SkillGym AI Digital Role Play to Support Leadership Soft Skills Development Through Practice: A Case Study

Learning Outcomes of a Practice-Based Methodology to Boost People's Self-Awareness in Managing Key Conversations

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Abstract—This article shows the impact of delivering a Training Bootcamp to a population of 171 learners applying a methodology based on AI Digital Role Play delivered on a consistent basis. In this bootcamp, participants have leveraged the opportunity to consistently practice in a safe environment a wide range of leadership key conversations and reflect on the impact of their observable behaviors. This *Case Study* reports the outcomes of this Training Bootcamp both in terms of qualitative and quantitative data impacting three main areas: participants' *engagement, behavioral performance,* and *overall satisfaction*. Its aim is to show how effective, long-lasting, and actionable the practice-based approach is on soft skills development, a development area where, historically, there has been a lack of practice opportunity for learners.

Keywords—soft skills, people's development, digital role play, practice, digital learning, skill workout, neuroscience, artificial intelligence, augmented reality, case study, gamification, training consistency

1 The context

In this *case study*, we report the outcomes of delivering a two-month (nine weeks) SkillGym Training Bootcamp to 171 learners of a multinational company in technology showing the direct application of our *learning by doing in the flow of work* approach. The participants have been involved on the AI Digital Role Play platform SkillGym in individual practice and self-reflection on the observable behaviors in a set of scenarios focusing on leadership conversations (*giving feedback, motivating a collaborator, dealing with a conflict in the team, valuing diversity, etc.*).

1.1 Preparation of the Training Bootcamp: needs, target population, and dedicated contents

To provide an effective solution, it is normal for us to proceed with an in-depth analysis of the cultural framework and the specific needs of the target company. In the project described in this *case study*, we have conducted a series of meetings with the sponsor (Learning and Development [L&D] department) of the company to better understand the cultural background, the founding elements, and the specific needs.

In this case, as briefly mentioned before, the target company is operating in the technology industry. For this reason, most of the employees are technicians (mainly engineers) with many years of experience in the specific technical field. The company culture is very traditional and driven by solid and structured processes. After a few meetings with the training sponsor, we have been able to identify a primary need in *helping managers in doing business through others* to develop their skills as people managers instead of super-technical experts.

In fact, it is quite natural that, in technology-driven companies, people are promoted for their technical abilities. This practice makes sense, but it is not a guarantee of *effective managers.* Soft skills required to be an effective people manager cannot be taken for granted as part of a technical expertise.

Before approaching SkillGym, the company delivered a set of more common learning strategies to support people's soft skills development such as class trainings and e-learning content. Despite a good level of satisfaction among the learners, these approaches were not so effective in behavioral change; people acquired the knowledge but didn't change their behaviors. For this reason, the company decided to provide learners with the practice-based methodology SkillGym.

Together with the sponsor team, we have decided to tackle this key issue by designing a Training Bootcamp including a set of conversations focusing on the most common and key conversations between managers and their reports.

The company has selected a first group of 171 learners to enroll in the Training Bootcamp for two months (nine weeks) of practice.

The following eight AI Digital Role Play scenarios have been selected to build a dedicated Training Circuit to support the defined target in the identified challenge:

- *Give feedback* – a top-down scenario to practice how to give effective feedback to a report.
- *Talk up, not tear down* – a conversation about managing a conflict on the team and someone who doesn't trust in your leadership.
- *Assign an objective* – a scenario to practice the difficulties in assigning a challenging objective to your reports.
- *Delegate a task* – a conversation revolving around a top-down key conversation with one of your team members to whom you want to assign a task.
- *Optimize performance* – to practice how to effectively support one of your team members in setting priorities and improving his or her performance.
- *Drive the change* – an AI Digital Role Play to explore more about providing your guidance to someone who is reluctant towards change.

- *Value diversity* – a very compelling conversation to reflect on the importance of valuing diversity in the team and avoiding any sort of discrimination on the job.
- *Turn soloists into team players* – a tough scenario to practice dealing with a team member who is not able to work with others and is acting as a soloist.

