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A Review of WebEx Training Center

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Overview

For years, technologies for delivering live online training have been an appealing solution for learning and development (L&D) for a number of reasons. Reducing costs associated with face-to-face training (especially due to recent economic pressures), reaching a global audience, increasing capacity, rapidly meeting critical business needs and providing consistency in learning programs are a few popular ones.

Those reasons still ring true today and now we can add several more such as its use as an on-demand collaborative environment. As well, we can now use the technology to deliver high-quality video and rapidly author self-paced e-learning content. But is live online training as effective as traditional face-to-face training?

If done right, yes. Empirical research supports the idea that it is the method, not the medium, that counts.¹

We find that a combination of trained online instructors, an appropriate technology solution and technology advances in general give L&D the ability to fully exploit the features and functionalities of today's technology solutions for live online learning. Employees can experience unique, engaging, interactive and effective training

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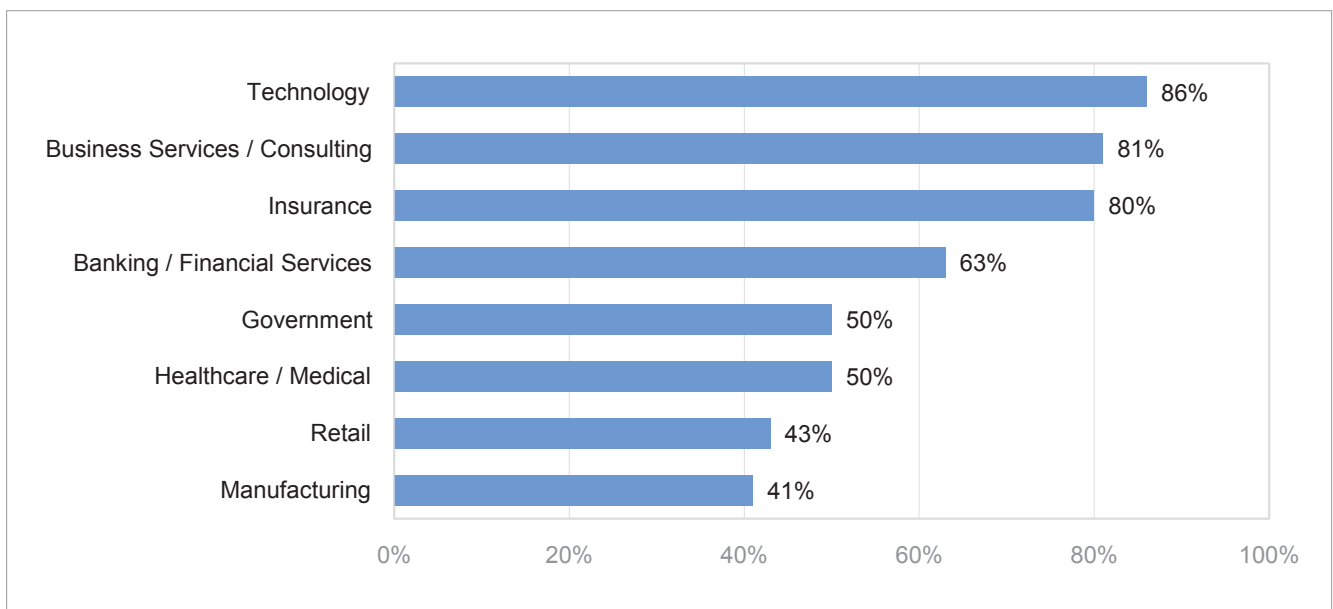
¹ In a meta-analysis of job-related courses comparing web-based and classroom-based learning, research showed online learning to be superior to classroom-based instruction in terms of declarative knowledge outcomes, with the two being equivalent in terms of procedural learning. Source: "The Comparative Effectiveness of Web-Based and Classroom Instruction: A Meta-analysis," *Personal Psychology* / T. Sitzmann, K. Kraiger, D. Stewart and R. Wisher, 2006.

and collaboration, making live online learning technology platforms a good standalone or integrated training option for all types and sizes of companies.

In our research, we found that live online learning is extremely popular across all industries. Figure 1 shows the percentage of companies that reported using virtual classrooms by industry.

One technology solution for live online training reviewed here is WebEx Training Center, a product which has been around for many years.²

Figure 1: Percent of Survey Respondents Using Virtual Classroom Technology – By Industry



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2009.

