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Team Performance

“Are there some obvious signals as to how well a team is performing, from a teamwork point of view?”

Pamela Van Rees, an MBA student at Boston University with experience in large-scale management simulations, provided the following list of characteristics of well-functioning simulation teams:

- The firm’s long-term well-being is the top priority of all members.
- Relevant issues are fully and adequately explored.
- Proposals and objectives are clearly explained.
- Members feel comfortable and spontaneous.
- Feedback is given freely and directly.
- Members feel respected, supported, and listened to.
- Decisions are made with maximum efficiency and speed.
- Disagreements are tactfully stated without being offensive.
- Differences and misunderstandings are resolved in such a way as to strengthen and deepen rather than weaken relationships (by exploring the origins and implication of ideas).
- Everyone’s judgment is acknowledged and explored.
- Interruptions are minimal.
- Everyone’s schedule is accommodated as fully as possible.
- At any given time in a group meeting, each firm member is either engaged in holding the focus (proposing an idea or decision), listening to another’s focus, giving feedback about the focus, or facilitating (creating the structure or leading) the discussion.

Students can access LINKS Simulations website resources prior to paying for participating in their LINKS event. For example, the LINKS participant's manual is accessible on the LINKS website for viewing, downloading, and/or printing. So, LINKS students aren't constrained from getting started with reading the LINKS participant's manual before they pay for LINKS. With that being said, payment for LINKS is required by all students participating in a LINKS event. Payment is per-student, not per-team. Everyone who participates in a LINKS event must pay the LINKS usage fee and payment is expected to be made before the first scheduled round of a LINKS event. This article addresses some common questions about making a credit card payment for LINKS, which is our most popular form of payment.

How do students pay for LINKS?

Students access the "Pay For LINKS" button/link on the main LINKS Simulations webpage to pay for LINKS via personal credit card. Credit card payments are made securely via PayPal and a PayPal account is not required to make a single credit card payment.



Student payments are updated on the LINKS website within 24 hours of being received. If more than 24 hours have passed since a payment was made, students may forward the receipt that they received from PayPal to us at Billing@LINKS-simulations.com so that we can research their payment.

Occasionally, students are unable to pay via credit card. Payment by check or money order is possible. Details are accessible at this link:

<http://www.LINKS-simulations.com/PHP/EMAM.php?action=paymentquestionsfull>

A student has paid but their payment is not showing up on the LINKS website.

Why?

Our billing system compares the payment e-mail addresses that PayPal sends us with the e-mail addresses that instructors have submitted to us. When these e-mails match up, the payment has been "recognized" and this will be reflected on the LINKS website. Students may use another e-mail address for payment (e.g., a personal e-mail address). When we process the payments, our payment system cannot match this payment e-mail with one of the e-mails that were submitted by the LINKS instructor, so this student appears as unpaid.

There is an easy way to correct this problem. Students access the LINKS website and click on the “Paid With Different E-mail Address?” button. Students will need to enter their instructor’s last name, the e-mail address they are using for LINKS, and the e-mail address that they used for payment. Their payment status will be updated within 24 hours of submission.



When they make this correction our system will search for the payment e-mail that they submitted. If that email has been found then their payment status will be updated. If the payment e-mail cannot be found, because we (LINKS) have not processed the payment yet, then they will receive an error message. If this error message occurs then the students should try this process again in a couple of hours.

What happens if a student doesn’t pay for LINKS?

If a student fails to pay for LINKS before your LINKS event begins, an e-mail warning will be sent sometime after the first scheduled LINKS game run and a warning message will be displayed within the LINKS Simulation Database. Continuing non-payment ultimately will lead to suspension of access to the LINKS Simulation Database for all team members of a LINKS firm with one or more non-paying team members. Instructors will be routinely advised of the e-mail addresses of non-paying students, and instructors can view the status of student payments at any time on their firm-0 webpage for a LINKS industry.



The published LINKS price is the discounted price for early payment (i.e., for payment received no later than the first scheduled game run in a LINKS). After the first scheduled game run in a LINKS event, the price for LINKS reverts to its non-discounted level, which is 25% above the (published) discounted price.

The beginning of a LINKS event can be busy, even hectic, and the payment process doesn’t have to complicate things. We have many resources available on the LINKS website to help instructors and students through the payment process.

