What Is Gamification and Why Should Contact Centers Care?

WorkFlex Gamification Technology as a Tool for Agent Engagement

Do a Google search on the word "gamification" and view the following definition in the search results: "the application of typical elements of game playing (e.g., point scoring, competition with others, rules of play) to other areas of activity, typically as an online marketing technique to encourage engagement with a product or service." This definition leaves out a key application: employee work engagement, particularly in contact centers.

The Problem with Contact Centers
Contact centers are famously (or, some might say, *infamously*) challenging places to work. The work is generally repetitive, the training is often inadequate, the customers who call in are sometimes angry and/or rude, the work schedules are rigid, the pay is low, and opportunities for advancement are often lacking. What a prescription for successful recruitment and retention! Finding ways to reduce or ameliorate these negative employment factors is a never-ending project for contact center management. The quest for managers is always to encourage employee engagement and satisfaction with the job, so that employees will stay put and not head for the exits as soon as a more desirable position presents itself. Suggestions and prescriptions for solving what one might call the contact-center-employee "revolving door" predicament are voluminous. Gamification is one recommendation that has gained widespread attention in recent years.

A Closer Look at Gamification
As indicated in the introductory paragraph, gamification usually includes rules-of-the-game, competition with self or others, and earning something valuable, be it points, badges, or prizes and special awards. The concept originated in the video-gaming industry, where players engage in a game's contextual activities to earn things considered valuable within the world of the game. Applied to the contact center environment, video game-based tasks are translated into work tasks that employees (agents) must strive to master and execute exceptionally well to earn rewards. Each of these tasks are tied to Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) and business goals.[i] So, for example, companies might award points and

ultimately "guru" badges for high-level training performance. "To earn the badge, employees must: (a) review product documentation; (b) score 80% or higher on the product knowledge quiz; and (c) earn customer satisfaction scores of 9 (out-of-10) or higher on five consecutive 'Product X' calls."[ii] The result is skilled, knowledgeable agents who are more likely to succeed at achieving lower Average Handle Times (AHT), First-Call Resolution (FCR) of customer issues and other KPI's the contact center deems critical. The agents not only receive points for their training performance, but also for the ensuing KPI performance improvement.

Gamification normally requires automatic tracking of performance metrics so that points can be automatically awarded to agents based on objective, standardized criteria. Meeting a set criterion triggers a near real-time distribution of points. For example, if an agent completes a call to the satisfaction of the customer within 240 seconds and the gamification system is set up to award 20 points to anyone completing a call in under 300 seconds, the points are awarded and the agent is immediately notified. Agents can see their point totals on their desktop, and, to foster friendly competition, management can use leaderboards to display team-member totals for whichever performance categories (AHT, attendance, FCR, etc.) are included in the game. Both the private and public display of these totals are means of recognizing employees for superior performance, something studies show is hugely impactful on employee morale.[iii] "[N]ever underestimate how important recognition is for the happiness and engagement of employees," notes the author of one industry white paper on gamification. Employees whose performance lags somewhat will see their teammates' higher numbers and feel motivated to up their own game. "'[I]f I didn't do well today, I can do well next week.'"[iv]

Potential Gamification Pitfalls

While many in the contact center industry enthusiastically embrace gamification as a motivating, engaging practice, some see a less than bright future for companies implementing gamification programs. In 2012, Gartner predicted that "by 2014, 80 percent of current gamified applications will fail to meet business objectives primarily because of poor design."[v] The precise failure rate is difficult to determine, but it has been "estimated that most gamification efforts will fail due to poor understanding of how gamification should be designed and implemented."[vi] Some commentators have predicted that even if design and implementation are successful, "it is likely that the novelty of the game will wear off, and rewards could become unsustainable."[vii] The concerns are not without validity. Will amassing points and earning badges be enough to keep agents interested, and if there are monetary rewards or physical prizes like blenders, coffee makers, toasters, or gift cards, will accumulating these make agents happy enough to remain engaged in the game process? How many household gadgets can an agent win before thinking, "Yay, another toaster…" Even monetary rewards, though presumably attractive to every employee, may offer diminishing returns as agents become accustomed to receiving extra cash and begin to take it for granted. For the contact center, supplying these incentives is an ongoing expense that can quickly become an untenable financial burden, particularly if a large percentage of the agents choose to participate in the "game."

