

E-Learning: “If We Build It, Will They Come?”

ASTD and
The MASIE Center
Report Illuminates
E-Learning Motivators
and Acceptance Levels



Executive Summary

Copyright© June 2001 ASTD/The MASIE Center. All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical (including photocopying, recording, taping, or via information storage and retrieval systems)—without written permission from the publishers.

E-Learning: “If We Build It, Will They Come?”

Executive Summary

**ASTD and The MASIE Center Report Illuminates
E-Learning Motivators and Acceptance Levels**

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	iv
Introduction	1
The Study	1
Recommendations	2
Drivers of E-Learning Acceptance	3
Marketing	3
Support	4
Incentives	5
Drivers of E-Learning Satisfaction	5
Technology	6
Location and Timing of Event	6
Summary	7

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the following organizations for their generous support of this study.

Elite Sponsors

AchieveGlobal
IBM
Mentor Technologies
Unext.com

Industry Sponsors

Cognitive Arts
Forum
Microsoft
Vital Learning

Corporate Sponsors

Avon
Bank of Ireland
Blue Slate Solutions
Motorola
PricewaterhouseCoopers

Introduction

Most trainers and managers inherently know that just making e-learning technology available will have no significant effect on employee development or workforce productivity. Employees may need to be motivated to take advantage of e-learning opportunities.

A new study from ASTD and The MASIE Center provides relevant information for managers regarding the factors that motivate learners to accept and use e-learning. It also recommends best practices for organizations seeking to increase participation in their e-learning course offerings.

The Study

The study surveyed nearly 30 courses at 16 companies in the United States and over 700 learners to analyze the relationship between organizational efforts to market and motivate learner participation and actual satisfaction with technology as a means of providing learning.

The first phase of the study gathered information on all of the courses from the training functions of the companies. The information was used to assess the impact of the context of the e-learning offer on acceptance rates. Specifically, the study sought to understand why some learners begin e-learning courses and others do not.¹ Because the context of any offer is complex and varied, the study examines the impact of three particularly important features of the context: Marketing, Support, and Incentives.

The second part of the study assessed the factors influencing acceptance from the learner’s perspective for nine of the courses from the first part of the study. Data were collected from employees who received an invitation from their firm to participate in one of the courses. The information was used to differentiate the learners who accepted these offers from those employees who did not.

In general, the results revealed that the most successful e-learning courses are those that are well advertised and championed, and those for which ample completion time and support are provided during work hours.

Course Profile (N=29)

The companies and courses examined in the study were carefully selected based on specific criteria for inclusion. They do not completely or accurately represent the full range of e-learning courses being offered. Courses were all work-related and offered for the purpose of improving skills with the participants’ current jobs and employers. The distribution of soft skill and technical topics corresponds to the types of courses reported in ASTD’S 2001 “State of the Industry Report.”

Participants indicated that 41% of courses were required (mandatory), 31% were voluntary and 27.6% were perceived as both. The majority of courses (79%) were offered every few weeks or months. Only 40% had a formal enrollment period. The most common courses being offered were either 1 hour, 4 hours, or 1 day in duration, or an average of 1.76 days. Courses were offered to an average of 1,163 employees. Information was gathered only on courses offered to North American participants.

Learner Profile (N=714)

Characteristics	Mandatory	Voluntary
Position	47% in sales and marketing	47% in sales and marketing
Years with Employer	61% 3 yrs or less	41% with more than 10 yrs
Age	63% 20–39 yrs old	56% 20–39 yrs old
Gender	47% male, 53% female	56% male, 44% female
Level of Education	55% bachelor or graduate degree	70% bachelor or graduate degree

¹ While e-learning course completion rates are notoriously low, the current study examined only start rates.

Recommendations

In order to increase e-learning participation and satisfaction, it is recommended that organizations

- Use intentional, dynamic, and continuous marketing activities, including traditional marketing methods, such as face-to-face discussions and print advertising.
- Provide the time and space to learn on company time.
- Create a learning culture that encourages and appreciates e-learning.
- Develop an environment where peer support is widespread.
- Ensure that frustration with e-learning technology is not a barrier to successful e-learning.
- Develop incentives beyond candy bars and meaningless certificates that provide valuable benefits such as career advancement and peer recognition.
- Continue to implement and develop synchronous, collaborative courses that fuel the learner’s fundamental desire for interaction while more closely simulating the classroom experience.
- Blend e-learning with other complementary forms of instruction to attract those who may be uncomfortable with learning via technology.

