Play in the workplace has a perception problem. Let's fix that.

Playing Around

BY BRIAN WASHBURN

Educators and game designers have extolled the virtues of play for years, but in corporate training settings, play still is not perceived as a dignified or efficient way to learn. It's time for training professionals to reframe the concept of play so that it's synonymous with effective, results-oriented training programs.

Here are four ways to start playing around.



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Break the ice

Have you ever been tempted to arrive late to a training session because you knew there would be an opening icebreaker that would eat up time you could otherwise spend at your desk, doing something more productive?

It's the responsibility of the trainer to ensure that play, even in an icebreaker, has a purpose. Here's an example of purposeful play: On a warm Saturday afternoon in India, 75 of the country's most successful ophthalmologists and business leaders gathered for an annual meeting. The CEO of the world's largest eye bank welcomed them. Then he surprised them all when he pulled out a bag of tennis balls.



PHOTO: GETTY

He broke the attendees into small groups and challenged them to pass the tennis ball around from person to person as fast as they could. Everyone went to work, coming up with creative ways to pass the tennis balls in under three seconds. (One group, for example, positioned themselves to "stack" their hands, one below the other, letting gravity do the work of passing the ball.) This activity served to break the ice and tied into a two-day annual meeting whose theme was innovation.

Here are some ways to use play in an icebreaker:

- Select an activity that can serve as a metaphor for your content.
- Tie the icebreaker to your content with debriefing questions such as, "What do you think this activity has to do with the content we're about to cover?"
- Regularly refer to the icebreaker throughout the rest of the learning experience to reinforce the takeaways from it.

Introduce technology

Getting an audience to participate in a webinar can be difficult. Even when interaction is built into the design, audience members' lack of comfort or familiarity with various web-conferencing features could lead them to remain passive observers or, worse, multitask during the presentation.

To address this issue, one international nongovernmental organization decided to use play in its webinar. As participants logged in, they were greeted by a series of questions such as, "Who will win the World Cup this year?" which modeled the polling feature; or "What are three questions you have about this topic before we begin?" which modeled the chat feature. Audience members earned points for each response they gave.

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Even before the presentation began, the audience was warmed up and familiar with the interactive features they would be using later on.

In another webinar, the presenter broke attendees into two groups at the start of the session and ran a Family Feud–style game, pausing to ask questions throughout. Groups of people who had never met before came together across time and space to compete while participating in the online workshop.

These are a few ways to use play during a webinar:

- Issue questions or a challenge to participants as they log in that requires them to use a feature of the platform.
- Establish an optional points system and give away a prize to a high scorer.
- Debrief this activity so that people know they've not only played a game, but learned how to participate throughout the remainder of the webinar.

Engage large audiences

Sometimes logistical challenges, such as a large ballroom full of attendees, appear to limit the feasibility of play. But it's still possible to play in a large group. In a keynote address, leadership expert Steve Robbins asked his audience of 2,000 to repeat the word "silk" 10 times. Then he quickly asked what cows drink. "Milk!" the audience shouted in unison.

Laughter erupted when they were reminded that cows drink water, not

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milk. It was part of a lesson on how the brain works, and Robbins delivered the rest of his presentation on neuroscience to a fully alert audience.

Hiding props underneath seats is another way to involve audience members through play. Professional speaker Phil Waknell distributed two balloons to his audience this way before delivering his presentation. He asked the audience members to inflate the first balloon and let it go to illustrate his point that everything you say is just hot air if you don't tie your speech up with a strong conclusion. Later he asked his audience to inflate the second balloon and tie the end, explaining that a strong ending gives your audience something they can hold on to.

Here are some ways to use play in a large group setting:

- Physical movement has been shown to enhance learning. Follow Waknell's example and place props under your audience's chairs before a session, and then have them use the props to physically engage with the content.
- Whether you're using a call-and-response activity like the "silk" example or getting everyone up to thumb wrestle, keep in mind that there are many more methods than PowerPoint slides to communicate with a large audience. Just be sure to debrief the activity so the audience isn't left to wonder why you had them playing around when you simply could have been talking to them.

Use games for learning and performance support

Bringing game design concepts into the corporate training space has been a hot topic for several years. According to game designer Jane McGonigal, all games share four traits: a goal, rules, a feedback system, and voluntary participation.



The car-sharing service Car2Go has applied these four traits to real-life performance support. To train Car2Go members to drive in a more eco-friendly manner, there is a monitor on the dashboard of these rental cars that scores drivers on the way they accelerate, cruise, and decelerate. When a driver is scoring highly, the image on the screen shows a tree in full bloom with birds happily flying overhead. More aggressive drivers will observe the tree wilting and the birds replaced with images of rain clouds as their score decreases.

Use these tips to design games that drive learning:

- Introduce game elements, such as a leaderboard or another points system, to keep learners striving to add to their individual or group scores.
- Create activities that foster cooperation among learners.
- Develop a storyline that runs the entire length of a learning experience and creates the feeling of taking part in a quest.
- Games work especially well with learners who are competitive, but make sure that learners' desire to win doesn't overshadow the point of the learning activity.
- Keep the game rules simple, or your learners will end up confused and frustrated.

People like to play—but they don't like to feel that their time has been wasted. With a little creativity and some careful planning, training professionals can change the perception of play—turning it into an engaging, purposeful learning method that produces serious results.

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