Playing for success

Using game elements to engage learners, encourage behavior and help achieve organizational objectives

KPMG International

Executive summary

Engaging staff in learning programs is a constant challenge. Even as technology elevates the stimulation baseline, so too does it unlock new opportunities for engaging learning experiences.

As a large, global organization, we at KPMG have a challenge ensuring that our employees understand the full range of capabilities the organization offers across audit, tax and advisory. In response, we created a gamified app to help employees learn about the global network of member firms' capabilities in an engaging way. This publication shares our high-level findings, with takeaways for other organizations considering using gamification for learning or training.

Over the first 12 months:

users across more than **30 countries** had more than one million interactions with information about KPMG's service offerings

89% of people indicated that the app gave them a positive impression of KPMG as an innovative place to work

24% improvement in overall awareness of the firm's capabilities was observed

the **knowledge gap** between countries was cut in half, while the gap between staff gradings was **reduced to only 4%**

71% of users are now more comfortable connecting a client challenge or opportunity with how we can help

83% of users had fun playing

Key findings

Improved awareness and confidence. Gamified learning tools can improve awareness of a dry or unexciting topic and help staff become more confident in their roles.

Motivational alignment. Audiences across staff gradings respond consistently when motivation is properly aligned.

Valuable data. Digital tools generate large amounts of data, which can yield insights to improve learning tools or achieve other company objectives. Don't waste the opportunity!

Gaming experience. With proper design, previous gaming experience is not required for user participation, performance or enjoyment.

Leadership. Appropriate communication from leadership is required to create comfort around participating in game-based learning experiences at work.

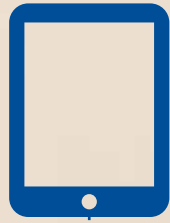The appropriate application of game elements to learning experiences can engage people, encourage behavior and help achieve organizational objectives.

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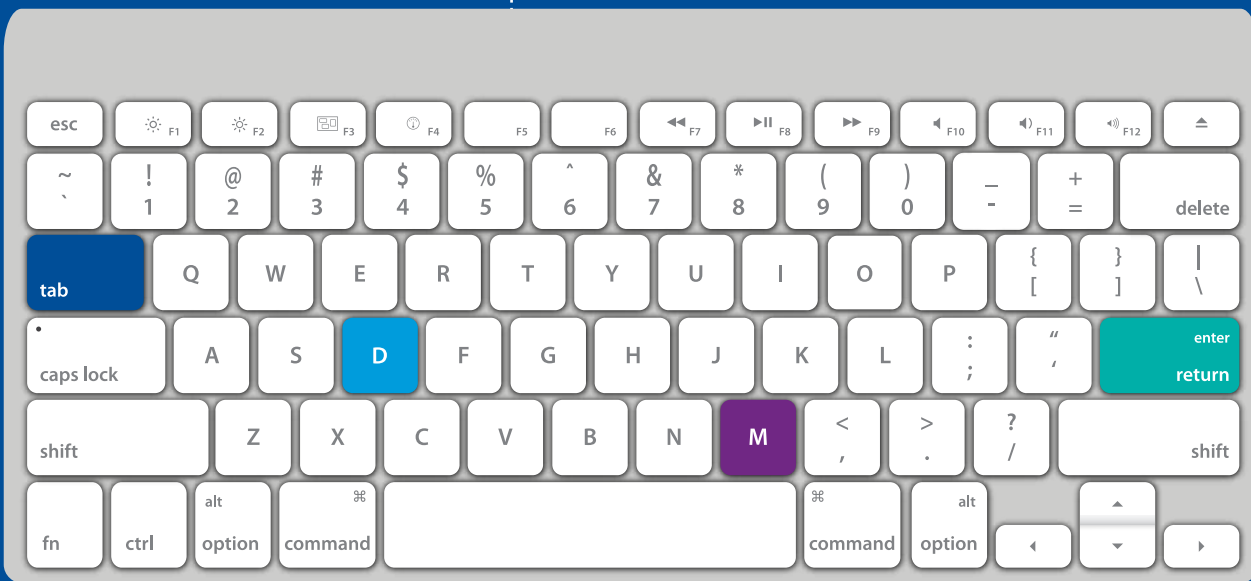
Introduction

Background

Much has been said about the power of gamification to transform business activities. We know from personal experience that the feelings of excitement, challenge and achievement that games evoke can help make even the most ordinary subjects engaging.