Table 1: Key Findings

Start Rate	■ 69% for mandatory courses and 32% for voluntary courses
Support	■ Peer and manager support lacking
Location and Timing	■ In the office, during working hours
Promotion and Marketing	■ Emails and face-to-face are preferred methods of course awareness ■ 60% believed course was poorly advertised
Technology	■ 52% of courses were web-based ■ 80% were satisfied with the technology part of the course
Incentives	■ Value of skills learned for use in and outside the organization is the key incentive for taking a voluntary course
Overall Experience	■ 38% preferred on-line training over classroom

Drivers of E-Learning Acceptance

The study confirmed that many e-learning courses are unable to attract all the learners to whom they are offered. Overall, there was a 58% participation or “start” rate across all courses. In other words, on average 6 out of every 10 employees who were offered an e-learning course actually started the course. The average start rate for courses where participation was voluntary was a mere 32%, significantly lower than mandatory courses. However, mandatory courses were far from perfect as well, averaging only a 69% start rate.

Marketing

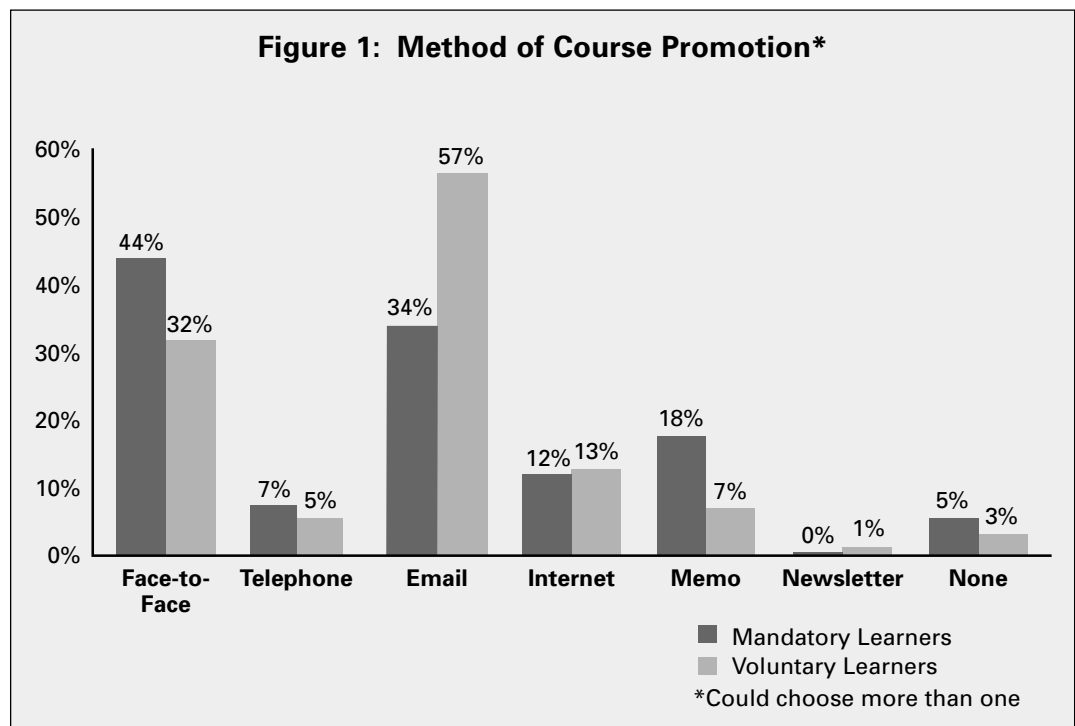
Face-to-face conversations and targeted email messages were the most common means by which learners reported hearing about e-learning courses. Companies were more likely to rely on traditional methods, such as face-to-face conversations or print media, when the course was required. For instance, internal memos were utilized 10% more in cases where courses were mandatory. Memos, email, and other electronic communication, all presumed to be effective enough on their own in reaching all categories of e-learners, were not any better than other marketing tools.

Approximately 30% of courses had full participation (100% start rates), all of which were mandatory courses. Full participation occurred when courses

- Had an internal champion.
- Were tied to performance reviews.
- Were NOT taken at the desk.
- Had intense marketing and promotion.

Methods of Course Promotion. The study found that managers must engage in at least four out of five of the promotional activities below before the start rate significantly increases.

- Use testimonials
- Use formal means of communication
- Purposefully use managers/supervisors of learners to tell them about course
- Inform people about training more than once
- Have an internal champion



Only 60% of learners reported that the course was well advertised. It is therefore critical for organizations to be intentional and varied in their marketing activities aimed at learner participation in an e-learning course.

