Employee Gifts & Incentives

Get in the Game: Applying Gamification to On-the-Job Safety

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BY MICHAEL LEVY

It isn’t easy to put a price on a worker’s health and safety, but if we had to, it would be this: $1 billion. That is the amount U.S. employers pay every week in direct workers’ compensation alone, according to the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration. With a sum like that, one can say workers’ safety is a prized commodity.

So then, why not actually give safe workers a reward for their practices? These days, savvy companies are learning to “game the system” to gain better safety records. I am speaking of gamification, the use of contests or game-play elements to inspire desired behavior among employees. In other words, it’s playing a game in a place or context where we wouldn’t necessarily do so.

Originally a tactic used with success among tried-and-true customer loyalty programs, gamification has now expanded into the workforce and has been successful in fostering company-wide safety initiatives — and for good reason. With $52 billion a year spent on workers’ compensation expenses, every improved practice, every extra safety precaution, every slip and fall can make the difference between profit and loss. It is a small wonder that so much time, energy, and expense is put into minimizing, and potentially eliminating, on-the-job safety incidents.

In this article, I want to share with you some firsthand examples of how gamification works, sharing stories from companies with which my firm, Online Rewards, has worked. These examples may well help you improve on-the-job safety records at your own organization.

But for background, let me first provide a little more color about the concept of gamification.

Learning the Rules

The basic principle of gamification is that the engaging quality of game playing can be applied to commercial situations, particularly to situations where compensation is either not affordable, not appropriate, or both. The strategy can be as simple as earning points toward days off for watching a safety video or earning a prize for taking advanced training courses.

Think about it. Everyone enjoys a good game. By nature, most of us are even competitive enough to want to win. Games get our adrenaline going, which relaxes our brains and allows us to become more focused. Aside from the excitement and enthusiasm of game playing, however, there’s the simple matter of rewards. Winning bragging rights can be rewarding in and of itself, but if there’s a carrot being dangled, we become even more determined. It’s basic Behavior Modification 101: Desired behavior equals reward (but without B.F. Skinner and the lab rats).

So what are the rules? To be sure, the applications of gamification cover a range of formats, including sales incentive, employee recognition, team building, individual performance improvement, wellness, and now, occupational safety. But while there are many formats of gamification, the three main components are:

1. Points – assigning a numerical value to any particular action or to a combination of actions.
2. Levels – some indication of status reached by accumulating a certain number of points. Higher levels, obviously, yield more points and greater bragging rights.
3. Quests – challenges or journeys with tasks to be completed or obstacles to overcome within a specified period of time.

The rewards of gamification can be set up to recognize individuals, teams, or shifts and can also be set up in accordance with blocks of times, such as week, month, or quarter.

Gamification to Motivate Employees

With the success gamification has had within the loyalty industry, it only stands to reason that it would work as well in motivating a company’s employees as it does in inspiring customers. Are there data or case studies to support that? Glad you asked.
In an evaluation of company engagement and incentive strategies, the IT research analysis firm Gartner Inc. detected a trend wherein dramatically more importance is being placed on gamification. In fact, Gartner predicts more than 50 percent of organizations will be using some form of gamification within their employee engagement initiatives by 2015. This follows the trend in the loyalty industry, which has been using gamification to engage consumers for decades.

But while corporations — particularly retailers, grocers, and mass merchandisers — have traditionally leveraged the mechanics of games to build loyalty, increase engagement, and sell product, now more non-traditional types of organizations are beginning to see a different class of opportunities. These organizations are seeing the benefits of applying gamification internally, among their own employees. Today, gamification is used as a tool for:

- Employee performance recognition
- Years-of-service recognition
- Sales incentives
- Company safety

And company safety comes with many rewards. It is important to note, however, that no amount of investment in equipment, facilities, machinery, or practices — not even that great big CAUTION sign — can completely prevent safety incidents. Only the employees are capable of doing that for the corporation.

So where to start? Here are several brief overviews of instances where gamification was successfully implemented to increase on-the-job safety.

**Case #1: Sharing a Bucket of Rewards**

One of the foundational requirements of safety is accountability. The challenge is sharing it across the organization, as one mid-sized custodial staffing company found. Our solution leverages the power of teamwork to foster safety incentives.

The application is straightforward: At the beginning of the year, the administrator authorizes a sum of points to put into a “bucket” to be used for rewards at the end of the year. This bucket is then displayed on the homepages of the custodians participating in the safety incentive program. Providing there are zero lost-time accidents at the end of the year, the total amount of points initially placed in the rewards pot is divided, as rewards, evenly among participants. If any lost-time accident does occur, a portion of the points is deducted from the bucket. Whatever points remain at the end of the year will be divided evenly.

By holding every employee within the organization accountable for the actions of the entire group and also by rewarding the entire group for a stellar safety record, the company has encouraged all workers to support one another and to speak up if unsafe behavior is observed.

**Case Study #2: Team-Based Performance**

Gamification may also be applied in teams, literally. In 2009, a regional electrical company approached us with a plan to instill a culture of safety awareness within its road crew teams. We designed a Web-based rewards program portal for the client that monitored individual employee and team safety records. But instead of road crew teams, we designed the program around football teams, each of whose individual performance was measured against defined goals. Each crew member, or player, could jump on to the portal to monitor the progress of not only his or her own individual safety records, but also of the team as a whole. Teams that achieved their safety targets for the quarter received an equal amount of reward points per individual. The rewards program also empowered each team to customize its program with its own team name, assigned leader, and team icon or logo, all in an effort to cultivate team spirit among everyone participating.

**Case Study #3: Maintaining an Incident-Free Record**

PcS Phosphate Co. is a maker of ingredients used in fertilizers, livestock feed, and industrial applications. While the company was proud of a good safety track record, it wanted to ensure it would continue to operate incident free. So in 2011, recogniz-
ing that its employees were the only ones truly capable of helping the organization achieve that goal, PCS ran a program to inspire workers to maintain their already spotless record.

Having had no reported incidents, PCS realized the most cost-effective way to do this was to spend a little extra on each employee to prevent incidents rather than potentially pay the costs after any such incident. PCS determined that each employee who had an incident-free month would be reward-
ed with so many dollars. The staff was divided into teams, a strategy that encouraged them to think more creatively about how to avoid accidents. The team aspect also added to the competitive nature of the incentive program, generating additional excitement among the employees, which improved morale.

Case #4: Rewarding Safety Education
While the goal of workplace gamification is to inspire desired behaviors, it also can be applied as a fun and rewarding way to learn about company safety policies and hazard prevention techniques.

For example, more companies are inviting employees to take online quizzes based on material that was presented in annual safety training classes. After successfully completing a quiz, employees then earn virtual tokens within their individual rewards account, located on the safety incentive program’s website. Recipients of these virtual tokens can “redeem” to play an online game, such as a “Spin & Win” wheel or a "Scratch & Win" card on the rewards program website for a chance to win a prize instantly.

The Goodness of Gamification
Whether as a means of rewarding employees for educating themselves about occupational safety or rewarding them for working together to prevent safety incidents, gamification is being successfully implemented. And as I said, there are at least 1 billion reasons to use it.

The incentives traditionally used to promote customer loyalty, especially those such as gamification, are finding their way to good use inside our organizations, not only rewarding desired outcomes within our employees, but also — and more importantly — protecting these valuable employees from harm.

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