



Rapid Guide
How to Get **Soft Skill Simulations**
into Rapid E-learning

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In 20 minutes you will:

- Know what a soft skill simulation is
- Know what simulation options are available to you in rapid e-learning
- Know when to consider them and how to create them

What is a soft skill simulation?

A simulation is a training technique in which a real situation is represented to enable the learner to practice key job tasks.

The key traits of a simulation are:

- Accurate representation of real situations
- Opportunities to make realistic choices
- Accurate representation of the consequences
- Feedback and remediation on suboptimal choices.

The most commonly used metaphor is the flight simulator. It emulates the real task of flying a plane very precisely, but in a safe environment in which the learner can practise flying, make mistakes in a safe environment and reduce the risk of those mistakes on the job. The standard workshop role play is also a form of non-technical simulation. The issue with role-plays is that most people (perhaps trainers and salespeople as exceptions) get uncomfortable with acting and role-playing with and in front of their peers, and the training value gets lost in performance anxiety.

So, e-learning can be a great way of creating private simulations which look to minimise the risk of costly mistakes on the job.



Case study: Soft skills simulation for negotiation

A US law school developed a series of simulations to teach people how to negotiate. It consisted of three common situations: buying a house, closing a deal, resolving a customer dispute. In the case of the house buying simulation, the learner is given a brief background on their position (they're trying to buy a house, their maximum price is X, the seller won't go below Y). The learner then talks to the seller and is presented with a series of first choices, e.g. demand he lowers his price, ask him to throw in the furniture, ask him why another house on his road sold for less, etc.

Each choice leads to a different response from the seller (angry, willing to talk more, brings up a new subject etc) and the learner is presented with a new set of choices. It's possible to arrive at a variety of outcomes, from negotiation breakdown to successful closure – this is commonly known as 'branching'.

Feedback is delivered by a negotiation expert, who provides anecdotes and examples to help steer the learner back on track if they've made a mistake.

What's different about simulations in rapid e-learning?

Traditional e-learning	Rapid e-learning
Options for rich media (video in particular) to enhance the reality of simulations	Typically low/no use of video
Longer development cycles can accommodate the detailed scoping and scripting involved in full blown simulations	Very short development cycles limit the potential for incorporating complex simulations, though if you can sit down and write a perfectly good soft skills simulation in a day if you had to.
Bespoke programming efforts can enable branching (multiple paths through a simulation with different potential outcomes)	Some rapid authoring tools have limited capacity for branching – though some can allow you to specify different paths for different answers

When to use them?

Many of the more engaging traditional bespoke e-learning courses are soft skills simulations, using audio and video to enhance the reality of the situation.

They are typically used when:

- Seeing consequences can change behaviours
- Performance can be enhanced through practice
- Practising on the job (e.g. sales, coaching) could lead to costly mistakes – i.e. the effort of scoping, scripting and designing the simulation has a clear benefit
- There are identifiable critical mistakes that could be corrected through behaviour change.

It's no surprise that professions like pilots and the military are very focused on high-end simulations, as mistakes in these fields can lead to dire consequences.

In traditional e-learning, many people back away from simulations because of their relatively high cost to design and build, especially if a lot of media is required. This, combined with the fact that in some situations the stakes just aren't high enough to warrant a simulation, means that they're often approached with caution.

With rapid e-learning, the tools and following a simple process can put them in the reach of most organisations and e-learning designers. A simulation doesn't have to have a high media content to be authentic, engaging and beneficial for the learner, as we attempt to explain in this guide.

Soft skills simulations in rapid e-learning

While you may not have the opportunity to use audio and video, and branching options are limited, this does not mean there is no room for 'simulation-lite' interactions in rapid e-learning.

It's possible, even with the most elementary of authoring tools to incorporate the core elements of soft skills simulations in rapid e-learning.

Follow these principles of rapid simulation authoring to explore the potential of simulations in rapid e-learning:

1. Explore what your authoring tool can handle
2. Keep it brief
3. Revisit the situation
4. Focus on analysis

Step 1 - Explore what your authoring tool can handle

Experiment with these features to determine what your authoring tool is capable of when it comes to the nuts and bolts of simulation assembly.