For a detailed listing of LINKS Payment FAQs, access this link:

<http://www.LINKS-simulations.com/PHP/EMAM.php?action=paymentquestionsfull>

Instructors may wish to encourage their students to watch this payment video “Common LINKS Payment Questions”:

<http://www.LINKS-simulations.com/Videos/PaymentQuestions/CommonLINKSPaymentQuestions.mp4>

“Practice Rounds In LINKS Events” [White Paper #3] Updated

Some instructors prefer to begin LINKS events with one or two practice rounds. Instructors’ preferences for practice rounds may be influenced by strongly-voiced student views. Voiced student preferences for practice rounds may reflect a wide variety of understandable and even noble considerations (e.g., “safer” and more learner friendly), but laziness (lack of substantial effort to pre-read the simulation manual, for example) may also be an unstated student consideration.

Practice rounds permit students to become familiar with LINKS and its web-based resources and the LINKS Simulation Database in a low-risk fashion without initial decisions (and possible miscues) being held against them. Of course, students may also access the appropriate LINKS demo version in the LINKS Simulation Database to become familiar with its format, layout, and operational details.

Practice-round logistics and alternatives to practice rounds are discussed in this White Paper.

Practice-Round(s) Logistics

After one or more initial practice rounds as per the LINKS instructor’s preferences, LINKS is reset back to its original starting position (round #3). Students then continue on from their original starting position in LINKS in the “official” (non-practice) part of a LINKS event.

Students are normally advised of practice-round scheduling in the course syllabus or LINKS event schedule, so there are no “surprises” in the conduct of LINKS and so that it’s clear which rounds count for grading purposes and which rounds are purely for practice. There doesn’t seem to be any obvious case for “surprising” students with a LINKS event reset after one or more initial (practice) rounds. So, a practice-round schedule is normally publicized to students before LINKS begins.

To schedule practice rounds, instructors include the practice round(s) in the LINKS game run schedule submitted before the beginning of a LINKS event. Also, instructors include the specific date/time when LINKS is to be reset back to round #3, for subsequent use by LINKS students in the actual/official event.¹ Once LINKS is reset back to round #3, previous practice-round results will no longer be available via the LINKS Simulation Database.

In resetting LINKS back to round #3 after the conclusion of or more practice rounds, everything reverts back to where it was after round #3. This is not a LINKS reinitialization, with new randomness

¹ Normally, the reset back to round #3 would be scheduled two days after the last practice round.

introduced into the round #2 and round #3 results. It is just a reversion back in time to where things were at the end of round #3. After such a reversion, all decision inputs and financial results will be as they were when students first assumed managerial control of their LINKS firms after round #3.

Practice Round Issues and Disadvantages

There are important issues and potential disadvantages associated with practice rounds in large-scale, competitive management simulations like LINKS. And, perhaps more importantly, there's a viable alternative to practice rounds to achieve the goal of reducing student angst at the beginning of a LINKS event.

First, the presence of one or more practice rounds encourages students to think of LINKS as a game rather than treating it as a real management challenge. It's always wise to continuously and consistently encourage students to treat LINKS as a real business.

Second, practice rounds may encourage some students to ask for "do-overs" if something unfortunate/bad/unexpected happens later during a LINKS event. This is decidedly not real life, since real life doesn't permit low-cost/no-cost "do-overs."

Third, instructor-optional switches may be used to "ease" students into LINKS and reduce initial student angst. For example, product development (service design in the LINKS services variants) may be disabled for a round or two at the beginning of a LINKS event. This encourages students to order and analyze relevant customer preference research before engaging in costly and disruptive product/service reconfigurations.

And, perhaps most importantly, such an initial disabling of decision input web-screens reduces the start-up student workload as the LINKS event begins.

In my own LINKS teaching, I never use practice rounds for the reasons cited above. I do routinely use instructor-optional switches to limit the LINKS decision space initially and then add deactivated decision areas (input web-screens) over the event's first few rounds.

Sample Usage of Optional Switches Rather Than Practice Rounds

To illustrate the use of instructor-optional switches, here are sample schedules for the LINKS Marketing Strategy Simulation and the LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation for an instructor who wishes to slowly ease her/his students into LINKS rather than scheduling practice rounds.

