Brandon Hall
—GROUP—

Using Digital Simulations to Coach Engagement Managers at McKinsey

McKinsey and Company
Best Advance in Coaching and Mentoring
October 2017

Brandon Hall
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HCM EXCELLENCE AWARDS
SILVER
EXCELLENCE IN
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
2017

Company Background

McKinsey&Company

Company At-a-Glance	
Headquarters	As a global partnership, McKinsey does not have a "headquarters." Its managing director chooses the home office. London is the current choice.
Year Founded	1926
Employees	25,000+
Global Scale	Worldwide, 120 locations in 62 countries
Customers/Output, etc.	McKinsey is a global management consulting firm, committed to helping institutions in the private, public, and social sectors achieve success.
Industry	Professional services
Website	www.McKinsey.com

Budget and Timeframe

Budget and Timeframe	
Number of employees involved with the implementation?	6 core team members
Number of Operations or SMEs involved?	20+ experts within and outside the firm; in addition; user panel of rising Engagement Managers supported decision-making along the way
Timeframe to implement	9 months

Start date of the program	December 19, 2016

Business Conditions & Business Needs

Engagement managers (EMs) play a pivotal role on McKinsey client-service teams: An EM serves as the day-to-day face of the firm to its clients, the portal to the rest of McKinsey, the brain integrating all the team's thinking and efforts, and the trouble-shooter when project emergencies flare. EMs balance the needs of client stakeholders, McKinsey leadership, and their own team of consultants – often having to make and justify tough trade-offs among those groups. It can be said that an EM's performance is the single most critical determinant of the quality of experience and degree of impact delivered on an engagement.

Rising into the EM role is a huge shift in responsibility for McKinsey's consultants, and it can be an anxiety-producing one. It marks the transition from "leading self" to "leading teams," and it is the point where many colleagues discover that some of the strengths and behaviors that brought them success in their careers to-date are less useful or even impediments to success going forward.

The role can feel very isolated, with only one EM typically assigned to a team and, with teams often geographically dispersed, new EMs can lack natural peer-coaching avenues. Where EMs are focused on a single client project, their senior engagement leaders are managing multiple client engagements. While EMs have support, they may not have an opportunity to receive daily apprenticeship.

In the past, the company supported the role transition with a digital simulation modeling exceptional performance, rewarding "best" decisions that facilitated a balance among the stakeholders but without the contextual constraints of time, budget, or team capacity. While popular with learners, that simulation did not prepare them for complexities they'd soon be stepping into and, at the same time, it set up an almost impossible standard of performance.

The importance of the EM role, the difficulty of the transition, the limited outlets for "organic" on-the-job coaching, and the need to enhance the existing learning program contributed to the decision to reshape this role transition for learners. The company chose an innovative strategy for its new EM Accelerator program, leveraging coaching in a digital "serious game" (EM Gateway) with personalized follow-up in a WebEx-enabled session.

Overview

Distinctive coaching shines a light on what learners can't see themselves, sensitizes them to new ways of thinking, targets areas of need that might not be easily observed, enables greater insight into one's strengths, and suggests paths forward in development areas.

For its rising EMs, McKinsey asked, "Can we scale that model of coaching, and deliver it to our learners in a role that is normally somewhat isolated? Can we enable in a digital event an experience that typically only happens live and in-person?"

Figure 1: EM Accelerator Program Composition
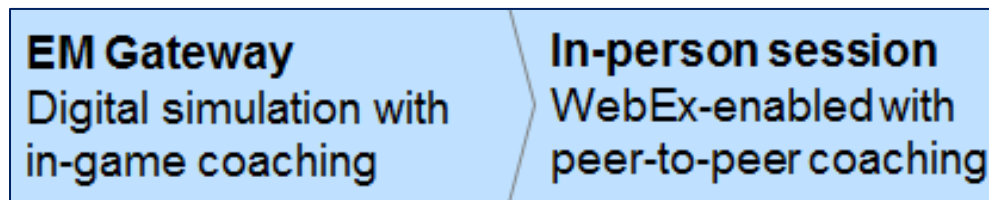
Source: McKinsey & Company 2017

The EM Accelerator program, including the EM Gateway simulation, was designed to provide coaching that enabled mindset expansion and performance enhancement, using digital and social coaching experiences.