That's why, when faced with an internal learning and development challenge, KPMG wanted to see whether gamification could help the organization better meet its goals.

We wanted to discover:

— Would our people use a gamified learning app and find it an engaging experience?

— Would the app be an effective training tool?

— Would it impact how our staff perceive the organization?

The challenge

As with any global organization, KPMG's size and complexity can be daunting. With 200,000 employees in 154 member firms across the globe and more than 150 capabilities across audit, tax and advisory, many employees lacked a full or detailed understanding of the firm's capabilities. This is a critical issue in a world where client challenges are increasingly complex and do not always neatly fit a firm's internal taxonomy of services and products. Client relevance is determined first by an ability to listen and frame their issue before responding in a focused way.

By improving these knowledge gaps, we sought to:

— improve individuals' awareness of our organization

— enable our people to better serve their clients by having the knowledge and the confidence to connect client issues or opportunities with the appropriate service capability.

We found that traditional ways of sharing content, through channels such as intranet pages or in printed documentation, can be unengaging and difficult to absorb. Methods of improving the engagement of this interaction, such as product fairs and on-site training programs, can be resource intensive and not always scalable in a cost-effective way.
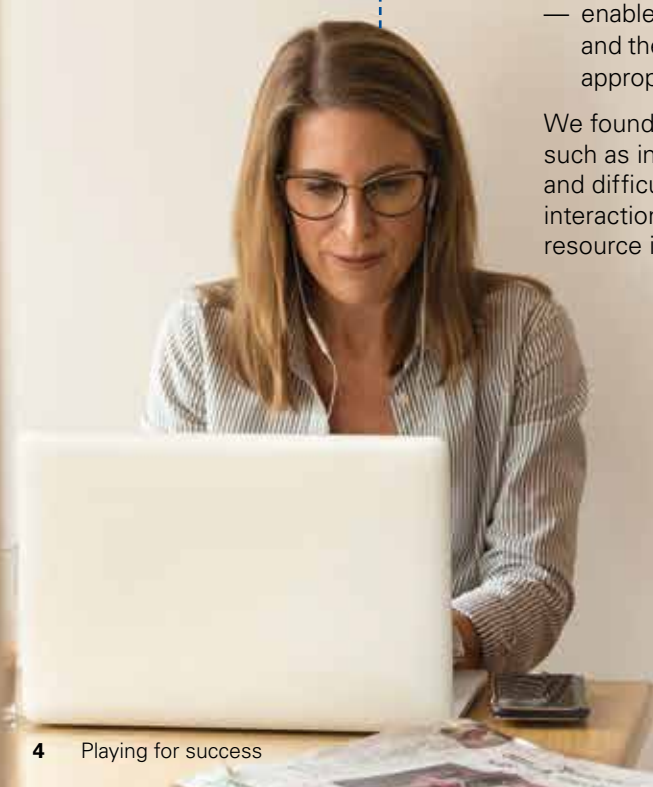
The solution

Following a successful, small-scale pilot project, KPMG's global Clients and Markets team created a gamified learning app called KPMG Globerunner. The app, which was released globally, is a fun and engaging way for employees to improve their awareness of the firm's service offerings.

There were two ways that the app was used within the firm:

1. As part of mandatory onboarding sessions (new employees).
2. Voluntary participation (new and current employees).

How it works

The default mode is a single-player game. Users are challenged to race around the world in a global travel-themed experience. Players are asked questions about the firm's service capabilities, such as, "A CFO needs help with X — which offering can help?" Correct responses earn points. Each round of the game can be completed quickly, generally lasting about 2 minutes.

As players progress and earn points, they unlock access to new locations, complete missions, earn achievements and gain ranking on a global leader board. The degree of difficulty also increases through greater granularity in questions.

There is also a tournament mode, which enables teams of players to compete against other teams from around the world.

Following a successful, small-scale pilot project, KPMG's global Clients and Markets team created a gamified learning app called KPMG Globerunner.

Insights

Achievement

Twelve months after the commencement of the global rollout, users across more than 30 countries had more than one million interactions with information about the firm's service offerings.

Overall, we observed a 24 percent improvement in awareness of the firm's capabilities, indicating that the app made a positive contribution to the achievement of the learning and training objectives for which it was designed. This improvement increased to as high as 34 percent for more difficult questions.