² WebEx was founded in 1996 and became a Cisco company in 2007. In acquiring WebEx, Cisco broadened its collaboration portfolio, which includes IP communications, telepresence, customer support, social software and messaging via the acquisition of Jabber.

In this research bulletin, you will find:

- An overview of and background on live online learning technology;
- Best and alternative use cases³;
- WebEx Training Center differentiators; and,
- A critique.

Overview of Live Online Learning

The live online learning technology market has experienced consolidation in recent years. As well, some of the bigger players in the “meeting” software market have made their own web-conferencing solutions the default option for unified communications and collaborative platforms. Many smaller players have entered the market with inexpensive and “free” options (normally ad-supported). We found that, while the latter can be a great option for meetings, many just do not have the level of functionality needed for high-fidelity, interactive online training.

Some learning management system (LMS) companies have integrated their own live online learning into their platforms; however, most mature systems integrate with most major LMSs.

Other platforms best described as virtual or immersive worlds continue to become easier to use and offer another delivery option for live online training. They tend to have more robust personalizations, such as avatars, facial expressions, and first- and third-person camera views – and are a viable option for live online learning.

Background of Live Online Learning

Although computer-mediated distance education has been around since the 1960s, the first Internet-based virtual classrooms⁴ were not

³ A “use case” provides a description of a sequence of interactions between actors, and the system necessary to complete a specific goal or function. Use cases are often co-authored by systems analysts and end-users, and are presented as a sequence of simple steps.

⁴ For more information, *Virtual Classrooms: Facts, Practical Analysis, Trends and Provider Comparisons*, Bersin & Associates / David Mallon, November 2010. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library or for purchase at www.bersin.com.



KEY POINT

Presenting and sharing data and applications, whiteboards, linking, audio and video support, breakout rooms, hands-on labs, recording, and chat and instant messaging are some of the features that have brought live online learning to new levels.

marketed to the enterprise until the 1990s. Since then, the virtual classroom has been primarily used to approximate face-to-face instruction, and often serves as a replacement or enhancement for face-to-face, instructor-led training (ILT). For these reasons, it has commonly been viewed as a special instance of face-to-face classroom training – but that is changing.

Early virtual classrooms included familiar face-to-face classroom methods and processes, including online syllabi, notes, reading, testing and assignments. Newer versions of the virtual classroom, released in the late 1990s and early 2000s, brought both advances in the manner in which content was delivered, as well as several new features. Presenting and sharing data and applications, whiteboards, linking, audio and video support, breakout rooms, hands-on labs, recording, and chat and instant messaging are some of the features that have brought live online learning to new levels.

Over the past several years, we have seen advances in delivery models, greater interoperability with other systems, voiceover IP (VoIP⁵), collaboration, audio and video advances, advanced tracking, monitoring, and mobile support. Many systems also include features to bridge the gap between self-paced e-learning and face-to-face ILT, as well as to support informal learning.

One challenge in understanding live online learning platforms is recognizing the various terms used to describe them – such as virtual classroom, synchronous e-learning⁶, live online learning and virtual instructor-led training (vILT). There are also several others used less frequently and which encompass live online events that may not be instructional in nature; these include web-conferencing, web meetings and online video-conferencing.

⁵ “Voiceover IP” (VoIP) is a transmission technology that transports communication via the Internet. It is also referred to as “Internet telephony.”

⁶ The “virtual classroom” is a tool for delivering live e-learning. It is often called “synchronous e-learning.” The interface mimics the face-to-face classroom in many ways with a roster, hand-raising icon and an instructor leading the group. The primary difference between the face-to-face classroom training and virtual classroom training is that the latter is used to deliver content live, over the Internet, to people who are geographically dispersed.