The program has a global footprint and scope, and its digital and distanced-based format allows it to easily engage several hundred colleagues each year, with scalability to handle more as the organization grows. The program's design allows it to reach learners "just-in-time," at-the-moment of transition into the EM role.

Program Objectives

- Offers rising engagement managers a set of practical leading practices, advice, and curated tools to enable them to "hit the ground running" in the role.

- Gives new EMs a rich baseline view of how their individual tendencies, strengths, and blind spots play out relative to the requirements and success factors of the EM role – and to begin to shift their mindsets and behaviors.

- Provides a forum for peer coaching at the EM level, filling what is often a coaching void for many EMs.

EM Gateway Simulation

As a sophisticated digital game, this simulation allows learners to get their feet wet in the role, making the kinds of strategic and tactical decisions typical for EMs, navigating the sometimes conflicting needs of colleagues and stakeholders.

Coaching in the game is provided in multiple ways:

- Metrics on a dashboard.

- Comments in the voices of the stakeholders and an internal "coach."

- Summative take-away reports.

All these modes focus less on right/wrong decision-making and more on shedding light on the implications of learners' decisions and surfacing EMs' thinking as they consider their options. Who is impacted by their decision? Whose experience is being neglected? How is the team's answer to the client's problem change the outcome of this decision?

EM Accelerator WebEx Session

In the Accelerator session (distance-based and WebEx enabled) learners share and reflect on their experience in the game, discuss the strengths and blind spots they observed and saw reflected in their take-away reports, and receive/provide 1:1 coaching with peers.

While EMs spend a lot of time working with junior team members, they often don't work alongside their peers, so coaching can draw from analogous experiences rather than shared ones. Even with 24 possible endings, the digital simulation provides a shared experience to baseline sessions' peer-coaching conversations.

Design and Delivery of the Program

As noted, the pre-existing digital simulation for rising EMs offered one view into the role. It was intended to model the exceptional performance all strive for in engagements, and consequently reward "best" decisions regardless of the contextual constraints of time, budget, or team capacity.

While popular with learners, that simulation did not prepare them for the complex trade-offs they'd soon be stepping into and didn't provide them with insight into their own likely habits and preferences in the role.

Modernizing that simulation with game mechanics, user analytics, and an enhanced in-person follow-up has helped the company address pressures that new EMs face in their roles and deliver a truer-to-life experience. Rather than simply providing a set of leading

practices under ideal conditions, McKinsey enhanced the simulation as a game and made it part of a blended learning experience that provides longer-term coaching.

The company is now better able to mirror back a powerful view of learners' strengths and blind spots relative to the EM role without learners having to endure the real-world bumps and bruises that this kind of self-insight would cost.

EM Gateway Simulation

The first part of the EM Accelerator experience is EM Gateway. This is an immersive, fully digital simulation lasting approximately 90 minutes that gives learners a chance to experience the excitement, tension, and dilemmas of the EM role in a risk-free learning environment. Rich coaching is delivered via insight-generating visualizations of their decisions and qualitative input from a fictional "coach" and other characters in the simulations.

Figure 2: EM Gateway Simulation

Source: McKinsey & Company 2017

EM Gateway is a blend of both real-time and turn-based play. While the game is structured in turns, the up-front portion of each turn typically consists of a two-to four-minute timed window of opportunity to check emails, investigate the new analysis and insights the team has generated, review the overall thinking of the team, and check and attempt to bolster individual team members' morale and performance.

As in real life, how players prioritize their limited time is crucial. There is simply no way to "do everything!"

**Figure 3: Blend of Real-Time and Turn-based Play**

Turn-based simulation is built on the branching story of client engagement, where the decisions that are made alter the flow of the experience that follows. For example, in one turn of play, the learner must choose between meeting with a key client stakeholder to discuss the current state of the team's solution or meeting with a McKinsey expert to enhance that solution before sharing it with the client in a later round. Is the client going to be satisfied with a delay if the quality is noticeably higher or frustrated that the player blew him off?

What happens when the player does meet with that client stakeholder later in a simulated dialogue? How can the conversation be structured best to deliver insights the client wasn't expecting to hear? Will the player hold his ground gracefully when the client pushes back on a new direction for the project? These trade-off-driven, stakeholder-impacting decisions reflect the reality of the EM role and help surface learners' incoming strengths, biases, and blind spots.