All the SkillGym scenarios (including the eight provided in this Training Bootcamp) are designed on the *SkillGym Capability Model*, a soft skills framework detailing the 80 key skills (grouped in eight compelling competencies) to master key conversations. It means that each of the AI Digital Role Plays, thanks to the methodology and technology used, can track the user's *observable behaviors* related to a certain number of those skills (8–15 per scenario) and provide effective insights for self-reflection and personal development related to them.

Therefore, the usage of several different scenarios provided with the Circuit allows each user to practice on a large set of skills belonging to the eight competencies of the model with the additional benefit of being challenged on the same skill in different situations.

To boost this approach, SkillGym provides a premium service that has been used in the Training Bootcamp described in this article, called *Competency Watcher.* Through it, the proprietary Leadership/Competency Model of the client is cross-mapped against the original SkillGym dictionary of skills. Through that the entire SkillGym platform metrics have been "dressed" in the client competencies and skills, which provides learners with two key benefits:

- Evaluate behavioral improvement on their company Leadership Model, the same framework on which their *performance management system* is based.
- Deepen the understanding of the key behaviors and skills desired by their company showing the practical and daily form in which such skills are normally, and typically unconsciously, used.

Let's focus a bit on the AI Digital Role Play platform SkillGym to provide a general overview of the philosophy behind it and its features.

1.2 SkillGym AI Digital Role Play: methodology and solution

SkillGym (www.skillgym.com) is the AI Digital Role Play platform providing the opportunity to practice conversational soft skills with a wide set of interactive stories, powerful skill training circuits, and no human in the loop for full scalability (the opportunity for learners to repeat the role play sessions as a way to empower reflection and consolidate behavioral improvement).

It leverages the power or practice, which is normally not possible in soft skills training, to deliver a very effective approach on behavioral development that has already been applied to more than 350,000 people.

SkillGym leverages *AI* and *Augmented Reality* to implement a structured methodology based on *Neuroscience.* We claim that the SkillGym learning method might be related to several processes that can be famed into different neuroscience and neuropsychology theories. Since a neuroscientific explanation of the method is not the main purpose of

the present statement—only a brief overview will be provided. Encoding-Specificity Paradigm [1, 2] indicating that memory recall will be enhanced when contextual factors are congruent between memory encoding and memory retrieval, Global Environmental Context [1], and finally, we refer to automaticity as related to memory retrieval [3, 4]. We claim that SkillGym might also impact on implicit processing of information, such as structural priming [5, 6] and what we call "Dejà-vu Effect," based on Clearly et al. [7] findings about deja-vu as a stimuli-driven phenomenon.

SkillGym digital role play game provides a safe space to practice dealing with key conversations (the ones implying strong emotions, high stakes, and divergent opinions) and feed your self-reflection on the impact of the observable behaviors. We claim that this approach is extremely effective since it provides people with the opportunity to develop a stronger self-awareness (SA) of others' *weak signals* (facial expressions, posture, gesture, tone of voice) and a clear picture of their own impacts in key conversations (it acts as a *revelatory* unbiased mirror showing the person from an external point of view).

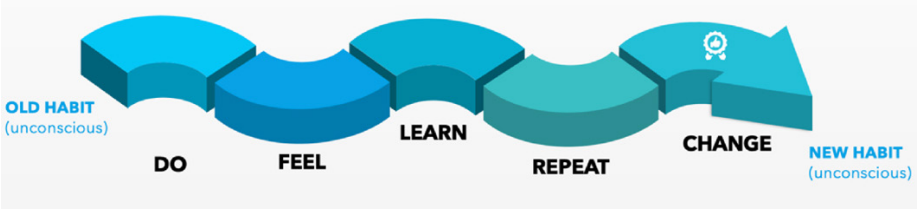

Fig. 1. The SkillGym learning flow

To more deeply understand the impact of SkillGym philosophy and methodology, it is normally very helpful to think of soft skill development as a sport. The AI Digital Role Play SkillGym is designed to encourage business professionals to train like athletes, which is why we recommend trainees consider themselves as *business athletes,* providing them with a gym for consistent practice (the growing library of compelling AI Digital Role Plays), continuous feedback, a full set of more than 80 objective behavioral metrics to assess and track progression, and a variety of pre-designed Training Circuits focusing on specific issues (*Powerful Feedback, Effective Listening, Make Things Happening*, etc.).