The popularity of using email to notify learners about e-learning opportunities indicates that organizations believe that mass mailing a URL will result in large-scale commitments to taking e-learning courses. However, this study revealed that targeted contact with the prospective learner has thus far been the most successful marketing channel. Just as on-line retailers are now realizing that traditional marketing methods (i.e., catalogs) are necessary and effective in building their customer base, so managers must not abandon the traditional classroom marketing methods.

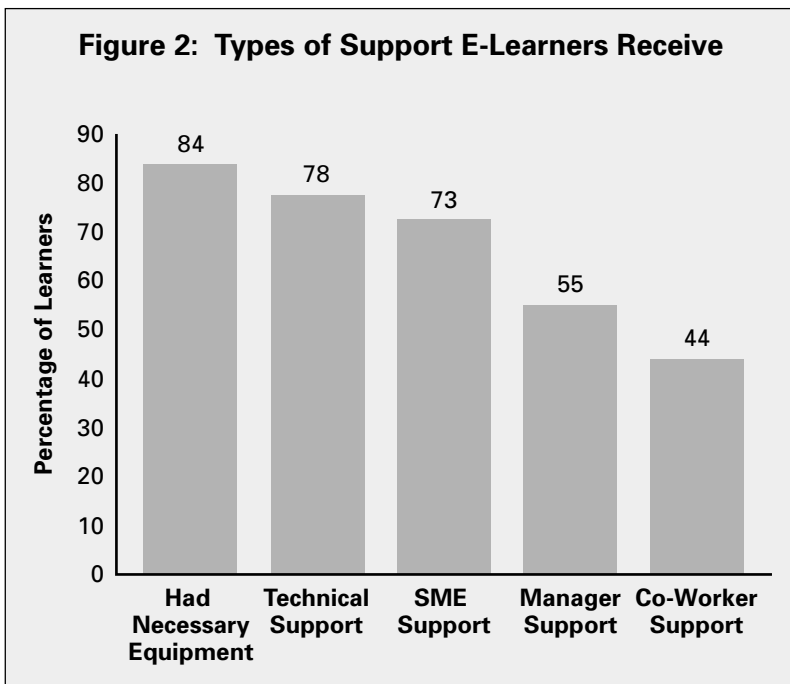
Support

Although marketing and promotion efforts appeared to be the crucial factor in prompting learners to begin the courses in the study, they were not always likely to engage in the portions of these courses delivered via technology. Rather, it was the amount of support learners received that actually increased their willingness to begin the technology-delivered portions. The level to which learners felt they were supported was one of the primary indicators regarding their participation in e-learning.

The results of the study revealed most e-learners felt supported by the technology and by technical and subject matter experts (SMEs), with levels of satisfaction ranging from 84% to 73%. However, opportunity remains for stronger manager and co-worker support in providing learners with enough time to take the course as well as the encouragement to see it through.

The role of the manager as an overt champion of the learner’s development must be extended to e-learning offerings. The manager plays an essential role by

- Explaining why the learner should take the course.
- Motivating the learner by linking the course content to the workplace and business objectives, as well as to future career opportunities.



- Displaying an interest in the course and giving as much status and importance to it as attendance at a classroom course.
- Providing context, assignments, and work samples to help transfer the learning to the reality of the workplace.
- Assigning peers to provide support and dialogue with the learner to reduce confusion and to assist with transfer.

If the manager does not appropriately support the learner and the e-learning opportunity, the learner tends not to see the value of the course, which could lead to lower start rates. Likewise, it is increasingly important for managers to encourage and show appreciation of peer support. Without peer support, e-learning courses may pose more difficulties than benefits, which further leads to lower acceptance levels.

Although the learners indicated that their technical support was sufficient, it is important to continue to ensure that frustration with e-learning technology is not a barrier to a successful e-learning program (which is another ongoing concern for vendors of e-learning technology).

There were also lower acceptance levels in voluntary courses where students were unfamiliar with the technology. As with most forays into technology, comfort with e-learning technology is likely to increase only with hands-on experience.

Incentives

The compulsory nature of mandatory courses makes marketing and incentives less necessary for acceptance. However, the information on incentives for voluntary courses provided here can and should be applied to mandatory courses as well—not necessarily to increase start rates, but to increase learner satisfaction.

Interestingly, 36% of voluntary learners actually believed their course to be required or expected. Even so, the single largest motivator for voluntary learners proves to be the desire to obtain new skills for current or future job opportunities.

Most incentives offered did not increase participation in voluntary courses. Over 75% of e-learners reported that taking the course did not increase the likelihood of a promotion nor did failure to participate decrease the possibility of losing their jobs. In addition, more than 80% did not feel that taking the course would affect the benefits they would receive.

