Seven Ways to Gamify Social Collaboration

by *Phaedra Boinodiris*

Social collaboration is not about technology. It's about connecting people, and it's changing the way business is being conducted. Similarly, gamification is not about games. It's about motivating the personal and professional behaviors that drive business value. Together, social collaboration and gamification help companies reap great benefits — among them, the ability to deepen customer relationships, drive operational efficiencies, and optimize their workforce. Furthermore, gamifying social collaboration in the enterprise can achieve higher levels of engagement, change behaviors, and stimulate innovation.

Gamification is the application of game-design thinking and mechanics to non-game contexts to engage users and solve problems. There must be an equal amount of perceived user and business value for gamification to work in a professional setting. Providing perceived value to clients requires a deep historical knowledge of the target client: where she visited, what she bought, what she likes, and what she dislikes. A history of the user must be amassed for gamification to provide real business value. Since only a small number of companies capture the necessary quantities of user data, few organizations that use gamification to drive loyalty are delivering true user value. The same can be said for rolling out gamification campaigns to employees.

Incorporating gamification into social collaboration platforms promotes the adoption and usage of the application in a way that is user-friendly and highly engaging — which in turn promotes immediate and enduring information sharing within the context of business processes. This approach also creates a more skilled and adaptive workforce long term, which is imperative for the future. Indeed, over the next decade, social capabilities will become embedded in every single website and computing device for every participant in every business transaction. All those involved in a business process and transaction will have the ability to share content, comment on content, rate/vote on content, and collaborate in an open and sharing environment. This social activity will generate insights into all business processes, including R&D, marketing, sales, technical support, and even accounting, procurement, and legal.

Social collaboration technologies can fundamentally impact your business. Many organizations today have implemented a social platform to help engage the right people, accelerate innovation, and reinvent how people work. Unfortunately, most companies approach enterprise social collaboration as a technology deployment and fail to understand that the new relationships created by social collaboration are opportunities for businesses to engage customers, crowdsource innovation, or improve employee performance.

Organizations have the opportunity to apply organizational research principles, social business applications, and analytics to revolutionize the very fabric of work. Social business tools can help facilitate work. Very work-centric apps such as project management and file-sharing apps, wikis, and communities are very useful to control flow and share valuable information among teams. These tools, however, neither change the perception of work nor work culture.

With the technologies available today, we can revolutionize the perception of work itself along with one's role in the workplace. In his book *Drive*, Daniel Pink has aggregated the findings of leading organizational researchers and found that, more than anything else, knowledge workers seek self-direction. Finding ways to motivate the knowledge worker of today will lead to significant improvements in productivity, reduce turnover rates, and drive innovation.

Why Game Technology?

By combining the most innovative organizational research techniques with the most cutting-edge social business tools and game design techniques, organizations today can create a virtual workplace environment that:

- Ensures that skills and challenges are matched appropriately

- Engages more employees in their work and intrinsically motivates them to pursue loftier career aspirations

- Facilitates immediate access to subject matter experts anywhere, anytime

- Offers real-time updates on the creation of client value

- Increases productivity generated by contemporary communication rather than antiquated reliance on email, ad hoc relationships, and processes

In essence, organizations can create an aspirational workplace where employees can both see and feel a sense of self-direction.

The Seven Ways to Success

Many organizations making the transformation into social enterprises are already reaping the benefits and measuring the results. Some are not. Some businesses are stumbling, wondering why their collaboration tools aren't producing anticipated results. And even those seeing some limited success are wondering how they can leverage the technology further.

The reason some companies are thriving at social collaboration while others are struggling is that the latter are making grave errors in their understanding, evaluation, and implementation of social collaboration technologies. Here are some quick insights into the successful ways companies use gamification in tandem with social collaboration within the enterprise:

1. Buy Better Than They Can Build

Leaders realize that a social collaboration platform built inhouse is usually not as effective as what's available on the market. There are three reasons why:

1. Vendors have years of experience building and fine-tuning these social platforms.

2. Inhouse solutions are usually file-sharing tools, not full-featured collaboration platforms.

3. Building is a long-term commitment. Over time, you'll want to add features and functions that further support your business. It's better to pass that responsibility off to a provider while you focus on your core competency.

An IT company in Sweden uses social collaboration software to provide an enterprise social network for its employees around the world, and it needed to implement strategies that would build interest and encourage ongoing use of the solution across its worldwide user base. Rather than develop a homegrown solution, the company implemented a flexible gamification engine and dramatically increased the adoption of social collaboration software at its locations around the world. The new solution was set up to help elevate user retention while expanding the number of social media functions for which the software is used.

