Gamifying Support

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Abstract. When applied with care and consideration, gamification can have significant positive effects on support. Utilizing gamification elements, such an leaderboards, levels, badges, and rewards, within a community can help engage customers and encourage them to generate support content. This allows them to self-serve and more quickly resolve their issues. Internal support engineers can also be motivated when exposed to a point system with appropriate challenges, levels, and rewards. The result can increase overall job satisfaction, increase engineer positivity, and lead to better customer service.

Keywords: Gamification; Support; Enterprise; Ticketing systems; Customer help; Leaderboards; Badging; Rewards; Motivation; Self-Help; Self-service; Community.

1 Introduction

Talk of gamification seems everywhere and the numbers suggest that its popularity will only continue to flourish [1,2]. Many companies are experiencing great success as they implement gamification principles within their products [1]. Gartner has predicted [3] that "by 2015, more than 50 percent of organizations that manage innovation processes will gamify those processes" and "by 2014, a gamified service for consumer goods marketing and customer retention will become as important as Facebook, eBay or Amazon, and more than 70 percent of Global 2000 organizations will have at least one gamified application." Riding this wave of interest, and market and development movement, the present paper aims to discuss ways we can gamify enterprise support.

To understand concepts and terminology discussed later this paper, we must first define some items related to gamification. Gamification is the use of game elements design mechanics in non-game contexts [4,5]. Common aspects of gamification [4] are:

- Creating interest and fun
- Challenges, missions, and competitions
- Reputation
- Rewards
- Community and social connections

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Common gamification terms:

- Points serve as encouragement and keep score. Points serve as feedback and track progression [4,6].
- Leaderboards allow people to track and visually monitor their progress relative to others [7].
- Levels are "rewarded increasing in value for the accumulation of points." Statuses are rank or level of an individual. [7]
- Badges are "visual representations of some achievement within the gamified process [4]."

2 Gamifying Customer Actions

Enterprise customers contacting support are commonly database administrators or system administrators in our industry. They are college educated and technical. In some circumstances customers know nearly as much (technically and in product knowledge) as support engineers. Furthermore, they collectively hold the knowledge about how their products are being used and any customization. Details about extensive customization are rarely communicated back to the support company. Customers with questions or issues could often learn from other customers (because they've experienced the same problem). The majority of issues within service requests have been logged previously by other customers.

How do you get customers to help each other in order to allow them to collaborate in a timely and effective manner without having to wait for "formal" help? It requires customers to do two things: 1) answer questions and offer advice to other customers experiencing difficulties. 2) author articles to help prevent other customers, so these answer can help other avoid creating formal request for service. Database administrators and system administrators are extremely busy and work in a demanding environment. They most commonly don't have the time and/or motivation to do these things. But they also don't like waiting for answers, especially, because of their expertise have that feeling that someone already knows the answer.

Communities are commonplace and becoming perhaps the most prevalent way companies attempt to facilitate customers helping customers. Communities allow customers to ask questions and have the customer community respond and help resolve their issues. This often leads to interesting discussions and examples. It may also spawn related questions and answers. With a quick sampling of the support space you can find communities that allow forums to be moderated by an expert customer and even some that allow customers to author articles on particular topics. But as you might expect, the quality can be of an "uncertain" nature.

Theoretically, this would be an easy way to engage with customers and to help offload service request handling. In practice, you will find some communities in a state of voyeuristic comatose. Customers often go to communities to read questions and responses to common issues or post their own question in hopes that somebody can help them out. Very few customers take the time to respond to questions raised by

other customers. [8] Most do so with a brief response; participation drops dramatically if a response requires more. It's understandable given that customers don't work for the companies that host these support communities. It's not a core job requirement and there is nearly no incentive for them to spend time and effort helping others out. Interviews with intrinsically active community members (i.e., altruistic gurus) suggests that even these members often find responding time consuming and draining, deterring them from their job priorities. Given the voyeuristic nature of communities and job pressures and demands, how do we encourage customers to participate actively in communities?

