

When Fast Is Too Slow: “Xcelerating” Leaders at Electronic Arts

By Andy Billings



Electronic Arts (EA), a leading interactive entertainment company, is transforming itself as a survival response to massive digital disruption throughout our industry. At EA, our disruption was related at first to online gaming and new game hardware systems, and it now includes the emergence of augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and hyperscale streaming media.

We began our transformation about 10 years ago at a time when our company was “near death.” After years of success, we found ourselves in a period of major and unsustainable financial loss—a symptom of an organization needing transformation in every important dimension: strategy, products, structure, and people. At the start of this disruption, our product distribution was weighed almost 100 percent toward retail and zero percent toward digital.

After staging a major comeback, we are divided 50/50 between retail and digital distribution. Leadership development, namely our “Xcelerators” program for high-potential leaders, has been an integral part of our transformation success.

Our Xcelerators program not only prepares high-potential leaders for advancement, but it also energizes them to become highly engaged evangelists of our strategic digital transformation. When we found ourselves on a “burning platform” due to our focus on physical products sold at retail, we pivoted our learning and development function. For our Xcelerators program, we focused on developing a deep, career-changing leader development program that combines virtual learning

TABLE 1: DIMENSIONS OF OUR TRANSFORMATION

From this ...	To this ...
Sell games on discs at retail >>	Deliver games and additional content online via digital downloads or streaming
Tangible product, played in your home >>	Played online, anywhere, anytime, with anyone
Play on your own >>	Play in digital communities that can include millions of players
One business model: sell games at premium, fixed prices >>	Multiple models, including offering games for free to millions with monetization for just a fraction of players
Anonymous players without any feedback loops >>	Self-identified community of interacting players providing rich insights on preferences
Games as products >>	Games as digital services delivered to a player network

experiences and highly engaging, face-to-face sessions over the course of a year and a half.

In our ever-changing world of disruption, we created a flexible delivery framework to ensure dynamic content change and format innovation. For each cycle, we gather global leader cohorts into an immersive learning community that is continuously connected online while meeting six times over the course of one and a half years for four-day intensive sessions rotating across global EA sites.

For our carefully selected “change leaders to be,” we bet on quality and focus on those with flexibility, intensity, and extensive senior leader interaction rather than attempting to reach more leaders virtually but with less than career-changing intensity. Each cycle offers new content based on our evolving business models and company organization. We also apply innovations to each successive cohort to ensure a constantly evolving leader development experience.

Fast Is Too Slow

Fast is not the right standard for evaluating the impact of the leaders in our Xcelerators program. As we all know, high-potential leaders are already moving with velocity in their careers. We set out to evaluate our leaders against a more demanding standard: Would the leaders in our Xcelerators program move even faster compared to high-potential leaders who didn’t participate in the program? That is, would the Xcelerators’ experience increase the velocity of our leaders even further than those who didn’t participate?

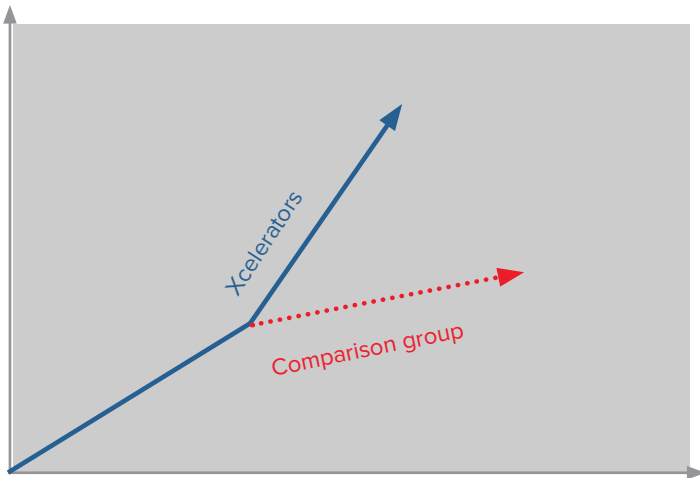
Increasing velocity is critical for a threatened organization in a race to survive, transform, and thrive as a digital business. Rather than simply measuring velocity, we evaluate career-changing impacts over time on a longitudinal perspective by looking closely at two key success factors: promotion readiness and retention. Promotion readiness requires practice and the honing of newly acquired leadership skills. Promotion also requires visibility of advanced accomplishments to decision-makers and the availability of a new position; time must pass to allow a leader’s contributions to prove out against the success of the transformation.