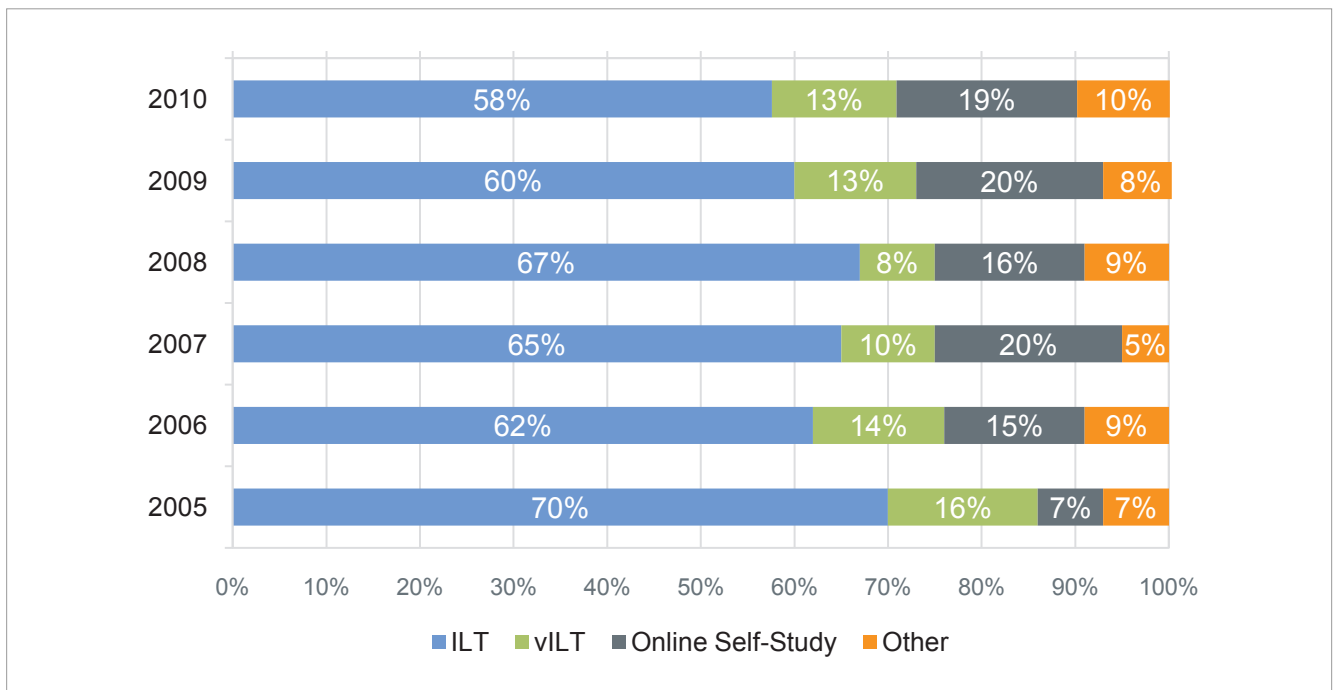
KEY POINT

The use of live online classroom training now accounts for 13 percent of all training hours.

WebEx Training Center was designed specifically to be a solution for an organization’s learning and training needs – online instructor-led training that is delivered live over the Internet and which is not in-person. In contrast, WebEx Meeting Center, Event Center and Support Center were designed specifically for those business processes (meetings, events or support). This is an important consideration for companies that may be purchasing live online technologies. A solution designed for meetings will not have the depth of functionality needed for training and online collaboration. Recognizing this upfront will make comparing solutions easier and, ultimately, will lead you to the right system based on your unique needs.

We have found that the use of live online classroom training has remained steady in recent years, except for a resurgence in 2009 with cuts in travel and training budgets; it now accounts for 13 percent of all training hours.

Figure 2: Training Delivery Methods 2005 to 2010 – U.S. Total



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2010.



Critique

Cisco, a multinational corporation headquartered in San Jose, California, has a full suite of real-time collaboration tools as part of its total portfolio – telepresence, enterprise social software, messaging, IP communications, customer care, mobile applications and, of course, WebEx (acquired in 2007 for \$3.2 billion). The Cisco WebEx portfolio includes WebEx Meeting Center, WebEx Training Center, WebEx Event Center and WebEx Support Center.

