

## Are you game?

# How gamification can energize participant engagement.

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Humans are game players by nature. So it makes sense for organizations to leverage game-like elements to drive engagement with employees. Enter gamification: the art and science of applying game design to engage and motivate individuals. While it has had success with all demographics, gamification techniques have proven especially effective with millennials—digital natives who have grown up in the instant, on-demand world of smartphones, social media, and online gaming. And while gamification may sound complicated, in the end, it's about tapping into our collective desire to compete with ourselves and each other.

Just how widespread is the use of gamification in business? In the last few years, it's entered the mainstream as a proven business strategy with far-reaching implications. According to Gartner Group, a leading information technology research and advisory company, over 70% of organizations employed at least one "gamified" application in 2014.

Consumer brands like Nike+ and Fitbit offer gamified products to help get people moving and living healthier lives. Google gamified an internal process for employees to submit travel expenses, resulting in 100% compliance within six months of implementation. Even local energy companies have started showing customers how much electricity they're using compared to their "best performing" neighbors to motivate them to decrease their monthly usage.

DC providers are getting into the act as well, leveraging gamification techniques to make the serious subject of retirement planning more approachable and actionable.

## It's time to adopt a new way of thinking

Fundamentally, games are designed to reward players in some way while making the experience more fun and engaging. For many participants, retirement planning is anything but. DC providers have an opportunity to employ these techniques to motivate participants to save more, invest appropriately, and get engaged with their plan.

Some key trends to watch:

- **Traditional participant campaigns are supplemented or replaced by interactive alternatives.** For example, mobile apps or online features that enable participants to visualize different scenarios for retirement—based on their saving and investing activity—are more interesting and interactive than reading a brochure. Once engaged, participants

may be more open to education and guidance, and take the desired steps to improve outcomes.

- **Online tools and calculators provide a personalized measurement, such as a retirement “number” or “score.”** Allowing participants to see how they measure up against a given scale is valuable on several levels. First, it provides an at-a-glance assessment so participants can quickly determine where they are relative to a specific goal. Perhaps more importantly, though, it can drive action: A low number or score can bring about awareness and motivate participants to recognize and solve problems, while a higher number can build confidence and reinforce good behaviors.
- **Providers are leveraging the power of peer competition.** While some participants are self-motivated, many need the extra nudge of competition—or being held accountable to a teammate—to engage. For example, advisors can help sponsors implement contests that pit different locations or work teams against one another to see which group can increase its plan participation, deferral amounts, or knowledge of retirement investing best practices.

## **Technology helps, but is not required**

In addition to discussing web-based gamification with sponsors, advisors can add value by broadening the conversation to include more than just online tools. Suggesting alternative ways to implement these techniques helps sponsors recognize other opportunities to create engaging experiences for participants. Gamification is really about driving behavior, so think about how non-technology touch points—such as phone representatives, account statements, and meeting services—can reinforce gamification techniques used on the Web.

## **Motivate sponsors to move beyond the mundane**

Here are three short-term tactics to consider when discussing gamification with plan sponsors:

1. **Understand that benchmarking is gamification.**

When you can show a sponsor how their plan stacks up against industry peers, it immediately triggers that sense of competition. Employers typically don't want a lackluster benefits program. After all, sponsors offer retirement plans as a recruitment and retention tool—a way to keep the best employees from leaving to go work for a competitor.

The same can be said at the participant level. Showing participants how their deferral rate or account balance measures up against others in the plan or in their demographic can motivate them to take action.

## 2. **Gamify employee interactions.**

Group and one-on-one meetings are great opportunities to use gamification to engage employees. For example, sponsors can define what it means to be a “savings champion” and encourage participants to achieve that level by showing them.

## 3. **Recognize and reinforce the game.**

If your provider has an online retirement-readiness number or score, educate and encourage participants on how to interpret it. And reinforce the value of the tool during group and one-on-one meetings.

Position yourself as a retirement planning coach for this conversation. Then begin to think about your plan reviews with the sponsor or education meetings with participants as coaching sessions to build their skills.

## **Evolving with a changing workplace**

The game analogy can give you a unique approach to address age-old topics, such as plan design and participant education. After all, in sports, there are reasons that players want to work for a winning organization. Behind many successful players is an employer who motivates them to work hard and do their best.

By gamifying key aspects of retirement planning, sponsors have a better chance of reaching and meeting the needs of employees—especially millennials, who represent the largest generation to date within the U.S.

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