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Powering the Xcelerators Experience

- **Individualized Development Plan.** 360° feedback, futures plan, action steps
- **Xcelerator Team Meetings.** Each participant has a “board of directors,” including manager, senior leader, HR, and development partner
- **Six Four-day Intensive Sprints.** held at EA global locations, with a focus on EA transformation topics
- **Immersive, EA-Specific Simulations and Hands-on Challenges.** Build key capabilities
- **Virtual Learning.** Pre-work and post-work for sprints plus ongoing community learning and videos from participants to their teams.
- **Leaders Learning from Leaders.** 150+ senior directors interact with leaders, including CEO.
- **Put It to Work.** Transfer learnings to work assignments and metrics from each sprint
- **Forums.** Create “family groups” for sharing leadership experiences. Highly impactful insights and support.

FIGURE 1: DO XCELERATORS HAVE A STEEPER TRAJECTORY?



Similarly, an impact on retention takes time to become apparent. Inside each person is a dynamic balance between the vectors for retention and departure. If the Xcelerators program increases a leader’s effectiveness and satisfaction compared to other high-potential leaders, this unfolds over time.

In our follow-up assessments (ranging from one to six years later), we see that our impact on promotions and retention fulfill this longitudinal perspective. We also repeated an evaluation across multiple cohorts of Xcelerators to further increase our confidence in the lasting impact of these programs.

Assessing Velocity: The “Me-We-Biz” Framework

The success of our Xcelerators program comes down to our ability to develop leaders who make stronger transformation contributions to their teams and to our business. We designed the “Me-We-Biz” framework to help participants understand the new expectations and mindsets we seek from them as part of the program.

- **Me.** The first area of acceleration is based on the participant’s effectiveness as an individual leader creating

change. Most participants start the program understanding that this is a focus of their development.

- **We.** In this area of acceleration, we gauge the leader’s team health and performance, as well as the team’s readiness for change. With regular team health data and KPIs, participants come to understand that changing their teams as part of the overall company transformation is deeper and more complex than they might have imagined. Leaders also apply what they learn to “fast forward” their direct reports. Over the course of the Xcelerators program, participating leaders learn how and where to begin shifting their team’s performance.
- **Biz.** This third area of acceleration focuses on business results and the contributions leaders make to the transformation. We’ve found this to be the area of greatest mindset change as participants must grow to see themselves as company leaders with a responsibility for taking on the company’s biggest challenges, problems, and transformation as their own.

Net Promoter Scores

Net Promoter Scores (NPS) are another important way we measure the effectiveness of the Xcelerators program and improve its design. In a digital world, NPS provides an indication of our program’s “virality” by showing the extent to which participants recommend the experience.

To calculate NPS, we ask participants to rank on a one to 10 scale the extent to which they would recommend the Xcelerators experience to others. Promoters are those who respond with a score of nine or 10. We also refer to them as program “evangelists.” “Detractors,” on the other hand, are those who respond with a score of zero to six, while those that achieve scores of seven or eight are “passives” and only count towards the total number of respondents. NPS are calculated by subtracting the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promoters. Scores can range from negative numbers up to a theoretical high of 100 percent, if everyone rates the experience a nine or 10.

NPS are a rigorous way of assessing the extent to which participants are enthusiastic enough to promote the program

TABLE 2: ASSESSMENT VIA ME-WE-BIZ FRAMEWORK

Areas of Acceleration	Self-Assessment	Independent Assessment
ME As an individual leader leading transformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 360 self-assessment • Net promoter scores 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 360 leadership assessment (manager and direct reports) • Career impact (independent ratings)
WE My team’s health, performance, and readiness for change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant ratings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Team health survey data • Manager ratings
BIZ My business results and transformation progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put it to work—transfer of business practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retention analytics from HR database • Promotion analytics from HR database • Game changers—critical incident technique

to others. Research shows that recommendations such as this are a more demanding evaluation than qualitative responses (excellent, good, and so forth). We use the NPS methodology to gain deeper insight into what participants think about the Xcelerators program, which in turn we use to make program improvements.

