they uncovered in a scavenger hunt game.

18. Keep it fresh

Keep learners engaged by regularly refreshing and updating gamification content. Add levels and badges so they continually have something new to strive for. Limited-edition badges issued for just a short period of time will generate interest and excitement.

If there is a need for learners to rapidly absorb an important topic, such as a new safety mandate, create a sense of urgency by releasing a special badge that can only be earned within a specific time window.

19. Require participation

No one likes to be told what to do. For this reason, many companies make their gamification initiatives voluntary. They hope the games or extrinsic prizes will be so enticing that the majority of the workforce will participate.

Unfortunately, that is not always the case. "Let's face it: Employee time is limited," says Steve Boller, marketing director at [Bottom-Line Performance](#). In a white paper titled *7 Steps to an Effective Serious Game or Gamification Implementation*, the vendor highlights four organizations with successful gamification initiatives. All of them make play mandatory.

"Most of us only have the energy to focus on the activities that are truly essential to our jobs," Boller says. "Our experience shows us that the organizations that are most successful with serious games require play."

20. Leverage it throughout the employee life cycle

Thanks to its versatility, gamification can be applied in a wide variety of ways. In fact, firms can leverage the approach throughout the employee life cycle.

An Coppens is a gamification design consult who founded [Gamification Nation](#) in 2012. "There are fabulous examples of gamification all along the employee life cycle," she says. Firms are turning to gamification for everything from corporate branding to employee recruitment, onboarding, job mastery, and feedback.

She notes that gamification can be particularly effective as a [recruitment tool](#). A business partner, Pymetrics, has its job candidates play 12 games. The company combines data derived from the game play with education and work experience information in order to create job matches that are free of gender and ethnic bias. Another partner, Games for Business, can replicate an office environment and develop a quest enabling potential hires to virtually explore the company within a game framework.

"Companies are also using gamification throughout the employee journey to reinforce learning, performance, and career management," Coppens says.

21. Use it as a management tool

"Gamification is like a fitness tracker for work," says Roni Floman, VP of marketing at [GamEffective](#). The Israel-based company markets a gamification platform used around the globe.

GamEffective tracks relevant key performance indicators (KPIs) from enterprise apps. Like an actual fitness tracker, it displays real-time data that employees and management can harness, providing everyone with a running snapshot of past and present performance.

"Gamification offers a new way of managing employees," Floman says. Managers can select certain KPIs to measure employees' scores compared to one another and to their own past performance. Managers can also target and benchmark definable business goals. Gamification makes the challenge of achieving work-related goals more engaging in the same way a fitness tracker makes an exercise program more fun.

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22. It is just one part of the L&D toolkit

There is a tendency to think that gamification should be applied to all training; however, experts caution that it should just be part of the mix. "You probably have lots of training initiatives happening in a calendar year. Organizations have the most success when games are part of a larger, blended curriculum or strategy," Boller says.

Firms can start simply, with a small or pilot implementation. "People tend to think gamification is very complex, and that they have to go all in or they are not in at all," says Carol Leaman, CEO of [Axonify](#), which designs gamification solutions. "You can start small. Pick two or three games that are easy to implement, and test out their impact."

Kapp concludes, "Don't gamify everything. Gamification is just one part of the L&D toolkit. Choose the right project for gamification, and tailor it to your audience." A consultant can help a firm decide what projects might be most appropriate for gamification.



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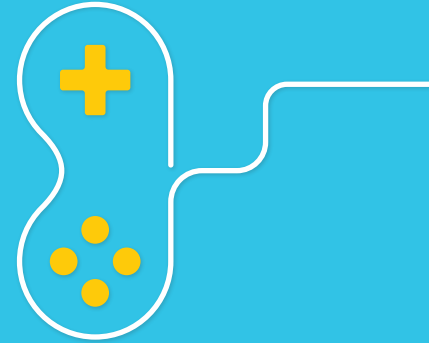
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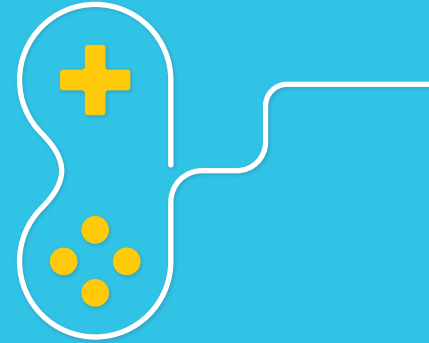
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Susan Jacobs is the senior editor of CLO Advisor. She has a deep-rooted interest in (and passion for) education and technology. Prior to this position, she was a senior content producer at Bright Business Media, a leader in the meeting and events industry. Before that, she served as editor of the *Jewish Journal MA*. Susan is a graduate of Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism.