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How play and experimentation in digital playgrounds can drive human performance

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David Mallon:
Welcome back to Capital H, the podcast where we explore the latest trends and developments to make work better for humans and humans better at work. I'm your host, David Mallon. I'm a managing director in Deloitte's Human Capital practice in the US, and I'm chief analyst for our Insights2Action Research and Sensing Team.

Today we're going to dive into another trend from this year's Global Human Capital Trends research: the digital playground. Technological advancement, most notably new technologies powered by Generative AI and other technologies that other parts of the organization are already reasonably familiar with, such as a digital twin in the context of engineering and supply chain. These new technologies combined are bringing the potential for dramatically new ways of working; new ways of working that can elevate human performance, that can increase outcomes for both organization and worker.

But to deliver on this promise, we're going to need safe spaces where we can play, where we can encourage curiosity. We're going to need digital playgrounds, where we can experiment and explore how to bring these new technologies to bear.

I'm going to be joined by a few of my Deloitte colleagues and authors of this year's research, and we'll talk about how play and experimentation in the digital playground can drive human performance. Let's dive in. It's time for our round table discussion on our 2024 Global Human Capital Trends report chapter on the digital playground. I'm joined by two of my Deloitte colleagues today, Dany Rifkin and Lauren Kirby.

Dany's a manager in our San Francisco office. She works with tech and media clients at the intersection of emerging technologies and workforce strategies. Lauren is a manager in our Nashville office who serves clients across

industries, helping them think through tech strategies, especially given the adoption of technologies like AI.

Lauren's also been an author of our Global Human Capital Trends report for the last three years. Dany and Lauren, thank you so much for joining us here today.

Dany Rifkin:
Thanks so much.

Lauren Kirby:
So excited to be here.

David Mallon:
Lauren, let's start with you. So, digital playground, such a sort of fun set of words, but what do we mean by it? Especially in the context of human capital, driving human performance? What is a digital playground?

Lauren Kirby:
That is a really, really great question. I think we are all aware in our personal lives of the increasing amount of technology available right at our fingertips. And organizations are feeling the same thing. They're experiencing that same increase in technology in the form of rapidly advancing suites of digital tools that they can use to achieve their transformational business results, and customer results.

But often, in the race to implement these new technologies and to use them to better impact the bottom line, they often overlook one really, really important aspect of the equation, which is the impact on the workforce.

Very few organizations today are really looking at the benefits that those technologies can bring to the humans at their organization. So, the topic and the term "digital playground" came out of that question: how do we combine the human impact with the business impact when it comes to our organization's tech?

And the answer is, we can create something called a digital playground, which is a safe space that encourages intentional play and curiosity among workers to experiment and explore completely new ways of working within the technology.

David Mallon:
So, intentional play, curiosity, I love the notion, but Dany, maybe get a little bit more practical for us. What does this mean tangibly?

Dany Rifkin:
Yeah, of course. Well, when you think of a playground, you may think of a structure or a physical place, which makes sense. But in this case, we're not talking about a singular space, physical or virtual—we're really talking about both making tools and experiences available that can be experimented with in a risk-free way. So, creating safe spaces to play and take risks where the current infrastructure may not allow employees to do that.

And perhaps, most importantly, the digital playground is a mindset shift. It requires a culture of innovation and a culture of play as you were talking about. Which one where behaviors like experimenting, risk-taking, collaborating, and frankly, having fun are encouraged and celebrated.

And you can have all these technologies, but workers won't use them if they don't feel safe. So, the point of a digital playground is to allow workers to experiment with new processes and technologies without putting business outcomes and employee-employer outcomes at risk.

David Mallon:
I think a point both of you made, which is pretty crucial here, is that despite our usual tendencies to focus on the bright and shiny objects, this notion of the digital playground isn't so much about the technologies themselves, as about how we are using them, why we're using them, how we set them up, how they're perceived.

And it's not just to answer operational questions, but Lauren, as you mentioned, the human ones as well, we are using them to make decisions about our people to explore with and for our people, and as the playground notion suggests to play.

Let's poke on this notion of play and experimentation. What's creating this? Why do we need more play? Dany, I'll start with you and then Lauren, dive in.

Dany Rifkin:
Yeah, I hope that this is not a question that too many people are asking, to be frank. I think it should be a bit self-explanatory why play is important in our lives, and I think it's frankly a shame that it doesn't come up in our workday more. But I do think at this moment in time, it's become increasingly important.

There's a few factors that are driving this need for a digital playground. The first is, as a result of AI, other technologies and shifting economic conditions, entry-level roles may decline and they may require new skills. You know this. I don't think it's too big of a secret that there is a lot of conversation in the market around the impact AI is going to have, particularly on junior employees.

And in many organizations, automation and AI may be able to complete these more routine or lower-risk tasks that have traditionally been done by those in entry level or more administrative roles. Things like administrative tasks, drafting outlines, or conducting routine data analysis.

Or in a more tactical example, in customer service, chatbots are handling a significant portion of customer inquiries, and increasingly are able to accomplish simple strings of tasks.

But it's not all doom and gloom—as work becomes more dynamic, less predictable, and more composed of making judgments in the face of constantly changing data, the relative importance of capabilities such as curiosity, empathy, and resilience as inputs to the work is rising.

So, by giving workers a space to explore, experiment, play, have fun, digital playgrounds can both cultivate and capitalize on workers' human capabilities. Digital playgrounds can help workers refresh their skills, step into new roles, adapt to a rapidly shifting job market, figure out what they like and they don't like, and they can help organizations develop the vision and resilience to thrive under challenging conditions.

Lauren Kirby:
Two more things I would add, Dany: One is workers really do need the time and

the space to learn how to collaborate with these smart technologies. In the example that Dany just cited, and in many of the examples that we're seeing organizations use today, technology isn't just replacing human effort or augmenting human effort. The smart technologies are handling tasks within processes and within work groups, which requires workers to build new modes of interaction.

The experience of the work for the human worker is changing, which likely explains why executives in our trends research rated human–machine collaboration skills as very important. And it's not surprising then that the human and machine collaboration is a continually evolving field of inquiry, and one of growing importance to human performance, and worthy of the kinds of dedicated experimentation and dedicated play that could take place in something like a digital playground.

And the other is, we are continuing to see distributed teams changing how work gets done. As we move further and further into this hybrid-work reality, workers are increasingly working at different times, in different places, and at varying speeds. We've talked about this for a while, and it's only going to continue. And because of this, there is a pressing need for spaces, for ideation, experimentation, and exploration that span time and distance.

David Mallon:
So, we have a better understanding maybe of the bigger picture, sort of what and why of all this. Let's talk about the technologies, and there's certainly a lot. I'm going to kind of let you all bounce back and forth between yourselves and your examples in this question.

But what are, first off, some of the key tools, suites of tools that are available today that might be best suited for being added as an apparatus in your so-called digital playground, and maybe for each tool, if you could share a real-world use case.

Lauren Kirby:
Of course. I will start us off with the one I think that's the top of everybody's list, the top of everybody's mind, and really, the top of everybody's newsfeed, Generative AI. One example is a Fortune 500 software firm tested a new GenAI system with its customer service agents who are required to have both detailed product knowledge and really top-notch problem-solving skills to successfully resolve customer issues.

And their system combined a recent version of a GPT platform with proprietary machine learning algorithms based on data from previous customer service interactions among their 5,000 agents. And it provided real-time suggestions for how agents should respond to customers as well as links to relevant internal documentation to help solve technical issues.

And in doing so, the firm realized a 14% increase in the number of chats and agents successfully resolved over the span of an hour, and an even greater increase, 35%, for less-experienced agents, helping them move more quickly through their learning curve.

Dany Rifkin:
I love that example, Lauren. Another emerging technology I spend a lot of my time thinking about is spatial computing. I was actually in LA this week at the Augmented World Expo trying on a bunch of cool new technologies like haptic gloves and the newest head-mounted devices like AR glasses.

It's a really exciting space to me and it continues to be a space in which both hardware and software are moving very quickly. Spatial computing, of course, also known as immersive tech AR/VR, augmented reality, virtual reality, metaverse.

Some of the most compelling applications for the enterprise today include VR training, augmented work instructions, and digital twins, which are 3D simulations of physical spaces or processes.

One great example of this is before construction even began, BMW created a digital twin model of an electric vehicle production plant set to open in Hungary in 2025. They built digital twin simulations to allow workers to train together in a virtual 3D environment, which gave them the opportunity to gain familiarity with the new space and practice location-specific skills, the freedom to experiment, play, and make mistakes without ever being able to set foot in a physical environment.

Those digital twins also allow BMW teams to collaborate across multiple locations, to work out bugs and process inefficiencies before the plant opens, which saves time and cuts costs.

Lauren Kirby:
Another example that I just want to add, taking digital twins kind of to the next stage, is digital doppelgangers and digital humans. So, digital doppelgangers replicate specific skills, knowledge, and other attributes of an individual or a small team.

A digital human is an avatar used in a virtual environment that can produce a whole range of human body language. Two quick examples on this. One is a team at the MIT Media Lab is working on technology to enable machine intelligence to replicate a person's digital identity so that others can "borrow" their identity to provide consultation or to help with decision-making in the absence of the source human.

For example, the technology could be used to create a doppelganger of a corporate lawyer that provides legal expertise to clients at a reduced fee, in essence, borrowing the identity of the lawyer.

HP has actually already used AI in their call centers to route customer calls to the agents best equipped to handle them, but has evolved the AI to act as a digital doppelganger, replicating the skills and the expertise of high-performing call agents to incorporate them into its algorithm.

Dany Rifkin:
I'd like to share one more example of a digital playground we set up within our own practice in human capital. At the end of 2023, as Deloitte was building earlier versions of some of the GenAI tools we're using today, we wanted to build GenAI capability into our practice and get folks who were already excited about the new technology playing with it within the context of our business.

So in a few weeks we launched and ran what we called the GenAI Prompt-a-thon, which is a name we made up to reflect that this

is largely a group of nontechnical strategy consultants across levels interacting with a multimodal GenAI tool in natural language. Participants came up with use cases to solve real client problems more effectively and efficiently and pitched their solutions to a panel of AI leaders.

Some of these use cases were immediately relevant to our business and we shared them with practice leaders and actually continue to talk about them in external circumstances as well. Clients get really excited about some of the ideas that our team members were able to come up with.

And what was so great about this process is we were able to identify an organic talent pool of folks interested in contributing to GenAI initiatives. We built GenAI fluency among a wide range of folks. We literally had first-year analysts all the way up to partners participating, and we came up with some great applicable use cases for our clients.

This was also a great opportunity to provide feedback to make the tool better, which is of course an important part of developing a new tool, particularly with an emerging technology, and that team was able to get feedback from a group of folks that they may or may not have been able to access if we hadn't run this experience. And most importantly, on the topic of this call it was extremely fun and was another great example of just bringing a lot of fun to everyday work.

David Mallon:
It does sound fun, and I've had a chance to do some of that kind of playing in these sandbox environments myself, and I see it even in the work that I do, is just a way to explore how myself was going to look in the future when it's enabled by these sorts of tools.

Both of you, the examples are wonderful. Lauren, I'm reflecting on the doppelganger, and you see new stories every week around these days for example, politicians replicating themselves on the campaign trail because they can't necessarily be in more than one place at once. The examples are coming fast and furious, and I'm glad we're talking about how we're starting to derive value from them.

So, first off, I want to thank you both for your time today. We'll go ahead and wrap up today's conversation. Just any final parting thoughts on what is obviously a very emerging topic, lots of great experimentation and play, obviously, that's why we're here—but any final parting thoughts you'd like to leave with our listeners around digital playgrounds especially as work continues to evolve into the future? Dany, I'll start with you.

Dany Rifkin:
Yeah, I think I would remind leaders that the accelerating influence of emerging technologies means that the next few years and probably many years after that are going to be full of change. Some of that, we're ready for, and some of that, frankly, we're not.

But we can't treat adopting tech like GenAI and spatial computing as a typical tech adoption. What we're tasked with is really cultural transformation. So, creating and encouraging the use of digital playgrounds and the mindset shifts that make them possible is I think the great leadership challenge of the next decade. In short, what got us here isn't going to get us there.

Lauren Kirby:
I completely agree Dany, and on maybe the flip side of that coin, I want leaders to feel really, really inspired about the possibilities in front of them. Yes, I completely agree. They have to treat this as the true transformation that it is, the challenge of the decade.

But if they, and if we are able to get this right, we all stand to benefit. And I personally am so excited to see the acceleration of creative new ideas that can transform into ROI faster than ever because people now have the tools to truly experiment.

David Mallon:
That's a good place to end. Well, that will do for today, thank you both.

That brings us to the end of today's episode of Capital H. I'd like to extend my thanks to my Deloitte colleagues who joined us today and shared their thoughts. So organizations are likely going to need many digital playgrounds, each involving a different set of tools, and of course, leaders and workers. Each of these playgrounds may have a unique purpose. Some specific to a particular project, and it may end when that project is over. Others will be more open-ended, with many potential uses and as much about exploration as decision-making. The potential uses for experimentation and play in service of better outcomes are practically infinite for both the organization and the worker.

Thank you listener for tuning in today. We look forward to having you on future Capital H podcast episodes, and especially as we continue to explore this year's 2024 Global Human Capital Trends. If you're interested in learning more about that research, you can find the full report at Deloitte.com/hctrends.

Of course. Let us know what you think of Capital H. Rate us on whatever service you find us; and look us up on social media. We'd love to hear from you. Thanks again, and we hope you'll continue to join us as we explore the topics and trends that focus on putting humans at the center of work. Till next time.

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