Are Training Games a Waste of Time?

THERE WASN'T MUCH TO DEBATE with our October 1995 FaxForum survey question on the use of training games: 100% of the respondents use them, and 76% use them in all or most of their programs. Even the one respondent who emphatically let us know what he or she thinks about games, "I hate them!", admitted to using them in some programs.

What good are they? The reason why all the respondents incorporate games into their training is because games are beneficial. At the very least, they hold participants' interest. At best, they help create a positive learning experience and enable people to retain the material. As Edward Scannell, director of the Center for Professional Development and Training, Scottsdale, Arizona, and co-author of the best-selling, training games book series, says: "People are not content to be 'talked at.' They want to take an active role in their own learning. Games get people involved and clearly enhance their learning."

Fun was also not an issue with the respondents. Ninety-eight percent said that training should be fun. Of the remaining 2%, one person split hairs by pointing out that sometimes a simulation can be involving but not necessarily fun. The other person cautioned that what is fun for one individual may not be fun for another, and that sensitivity should be exercised. Drawing on personal experience, this resondent shared that he or she likes competitive games but dislikes being asked to "make animal noises" or "to hug" another participant.

About a quarter of the respondents used games in each of the four survey choices: as icebreakers or active-learning exercises and to increase retention or to review learning points. The responses were fairly equally divided among the choices for "What kinds of programs are best supported by games and other fun activities," with "teambuilding" having a slight edge. (See accompanying graph.) "Other" answers included finance, product knowledge, customer service, sensitivity issues, and listening skills.

The type of activities chosen ranged from board games to interview exercises—with the percentages also equally divided among the choices. (See the accompanying graph.) In keeping with its TV popularity, a "Jeopardy-like" game was mentioned most often as a favorite training tool. Rick Welebir, employee development specialist with the Metro Washington Air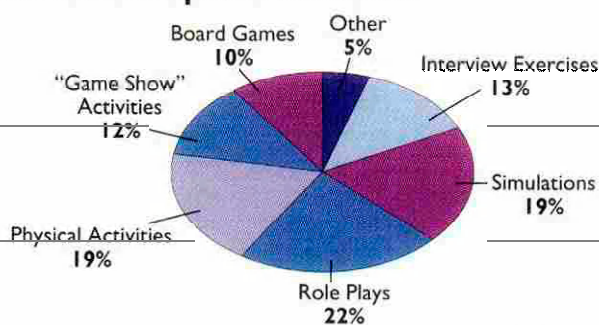ports Authority, uses props and music and awards prizes in the version he uses. He finds that it's a good closing activity as well as a way to review main points in customer service training. He, as well as others, find that it fosters team spirit.

Other favorite games of respondents range from the usual to the unusual. The usual includes a get-acquainted exercise where participants form into small groups and find three things they have in common that are not job-related. Another game shared by Bobby Cline, project manager from Georgia Tech, uses dice. He explains: "A small team of participants throws a pair of dice 100 times to collect data and construct a bar graph on how frequently each number came up." He uses this game for teaching problem-solving tools in statistical process control and for team building. He also shared with us that one pair of dice is "loaded" to illustrate to participants what can happen when something goes awry in a manufacturing process.

Perhaps one of the most unusual games mentioned, and surely one of the most fun, was having a team build a tower out of gumdrops and uncooked spaghetti—*without talking!*

Not surprisingly, 99% of the respondents labled games an "effective option for workplace training." Obviously, the one person who reported hating them cast the dissenting vote of they're "a waste of time." From this survey, at least, it looks as if games will continue to be used in training as a way to stimuate learning.

Which of the Following Activities Have You Used in Workplace Training Programs You've Developed or Delivered?

Board Games 10%
Other 5%
Interview Exercises 13%
"Game Show" Activities 12%
Physical Activities 19%
Simulations 19%
Role Plays 22%

What Kinds of Programs Are Best Supported by Games and Other Fun Activities?

Management Development 16%
Other 4%
Diversity Training 10%
Communication or Interpersonal Skills Programs 17%
Team Building 18%
Technical Training 11%
Sales Training 12%
Total Quality Management Training 11%