In a typical AI Digital Role Play session, SkillGym provides the user with the opportunity to interact with a digital character (pre-recorded actor managed by AI) in a key conversation (*giving feedback, motivating a collaborator, dealing with a conflict in the team, valuing diversity, etc…*) using two possible approaches: options-based point-and-click or through natural language (named *Talk Your Way*).

During the interaction, SkillGym captures user's behaviors (in case of *Talk Your Way* they also include user's tones of voice, intentions, and emotions) and generate an adaptive real-time reaction from the character on the other side.

Following the conversation (lasting on average 15–20 minutes), the user goes through a self-assessment of the session and then enters the self-reflection phase that is fed by three different types of feedback:

- The *eavesdrop feedback* to unveil the true impact of the conversation from the direct voice of the character who will be "spied" while explaining to someone else how was the just-ended session.
- The *augmented replay* that allows to rewatch the entire conversation like a movie with the augmented reality providing information on the behavioral dynamics to drive and feed user's self-reflection.
- The *smart debrief* introducing a data-driven feedback with behavioral metrics and scores.

An average session on SkillGym is normally lasting 20–30 minutes allowing users to practice and reflect effective behaviors in compelling situations. See Figure 2 for an overview of the entire SkillGym session flow.

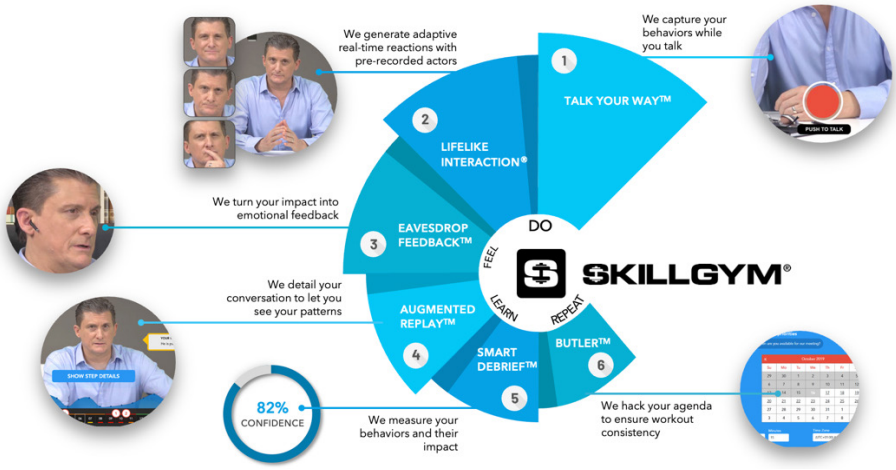

Fig. 2. The SkillGym session flow

Now let's move on to the key activities performed during the Training Bootcamp of this *case study*.

1.3 Structure of the Training Bootcamp

As described above, the Training Bootcamp has been designed to support the learners for two months (nine weeks). During this period, all the participants have been enrolled in Training Circuits including eight scenarios above. Each has received an initial email to set up the individual profile followed by a set of recurring emails from the system to engage and propose scheduling conversations with the characters. In fact, SkillGym offers a highly realistic service, called *the butler*, that supports users in planning AI Digital Role Play sessions with the SkillGym characters and simulates exchanges of emails and calendar invitations with them. It favors a high level of engagement (see the Training Bootcamp Result section of this article), keeping users in the loop of practice in a very authentic and effective way.