Feature	Why it helps	Examples of tools that can
Quiz engine with customised feedback for each response	A simulation has to do more than provide you with "correct/incorrect/try again". If your tool cannot handle this, then you may be limited to reflective questions	Adobe presenter Articulate Captivate Lectora
Embed one question quizzes in the course	Soft skill simulations in rapid e-learning commonly rely on a quiz engine so it's important that quizzes can be incorporated into the body of the course	Adobe presenter Articulate (engage or quizmaker) Captivate Lectora
Ability to incorporate audio	Audio can assist greatly in lending character and realism to the simulation	Any tool with audio import capability, including Adobe Presenter and Articulate
Ability to incorporate video	For the same reason as above, though you may not have the time and resources to add it	Any tool with audio import capability, including Articulate
Ability to create branching scenarios	If you really want your learners to 'recover' from mistakes and figure out how to get, say, a sales or coaching discussion back on track, branching can do this – but be aware that it's time consuming to script and must really justify its existence in rapid e-learning	Captivate Lectora Others can accommodate it, but with fairly complicated design work - we don't really recommend it.

If you can at least manage to provide customised feedback to responses, you can create the one-turn simulation, described below.

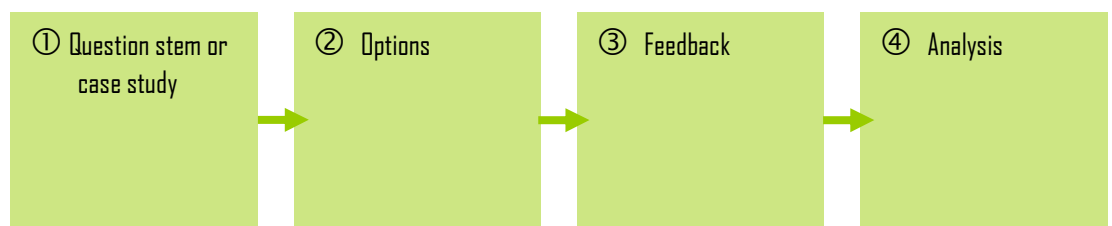
If your tool cannot incorporate quizzes, or provide customised feedback to responses, you may be limited to interactive case studies, described later.

Branching is feasible inside a simple tool like Microsoft Powerpoint. Hyperlinks can branch to other slides and so you can put together very simple simulations this way. It will though be considerably cruder than a simulation developed in Captivate for example.

Step 2 - Keep it brief

Bespoke soft skills simulations are often 10-20 minutes long providing extensive practice opportunities. Because of the tool limitations of rapid e-learning, and the fact that your rapid e-learning module is probably 20 minutes in total, you should keep your simulations brief.

The easiest option is the one-turn simulation.



This is in effect a quiz question consisting of:

- **Question stem:** Description of a situation with a task for the user
- **Options:** Tactical or verbal options
- **Feedback:** Consequence plus some simple tutoring, possibly from a coach
- **Analysis:** More detailed feedback in the course.

At this point in the process, you also need to think about the learner's perspective. Are you going to create first-person simulations, where they're in the action (for example in the case study below), or are you going to create 'third-person' (sometimes called 'fly on the wall') scenarios, where the learner is observing the behaviour of others?

Typically first-person scenarios are preferable if you're going to address conversational/interpersonal skills, e.g. coaching, customer service or sales skills. However, if you want the learner to develop skills of judgment and analysis, for example identifying compliance infractions, or analysing someone else's behaviour in a job interview, the third-person perspective is useful. Typically it allows for a more dispassionate set of choices and more analytical feedback. You can of course mix the two, depending on the learner needs and content requirements.

For the options in a simulation, you can also either use exact phrases e.g. "Tell me why you think that?" or a higher level description of the approach (so the learner can imagine using their own words) e.g. Ask them why they think that.



Case study: One turn simulation for customer service

Question stem: Joe Wright calls to complain about the water service in his area. "It's been off for the last two hours, I can't even give my kids a bath! What are you going to do about it?" On your system you can see that his area has been affected by a mains problem that will be fixed in one hour. How should you respond?

Options:

1. "I am sorry about that. I will send an engineer out immediately."
2. "I'm sorry about that. I will find out the problem and call you back if I can take some information".
3. "Can you confirm your address and customer number please?"

Feedback:

1. Joe: "Great – so what time will they be here and what's your direct line so I can call you when they don't arrive?"

While it may seem a good idea to offer to send an engineer out, this is very expensive and may not be necessary to resolve the problem.