Figure 4: End of Phase Reflection
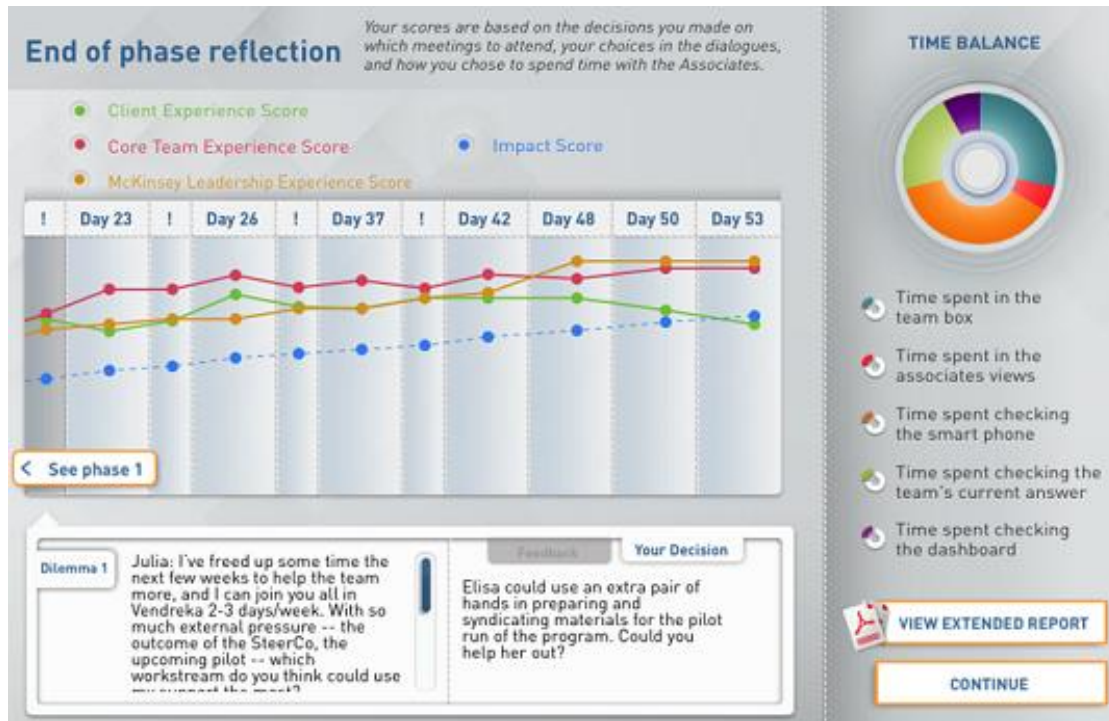
All these decisions offer opportunities to mirror back learners both in-the-moment and in the aggregate, where their strengths and blind spots are, i.e., to provide the insight that comes from good coaching.

The power of digital analytics provides quantitative insights that are not available even to the most observant in-person coaches. Since all the decisions represent trade-offs among stakeholders and around the quality of the team's effort, the game dashboard offers insights into how their decisions impact these areas.

Behind-the-scenes analytics enable coaches to share back to learners how much time they're spending in different areas of the game, e.g., reviewing documents, "talking" to their teammates, meeting with one stakeholder versus another, and can reveal personal habits and tendencies that may be influencing their overall performances.

Figure 5: Feedback from a "Coach"

For a more personal touch, qualitative feedback comes in the form of advice from a fictional senior "coach" observing the engagement and from the characters' reactions in the story. These comments provide more perspective to help interpret the data on decisions made and suggest what new problems may need to be mitigated in upcoming turns and in real life.

EM Accelerator Session

The company saw an opportunity to extend and enrich the coaching experience beyond the simulation, connecting experiences to real-life issues that transitioning EMs are beginning to see in their new roles.

Debriefing the simulation in the EM Accelerator, synchronous WebEx-enabled session enables learners to share their new insights with peers and senior faculty members. These sessions run for two hours, with part of the session consisting of a faculty-facilitated discussion of the simulation experience and the remaining part of the session devoted to peer coaching conversations tailored to the interests and needs of individual learners.