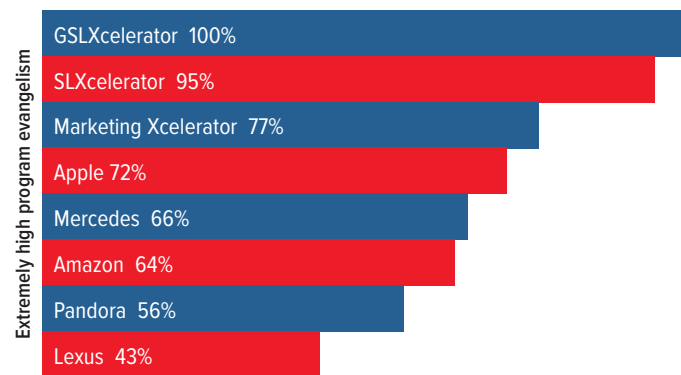
Participants from our most recent run of Xcelerators gave it exceptionally high NPS and described it as a career-changing experience.

All organizations will eventually face disruption. Survival depends on developing transformational leadership.

Dramatic Xceleration

Our longitudinal analysis confirms the multi-year impacts of the Xcelerators program. We have even more confidence in these results after seeing the same pattern of impacts for each cohort of participants. Promotion across multiple cohorts ranges from 50 percent to 143 percent higher compared to other high-potential leaders. Retention is also higher: 22 to 55 percent higher than high-potential comparison groups. These are dramatic impacts that prove our program helps develop and retain digital transformation leaders for EA.

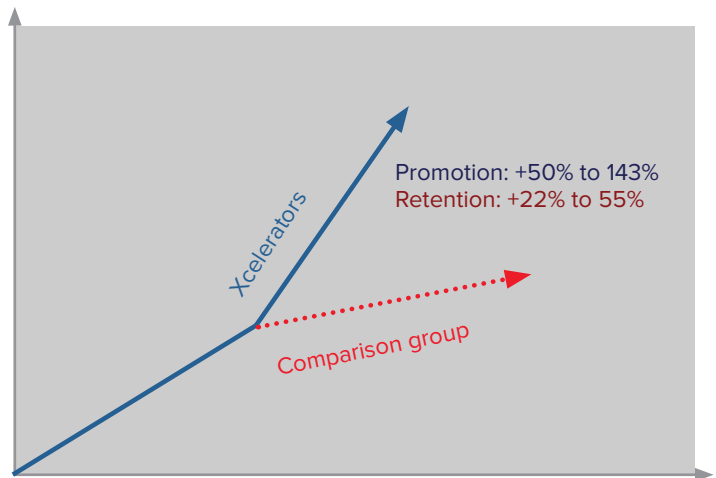
FIGURE 2: XCELERATORS HAVE HIGH NET PROMOTER SCORES



Our findings indicate that promotion and retention differentials between an Xcelerators group and high-potential leaders who did not participate in the program peak several years after participants finish the Xcelerators program. This shows us that it takes time to translate promotional readiness into actual promotions. Similarly, we see that the extra “connection” to the company that comes with the Xcelerators becomes stronger over time, while those who aren’t in the Xcelerators group have a higher attrition rate.

Promotion and retention increases result in major business contributions. Looking at two cycles of the Xcelera-

FIGURE 3: DO XCELERATORS HAVE A STEEPER TRAJECTORY?