> " I have been with KPMG Australia for 7 years and this was the most exciting way to know more about the firm's services. Awesome tool. "
>
> — Peter, Senior Advisor, KPMG Australia

Highlights

The majority of users enjoyed the app. Different users reported different favorite elements of the game, including leader board advancement, earning achievements, core game mechanics, and the pictures and sounds as new locations were unlocked.

83% of users had fun playing KPMG Globerunner.

71% of users are now more comfortable connecting a client challenge or opportunity with how we could help.

The increase of employee confidence in connecting a client challenge or opportunity with how we could help is particularly satisfying. With an improved awareness of our offerings and a more confident mind-set, our people are in a better position to serve our clients.

Before KPMG Globerunner was introduced, the difference between country groupings with the highest and lowest knowledge baseline was around 10%. After using the app, this gap closed to 5%.

Knowledge gap between countries was cut in half.

In addition to achieving specific learning objectives, use of a gamified app had a wider positive impact on employees' perception of the firm and overall feelings of engagement with the workplace.

Knowledge gap between staff gradings reduced to only 4%.

At the start of the program, a differential baseline awareness of 12% was observed between staff gradings. This gap was significantly reduced, down to only 4%, after using the app.

89% of people indicated that the app gave them a positive impression of KPMG as an innovative place to work.

Success

Key
takeaways

▶ Gamified learning tools can be effective in helping achieve learning and training goals, both as part of new employee onboarding and with existing employee populations.

▶ Including game elements can add a spark of fun to the learning process in contexts where the material is dry or unengaging.

▶ These tools can help close knowledge gaps within a population, whether that is a disparity between office locations, between organization divisions, or by level of employee seniority.

▶ The use of gamified learning tools can have benefits beyond the core objectives, such as creating a positive image of the organization in the employee's mind or encouraging the view of the organization as an innovative place to work.

" In most organizations, employees expect required training to be an arduous and underwhelming experience. This results in an uninspired learning culture. Conversely, game-based learning presents the opportunity to reinvigorate learner interest, tap into learners' competitive inclinations, and drive higher learning engagement and satisfaction. Gamification is not a 'one size fits all' approach, nor will it achieve all types of learning objectives. However, games are a great way to introduce new learning concepts, augment live training experiences and reinforce key concepts over time. "

— Chris Shuster, Director, KPMG
    Learning and Development Advisory,
   KPMG in the US

Motivation to play

As we rolled out the KPMG Globerunner app, many individuals commented that it might appeal to our junior staff members, but that more senior staff members wouldn't be interested. This is a common assumption, seemingly based on the idea that games are designed for kids, not adults.

However, we found that this assumption was off-base: junior and senior staff members reported the same level of enjoyment in using the app. In fact, senior employees (senior manager/associate director/director) actually had the highest percentage of 'power users' in their grading, defined as users who answered more than 100 questions total.

So why were our more senior people playing? The central theme of the feedback from our senior users was interest in the content. At that stage of their careers, knowing about the firm's offerings can assist with career progression, providing a good external motivating factor to engage with the app and learn. The inverse was also true. Across all staff gradings, when users did not believe that the content was relevant to their personal career progression, participation nearly halved.

