

# Train with no pain

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Corporations are using the power of video games and other online tools to inject a big dose of fun — and lots of interactivity — into their teaching methods

By *Rosalind Stefanac*

Illustration: *Johnny Ueland*

Amy Chalmers loves slicing sushi — the virtual kind, at least. Every workday, she spends about 90 frenzied seconds swiping through the nigiri pieces and California rolls floating across her computer screen. She smiles when she makes a clean pass across the middle of a roll and the pieces fall away.

Chalmers is playing Samurai Sushi — a computer game with a twist. Every so often, the screen will freeze and a question about personal tax will pop up. “I have to answer it before I get back to play,” she says. The game gives her a point if her answer is correct, but it also shows an explanation of the question at hand.

“Eventually I start knowing more and more,” she says. (This particular day, the theme is RRSP tax credits.)



Samurai Sushi is one of three or four games that Chalmers and other student accountants preparing tax files at Vancouver-based accounting firm MacKay LLP have integrated into their routines. “It’s a little fun thing we’re allowed to do and I know it’s going to be short and benefit me,” she says. Every game is interrupted by five or six varying questions — multiple choice, match the components or fill in the blanks — developed by trainers at the firm and based on a variety of tax rules. The more answers employees get right, the more points they accumulate to bid on auction prizes, ranging from coffee cards to iPads or even vacation time.

Gone are the days when video games were the domain of reclusive teenagers frittering away the hours in their parents’ basements. Now corporations are leveraging the power of gamification, as it’s dubbed in the training industry, to make training fun. Many are also forgoing PowerPoint-plagued classroom lectures and costly conferences for interactive online learning options that make learning accessible on practically any electronic device. Or they’re combining a little old with the new. In so doing, they’re discovering a workforce that is much more motivated to keep on learning.

The gaming platform used at MacKay is the brainchild of Waterloo, Ont.-based Axonify, which boasts customers in retail and manufacturing, among others. CEO Carol Leaman, an accountant herself, says extensive research shows that bite-sized, targeted learning is much more effective than traditional methods. “We’re not suited to sitting and listening to long, comprehensive bodies of content, especially if there is no reinforcement,” she says. “And with this system, we might start on the same questions on day one, but if I get them right and you get them wrong, the platform intelligently knows you’re going to need more repetition.” Leaman says the statistics show that gaming and rewards drive participation and result in a better-trained and motivated workforce.

So far that’s proving true at MacKay, where tracking reports show 100% of employees enrolled in the program are using it regularly. “I have my eye on that vacation day so I’m trying to rack up my points,” says Chalmers. “There’s also some friendly competition because we get to see who has the most points at the end of the week.”

At Capital BlueCross in Pennsylvania, where the gaming system was first piloted in the accounts administration area, a key benefit was helping employees reinforce their knowledge without pulling them off their jobs and disrupting workflow. “In any environment where you have to keep abreast of policies and procedures, this is a good application,” says Scott Walter, director, operations process improvement and business intelligence. “Our vice-president was adamant about it showing a positive impact on our bottom line and we were able to prove that.”

Doug Harward, CEO and founder of Training Industry Inc., a US-based consulting company that tracks the global training market, says virtually all businesses spend significant time and money (up to 2% of their operating expenses) on training at some point and want to get the best bang for their bucks. In North America alone, approximately US\$133

billion was spent on training in 2012, which is up 5% from the previous year and doesn't include what employees personally spend on education. "Everything around learning these days is about getting access to the right information relevant to my needs and getting it quickly so I can go back to my business," he says.

This ready access to information has proved a godsend in the accounting profession, where ongoing changes in rules and regulations need to be communicated quickly. "All our people are busy, so finding time for scheduled learning can be challenging," says Ryan Wildman, a senior manager at Grant Thornton in Toronto who develops and coordinates assurance training. That could be why the proportion of elearning courses at the firm rose to 61% in 2012 from 33% in 2011, based on the need to communicate industry changes and employee demand.

Wildman says many staff members prefer elearning to live sessions because of the convenience. They also like being able to replay information if needed. "Otherwise, if a person misses a key detail in a live event, that learning opportunity is lost," he says. There's no ducking out of mandatory sessions either. Employees' elearning records are monitored to ensure they're completing courses in a timely fashion.

It's no surprise that more and more companies are making use of the Internet's limitless capacity and creating learning portals where employees can access a whole bounty of continuing education sessions, videos, reports, presentations, virtual conferences and other learning modules on demand.