On top of the automatic engagement provided by the platform, during the nine-week practice period, the participants are involved in three live group sessions called *Empowering Sessions* that are conducted remotely by a SkillGym Customer Success Manager (CSM). These moments are a core part of the SkillGym methodology and are designed to provide personal and team empowerment through experience-sharing and metric-driven result sharing. Participants have been supported with the following *Empowering Sessions*:

- *Kickoff session* (90 mins) to introduce the AI Digital Role Play platform and guide them on how to leverage the practice-based approach exploiting the insights from the tool to empower individual self-reflection.
- *Follow-up session* (45 mins) delivered after one month (four weeks) of practice to share metrics with the participants and ignite an experience-sharing discussion among them (via powerful questions by the CSM, instant surveys, etc.).
- Final *closing session* (45 mins) in the final days of the training period to wrap up the lessons learned, cross-share the experience among the participants and collect live feedback on the experience.

Fig. 3. The SkillGym Training Bootcamp

On top of that, to maintain an open channel of discussion and exchange with the participants, SkillGym provided the *Engagement Booster,* a social channel (e.g., Microsoft Teams group, Slack Channel) made available to all the participants. During the Training Bootcamp this channel has been moderated by the SkillGym CMS and used to distribute a variety of engaging content such as descriptions of the different characters and scenarios, recaps of the aggregated results, and clarifications regarding questions. It has been a very interesting experience in constructive engagement and a very effective way to collect feedback and experiences on the go.

In addition, a final survey has been also distributed to all the learners before the end of the Training Bootcamp that allows participants to share (anonymously) their points of view of the experience (see the next section for the results).

Furthermore, users went through the individual practice period and the Empowerment Sessions. The sponsors of the initiative—the company L&D representatives—have been involved in a series of weekly alignment meetings with the dedicated SkillGym CSM to analyze the ongoing data with the purpose of discussing any ongoing need for adjustment.

The weekly alignment meeting (30 minutes) has been a very effective practice to enforce the team cohesion between SkillGym and the client company and has provided us with the opportunity to continue a discussion on the data and the possible weekly key actions.

During these recurrent meetings, we have been able to constantly monitor the set of key success metrics such as the participants' engagement (number of users registering, activating the account, and playing the AI Digital Role Plays, hours of practicing, number of sessions), and their performances in terms of behavioral development with a particular focus, in this case SA.

SA is a pivotal metric in behavioral development—with the key roles of empowering self-reflection and feeding the development of all soft skills.

These results are reported in the next section. Before moving to them, it is interesting to report that for this Training Bootcamp (as in many other cases) the client company decided to only view *aggregated data* describing the results of the group practicing—not individual performance. This approach has been communicated to the participants and remarked during the empowering sessions as it is providing the learners with a fully safe space to express themselves without the risk of being observed and judged by anyone. It is fully aligned with the SkillGym approach aiming to empower and feed personal SA instead of providing knowledge and instructions on how to behave.

2 Training Bootcamp results

In this section, we provide data and results of the learner's effort in terms of *engagement, performance,* and *overall satisfaction*.

2.1 Engagement and participation results

During the Training period, we have registered a total of 169 learners who have activated their accounts (98.8% of the total) and a total of 166 who have consistently engaged with the AI Digital Role Plays (97.1% of the total). These engagement metrics are extremely positive since they mark the engagement of almost all the target population while the average engagement in *traditional digital learning* (such as digital repositories of courses, video) is normally around 20% to 40% (informal data shared by various clients).

The 171 learners have practiced on SkillGym for a total of more than 2,150 AI Digital Role Play sessions (nearly 13 sessions each on average) with a total effort of 700 hours of training on the platform that corresponds to more than 4 hours and 15 minutes each.

Participation through the weeks has uncovered a very interesting *consistency*. Consistency in practice is another keyword for the SkillGym practice-based approach. It should be one of the key focuses required for participants to obtain positive and

long-lasting behavioral development. During this training bootcamp, the number of sessions per week has shown good results. See the Figure 4.

