

# MEDIA REVIEWS

Reviewed by Dan Michaluk for *Training Media Review*

Allen Interactions has taken a large step towards meeting the ultimate challenge in simulated learning with DialogCoach, a virtual mentor for customer contact. It offers a customizable simulation engine that can model many common customer service scenarios.

Allen's vision is to provide organizations with a tool for creating relevant and timely scenario-based training with zero software development and integration costs. In other words, an off-the-shelf product with the capability of custom-built software costing many times more.

Here's an example of how that vision could unfold: A contact center manager identifies that service representatives aren't handling a new promotional campaign well and determines that training is the most appropriate solution. She observes several reps handling calls and drafts a scenario using Allen's Scenario Editor tool.

After the scenario is tested, customer reps sit at their desktops or in a training lab and practice. They talk into the computer microphone as if they were speaking on the phone, and they enter data into an emulated software system as if they were sitting at their work terminals. When they make a mistake, they receive immediate feedback. Simulation performance, including audio clips of reps' dialogue, is stored in a database for review by the manager. He or she follows up with individual coaching. In less than a month, reps are handling the promotion effectively, and sell-through rates have doubled.

Allen launched DialogCoach in the fall of 2001, but based on conversations with several Allen representatives, a short interview with a DialogCoach client, and my review of a DialogCoach scenario, I believe Allen is still several steps away from its goal of JIT simulations. Research and development is often long and difficult, but currently, Allen does have an outstanding offering for simulation-based contact center training.

## Simulation With Voice Recognition

DialogCoach is the training software or "front end" of Allen's solution. Using a sports metaphor, the learning exercise is divided into two modules: Training Camp and Contact Training.

In Training Camp, reps complete three scenario-based exercises. In two of the exercises, they listen to a customer interaction, analyze it, and then study an expert's analysis. In the third exercise, reps record responses to several call scenarios. Those responses are saved as audio files and can be replayed and analyzed by the reps and their managers.

In Contact Training, reps handle a complete customer call. They listen to a customer query and respond by speaking into the computer microphone. If reps follow the proper script, voice recognition technology activates immediate feedback (a green checkmark), and the call progresses. If not, the call stalls and reps can ask for help.

In addition, reps must input call data into a software system that looks and behaves like the company's actual system. Again, if reps don't enter data correctly, the call stalls. After the call, the rep can view a performance scoreboard and listen to his or her recorded responses.

The Contact Training module has five difficulty levels. Beginners start at the Warm-up level, which has a number of learning supports (call scripts, call tips, and coaching hints, for example). Each successive level removes a support feature. Reps progressing to the most difficult level, Play-off Mode, engage in a realistic call scenario without any supports—a difficult challenge and a true test of learning.

DialogCoach is an outstanding tool for teaching spoken call scripts and data-input tasks. By starting in Warm-up Mode and attempting the call scenario at each successive difficulty level, I was able to learn the script and the data-input steps for a change of address in less than 45 minutes. The feedback told me when I wasn't following the script, and I was able to adjust my performance accordingly.

The use of voice recognition technology makes DialogCoach an improvement on existing call center simulations that prompt learners to choose from a list of appropriate possible responses. The experience feels real, which means better transfer to on-the-job performance. Surprisingly, the voice recognition technology rarely made a mistake. Our experience verified Allen's claim of 80 percent accuracy. In the event of an incorrect evaluation, DialogCoach allows reps to dispute it and move on.

## The Downside

Like all simulations, DialogCoach has its limits. The voice recognition technology evaluates responses by "listening" for key words. Data-entry analysis is similarly simplistic. Therefore, DialogCoach is best for teaching linear-interaction scripts and less effective for teaching consultative interactions, which contain many possible branches to the dialogue.

Unfortunately, DialogCoach's powerful learning experience was blemished by poor production quality. It has a complex interface that's not supported by adequate onscreen help. The tool used to navigate Contact Training has 15 separate user-input buttons, some labeled in text and some with cryptic graphics. Even advanced computer users will spend too much time learning how to use the interface instead of working on skills.

In addition, the version of DialogCoach we reviewed had several small bugs and crashed completely three times during the test. I spoke with a senior developer at Allen who told me that the code base of the version I tested wasn't completely finished.

### Putting It to Work

DialogCoach is a customizable simulation engine. Purchasers should be prepared to create and manage an implementation plan that includes 1) a needs-driven process for rolling out the software, 2) a process for creating the initial scenarios, and 3) a process for creating scenarios on an ongoing basis.

Organizations implementing DialogCoach will face a number of important rollout decisions such as,

- Will DialogCoach run on client workstations or across a network?
- Will it integrate with an LMS? (Allen has integrated DialogCoach with standards-compliant LMSs.)
- How will learner data be captured and shared with managers?

In addition to managing the technical rollout, purchasers must create call scenarios. With the Scenario Editor tool, managers and other non-IT staff can author and edit scenarios easily; authors just enter scenarios into databases. Currently, that functionality is limited to simple changes to dialogue and data-entry scripts.

New scenarios that demand reps take a different action (dealing with a hang-up by calling a customer back, for example), require manual programming. Allen will soon be offering tools to fully automate the scenario-building process.

### Recommendation

Contact centers with highly scripted service processes should investigate this tool as a complement to live coaching and call monitoring. Contact centers with customer relationship management systems should also pay attention. DialogCoach is an excellent tool for helping reps master system tasks.


The successful use of voice recognition technology in DialogCoach distinguishes it from other simulation-based solutions. Also, Allen's efforts to deliver an inexpensive scenario-building solution are laudable, if not completely realized.

Our only warning: Organizations shouldn't underestimate the implementation effort required to launch this powerful, yet complex, tool. You must deploy DialogCoach carefully based on a complete consideration of business needs and by developing an effective scenario-building process that includes thorough technical and scenario testing. Organizations that observe those requirements will take a step towards achieving the ultimate in contact center training.

DialogCoach	
N/A	Ease of installation
★★★★	Holds user interest
★1/2	Production quality
★★★★	Degree of interactivity
★★★★	Quality of interactivity
★★★	Value of content
N/A	Value for the money
★★★1/2	Documentation
★★★	Overall rating

### Software Details


DialogCoach, software, 2001, Allen Interactions: 800.204.2635, [www.alleni.com](http://www.alleni.com); [www.theDialogCoach.com](http://www.theDialogCoach.com). Purchase: US\$130 - \$500 per person

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RATINGS KEY	
★★★★★	Outstanding
★★★★1/2	Very good
★★★	Good
★★★1/2	Above average
★★★	Average
★★1/2	Below average
★	Poor