Providing points to customers for each way they participate in the community (posting questions, responding to questions, moderating communities, authoring articles, rating other customer responses, verifying solutions, etc.) is a good place to start. These points should be weighted, such that simple tasks (like asking a question) get you fewer points than a more meaningful and effortful posting (such as posting a validated response to a question). [4] Companies need to be careful, otherwise they might encourage customers to post a bunch of uninteresting questions or rate a bunch of responses (without reading them thoroughly). Points may accumulate over time as the validity and effectiveness of the post is verified. For instance, if Customer A posts a question, they might get one point for posting the question, but if the rest of the community rates the question as a good and useful question, then Customer A gets five for the posting of the questions. Additional customers who mark this post as useful or "solved my problem" continue to accumulate points for the poster. The same principle should be carried through into responses as well; if a customer posts a response or solution they get some points, but not nearly as many points as they would get if the community rated the response or solution highly. The key is to give appropriate weighting for the behaviors your company wants to reinforce and make it proportional to effort and usefulness.

The points should be associated with levels. Those levels should be significantly challenging to get to. If the levels are too easy, it won't keep people engaged, but if they're too hard then people will get discouraged [4]. Typically gaming theory would have levels become more difficult to achieve as your investment in the game grows. The reinforcement of levels goes quickly early on (like reinforcing a new hire with praise), but starts to slows over time as one becomes a master. Challenges to get to the next level get harder, requiring more "value" to be provided, like uncovering new secrets. The same applies to technology challenges that a customer might overcome to provided sophisticated answers to complex problems. Sometimes you can get people engaged by making the first couple levels easy and then increasing the difficulty to make an equal incremental movement.[9] The individual's point total and associated status should be prominently displayed at all times. The community should also have a leader board displayed ubiquitously, which posts the top contributors of all time and top contributors for a smaller increment of time (e.g., daily, weekly, or monthly).[4] The hardest part is figuring out the point levels for each level. I suggest first piloting with a small group of customers or in a few verticals to test out your point system. It will likely need some adjustment prior to exposing to the whole customer base. It should be noted that this is not simply set up and go. Ongoing care and maintenance

must be applied to monitor, tune, and validate the effective use of the system. Each level should be associated with a proper name and reward.[7] Sometimes the name is significantly rewarding enough. For example, to be called an Oracle Guru could carry some clout and therefore motivate people to participate in the community to get the title alone. For other people, a title won't be enough and you'll have to reward them with an additional element. Providing the ability for customer to badge external sites with their newfound "status" can enhance the value of the level. That is, provide an image or badge that can be added to Facebook, LinkedIn, or a résumé.

Rewards can be difficult. First, companies face monetary restrictions in compensating customers. Oracle, for example, can only give gifts to customers that have value of less than $10. This is hardly motivating to database administrators and system administrators making a professional salary. More importantly you need to know what actually motivates customers. If you don't know what motivates your customers, you won't be able to appropriately reward and reinforce desired behaviors. Our research with technical enterprise customers indicates that they want rewards that they can leverage to get further in their career and increase their salary. Customers indicated that they wanted something they could put on their resume, like a certification or special Oracle status. They also indicated that receiving free Oracle University classes or books would be motivating.

Gamification can have huge impact: generating support useful articles and documents, reducing service request creation, and reducing business costs. However, in order for this to happen, customers have to learn to trust the sources and be able to feed back results to further vet and verify the sources. If they don't use and value the content that other customers create, it all falls flat. It's important to note this because some customers have indicated that they won't accept just any solution or advice from another customer, particularly when issues involve complex problems. If they trusted and implemented an unvetted solution they might experience even more serious issues. These issues could end up costing their company millions of dollars. Customers want vetted solutions. They want a trusted Oracle support engineer to read through the suggestions and indicate which ones are Oracle recommended and which ones are not. If they had this validation from Oracle, then they could feel safe to trust the solution and implement a fix. If not, they might read it, but would rarely ever try it out (unless they were extremely desperate or in an extremely controlled and contained environment).

