

Executive Interview

2020

Mursion Powered by a blend of artificial intelligence and live human interaction, Mursion provides immersive VR training for essential skills in the workplace.



M Mursion

By using trained professionals who orchestrate the interactions between learners and avatar-based characters, Mursion simulations achieve the realism needed to deliver measurable, high-impact results. Applicable to any situation requiring high stakes interpersonal skills, the approach has demonstrated impact in areas such as leadership development, sales enablement, customer service, and diversity and inclusion, across industries. Authentic interactions simultaneously engage the emotional and cognitive faculties for learning that truly transforms the learner.



MARK ATKINSON

*Chief Executive Officer
Mursion*



RACHEL COOKE

*COO and Podcast Host
Brandon Hall Group*



DAVID WENTWORTH

*Principal Analyst,
Learning and Development
Brandon Hall Group*



About Mark Atkinson

Mark Atkinson is responsible for Mursion's long-term strategic plan, capital requirements and key leadership positions. Mark spent the last twenty years building technology ventures that support human capital development in K-12 education and corporate learning. He founded TeachForward, LLC a full-service educational consulting firm with a proprietary web platform that delivers custom-developed, performance assessments to K-12 educators. Before working in education, Mark served as Senior Producer and Manager of New Markets for CBS News Productions and was an Emmy award-winning Producer for Peter Jennings Reporting, ABC News, where he produced a series of network specials on U.S. foreign policy. Mr. Atkinson is a graduate of Yale College.

About Rachel Cooke

Rachel Cooke is Brandon Hall Group's Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 15 years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research, and Performance Improvement industries.



About David Wentworth

David Wentworth is Principal Learning Analyst at Brandon Hall Group, focusing on all aspects of learning and the technology that supports it. David has been in the human capital field since 2005 and joined Brandon Hall Group as senior learning analyst in early 2012.



Q RACHEL

Mark, can you share a bit about the work you're doing and how you're helping your clients in today's environment?

A MARK

Mursion's primary purpose is to create a spontaneous, live simulation platform where managers and frontline workers can practice challenging conversations. Mursion helps leaders develop the skills to give co-workers feedback, lead diverse teams, run multi-national, cross-cultural projects, and become more effective communicators on the job. Mursion supports frontline workers with interactions with customers whose impatience and rudeness often challenge the delivery of the service they do. When confronted with a difficult co-worker or customer, it's human nature to be patient, but if a person's buttons are pushed, they will revert to more basic instincts. Today, those reactions can produce terrible consequences, including lawsuits, claims of discrimination, and unfairness, and could lead to brand destroying events. There has always been a need for employers to allow frontline

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workers and managers to practice difficult conversations, but that is especially true now with society's recent developments, some of which built on prior tensions. The Occupy Wall Street Movement surfaced fundamental unfairness and pay equity, which plagued culture, and the way work has evolved. Those stories, which led to public demonstrations of concern, were followed months later by the #MeToo movement and then outing unacceptable behavior by managers in many companies and sectors of the economy. Followed by the response to George Floyd and the re-emergence of systemic racism, an issue America has wrestled with since its founding. The social tensions, combined with

everyone locked down due to a pandemic, creates urgency for the workplace to change. Many employers realize it's no longer "nice" for managers and frontline workers to practice challenging conversations, it's essential. It is not an indictment of anyone but the fact that we have grown up in a world where everyone lives in certain bubbles and has reinforcing conversations with people whose experiences and values are similar to their own. However, our job is to create a fair and equitable environment and, when interacting with customers, must make them feel honored regardless of their background or views of the world. Those can be challenging things to do and people can't excel at it if they don't have an opportunity to practice.



RACHEL

How has the current state of a society shaped how you help leaders and individuals navigate the workplace?

empathetic, professional manner. The effort they make to listen, go deep, check any bias they have at the door, and come across as true professionals, is outstanding. The cases and data from these simulations show that people yearn to connect; they need the safety and opportunity to practice and get it right.



MARK

A downside of the highly charged political environment is that many people struggle with whether it is safe to reach out and have difficult conversations with others. Mursion is deeply committed to the idea of privacy and the right to experiment, having a tough discussion privately. Data shows that people are inherently good and want to connect but have not developed the vocabulary to avoid awkwardness reaching out to those with different backgrounds. This practice reinforces the point of safety. Anecdotally, Mursion had a large telecommunications client with workers who perform services related to people's homes' communications equipment. The employees' job is to be as professional as possible, whether going into Buckingham Palace or an unkempt department. Employees are to treat each customer like royalty and provide a service without making any judgment. It would bring tears to your eyes to watch these employees rehearse scenarios where they must confront an uncomfortable situation but do so in an



DAVID

Organizations are just getting their feet wet with immersive technologies and VR. An acronym that can help determine when it makes sense to use this type of technology is DICE. The "D" stands for if the real-life training would be dangerous. The "I" is for if it would be impossible, for example, if you wanted to create a scenario where someone was on another planet. The "C" is for counter-productivity, and the "E" is if it's too expensive. Counter-productivity is hitting its stride because when most people think of immersive technologies, they think of dangerous or hazardous material training. But to replicate this training could be counterproductive if people are doing it in real time at their job. You also wouldn't want someone to learn how to talk to a customer in real-time or have a tough internal conversation with a manager and subordinate because that, too, is counterproductive.

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These immersive technologies shine when they can recreate the environment and the feeling of practicing these situations in real-time. When people would previously think of these technologies, they would think, "this situation is too mundane for that; I don't need this technology." It makes sense to help people work through on-the-job training without actually having the consequences of being on the job.