	LINKS Marketing Strategy Simulation	LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation
Initialization and Advancement To Round #3	<p>Disable product development, generate demand, and service decisions.</p> <p>Initial (round #4) decisions focus on basic operational elements of forecasting, information technology, manufacturing, and research study ordering.</p>	<p>Disable distribution, transportation, generate demand, and service decisions. (Product development decisions are not a part of this LINKS simulation.)</p> <p>Initial (round #4) decisions focus on the core supply chain (inventory pipeline) elements of forecasting, manufacturing, procurement, and research study ordering.</p>
During Round #4 (for use in round #5 and beyond)	Activate generate demand and service decisions.	Activate distribution and transportation decisions.
During Round #5 (for use in round #6 and beyond)	Activate product development decisions.	Activate generate demand and service decisions.

LINKS Pricing and Practice Rounds

For LINKS pricing, each practice round counts toward the total number of rounds in a LINKS event. For example, standard LINKS pricing includes nine rounds for the LINKS Marketing Strategy Simulation and for the LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation. An event schedule with two practice rounds leaves seven additional rounds in the actual event for the standard LINKS price. Of course, additional rounds in a LINKS event may be included in the original LINKS purchase price that LINKS students pay for LINKS participation. But, this has to be planned ahead so that the correct price is paid by LINKS students at the beginning of a LINKS event.

Historical Benchmarks

How high is “up”? In LINKS, the answer is partly provided by the within-industry benchmarks reported on the first page of each firm’s financial reports. These within-industry benchmarks provide a firm’s current-industry performance “ups” (current-industry minimums, averages, and maximums) on Key Performance Indicators such as Net Income To Revenue % and Forecasting Accuracy %. However, the larger question remains: what’s possible? ... what’s the upper limit of performance? The LINKS Historical Benchmarks provide the answer to this broader question.

LINKS Historical Benchmarks are based on the history of all firms since February 1, 2012 for a particular LINKS Simulations variant.

These Historical Benchmarks provide a meaningful cross-industry performance reference for any firm at any point in time in a LINKS event. For example, a firm in a LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation industry in Month #6 may compare its performance to all past firms in Month #6 of LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation industries via the Historical Benchmarks.



Note: The Global Top-10 Rankings also provide benchmarks, but the comparison in the Global Top-10 Rankings is to all other firms in all LINKS Simulations variants with a scheduled game run in that calendar week. And, of course, those other firms are using any LINKS Simulations variant (not necessarily your LINKS Simulations variant) and are at various stages in their LINKS events.

Decision Variables Checks and Messages

With the lengthy reports in LINKS, instructors are challenged to identify noteworthy issues for attention and follow-up after LINKS game runs.

To assist instructors and to increase the visibility of “unusual” developments and questionable student inputs, “Decision Variable Checks and Messages” e-mail is sent to LINKS instructors immediately after game runs to provide top-line reporting of noteworthy but potentially low-visibility circumstances in just-completed LINKS game runs. No new information is reported that is not already in the instructor and firm reports, but this instructor e-mail increases the visibility of these developments.

A sample “Decision Variables Checks and Messages” e-mail is shown below.

```
Decision Variables Checks and Messages for Quarter 10 are included near the end of the financial reports of each LINKS firm in industry SAM. To provide convenient instructor access and to ensure the visibility of these Decision Variables Checks and Messages, this instructor e-mail message reports the Decision Variable Checks and Messages for each firm in industry SAM in Quarter 10.
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Status of Decision Variables Checks and Messages For Industry SAM Quarter 10:
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Firm SAM1: No decision variable checks and messages to report.
Firm SAM2: Decision variable checks and messages reported in the attachment SAM2.txt
Firm SAM3: Decision variable checks and messages reported in the attachment SAM3.txt
Firm SAM4: Decision variable checks and messages reported in the attachment SAM4.txt
Firm SAM5: No decision variable checks and messages to report.
Firm SAM6: No decision variable checks and messages to report.
Firm SAM7: No decision variable checks and messages to report.
Firm SAM8: Decision variable checks and messages reported in the attachment SAM8.txt
DISTRIBUTION DECISION VARIABLE CHECKS [Firm SAM2]
  DC2 closed; DC2 inventory has been disposed (@ 80.0% of current book value).
  DC2 inventory disposal costs =      11,400 (recorded as Consulting Fees).
SERVICE DECISION VARIABLE CHECKS [Firm SAM3]
  Service outsourcing now exists in region 1 so 34 CSRs are fired in region 1.
FORECASTING DECISION VARIABLE CHECKS [Firm SAM3]
  4 forecasts are unchanged. Forecasts are normally changed every quarter.
FORECASTING DECISION VARIABLE CHECKS [Firm SAM4]
  4 forecasts are unchanged. Forecasts are normally changed every quarter.
RESEARCH STUDIES DECISION VARIABLE CHECKS [Firm SAM8]
  No research studies have been ordered.
  Research studies are normally ordered every quarter.
```

