BOARD SIMULATIONS IN LEADERSHIP TRAINING:

Exploring Participant Preferences, Perceptions, and Comparative Effectiveness

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EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

Effective leadership is paramount for organizational success, and leadership competencies need to be developed through multiple means. Traditional training methods, while informative, often lack the engagement required for deep learning and practical application. This is particularly true in today's digitally saturated world, where leaders grapple with digital fatigue.

This study investigated the effectiveness of board simulations in leadership development programs, comparing them to other experiential learning techniques such as case studies, role-playing, and digital simulations. Our primary objectives were to analyse participant preferences, perceptions, and the comparative effectiveness of these methods in fostering essential leadership skills.

Participants reported that these simulations contributed to developing transferable skills like problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking, all highly relevant to real-world leadership situations. In fact, board simulations scored the highest among all evaluated methods in perceived real-world applicability (around 39% on a 5-point scale).

The findings of the study suggest that while board simulations offer a valuable non-digital learning experience with high perceived real-world relevance, incorporating elements to enhance engagement and specifically address strategic thinking and communication skills could further optimize their effectiveness.

In comparison to case studies, board simulations scored higher in overall effectiveness, particularly in terms of engagement and skill development. Importantly, all methods evaluated, including board simulations, scored relatively high in developing and applying leadership skills. This highlights the importance of a multifaceted approach to leadership development training.

This study provides valuable insights for organizations seeking to enhance their leadership development programs. By considering participant preferences, skill development focus, and engagement levels of various techniques, organizations can design training programs that cater to diverse learning styles and optimize leadership development outcomes.

OBJECTIVES
OF THE STUDY

- To assess participant preferences and perceptions of board simulations in leadership training, compared to other experiential learning tools.
- To explore the factors influencing participant preferences for board simulations and its unique value in developing leadership skills.
- To examine the transferability of skills acquired through board simulations to real-world leadership situations.
- To compare the effectiveness of board simulations with other learning tools in developing leadership skills.

INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic business environment, effective leadership development is critical to organizational success. Leadership training not only equips individuals with essential people management skills but also fosters innovation, strategic thinking, and the ability to navigate complex challenges. Various methodologies are employed to disseminate learning and ensure that it translates into practical, impactful leadership. Among these methods, experiential learning tools like board simulations, case studies, role play, and digital simulations stand out for their potential to enhance engagement, retention, and application of knowledge.

At a time when digital fatigue is often being complained of, board simulations/ games, in particular, have emerged as a powerful tool in leadership development. Board simulations in leadership training offer a unique way to develop leadership skills in a non-digital setting. These games provide opportunities for face-to-face interaction, fostering social connection, critical thinking, and strategic decision-making. The tactile and interactive nature of board simulations fosters deeper cognitive engagement and facilitates a more nuanced understanding of leadership dynamics. By incorporating board simulations into leadership development programs, organizations can combat digital fatigue, promote a healthy work-life balance, and enhance the overall engagement of their leaders.

The importance of leadership development cannot be understated. Strong leaders drive organizational success by inspiring teams, fostering a positive culture, and steering companies through change and uncertainty. Developing leadership competence is not just about theoretical knowledge; it requires the practical application of learning. This application ensures that leaders can effectively translate classroom insights into real-world actions, making them more adept at handling the multifaceted challenges of modern business.

To enhance learning retention and ensure the application of knowledge, it is crucial to employ engaging and varied learning techniques. Retention is directly linked to the enjoyment and active participation in the learning process. Techniques that captivate learners' interest and involve them in active problem-solving lead to better retention and application of skills.

However, board simulations are just one piece of the puzzle. This study aims to analyse and compare the effectiveness of various experiential learning techniques in leadership development. The four primary methods under consideration are:
- Board Simulations
- Case Studies
- Role-Playing
- Digital Simulations

This study evaluates each method across the following key indices:
- **Engagement and Participation:** How effectively does this method engage learners and encourage active participation?
- **Skill Development and Application:** Does this method effectively develop leadership skills, and can participants apply these skills in real-world scenarios?
- **Real-World Relevance:** How applicable are the skills learned through this method to real-world leadership situations?
- **Learning Enjoyment:** How enjoyable do learners find the learning experience with this method?
- **Overall Effectiveness:** Considering all aspects in totality, how effective is this method in developing leadership competence?

Specifically, the study seeks to assess participant preferences and perceptions of board simulations in leadership training, compared to other experiential

learning tools. It also explores the factors influencing these preferences and the unique value board simulations offer in developing leadership skills. Additionally, the study examines how well the skills acquired through board simulations transfer to real-world leadership situations.

By comparing the effectiveness of board simulations with other learning tools, the research aims to provide insights into the most effective approaches to leadership training, ensuring that the learning is engaging, relevant, and practically applicable.

METHODOLOGY
OF THE STUDY

- The research study employed a survey questionnaire methodology to collect data on the preferences and perceptions of mid to senior-level management professionals regarding the use of various experiential learning tools with a focus on board simulations in leadership training programs.
- The structured survey was done by the market research organization named Cfore. The questionnaire was distributed to more than 600 participants through two primary channels, namely WhatsApp and email. This allowed for convenient and efficient data collection while ensuring a wide reach among the target audience.
- The sample for this study consisted of 400 mid to senior-level management professionals who had firsthand experience with board simulations in leadership training programs. The respondents were based in the metropolitan cities of India & South East Asia, working in SMEs, domestic corporations and large MNCs. This deliberate sample selection aimed to gather insights from individuals who could provide valuable perspectives on the effectiveness and benefits of this experiential learning tool in their specific context.
- To ensure the data collected reflected the experiences of individuals who have actively participated in board simulations, the study targeted mid-to-senior level management professionals from 33 to 50 years of age with a work experience of 10 to 27 years and a minimum education of bachelor's degree. The role profiles of the participants were People Managers and Managers of Managers. The survey questionnaires were distributed to professionals working across a diverse range of industries in India & South East Asia, including Construction & Engineering, Manufacturing, Professional services, Aviation, Agri & Food Processing as well as Retail industry.