2. Joe: "Yes, that's fine. What do you need?"

That's the correct option. You've apologised and asked for more information to help solve the problem.

3. Joe: "Would it kill you to say sorry before the questions start?"

That's not the best option. Starting with an acknowledgement or an apology is always a good idea.

One turn simulations can be a provide a great opportunity to check the learner's ability to practise what has been addressed in the course and apply facts or information in realistic contexts.

If your authoring tool can go beyond one turn (i.e. it can truly branch such as Captivate) you need to think carefully how far you want to progress down certain incorrect paths. You must always offer a route back to the recommended way of handling a situation (with feedback on what the learner did wrong before they move on to see the consequences of making the correct choice). It is often wise to allow a **couple of levels** before you force the learner (via a *Try Again* option) to ultimately choose the option that takes them back on track. You don't have to give too much away in your feedback when they pursue these dead ends, just give hints to make them work at it a little.

If you do go for a full branching approach, you can at the end of each path, provide a summary of where they have been and what mistakes they have made. This is simply because each path has a unique end branching point and it is easy to trace the route they took to get there.



Rapid angle: Make it real - ask an expert

The most important point in simulations is their authenticity. The situations, choices, and especially the consequences must strike a chord with learners. If they're not plausible, learners won't engage with them.

Make sure your simulation content is realistic by:

- Listening to taped calls (if customer service/call centre)
- Design them directly with an SME; putting the question stems out to SMEs/user group and asking what people would do in the situation
- Getting SMEs to review them for language and tone
- Getting your user group to review them

Once you've got the expert's view on the simulation, you could even go one step further and put your coaching and advice in their voice, so that they become the person providing commentary on why a particular course of action is correct or incorrect. Depending on your audience, and their level of authority within your organisation, this could really help to deliver the message.



Rapid angle: Engage with simulations

Since so many people are using the Articulate Studio suite of tools, it's useful to think about how Articulate Engage can be used to set up simple scenarios:

- The 'media tour' is a great way to set up a situation using a photostory. You can have say three photos in sequence with captions explaining the dialogue between characters
- Tabbed screens can be used to pose questions. You can use the introduction text to pose the question, then create a tab for each response, using the name of the tab for your options, for example 'Call the client', 'Send an email', 'Ask your boss', etc - it's important to keep the options quite short if they're going on a tab.
- You can then use the tab content itself to provide both consequence and feedback. You could do this by including audio (which could be the voice of the customer) and text to provide coach/contextual feedback - or vice versa.

In this straightforward way, you can create quite rich simulations with layered feedback using a very common and easy to use authoring tool.

To see some examples of how we've used Articulate to create simulations, have a look at the 60-Minute Masters course we built with Clive Shepherd, which has many examples of simple simulations:

<http://www.kineolearning.com/60minutemasters/>

Step 3 - Revisit the situation

If your authoring tool can handle quiz questions (and most of them can), it can be useful to revisit a simulation character or situation several times during the e-learning, applying a new point or process step each time you revisit. So, for the example above, we might add another one-turn simulation when taking Joe's details and explaining the next step, with a follow-up call a week later, etc. This approach creates continuity and is a way of keeping a high level of practice elements in your e-learning, contributing to engagement. We've worked with several clients where we revisit situations like this at the start of each new section in a module, to maintain engagement and provide a clear narrative thread through the module.

Case study: Following the performance journey in simulations



On a recent Kineo project, we were focused on a performance coaching solution for a particular client. We wanted to combine an understanding of the theories and principles of coaching, with a heavy dose of reality for managers who were familiar with the variety of coaching challenges that the job entails.

We designed a series of 'take me through it' simulations. These were photo-stories which focused on a particular manager and her employees, each of which had a different set of performance challenges. The learner observed the situation unfold, from a third-person perspective, and was then faced with a challenge: how would they handle the situation?

We worked closely with a range of SMEs to develop plausible actions, each of which had customised feedback explaining why or why not it was an appropriate action, the potential consequences, and what else to consider.

We revisited each character several times throughout the module, as each step in the performance coaching process was introduced. This was coupled with 'just enough' theory to enable the learner to engage with the simulation and take action.