Some are even taking it a step further by developing online learning platforms that train employees in a systematic way throughout their time at an organization. Four years ago, for example, KPMG started its "business school," composed of live and elearning elements geared to developing business and leadership skills. Individuals fill out an assessment based on their practice level and are linked to resources and/or courses that can help them develop their core competencies. There are hundreds of offerings, both mandatory and optional. Cam French, a senior tax specialist in his third year at KPMG in Edmonton, says he takes up to 15 optional courses annually depending on his client base and the issues coming up. "When I was in audit I had a lot of customers in the construction business so I took things like how to account for construction revenue," he says. "The system tracks every course I've taken and I can always go back to review materials months or even years afterward, which is great."

Desire2Learn, a Kitchener, Ont.-based training software developer, provides a learning environment that can even be used to groom future leaders. A manager who sees leadership potential in a junior auditor, for example, could plot requirements essential for a front-runner in the organization, then match courses for the employee to take over the years. "It allows you to mentor them and systematically develop them by providing courses that match their competencies," says Jeff McDowell, vice-president of marketing and business development. "Corporations used to look at learning as a one-off but now it's really about learning over time and adapting the learning environment to individual needs."

At CPA Canada, Desire2Learn's system is helping facilitate a comprehensive tax training program that was rolled out for some 550 accountants across the country last fall. (Since it's a three-year program, more than 1,500 accountants will eventually be enrolled.) The program uses elearning, social media and live sessions to teach tax concepts and assess employees throughout. Organizations sponsoring staff through the program get reports on how their crews are faring along the way.

Frank Colantonio, CPA's director of continuing education, says the mix of elearning, live sessions and online forums — where trainees can post questions and have discussions with others in the program — has been a hit. Going forward, part of the tax cohort will participate in a pilot program where they will be given tablets to test how the program works on mobile applications. "With all our education, we're looking at technology to create more value in the time spent face to face," he says. "Let's see what we can pull out of that [live] session and deliver differently as an elearning module or video ahead of time."

Janani Balendran, a senior tax analyst at Deloitte in her first year of the program, says the online pre-work and discussion forum really enhance the live sessions. If she were to sit in a lecture, she might be tired and not absorb everything. "[The new method] forces you to be on top of your game. You have to come prepared to answer questions and share what you've learned."

This blended approach to learning, in which technology is used to enhance traditional methods, is being adopted across organizations with substantial success. At Deloitte, all face-to-face classroom sessions start with required online reading and analysis so attendees are ready to talk about complex scenarios when they meet. "We have turned people

away at the door if they haven't completed the work — even if they are at the senior level,” says Andrea Humber, a partner at Deloitte who is responsible for assurance and advisory learning in Canada.

Even the live sessions use very few PowerPoint slides; instead, employees are encouraged to share their perspectives under the guidance of a facilitator. “We don't have classroom lectures anymore because we find a coaching style of learning far more effective,” says Humber. “It's a completely different approach.”

Reinforcing that learning day to day is another key objective for many organizations. At KPMG, all training is based on the premise that 70% of learning takes place on the job. “We realize if we want to develop our people to their full potential, it's not going to happen sitting in a classroom,” says Kristy Carscallen, partner and chief human resources officer. “Once employees get their initial training, it's all about giving them the right opportunities to put that learning into practice, be that with a new client project or a secondment in a particular industry.”

Social media is also helping employees stay connected before and after the formal learning is over. At PwC, new hires, new managers and other staff can start talking virtually before they even meet, via a global networking platform called Spark. “They play 'get to know you' games online and get status updates on the course details,” says Sandra Medeiros, the firm's director of learning and development for audit and assurance practice. “After they meet in person for the three- or four-day course, they go back to their offices all over the country and can still keep in touch.” Medeiros says they will sometimes post pictures taken during the course or check in with peers and instructors with ongoing questions and comments online. “Think of it like Facebook for the workplace,” she says.

### **Work imitates life**

What's the best way to prepare employees for the real world? Make the training session as real as possible.

First-year employees at Deloitte, armed with their laptops and proprietary audit documentation software, go through a five-day audit simulation together in the classroom, complete with email interruptions from mock clients sending additional information to simulate an actual audit experience. When details are missing, they're prompted to set up meetings with clients, played by managers in their practices.

At Ernst & Young, the simulations extend after hours. The firm recently tried a pilot program where tables and chairs were removed from a training room to mimic a cocktail environment. “Some of the simulation addressed simple things like how to hold a glass and plate when introducing yourself,” says Diana Brouwer, Canadian learning leader. “People loved it and felt better equipped to be in that kind of client environment outside the office.”

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