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How to succeed in business – play games

Israeli software developer-marketer Ronen Gafni sold his house to finance a board game that took six years to develop. Only in Israel, as they say.

But Gafni's seemingly crazy gamble is paying off. FreshBiz, his innovative game, aims to teach MBA students and entrepreneurs how to succeed in business in the real world. With the assistance of trained facilitators, it's being played in the boardrooms of banks and consulting and financial firms, and by professors and their protégés around the world, including at New York and Pace universities.



Ronen Gafni with his
FreshBiz game.

In June, Gafni hosted a Tel Aviv “world tour” where 100 entrepreneurs and business owners learned how FreshBiz instills skills for success and enrichment while developing entrepreneurial thinking. And on Aug. 15 and 16, he's taking it to New Jersey, to locations not yet confirmed. (For more information, email FreshBiz partner Simcha Gluck at simcha@freshbiz-game.com.)

“FreshBiz is in the category of game-based executive training, which is popular now because more and more people understand that learning through experience is more powerful than reading or learning through a lecture,” said Gafni, 39, who runs a branding company with his wife, a graphic designer.

“The game simulates a business environment and your mind doesn't care if you're experiencing reality or fiction. Using skills learned in the game, your brain starts creating new ways of behaving to implement into life itself.”

He reports that he first made the connection between games and business at the age of 14 after reading the story of Coca-Cola. He and a friend created a computer game that simulated the business environment of that corporate giant. “It was then that I realized that the business world itself is just a big game where all you need to do is learn the rules.”

The roll of the dice moves players — they've come to be known as “FBZers” — from starting a new company to trading on the stock market. The game is timed for 90 minutes and is geared toward collaboration with other players. FBZers have reported using the insights they gained to start up new businesses and complete exits from existing businesses, among other accomplishments.

In Israel, it's been played by IBM and Bank Leumi executives.

Bruce Bachenheimer, clinical professor of management at Pace University, told the Jewish Standard that he took his MBA students to play FreshBiz last March at Hive at 55, a co-working space in Lower Manhattan.

“We all enjoyed the experience and found it quite insightful,” he said. “While the board game itself is quite well thought out, I believe the real value of the game lies in the facilitators — those coaching players during the game and, more importantly, conducting the debriefing afterward. The game itself is a very good tool, but not in and of itself — the ‘brilliance’ lies in the abilities of those conducting the exercise.”

One of these facilitators, Tal Shamberg, recently was quoted in a Jerusalem Post article about a FreshBiz session at a conference for Israeli ultra-Orthodox businesswomen. Shamberg said that after his first FreshBiz session, “I really started thinking about my life and my business in ways that I’d never thought of before. I started thinking about collaboration and competition and the way I relate to money and teamwork in a totally different way, which has really opened up my business and my personal life.”

Gafni and his facilitators have introduced the game in New York, Madrid, Copenhagen, Johannesburg, Brazil, Mexico, Peru, India, Australia, and Singapore, among other places. Four partners have joined the business in the past year.

“Over 3,000 people are playing the game. For the last two years we’ve been giving the world a taste of what we have, and in August we’re launching a Kickstarter campaign to get funded to take the game global, translate it into several languages, and complete a digital version,” Gafni said.

Until now, the venture has been self-funded.

“I sold my house to fund this because I do believe that it’s changing people’s lives,” Gafni said.

“I know what I’m doing is meaningful and contributes to educating minds. This is why I was willing to put everything I have into it because I really believe it’s an important mission — and it’s a lot of fun.”