Here it's a good idea to follow the conventional wisdom: buy the technology when you need to automate commodity business processes; build it when you're dealing with the core processes that differentiate your company.

✓**Action:** Perform an analysis of today's leading social collaboration technologies and select the one that can offer you the most value. Remember that all platforms are not created equal.

2. Employee Adoption Is Key to Success

Leaders have realized that when new technologies emerge, people can be slow to adopt them — even technologies that have the ability to simplify and streamline their jobs.

Organizations that are fully leveraging their collaboration technologies today have discovered that gamification can act as a catalyst for employee adoption. When infused into the solution, gamification employs compelling motivators to push rapid adoption of these new technologies.

One leading telecommunications company learned the great value of gamification firsthand. To promote quick adoption of its community social business environment, the company integrated gamification and began rewarding customer service and in-store reps when they searched for information, posted new inquiries, answered peer questions, and "liked" valuable content. Within a few weeks, the company saw incredible business results:

- More than 30,000 call center and store employees were regularly using the community social platform.

- There was a 1,000% increase in user participation.

- Over 15,000 frontline employees completed a set of self-guided tutorials.

- There was a 6,000% increase in the number of "likes" issued to indicate helpful responses.

- Resolution rates and customer satisfaction scores improved every month since implementation.

✓**Action:** Implement a multifeatured gamification module to drive rapid adoption, accelerate your ROI, and — in the process — infuse new vitality into your teams.

✓**Action:** Consider rolling out an "alternate reality" game event where employees role-play through a game while using the social business platform. What better way to learn how to use the tools and recognize their value than through play?

✓**Action:** Consider Pink's tenets on how, more than anything, knowledge workers seek a sense of self-direction. Build the gamification platform in a way that emphasizes autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

3. Replace "Communication" with "Inspired Collaboration"

Leaders transform internal communication into inspired collaboration. A social collaboration platform is not just a place to communicate and share files. It's a place where ideas are born and nurtured, the status quo is questioned and challenged, and innovation thrives.

One global business consulting firm certainly found this to be true. In an effort to transform its work-force into a vibrant, animated, and collaborative community, the consulting firm installed a customized gamification program into its social collaboration platform. Now, employees are rewarded for their valuable collaborative efforts as well as for publishing and sharing content via social networks. High-visibility rewards are presented to employees for reaching key achievement milestones.

Four months after implementing the program, the firm experienced significant increases in collaboration and social sharing, including:

- A 57% increase in overall collaboration activity

- An 80% increase in blog traffic from social media

- A 45% increase in website traffic from social media

✓**Action:** Don't settle for "enabling communication." Use your rewards-based collaboration system to stimulate valuable, interactive participation among your employees. Inspire your people with activities and ideas that challenge them. Again, make sure that your rewards are meaningful based on the data collected from your audience.

4. Take Advantage of the Opportunity to Educate and Cultivate Interest

Businesses today are encouraging their employees to continuously educate themselves. A gamified collaboration tool can help provide a mechanism to attract users through friendly competition, status building, and a sense of accomplishment and self-improvement. Such tools are jam-packed with intrinsic motivators to get employees excited about learning.

To provide staff with product training, sales resources, and certifications in a way that would catch and maintain their attention, a leading automotive manufacturer created the Professional Performance Program (p2p). Sales and service representatives learn by browsing the p2p social business portal, watching informational videos, downloading the latest product information, and completing Web courses. Participants work toward individual goals, compete with their peers, collaborate to accomplish team goals, and compete against other dealerships. The program had the following results:

- A 417% increase in platform usage

- 15% more unique visitors and a 30% increase in visits to the portal

- An increase in performance measures, including sales and customer satisfaction

- A rise in engagement by younger audiences

- An increase in volunteer learning above and beyond annual certification requirements

✓**Action:** Use your collaboration platform as a vehicle to transform the education/training process into a place where users go to share ideas, engage in more informal learning, and participate in a community.

5. Recognize the Expertise That Exists Within the Organization

Organizations have a diverse range of employees, all of whom are important to the success of the business. Many employees provide knowledge and expertise, are willing to share it, and are driven to help others accomplish tasks. They facilitate business activities, programs, and processes.

Leaders use their collaboration platform to measure performance and expertise, and in so doing, discover the untapped capacity and underleveraged expertise that exists within virtually every organization today. Based on their findings, managers can assign new tasks and responsibilities to those best suited for the job, whether it's someone on the team, someone inside a neighboring department, or someone from a completely different area of the organization. Having and using that information can result in higher productivity and higher-quality output, and may even mean the difference between project success and failure.

