

Q&A: Playtech and the Responsible Gambling Council on coming together to aid better mental health in gambling

Responsible Gambling Council's Janine Robinson and Playtech director of sustainability Lauren Iannarone chat to EGR Compliance on cooperating to build better digital resilience among online gamblers



Robert Simmons
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The treatment of online gambling, and more pointedly gambling-related harm among players, is often cited as being a public health issue, with many advocating for an approach similar to that applied to smoking or childhood obesity. However, unlike its more obvious counterparts, gambling-related harm is a far more nuanced issue where a blanket public health approach could harm just as much as it could heal the issues plaguing the sector.

That being said, there are parts of the health-related approach which could ultimately benefit from being adopted by operators. One such strand being experimented in by online slots supplier Playtech is that of digital resilience, building online awareness among players who might not otherwise perceive potential gambling-related harm until it was too late.

In its work in this area, Playtech aims to aid the sustainability of its business model by creating a culture of online awareness among its players. As part of this, the software supplier has forged many partnerships with advocacy and mental health groups, including its latest partner, Canada's Responsible Gambling Council (RGC).

RGC managing director of responsible gambling initiatives Janine Robinson and Playtech director of sustainability Lauren Iannarone chat to *EGR Compliance* about working in this area and the cooperation and betterment opportunities it affords.

EGR Compliance: What are the fundamental objectives of the RGC?

Janine Robinson (JR): The Responsible Gambling Council (RGC) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting safer gambling by influencing positive change and advancing responsible gambling standards in Canada and around the world. Our mission is to prevent problem gambling and reduce its impacts. For over 35 years, RGC has worked with regulators, operators, and the gambling public to ensure that gambling safeguards are in place to support the wellbeing of people and communities.



Janine Robinson, Responsible Gambling Council

EGR Compliance: In what ways has the organisation changed since its founding in 1980?

JR: RGC was originally founded as the Canadian Foundation on Compulsive Gambling (CFCG). Our founder, Tibor Barsony, struggled with problem gambling and

it caused many problems – personal, financial and health. He was in fact incarcerated because of problems related to gambling. When he left jail, he realised there were no programmes to help those struggling with problem gambling, so he made it his life's work to support and educate those suffering with gambling.

As the Canadian Foundation on Compulsive Gambling evolved into the Responsible Gambling Council, our work also evolved to include more prevention awareness campaigns, research and accreditation to promote the importance of prevention and responsible gambling.

RGC began as an organisation focused on advocacy, policy and treatment. Over the years, our work evolved to focus on broad-based prevention, with an emphasis on secondary prevention among groups at higher risk of experiencing harm: youth, ethno-cultural populations and indigenous people, for example. We also have a strong research programme that focuses on creating evidence-informed programmes, standards, and recommendations.

In 2016 RGC launched RG Plus, a strategic consultation service that works with governments, operators and regulators across the globe to develop policies and strategy, conduct jurisdictional reviews and benchmarking, as well as create customised training solutions.

EGR Compliance: What would you say are the fundamental aspects of the sustainable success strategy and how do these play out at a business level?

Lauren Iannarone (LI): At its core, sustainability is about taking account of evolving societal concerns into core business as part of a business's strategy to achieve and sustain long-term sustainability as a going concern. Sustainability is not just about writing a cheque to fund nice CSR initiatives but taking into account stakeholder interests as part of the way in which you do business – and embedding these considerations into core business – from product development to the people strategy – from promoting innovation to wellbeing of employees. With our new five-year commitment, we are on a journey to embed this ethos across the business. Playtech Protect is a great example of how we are making safer gambling solutions a core part of our product and service strategy.

As part of our R&D and product development process, we are investing in R&D to understand features that are associated with greater risk of gambling-related harm and how the design and characteristics of gambling products impact customer behaviour. As part of our product and game design process, we have been working with our leaders and industry colleagues to develop new standards for product and game design in the sector. Further, we are testing product labelling to explore ways to better inform customers of the risks associated with their gambling activity and provide advice on strategies to minimise risks. Finally, we are open-sourcing safer and responsible gambling product assets to licensees to help raise standards.

EGR Compliance: In what ways does adopting digital resilience and safer gambling behaviours form an important part of protecting the mental health of players?

JR: Mental health and gambling feed into each other. Gambling behaviours can impact multiple domains of someone's life, including their mental health such as feelings of anxiety and stress. The opposite is also true, where online and gambling behaviours are impacted by someone's mental health, such as anxiety and depression. This link is particularly present under the current Covid-19 circumstances. Our recent survey found that among people who gambled online during the lockdown, moderate and severe anxiety and depression were associated with high-risk gambling.

The comorbidity is high but people still don't often consider problem gambling as part of mental health. Mental health has been growing in public awareness but programmes directed at changing the perception and stigma of problem gambling are limited.

If gambling is harmful, people experience all kinds of mental health consequences related to finances, stress, worry, depression, lost sleep, sedentary lifestyles, alcohol/substance use, etc. If gambling is recreational and enjoyable (presumably within affordable financial limits) it should be low risk and pose limited harm for one's mental health.

The same is also true for online behaviours other than gambling. When a person spends their time online, gambling or otherwise, in a safer way, they are limiting the negative consequences they may experience from these behaviours, including impacts on their mental health.

Being aware of the potential risks of gambling and having the tools and knowledge necessary to make informed decisions about your play is the foundation for building a safer player base. Bringing in the lens of digital wellbeing and how to teach the public about safer online strategies more generally will help move the needle from problem gambling to prevention.