- The survey questionnaire method served as a systematic approach to collect quantitative and qualitative data. It included structured multiple-choice questions to measure participant preferences, perceptions, and satisfaction levels, providing a comprehensive understanding of their experiences with board simulations. The last question of the survey was an open-ended question allowing for respondents to share their insights on experiential learning tools.

- By using the survey questionnaire method and targeting a specific group of professionals, the research study aimed to gain meaningful insights into the role of board simulations in leadership training programs and its impact on participant learning outcomes and development.

PRIMARY DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

Chart 1

Please rate your level of familiarity which each of the following experiential learning tools
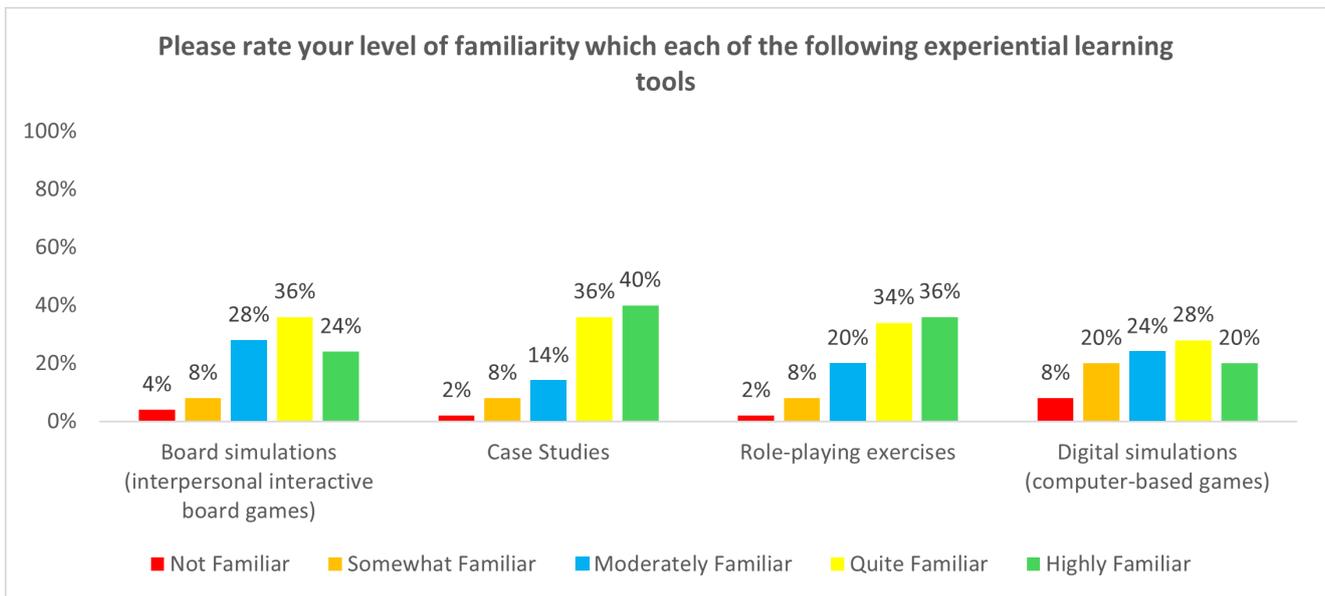
Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of respondents.

- Case studies appear to be the most familiar experiential learning tool for the respondents, with 40% indicating a high level of familiarity.

- The results show that a significant portion of the respondents (36% and 24%) indicated a high level of familiarity with board simulations. This suggests that board simulations are a well-established tool within the target audience.
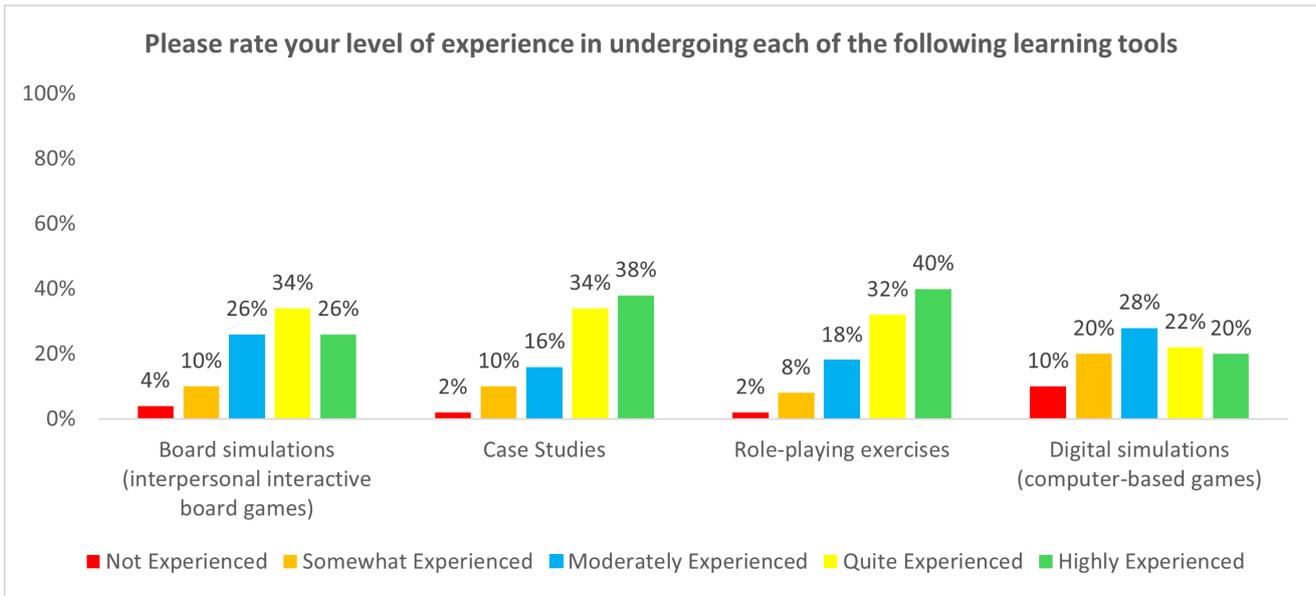
- Role-playing exercises and digital simulations seem to be less familiar to the respondents, with only 36% and 20% reporting high familiarity, respectively.

