Teaching experience

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Business veterans claim you cannot teach 'experience', but European researchers say you can. The team developed software that helps players acquire real-life skills and realistic experiences through game playing. But this game is no executive toy.

The interactive software has caught the imagination of world-class business colleges in the USA and elsewhere and it has prompted enormous interest in Europe's leading corporations. ChangeMasters represents an emerging shift in business education, based on realistic computer games.

Colleges and companies believe it gives students real-world skills through 'experience'. "Experience is the best and simplest way to learn anything, that is why it is so valued in the business world," explains Professor Albert Angehrn.

ChangeMasters focused on change management, one of the most important elements of modern business. Change is essential to responding to dynamic markets, consumers, competitors and innovation, and change is one of the most important themes in corporation history.

Protectionism was replaced by globalisation, in-house departments to outsourcing, functional to process-oriented organisation. Change is constant. Even housekeeping tasks, like moving to new computer systems, or daily business activities like new product development require changes to the way an organisation works.
Become a master in the martial art of business, the gaming software way.

Executive games, seriously

But change is hard, rarely goes smoothly and often courts disaster. ChangeMasters plans to make the process easier by equipping executives with real-life skills and realistic project management experience using a serious game. Serious games attempt to achieve real-world results through videogame technology.

The ChangeMasters game contains hundreds of parameters to define the corporation, its people and the project. "It defines the corporation's character and culture, formal and informal networks, all the elements that compose the dynamics of an organisation," reveals Angehrn.

It can even represent Western, Latin American or Asian cultural attitudes accurately. "In China, for example, etiquette and attitudes are very different, so a successful strategy in Europe might fail in China. ChangeMasters can reflect these cultural differences," Angehrn notes.

But it also makes clever use of informal aspects of corporate life. Informal networks, like the water cooler or coffee room, the psychological attitude of individuals, like openness or resistance to change, and even the status of individuals within the organisation.

"Some people have enormous influence in a corporation or department through their reputation, or their informal networks of co-workers," notes Angehrn.

Typically, teams of managers work together to play a game for 90 minutes. "It is not aimed at individuals," says Angehrn, "And we recommend that it is run as a seminar, with a large number of staff forming teams to run through the change scenario, but some companies, like Ikea, run the game in small workshops."

The limits of compulsion

The game allows teams to employ theory through various strategies, including compulsion, but each strategy chosen affects other parameters that can blow up later. "Compulsion is not very effective," warns Angehrn, "Because it can increase resistance." Just like in real life.

Afterwards, the game players are debriefed on their strategy and the lessons of the exercise are driven home.

The game is very difficult. "Nobody wins, nobody manages a painless project. I think this is the way it should be, it should be challenging and it should reflect real life. It tests the limits of managers' confidence. The idea is for people to learn lessons and acquire new skills before carrying out a task in a realistic scenario," Angehrn explains.

But for all its difficulty, ChangeMasters is not insincere. "People wouldn't play the game, or would complain about it loudly if they thought it was 'fixed'," reveals Angehrn.

In fact the opposite is the case, and players rave about the impact of learning sessions with ChangeMasters, commenting that it has changed their way of approaching a project. They say it gives them new tools, and a new understanding of the issues involved in change management.

Not quite Second Life

The game does not look like many modern games. "We initially produced an interface like the online game, Second Life. It had a 3D, richly visual environment. But executives spent too much time exploring the environment rather than playing through the games," he says.

Instead, the screen uses graphs, text and buttons to offer an overview of the game status, track emerging developments and offer players a choice of actions.

The game incorporates the familiar tools of corporate communication, including newsletters, emails, memos, executive information systems (EIS) and formal networks like personnel in a specific department.

Ultimately, though, the game is about helping executives to acquire and practise useful skills, and many organisations, like Ikea, Fiat and the Scottish government, believe ChangeMasters achieves that.

Some of the world's top universities, too, are enthusiastic, and ChangeMasters is used at Cambridge and INSEAD in Europe, Yale, MIT, Stanford and many other of the top-tier institutions in the USA, and CEIBS, the top Chinese school. The ChangeMasters simulations were based on work at INSEAD's Centre for Advanced Learning Technologies (CALT).

ChangeMasters has refined the technical platform and is launching offices all over Europe under the brand AlphaExperiences. Initially, it is offering change management as the primary product, but the game engine itself could be adapted to other scenarios, like product development, and the partners will work on expanding that content.

Ultimately, however, ChangeMasters has an even larger vision, where it will offer a channel for other high-quality business education software to one day, perhaps, become the Amazon of executive education.

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