

BEST BEHAVIORS

Cultural training through role-playing provides a new tool for warfighters



A U.S. Airman newly arrived on foreign soil sits on the ground beside his interpreter. Around them, a group of villagers talk about the concerns of their community. As the conversation becomes more animated, a local man reaches over and takes the Airman's hand. Instead of feeling uncomfortable with the gesture and pulling away, the Airman smiles and accepts it. Thanks to his cultural training, he knows hand holding to be an expression of friendship.

Personal relationships can be extremely important in conflict zones, but there is often a huge gap in understanding between one culture and another. That gap has now started to close, thanks to training software developed by the Alelo company, with support from the Air Force Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program.

Los Angeles-based Alelo already had a language training program called Tactical Iraqi, in which "players" traveled through a virtual, 3-D Iraq, conducting sim-

ulated missions like "meeting with the local sheik and discussing reconstruction in the neighborhood." Tactical Iraqi was effective for learning language, but in the face of ongoing tensions following the height of the Iraq war, U.S. military officials realized that American warfighters also needed more realistic cultural training. In 2007, Alelo received SBIR funding to shift the focus of its technology from what Alelo CEO and chief scientist W. Lewis Johnson called "big L/little C" simulations, focused primarily on language with a smattering of cultural learning baked in, to "little L/big C" training, which emphasizes navigating sensitive situations found in different cultures.

"The Department of Defense wanted to be able to provide a compressed amount of training to a large number of people, instead of in-depth language training to a smaller number of people," Johnson said. "If you only have a short time to train, you had better put an emphasis on cultural awareness. You'll learn a few basic phrases along the way, but your understanding and

awareness of the local culture is what's going to help you succeed."

With the help of the SBIR funding, Alelo was able to migrate its technology to a web-based platform that can be used anywhere, including on mobile devices. The result is a suite of web-based tools collectively called VCAT—Virtual Cultural Awareness Training. Much as with Tactical Iraqi, players work their way through different scenarios specific to the region where they'll be spending time. What does an Afghani man mean when he takes your hand? How should one handle endless rounds of toasts at a dinner in Taiwan without overindulging or appearing ungracious? How should one collaborate with local specialists on humanitarian assistance or narcotics interdiction in various parts of the world? VCAT has the answers, and focusing on specific roles and tasks for the avatars in the cloud-based AI (artificial intelligence) simulations makes the training both useful and real to participants.

"We make it very concrete," Johnson said. "The role-playing interactions with virtual characters allow you to develop interpersonal skills in an environment where you can practice all you want. There's no risk in making mistakes—you try different alternatives and see the outcomes, and what you learn transfers readily to the real world."

Working with DoD's Unified Combatant Commands to identify areas of need, Alelo developed VCAT courses for more than 90 different countries. To date, over 450,000 military personnel have received the training, including allies such as the Royal Australian Air Force. In several U.S. commands, the training has been designated

as required for overseas deployment.

"That's the biggest mark of acceptance of the tech," Johnson said. "We're pretty proud of that designation."

"VCAT modules have become the standard for advanced, distributed cultural awareness learning for the Department of Defense," he added. Alelo has created additional courses for NATO, which uses VCAT to train troops deploying to Afghanistan, and it has also developed programs for such agencies as the Voice of America. The company also provides language training solutions to colleges in a number of countries.

To meet a completely different set of cultural challenges, Alelo has now adapted VCAT courses for navigating the corporate world. Trainees can role-play their way through client meetings, customer interactions, and even step into the shoes of a boomer manager trying to determine the best way to keep newly hired millennials on-task. While in-person workplace training often

asks participants to act out scenarios, "people tend not to like it because it's in front of an audience and they find it embarrassing," Johnson said. "It's ironic that we're using virtual technology to teach human skills, but there are a lot of good reasons to do that—virtual coaches can be replicated in ways human coaches cannot."

This type of training has become even more critical for the pandemic and post-pandemic economy, and Johnson sees the commercial sector as a growth market. The company saw enrollments quadruple in early 2020.

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