- Case studies and role-playing exercises appear to be equally familiar to the participants, with both showing a distribution across the entire Likert scale,

with a slight mode at "moderately familiar".
- Digital simulations seem to be the least familiar tool among the respondents. Over half (56%) indicated either no familiarity or only some familiarity.
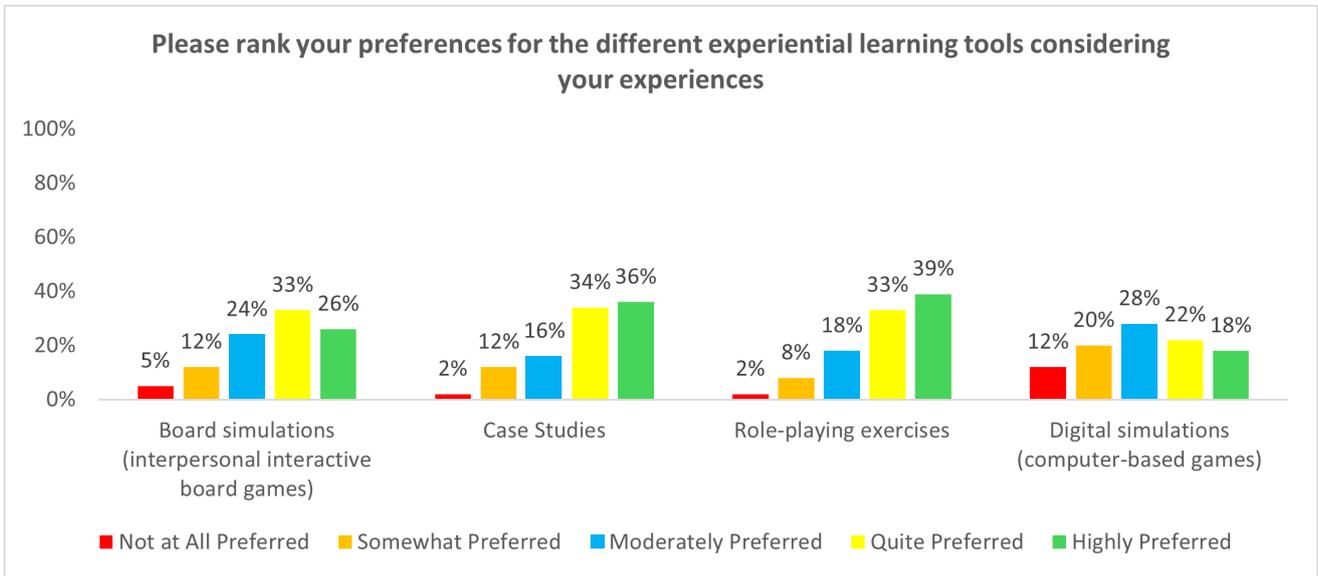
Chart 2

Please rate your level of experience in undergoing each of the following learning tools

Legend: ■ Not Experienced ■ Somewhat Experienced ■ Moderately Experienced ■ Quite Experienced ■ Highly Experienced

Board simulations (interpersonal interactive board games): 4%, 10%, 26%, 34%, 26%
Case Studies: 2%, 10%, 16%, 34%, 38%
Role-playing exercises: 2%, 8%, 18%, 32%, 40%
Digital simulations (computer-based games): 10%, 20%, 28%, 22%, 20%

Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of respondents.

- For board simulations, the results show a total of 60% of the respondents have significant experience with board simulations, with 34% indicating "Quite Experienced" and 26% indicating "Highly Experienced".
- Case studies and role-playing exercises both show similar levels of experience among the participants. For both, a total of 72% of the respondents have a significant experience respectively across the "Quite Experienced" and "Highly Experienced" categories.

- Digital simulations seem to be the least experienced tool among the respondents. Over half (50%) indicated either no experience or only some experience.
- These findings support the idea that board simulations are a well-established tool within the target audience. Though there is a higher level of experience with both case studies and role-playing exercises as compared to board simulations, owing to them being traditional tools, board simulations are quite a well-established and well-received tool. Digital simulations appear to be the least familiar tool.
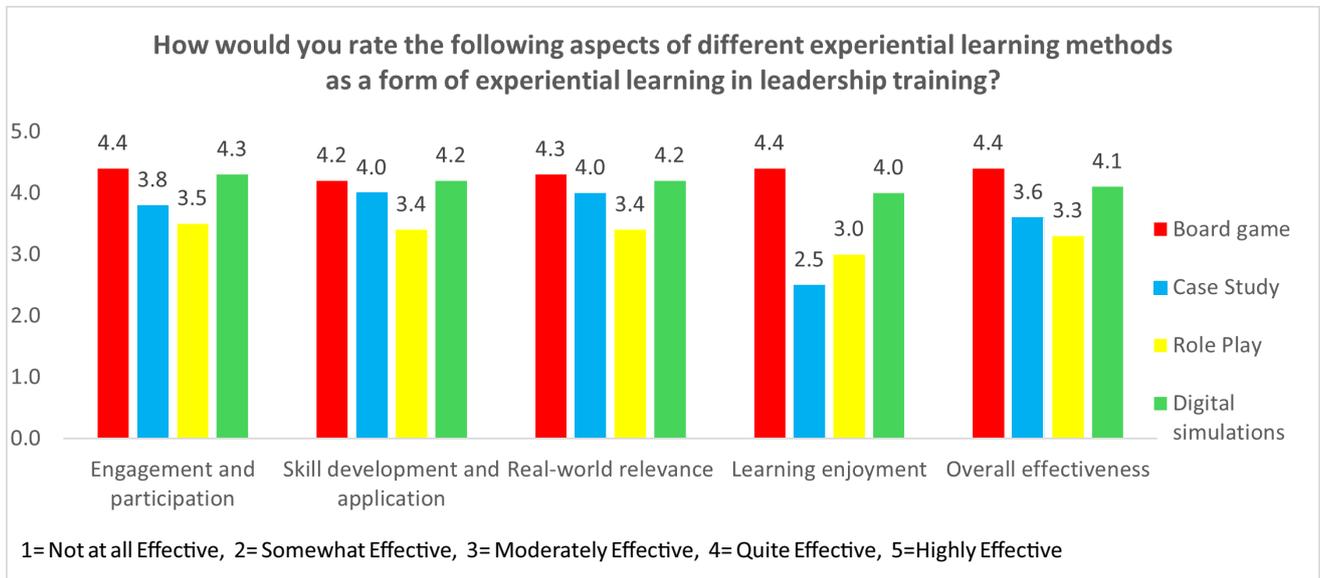
Chart 3

