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Will a bit of fantasy help your reality?

How watercooler managers can potentially gain new skills

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Monday morning football managers at watercoolers across the land know perfectly well that, were they in charge of England/Rangers/West Bromwich Albion, things would be different. And, of course, wildly successful. They might even sign up to a Fantasy Football league in an attempt to prove their abilities, but despite their best efforts it's unlikely that they'll ever don the bad hair and pained expression of an actual football manager.

Competitors in Fantasy CEO are in a very different position: it's completely realistic for entrants who don't already run a business to aspire to do so. But will the game itself help them to get there, or will it merely distract them from using their time more productively – by wooing potential investors, say, or signing up for the sort of training course that ends with a framed certificate and access to a network of heavyweights?

David James, director of the School of Growth, Innovation and Enterprise at Henley Management College, is all in favour of would-be entrepreneurs using the game for training and says that it will help aspiring CEOs to understand how different aspects of business interact. "People tend to look at things in isolation but here you can see the result without sending the company down and losing lots of people's jobs," he says.

The ability to compete as part of a team – as James himself will be doing – will also add to the game's verisimilitude. It will give players the advantage of being able to bounce ideas around while drawing on the specific skills of each individual team member. It's also a reflection of the way that real business leaders make decisions. "If you are a senior manager or aspiring CEO you don't make decisions in isolation, you make decisions working as a team, and that's what you do here as well."

David Carter, the chairman and founder of Merryck & Co, a business mentoring company, agrees that the game will help people who want to start and run their own business – more even than traditional qualifications. "I don't see an MBA as being helpful at all for [an entrepreneur] CEO," he says. "The sort of stuff that you learn on an MBA is big company, Fortune-1000 size stuff and that's irrelevant to a small start-up entrepreneur." However, the flip side of this is that people who would rather climb through the ranks of a big corporate than launch their own firm might be better off looking for other ways of advancing their careers. In this scenario, ambitious would-be corporate leaders should focus their efforts on impressing people within their company while staying abreast of what's happening in the outside world. "People who get in and learn and apply themselves will be in a good position," he says. "Read business books, read Harvard Business Review, The Economist, the business press and have a good idea of what's going on in other companies and what makes them successful. It's a good way of keeping your conversation interesting. When people are brainstorming you can sit there and say 'M&S do this, Tesco do that and this worked for BA' and you'll be ahead of the game." It's also worth moving job roles within your company in order to broaden your experience and going on general management courses, James says.