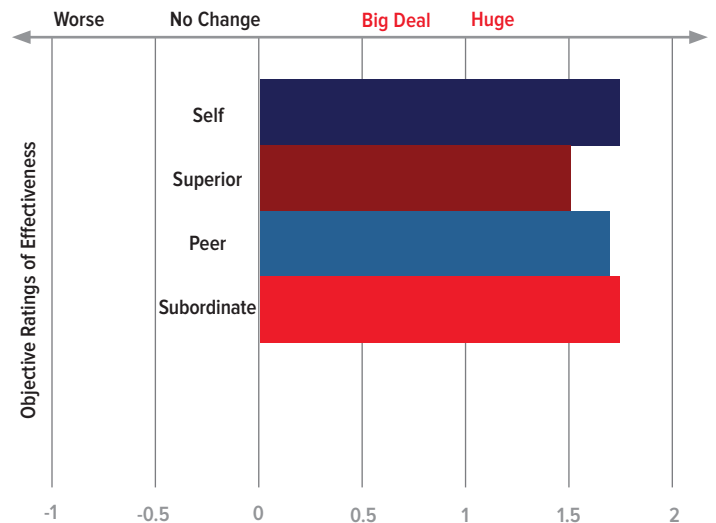


tors program (with approximately 30 leaders in each), we created 12 more promotions and 14 more retentions than our comparison non-participant groups. A very conservative estimate of the value of each of these promotions and retentions is one to one and a half times annual salary (well north of \$100K each). By doing the mental arithmetic, you can calculate a return in the millions of dollars. It’s a high ROI, regardless of how you adjust your assumptions.

More Effective Transformation Leaders

Objective ratings also show large changes in leadership effectiveness. These increases are seen across each rater group (managers, peers, and team members), which confirms our findings that participants in our Xcelerators program become more powerful leaders who make greater contributions, find more satisfaction in their work, and remain committed to the company through the transformation.

FIGURE 4: LEADERS ARE MORE EFFECTIVE—EVERYONE SEES IT



Xcelerating Leadership: The Case of Simon

Simon, a game team leader working in a successful EA mobile game studio, joined the Xcelerators program with a chip on his shoulder. He was outspoken in his skepticism about the company’s future and its ability to be agile. He was also skeptical about what he could learn from a group of peers in the Xcelerators program.

During the program, however, Simon felt challenged for the first time in a long time. Seeing others in his group take on daunting business, team, and personal effectiveness challenges energized him. He came to understand his leadership gaps (especially weakness as a clear communicator). Simon also suspended his defenses and came to value his peers. Eventually, he decided to scale up his career plans to become a studio leader who would bring more value to his studio than he would in his current role leading a single game franchise.

In addition to learning that he needed to communicate more like a senior business leader, Simon realized he overused studio resources to optimize his game quality, which took its toll on the health of his team and ultimately created a negative impact on the rest of the studio. Despite being early in his new “futures plan,” Simon was presented with an unexpected opportunity to become general manager in his studio. Earlier in the program, he would never have wanted such an opportunity, but with a healthy dose of humility and a newfound positive approach, and by using his development partner as an ongoing coach, Simon has been doing great in his new role and has gone on to launch a successful new series of games that are enjoying good market success. In addition, Simon is being asked to participate on cross-functional, collaborative projects that span across the company.

TABLE 3: IMPACT SUMMARY

ME—My Personal Leadership	WE—Leading for Team Performance	BIZ—Leading for Business Results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion readiness • Increased retention • Dramatically improved leadership capabilities • Career changing experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More effective team leadership • Developing leaders on their teams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Game changers—innovation and change • Leadership challenges—actionable insights • Network of transformation leaders

Impacts validated: 1) Multiple dimensions 2) Over time 3) For multiple groups

To further gauge the depth of the experience, we asked several cohorts to rate the extent to which the Xcelerators program is career changing for them. One hundred percent rated the program as impactful, and more than two-thirds rated it as the most impactful leadership development experience in their careers. To confirm this perspective, we asked managers and HR leaders to make a parallel rating, which supports our findings that the program is a career-changing experience.

As a key component of the Xcelerators program, participants focus on a “game changer” they can contribute to their transformation as leaders. They start by bringing a real-world activity from their current role (we never have “make work” assignments in the Xcelerators). As the program unfolds, we work through leadership challenges (which are multi-day assignments) and facilitate executive interaction so participants see new ways to cross boundaries, work

with new colleagues, and adjust their objectives and work processes to amplify results.

