

3

Practice Rounds in LINKS Events

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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 students' 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 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.

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

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 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.