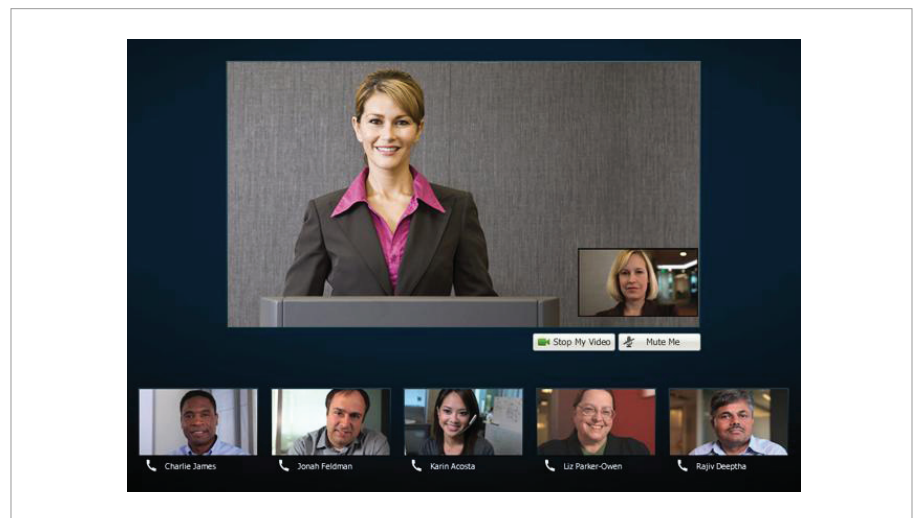
One strength of WebEx Training Center is its placement in a larger suite of Cisco's collaboration tools. One of its corporate market focus areas is collaboration, which includes IP video and phones, telepresence, unified communications, enterprise social software, mobile applications, video-conferencing, and web-conferencing.

Cisco recognized the nature of the mobile workforce long ago and has a mobile solution for WebEx Meeting Center for the BlackBerry, iPhone and iPad. Support for mobile devices for WebEx Training Center will be available in the near future.

Differentiators of WebEx Training Center include:

- High-quality video (sharing, adjusts to bandwidth) – WebEx Training Center introduced high-quality video in May 2011;

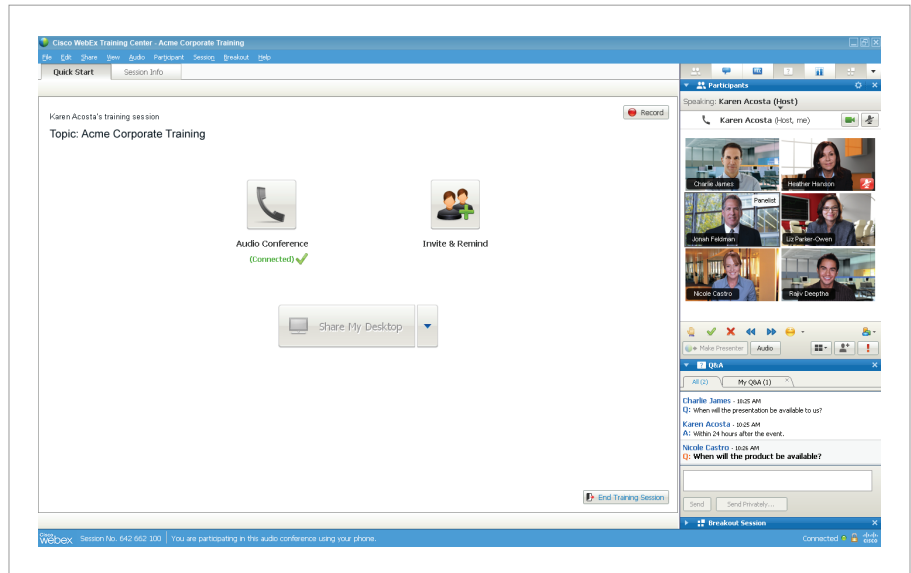
Figure 3: WebEx Training Center Headquarters Video



Source: Cisco Systems, 2011.

- A focus on usability (please note the simple, clean interface as shown in Figure 4);

Figure 4: WebEx Training Center User Interface



Source: Cisco Systems, 2011.

- Performance in sharing;
- Tailored for training departments (first with breakout rooms and the only with a hands-on lab);
- Sophisticated polling;
- Attention indicator;
- Productivity tools, such as add-ons (for Microsoft Outlook, instant messaging, et al); and,
- Integration with the most major learning management systems.

WebEx Training Center also has a number of use cases, making it a solution for more than just live online learning. Organizations can leverage the many features of the platform to best-suit the needs of L&D and their companies.