Simple knowledge games/quizzes might be used to educate customers and generate knowledge. For instance, a knowledge trivia game could be used to have customers type a short answer to generate knowledge material (like, "provide your best trick to increase performance"). An enterprise company could then collect this and generates support documents (like tips and tricks or FAQs). The game would tie correct responses, or responses seen by others in a forum and rated as valuable, to rewards (such as bonus points). It is tricky to balance points, interactivity, and customer value/effort.

It's easy to recognize how gamifying customer actions benefits a company offering support. It helps generate support material, it can help reduce service request creation, and it can help reduce costs to the business. However, it should also be recognized that the benefits extend to the company's customers as well. Customers can self-serve

by quickly finding a greater number of solutions to their issues. Well regarded and rated solutions go the top of search results, like well rated products at a shopping site. Self-service offers the most expeditious and desirable means of resolving issues according to customers; many customers indicate that creating a service request is their "last resort". Furthermore, customers have greater access to customization information; customization spawns many customers' questions and issues and can be very difficult (for a company offering support) to acquire information about.

3 Gamifying Support Engineer Actions

Gamifying customer actions is important because many companies have large customer bases. Over the totality of the customer base, actions accumulate quickly for customers whose job it is to interact with a company for support on a regular basis. This is not typical of a consumer product, where you might never raise a support question for your phone, toaster, or speakers. But with sophisticated enterprise software working with a product vendor is standard practice. Gamification can also improve internal support processes even though the number of internal support engineers can be 100 to 1,000 times less than the number of customers. This is for two primary reasons: First, a single support engineer repeats actions more frequently over the course of the day than a customer. The frequency of these behaviors multiplied by the number of support engineers is often equitable to the frequency of customer behavior multiplied by the larger number of customers. Second, engineers are involved with more steps in the support process and at nearly every step have more control and influence over the process than customers do. Organizations with as few as 10 or as many as 10,000 representatives can benefit from gamification.

The first area to implement gamification principles into the internal support processes should be training. Just as you can use gaming principals and techniques to help educate customers, you can use those same methods to train support engineers (particularly technical support engineers, who require deeper understanding and experience than first level support engineers). Training of support engineers is often long, arduous, and most often a very isolating experience. They spend a lot of time familiarizing themselves with the product(s) and various types of environments, reading through collections of issues, and learning the support processes and methodologies. Simple games (such as the knowledge games mentioned above, games involving mock customer issues/scenarios, or training missions, quests, or challenges) along with testing and levels can help keep engineers engaged during training, help track their progress, and motivate them to do well. Training and testing engineers is not at the first start of a job, it can be continue through an engineer's tenure with a company; as new products and processes emerge.

The job of a support engineer is challenging. Issues tend to get repeated across different customers. The larger and more complex the products, the more likely engineers have specialties. Even unfamiliar issues have a ring of familiarity. Secondly, most support organizations have a specific process they want their engineers to follow, especially during the first steps in resolving a service request. They discourage

and often reprimand engineers for deviation from that process. These support processes are followed with little variance on every service request. There are typically set steps that an engineer takes to clarify, validate, research, and resolve customer issues. The monotony of a support engineer's job often causes engineers to lose interest in their job and cut corners. Gamification can help to both reward complex tasks and encourage the following of rote processes that have little intrinsic reward for their completion.