These are not “action projects” taken on solely for the duration of the program. The participants engage in meaty challenges that become part of their continuing roles in the company.

Inside the Engine: What Powers Our Xcelerators Program Impact?

Understanding how leaders learn and change improves all leadership development efforts. As participant-observers in dramatic leadership change, we offer the following insights on drivers of change in three categories:

- **Disrupting leadership mindsets.** These are the mental models leaders have about themselves, their teams, and business models.
- **Leading-edge strategic content.** We develop the program

content so that it's completely tailored to the company transformation.

- **Moving with speed and agility.** Leaders experience rapid team formation as they are continually remixing into new sub-groups. They learn how to lead in a team setting. Time pressures help them learn how to increase their "speed to productivity," sometimes failing but often succeeding.

Demanding environments requiring behavioral change.

We provide a "leadership practice field" to translate concepts and insights into reliable leadership competencies. Participants must solve "puzzles" that don't unlock by using familiar practices.

- **Experiential challenges.** Each sprint contains a multi-day simulation or leadership challenge that provides learning but also applies pressure for participants to perform in a compressed time window.
- **Time compression.** This provides the leaders the opportunity to see the consequences of their decisions and see how their choices play out. Consequences closely follow decisions in simulations.
- **Intense feedback.** Every day leaders are "up for view" in a feedback-rich environment.

Inspiring personal transformation. Leadership development requires risk, personal innovation, and intense social interaction, all of which burn high amounts of emotional and intellectual energy.

- **Leaders learning from leaders.** Leaders are exposed to high performance standards by interacting with our most effective leaders from across the company. This raises their aspirations along with providing greater empathy for being a more senior leader.
- **People care about me.** Leaders have a sense of psychological safety for leadership learning. There's pressure and challenge but also support and encouragement. Leaders feel valued and special, and they come to expect more of themselves and their colleagues. They are part of a high-performing leadership development community.

What Are We Learning about Transformative Leadership?

We continually evolve the leadership development focus points of our Xcelerators program. Accelerate is a verb not a noun, and the Xcelerators program is not a static set of offerings. We constantly change, iterate, and experiment with our program content, half of which is different from one run to the next.

We believe that our approach to innovation as well as new content keeps us fresh. Looking deeper, however, we also see enduring leadership capabilities that support transformation across our history of developing our Xcelerators program. Here are five capabilities we see consistently through the fog of flux:

- **Digital transformation mindset.** No one knows the digital future. We only know it will be filled with innovation, volatility, and uncertainty. Thus, we need a combination



of business acumen and flexibility. Humility mixed with any strategic planning is also important.

- **Purpose driven + grit.** Transformation is not a linear journey from A to B. The specific destination is unknown. To inspire people to join the journey and stick with it (especially when times are dark), leaders need to evangelize with an inspiring and compelling purpose, vision, and set of values.
- **Technological fluency.** Technology is driving innovation, and tech change is moving at an exponential pace. Leaders must deeply understand tech in their industry. Everyone must think like a chief talent officer.
- **Virtual, global communicator.** Digital means global (global customer communities and workforces). Leaders must have as much presence and clarity on video, satellite, video, and TV as in person. They will be communicating, often asynchronously, 24/7.
- **Playful resilience.** There are no rest stops on a transformation journey. You must have fun and draw energy from an experimental approach to innovation and organizational change. At those points when it's not fun, draw on your resilience to keep transforming.

We are Xcelerating the development of leaders with these transformational capabilities. Don't these capabilities also seem to be just as important to strengthen among HR leaders helping people and organizations transform? ■■

Andy Billings is vice president of profitable creativity at Electronic Arts where he develops key change agents who ensure ongoing profitability by overcoming "impossible" challenges. Participants in Andy's learning and development initiatives have played a major role in the company's recent digital transformation and financial turnaround. In addition to his work at EA, Andy serves on several boards of directors and advisory boards. He can be reached at abillings@ea.com.