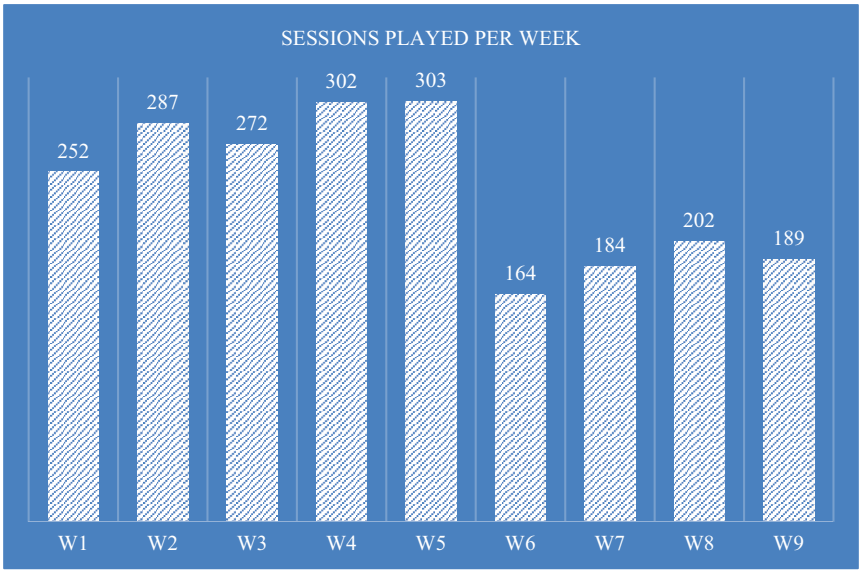

Fig. 4. AI Digital Role Play sessions played per week

Considering the total amount of time invested on average by each participant in practicing with SkillGym (4 hours and 15 minutes), we can report that one-fourth of this time (approximately 1 hour and 5 minutes on average) has been spent on the *Augmented Replay*—the core phase of the SkillGym learning flow in which learners can reflect on the impact of the observable behaviors by rewatching their conversations. This is another very impressive result as every minute spent in this analysis is extremely precious to feed individual self-reflection and to grow SA. On the other hand, if we compare this time with what is normally happening in our professional and private lives (not having any chance to stop and reflect on the conversation we deliver), it is clear how these results are extremely positive.

We are normally too busy to take time to properly prepare key conversations and reflect about their outcomes. The learners involved in this Training Bootcamp did just this, which is a remarkable achievement due to a smart mix of innovative technologies and an engaging approach applied to a strong methodology based on neuroscience.

2.2 Learners' behavioral performance results

Let's focus now on the behavioral performances marked by the 171 learners involved in our two-month (nine weeks) Training Bootcamp.

As previously described, we decided to focus on SA as the first success metric. SkillGym measures this key element through a self-assessment that is provided to the user in each session after the interaction with the character and before getting any

feedback/result. It allows the user to have an unbiased self-evaluation that is compared with the objective evaluation of the observable behaviors and the impact on the specific character met during the conversation. It generates a percentage value (1% to 100%) that expresses how close the self-evaluation and the real impact is. Scoring 100 in SA means that the user has delivered a self-evaluation completely in line with the perception of the character on the other side. It is important to note that a high score in SA can also be obtained in a low-performance session where the objectives are not achieved, and the effectiveness is minimal.

Below, we report the evolution of the individual SA expressed during the weeks of practice. These data represent the average value of SA marked by the users in each week of the Training Bootcamp (W1, W2, etc.).

The trend is very interesting as it shows constant growth through the weeks. It highlights the effectiveness of the practice-based approach in the learning community.

In this case, the learners obtained very high scores considering that the benchmark provided by the SkillGym big-data (5+ million sessions played on the system) reports 85 to 88 as the most common results.