Figure 6: Simulation Debriefing
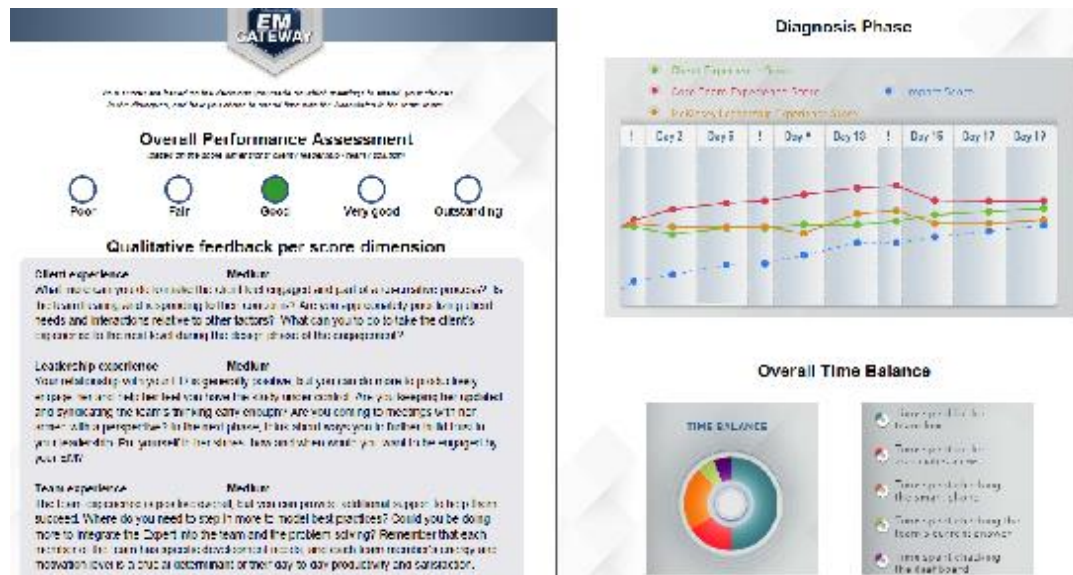
Prior to facilitated discussions, learners are asked to review their individual feedback reports from the EM Gateway game and to be prepared to share their biggest takeaways and challenges with their colleagues. Since the simulation provides a shared context and different results – 24 possible endings – these discussions open mindset-expanding, "what if" thinking.

For example, one learner may arrive at the discussion having played the simulation with a strong bias toward engaging the client early and often, while another learner may have played the game focusing more on leveraging the expertise of the team's leadership and experts. These players have very different experiences, perceptions, and outcomes from the same game. The sharing of these decisions, coupled with exploring the thinking and mindsets that led to them, are eye-opening.

From both the facilitated and peer-coaching discussions in the Accelerator session, learners grow in their understanding of the pressures and requirements of the EM role and emerge with a sharper view of what they need to address in their own skillsets and mindsets as they begin the role themselves.

The result of this enhanced self-understanding is that they are now ready to pursue targeted follow-up coaching and support from their real-life mentors, teams, and from each other.

Adoption of the Program

Like many organizations, McKinsey does not mandate its training for firm members, but positions each opportunity by the impact it will have on learners and how it will address their challenges. Learners then opt into the programs they feel will benefit them.

The company positions EM Accelerator as the leading option for rising EMs and strongly encourages them to participate. To date, there has seen widespread, highly encouraging adoption and penetration rates, due to the program being entirely distance-based and very much "self-serve," rather than required, in its construct.

Since its December 2016 launch, McKinsey has had 68% penetration with its learner audience for the program, compared with 44% for the heritage program this time last year.

One challenge anticipated for learners was making time for the simulation prior to the in-person session. Play can take one and a half to three hours, making it hard to fit into a busy work schedule. To mitigate that time element, the game was designed with both a mid-point and a final take-away report, so learners can still participate effectively in Accelerator with only 45-60 minutes of play.

Figure 7: Program Challenge

Source: McKinsey & Company 2017

To further encourage adoption, the company made significant efforts to create awareness by "marketing" the program at different levels of the organization. A "Hollywood-style"

trailer for the simulation featuring a fictional news broadcast builds excitement, and local office learning leaders encourage participation among the target audience.

