

Simulated Virtual Environment Training Platform for High Stakes Professionals and Enterprises needing to develop Interpersonal Skills



Mark Atkinson
CEO
Mursion, Inc.

CEOCFO: *Mr. Atkinson, according to your site, Mursion is reinventing the way professionals master their craft. How so?*

Mr. Atkinson: Mursion provides professionals who work in high stakes careers the opportunity to engage in authentic, simulated practice of the toughest conversations they must conduct at work in order to carry out their job duties. Mursion's virtual environments replicate the workplace conditions where these professionals are required to demonstrate mastery over these essential interpersonal skills -- like having a tough HR conversation, or leading a diverse team of professionals, or handling a particularly ornery customer. We believe these so-called "soft skills" -- collaboration, communication, leadership and team building, are the key skills of the 21st century, and the only way to perfect them is to rehearse them in authentic simulation scenarios.

CEOCFO: *What is an example of the authentic part? What was the old way and how has Mursion improved the experience?*

Mr. Atkinson: We just completed a national engagement with the hotel chain Best Western. Best Western's goal was to improve the customer service that its front desk clerks provide to both business and leisure travelers. Visitors arrive often stressed from the travel experience we know of today and want everything to be perfect and invariably find that their room might not be ready on time or that the internet was not working in their room or their neighbor was loud or intolerant. These are the day-to-day challenges that front desk clerks face. The way Best Western would typically train is to have a big customer handbook that they gave to these folks and they would teach people what was in the handbook. Of course, that gave the front desk people a knowledge of what the company's policies were but did nothing to actually prepare them for the real challenge of dealing with a frustrated, exhausted business traveler who was yelling at them because their room was not ready at the front desk. We created a virtual environment that replicated the lobby of a Best Western hotel, and an avatar that replicates the behaviors of this angry, frustrated business traveler. We gave every front desk clerk in Best Western's hotels in the United States an opportunity to practice a set of strategies that are in their policy manual but they had never had a chance to rehearse or practice before. We just completed this training and are in the process of winding it down. Best Western has had the single largest positive change in customer satisfaction that they have ever had as a result of the training that we just completed. I think it is mostly because if you think about the comparison between reading a manual and practicing the real skill they are very different experiences.

CEOCFO: *How do you really know how people will react? How do you replicate actual experiences, not a textbook version?*

Mr. Atkinson: Ultimately, the customer decides. Our technology is a combination of artificial intelligence and human intelligence. It is not like talking to your iPhone in that stilted jargon that reflects the real state of AI today. Artificial intelligence drives many of the physical attributes of Mursion's simulations, but the actual exchanges are happening between trained actors at Mursion who "inhabit" the avatars with whom the learners are interacting.

Here's an example of how Mursion works: Best Western Hotels asked all of its regional managers to describe to Mursion what happens in its hotels when customers are delayed and their rooms are not ready, or when a party in a neighboring guest's room keeps a weary traveler up all night; or the internet goes down in the hotel just as a business traveler is trying to wrap up tomorrow's big presentation – what's a front desk clerk supposed to do in each of these situations? The hotel chain gave Mursion the case files of the problems they face routinely and that they wanted their the front desk staff to be able to master, and then we designed scenarios that mimic these events. Then we role play each scenario for the client until the client agrees that our virtual simulation replicates the real world experience. Then we create a rotating bank of those scenarios for the front desk clerks to practice, until they feel comfortable with each challenge. I think if you ask Best Western, they will say that the training not only helped boost the confidence of front desk; it produced measurable gains in customer satisfaction.

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CEOCFO: *How does it help that you started with a platform that was for teachers and school principals? What did you learn from that has made it perhaps easier and a better offering now that you are working on a different level as well?*

Mr. Atkinson: Two things. The first is it has forced us to simulate multiple character environments or challenges. In the example I was just giving you about the Best Western engagement, the front desk clerk only has to deal with one angry customer at a time. They are usually in a line and they come up to you one at a time, it is one on one. Because teaching involves a classroom of children, we have had to think through both the technology but more importantly, the simulation design challenges of having multiple students with unique learning and ethnographic profiles, operating in real time in an authentic way. If you walk into any given classroom, there might be a very shy but brilliant girl in the back of the classroom that nobody calls on, and a very obnoxious, loud and seemingly smart but actually not so smart young boy at the front of the classroom. There might be a child who has just recently immigrated to the US and does not speak English as his first language and the teacher has to manage that. This is what education is like every day – or, there is a child with a specific learning disability. We have to create authentic scenarios that have very challenging, unique, cognitive, behavioral language and other characteristics that play all at the same time. We thought that if we can do it well in education, doing these one on one adult situation -- such as the HR person that has to discipline the manager for violating specific employment practices at the firm, or the sales trainee who has to learn how to close the deal with the obnoxious client, or the front desk clerk, or the medical student who has to learn how to do an oral diagnosis of type two diabetes by interviewing patients who walk into the clinic -- there are all these kinds of things that have all kinds of tricks and challenges to them, but we think few are more challenging than educating a diverse population of young children with various social, emotional and cognitive challenges they bring to that task. We have cut our teeth on one of the hardest challenges, which has helped us to think through both the technologies and the simulation design protocols for less complicated things, like the scenarios I described to earlier.

CEOCFO: *How are you reaching out to clients in all realms? How do you stand out if someone is searching?*

Mr. Atkinson: We do not do well by search. Ours is something to experience. We have only gone to a handful of conferences around education and typically the chief learning officers of the corporate world or the medical world and the chief academic officers of the education world. All of our leads have come from those events and those leads have led to some significant transactions. We have grown rapidly. We have not finished our first full year, but we believe that we will have an impressive first year, and as we gain visibility into next year, we believe we are looking at rather substantial growth. The way it sells is to experience it. There is no better way for us to sell.

CEOCFO: *What has been your biggest challenge over the years?*

Mr. Atkinson: The biggest challenge has been navigating these different verticals and developing the best vocabulary to position our solution intelligently within the training that one would have in medicine versus sales, versus hospitality, versus HR for example. In those domains people quickly see the value of our system, but for them to want to buy it we will be able to speak their language and position the system properly within the context of how they do training and performance assessment in each of those areas. We have brought on subject matter experts to help us, and we find that

our clients are very receptive to making the translation. For example, they can see how a simulation in hospitality can be adapted for something that they might do in healthcare by changing this aspect of the environment or this element of the design. Our ability to speak their language quickly is the difference between getting that deal and still talking about the deal.

CEOCFO: *Why choose Mursion?*

Mr. Atkinson: It is the most powerful, cost-effective, authentic way to quickly train large numbers of people around challenging interpersonal skills.

Interview conducted by: Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine

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