

Got Game?



Younger managers think and learn differently—Is your organization ready?

by John C. Beck and Mitchell Wade

There is a new generation of workers taking over key positions in your company. This generation is younger, yes, but they're also different in ways that will definitely change how business is done. Our research shows they have an entirely different set of skills. They desire different outcomes in life. The way members of this generation think about their careers, their companies, and their co-workers is a long way from what others have come to expect. How hard this huge new cohort works, how they try to compete, how they fit into teams, how they treat risk...gamers are different from their predecessors in significant and verifiable ways. And those differences are driven by one central factor: growing up playing video games.

Games Have A Huge Impact

If that sounds unlikely, you may—like many of us—have overlooked just what a force video games have become. But games are not a “niche” any more. Americans now spend more money on video games each year than they do going to the movies, and more time at home playing video games than watching rented movies. Already, five out of every ten Americans—about 145 million consumers and employees—play video games in one form or another.

To most outside the video game industry, games are still practically invisible. Most business professionals know that games exist, of course, but usually view

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them as a child’s toy. But many of your workers have spent billions of dollars, and billions of hours, in the virtual worlds created by these machines. This is a powerful information technology, unique in history, and radically more different from television than television was from the technologies that came just before.

This “game generation” will soon outnumber their elders in the workplace. Their way of thinking will soon pass the business tipping point. Sooner or later, those who grew up without video games will have to understand the gamers. That means letting go of prejudices and learning about what makes them tick.

Gamers Are More Sociable

We found the more time young professionals spend playing videogames, the more sociable they say they are. To analyze this, subjects were asked statements like “Being accepted and appreciated by coworkers, having close friends at work, is important.” Frequent gamers, on average, were more likely to perceive a need to connect with their peers.

We don’t know whether more-sociable people sought out games, or whether games made otherwise average people more sociable. What we do know is that, if someone you hire has lots of digital game

experience, then your safest bet is that she will place more value on connecting with the team, not less.

Gamers Like to Win

Gamers believe winning matters. Even when faced with the most extreme version of that sentiment—literally, “winning is everything”—a substantial portion of the game generation agrees. That makes perfect sense; if much of your voluntary life has literally been a game, then winning does seem to be just about everything. As a college student told us: “When you play video games, it’s a competitive thing. Having the controller in your hand makes you feel powerful. When you beat one of your friends in a game, it feels just as good as beating them in real life.”

Gamers Are More Loyal

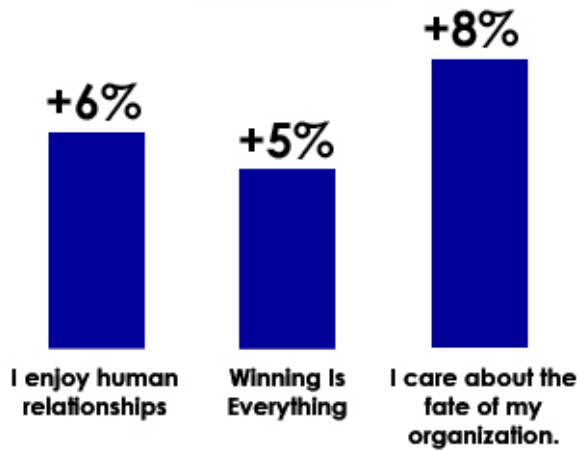
The game generation sees competition everywhere. They believe, quite literally, that competition is the law of nature. So one might have doubts about where that competitive drive is focused, since video games don’t usually involve teamwork. Yet the game generation shows great teamwork skills. They care more about the organizations they work for than other groups—not less.

Gamers Gain Perspective

Gamers also learn from games that “going meta” can be a lifesaver. What we mean is that with distance and control added to your point of view, you can perform better. You can see the strategic situation faster. You can take bigger risks. You can easily separate the emotions that go with getting hit from the analysis of how to survive the next time. The



% difference between Gamers & Non-Gamers agreeing with these statements:



power of going meta comes through over and over, not just within a game, but as you shift from game to game. By sampling so many different realities, gamers become good at separating the underlying principles from the visible surface. They become analytical and strategic. In a way very parallel to executive experience, the perspective games bring begins to add IQ points.

