

THE MEASURABLE IMPACT OF

SIMULATION TRAINING IN SALES & LEADERSHIP

# *White* PAPER



# White Paper: The Measurable Impact of Simulation Training in Sales & Leadership

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*"I hear and I forget,  
I see and I remember,  
I do and I understand"*

(Chinese Proverb)

## I. Introduction

There is a growing body of evidence to show that simulations are a successful training method in various industries. This white paper will: a) explain the theory and practice of simulation, b) explore the use of simulation methods in sales and leadership training and c) detail the unique benefits that simulation training provides.

There are some roles that people must be fully trained for before they begin the job, such as surgeons, soldiers and pilots. In other roles, it is much more beneficial to the organisation when individuals are trained in the role as early as possible. When interacting with business prospects, there is very little room for mistakes or bad habits; every interaction has to go according to plan. This is where computer simulations come in.

Top-performing businesses are always looking for training solutions to develop sales people to excellent standards, but there is debate on the best way to do this. Simulations present a learning method that trains people to deal with fast-moving situations that have an impact on business outcomes. When these scenarios arise, and business people are not trained for them, they are likely to result in lost business.

Practice is an important part of professional development, but preventable mistakes that may cost businesses money and time are always a risk. Furthermore, when traditional sales training methods are used, business leaders may be doubtful about the impact they will have on performance. Simulations are the solution to a widespread training problem: learning retention. In short, they are the key to reliable, high-impact sales training.

## II. What are computer simulations?

Simulations are a computer-based learning technique where the learner takes the role of a character and explores a sequence of common scenarios that may be specific to their industry. The character (such as the one featured in Figure 1 below) is faced with difficult decisions that are based on real life examples— often involving other people - and must use critical thinking skills to choose a course of action. Simulations are used to train military, aviation and healthcare personnel; their effectiveness suggests that they should also be widely implemented in business. In a simulation, a paramedic may be faced with an emergency where they must make a sequence of quick decisions. Conversely, a sales person may have to make decisions on a course of action when they arrive to deliver an important presentation to an unfriendly board that announce they are short of time. A business leader may need to implement a strategy to rescue their organisation from financial despair. All of these roles require quick thinking and any mistakes will have consequences both for individuals and organisations.

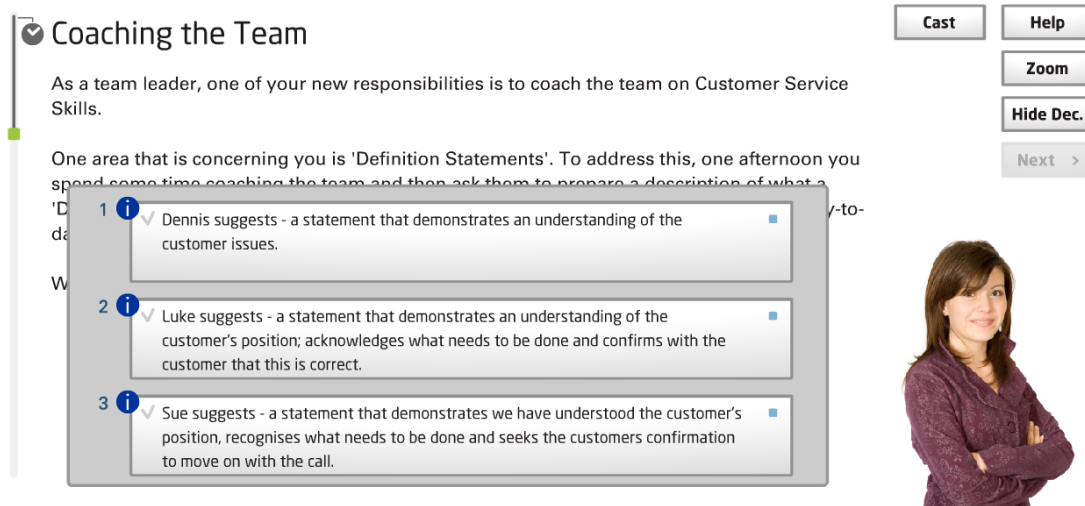


Figure 1: Example of a TLISA simulation

The point of the simulation is that the player gets to see the consequences of different actions. When faced with different scenarios, they will be presented with a selection of potential courses of action; this multiple choice format encourages learners to consider the outcome of each selection before making a decision. At the end of the simulation, they are presented with feedback on their choices and will be debriefed on how useful and successful their decisions were. Simulations are always played at the end of a training course, as a way for learners to apply their new skills and techniques, as well as test their learning. As a general rule, they are played in the afternoon of a training day to sum up and test the day's learning, as well as to prevent learners'

attention from slumping. The simulation method provides a way for the learner to really get to grips with challenging situations and understand how to handle them effectively. This is a means of pre-empting real life encounters in order to reduce mistakes and encourage on-the-spot critical thinking when dilemmas occur.