A medical-device manufacturer in Sydney facilitates employee collaboration and participation by deploying a flexible rewards and recognition engine, which allows employees to tag user profiles with specific skills, experience, and interests. The solution increased employee blog creation by 40%, blog entries by 130%, and profile tags by 40%. The manufacturer gained a social business platform that supports rapid adoption of new ways of collaborating.

✓**Action:** Use gamified assessment tests as a way to ascertain the hard and soft skills of each employee.

✓**Action:** Use your gamified collaboration platform to derive a deeper understanding of the experience, skills, and talents that exist within each employee, even as you motivate them to higher levels of success.

✓**Action:** Create a safe environment for all employees within an organizational hierarchy to stress-test assumptions and collectively optimize processes.

6. Use a Reward — Not a Mandate — to Drive Adoption and Usage

Leaders seize the opportunity to entice their employees to use new technologies that will make their jobs easier, render them more productive, and help them achieve work/life balance. It's not simply a matter of deploying some collaboration tools and hoping for the best. It's a long-term strategic approach to shaping business culture, and it depends greatly on executive leadership. Be an inspiration and lead by example.

✓**Action:** Introduce your collaboration platform to your employees in a way that helps them understand its value and breeds anticipation and appreciation. Make sure that it is playful enough to encourage iterative use, keeping in mind the motivations of your audience. Ask for input and request feedback for fine-tuning. Make your people a part of the process.

7. Recognize That a Collaborative Platform Will Best Succeed in a Collaborative Environment

Today's businesses are rapidly adopting a process in which business decisions are not so "top down" as they are collaborative. An environment of active participation and engagement is valued and expected at every level. We have to reinvent the way we interact at work. Connecting remote teams of people to improve decision making and discover relevant expertise or related work empowers people and enables problem solving.

Building trust and encouraging social interactions are essential to a collaborative environment within your workplace. Social collaboration goes a long way to supporting people's intrinsic sense of "belonging" by recognizing contributions and building stronger communities and relationships across the organization. Collaborative platforms provide a gateway for information exchanges across geographies and departmental silos.

✓**Action:** Use your collaboration solution as an additional tool to enhance a corporate environment that already cultivates and encourages collaboration.

In Closing

Through better understanding of employee skills and motivations, companies can begin to understand and proactively mitigate the growing risks of diminished productivity, employee attrition, and a general lack of intrapreneurial spirit. Leveraging game technologies for talent management, for example, can open the door for organizations to engage their employees in meaningful career conversations, deeply connecting them to their own career aspirations as well as the goals and objectives of the company.

Well-designed gamification solutions work to develop engagement strategies that are personalized to what uniquely motivates an organization's target user. These solutions are based on turning large amounts of data into predictive analytics. Data collection, analytics, and business process capabilities provide the framework for creating a sustainable and scalable solution for successful gamification. Take the time to understand your user's history, which will provide the information necessary to create a value chain that meets ROI requirements.

Another example of gamification at work in enhancing social collaboration is advanced gaming solutions for conferences. A mobile methodology for encouraging ideation, engagement, and networking around pertinent topics among conference attendees can be a great platform for gamification. For conference organizers, a gamified solution can provide insights into attendee interests and what influences the evolution of ideas (people, sessions, keynotes). It can also provide a robust Rolodex of idea activists; through this game-like environment, you can see who champions critical ideas and who resists them.

If you are ready to embark on creating a gamification-enhanced application for your business, start by understanding that it will not be easy. Slapping points on an otherwise boring application will not motivate users to use it. Start by spending most of your time considering what motivates your audience and by having a full understanding of the user data that you are capturing. You will need to know a lot more about your users (employees/customers) to determine what would provide real value to them.

Perhaps the most important thing you can do with your social collaboration platform is use it to more fully engage your employees. Organizations today are anxious to capture the hearts, minds, and focus of their employees. A gamified collaboration solution can go a long way in engaging your employees and driving tangible business results, impacting everything from top-line revenue to reduced expenditures and greater customer satisfaction. Implement the solution with the highest of expectations and introduce it in such a way that your employees fully understand how it will benefit them directly. And then use the technology to its fullest potential.

Your company will transform itself into a social enterprise over the next few years. The sooner you accomplish that, the sooner you'll be reaping the benefits.

About the Author

Phaedra Boinodiris is the Senior Developer Advocacy Lead/Ecosystem Relationships at IBM. Prior to working at IBM, Ms. Boinodiris was a serial entrepreneur for 14 years, during which time she cofounded WomenGamers.Com, a popular women's gaming portal. There, she subsequently started the first scholarship for women to pursue degrees in game design and development in the US. In 2007, Ms. Boinodiris was honored by Women in Games International as one of the Top 100 women in the games industry. In her spare time, she happily mentors business school students at her alma mater, the Kenan-Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.