Gamification in the Real World

Despite the reported challenges in designing effective gamification programs and in maintaining agent interest in the programs, recent studies indicate a high success rate for companies that choose to implement them. A May 2016 report from Aberdeen, for example, shows markedly better KPI's for gamification-embracing companies, year-over-year. (See Figure 1 below.)

Figure 1: Gamification Helps Improve Operational Results

Source: Aberdeen Group, May 2016

Companies included in the Aberdeen study offered employees a variety of rewards, "ranging from badges and honors to leaderboards and non-financial spiff programs where employees can earn awards such as additional time off or a free designated parking spot."[viii] One reward on this list stands out to us here at WorkFlex: "additional time off." Our intelligent agent mobile app is designed to put schedule self-management capability into the hands of contact center agents – a level of empowerment that by itself is extraordinarily effective in the effort to engage them. The app enables a genuine balance between their work and personal life, an employment benefit most Millennial workers consider of great value.[ix] (Since Millennials now make up the majority of the workforce, this fact cannot be ignored by employers, particularly in a marketplace where workers seeking flexible hours can sign up to drive for Uber and Lyft, run errands for TaskRabbit, etc.) We have now added gamification to the app as another avenue of engagement and empowerment. The WorkFlex gamification method is unique because it does not tie rewards to KPI's in the way that is common in most programs.

Gamification on the WorkFlex Agent Mobile App
Explanations for why gamification programs often fail typically include poor game design, and while that almost certainly is a significant factor, another cause of failure may be the reward system. If employees receive only recognition and nothing of tangible value, their interest in the "game" will probably be short lived. If employees *do* receive material rewards, these may lose their appeal over time. Winning toasters and other gadgets for the home is pleasant, but at some point, begins to pale as an incentive. The game and the reward are simply not linked in a meaningful way that maintains employee interest.

The WorkFlex approach to gamification keeps work and reward closely aligned. Focusing on point accumulation, the WorkFlex system awards points to agents for helping contact center management achieve optimized net staffing. So, for example, an agent could earn 100 points for working overtime through an interval during which the center is projected to be short on staff and which is difficult to fill. Using the WorkFlex mobile app, the agent would simply look for understaffed time intervals displaying 100-point rewards and select one or more. The agent can then use the accumulated points to take time off. If an agent is scheduled to work on a Friday evening, but wants to attend a concert, those points can be traded in for the needed hours off, even if the center might consequently be slightly understaffed.

The WorkFlex system then shows those resulting understaffed hours as available for overtime, perhaps with points to be earned, and agents wishing to add to their point totals can select them, thereby again helping optimize staffing.

The benefit for agents of the connection between agent work and reward is as great as it is for contact center management and operations, because the reward is intimately tied to how much and when the agents work. The strong desire of most contact center employees to balance their work and personal lives makes receiving points toward time off a reward for which it is worthy to strive. The WorkFlex mobile app gives agents tremendous flexibility in adjusting their schedule as needed, but maximizing the ability to devote time to their personal life through a gamification point accrual system is a reward they value highly and for which they will continuously stay engaged in the "game."

Conclusion

Opinions about the usefulness and success of gamification programs differ, but studies do show that companies making the effort to implement them have been achieving goals that remain elusive in "non-gamified" companies. Aberdeen's "findings reveal that 58% of businesses with elements of gamification embedded within their contact center activities improve agent retention rates year-over-year. This compares to a mere 16% by All Others."[x] Numbers like these would seem to speak for themselves, and by using a gamification program that rewards flexibility at work with more time off work – a benefit most agents value highly – the numbers could rise even higher.

Endnotes

[i] https://callminer.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Using-Gamification-to-Improve-Contact-Center-Performance.pdf

[ii] http://www.mycustomer.com/service/contact-centres/gamification-how-to-power-up-your-contact-centre-staff

[iii] https://hbr.org/2015/11/the-easiest-thing-you-can-do-to-be-a-great-boss

[iv] http://www.gameffective.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/customer-service-gamification-white-paper.pdf

[v] http://www.gartner.com/newsroom/id/2251015 Paragraph 2.

[vi] http://gamification-research.org/2016/09/how-to-gamify/

[vii] http://blogs.aspect.com/a-risky-game-gamification-in-the-contact-center/

[viii] http://v1.aberdeen.com/launch/report/knowledge_brief/12461-KB-CC-Gamification.asp

[ix] https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/gx-millenial-survey-2016-exec-summary.pdf

[x] http://v1.aberdeen.com/launch/report/knowledge_brief/12461-KB-CC-Gamification.asp