LI : This is a key area we would like to further explore through the research and insights work that RGC will be leading. There are several organisations and existing initiatives investing and developing promising practices and solutions to promote healthy online behaviour and digital resilience. The question is how the gambling sector can learn from others, collaborate, and test and implement effective strategies for safeguarding consumers.

EGR Compliance: How do you think the online gambling sphere has changed the debate around the intersection between gambling-related harm and mental health?

JR: This is a good question: both topics are widely misunderstood and extremely impactful, on a societal level. Shifts to increased time spent online have brought to the forefront concerns about the mental health impacts of the time spent and the activities engaged in while online. As gambling forms a part of this time spent online for many, this shift has also brought more attention to the interconnections between online gambling and mental health.

This shift and our collaboration with Playtech provide an opportunity to increase meaningful dialogue about the intersections, including how gambling can fit into broader discussions of digital wellbeing and what impacts this may have for the mental health of those who spend time online.

LI: Of course, online gambling is not the only factor – the entire shift of entertainment to online has been a key driver for the debate and call to action. The public health impacts of gaming and gambling-related harm, particularly mental health impacts, has been rising up the public health agenda for a while. This concern is informing calls for stronger action across the board. With Covid, this has become even more relevant, visible and urgent. The focus on resilience, looking after one's mental health and risky online behaviours is now top of mind for all. The enormity of the current situation offers an opportunity for bringing together interested organisations to better understand what works and how best to work together to make a meaningful difference at scale.



Lauren Innarone, Playtech

EGR Compliance: In what ways will your collaboration with Playtech enhance the RGC's research, education and treatment efforts?

JR: This partnership will look to take the work that is currently being done in silos across various industries and sectors and create a more complete picture of how

digital wellbeing intersects with gambling. It is providing us with the ability to speak to leaders in the digital wellbeing space and to generate unique insights on emerging issues in this field.

Results from this important and original research will be critical for informing the education programmes we offer at RGC, providing evidence and guidance for creating messages about digital wellbeing and safer gambling for adolescents, young adults, and the public at large. We have been working with a public health lens in our research and education initiatives, and this collaboration will allow us to continue to push that approach and encourage a commitment to public health on a global scale.

EGR Compliance: In your opinion, should online gambling operators be doing more to promote good mental health and digital resilience?

JR: Our world is a digital one and online gambling operators have the potential to make huge impacts. Resilience or healthy habits are not only the responsibility of consumers, but also of operators. Operators have the resources, access and duty to support safer play and help reduce negative impacts among their players. The platforms they offer should be as safe as possible. This includes:

- making safer play behaviours an easy, and understandable choice (e.g. limit setting is encouraged and explained), and
- implementing the practices adopted by all reputable operators (e.g. embed safer gambling into the platform, avoid misleading marketing etc.).

One thing to note is that the intersection between digital wellbeing, mental health and gambling harms is still largely under examined. This collaboration with Playtech will have a widespread impact on the industry and the public – globally – in filling the knowledge gaps and enhancing user safeguards.

EGR Compliance: What is the one change that you would ask online gambling operators to make in order to achieve this aim?

JR: More than one change is required but, if only one, I would ask operators to demonstrate innovation, try something new and push the needle on safer gambling. Some of the best minds are in this industry and collaborations like this one between Playtech and RGC can help advance the field. Technologies are advancing faster than prevention, awareness, and treatment. Operators have access to players, player data, and resources to support innovative, creative, and evidence-informed practices.

This partnership can act as an ignitor to the rest of the gambling industry to think outside the box when it comes to player safety and committing to problem gambling prevention strategies. We hope that this cross-jurisdictional collaboration will help spark regulators and operators around the world to share expertise and work together to address issues that affect both industry and players.

EGR Compliance: Does the RGC plan to expand its partnerships with other gambling operators in the near future?

JR: Collaboration between third-party research and operators is a strength, so yes RGC plans to expand its collaborations with other operators in the future. RGC strongly believes in collaborating with operators and regulators that have a vested interest in player safeguards as we are all committed to seeing a world free of problem gambling.

Earlier this year, RGC was given RET Charitable Status and added to the list of approved charities to direct funding as one of the few research-based responsible gambling organisations. Our goal is to receive funding that will allow us to conduct important, independent research on understanding the impacts and outcomes of responsible gambling efforts and programming in the UK. We also bring our international lens to this research, with an eye to supporting the UK to benchmark their practices globally, and to learn with and from other jurisdictions which are also leading the efforts toward reducing harms related to gambling.

EGR Compliance: What are your objectives for the rest of 2020?

JR: 2020 will be an important year for RGC and the online gambling industry, especially as we continue to navigate Covid-19 and the impacts it has had on players. Our objectives include increasing awareness of gambling as a key vector or aspect of promoting digital wellbeing globally, to learn from experts in the digital wellbeing field and existing programmes, and to craft a way forward for encouraging safer gambling alongside digital wellbeing.

At the RGC we continue to seek innovative ways to collaborate with operators and regulators on research and programming that drives positive change in player protection. We are thrilled to collaborate with Playtech in 2020. Playtech stands behind and demonstrates their values through their Sustainable Success Strategy. Their commitment to player protection and finding new and innovative ways to go above and beyond regulatory requirements sets an example for the industry.

Canada Canada Insight Mental health North America Playtech Responsible gambling Responsible Gambling Council Safer gambling Sustainability