Relative percentage of users by staff grade that became power users

29% Partner

84% Team member

86% Manager

100% Senior manager/ Director
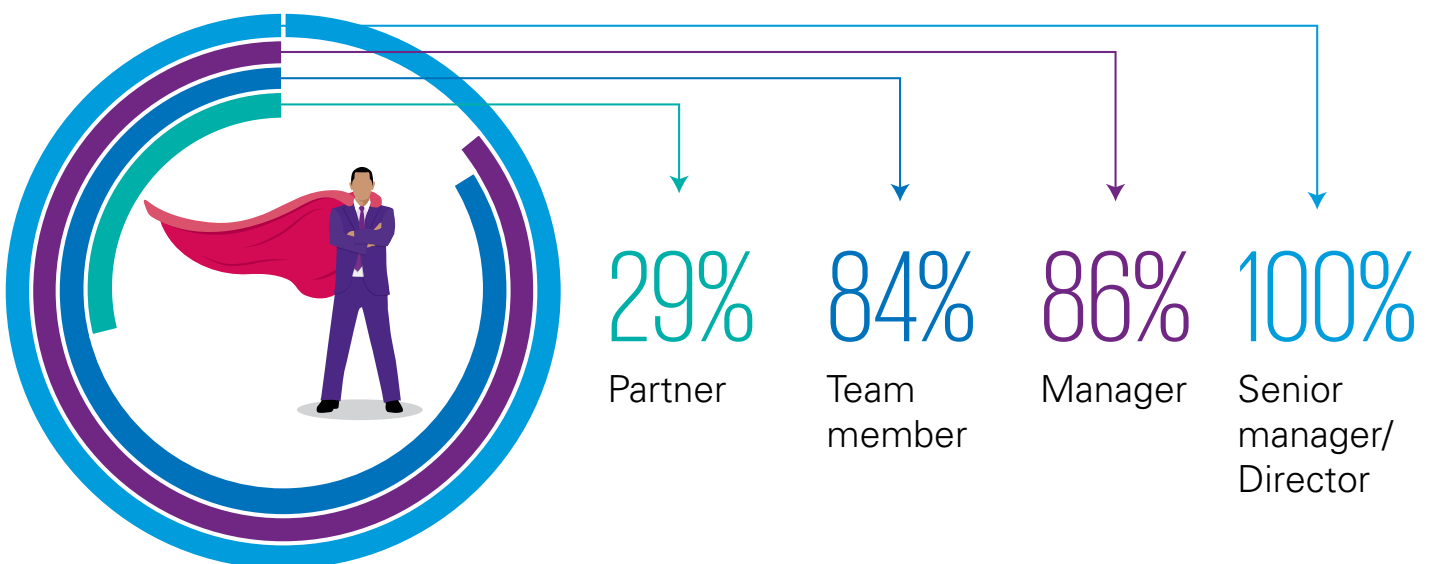
> ❝ To develop their skills, our people are seeking choice in their learning — they expect learning to be self-directed or delivered just in time and on demand; and above all, in a seamless and modern learner experience. KPMG GlobeRunner has helped us meet those expectations. ❞
>
> — Susan Ferrier, Global Head of People

Relative number of questions answered

100%

52%

Content does not have career progression relevance (relative)

Content has career progression relevance (relative)
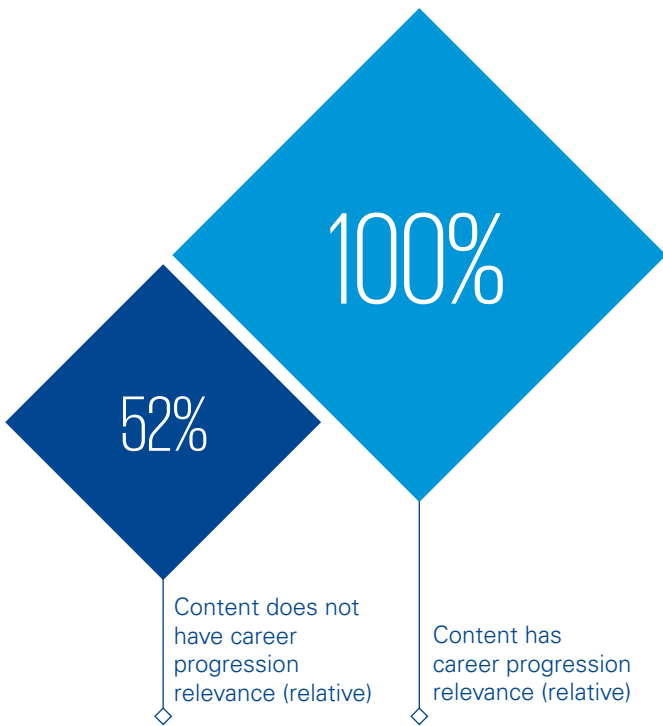
Of those who engaged with the app, some reported additional benefits. Of particular interest is the deep impact that the tool had in helping some employees contextualize their role and purpose at KPMG. Understanding where they fit in the bigger picture gave some users a deeper sense of purpose, motivation and confidence.

But I'm not a gamer

Are gamified learning apps only suitable for people that play video games? We designed the app so that a lack of gaming experience would not be an impediment for our people. When we looked at 'gamers' vs. 'non gamers', we found negligible difference in participation, performance or enjoyment of use.