Based on this sample “Decision Variable Checks and Messages” e-mail, instructor follow-up would be appropriate with firms SAM3 and SAM4 regarding their unchanged forecasts. Forecasts are normally changed in every LINKS round, reflecting most-recent sales history, competitor actions, and a firm’s forthcoming business/operating plan. And, for firm SAM8, a watchful and inquisitive LINKS instructor might converse with this firm about the value of research studies and the implausibility/inappropriateness of ordering no research studies.

Frequent messages included in these “Decision Variable Checks and Messages” are “forecasts are unchanged” and “no research studies have been ordered.”

Presidential Review Meetings

Best-Practice Presidential Review Meetings

What?

- o Private, pre-scheduled 30-minute meetings with each LINKS team to permit the LINKS instructor to review a team's LINKS business, to answer team members' questions, and to sense the progress that teams are making in the simulation. This is one-with-a-few style of teaching/coaching, rather than the one-to-the-masses lecture-hall style of instruction.
- o "Private" due to the competitive nature of LINKS.

Why?

- o Provides a different kind of powerful teaching/learning opportunity (instructor as coach) at key points during the simulation event.
- o Simulates business review meetings with a "boss" or senior management official.

Who?

- o Instructor and all members of a single LINKS team.
- o Instructor plays multiple roles during a presidential review meeting: "firm president," instructor, coach, and encouraging/proud/supportive "parent."

When?

- o Re-assigned class time is recommended, with teams not meeting with the instructor using that time for their own private firm deliberations. In most cases, meetings will extend beyond class time, due to the number of firms involved.
- o In shorter LINKS event, a single round of review meetings might be held, perhaps just before (or no later than just after) the second decision round. In longer LINKS events, several waves of presidential review meetings might be scheduled with the second round of presidential review meetings occurring at about the mid-point of the simulation event.

Where?

- o Private meeting space is required, possibly the regular course classroom for presidential meetings scheduled during class hours.

How?

- o Meeting Scheduling
 - Pre-scheduled meetings, normally permitting students to pick their own times from a range of available meeting times.
 - Classroom-hours meeting times might be rotated around all teams, if multiple presidential review meetings waves are held. With a single set of presidential review meetings, classroom-hours meeting times might be randomly assigned.
- o Instructor Preparation: Bring printed firm results output to the meeting, to reference during the discussion.
- o Meetings Format Options:
 - No Student Prep [Not recommended]: Just discussion and Q&A.
 - Some Student Prep [Recommended]: Team members collaborate and submit (via e-mail) questions/issues to be discussed. Submissions are due at least 12 hours before the scheduled presidential review meeting to permit the LINKS instructor time to review and prepare.
 - Substantial Student Prep [Optional]: SWOT Analysis. Submissions due at least 24 hours before the scheduled presidential review meeting to permit LINKS instructor review and prep.

- o Some Instructor Questions To Pose During the Meeting:
 - What are the largest problems that your firm faces?
 - What's been your best and worst team decision to date?
 - Who is the best performing competitor in your industry? Why?
 - To customers, what differential advantage does your firm offer compared to competitors?
 - How is your firm currently organized (e.g., by function, by region, as a committee of the whole)? Is this organization "best" for the current problems/challenges faced by your firm?

Likely Outcomes Arising From Presidential Review Meetings

For Students:

- o Greater emphasis on research study needs going forward.
- o More attention to prioritization of issues.
- o More focus on the really important issues.
- o More systematic attention to division of labor and responsibility assignments.

For Instructors:

- o Deep appreciation for team and individual-student progress.
- o Ideas for in-class discussion and in-class tutorials, based on common issues and concerns arising across teams.
- o Follow-up meeting scheduling for "lost"/"deeply troubled"/"unprepared" teams.

Variations on Private, Single-Team, Scheduled Presidential Review Meetings

- o With many industries in very large courses, schedule joint meetings with each firm 1 from all industries meeting with the LINKS instructor simultaneously. Repeat for firm 2, etc. Note that non-competing teams are jointly meeting with the LINKS instructor.
- o In distance learning, use teleconferences for meetings.
- o Automatic presidential review meetings must be scheduled immediately by any firm with two successive rounds of losses (negative net income).