Please rank your preferences for the different experiential learning tools considering your experiences

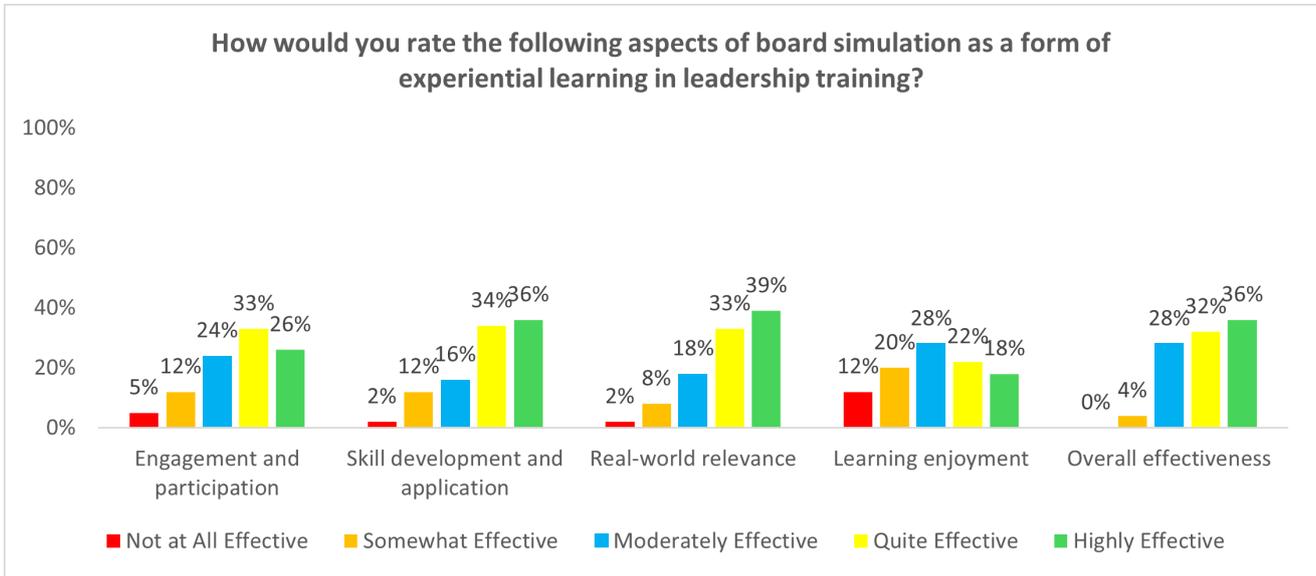Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of respondents.

- **Board Simulations:** A plurality of respondents (33%) indicated a moderate preference for board simulations. However, a significant portion (26%) also rated them as highly preferred. Overall, 59% of respondents expressed some level of preference for board simulations.

- **Case Studies:** Case studies appear to be the 2nd most preferred choice among the respondents. A total of 70% with 34% saying quite preferred and 36% saying highly preferred for this tool.

- **Role-Playing Exercises:** Role-playing exercises are the top most preferred tool, with 33% indicating moderate preference and a significant portion (39%) indicating quite preferred, which totals to 72%.

- **Digital Simulations:** Digital simulations show a similar preference distribution to board simulations. 28% of respondents indicated moderate, 22% and 18% indicated as quite preferred and moderately preferred.

Chart 4

How would you rate the following aspects of different experiential learning methods as a form of experiential learning in leadership training?

1= Not at all Effective, 2= Somewhat Effective, 3= Moderately Effective, 4= Quite Effective, 5=Highly Effective