Engaged but unproductive

Engaging players was a key focus of the app design process. We hoped that players would answer around 50 questions and considered 100 questions per player a great outcome. However, we did not anticipate the small subsection of users who became so engaged by the game that they answered thousands of questions. These players reported "loving" the app and even feeling addicted to play.

At a certain point, responding to more questions does not correspond to a continued increase in awareness and play becomes unproductive. The app crossed this boundary for a very small subsection of users, changing from a fun but productive learning app to an entertainment app.

> "It is important to identify different population segments within an organization to enable you to target their needs. This can include different positioning of the learning tool to better align with role, seniority, geographical location, or other factors. Understand, too, that there will be a segment that is less likely to be engaged by the offering. This is not your target audience — focus your efforts elsewhere.

— Julio Hernandez, Head of Global Customer Center of Excellence

Implications
for others

Gamified learning experiences can be fun, useful and engaging for employees, regardless of gaming experience or staff seniority. In fact, senior staff members can be more responsive to gamified learning experiences than their less senior peers where motivations are properly aligned.

In developing a gamified app or any other learning solution, consider not only the immediate learning objectives but also how to tie those objectives into the larger organizational context. While game mechanics such as achievements and leader boards can provide an immediate emotional reward, external motivations to learn, such as supporting career advancement, provide the motivation for greater engagement with the material over a longer term.

While engagement is critical, it is also important to be able to identify when activity reaches an unproductive level and have a plan to address it. If you identify unproductive users, one solution is to 'promote' these individuals to an employee advisory team, where they can contribute to the app enhancement decision process. This redirects their energy and provides a positive outlet for their over-engagement.

> " The trade-offs made during design made our country adoption a smooth process, free from cultural pushback. I know the team lost sleep about whether we were designing a 'safe but lame' game during the build, but I'm glad that we haven't been slowed down during our rollout by cultural challenges. "
>
> — Vaughan O'Leary,
>   KPMG Globerunner team

Cultural differences

As a training app for a global firm, we gave careful consideration to the influence of culture in different countries and regions. Some of the more interesting game options and mechanics ran the risk of being less socially acceptable in some of our member firms. We found ourselves walking a fine line between a 'safe but lame' design and an engaging experience.

While we made a number of trade-offs and compromises, our guiding design principles resulted in an app that was well-received in countries around the globe. Responses and feedback have been similar from people in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia Pacific and the Americas.

The comfort factor

Would you be comfortable playing a training game in a professional work environment?

In our pilot in 2013, we discovered that many employees felt uncomfortable "playing a game" at work, even if the game was a company-designed training app. We attributed most of these concerns to two areas: lack of company branding on the game itself, and concerns surrounding leadership endorsement. For the KPMG Globerunner app, we kept the branding subtle and focused on leadership endorsement to help our employees feel more comfortable.

At one member firm, the launch communications came in the form of a cheeky graduate emailing the CEO, challenging him to play and cc'ing the whole firm. The CEO 'replied all' with a playful response. Employees from this country showed one of the highest levels of comfort using the app in the workplace.

"

I kept getting 'the look' from people walking past my desk — I was quite uncomfortable. "

— Kevin, Graduate

The importance of leadership buy-in and active communications to encourage use of the app cannot be understated. In member firms where the rollout communications included a strong message from a KPMG leader from that country, the number of staff that felt comfortable using the app increased by 20 percent. When this message was not included, typically due to a softer launch, we observed much higher levels of employee discomfort.

Staff grading also had a significant impact on comfort levels. The more junior staff members were actually much less comfortable using a gamified app in the workplace, reporting feeling like they were being "caught" doing something wrong or that co-workers thought they were wasting time.