Simulations encourage learners to acquire specific knowledge and decision-making skills that can be successfully used in a professional situation. Learners are exposed to common challenges that they may not have encountered yet, but may arise in the future and must be handled effectively. In short, simulations enable learners to develop critical skills and practice them in a safe environment. They are a way for sales people to cheat time by gaining exposure to difficult scenarios that they may not have encountered in their careers yet. The huge benefit of simulations is that, due to the fact they are computer-based, they can be updated and tailored to any organisation at any time; their content will never become out-dated or irrelevant, and they can be delivered internally.

### **III. The strength of simulations**

The primary concern in any type of knowledge transfer or training environment is how much of the new information is retained. Many business leaders are reluctant to send their team members on training courses (especially if they are expensive) because they can't guarantee that the new learning won't just be left in a notebook and thrown in a cupboard, never to be seen again. In the long term, this attitude is problematic because when sales professionals are short of skills or embedded in bad habits, the business will suffer until good quality training is delivered. Nevertheless, business leaders have strong reason to be apprehensive about training, especially if they have been previously disappointed by previous training outcomes.

When learning is delivered in a one-way method, there is a risk that learners can walk away without listening. However, by actively engaging participants through experiential learning, simulations transfer knowledge effectively. In this way, a simulation can be used as an informal test at the end of a training programme, which doesn't stress learners the way more traditional forms of 'test' do; learners are presented with simulated scenarios that force them to recall their recent learning on methods and techniques, and are able to learn through the mistakes they make. Due to their interactive nature that puts the learner in control, they are perceived almost like a game and become fun for participants; a far cry from ancient 'role play' methods that sales training once relied on. Because they are fun, simulations have been proven to increase participants' motivation to learn and therefore increase the amount of new

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information they absorb. In a training environment, this means that the training content is immediately absorbed and then translated into practice. Greenblat (1981) identifies four key elements that must feature in simulations in order to stimulate learning:

- (1) finding modes of creating motivation prior to transmitting information*
- (2) the learner must be an active participant in the learning process, rather than a passive recipient of information*
- (3) instruction must be individualized such that learning is at the appropriate pace for each learner*
- (4) there must be prompt feedback on success and error.*

(Hertel and Millis, 2002, 2)

This 'creative motivation' addressed in the first point comes as a direct result of simulations' game-like aspect. Interactivity makes simulations enjoyable and helps transfer the new information. Regarding the second point, critics may suggest that this could be said for on-the-job training, but the two methods are not quite the same, as Hertel and Millis explain:

*'By designing the simulation without all of the complexities and distractions of real life, students are able to focus on the instructor's intended learning objectives.'*

*'Simulations promote student motivation and participation because events can unfold and decisions can be made at an accelerated pace. Furthermore, irrelevant time-consuming events can be condensed or eliminated.'*

(Hertel and Millis, 2002, 2)

In the light of these statements, it could be the case that on-the-job training (in which distractions are present) could be strengthened and supplemented by simulations that reinforce and test the key learning objectives. However, on-the-job training alone cannot be relied upon to deliver the same level of information intake as simulations. Greenblat's third and fourth points will be addressed later in this document.

Simulations motivate learners to learn specific skills; these are often skills that are vital to get right and need as much understanding and practice as possible. Take the example of an organ transplant, for instance; or landing a plane. Nobody would expect a commercial pilot to practice their first landing in a real passenger jet. Similarly, nobody would expect the same pilot to learn how to land a plane through attending some classroom-based training and reading about it in books. It's important that business leaders view sales training in a similar light.

For these reasons, simulations have become common training practice in numerous industries; due to simulation, aviation training is now seen as 'more realistic, safe, cost-effective, and flexible than ever before' (Salas, Bowers and Rhodenizer, 197, 2009). Something else to be considered is that, before taking control of the cockpit, a training pilot will no doubt have completed hours of shadowing, observation and partial operation. Sales and leadership training should not be too dissimilar. Simulation is an ideal way to test an individual's learning before they independently tackle situations.

### **IV. Simulations for sales and leadership success**

Although sales scenarios do not present a life or death situation, a poorly functioning, semi-skilled sales team could be the eventual demise of a business. Sales meetings are a win or lose scenario and any business is loath to lose business through preventable mistakes. Leaders must have sharp skills to motivate their people, diffuse team conflicts and successfully implement a company strategy. The use of simulation in business allows learners to develop critical thinking skills that will benefit them when it comes to making split-second decisions in their role.