- Board games (4.4) and digital simulations (4.3) score the highest in promoting engagement and participation among learners. Case studies (3.8) and role-playing (3.5) score somewhat lower.
- All four methods score relatively high in skill development and application, with board games (4.2) and digital simulations (4.2) again at the top. Case studies (4.0) and role-playing (3.4) follow closely.
- Board games (4.3) have the highest perceived real-world relevance whereas Digital simulations (4.2) score slightly lower. Case studies (4.0) are the next in line while role-playing (3.4) is seen as least applicable to real-world situations.
- Board games (4.4) score the highest in terms of enjoyment, followed by digital simulations (4.0). Case studies (2.5) are seen as considerably less enjoyable, and role-playing (3.0) falls somewhere in between.
- Board games (4.4) emerge as the most effective overall method, followed closely by digital simulations (4.1). Case studies (3.6) and role-playing (3.3) score lower in overall effectiveness.
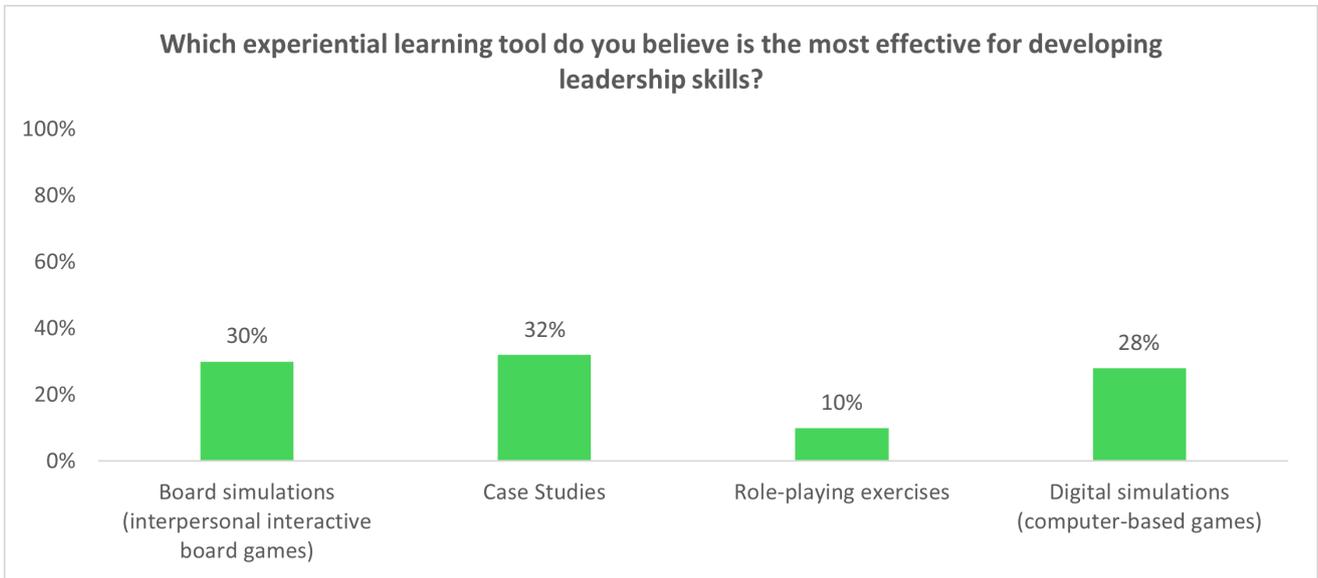
Chart 5

How would you rate the following aspects of board simulation as a form of experiential learning in leadership training?

Aspect	Not at All Effective	Somewhat Effective	Moderately Effective	Quite Effective	Highly Effective
Engagement and participation	5%	12%	24%	33%	26%
Skill development and application	2%	12%	16%	34%	36%
Real-world relevance	2%	8%	18%	33%	39%
Learning enjoyment	12%	20%	28%	22%	18%
Overall effectiveness	0%	4%	28%	32%	36%

Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of respondents.

- In Skill Development and Application, the highest score (36%) is also aligned to the highest score of overall effectiveness (36%), indicating that board simulations are effective in helping participants develop and apply new skills.

- Real-World Relevance (39%), scores the highest among the five indices. This means participants perceive the skills and knowledge learned through board simulations to be directly applicable to real-world work situations.

- The "Quite Effective" score of 22%, the "Highly Effective" score of 18% and the "Moderately Effective" score of 28% in Learning Enjoyment indicates that while board simulations are high on Skill Development and Application with a Real-World Relevance, they also are fairly enjoyable leading to high engagement and participation along with overall effectiveness.

- This is further validated by the overall scores of 59% across "Quite Effective" and "Highly Effective" categories for Engagement and Participation (33% & 26%) along with the total scores of 68% across the same categories for Overall Effectiveness (32% & 36%). This suggests that participants find board simulations to be involving and contribute actively, and that these simulations lead to successful learning outcomes.

Chart 6

Which experiential learning tool do you believe is the most effective for developing leadership skills?

Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of respondents.

- There seems to be an agreement among respondents that both board simulations (30%) and digital simulations (28%) have similar effectiveness. This suggests participants view both as an effective way to gain knowledge and skills in the area of leadership development.

- The data shows that case study with 32% emerges as the tool with highest effectiveness for leadership development.

Chart 7

How confident are you in your preference for board simulation as an effective form of experiential learning tool?
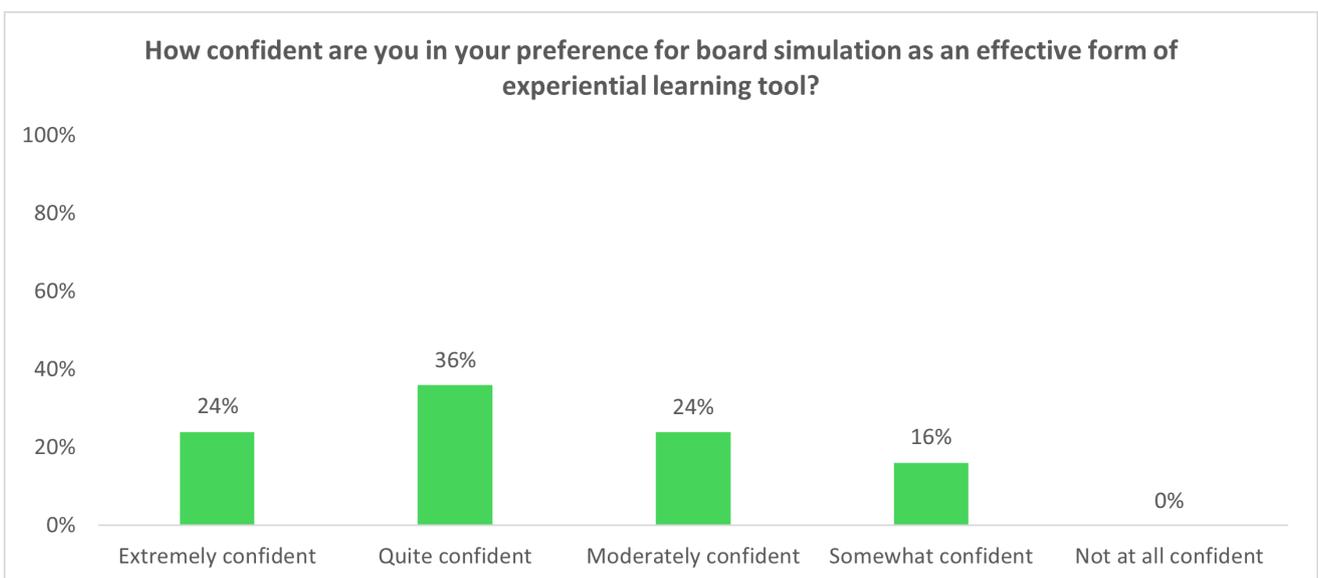
Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of respondents.