Relative discomfort levels

100%
Team member

38%
Senior team member

23%
Manager

17%
Senior manager

2%
Director

4%
Partner
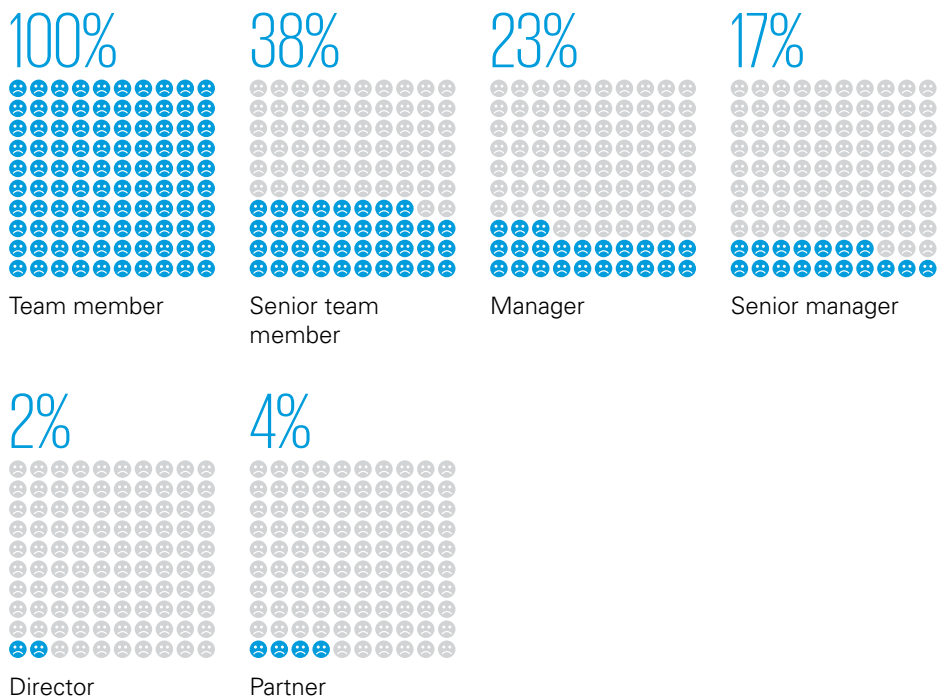
Valuable data

Use of a digital tool provides a unique opportunity to collect and analyze key user data that can be used to provide inputs to business leaders, inform engagement activities, and support future learning and training initiatives. As we designed the app, we carefully considered what we wanted to learn and ensured that the app was able to collect the necessary data, some of which is reflected in this paper.

However, with data collection comes a responsibility to consider privacy requirements and ensure that your users agree to the terms of data collection and use. Key considerations include how the data is to be used, whether internally or sold/shared with a third party, as well as the security of the app and data storage environment.

Implications
for others

The needs and nature of an organization's employee base must be taken into consideration at the outset of the design of any gamified app in order to gain full value. Cultural considerations can significantly affect engagement or adoption and must be factored into the design, even if this means eliminating 'fun' game options from consideration.

It is also important to be aware that a potential downside of a 'fun' app for learning or training is that employees may be hesitant to engage at the workplace, not wanting to be seen as unproductive or disrespectful. Appropriate communication, especially from company leadership, is critical to position the app as an organization-sponsored training tool and encourage participation.

Use of an app instead of, or in addition to, other types of learning materials provides an excellent way to baseline knowledge, test content mastery assumptions and track learning progress over time. This data can be used to help refine the app design over time to achieve greater results, as well as to contribute to the achievement of broader learning or training goals.

"
While I was working and using the app, I got a TON of questions about what I was doing, making me feel uncomfortable about using it at work. "

— Steve, Senior consultant

"
The collection of data is not an end in itself. Meaningful algorithms should be used to analyze the data to generate insights, which can then inform executive decision-making. Use of a gamified tool thus provides a unique opportunity to gain insight into the organization, which can be used to reduce cost, mitigate risk and foster growth. "

— Christian Rast, Global Head of Technology & Knowledge

Conclusion

At KPMG, we set out to create an engaging, scalable experience to help our people learn about the firm's service capabilities. The KPMG Globerunner app demonstrated success in this regard, generating a 24 percent improvement in capability awareness. The majority of users indicated that they had fun using the app and are now more comfortable and confident responding to client challenges and opportunities. Importantly, we've received stories of how using the app has helped our people better respond to clients in real-life situations.

We believe that, used appropriately, applying game elements to user experiences can be effective in engaging people, encouraging behavior and helping to achieve organizational objectives. However, gamification should be considered as only one tool in the toolbox as part of a broader, organization-wide learning and training program.

Author

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About KPMG

KPMG is a global network of professional services firms providing Audit, Tax and Advisory services. We operate in 154 countries and territories and have 200,000 people working in member firms around the world. The independent member firms of the KPMG network are affiliated with KPMG International Cooperative ("KPMG International"), a Swiss entity. Each KPMG firm is a legally distinct and separate entity and describes itself as such.

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