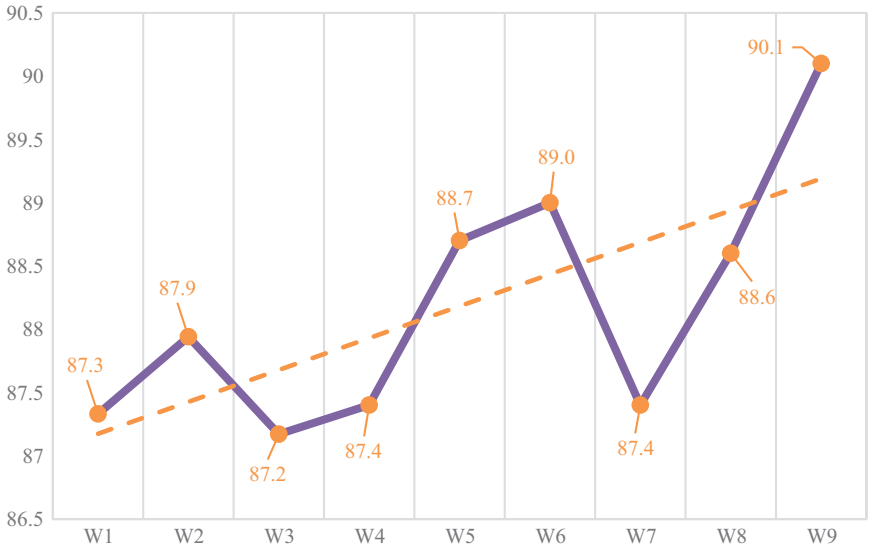

Fig. 5. The avg. SA/week trend

Let's focus now on the average SA expressed by each learner during the consecutive sessions played during the Training Bootcamp.

In Figure 6 we report the average SA of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc. session played by each user. It shows the average development of SA along the learning path, and it confirms, once more, that consistency in practice is the key aspect.

This chart trendline shows a strong and continuous growth through consecutive sessions played by the learners, despite some natural *ups and downs*. We reported here the trend between the 1st and the 13th sessions as the average sessions played by the participants is 13.

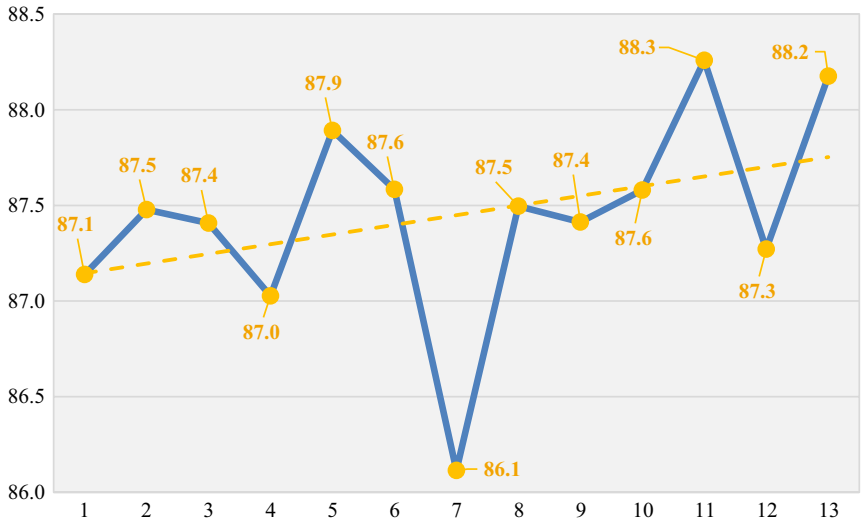

Fig. 6. The avg. SA/session trend (up to the 13th session)

In any case, many users played more than 13 sessions in the Training Bootcamp.

Because of this, it is interesting to expand the analysis to some additional sessions to analyze the trend. If we expand the analysis by adding five more conversations and we look at the trend to the 20th session (see Figure 7), the result is interesting. The trend maintains a strong growth and accelerates to higher values (around 90%), confirming the importance of continuous practice.

