



# Rethinking Gamification

How Demonstrating Personal  
Impact Can Enhance Adult Learning  
and Training Outcomes



# Executive Summary

This white paper critically examines the limitations of gamification in adult learning and training environments. Despite its widespread adoption, gamification often struggles to sustain long-term engagement and effectiveness. By focusing on extrinsic rewards like points and badges, it overlooks the intrinsic motivators—autonomy, mastery, and purpose—that drive meaningful, lasting learning.

Everfi proposes an alternative framework that emphasizes personal impact. This framework uses customization, relevance, and actionable feedback to align learning experiences with individual goals and professional contexts. Through a blend of research, detailed case studies, and actionable strategies, this paper presents a robust argument for rethinking adult education and training to achieve better outcomes.



## Introduction

Gamification, the application of game-design principles to non-game contexts, has become a popular component in adult learning and corporate training. Platforms like Duolingo and Salesforce Trailhead leverage points, badges, and leaderboards to encourage participation. However, while gamification can provide an initial boost in engagement, its effects often wane, leaving learners disengaged and outcomes unmet.

This paper argues that gamification's focus on extrinsic motivators limits its long-term impact. By shifting to tools that emphasize personal impact—those that align learning with individual values, goals, and real-world relevance—organizations can foster sustained engagement and meaningful learning outcomes.

# The Evolution and Challenges of Gamification in Adult Learning

## The Rise of Gamification

The term “gamification” gained traction in the early 2000s when digital platforms began incorporating game-like elements to boost user engagement. By the 2010s, gamification became a popular strategy in education and corporate training, with applications ranging from language learning apps like Duolingo to professional training systems like SAP Litmos.

Gamification taps into basic psychological principles, such as the desire for achievement, competition, and recognition. By rewarding progress with badges, points, and leaderboards, it creates an engaging environment where learners are motivated to participate.

**However, the strengths of gamification—such as its ability to grab attention—can also be its weaknesses. Over time, reliance on external rewards often detracts from the deeper learning and intrinsic motivation necessary for sustained engagement.**

## Limitations of Gamification

Gamification’s reliance on extrinsic rewards is its greatest limitation. While points, badges, and leaderboards can drive short-term engagement, they often fail to cultivate the intrinsic motivation necessary for sustained learning. These limitations prevent it from delivering the meaningful, transformative experiences that adult learners seek.

Several recent studies highlight the temporary nature of gamification’s effectiveness. For example, a 2020 study by Putz et al. analyzed gamification’s impact on knowledge retention and found that while gamification had positive short-term effects, its impact was roughly ineffective after only two weeks (Putz et al., 2020). Similarly, Tsay et al. (2020) noted that learners often experience a novelty effect, with an engagement increase initially that drops off significantly after a short period of time once the novelty wears off.

The reliance on extrinsic rewards for motivation is a primary factor in the drop-off effect. According to Deci and Ryan’s (2000) self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation—driven by autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is more sustainable than extrinsic rewards. When learners engage with gamification their focus on external rewards tends to undermine the development of intrinsic motivation. This directly leads to decreased engagement levels and an inability for learners to achieve desired learning objectives.

These challenges underscore the need for alternative methods that better align with adult learning principles.

# The Case for Demonstrating Personal Impact

To address these limitations, organizations must prioritize tools that emphasize personal impact. By aligning learning with individual goals, values, and contexts, these tools tap into intrinsic motivators and create meaningful connections between content and learners' lives.

## Why Personal Impact Works

### Relevance

Content tailored to a learner's role or aspirations resonates more deeply, increasing engagement and retention.

### Purpose

Demonstrating how training contributes to personal or professional growth fosters motivation and commitment.

### Mastery

Encouraging self-paced learning and providing actionable feedback empowers learners to build confidence and competence.

## Key Features of Personal Impact Tools

### Customization

Personalized learning paths ensure content is directly applicable to learners' unique needs.

### Real-World Scenarios

Training linked to real-world applications enhances relevance and engagement.

### Feedback Mechanisms

Continuous, specific feedback helps learners track progress and make meaningful improvements.

# Case Studies: Moving Beyond Gamification

Several organizations have moved beyond gamification and adopted strategies that emphasize personal impact and relevance, leading to more sustainable engagement and positive learning outcomes. Some notable case studies include IBM, Coursera, and LinkedIn.

## IBM's Smarter Workforce Initiative



IBM's Smarter Workforce initiative shifted from gamified learning modules to personalized learning paths. By integrating data analytics, IBM tailored the learning experience to individual needs and career goals, improving employee engagement and skill retention. Although the exact percentages may vary, IBM's efforts led to a measurable improvement in learning outcomes and employee satisfaction. The focus was on aligning content with performance metrics and fostering career growth through relevant, personalized learning experiences.

## Coursera



Coursera offers a range of online courses with a strong focus on real-world applications, often offering Guided Projects and Specializations. The platform's shift to emphasizing personal relevance has helped learners apply what they've learned directly to their careers. A survey revealed that 87% of learners reported career benefits, including promotions and pay raises, after completing courses.

## LinkedIn Learning



LinkedIn Learning, while offering some gamified elements, has increasingly focused on providing personalized learning pathways based on career aspirations and job requirements. Through its integration with LinkedIn's vast professional network, users are given content recommendations based on their career goals, job market trends, and the skills they need to advance. This focus on professional growth and job relevance has helped sustain engagement and foster a deeper connection between learning and career development.