Customers contact support because something isn't working properly. The very nature of that means support engineers deal with customer complaints. Some customers can be especially harsh and unkind when contacting support; support engineers take the brunt of that negativity. Furthermore, if the issue is critical, the support engineer must bear a certain level of stress as they attempt to resolve the issue quickly. Support organizations are always concerned about customer satisfaction; consequently, support engineers are instructed to remain calm and positive, regardless of the issue and/or how the customer treats them. The stress of dealing with customer complaints, while simultaneously being pressured to resolve as many service requests as possible, can lead to engineers burning out. How customers respond to survey's about the quality of their interaction, tied with the criticality of the issue (as a unbiased gauge of stress) could provide another source of points for the engineer. The feedback loop for them seeing the points accumulated from "tough" calls and how this is tracked and shared with the organization can help keep the engineer focused on the solution while working to keep their composure in stressful times. Other metrics, based on analytics within a call or support center can also drive points, badges, and esteem as we will discuss in a moment.

If done correctly, gamification can keep support engineers engaged in their work, increase job satisfaction, increase engineers' positivity (and consequently customer satisfaction), and improve their overall work experience. Having a point system, with goals and/or levels that the engineers work toward keeps them engaged and deters from the repetition and boredom in what they do. Working to overcome harder challenges and to attain higher levels brings novelty into their work environment (where there otherwise wasn't). These same point systems and levels/statuses attained by the support engineer also serve to reward them. As mentioned before, the nature of support makes it a complaint-based business. Customer can often be quite negative and irritated. Gamification can provide support engineers rewards and help them to feel positively about their job.

Support organizations track certain metrics very closely to evaluate how their support organization overall and their support personnel are performing. Time to resolve a service request, number of service requests closed, and customer satisfaction are key measures. During performance reviews how well a support engineer or support group is doing on these dimensions is commonly discussed. This sets up extremely well for gamifying support. Leaderboards placed in the internal support application(s) can help support personnel keep track of their numbers. These numbers can be shown over time, and in comparison to other engineers in their group or top-rated engineers. This can be very motivating, because individuals at the top work hard to stay there and individuals at the bottom work hard to get out of the basement. Where engineers rank

on these scales can also be connected to levels, status, and badges. Individuals can take great pride in where their position on the scale. Furthermore, it's very easy to connect these ratings to rewards, such as bonuses, raises, promotions, PTO, and preferential choice in what they work on.

Much like we discussed earlier about customers creating support articles, it's even more critical that internal engineers create support documentation. Sometimes this gets deprioritized relative to service request handling, making it difficult for engineers to write new articles when they're dealing with high volumes of cases. If support organizations want to encourage the creation of more valuable support artifacts they can implement some gamification principles, like those we discussed above: points for useful articles generated, as measured by the customers' ratings of that particular document. More detail can be found above in the discussion of customers' participation in communities. It would work nearly identically for internal engineers, except that they would be generating more polished, detailed, and vetted documents.

4 Gamifying Support – Potential for Making It Worse

The bulk of this paper reviewed the opportunities to gamify support, gamification doesn't come without some risk to a support organization. Gamers quickly learn how to game the game.[4] Likewise, engineers will quickly learn what produces points and how to most efficiently collect them (particularly if they're motivated by the reward system). This means both customers and engineers will adapt their behaviors accordingly. These could be desired support behaviors or they could be undesired artifacts of how the gamification system was set up. Constant attention and tuning must be given to the system to ensure desired effects. It's critical that you don't reward people for pointless actions. It will decrease intrinsic motivation and increase meaningless behaviors.[10] Gamifying support could result in dehumanifying customers. Be careful that support engineers don't get so caught up in the "game" that they forget that customers are individuals whose feelings and thoughts must be considered throughout the process. Finally, don't let the games interfere with core business tasks. The job still needs to be every bit as efficient and effective as it ever was. Gamification is meant to enhance that, not get in its way.

5 Conclusion

When applied with care and consideration, gamification can have significant positive effects on support. Utilizing gamification elements, such as leaderboards, levels, badging, and rewards, within a community can help engage customers and encourage them to generate support content. This allows them to self-serve and more quickly resolve their issues. Internal support engineers can also be motivated when exposed to a point system with appropriate challenges, levels, and rewards. The result can increase overall job satisfaction, increase engineer positivity, and lead to better customer service.

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