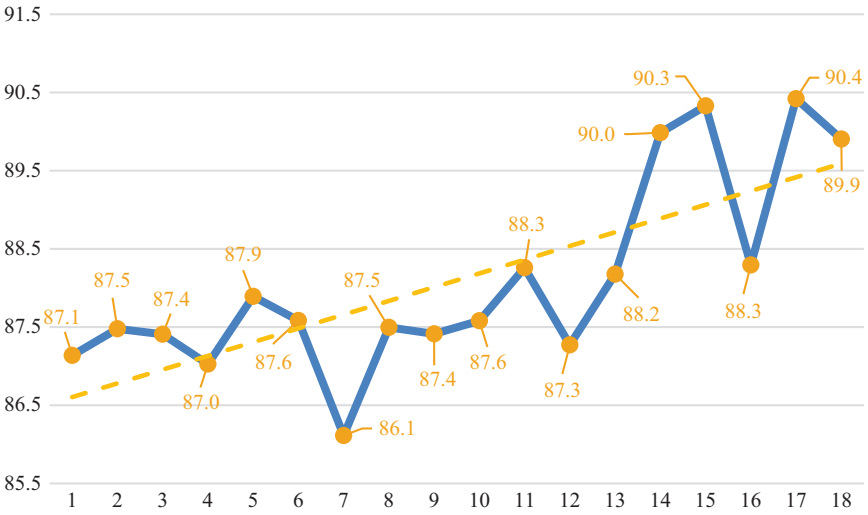

Fig. 7. The avg. SA/session trend (up to the 18th session)

For the sake of this paper, we focus on SA as the main KPI (key performance indicator), but SkillGym tracks more than 80 different behavioral metrics. Another interesting index to be monitored is *Confidence,* which shows the ability of the user to deliver effective behaviors during the conversation. It is an overall value representing in a single score (from 0 to 100) the observable behaviors put in place by the learners and their ability to understand and react to the stimuli offered by the SkillGym characters.

Below, we report the data of the Training Bootcamp showing the average *Confidence* and average SA expressed for each AI Digital Role Play included in the Training Circuit. As per the table (Figure 8), the data offer an interesting picture.

Most of the *Confidence* scores are in line with the SkillGym big data that is normally used as a benchmark, but some of them offer valuable insights to the client company. For example, it appears that some topics such as giving feedback (*Give feedback* scenario), managing conflicts (*Talk up, not tear down* scenario) and delegating a task (*Delegate a task* scenario) have been more complex for the audience.

Ai Digital Role Play scenario	Avg. Confidence	Avg. SA
 Give Feedback	71,0	86,8
 Talk up, not tear down	73,2	88,5
 Assigning an objective	74,3	88,0
 Delegate a task	73,7	88,5
 Optimize performance	77,9	89,2
 Drive the change	75,7	88,3
 Value diversity	88,1	88,0
 Turn soloists in to team playing	85,3	88,4

Fig. 8. The avg. SA and Confidence per scenario

With this data, the client company can drive further training activities. SkillGym has been designed for behavioral development, but we often see organizations also using the platform data for assessment purposes. In fact, in many cases companies have no other source of in-depth practice-based objective data to be used to support their decisions related to People Development.

2.3 Participants' overall satisfaction

In addition to *Engagement* and *Behavioral Performance,* which are primarily quantitative performance-oriented results, we also conducted a qualitative analysis looking at the participants' *Satisfaction* for the training experience. To do this, we have leveraged the Empowering Sessions and tools such as instant word clouds and surveys to collect insightful feedback from the learners.

In Figure 9, we report some of the word clouds generated in real time during the empowering sessions via anonymous instant surveys. We encouraged the participants to provide us with their observations on the following aspects:

- Training experience with the AI Digital Role Play platform.
- Behavioral analysis via Augmented Replay feature of SkillGym.
- Benefits of the Training Bootcamp.

We asked them to express (anonymously) comments, emotions, and *gut feelings* via keywords. Figure 9 shows the resulting word clouds.

Fig. 9. Participants' cloud words—feedback on the training experience

The usage of the anonymous word clouds has allowed the collection of a wide variety of interesting elements. The main keywords that emerge from the learners in regards to the training experience can be summarized in a few key concepts.

