

## **Simulations Build on Adult Learning to Accelerate Skill Building and Application**

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Simulations aren't a new tool in enterprise learning. As with many of the technologies that have graced the learning stage in the past few years, simulations enjoyed a burst of popularity and attention that subsequently died down. But unlike many of the fly-by-night tech solutions that burst into a short-lived flame, the buzz around simulations still burns and with good reason — simulations are one of the top tools that engage learners and accelerate skill building, as well as the application of new skills and knowledge once employees are back on the job.

"We are seeing an increase in demand for simulations across the board, whether it's an e-learning simulation, a classroom-based computer simulation or a board simulation," said Rommin Adl, president and CEO of Strategic Management Group Inc., one of the largest simulation and multimedia training companies in the world. "We're seeing growth in every single segment that we serve across different practice areas such as business acumen, leadership, project management and sales."

Adl said part of the reason simulations are still hot is because they align closely with adult learning principles and offer the opportunity to learn by doing in a risk-free environment. Cost, once a huge deterrent to simulation implementation, remains a factor, but it is not as big a worry at the top of the organizational pyramid.

"It links to the strategic nature of learning," Adl said. "If the learning is linked to some major strategic change initiative, then cost tends to be important, but it's almost secondary to really creating alignment around the strategic change, whereas, if it's a curriculum-based or open-enrollment type program, cost is going to be much more of a factor."

Customization also is a key issue when considering the viability of simulations in your learning organization, and highly customized simulations naturally have a much higher cost point. Cost might be relative, however, in comparison with the results inherent in scenario-based simulations created with adult learning principles as a backbone.

"Most adults leave the academic learning environment when they exit school," Adl said. "As a result they're not used to frequent learning experiences. The first principle we hold is that there's got to be something in it for the learner — why should they attend in the first place? Usually the learning is tied to some sort of strategic change initiative or something that is linked to the performance of the organization. Once you get the learner in there, there's the real challenge of holding their interest and making them engage."

Adl said adults tend to have fundamentally shorter attention spans, and there are lots of distractions that might pull at them over the course of a learning program. Engaging simulation design is one way to combat these problems. Simulations that encourage high levels of competition, employ humor and use real-world examples often are the most engaging.

Adults also might have very different learning styles. Some will be active learners and want to do things, and others will be passive and want to be told the answers. Simulations can be tailored to engage all types of learners.

In scenario-based simulations, Adl said it's often best to get the learner to focus on best practices — what are the optimal decisions they could make or the optimal answers? At the same time it's important to recognize that, as in the real world, in day-to-day business situations, other possible answers may be as good or almost as good.

“Adults want to be challenged,” Adl said. “Learning needs to be intuitive, but at the same time don't just make it telling the answer. Have them go and figure it out. Make it so that the answers aren't always apparent, so they're forced to step out of their normal boundaries and try some new things. Adults generally have very established views of the world and opinions, and when it comes to working with simulations, especially in the scenario simulations, a lot of times the answers aren't black or white, especially when it comes to something like leadership simulations. There's usually a series of possibilities that could occur that may lead to positive outcomes.”

Adults also enjoy discussing their experiences, so learning simulations should consider built-in team activities that leave space for best practice sharing.

“That gives them more skin in the game and makes them feel like they're contributing and learning from others,” Adl said. “That's a key, key piece. The other thing about simulations is the level of customization that goes into it. That's a real key piece especially in the applications. A vast majority of our programs have some degree of customization that goes into them. If it's a big strategic alignment program, usually that will be built from the ground up and is highly, highly customized for the business and specific priorities. If it's something that is more of a leadership program for front-line managers, we may not customize the simulation so much as customize the content around the simulation, so that it is aligned to the clients' competency models or their norms and culture. The learners go in and can really identify the learning and relate it back to the job.

“There's always some sort of applications piece where we really will have them link it back to the job and then go do something about it. That lends itself nicely to a follow-up and results-measurement process. There are other, more tactical things that help drive results, and part of that is once they get into the simulation, making it very intuitive, simple — balancing simplicity and reality with the key learning objectives. A lot of technology companies get hung up on the technology, and they sacrifice the basic learning objectives and application that you want to get out of it.”

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