

# Making a game of work

Throughout most of last year, the sales people at Davis Controls Ltd. played video games regularly – and their employer didn't mind at all.

That's because Davis Controls, which provides instrumentation and control technology for the processing and manufacturing industries, recently started using video games to train its sales force.

"We were looking for training that could modify some of the behaviours and habits of our sales force. I believe this type of training has helped us achieve this goal," said Stephen Kalau, national sales manager at the Toronto-based company, which uses a virtual sales-training program called Momentum, created by E=mz<sup>2</sup> Inc., of Burlington, Ont.

Davis Controls is among a growing number of companies that use game-based training – also referred to as simulation training – to teach new employees or to improve the skills and knowledge of existing workers.

In a 2008 survey by the Entertainment Software Association, about 70 per cent of the 150 large U.S. companies that took part in the study said they used interactive software and



games to train their employees. And among this group of companies already offering game-based training to workers, more than 75 per cent said they plan to expand their use of this technology.

"Games are gaining wide adoption [in the workplace] each year," said Richard Nantel, co-CEO of the Brandon Hall Group, a research and analysis firm in San Jose, Calif., which specializes in e-learning.

"Well-designed games surpass all other modes of instruction," he added. "The reason for this is that no self-discipline is required by the learner to stick to the training. Rather, the learner engages with the content in a way that triggers the brain's reward centres."

## How it works

Traditional employee training often takes place in a classroom setting, with an instructor describing and demonstrating new techniques or technology. But simulation training uses a

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computer to deliver virtual-reality scenarios that mimic typical workplace situations. As part of the "game," workers must complete certain tasks that require a particular knowledge or skill.

For example, to help restaurants train their bartenders, the Miller Brewing Co. has a "Tips on Tap" game in which trainees are asked to do things like pour a glass of beer. When a customer puts an empty glass on the counter, the trainee is expected to immediately put the glass away. The trainee's actions are rewarded – or punished – by the amount of tips accumulated at the end of the game.

The Hilton Garden Inn, part of Hilton Worldwide, uses a virtual hotel, complete with digitally rendered guests, to train new hotel employees in Canada and the United States.

With the Momentum game used at Davis Controls, trainees can be taken through a scenario where they're on the phone to a virtual customer and their goal is to secure a meeting. To do this, they must carry out a conversation, which in the game means choosing from a series of sentences that appear on their computer screen. Each choice they make elicits a different reaction from the



customer, ultimately determining whether they accomplish the task assigned to them.

Most game-based training systems are designed to give workers immediate feedback on their performance, either by letting them know what they did correctly and why it was the right thing to do, or explaining why they failed and providing the right answer.

### **Why video makes a good teacher**

Technology analysts and employers who have used game-based training say this learn-by-doing approach not only makes it easier for staff to grasp new ideas, it also helps them remember what they've learned long after the game is over.

Marguerite Zimmerman, chief executive officer of E=mz<sup>2</sup>, says employees who train on Momentum retain about 80 per cent to 90 per cent of what they learn in a game.

"We measure knowledge retention in the game," she explained. "Every time you're in the game, we revisit those core competencies we know you learned in previous modules."

She said game-based training makes learning the ropes less stressful for new employees, or for workers who are being retrained for new duties, because they can make mistakes without the risk of being embarrassed in front of colleagues or worrying about real-life consequences.

"One of the real advantages of the gaming environment over live training is that it is fair and consistent," she added. In contrast, the success of live training can sometimes hinge on the personality or methods of the trainer and the engagement of the students, rather than on the material.

Stany Hupperetz, a Montreal-based sales representative with Davis Controls who trained last year on Momentum, said learning through a video game improved his ability to remember and apply new skills.

He said that with the traditional training sessions he attended in the past, he often felt pumped up for a few days. "But then you go away and the binder goes into a closet and you're back to the way you were before," he said. With the game training, "the results for me were extraordinary – my bookings went up 40 per cent as I followed the program."

### **The business case**

Beyond their promise to deliver more knowledgeable employees, game-based training providers say their products can help companies reduce, or even eliminate, the costs typically associated with traditional training.

With seminars or corporate retreats, for example, companies often need to put up their employees in hotel rooms and pay for meals and transportation. Companies might also hire a consultant to lead training sessions in the

workplace. Such training expenses could add up to tens of thousands of dollars annually.

By comparison, game-based software could cost as little as a few thousand dollars. Momentum, for example, might cost about \$1,200 a year for a company with a small sales force.

And because game-based training can be done at work, employers are unlikely to experience as much productivity loss as they would with traditional training methods that take employees away from their jobs.

### **The way of the future?**

While some may balk at the thought of being trained by a video game, younger workers are likely to embrace this method without hesitation, said Mathew Georghiou, chief executive officer of Sydney, N.S.-based MediaSpark, which develops educational games and simulations.

Young people's affinity with video games is what's driving the growing adoption of game-based training in schools, Mr. Georghiou said. So it isn't a stretch to expect the same trend to catch on in the workplace.

"The average video gamer is said to be now in his or her thirties," he noted, "so they are already decision-makers in the work force."

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