Learners are driven most by their own intrinsic motivation and personal development plans—not by external factors. Only 12% and 22%, respectively, received financial or non-financial incentives to take the course, 79% and 77%, respectively, believed the skills and knowledge they gained would be useful within or outside the organization.

Managers must continually ensure that employees are aware that e-learning courses will contribute to their personal development, which in turn helps to create an overall learning culture within their organizations and drives intrinsic motivation. Managerial participation in learners' personal development plans will further drive and motivate employees to acquire new skills as well as aid in increasing the awareness and benefits of particular courses. If managers encourage peer acceptance and support, the drive to excel beyond one's peers will serve as an additional, and very compelling, motivator.

Drivers of E-Learning Satisfaction

In addition to looking at the factors that influence acceptance of e-learning, the study also examined the factors that produced satisfying learning experiences for those who took the courses.

Study results indicate that learners were able to benefit from their e-learning experiences, with 84% willing to take a similar course in the future and 72% indicating that they had a positive experience. However, only 51% felt that they had learned more rapidly than they would have on the job, and roughly 58% did not get adequate interaction with either instructors or other students. The lack of collaboration is one factor that potentially leads to dissatisfaction.

The amount of support learners received while taking the technology-delivered portions of the courses also played a key role in their level of satisfaction. Again, learners found the support provided by the technical staff and subject matter experts to be especially important.

Technology

With 80% of learners indicating that they were satisfied with the technology used for the course, it can be concluded that the technologies used to provide an e-learning course is an important factor for satisfaction. However, it must be understood that technology alone is not a valid predictor of learner satisfaction, but is rather just one component of the offer and support structure.

The impact of technology on learner satisfaction is greatly colored by the learners' previous experiences with e-learning. Learners who reported having negative experiences with e-learning previously were significantly less satisfied with their current e-learning experience. This finding underscores the importance of learner's initial experiences with e-learning.

Collaboration is also an essential factor in learner satisfaction. Only 21% of courses in the survey had a digital collaboration component, and only 20% were synchronous. In addition, learners gave low satisfaction ratings to the level of interaction and real-time portions of their e-learning courses.

Thirty-five percent of the courses surveyed used more than one type of technology and 72% were blended with other forms of instruction, suggesting that training managers are hoping that all forms of e-learning will benefit from synergy with other instructional methods.

Most courses surveyed were online (52%) either via an intranet or over the Internet, reflecting the trend toward increasing use of web-based forms of training. Web-based training offers the potential for connecting learners through synchronous and collaborative learning, the full extent of which has not yet been reached.

It is possible that, with increased broadband saturation, Internet- and intranet-based courses with compelling real-time interactivity will proliferate. Should organizations continue to implement and develop multi-platform, synchronous, and collaborative courses and applications, they will fuel the learner's fundamental desire for interaction while more closely simulating and complementing the classroom experience.

Location and Timing of Event

Where and when learners are engaged in e-learning courses was shown to affect their level of satisfaction. The study revealed that 86% of e-learners in mandatory courses took the technology part of the course at work, either at their desk, in a shared workplace, or at an onsite training center. Learners who took courses while on the road or at a customer's site were significantly less satisfied with their e-learning experience.

When learners were asked about their preferred time, 76% stated they preferred to take e-learning during working hours. This is attributed to the fact that many learners do not want the technology training to disrupt their personal life, as today's workforce is always striving to maintain a good work-life balance. Employers that provide their mandatory training during work hours will find they have a more satisfied workforce.

There is an indication that voluntary e-learners are more apt to take their courses at home, outside of regular work hours, as the study revealed 39% preferred to take the course at home, with 44% actually taking the course at home. Presumably, when a learner voluntarily takes a course, they assume that training will most likely have to be completed on their own time. Many will accept this constraint as they report taking the course to increase their skill base for use in other jobs within or outside the organization. Therefore, the skills learned for self-betterment outweigh the cost of intruding on their personal time.

Summary

Interest in e-learning has grown rapidly in recent years. Many organizations have begun taking steps along the e-learning journey. The question many of them face is whether their learners are on the journey with them. Organizations cannot rely on the technology itself to drive interest, acceptance, or satisfaction with e-learning. This landmark study has revealed that while companies can indeed view e-learning as an efficient new means for educating employees, the context in which this learning is offered must be carefully considered and managed.



*Linking People,
Learning & Performance*

1640 King Street Box 1443
Alexandria, VA 22313-2043 USA

Tel 800.628.2783 703.683.8100
Fax 703.683.8103

www.astd.org

Product 190105

897/54710