LINKS Global SCM Competition

The 2015 LINKS Global SCM Competition is scheduled for October-November 2015.

The LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation is used in the LINKS Global SCM Competition.



Highlights of the LINKS Global SCM Competition:

- Cross-Institution 8-Round Supply Chain Management Simulation Competition
- Your Student Teams Compete Against Student Teams From Other Institutions
- Challenges Students in an Intense Team-Based Cross-Institution Competition
- For Students in Academic Degree-Granting Programs Worldwide
- Targeted at Upper-Level Undergraduates and All MBAs

Further details about the October-November 2015 LINKS Global SCM Competition (scheduling, student eligibility, costs, and registration procedure) are accessible via the LINKS Global Competition link on the LINKS website.

Registration signup and payment deadline for the 2015 LINKS Global SCM Competition is September 25, 2015.

Participating in a LINKS Global SCM Competition is an alternative instructional/learning opportunity to the traditional usage of LINKS within a single instructor's course (i.e., an event with students from a single course conducted according to the course instructor's preferred scheduling).

Faculty members with questions about the LINKS Global SCM Competition are invited to contact Randy Chapman, the LINKS author (Chapman@LINKS-simulations.com).



LINKS Train-The-Trainer Seminars

October 5-9 and December 7-11, 2015

LINKS Simulations Immersion Experience

Five Teleconferences and a Four-Round LINKS Simulation Event

Registration is available for the next five-day, intensive-mode Train-The-Trainer distance-learning seminars for the LINKS simulations. Randy Chapman, the LINKS author, leads these distance-learning events for academic faculty interested in learning more about teaching with LINKS. These intensive-mode seminar formats includes 2-3 hours of work per day during each of the five days of the distance-learning seminars.

LINKS Train-The-Trainer Seminars are offered for the enterprise management, marketing, services, and supply chain management LINKS variants.

Current LINKS instructors are invited to pass along this announcement to faculty colleagues and

advanced doctoral students who might be interested in learning more about teaching with LINKS.

Experienced LINKS instructors sometimes participate in a LINKS Train-The-Trainer Seminar to refresh their memories of LINKS details just prior to teaching with LINKS or to explore another LINKS simulation variant for a future teaching activity. Such experienced LINKS instructors may elect just to participate in the TTT's four-round simulation event, ignoring the public teleconferences included in the LINKS TTT program. (PowerPoint decks are available to all LINKS TTT participants before each teleconference, so such experienced LINKS instructors may freely choose to participate in all, some, or none of the teleconferences as per their availability and interest.)

Reminders

LINKS Passcode Retrieval: LINKS passcode retrieval for a LINKS participant (student or instructor) is possible via the “Retrieve LINKS Passcode” link on the main LINKS webpage (<http://www.LINKS-simulations.com>). Executing the “Retrieve LINKS Passcode” operation e-mails the firm’s passcode to the participant’s official e-mail address as recorded in the LINKS Simulation Database.

Student Payment Timing: Student payment with a personal credit card is via the “Pay For LINKS” link on the LINKS webpage.

The published LINKS price (the discounted price) is in effect until the first round of LINKS is complete. Then, the price is increased 25%. This means that we can initialize a LINKS event (and advance LINKS through to its normal starting point) and students can continue to pay at the discounted price until the first scheduled round.

It is not necessary for your students to pay before LINKS begins to have access to the discounted LINKS price. Students must only pay before the first official game run on your game-run schedule to receive the discounted price. Thus, student payments can occur simultaneously with the beginning of a LINKS simulation event. As a practical matter, a final warning/reminder is e-mailed to those students who haven’t paid by the first game run, before implementing the non-discounted price.

E-Mail Address Management: Using their LINKS firm’s passcode, LINKS students may change their official LINKS e-mail address via the “E-Mail Address Management” button in the LINKS Simulation Database. Confirmations of e-mail address changes are e-mailed to the old and new e-mail addresses.

LINKS Instructor Resources: Instructors access LINKS Instructor Resources via the LINKS webpage. Contact Randy Chapman (Chapman@LINKS-simulations.com), the LINKS author, to obtain the username and passcode.



The LINKS Newsletter is a bi-monthly newsletter for current and prospective LINKS instructors and for LINKS friends. Please e-mail comments, suggestions, and other contributions (e.g., LINKS teaching tips) to CWinkler@LINKS-simulations.com



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