Figure 5: Use Cases

Traditional Use Cases	
Corporate Live Online Training (synchronous)	Instructor-led training, demonstrations, labs
Extended Enterprise Training (synchronous)	Instructor-led training, demonstrations
Online Education (for higher education, continuing education, K-12)	Instructor-led training, demonstrations, labs
Alternative Use Cases	
e-Learning Delivery (asynchronous ⁷)	Although not its primary use, WebEx Training Center can be used to rapidly create self-paced e-learning through the use of recordings
Group Collaboration / Social Learning	The platform can serve as an environment for collaborative and social learning
Audio-Conferencing	Integrated hybrid audio (telephony and VoIP)
Video-Conferencing	High-quality video was introduced in May 2011
Rapid e-Learning Development	Training and videos can be recorded for playback on-demand
Web Meetings / Web-Conferencing / Presentations / Webinars / Helpdesk	The product can be utilized for multiple uses
Video to Support Traditional Face-to-Face ILT	The tools enable local subject matter experts (SMEs) to record video and to incorporate it into classroom training
Hands-on Lab	Hands-on lab provides learners with secure access to remote PCs for hands-on application learning and practice
Leadership Coaching and Development	As the speed and availability of Internet connections grow and gain prevalence, more and more organizations are investing in leadership development solutions with virtual components

Source: Bersin & Associates, 2011.

⁷ "Asynchronous" (or self-paced) e-learning involves an individual learning online at any time. Asynchronous e-learning is flexible because learners do not have to be online at the same time.



KEY POINT

While nearly anyone can run a meeting, it takes very specific skills and competencies to reap the benefits of an instructionally focused live online learning platform.

Summary

We end this research bulletin with a listing of the features and functionality of WebEx Training Center (see section, “Appendix I: WebEx Training Center Features and Functionality”). This robust solution for live online learning is well-suited for any organization looking for specific instructional features that support adult learning versus trying to adapt a meeting solution. For this reason, it is important for organizations to understand the problem they are trying to solve first. If delivering lectures / presentations are the primary use, then organizations will find the meeting options suitable and less expensive.

The best use of the solution also requires a specific skills set that is best obtained through training or certification – and companies should keep this in mind when selecting a live online learning platform. While nearly anyone can run a meeting, it takes very specific skills and competencies to reap the benefits of an instructionally focused live online learning platform. WebEx Training Center is one of the few platforms capable of doing that.

Appendix I: WebEx Training Center Features and Functionality

Functions	
Administration	
Notifications and Invitations	Instructors can send up to three automatic email reminders (from 15 minutes up to two weeks before a course).
Registration	Self-registration or instructor registration.
Scheduling	Self-scheduling or instructor scheduling; can schedule and launch directly from Microsoft Outlook.
Reporting and Analytics	Reporting and assessments include registration, attendance / attention, hands-on lab, polling / testing, sessions delivered, recorded session registration.
Sharing Information	
Application-Sharing	Learners can view an instructor's specific application on the presenter's computer. This is helpful when the learner does not have the application installed on his / her own computer, and needs to demonstrate or practice. This feature is often used for software and systems training rollouts and upgrades, as well as guided tours of websites. This uses more bandwidth than presentation-sharing, but lets you edit content during the course.
Presentation / Document-Sharing	Participants / instructors can exchange presentation files and documents within the course, and annotate the content. Presentation and document-sharing is more bandwidth-efficient than application-sharing, but does not let you edit content during a course.
Desktop-Sharing	Instructors can share multiple applications at once and show any part of their desktops (i.e., where files are stored). Control can be given to learners and applications can be annotated. This sharing option requires the most bandwidth among all sharing options.
Web Browser-Sharing	Instructors are able to guide learners to web pages and sites; learners can be given control of an instructor's web browser; pages can be annotated. Media / sound are not transmitted to learners and learners cannot interact with web pages on their own.
Web Content-Sharing	Displays the media effects and sounds, and lets attendees interact with web pages on their own. Does not let instructors guide participants to other pages.

Source: Bersin & Associates, 2011.

Appendix I: WebEx Training Center Features and Functionality (cont'd)

