

Treat Your Career Path Like a Game

Leverage gamification techniques to stay focused on your goals.

BY CAITLIN JOHNSON

A decade ago, I was inspired by a leader who once asked, “How can we use gamification to tap into the hearts and minds of our team and help them contribute to meaningful goals?” During the past 10 years, I have been exploring the science behind how people play games and have successfully developed and applied game mechanics to corporate strategies, leadership development programs, and career-pathing coaching.

Game designers leverage tactics that inspire and activate intrinsic motivation and action. Here are five ways to think like a game designer in creating a career bursting with impact.

Design the end game

One of the first things game designers will do is brainstorm the epic mission and purpose of play. What is the main objective? What does the end of the game look like? Why would people want to play until the end?

Translate that to career pathing by asking: What is the epic impact I want to make? What is my purpose and passion? What gets me excited to wake up in the morning?

Those can be daunting questions to address. To help you, consider the Japanese concept called *ikigai*, which means “reason to live” or “reason for being.” It’s what excites you when you wake up. Four questions are behind *ikigai*:

- What do I love to do?
- What am I good at doing?
- What does the world need?
- What can I get paid to do?

Draw four circles that intersect in the middle of a sheet of paper. Place one of those questions inside each circle and fill in as many answers as possible. As you answer the questions, identify the through-line that interconnects all four quadrants. The through-line connection is your *ikigai*. Note: The Japanese believe a person has more than one *ikigai* and that an individual’s *ikigai* grows and changes with them throughout life.

Build your character

When you start playing a new video game, you usually select a character or avatar. The character gen-

4

Inner Game Player Types

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Dominator. Loves dominating, strategizing, and discovering workarounds; the joy is in beating the competition; may not be a team player

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Keep track of your efforts ... and don't break your streak.

▼

erally comes with a fundamental skill level and basic tools. As you play the game, you improve the character's strengths and experience level. Consider that concept as you build out your own character.

Begin with self-awareness and understanding your intrinsic talents and strengths. Choose from a variety of self-assessment tools that can assist you. Two of my favorites are Gallup CliftonStrengths and VIA Institute of Character Strengths.

Another exercise you can do is to be mindful during the next week of tasks, projects, and environments that energize you versus those that exhaust you. List the things that you enjoy doing, things you do and don't even realize how much time has gone by, or things you may even invest your free time in doing. Conversely, list the things that make you want to roll

your eyes immediately or that you can do but require a lot more energy from you. Use those two lists to reflect on how you can spend more of your time doing what energizes you and less time on the tasks that exhaust you.

Those activities will help you understand what your natural and innate strengths are and where your opportunity areas are. Don't overly focus on your weaknesses. Of course, it's important to be aware and mindful of them. However, keeping with the theme of building your character, your task is to find ways to level up and master your strengths.

Consider the 10,000-hour rule of mastery discussed in Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*: You become a master of your strengths when you invest 10,000 hours or more in building that strength. Also keep in mind the Pareto Law, or the 80/20 rule, where 80 percent of outcomes result from 20 percent of all inputs. Ask yourself questions such as: How can I leverage my strengths more often? What tasks, projects, or roles exist in which I can offer my strengths? How can I ensure I use my top five strengths (your 20 percent) to get 80 percent of my results?

Build your team

As you continue to gamify your career path, you will undoubtedly encounter challenges, pitfalls, and procrastination. Building your team is about



Gamification Myth Busters

Contrary to popular belief, gamification has many benefits for adult learners; think engagement, connection, and problem solving. Here are two myths to debunk.

Gamification entails just badges, points, and leaderboards. While those are the most used game tactics, if you do not use them purposefully, they become bells and whistles that provide short-term engagement. Before adding those tactics, consider how you want to engage the game player and why. Why should someone want to collect badges or points? What's the purpose of being on the leaderboard?

We are adults, so we should not have to play games to get something done. Just do it. Yes, we are adults. And at times, we may need to grin and bear it to get things done. But it doesn't always have to be that way.

Gamification allows for choice, as does life. We can choose to engage in the negative things and allow them to affect our personality and future choices. Or we can explore other options by thinking creatively, creating workarounds, focusing on what we can control, and relishing growth opportunities.

2

Achiever. Wants to climb to the highest level and grab all possible titles; the joy is in the accomplishments; may get caught up in collecting "things" and lose focus on the most efficient way to win

identifying teammates and competitors to engage with along the way.

With regard to teammates, think of establishing a group to support you. It could comprise mentors, leaders, colleagues, communities, friends, and family. Who can you surround yourself with to encourage and hold you accountable?

Next, identify your competitors. Such people, whether they know it or not, challenge you to improve.

Here are some ideas on how to best leverage teammates and competitors:

- Accountability partners will check in with you or may even join you on this quest for career impact.
- Thought leaders or mentors are individuals you can bounce ideas off to brainstorm.
- Competitors are those who may be a few steps ahead of you or in a position you want. Use them as a benchmark or as someone to whom you can reach to inquire about insights on how they arrived in that role.

Go questing

Rather than setting lofty, long goals, try setting short, mini quests. Epic impact is your end game. To help you achieve it, create 90-day quests. Think of them as the levels of your career-pathing game.

Quests have multiple advantages. They are shorter and easier to achieve. They also allow for a safe place to try out tactics to see whether

they provide you with the outcomes for which you are looking.

When you are identifying the next step in your career path, one thing is certain: You want to make a difference in a new way. Once you agree to that, determine how you get from here to there—what does the next step look like? This is where gamifying your career path gets exciting, as games create environments that activate problem solving, creativity, and innovation.

A 90-day objective or quest can take the form of networking with one person every week, researching one role or company every week, or practicing or honing one key skill or strength every week.

Notice I selected one action item weekly. Challenge yourself to think of something you can do consistently and consecutively for 12 weeks, the equivalent of 90 days. After building games for more than 72,000 people, I've learned that 90 days is a sweet spot. It's enough time to gain traction and build consistency to see whether the actions you are taking are making a difference.

Create a way to keep track of your efforts, such as a scoreboard, and don't break your streak.

Level up

When you have completed your quest, crossed the finish line, and completed a level, it's time to celebrate the effort you have put in. When

you think of video games, after you complete a level, there is a celebration of some sort.

In video games, you'll also see the character's experience level bar increase, and perhaps your toolbox will expand with new items that you have uncovered along the way. That is the intent behind this step. It's time to review the actions and effort you have taken during the past 90 days. Look over your scoreboard and reflect on the learnings you have captured. What new experiences have you collected? What have you learned to help you continue to level up in your career?

Based on that information, how can you design your next quest? If you received the desired results, perhaps you want to continue your endeavors. Go for round two and double your points during the next 90-day quest. Or you can adjust your quest and design a different direction for the next 12 weeks. You decide the level of play you need.

As you progress through your career and your life in general, rise above the daily grind and discover ways to make a difference by leveraging your innate talents, accomplishing quests, and leveling up your mastery toward your epic mission.

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3

Explorer. Prefers to unearth new findings and explore hidden trails; the joy is in the discovery; easily distracted and not too concerned with winning

4

Socializer. Likes to build relationships and collaborate; the joy is in winning with others; may get caught up in chatting and lose a sense of objective



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