- With 24% of respondents indicating extreme confidence and 36% of respondents indicating reasonable confidence, board simulations emerge as a strong tool for experiential learning.
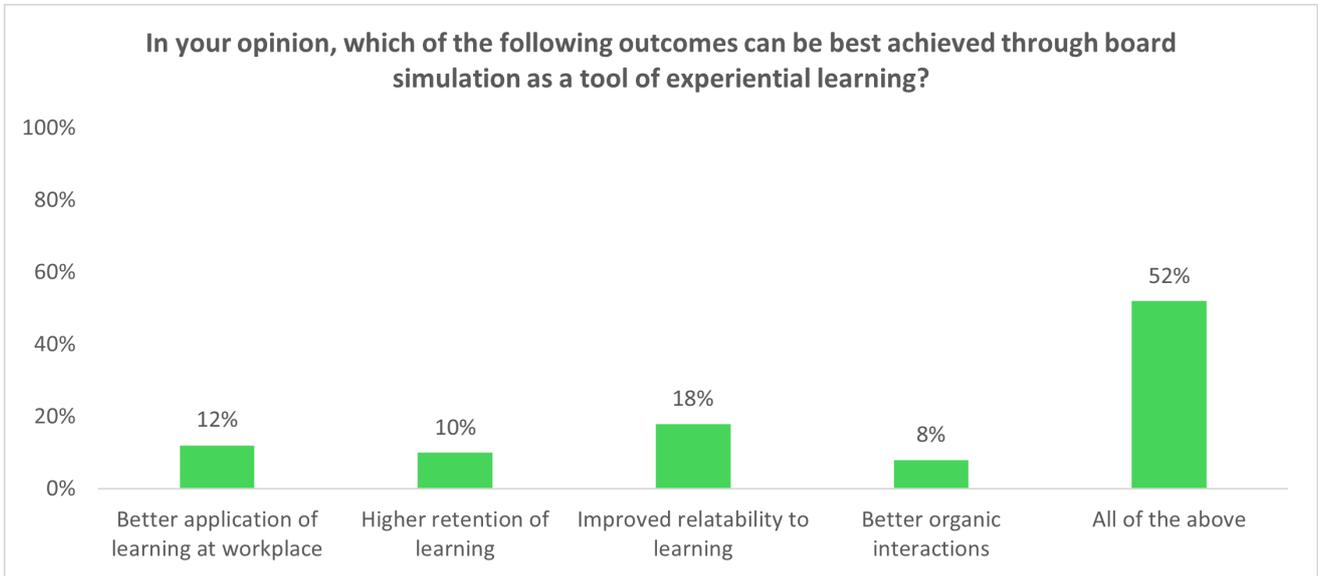
Chart 8

How well do you think the skill and knowledge acquired through board simulation can be transferred and applied to real-world leadership situations?

Extremely well	28%
Quite well	36%
Moderately well	24%
Somewhat well	12%
Not at all well	0%

Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of respondents.

- 64% of respondents ("extremely well" + "quite well") agreed that board simulations help achieve desired learning outcomes in leadership development programs. This suggests a strong positive perception of their effectiveness in promoting knowledge and skill acquisition application to real world leadership situations.
- Notably, 0% of respondents indicated that the skill and knowledge acquired through board simulations cannot be transferred and applied to real-world leadership situations.

- The data suggests that board simulations are perceived as a valuable tool for leadership development, particularly for achieving desired learning outcomes, developing critical thinking and decision-making abilities, and promoting effective communication. There seems to be a strong connection between board simulations participation and positive leadership development outcomes.

Chart 9

In your opinion, which of the following outcomes can be best achieved through board simulation as a tool of experiential learning?

Category	Percentage
Better application of learning at workplace	12%
Higher retention of learning	10%
Improved relatability to learning	18%
Better organic interactions	8%
All of the above	52%

Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of respondents.

- The chart reveals that more than half of the respondents indicate that board simulations deliver all the outcomes desired through experiential learning.

Chart 10

How satisfied are you with your experiences of using board simulation as an experiential learning tool in leadership training?

Rating	Percentage
1 Star	2%
2 Star	4%
3 Star	10%
4 Star	48%
5 Star	36%

Note: Percentages indicate the percentage of respondents.

- A high percentage (48%) of respondents gave a strong rating of 4 star to their level of satisfaction in using board simulations. This suggests a strong positive perception of their effectiveness in experiential learning.

STUDY OF SECONDARY DATA

1. Role of Game-Based Teaching in Leadership Skills Development

This paper explores the benefits of game-based teaching for developing leadership skills. They argue that games, when designed with clear learning objectives, can enhance the effectiveness and enjoyment of the learning experience (Tariq & Abonamah, 2021).