Each of these examples demonstrates how organizations can move beyond gamification to foster sustained engagement by providing personalized, relevant learning experiences. By focusing on mastery, real-world application, and career alignment, they can significantly improve learning outcomes.

# Developing Engaging Tools

Creating tools that emphasize personal impact requires a strategic approach that aligns learning experiences with the needs, motivations, and real-world contexts of adult learners. The following strategies are key to achieving this goal:

01

## Conducting Needs Assessments

Identifies the specific goals, challenges, and preferences of the target audience, ensuring that the learning experience is tailored to their unique circumstances.

### Why It Matters

Adult learners bring diverse experiences, skills, and motivations to the table. A one-size-fits-all approach often fails to engage these learners because it doesn't address their specific needs. Conducting a thorough needs assessment allows organizations to design content that resonates with learners, making the material more meaningful and relevant.

02

## Incorporating Storytelling

Uses narratives to illustrate concepts, making abstract ideas concrete and relatable.

### Why It Matters

Stories activate emotional and cognitive engagement by connecting learners to the content on a personal level. Research shows that narratives are easier to remember than isolated facts, enhancing knowledge retention. Stories also help learners visualize how the content applies to their own lives, fostering a sense of relevance.

03

## Embedding Real-World Applications

Designing learning activities and assessments that mirror real-world tasks bridges the gap between theory and practice.

### Why It Matters

Adults are often motivated by the practical value of training, seeking skills that directly enhance their professional or personal lives. When learners can immediately apply what they've learned, they see tangible benefits, reinforcing their commitment to the training program.

04

## Providing Continuous Feedback

Delivers actionable insights to help learners understand their progress and identify areas for improvement.

### Why It Matters

Feedback is essential for fostering a growth mindset. Timely, specific guidance encourages perseverance and helps build confidence in learners' abilities.

# Benefits and Impact

Focusing on personal relevance and intrinsic motivation in learning tools offers numerous benefits that contribute to sustained engagement, improved learning outcomes, and organizational success. These advantages not only address the limitations of gamification but also deliver measurable results.



## 01 Sustained Learner Engagement

Tools emphasizing personal impact hold learners' attention over time by aligning training with their individual goals, interests, and contexts.

### Benefits

Unlike gamification, which relies on external rewards that lose effectiveness, personal relevance fosters a deeper connection to the material. Learners remain engaged because they see the training as meaningful and beneficial to their growth.

### Results

Higher completion rates, increased time spent on learning modules, and consistent participation. This sustained engagement leads to better retention of knowledge and skills.

## 02 Improved Knowledge Retention and Application

By prioritizing relevance and real-world applications, learners can more easily understand and remember key concepts and apply them effectively.

### Benefits

Real-world scenarios and personalized feedback help learners bridge the gap between theory and practice, ensuring they retain information and know how to use it.

### Results

Increased proficiency in applying learned skills in the workplace or personal life, leading to better job performance, decision-making, and problem-solving abilities.

## 03 Enhanced Motivation and Satisfaction

Intrinsic motivators such as autonomy, mastery, and purpose drive learners to engage with content on a deeper level, leading to higher satisfaction with the learning experience.

### Benefits

When training aligns with personal and professional goals, learners find the experience fulfilling and rewarding. Continuous feedback reinforces this sense of accomplishment by showcasing progress.

### Results

Reduced learner drop-off rates and positive feedback on training programs. This satisfaction translates to stronger trust and loyalty toward the organization offering the training.

## 04 Greater ROI for Organizations

Tools that emphasize personal impact provide long-term benefits by aligning learning outcomes with business goals.

### Benefits

Engaged learners are more productive and successful in applying their skills, which directly contributes to organizational growth. Tailored training reduces time and resources spent on retraining or addressing gaps in knowledge.

### Results

Increased employee productivity, lower turnover rates, and higher rates of skill adoption. Organizations also experience cost savings and a clearer demonstration of the training program's ROI.

## 05 Positive Social and Community Impact

These tools contribute to broader societal improvements by empowering adults with the knowledge and skills they need to thrive.

### Benefits

Financial education programs can improve decision-making in personal finance, leading to better economic stability for individuals and families. These changes ripple outward, strengthening communities.

### Results

Measurable improvements in financial literacy, health outcomes, or other targeted skills. Empowered learners are more likely to share their knowledge and contribute positively to their workplaces and communities.





## Conclusion

Gamification has played a role in making learning more interactive and engaging. However, its reliance on extrinsic rewards limits its long-term effectiveness. Tools that emphasize personal impact provide a more sustainable, meaningful approach to adult education and training. By aligning content with individual goals, offering real-world relevance, and fostering intrinsic motivation, organizations can create transformative learning experiences that drive success.

### About Everfi Achieve

Everfi Achieve™ redefines adult learning with tools designed to prioritize personal impact. Its Learner Pathways use relevance, customization, and actionable feedback to create personalized, meaningful learning experiences. By focusing on intrinsic motivators, Everfi Achieve delivers sustained engagement and improved outcomes, setting a new standard in adult education. To learn more about Everfi and our solutions for adult financial education, please visit <https://everfi.com/financial-education-adult-consumer/>.

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