Measurable Benefits

Because its focus is on helping new EMs make their transition into the role, the main benefits the company expects see from the coaching experience are:

- Improved self-assessed confidence and readiness for taking on the new role (both in absolute terms and relative to a control group).
- Improved "360" feedback on EM performance, particularly from the perspective of senior engagement directors and EM team members.

These types of metrics were deemed highest priority to use as proxies for impact because they are readily measurable and "capturable." The company is primarily measuring impact via end-of-program and post-program surveys and interviews.

Going forward, the company will evolve its metrics using more rigorous advanced analytics methodologies to test for relationships between program participation and end outcomes – client impact and experience, quality of team experience, and advancement/retention of EMs.

McKinsey also is planning a multi-year, longitudinal view of impact where it looks at trajectories retention/advancement of participants across the one and a half to two and a half years they typically spend in EM roles.

Improved Self-assessed Confidence and Readiness

Through surveys, learners rate the simulation's effectiveness in preparing them for the EM role at 6.3/7.0, as compared to 5.8/7.0 for the heritage simulation. The Accelerator facilitated session also is yielding encouraging survey results, particularly given its distance-based WebEx format, earning a rating of 6.1/7.0 for the effectiveness of the peer-coaching.

Feedback

Qualitative data, in the form of learner feedback, often focuses on appreciation for the feedback and peer-coaching experience:

"I think the trip to become an EM is a long journey, but EM Gateway was a very effective and cool way to initiate it."

"Overall very impressive – I particularly liked the detailed feedback and recommendations that could be downloaded."

"It was great having the opportunity to discuss problems/solutions of being an EM with others in my situation (transitioning to EM)."

"The best parts were the insights from colleagues in the same role or ahead sharing real world experiences and tips. Awesome training!"

Improved 360 Feedback on EM performance

With the new EM Gateway simulation and Accelerator program in the field for 3+ months – with rollout occurring at a pace of 30-60 learners a month – the company awaits gathering ample 360 data from a critical mass of EMs who have participated in the program.

The company believes a critical mass of participants (at least N = 100) who have been in the field for their first one to two engagements as new EMs is essential to getting an accurate "read" on its impact, comparing this group with a control group of new EMs who did not take part in the program. McKinsey expects to have a first set of this data by July 2017.

Overall

The company's experience in developing and deploying the program surfaced insights and plans to continue exploring in three main areas:

- The use of a rich simulated experience to provide insight into learner behaviors.

- How that simulated experience can create a tailored foundation for both digital and live coaching experiences.

- The massive amount of powerful and insightful data generated that the company is just beginning to learn how it can leverage to drive additional support strategies.

Leveraging Simulations for Insight into Learner Behaviors

Gameplay in a complex branching simulation creates "memories of the future," a hypothetical record of how new EMs are likely to perform in the field. The company has been able to leverage that hypothetical thinking to support its learners imagining themselves into their new roles, problem-solving their needs, and sharing them with peers for peer-coaching that will enhance their development journeys. The simulation helps them experience challenges in a safe environment and learn from the insights it provides on their performance.

Leveraging Simulations for Extended Coaching Experiences

McKinsey believes the combination of digital coaching provided by the simulation and a facilitated group discussion and peer-coaching experience is a powerful one. The group discussion of the simulation allows for coaching-oriented exploration of participants' underlying mindsets and thinking and for participants to receive personalized coaching on the experience from others.

As a result, it is emerging from the early days of the program's launch feeling excited about the potential for using this type of blended digital and the 1:1 coaching and learning program to help colleagues "make the leap" between key role transitions with more confidence, self-awareness, and, ultimately, career success.

Leveraging Huge Data Set from Simulation Play for Learning Strategy

On the back-end, the company is keen to use the data "exhaust" created from the digital EM Gateway simulation to perform advanced learner analytics, another innovation for its learning organization with this project. Analysis of hundreds and eventually thousands of players' individual decisions and behaviors in the simulation will give a deeper insight into how learners are performing, whether they're improving with repeated play, where their strengths are, and where there are gaps in their skillsets.

McKinsey is interested in developing a clearer picture of its audience members and their performance to help refine the ongoing development journey as a group and as subgroups, by geography, by incoming tenure, and by gender. Data is still preliminary, but the company hopes to start leveraging insights from the analytics by the end of this year.

About Brandon Hall Group

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