In fact, cutting edge analytic tools that look a lot more like video games than office suites have already started helping decision makers gain a new perspective on large and complex problems that seem impossible to analyze, such as global warming, terrorist threats, and long-term investments in infrastructure.

Gamers Get More Practice

Games provide a perfect practice field to manage the competing interests managers and executives must deal with in everyday life. Training, like analysis, tends to simplify reality; it has to. Young basketball players spend time playing; but the foundation is all those drills, focusing on just a few basic points before tackling complex plays.

Games make logical relationships between action X and result Y much clearer than trying to learn a similar lesson in a classroom or even on the job. With a manageable number of characters, motivations and events, and with almost all relevant information present by design, games are the perfect tool for

teaching critical skills that can be used later on in real life.

Gamers Will Make Great Leaders

Gamers possess something vital for top executives at any age: a sustained, early chance to develop important leadership skills. Leaders are supposed to guide their people toward something better: a happier life, more money, more prestige, greater security. Electronic games encourage players to constantly be looking for that something better. The messages of games are: leave no stone unturned, no door unopened and no box full of potential treasure intact. Gamers learn to look continually for opportunity and improvement.

Increasingly games are teaching their players to manage as part of a team. Interactive games require that individual players join groups to understand and manage the complex electronic worlds around them. This teaches both teamwork and leadership in a variety of circumstances with a constantly changing set of teammates.

But there is one more demand of modern corporate leadership that games instill early and completely—a profound comfort with technology as a tool, not an end in itself. Analysis of elaborate graphical displays, manipulation of many variables and assumptions, and absorbing what happens in real time are all part and parcel of a video game experience. But gamers understand that the technology is there only to assist in making the correct decisions. Successful businesses of the future will be populated by leaders who know how to use technology as an aid to concise decision-making in a very imprecise human world.

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Gamers Are Ready for the Future

Because of all these factors, gamers are better prepared to deal with the challenges of the future than any other workforce before them. Over time, corporations have been forced to become less rigid, more global, and a lot better at responding on the fly. Employees have to work harder but they also have to work smarter. But gamers have already mastered that new management model. Individual control, trial-and-error, constant change—those are all a standard part of life for these up and coming managers. Thus, gaming has created an entirely different learning style, one that:

- aggressively ignores any hint of formal instruction;
- leans heavily on trial-and-error (after all, failure is nearly free, you just push “play again.”);
- includes lots of learning from peers but virtually none from authority figures; and
- is consumed in very small bits, exactly when the learner wants, which is usually just before the skill is needed.

As one mid-career professional put it, “Trial-and error learning a lot of times works best for me. Sometimes it can take a little longer to figure things out for myself, but once I screw something up, I can be sure I’m not gonna do that one again. I definitely prefer a hands-on component.”

Companies need to adapt their training programs to give gamers new ways of learning that harvest their

potential. Said one young manager, “Training would be much more effective if it was more interactive, like a game, with input and interaction with the system. I don’t mind whether it’s a computer or a person, it just has to be more interactive than just reading.” How are your current training tools meeting that need?

Are You Ready For The Game Generation?

Would you have expected all that from videogames? Neither did we when we started this research. But the important qualities of the game generation will go deeper than business acumen, work ethic or competitive drive. It will be how they adapt, learn and overcome the challenges the business world will place in front of them every day. To give the gamers in your organization an edge, you’re going to have to create new systems for them to learn and flourish. Now that you understand a little more about how gamers work and what motivates them, you should be better able to create environments for them to thrive and really get down to business—your business.

Games and gamers are known for nothing if not their exceedingly quick evolution. So it’s worth remembering that to really stay on top of this phenomenon, you’re going to have to keep up. As video games become a bigger influence on our culture, we all will need to pay attention to the ins and outs of what gamers are thinking not only today, but also tomorrow. It’s going to take some effort, but in the end, it will keep you in the game.



For more information on how to manage the game generation, contact North Star Leadership Group at 602.504.8787 or e-mail us at info@nslg.net. Or visit us online at www.nslg.net.