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Harper government examines game-playing to motivate bureaucrats

Federal memo says computer games have potential to train public-sector workers, engage citizens

By Dean Beeby, CBC News | Posted: Mar 01, 2015 5:00 AM ET | Last Updated: Mar 01, 2015 5:00 AM ET



A scene from the video game Halo 5. Customized computer games have become a common training tool in the corporate sector - and a Privy Council memo says games are a good idea for the public service. (Microsoft/Associated Press)

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The Harper government is looking at a whole new game plan for its workforce. Literally.

Senior bureaucrats are examining how so-called "gamification" – encouraging employees and citizens to play games for rewards – can improve motivation, engagement and problem-solving.

Gamification is a hot new concept in the corporate sector, as large firms such as Walmart use computer-based games to train workers at a fraction of the cost of old-style classroom learning. The technique is especially suited to a younger generation of employees with lifelong exposure to regular game-playing, especially on computers.

But the approach has not been widely adopted in the public sector in Canada beyond a few small applications, such as at the Hospital for Sick Children, in Toronto.

The Privy Council Office, the central organ of government and the prime minister's own department, now is looking at adopting gamification as it renews the entire federal workforce over the next five years.

"Gamification has the

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potential to advance public service renewal activities," says an internal memo from last June, obtained by CBC News under the Access to Information Act.

"Additionally, gamification may be a useful tool in engaging citizens. ... Future citizen engagement initiatives undertaken by the public service could possibly make use of its techniques."

The four-page memo, entitled "Harnessing the Power of Gamification," was written by Coleen Volk, deputy secretary to the federal cabinet. Volk proposes that game-playing be promoted by a policy think-tank established by the government in mid-February, called the central innovation hub.

Key lessons embedded

Raymond Rivet, a spokesman for PCO, says the hub is not working on any gamification projects "at the present time," adding: "Gamification is among the techniques that can be used to help achieve stronger policy and program outcomes."

Axonify, a Waterloo, Ont., company specializing in gamification for corporations, sells software that gives employees three minutes of game-playing each day, allowing them to choose from among 20 games that have key lessons embedded in them.

Workers accumulate points for mastering the games, and can exchange points for rewards on an eBay-like auction site, says president and CEO Carol Leaman.

"It uses brain science to get them to remember," she said in an interview. "They solidify neural pathways in the brain."

The technique is far more effective than "firehosing them for hours in a classroom. ... It's an entire waste of time to do that."

Axonify's clients, half of whom are retailers, are largely U.S.-based, including Toys "R" Us, General Electric, Bloomingdales, Johnson & Johnson as well as Walmart.

"I do expect government will start to take notice that this is what's going on in the corporate sector. ... Governments tend to lag," she said.

Loyalty programs

An expert on gamification, Neil Randall of the University of Waterloo, said he was "a little shocked and excited" to hear that Ottawa is looking into gaming as a workplace motivator.

Randall, co-founder of the university's Games Institute, has developed a game-based system for the Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital in Toronto, to encourage children to stick with their rehab program. More recently, he developed a game system for this year's Stratford Festival, to encourage a new generation to become theatre-goers.



An internal memo from the Privy Council Office suggests game-playing by federal workers on the job could improve training and productivity. (Adam Carter/CBC)

'They solidify neural pathways in the brain'

- Carol Leaman, gamification expert

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Retail loyalty programs, such as Aeroplan, were an early form of gamification as marketing departments seized on the potential to win and keep customers, he says. But developers are looking for the next phase, such as game-based techniques to engage and train workers.

The Privy Council Office has employed more traditional game-playing in the past to motivate its employees.

In September 2011, it held a one-day event called the Amazing PCO Race, where 370 public servants formed 40 teams to collect points for various tasks.

Among the activities: the Gearing Up for Combat challenge, where participants were assigned to dress a member of their team in either full Canadian Forces Arctic gear or combat gear. Winners won a pizza lunch with the clerk of the Privy Council.

The Volk memo says other federal departments, such as Employment and Social Development Canada, have also used gamification techniques in the past.

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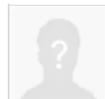


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