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HEALTH & WELLNESS

# Why More Companies Are Putting Lego Bricks in the Office

Executives believe bringing in the colorful brick toys helps with creativity, anxiety and communication

By Daryl Austin

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The engineers at German company Metafinanz snickered when they saw small piles of Lego bricks awaiting them in the conference room. The compliance team was skeptical, the risk management team was openly critical.

“But by the time we were done, the biggest critics had become the system’s loudest champions,” said Matthias Gotz, a strategist at the business and information consulting firm in Munich.

Lego A/S, the Danish maker of colorful building-block toys, was on the brink of bankruptcy in the early 2000s. But the company turned things around by making several changes, according to analysts and a spokeswoman for the firm. Gone were products that weren’t construction bricks. Instead, the company expanded its range of traditional Lego sets to also include popular licenses, like “Star Wars,” “Seinfeld” and “Harry Potter,” along with famous landmarks and other products meant to entice both children and adults.

Last year, Lego posted more than €7 billion in sales, up from about €2.2 billion in 2010. It is once again the top toy maker in the world.

The latest driver of growth for Lego is those adults who were using the product at home are also bringing it into their workplace. Those companies and individuals bringing Lego products into the office say it helps with creativity, anxiety and communication.

One driver of such growth is a program called Lego Serious Play. LSP is a training tool where employees are asked to address company concerns or aspirations by first building a small Lego model from a handful of bricks, then describing what they constructed and why.



V2X employees in Colorado Springs, Colo., using Lego bricks in a daylong workshop focused on enhancing business development processes. PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, JULIA VANDENOEVER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (2)

The system is designed to improve communication and enhance a company’s performance, according to Robert Rasmussen, a business consultant in Denmark who helped develop the program more than two decades ago. LSP has been used by the U.S. Naval Warfare Division, Harvard Business School and spread across energy, transport and finance industries. Companies including Google, Ernst & Young, Microsoft, Visa, Lexus and Procter & Gamble have used it.

LSP training workshops cost \$500 to \$5,000, range from two hours to two days, and might include a handful of employees or many dozen. There are about 13,000 certified LSP facilitators worldwide today, up from about 2,500 in 2015.

“Two years ago, there weren’t many U.S.-based facilitators like myself, but it’s exploding here now,” said Wendi McGehee, a professor of organizational psychology at Azusa Pacific University in Southern California who teaches the program to her students and when consulting local companies.

Other companies are using Lego products in different ways.

Communications technology giant Ericsson uses the product to teach programming concepts to schoolchildren and has used Lego robots to demonstrate how machines change the way we live.

Google’s New York campus has a Lego room where employees can get out of creative ruts and stimulate new ideas through building Lego models, according to former employee Adam Singer and a representative from the company. Engineers at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, Calif., use plastic bricks to plan and show concepts through construction design.

“South Park” co-creator Trey Parker surrounds himself with Lego sets at his company’s production studio, as detailed in the 2014 documentary film “A Lego Brickumentary.” Mr. Parker and others in the film said the prescribed instruction of building specific Lego sets is creatively liberating and therapeutic, according to film co-director Daniel Junge.

A representative for Mr. Parker declined to comment further beyond the benefits he spoke to in the documentary.

Jessica Milmeister, director of enterprise quality at McLean, Va.-based government services company V2X Inc., began using Lego elements following an LSP demonstration. Ms. Milmeister said individuals typically come to her office in Colorado Springs, Colo., to discuss a problem by explaining it verbally before. She then asks them to build a Lego model showing the same problem while explaining what each brick represents or means.



Jessica Milmeister trained in LSP facilitation to help her better communicate with her employees.

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“I often find that they build the model with assumptions that were not already explained, allowing us to dig in to find the true root cause of the problem,” she said.

The use of Lego in the workplace has been the subject of multiple studies that show how communicating through the bricks can help companies develop problem-solving skills, improve communication and overcome creativity challenges. There is further research on how it helps work-related stress and anxiety.

Of course, bringing piles of Lego bricks into the workplace isn’t going to fix everything. The system and product isn’t a panacea against issues that run deeper than communication breakdowns or the ruts some individuals and companies experience.

“Understanding what Lego Serious Play is not is just as important as recognizing all it can be,” Mr. Rasmussen said.

Lucas O’Ceallacháin, a coach development lead at the Australian Institute of Sport, uses LSP to train future coaches and Olympic athletes.

Mr. O’Ceallacháin uses the product by giving his trainees a handful of bricks, asking each person to build a model that demonstrates how they see themselves as a coach. He also likes using Lego elements to encourage participation from those prone to introversion.

“Everyone contributes equally when they have the same pile of bricks in front of them,” he said.

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