- **Increased Engagement and Interaction:** Games are seen as attractive and engaging, promoting active participation and interaction among learners (Tariq & Abonamah, 2021). This collaborative environment allows participants to share feedback and develop confidence, fostering essential leadership skills.

- **Bridging Theory and Practice:** Games can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. By simulating real-world leadership scenarios, participants can experience the challenges and dynamics of leadership first-hand, allowing them to test their knowledge in a safe environment (refer to McClellan, 2013, for similar findings on role-playing).

- **Developing Transferable Skills:** The paper highlights the potential of games to develop a wide range of transferable skills applicable to leadership roles. These include social communication, conflict management, negotiation, and problem-solving (Tariq & Abonamah, 2021).

2. Flow, Leadership and Serious Games - A Pedagogical Perspective

This paper explores the link between game-based learning and leadership development, focusing on the concept of "flow." Flow refers to a state of complete absorption in an activity, characterized by high challenge and high skill (Buzady, 2017).

- **Motivation and Engagement:** Buzady (2017) argues that well-designed games can create a flow state, leading to increased motivation and engagement in the learning process. This heightened engagement can be particularly beneficial for developing leadership skills.

- **Intrinsic Learning:** Flow experiences can foster intrinsic learning motivation, where individuals are driven by the enjoyment of the activity itself, rather than external rewards (Buzady, 2017). This intrinsic motivation can lead to deeper learning and a stronger desire to develop leadership skills.

- **Experiential Learning:** Serious games, which are games designed for educational purposes, can provide a safe and immersive environment for practicing leadership skills. By experiencing the challenges and rewards of leadership within the game, participants can develop their abilities in a way that complements theoretical learning (Buzady, 2017).

3. Business Game-Based learning in Management Education

Baldissin et al. (2013) explore the use of business games as a learning tool in management education. They argue that business games offer several advantages for developing leadership skills.

- **Active Learning and Decision-Making:** Business games require participants to actively engage with the material, making decisions, and facing consequences in a simulated environment (Baldissin et al., 2013). This active learning approach can be particularly effective for developing critical thinking and decision-making skills, essential for leadership roles.

- **Developing Strategic Thinking:** Business games can promote strategic thinking by requiring participants to analyze complex situations, plan for the future, and adapt their strategies based on changing circumstances (Baldissin et al.,

2013). This focus on strategic planning helps prepare future leaders for the challenges of the real world.

- **Risk Management and Teamwork:** Business games often involve elements of risk and require collaboration with others. Through gameplay, participants can develop skills in risk management, negotiation, and teamwork, all of which are crucial for effective leadership (Baldissin et al., 2013).

4. Gamification and Serious Games Methodologies in Education

This paper explores gamification and serious games as methodologies in education. Their findings can be applied to the context of leadership development.

- **Increased Motivation and Engagement:** Gamification techniques, like points, badges, and leaderboards, can be incorporated into learning experiences to increase motivation and engagement (Zadeja & Bushati, n.d.). This can be particularly beneficial for leadership development, where intrinsic motivation is crucial for fostering continuous learning.
- **Active Participation and Feedback:** Serious games, designed for educational purposes, can provide opportunities for active participation and immediate feedback (Zadeja & Bushati, n.d.). This allows learners to experiment with different approaches, receive feedback on their decisions, and refine their leadership skills in a safe environment.
- **Developing Transferable Skills:** Both gamification and serious games can promote the development of transferable skills valuable for leadership roles. These skills can include problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication (Zadeja & Bushati, n.d.). By incorporating game elements and simulations,

leadership training can become more engaging and effective in developing well-rounded leaders.

5. Using Case Studies to Develop Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills in Business Leadership

McClellan (2013) emphasizes the importance of experiential learning in leadership development. This approach goes beyond traditional lectures and focuses on providing participants with opportunities to actively engage with the material.

- **Bridging the Theory-Practice Gap:** Experiential learning methods, such as role-playing and simulations, allow participants to practice leadership skills in a safe environment (McClellan, 2013). This helps bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge of leadership concepts and the practical application of those concepts in real-world situations.
- **Developing Essential Skills:** Through experiential learning activities, participants can develop essential leadership skills such as communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and decision-making (McClellan, 2013). By experiencing the challenges and dynamics of leadership first-hand, they can refine their abilities and gain confidence in their leadership potential.
- **Promoting Self-Reflection and Adaptation:** Experiential learning encourages self-reflection and adaptation. Participants can reflect on their performance in simulations and exercises, identify areas for improvement, and adjust their leadership approaches for future situations (McClellan, 2013). This fosters a growth mindset and continuous learning, which are crucial for effective leadership development.

6. The Role of Experiential Learning in Leadership Development

Smith & Jones (2020) advocate for using case studies as a valuable tool for developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills in business leadership education.

- **Active Learning and Analysis:** Case studies require participants to actively engage with complex business scenarios (Smith & Jones, 2020). By analysing real-world situations, participants grapple with diverse perspectives, identify key issues, and recommend solutions. This active learning process fosters critical thinking and decision-making abilities essential for effective business leaders.

- **Fostering Discussion and Debate:** Case studies promote interactive learning through discussion and debate (Smith & Jones, 2020). Participants can analyse cases from different viewpoints, challenge assumptions, and defend their solutions. This collaborative environment allows them to learn from each other and refine their leadership decision-making abilities.