Document-Sharing	Instructors can share presentation content or other documents which can be printed, saved and annotated.
Whiteboard-Sharing	A whiteboard is a blank screen that allows learners to add and view annotations, and draw text or graphics. The whiteboard can also be used for real-time, informal collaboration and brainstorming. It can be saved and printed.
Multimedia-Sharing	During a session, web pages, Flash movie, interactive Flash files, audio, video and WebEx recording format files can be shared either in a PowerPoint presentation or as a standalone file. Real-time multimedia sharing is a new feature – allowing presenters to start sharing multimedia files immediately (no need to upload files), and attendees do not need media layers or other software on their desktops.
Remote Computer	When the “Access Anywhere Agent” is installed, an instructor is able to share any application or file on a remote computer. This is helpful to show an application that is available only on that computer.
Download Course Material	Instructors can share files by publishing them for learners to download.
Record / Playback	Classes (including interactions, voice and annotations) can be recorded, edited and viewed / shared later, or archived; reporting function is included for playback.
Annotation Tools	
Annotation / Markup Tools	Annotation tools call attention to particular content (i.e., pointer, line, highlighter, erasers, color, rectangle, text, et al) or can be used to write on a whiteboard (blank screen). Learners can also change views (e.g., standard, full-screen- zoom) to more easily make annotations.
Interaction	
Text Chat	Similar to instant messaging, learners can text chat privately or publicly in real-time with other learners or with the instructor within the course. Text chat can also be used for real-time, informal collaboration.
Assessment, Testing, Polling, Surveys	
Surveys and Polling	Real-time polling, assessments and testing of learners for instant feedback and opinions. Share group views. Instant tabulation. Polls can be created prior to the session using an offline polling editor. Poll results can be saved in such file formats as .csv, .txt and .html.
Assessments, Testing and Grading	Integrated testing includes multiple question types; delivering tests before, during or after sessions; automated scoring and reporting; store and reuse tests; and timed tests.
Threaded Q&A	Instructors can track questions and document responses, prioritize questions, and display answers publicly / privately or assign them to someone else.

Source: Bersin & Associates, 2011.

Appendix I: WebEx Training Center Features and Functionality (cont'd)

User Features	
User Control	Quick response icons include hand-raising, yes / no, go faster / slower, agree / disagree and emoticons (such as laughter, applause, thumbs up / down, et al).
Full-Screen View	Learners have the option to see the classroom content in full-screen view, hiding elements that may distract or limit the view (such as participant and chat windows). Floating panels are available for instructors to more easily manage their views.
Customization	
Custom Interface / Branding	Yes.
Custom URLs	Yes.
Productivity	
Persistent Classroom	No.
Instant Conferencing	You can join using one click meeting from Microsoft Outlook to set up an impromptu, instant session.
Integration with Scheduling and Calendar Tools	Training sessions can include a link that supports the iCalendar format, such as Microsoft Outlook or Lotus Notes.
Starting Sessions	Classes can be set up instantly or scheduled.
Instruction-Specific	
Breakout Sessions	Breakout rooms allow trainers to conduct multiple, simultaneous activities in small groups. Trainers can wander in and out of rooms to facilitate and check-in. This is a differentiating feature of WebEx Training Center in that it supports the type of separation (small group breakouts within a larger group) which traditionally has only occurred in face-to-face classrooms. Learners can share documents, presentations, whiteboards, videos and applications. If using integrated audio, audio subconference can be used to go along with each breakout room. Learners can be preassigned to a room or the systems can randomly assign learners to sessions. Instructors can broadcast messages to all breakout sessions. Content from breakout sessions can be shared in the main session room.
Hands-on Lab	Secure access to remote PCS for hands-on learning / practice; access can be restricted to one or more applications, or to an entire suite; support for VMWare 6.0 and MS Virtual PC 2007. If using integrated audio, audio subconference can be used to go along with each hands-on lab session. This is a key differentiator of WebEx Training Center. Instructors can prepare exercises for learners to complete during a session and can control the session for a true lab environment. Labs are also available for practice outside a live session after the class is finished.

Source: Bersin & Associates, 2011.

Appendix I: WebEx Training Center Features and Functionality (cont'd)

Remote Control	One user is able to take control of another user's system. This is frequently used in helpdesk applications.
Presentation Delivery	Learners can view an online presentation (usually created with MS PowerPoint) which is under the control of a host or presenter. This presentation can be annotated and tools are available to call attention to particular content (i.e., pointer, star, et al). The presentation can be shared through application-sharing, desktop-sharing or embedded (uploaded).
Attention Indicator	Optional visual attention indicator feature gauges student engagement. An attention indicator next to the learners name lets the instructor know if the attendee minimizes a window or brings up another active window. Attention data is available in reporting.
Maximum Learners	Up to 1,000 people - while some webcasting tools can host a few hundred thousand people, Training Center has a specific use (classroom training) which normally involves smaller groups.
Extended Enterprise	
eCommerce	Sell live or recorded sessions; configure credit cards and currency, use coupons, PayPal PayFlow Pro and website PaymentsPro supported standards. eCommerce is available for U.S., U.K. and Canada payments.
Multimedia	
Use of Rich Media	PowerPoint presentations can include animations, transitions, Adobe Flash objects and streaming video integration (using web or video camera). Video-sharing can be accomplished without installing media players by using the embedded media player. (The following media file format are currently supported – WMV, WMA, WAV, MP3, ASF, AVI, MPG, MPEG, MOV, FLV, F4V, QT, MP4 – for Windows and Mac.)
Enhanced Video-Conferencing	Higher resolution (up to 360 pixel resolution and up to 30 frames per second), shows up to six thumbnail videos, full-screen video, speakers easily switched (uses active speaker switching, which is similar to telepresence; video switches automatically to speaker) and / or lock in one trainer / participant. Webcam or digital video camera can be used.
Enterprise Security	
Enterprise Security / Configurable Permissions	Set security policies at the company, group and individual / session levels. Administrators can unlist meetings, configure password strength criteria, disable desktop-sharing and lock out accounts after a certain number of failed attempts. Ejecting attendees is an option.
Single Sign-on (SSO)	Cloud single sign-on (standards-based SSO provided).

