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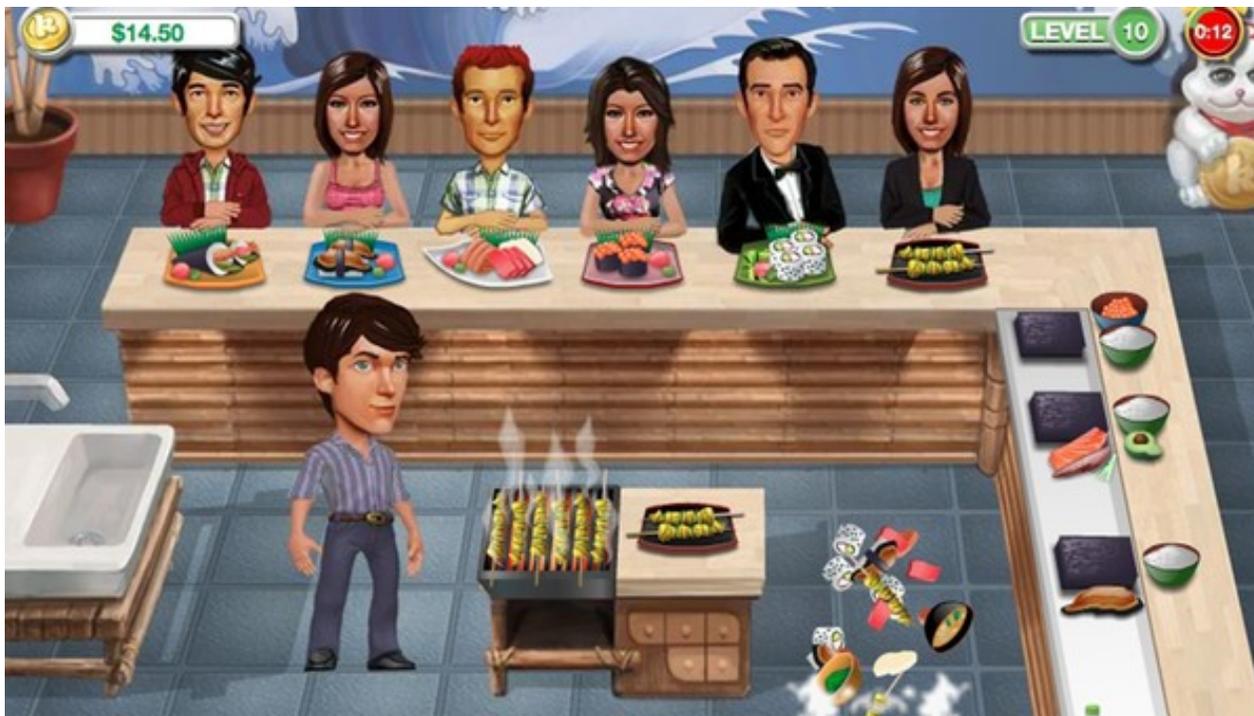
Video games can help bring excluded youth into work

Hannah Kuchler

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Axa's CEO found it stupid at first but came round to the idea, writes Hannah Kuchler



The 'Wasabi Waiter' video game reveals applicants' skills

When managers put on Mary Poppins masks to declare that “in every job that must be done, there is

“With an element of fun”, few employees merrily click their fingers and complete tasks like the children in the movie.

“Gamification” is a case in point. This buzzword describes attempts by companies to turn dull workplace chores into play, perhaps by injecting an element of video gaming or a ranking system. That such exercises are often a disguised way of tracking and boosting productivity can leave workers sulky, not cheered.

An exception is when gamification is used to pave the way to a job, rather than tinker with an existing role.

The Rockefeller Foundation, a US charity, recently teamed up with a start-up called Knack to use video games to assess the suitability of unemployed, underqualified 16- to 24-year-olds for entry-level jobs. A typical Knack game might involve playing a busy sushi waiter to show an ability to juggle tasks, prioritise and be considerate.

With Rockefeller research finding two-thirds of lifetime wage growth comes in the first 10 years of employment, the foundation believes it is vital to search for ways to make it easier to get a first job.

Involving the French insurance group Axa, American Express and the US health insurer Cigna, the trial assessed the abilities of 600 young unemployed Americans for jobs as financial analysts, customer service representatives and insurance claims processors.

What it found surprised some: in the games, 83 per cent of the unemployed scored at least as well as the companies’ existing staff in these roles : evidence of a sort that, despite not having stacks of certificates, they could be trusted and hired.

Rockefeller concluded that the games, designed to test skills appropriate for each role, “hold great promise” for changing the course of youth employment. The foundation is especially excited because unlike intensive training programmes such as one-on-one interview-coaching, video games are easily scalable, creating the opportunity to get a lot of people their first job, fast.

Axa was drawn to the trial after it successfully recruited employees who had certificates from mass open online courses — known as Moocs — rather than conventional universities.

Henri de Castries, Axa’s chief executive, told me that “for the first 40 seconds, you think these are stupid games”. But he quickly came round to the idea, drawing a parallel with the online courses run by companies such as Coursera and Udacity, that first alerted him to the fact the potential pool of talent was a lot larger than Axa was fishing in with traditional recruitment techniques.

Across the insurance industry, old-school hiring methods had poor retention rates, with a loss of up to 70 per cent of entry-level staff within a year. Mr de Castries hopes video games such as Knack's could create better matches between employees and their jobs, encouraging them to stay longer.

Testing by video games could clearly increase diversity at the entry level, allowing not only underqualified candidates but also those who may be discriminated against at interview because of their gender, race or disability.

But why stop there? In many industries, some of the biggest diversity problems are at the top of companies, where white men still fill posts on boards and in senior management, even if entry-level employees are more diverse.

When deciding whom to promote, employers could combine conventional internal performance measures with gamification to prove those hard to grasp qualities including valuable leadership skills such as the ability to encourage or delegate. These skills are not always easy to prove in the rung below management and, even after that, can be hard to monitor from afar.

Video games could help employers overcome unconscious bias — ensuring professionals are promoted on their ability to do the job rather than their confidence in meetings or time devoted to socialising with superiors.

They could help clear a path to what most agree is best for companies: hiring the most able candidates, no matter what their background. Think of it as a spoonful of sugar to get boards to take their medicine and improve diversity from the bottom to the top.

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