How to Reclaim Your Learners' Attention Using Gamification

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The next generation of tech addicted workers are on our doorstep. With shrinking attention spans and expanding appetites for instant gratification, it's becoming clear that the current approach to learning and development is not going to cut it when it comes to engaging them.

"In this always-connected environment, it's not likely that we'll be able to persuade this younger generation to put down their phones long enough to take the important training that they need," says Gabe Zichermann, expert and writer on the subject of gamification.

Zichermann, who gave the keynote address at L&D Innovation & Tech Fest, says L&D professionals are up against a monumental challenge in terms of managing people's attention. And the main culprit? A little neurotransmitter called dopamine.

Dopamine and Learners' Behaviour

"The main reason it's hard to get people to focus on your learning and development programs is because people are very easily overexcited by unimportant stimuli and bored of important things that they should be focusing on," says Zichermann. He momentarily transports us back to high school biology and gives us a crash course in neuroscience. "Dopamine is a neurotransmitter primarily responsible for all the great things that humans have achieved: it is that motivational chemical that makes you want to run faster, go higher, get to the moon and develop drugs for important diseases; dopamine fuels all of that," he explains.

"When you set yourself a challenge and then achieve that challenge, your brain secretes a little bit of dopamine: challenge, achievement, satisfaction. It's a highly pleasurable feeling and what happens as soon as that occurs is your brain says, "Please, ma'am, may I have another?" and you go right back into trying to make that cycle happen again and happen again," says Zichermann.

He points out that in our professional lives, we might experience this dopamine hit maybe once a year when we achieve a significant milestone or complete a project. But compare that to playing a video game like Candy Crush or scrolling through a Facebook feed, you're getting a hit of dopamine hundreds of times an hour. "So it's no wonder that when faced with the traditional business environment and learning programs, young people raised on videogames simply view the real world as being too slow, too boring," he reasons.

Using Gamification to Win the War for Attention

Instead of condemning the highly addictive and engaging powers of gaming and social media, Zichermann advises L&D professionals to embrace it and apply the principles of game design to learning and development. "L&D professionals can use many of the same

techniques that game engineers use to get and keep people's attention, but you can do it in a way that is focused on your organisation's goals and objectives, rather than a pointless goal."

According to Zichermann, Gamification is the use of game concepts, behavioural economics and loyalty program schemes to help engage and change people's behaviour, it's keeping their attention and getting them to do the things they need to do.

However, it's not enough to simply take a process and turn it into a game, warns Zichermann. "One of the biggest mistakes that organisations make when they try gamification is they take a bad process and turn it into a game. Here's a terrible process, but now with dragons and wizards! That is still boring and stupid, and people see through that very quickly." The idea is to use the concepts from gaming to engage and enhance a learning process.

3 Companies Using Gamification in L&D

Here are three examples of organisations that Zichermann has worked with to apply the principles of gamification to their learning & development programs:

1. New York University

New York University took a couple of hundred surgeons and split them into a control group and a randomly assigned experimental group. The experimental group was asked to play action-oriented videogames every day for an hour prior to going into surgery, and the control group just did things the way that they normally did.

The experimental group made 37% fewer mistakes and performed their surgeries 25% faster.

"Interestingly, the game in question was not a surgery simulation game, it was an action game designed to help develop your hand-eye coordination. This experiment showed that gaming could develop skills that were transferrable skills from one kind of environment to another," says Zichermann.

2. Delta Airlines

Delta is one of the world's biggest airlines and after a large wave of outsourcing, they decided to bring all their front-line staff back in-house. This meant they had a significant challenge on their hands to train their staff very quickly in order to bring them up to speed with their processes and general geography knowledge.

The airline built an application called "Ready Set Jet", which is a series of mini training games that Delta employees can play to teach them about geography, the Delta way, and everything that they need to learn in order to be frontline staff at Delta.

In the first year of this program, they found that employees who played this game did four years' worth of training in just one year.

"The craziest thing about the whole program was that you weren't allowed to play during working hours which really shows that people like learning, as long as it's delivered in the right way," says Zichermann.

3. KPMG

The Australian arm of KPMG needed a way to teach people about the KPMG culture and their process as well as global business – they had many young recruits who didn't have any global business expertise. They built a game called GlobeRunner, where participants can take different missions in different locations and learn about the capabilities, the clients and the offerings that KPMG has across their global network.

The program was highly successful, helping tens of thousands of people across the world learn about KPMG. "One thing we learned very quickly was that some people would get totally obsessed with this game, with a handful of people who played it to the point where managers had to get involved because they're playing too much," says Zichermann.

Follow the Three Fs for an Engaging Learning Experience

What makes a gamified learning experience engaging? According to Zichermann there are three things that any learning program needs to have in order to create long-term engagement and adherence:

- Feedback is telling you how you're doing, your progress against a goal

- Friends are your social circle or your co-workers. Because people generally trust their friends and peers, anything they do as a social proof will drive user behaviour accordingly – whether that's by collaborating or just watching them succeed and have fun.

- Fun is a little harder to define…

There's lots of different ideas about what constitutes fun, but one of the most interesting concepts comes from Nicole Lazzaro in what are called the four keys to fun. Her research revealed that there were four different kinds of fun that people experienced in their lives in general:

- Hard fun is something like a mathematical problem, hard to solve, difficult, challenging fun.

- Easy fun could be a game like Candy Crush or most of the games that the average person plays. Not very mentally taxing, they're more for relaxing enjoyment.

- Social fun is about interacting with other people.

- Purposeful fun is fun in the service of something else.

Zichermann advises considering the different kinds of fun when you're thinking about how to make a learning experience more enjoyable for your organisation.

Gamification for Good

"Our goal as process engineers, as process leaders, is not to get people addicted to our corporate training program. Yes, we want to make employees engage in our learning programs with as much gusto as they approach a game of Candy Crush or Fortnite– but we should be doing this in an ethical fashion. You can use gamification techniques to get and keep people's attention without turning them into zombies," says Zichermann.

Hear more from leading innovators like Gabe Zichermann at [L&D Innovation & Tech Fest](#).