- **Developing Transferable Skills:** Analysing case studies helps participants develop transferable skills applicable to business leadership contexts (Smith & Jones, 2020). These skills include critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and the ability to analyse complex information and make sound judgments under pressure.
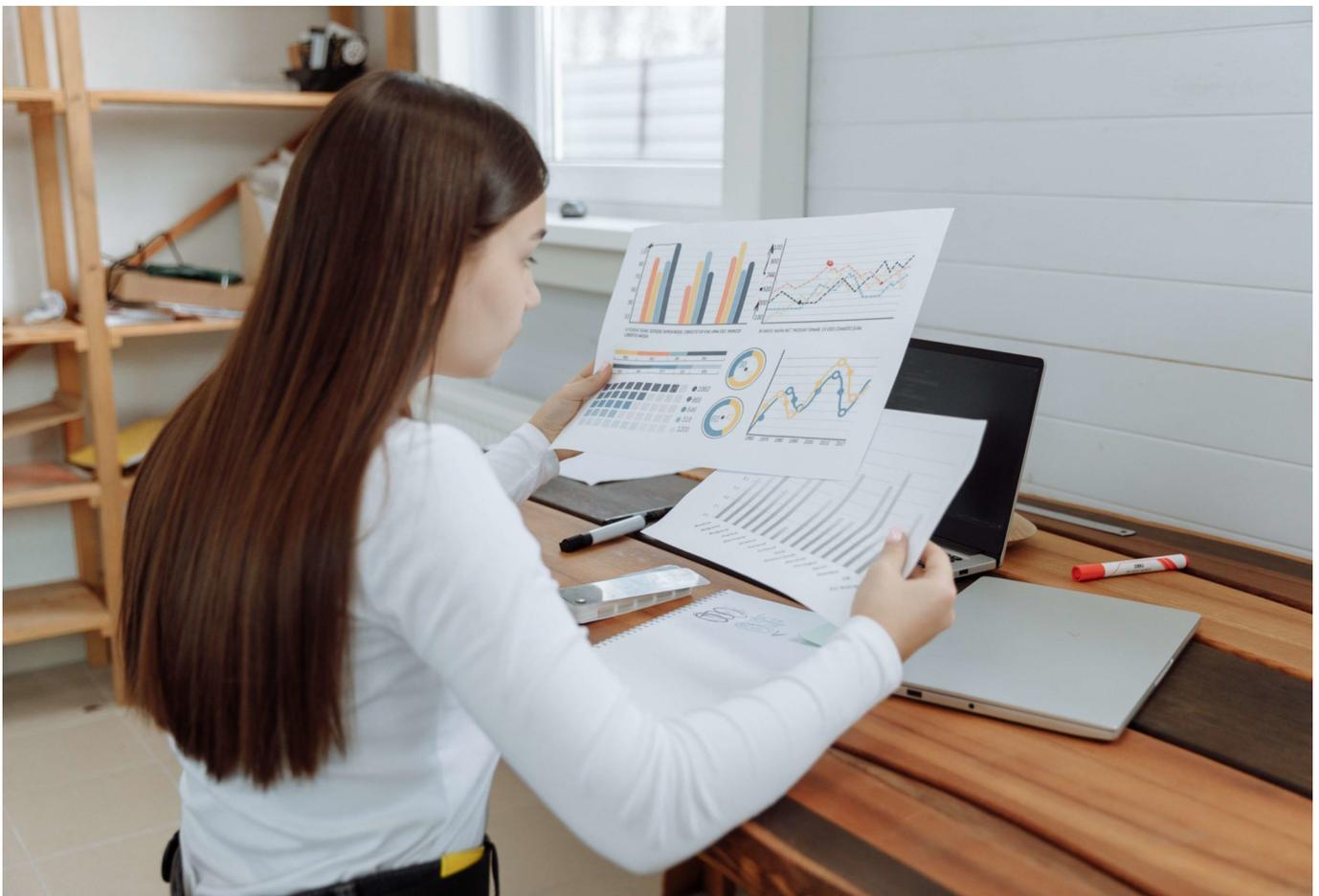
CONSOLIDATED FINDINGS

- **Preferences:** Board simulations have moderate to high preference as an experiential learning tool as indicated by 83% of respondents.
- **Transferable Skills:** Respondents reported that board simulations contribute to transferable skills like communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving, applicable to real-world leadership contexts.
- **Real-World Relevance:** Board simulations scored the highest (around 4.3 on a 5-point scale) among evaluated methods in perceived real-world relevance of the skills learned. This suggests participants feel the skills translate well to real-life leadership situations.
- **Overall Effectiveness:** Board simulations, scored relatively high in all aspects of different experiential learning methods with the overall effectiveness score being 4.4 out of 5. This suggests all aspects have value in leadership training programs.
- **Outperforming Other Methods:** Board simulations scored higher than case studies, role plays and digital simulations in almost all aspects.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effectiveness of board simulations in leadership development programs, particularly in the context of digital fatigue and the need for engaging learning methods. Our objectives were to analyze participant preferences, perceptions, and the comparative effectiveness of board simulations relative to other experiential learning techniques in developing essential leadership skills.

The findings support the value of board simulations in leadership training. Participants reported that these simulations fostered transferable skills like problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking, all crucial for effective leadership. Furthermore, board simulations achieved a high rating for perceived real-world relevance, surpassing other methods in this aspect. This suggests that board simulations effectively bridge the gap between theoretical learning and practical application, addressing the need for engaging and relevant leadership training in a digitally saturated world.

However, the study also revealed areas for improvement. While board simulations were moderately effective overall, they held a moderate preference compared to digital simulations. Additionally, engagement scores were lower for board simulations, and there might be room to enhance their ability to promote strategic thinking and communication skills. These findings suggest that incorporating elements of gamification or game design principles could enhance engagement in board simulations.

In conclusion, board simulations offer a valuable and complementary tool for leadership development programs, particularly when combined with other experiential learning techniques. Understanding participant preferences and the unique strengths and weaknesses of various methods allows organizations to design engaging and effective training programs that cater to diverse learning styles and promote the development of well-rounded leaders. Further research exploring ways to optimize board simulation design for specific skill development and investigating participant preferences in more detail could provide even richer insights for leadership program improvement.

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This whitepaper has been authored by the Leadership Development Practice team at GrowthSqapes Consulting in association with Aadya Aggarwal, an EI coach and an alumna of Ashoka University, India.