MARK

In the context of HR, one mistake could cost a company hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars in litigation costs. In today's world, young people, especially, have had it with a set of values they associate with the early 20th Century. They have been raised in environments where they expect people to be recognized as equals and treated fairly. They don't understand the legacy throwback culture and won't put up with it; they will move their labor and consumer dollars elsewhere. These are not just litigation risks; they are brand destroying events that can jeopardize millions of dollars of investment a company has made to seem in tune with the younger generation. These issues don't matter to all, but it is a definite matter with the up-and-coming generation, which is sensitive to treating people fairly. The risk of one mistake is very high.

RACHEL

Mursion's virtual reality and simulations offer insights around emotional intelligence regarding culture, society, and systemic racism. Can you expand on how your programs work?

MARK

The underlying science of what Mursion does comes from applied behavioral psychology. Using the scenario of raising children, we teach them to make eye contact, allow turn-taking in conversation, and raise their hands. Children also learn that sometimes the right thing to do is built on a conversation rather than raising their hands to hear the sound of their voice. These are some of the same skills that drive good meetings, creative initiatives, and good project-based development in an organization.

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Mursion's software focuses on a skill called **tracking, which is critical in a workplace setting.**



Following is an example of monitoring during a conversation between the two of us. When you ask me a question, my job is to persuade you I have the right answer. But I am also listening to your reactions and watching your facial expressions and eye contact to determine if I am clear or if something about my manner is off-putting, causing you to either be confused or disinterested.

During each simulation, Mursion's software tracks how an avatar feels engaged by the learner as the learner tries to persuade the avatar on a specific topic. An example of a classic simulation is a one-on-one conversation between team members, where Team Member A has to give direct feedback on how Team Member B comes across. The goal is to get Team Member B to think about it. Both team members are polite but professionally engaging during the conversation while dealing with the emotional highs and lows of Team Member B. At some point, Team Member B's body language gets huffy because they reacted adversely. Team Member A must calm down Team Member B and try to get them to open up and problem-solve. This simulation aims to understand when to push during a conversation but to know when you're pushing too far.

Following the simulation, the learner can view the recorded video to understand how the software measured the avatar's response to the learner and when the avatar felt the learner was tracking them. Each learner then tracks themselves and is asked, when did you think you were getting your point across and effectively communicating? For the most part, the lines will overlap; however, there will be moments when the learner thought they were nailing it, but the avatars were so confused or angry, they didn't hear a word the learner said.

Perhaps the learner's voice got so loud it was offensive, or they didn't let the avatar get in a word edge-wise. Often, people forget what they learned in nursery school, and that is what alienates them. Mursion produces analytics from these simulations that help people practice getting better at taking turns, listening, and de-escalating, all of which are critical skills.



RACHEL

We have been researching COVID-19 and Diversity and Inclusion. Dave, what do you see in the research that you can share?

DAVID

A The research shows that when the pandemic is over, the remote workforce percentage will be larger than it was pre-pandemic. Previously, some organizations would not entertain working remotely, but overnight, everyone was forced into doing so. While people will return to offices, it will not be at the level it was before.

From an organizational and technological standpoint, there will be a new need for connectivity and engagement. When everyone is working in an office, it is inherent that people are engaged with one another because they are physically together. With everyone working remotely, that is not the case. Although employees may have a similar home office set up and use the same applications daily, the feeling of being connected to co-workers is gone. It's essential to think about engagement and how to build on it.

Additionally, we asked, what is the essential leadership behavior being demonstrated currently? The number one response was kindness, patience, genuine interest, and curiosity about others' well-being. It's about ensuring everyone is okay and keeping an eye on everyone's health but also about feeling connected and doing the right thing. Another top response was empathy, listening, and understanding others.

MARK

A We had a Senior VP-level individual from a top tech firm's operational side reach out to do a simulation training. This individual told us a story about being at one of his organization's remote locations. When debriefing managers, who have roughly eight direct reports, asked them each to tell him about their team. Every single manager reported on their team based on financial metrics. In response, he asked each manager to say to him about their team, and they couldn't tell him if their team members were married, if they had kids or if they were healthy; they knew nothing about them. He was shocked as he knew everything about the people that worked for him, could tell their stories, knew when their kids were going to college, asked those questions, and made those connections. During COVID and being in Zoom meetings, we've learned that we are people first and professionals second. Understanding this is critical to building successful enterprises. Showing our humanity is a massive part of being a leader that we all need to practice. The beauty of Mursion is that it's compelling in short doses. It's not as though the learner has to take the whole day off or go to a remote location to immerse themselves in something that distracts them from their work. It's ten minutes in a simulator, in a powerful, engaging practice session. It's a big wake-up call about where and how people come across. Part of the reason why so many folks have turned to Mursion is that we can deliver an impactful experience in a short amount of time, and we all need it.



RACHEL

What would you like to share with our listeners about what is next with Mursion?



MARK

Mursion has three things on the horizon. First serve on any platform so people can access a simulation on any device, at any time, in any way. Second, we are starting to share learning analytics, allowing people to see how they are coming across in ways they have never experienced or practiced before. Third, the technology emerging to where the avatars' visual and vocal profile is so realistic that it will feel like having a conversation with a co-worker or customer pushes your buttons in an immensely powerful way without the creep-app feature found in former virtual reality. We're making it more powerful, analytical, and convenient.



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