



SYSTEM SIMULATIONS

*Beyond Learning Management Systems
- Integrate corporate training and
business goals with*

Virtual Academy

By Bill Siino

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Introduction

Learning Management Systems that track training and offer online education for corporate associates have proliferated over the past ten years. At last count, there were more than one hundred such systems offered in the marketplace by just as many companies. This speaks to the importance and success of online training as well as to the commitment of corporations to educate their employees and partners.

But training by itself does not create business success. Training needs to change behavior and lead to achievement of business goals. This is where most online learning programs fail. At System Simulations, we believe in integrating your training offerings with job information and with the goals your company must achieve. The result is what we call Virtual Academy.

“Virtual” because there are no bricks. “Academy” because it is more than a place to take classes and tests. The Academy differs from solutions of other learning management system (LMS) vendors. This manifests in features like customized home pages for individual students, reference materials, contests, job assistants, and central points of communication.

Virtual Academy is a customized student learning platform that integrates knowledge and learning management while tracking business objectives for employees and external partners.

Most learning management systems educate a population to a minimum level of proficiency. Virtual Academy keeps people coming back to the site long after completion of their required courses. The site provides up-to-date job information and performance results to continue shaping employee behavior and effectiveness.

Our Journey

In 1993, we began developing training products for several large corporations. We soon realized that some type of LMS was needed to organize, administer, and track the courses we were producing. Over the years, we studied several off-the-shelf solutions and implemented several of our own. With experience we came to realize off-the-shelf solutions did not include the specialized features our clients required. Often it was expensive, difficult, or impossible to add them. And frequently clients did not need many of the LMS features they were paying for!

We decided to build a foundation for an LMS that would do anything our clients wanted. This program would be built from well-supported enterprise-level tools,

software and databases. It would support the addition of new features within client time and budget constraints.

The architecture developed into a strong structure with a “skin” or “home” on top that could be remodeled as clients needed it, much like one remodels a home while keeping the cement foundation, water pipes, and heating system. This “remodel” philosophy allows us to produce learning management systems for a wide variety of applications, each providing clients exactly what is desired without compromise.

We call this solution Virtual Academy. We have learned what features correlate with business success and now offer all our clients the opportunity to go beyond standard LMSs and take business to the next level. The following chart shows what Virtual Academy delivers over and above basic learning management systems:

Basic LMS	Virtual Academy Added
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Flexible reporting hierarchy for very large audiences- Multiple permission levels for administrators, instructors, vendors, and students- Facilitator-led course enrollment with waitlists, rosters, maps, and reminder emails- Intuitive real-time reporting using PDF and Excel files- Seamless integration with SCORM-compliant e-learning- Course equivalents and prerequisites- Learning environments that match a user’s job title	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Tracking of business performance objectives (not just training goals)- Just-in-time access and one-stop shopping of reference materials, contests, job assistants, performance support tools, and central points of communication- A modular technology platform that enables future growth in scale and scope- Reflection of brand and image without technology-imposed compromises- Compliance with company standards and regulatory policies- Elimination of printing expense through use of online brochures

Success Factors

Clearly, the features and flexibility of Virtual Academy partly account for its popularity, but three other factors play an even bigger role in our success:

Partnering with Corporate IT

Virtual Academy requires ongoing data interchange with our clients' corporate IT systems. The result is more information and knowledge of performance status for your learners. To accomplish this, we offer flexible touch points that integrate with enterprise systems and databases.

More importantly, we understand the pressure on information technology groups and collaborate with IT departments, establishing mutual trust and respect. We frequently hear from clients that this ability to partner with IT is unusual and much appreciated. It removes some of the invisible barriers that get in the way of success with technology-related projects.

Cost-Effective Implementation

With Virtual Academy, we provide a highly customized solution for each business we serve. Over the years, we have fine-tuned our methods, which ensure optimal stakeholder input and signoff along with a rapid and effective development process.

The process depends on people, so we bring the right people with the right skills to the project at the right time. Besides our seasoned fulltime staff, we draw on a sizeable group of outside experts whenever specialized skills are needed.

Outsourced Operation

Your Virtual Academy solution resides on our secure servers. We take care of all operations and maintenance related to the technology. Our help desk resolves the remarkably few issues that sometimes arise with users.

By outsourcing Virtual Academy to our servers, you skip having to educate your IT department with program-specific knowledge, and avoid burdening its staff with extra work. We typically react much more quickly to issues and change requests than our clients' internal support services could.

About System Simulations

System Simulations was founded in 1991 to offer corporate clients interactive training and Web solutions. The company developed its first training application for Nissan's Corporate Training Office. Since that time, System Simulations has produced hundreds of large-scale web and computer-based training applications for large corporations in the automotive and other industries. Hundreds of thousands of individuals have taken courses covering applications ranging from human development to complex technical systems.

About the Author

Bill Siino has more than 20 years of experience designing, engineering, and producing interactive training and Web solutions. He crafts solutions within a blended media environment. Skilled in both military and commercial training systems, Bill has designed and managed CD-ROM, DVD, and Internet training systems for large corporate clients. He holds both bachelor and master degrees in electrical engineering.

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