Geoff Colvin states:

*"The opportunities for businesses to improve people's performance dramatically through simulation are glaringly obvious, yet few business leaders know anything about them."*

Simulations create an environment designed around specific learning objectives; this is an environment that the learner is invited to navigate and make decisions in. This is where Greenblat's third point about individualised learning comes in; simulations must be relevant to the learner and their industry. They can be tailored to different companies, in order to integrate their unique systems, terminology and performance measures into the learning. Furthermore, as the learners are assigned a character whose decisions will be evaluated, they feel a high level of responsibility to get it right. As they progress through the simulation, spending more time on some questions than others, learners are able to witness the consequences of their decisions once they have made them, and most importantly, are able to make mistakes in a safe environment where there are no real-life repercussions on the business. Business simulations tend to take between thirty and ninety minutes to complete. When simulations are played in groups, participants have an opportunity to discuss both actions and outcomes together, pooling their own personal experiences along the way to increase learning.



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Figure 2: Team collaboration

Unlike pilots or surgeons, business professionals complete simulations in teams. Working in collaboration, learners have to come to a consensus before deciding on which path of action to take in various scenarios. Options for action are presented in multiple-choice format, forcing teams to critically engage with all the options presented to them and weighing up the best option. Learners must discuss their rationale for selecting a certain action; through these conversations, they consider the potential consequences of their decisions. This joint problem-solving method exposes learners to new ideas. A beneficial side effect of this process is that it facilitates team bonding; when using simulations as part of an in-house sales training programme, this is a welcome addition.

It is Greenblat's fourth point on simulations mentioned earlier (*'there must be prompt feedback on success and error'*) that is the magic factor in sales, sales management and leadership training. The scoring and debrief that participants receive after completing a simulation is what embeds learning, ensures understanding and leaves the participant changed. When scoring is used, it provides a quantifiable measure of where improvement and further practice is necessary. Without practice and feedback, learning is incomplete; there is no evidence that a participant has engaged with training material and no guarantee that they will be ready to implement new methods when the time comes.

Feedback is an essential factor in getting things right. The feedback at the end of a simulation explains what went right or wrong in their decision-making process, and a training facilitator then has the opportunity to discuss the reasons for this with learners. In real life, there are few opportunities for feedback, so this element of the simulation is a huge benefit that allows professionals to analyse and perfect their behaviour before dealing with customers. When later faced with a real life version of the simulated event (e.g. a boardroom meeting where stakeholders are throwing out objections left, right and centre), the learner will know exactly how to handle the situation and, under pressure, make the right decisions to ensure the best business outcome instead of becoming intimidated, rushed or nervous.

Because simulations happen immediately after training, and are delivered in a short session, everything is fresh in the learner's mind and they can reflect on the key learning objectives. The feedback part of simulations also allows

learners to understand *why* certain courses of action are preferable. In their book on simulations in higher education, Hertel and Millis quote a law student:

*“Not only did I learn more substantive law than in any other course I’ve taken”, declared an “alumnus” of a legal simulation course, “but I learned why I needed to learn all of those things”.*

- page 1, Hertel, P and Millis J.

### **V. Conclusion**

Computer-based simulations are a revelation in sales and leadership training. They have changed learning for the better by making it both more enjoyable and more effective. By creating an interactive, positive learning environment, simulations have the unique power to increase learner motivation. This means that learners are more likely to fully engage, concentrate on the material and clearly remember its content. This is a particular benefit when educating adults; few sales business people relish the idea of sitting in a classroom and taking notes, or having to stand up in front of a group and participate in an embarrassing role play. The feedback element of simulations consolidates the learning and equips participants with the information and experience to make informed decisions on which course of action to pursue.

Computer-based simulations have provided learning and development departments worldwide with a fantastic tool for learners to break performance barriers, directly practice and implement new learning and get to grips with skills that are vital to individual and business success.



## References

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## About TLSA International

TLSA are leadership, sales management and sales training specialists that deliver flexible and fully accredited solutions for any organisation with sales professionals. We care about both the immediate and long-lasting impact to our clients' businesses, developing the highest standard of sales performance.

We are based in Hampshire, UK but can deliver training anywhere in the world. Our trainers have travelled to Europe, the Middle East and the USA to deliver our training programmes.

We offer consultancy, in-house training and off-the-shelf solutions for primarily the B2B market. Our aim is to make your life easier and boost your company's performance. The most recent addition to our portfolio is our Skill Accelerator®, catering to companies' demands for an affordable training solution with high return that can be delivered straight out of the box. This saves company time out of the workplace and simultaneously strengthens sales leadership and management.

TLSA's expert trainers deliver real-world practical learning and develop techniques that deliver long-lasting value. The impact of the learning is measured through accreditation, observation and coaching.

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