For the learners involved in the Training Bootcamp, the AI Digital Role Plays are engaging from different points of view (*realistic, funny, enjoyable*, etc.) and offer a different and in-depth training approach (*interesting, stimulating, formative, constructive*, etc.). At the same time, the tool is challenging and some of the participants reported a sense of discomfort during the sessions (*complex, difficult*, etc.).

These keywords demonstrate how this approach provides a realistic and effective training opportunity. The sense of "discomfort" reported by some of the users is an excellent starting point to trigger self-reflection, which is the ignition fuel of every change. It is also important to emphasize once again how learners can benefit from being provided with a safe environment that naturally facilitates a direct unbiased experience as well as the experimentation of new behavioral approaches with no risks.

Fig. 10. Participants' cloud words—feedback on the augmented replay

Let's focus now on the learner's feelings about the *Augmented Replay* feature. Above is the rich set of keywords expressed to describe learners' experiences in analyzing observable behaviors with the Augmented Reality-based reflection offered by SkillGym after each conversation played.

By analyzing the main keywords in this cloud, we can enforce some concepts that have already emerged in the previous analysis: usefulness and effectiveness of the solution are confirmed. It is also interesting to note some keywords that highlight the efficiency of the approach in allowing in-depth behavioral analysis and empowering self-reflection (*introspective, instructive, awareness, stimulating, detailed*, etc.).

All of these concepts revolve around the *SkillGym Manifesto*: boosting personal soft skills development by providing the opportunity for practice and reflection on the impact of your behaviors.

Fig. 11. Participants' cloud words—benefits of the Training Bootcamp

Finally, we asked the learners to provide their points of view on the benefits of the nine-week practice with the AI Digital Role Plays.

They strongly remarked about the useful growth in SA that we have already shown in the analysis of quantitative results. Participants have also emphasized the value of making *experiences* and going through empowering *self-assessments* and revealing behavioral *analyses.* It is also essential to underline how having *funny* experiences is an important benefit of practicing with SkillGym.

In addition to the previous word clouds that were collected during the Empowering Sessions, we also collected the opinions of the learners involved in the Training Bootcamp with an *online evaluation survey* that has been distributed in the final part of the training period.

The survey assessed (with some closed-ended questions) three main areas: *training methodology, user experience* and *satisfaction of expectations*. We collected 114 responses (67% of total active users) on a scale of 1 to 4. Below are the results:

- Learning Methodology: **3.5**
- User Experience: **3.4**
- Satisfaction of Expectation: **3.5**

The data show a very high level of satisfaction of the participants for all the areas investigated. Many of them reported a desire to continue practicing with SkillGym even beyond the Training Circuit.

Other learners also reported how the AI Digital Role Plays accurately depict the behavioral dynamics they currently experience on the job. Even before the end of the Training period (during the follow-up and the closing sessions), they shared how practicing with the tool is guiding them in improving their behaviors with colleagues in real life.

3 Conclusions

In this *case study*, we have described the two months (nine week) SkillGym Training Bootcamp we have provided to 171 learners of a multinational company in Technology. We have described in detail the application of our *learning by doing in the flow of work* approach. The learners of this Training Bootcamp have been involved in practicing with AI Digital Role Plays and reflecting on the impact of their behaviors. They have expressed a very high level of engagement with a total of 97% of active users.

With an average of 13 sessions played, they obtained significant growth in personal SA with a consistent trend of growth through the weeks of practice and the consecutive sessions played. In addition to this quantitative data, the participants have expressed a very high level of satisfaction in sharing plenty of valuable insights and point of views on the effectiveness of this approach.

This *Case Study* highlights two key concepts:

- The effectiveness of the practice-based approach versus the pure knowledge-sharing approach (confirmed by engagement, satisfaction, and measurable and actionable results)
- The efficiency of a methodology that exploits and roots its pillars into neuroscience

With such a positive impact and results on the target population, the sponsors at the client company (L&D representatives) confirmed they were extremely happy with the application of the SkillGym methodology in their context and to have leveraged a fully practice-based approach on soft skills development in a way they had never done before.

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