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Sean Hinton

Auckland University of Technology, shinton@aut.ac.nz

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Applying Gamification in New Zealand Contact Centers

Sean Hinton

Auckland University of Technology
shinton@aut.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

Enterprise gamification represents a new and vital area of research which seeks to better understand how intrinsic and extrinsic rewards can be utilized alongside emerging digital technologies to motivate staff and achieve business objectives. The purpose of this study is to examine and better understand, within the context of the New Zealand call center service industry, employee focused enterprise gamification deployments.

The context of New Zealand call centers was selected as an example of modern IT-intensive service work which is widely known for high turnover, low motivation and limited job autonomy (Boxall et al. 2003; Hunt and Rasmussen 2007), but also as emerging gamification processes are beginning to be deployed as catch-all motivational solution within these environments. The high rate of employee turnover is one of many indicators that the biggest issues facing companies in this industry are inadequately-trained staff, low levels of managerial support, high stress and diminishing motivation. As a result of these operational deficiencies, companies are looking for new and innovative ways to utilize existing tools or processes to provide low cost, high impact solutions.

Despite its deceptive name, gamification has less to do with traditional games, but rather is a process of enhancing an existing service with affordances for gameful experiences. Put simply, gamification within the framework of a business information system could be viewed as the use of game design elements situated in non-game contexts (Deterding et al. 2011). These positive experiences are comparable to those found in the traditional entertainment industry, in that they facilitate the acquisition of the intangible value generated in digital reward systems. This value can then be directed at inducing the desired behavioral change within end users to achieve greater job satisfaction and productivity. This increased productivity is said to be the result of a more engaged workforce, which is enabled by creating more enjoyable work processes and feedback mechanisms that are more meaningful to the end user.

While many employment schemes use extrinsic motivators (e.g., promotions and fringe benefits), gamification aims to better align new and existing extrinsic rewards with the intrinsic desires of users in the pursuit of long term engagement. In gamification systems this alignment is done primarily through the use of “game-mechanics” In essence,

game mechanics in a gamified system represent the building blocks for directing or inducing desired user behavior in non-game contexts

Typically, the use of traditional enterprise information systems in service industries encourage, at best, behavioral change through extrinsic motivation only. This is underlined by the common practice of rewarding employees with immediate financial benefits or tangible gifts when reaching key performance milestones (Malhotra et al. 2007). While this method undoubtedly leads to minor short-term improvements in employee performance, studies suggest that the impact of monetary compensation on job satisfaction is limited, while intangible benefits, on the other hand, may induce employees to exert greater levels of effort and for longer periods of time (Annakis et al. 2011; Heyman and Ariely 2004). There is thus a need to re-examine the use of traditional information systems to motivate employees, and consequently question if modern businesses should rely more on enterprise gamification systems to motivate staff.

The ultimate goal of this study is to expand the current knowledge base surrounding emerging digital tools and techniques used in gamification systems by generating an explanatory theory of employee behavior. An emphasis has been placed on the perspectives of employees’ subject to gamification processes, seeking to explain and identify motivational benefits or risks for workers and industry. This study does not aim to generate a formal predictive theory, but instead aims to generate a substantive context-specific theory capable of highlighting behaviors associated with gamification techniques in New Zealand contact center environments. To best achieve this research objective a constructivist grounded theory methodology has been used.

To date 22 employees from various roles within the New Zealand contact center industry have been interviewed. These interviews have then been transcribed, coded and subject to the cyclical process of constant comparison analysis and theoretical sampling. These interviews represent employees subject to, or directly affected by the influences of gamification systems in New Zealand contact centers. Notable thematic findings to date include: unspoken social reliance when reaping benefits of peer supported gamification initiatives, negative influences virtual monetary rewards have on task perceptions, conscious and unconscious managerial gamification favoritism and peer evaluation of role competency based on gamification performance.

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