Source: Bersin & Associates, 2011.

Appendix I: WebEx Training Center Features and Functionality (cont'd)

Integration	
LMS Integration	WebEx Training Center can be integrated with most leading LMS solutions; open APIs ⁸ .
Integrated VoIP	Learners can use PC speakers and a microphone / headset to listen and talk (when enabled by the instructor) instead of relying on a telephone.
Integrated Audio	Learners can use integration audio (users join using a phone via call-in or call-back), VoIP and third-party telephony services (audio-conferencing bridge) in mixed mode. An icon next to the user's name indicates the method of audio he / she has elected to use. Instructors can mute/ unmute individually or collectively.
Integrated Video-Conferencing	A live video feed of an instructor or learners can be shown using a video camera or (more often) a desktop webcam.
Other	
End-User Training	WebEx University offers training, mastery and certification programs; free webinars, self-service training and tutorials; and foundational courses. Courses are also available via The Cisco Learning Network, including Mastering WebEx Training Center (nine sessions of 2.5 hours delivered over five weeks), Virtual Classroom Instruction Specialist Certification and Leading Virtual Classroom Instruction.
24 / 7 Technical Support	Different levels of support are available, including integrated, global support, and are included in subscription.
Assist Services	Setup, coaching, recording, facilitation, poll creation, CD recording and many other assistance opportunities are available.

Source: *Bersin & Associates, 2011.*

⁸ "Application programming interfaces" or APIs offer the ability for one application or tool to speak to or be embedded within other applications or tools – a hallmark of Web 2.0 technology.

Appendix I: WebEx Training Center Features and Functionality (cont'd)

Delivery Model	SaaS or on-premise-based; hosted / ASP ⁹ ; standalone or integrated with other systems (such as an LMS). Training Center is delivered through the Cisco Collaboration Cloud, a client-server environment for integrating services using an extensible object model and flexible access control mechanisms. Provides an API exposed via web service (either SOAP ¹⁰ or REST ¹¹).
Cross-Platform Support	Microsoft Windows, Apple Mac, Linux, Sun Solaris.
Auto Adjust / Low Bandwidth	Automatic adjustment for each participant according to the participant's network bandwidth.
e-Learning Standards Support (AICC ¹² or SCORM)	Supports SCORM 1.2 ¹³ .
Language Support	English, Chinese (Simple and Traditional), Dutch, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese (Brazilian), Russian, Spanish (Latin American and European Spanish).
Financial Viability	Cisco's (NASDAQ:CSCO) annual revenue of \$43.2 billion as of FY'2011.

Source: Bersin & Associates, 2011.

⁹ "ASP" stands for application service provider.

¹⁰ "Simple object access protocol" (or SOAP) is a protocol for exchanging XML-based messages over computer networks, normally using HTTP / HTTPS. SOAP forms the foundation layer of the web services stack, providing a basic messaging framework upon which abstract layers can be built. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SOAP>.

¹¹ REST or "representational state transfer" is a style of software architecture for distributed systems, such as an LMS and other client systems. REST includes a set of guiding principles for how these systems should talk to each other. The goals of REST are to simplify communication between systems, improve scalability of connections and standardize the interface between systems. An API that adheres to REST is said to be RESTful.

¹² The "Aviation Industry CBT Committee" (AICC) is an international association of technology-based training professionals that develops guidelines for the aviation industry in the development, delivery and evaluation of computer-based training (CBT) and related training technologies.

¹³ "Sharable Content Object Reference Model" (SCORM) is a set of specifications for course content that produces reusable learning objects.



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