



Serious Games

Belgacom puts people at the heart of management

The telecoms sector is changing all the time, which means that to remain competitive, companies have to innovate constantly. And because the most innovative initiatives are often the result of teamwork, most projects are now undertaken in collaborative mode. At Belgacom, the leading integrated telecoms service provider in Belgium, projects such as this are led by team leaders or experts. Whether they're heading up a team in one of the group's branch offices or managing cross-departmental projects, they are expected to convey an exciting vision of the future and motivate teams to build that future together.

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Belgacom is convinced that in complex environments, enhanced performance and efficiency can no longer be achieved only through expertise or knowledge of processes; the focus is now on developing behavioural skills. As Martine Frébutte, Director of Belgacom Corporate University, explains: *"The human factor is essential to us, and this means we're very concerned about the professional and personal development of our team members."*

This is why we feel it's vital to take the emotional dimension of professional relationships into account".

There are 1,750 team leaders among the group's 17,000 staff. A range of training tools oriented towards behavioural skills were made available for them to use in traditional classroom training, e-learning, and tutor-led settings. But these resources didn't focus enough on interpersonal skills: *"After these courses, although staff were familiar with the basic principles of interpersonal skills, they continued*

to concentrate on targets and figures and laid insufficient emphasis on the human aspect", says Martine Frébutte. *"We felt we had to launch a new initiative focusing on interpersonal issues".*

Serious Games: a bridge between training and professional experience

In 2009, aware of the success of Serious Games in both higher education and corporate settings in the US, Belgacom decided to develop a third-generation Serious Game for team leaders, in collaboration with CrossKnowledge. Not only was

The company belgacom

Thanks to its long-standing experience as a historic telecoms operator and the wide range of skills within its teams, Belgacom is the leading Belgian provider of integrated telecoms services.

Continued investment in cutting-edge technology means Belgacom can offer its customers intuitive solutions combining fixed and mobile telecommunications, IT and media, to help them manage and enrich their personal and professional lives, both now and in the future.

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this decision in line with the group's strategy to engage in 'Entertainment and Beyond', it was also motivated by other factors such as a desire to put team members in situations where active listening, assertiveness and leadership are at a premium.

"Although role plays had their uses, they were too brief to teach us lessons that could later be applied in the field", says Martine Frébutte. The group was also eager to anticipate training needs by testing a method that would be likely to attract tomorrow's talents: in other words, 'Generation Y'.

Several partners took part in the project. Belgacom concentrated on business-related issues, collecting information from staff illustrating the importance of coaching. This meant that real everyday situations could serve as a basis for the game scenarios. CrossKnowledge, a company well known for its training methods and highly structured approach, led the project in conjunction with the Vlerick Management School, which provided an invaluable academic endorsement. Technical development was carried out by a specialized division based in the Netherlands, headed up by Ed Fennema.

The launch of the game, and of the full accompanying package, was announced in January 2011 at a conference attended by all the team leaders involved. As Martine Frébutte says, *"a game can't be approached like an ordinary training course. Learners really have to engage with the game over a period of time"*. To promote this collective

experiment, special care was taken over the communication plan that was to support the project. Senior management was given a sneak preview before the game was presented to the teams, and the team leaders then received their passwords by e-mail and a range of tools and resources were made available to them: user guides in the form of playing cards, e-learning modules to help people learn the rules of the game, and special lunchtime sessions.

Games as a vector for interpersonal exchange

This particular game takes the form of fifteen half-hour sessions. Wherever he or she happens to be, at whatever time of day, the player can log in to the portal, enter a password, and use his or her avatar to experience situations inspired by their work. As the sessions progress, the player has to deal with people who have a range of different profiles: some are cooperative, some are sceptical, while some are downright hostile. Decisions have to be made during each session; when this happens, there are three options open to the player. To ensure continuity with respect to his or her own experience, the player is asked to take on real-life tasks. *"For example, after five sessions",* explains Martine Frébutte, *"the player is given the task of persuading two team leaders who haven't started playing yet to get involved"*. These tasks are a way of ensuring that team members are talking to each other about the game, and that it moves beyond the virtual stage and into real life. Moreover, although the game is

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played individually, Belgacom made sure it defined 32 sub-groups of 60 players who are as varied as possible in terms of age, role, and rank. When they log on, players access their own profiles and can also see what game level each member of the same sub-group has reached, which encourages them to talk to people they would otherwise have no contact with.

Although the situations featured in the game represent a finite number of possibilities, the chances of two players finding themselves in exactly the same situation are very slim. This is why, as Martine Frébutte explains, *“players will tend to talk to each other about their experiences, rather than just about the answers they gave”*.

Assessing leadership profiles

During the sessions, players can access their 'scores' via the portal. There are no right or wrong answers; instead the game seeks to establish the player's profile according to criteria such as how open they are to others, how forward-looking they are, how well they manage their emotions, and so on. To help them

make the most of this information, players are given a brochure detailing the criteria and outlining the various leadership profiles.

The HR department has access to operational data on the participants that shows which stage they have reached and their 'scores', and also provides an overall snapshot of the company's leadership profile. The game enables each participant to identify his or her strengths and weaknesses and areas for improvement in terms of leadership and teamwork. Extra training modules are offered to players once the game is over, so that they can develop their skills in the areas they have identified.

To date, 1,280 team leaders have begun playing and about 250 have completed the game. Although it is still too early to measure the benefits of the initiative, Belgacom already considers that getting teams to interact on the subject of interpersonal management in this way has been a great success. As Martine Frébutte says, spontaneous initiatives have already emerged: *“One team has set up ‘midday*

game sessions', getting together at lunchtime to play two sessions and interact informally."

As further proof of the success of the initiative, Belgacom intends to use the technology to develop new Serious Games with a view to training other groups of learners.