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## IBM Goes Virtual to Train New Workers

November 27, 2006 -

Video games might not be the first thing that comes to mind when business officials discuss training, but IBM is using that medium to aid its global onboarding efforts, particularly in China, India and the United States.

The program is called IBM@Play, which also uses the virtual world of the Internet, is part of IBM's \$100 million expenditures in new technologies, and it was developed by IBM Research in partnership with IBM's Learning business unit.

In addition to speeding up the process of introducing the company's cultural values, decision-making regimens and necessary technical skills, IBM@Play was developed to accommodate thousands of new employees who live or work in isolated areas that are not close to centralized IBM facilities.

IBM@Play uses online 3-D virtual worlds that can be found in platforms such as Second Life and Planeshift, which is an Indian program in which people interact through lifelike digital personas called "avatars."

Seizing upon the popularity of these programs, as well as their inherent social network capabilities, IBM aims for the program to eliminate problems associated with working in a remote, satellite office.

"New IBM employees separated by thousands of miles will be able to mingle, interact and share ideas in the virtual world before their first day on the job," said Ted Hoff, IBM vice president of learning. "They can learn real-life working skills such as signing up for benefits, developing code as part of a global team and ramping up sales skills before they meet with IBM clients."

With its socially-motivated technology approach, this role-playing game can become more than a modern learning tool like video games and simulations, which have become popular in corporate learning scenarios. Instead, IBM@Play creates a digital realm where learning, collaboration and play are all integral to the work environment.

Hoff also said that because of the fun, game-like nature of the program, new employees are likely to have fewer inhibitions and be more willing to make mistakes because they'll regard their participation as play, not actual work.

Venturing into the virtual world to deliver learning is not new for IBM — about half of the company's employees already do their learning online. In India, IBM has been using "virtual worlds" to help onboard employees since August. In China, the company will begin to use a program called Fresh Blue for college students who plan to work at IBM after they graduate, which will help the future employees get a feel for the company before they actually begin working, thereby decreasing their learning curve and increasing their productivity earlier.

Beginning next year in the United States, IBM alumni will have the opportunity to mentor new employees through virtual worlds. This program will be a component of "Greater IBM," a virtual world project that already represents a Fortune 500 company's largest presence in the virtual world.

"The 3-D virtual world presents a new way for IBM to train thousands of new, geographically dispersed employees," Hoff said. "Through technology innovation, IBM is finding new ways to help employees connect, form social networks and collaborate to solve business challenges."

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