In this way the design balanced theory with practice, and provided a backbone narrative throughout the whole module, as the plotlines for each character developed and the challenges increased in complexity.

Step 4 - Focus on the analysis

The theory with simulations is that people's willingness to learn is greater when their expectations are violated, e.g. they thought step 2 would work, but it didn't, and they are wondering why not.

If you don't help someone when they make a mistake in a simulation by providing detailed feedback, you're missing the point. You may as well just create a quiz that tells them if they were right or wrong. So, it's important to get a good model in place for your feedback.

In rapid e-learning, while your ability to create media rich consequences may be limited, there are no constraints on your ability to provide rich analysis. Consider a template for how you will provide more detailed coaching and feedback for mistakes in each one-turn simulation, e.g.:

- What's behind the mistake?
- Why should you avoid it?
- What should you do instead?

This technique helps to bring out the learning implied in the mistakes.



Case study: Analysis screen text

This is a fairly typical example of the type of analysis that we'd recommend:

- **Why people make this mistake** - e.g. "It's common in a sales situation to be keen to promote the product and its features as soon as possible in the meeting, as this is ground on which the salesperson feels confident."
- **The potential consequence** - e.g. "However, pressing this approach too hard can make the customer feel that the salesperson is not listening to their needs and just reeling off a feature list. It's not consultative selling and is unlikely to lead to a productive relationship."
- **A better approach** - e.g. "In the opening stages of the call, focus on establishing an agenda, making sure the customer agrees with that agenda, and probing their needs to establish if there's a need you can address."

Even if someone doesn't make the mistakes in the one-turn simulation, the details on how to avoid common mistakes are extremely useful.



Rapid angle: Consider a coach

Providing detailed analysis and feedback can be enhanced if you use a coach to deliver their views. This can be your subject matter expert, as we mentioned earlier, or could be a created character represented with a photo. This simple device can help to imbue your learning with a sense of authority, especially if it is a recognised expert in the topic providing their personal views.

This can also be a good opportunity to include stories and examples relating to the simulation 'storyline' from your expert.

Depending on the complexity of material, you may have many different (even dissenting) viewpoints, in which case you may want to consider a panel of coaches who provide feedback on different aspects or topics within the learning. Bear in mind though that this will make scripting more involved and you need to set it up clearly to the learner, so they don't get confused by multiple angles of feedback.

Case study: Simulation for investment bankers



To illustrate how important it is to talk to your SME to get the narrative and environment right, here's a recent Kineo example.

In a recent project, Kineo developed a series of simulations for investment bankers to help them make decisions about financing deals. Key to getting this right was to work with SMEs to capture the language and the atmosphere in which the target audience operates, to make sure the e-learning lived up to that.

We developed an office environment, in which the learner's boss is rapidly firing questions at the learner (sometimes clearly with an attitude of 'I'm too busy, you figure it out' – all too familiar for the target audience!). Once the learner makes it through what's effectively a Socratic dialogue via email and phone calls with their boss, they advance to the big meeting, where they present their case to the credit committee.

Again in keeping with what this audience would expect, the credit committee takes no prisoners. One false move can get you fired. To keep the investment bankers engaged we built in a 'bonusometer' – showing how close or far they were from a big payout or an ugly layoff. This would not work for many audiences, but it plays well for this competitive and high-octane learner group.

The actual questions and screens themselves were still grounded in the examples mentioned above. The key here was getting the dialogue and the consequences completely authentic so there's no doubt in the learner's mind that people who understand the industry designed and scripted it.

Your audience, their environment and motivations may well be completely different. The key is to make sure you understand them and your script shows you've done your research.

Key actions



How to Get **Soft Skill Simulations** into Rapid E-learning:

- Decide if a simulation will enhance your rapid e-learning
 - Decide what your tool is capable of
 - Work closely with your SME to get the language and tone right
 - Follow the four step process set out above
 - Don't skimp on the feedback – that's the most valuable part
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Take it further

What do you want to do?	Check out these Rapid Guides
Find out which tools are best suited to your simulation needs	Rapid Authoring Tool Selector
Learn more about good practice in soft skills rapid e-learning	Soft Skills Template

All these and more are available at Kineo's Rapid E-learning Store:

www.rapidelearningstore.com

For more information on Kineo's rapid e-learning services and to learn how we can develop engaging simulations for you, get in touch:

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