

The Forum Report

e-Learning: Adoption Rates and Barriers

An increasing number of companies are adopting e-Learning. But in their rush to take advantage of e-Learning's benefits and promises, companies are finding that there are significant barriers to adoption, according to a Forum Corporation study of 144 U.S. companies.

Key findings:

- The percentage of companies providing access to e-Learning for all employees is expected to more than double in 2 years.
- The number of companies providing learning communities that have collaboration technology is expected to grow 150 percent over the same time period, from 21 percent to 51 percent.
- More than 60 percent of companies expect to incorporate 10 of the 11 components of an e-Learning system within 2 years.
- Technology infrastructure is one of only seven major barriers to the adoption of e-Learning; other issues pose even more significant obstacles.

This is one in a series of research reports on workplace learning. Upcoming reports will explore e-Learning, outsourcing and learning strategy.

Issue

An increasing number of companies are responding to the promise of e-Learning by adopting advanced learning systems. While traditional workplace learning occurred in a classroom setting and was based on a face-to-face teacher-student model, it was, and is, often criticized for being expensive, time-consuming, and unresponsive to learners' immediate needs. By contrast, e-Learning promises lower costs of distribution, any time and anywhere access, and just-in-time learning that is responsive to learners' immediate needs.

Today's most insightful companies are adopting learning distribution models that incorporate the classroom as only one of several ways to deliver learning and development to their employees. Increasingly, companies are adopting collaborative and technologically-enabled models. In doing so, they are responding to the demands of both their top executives and their employees, who are looking for learning that achieves both organizational and individual results. In addition, they are responding to the marketplace, which demands rapid responses to changing dynamics and rewards companies that are best able to apply new learning to key business issues.

Forum's research indicates that companies are moving rapidly to meet the demand to make learning more relevant to their business priorities, their employees, and their customers. Figure 1 examines the current and future adoption of 11 aspects of an e-Learning system. (See page 4 for research methodology.)

Figure 1. Components of an Advanced e-Learning System

	Current Usage	Expected Usage (in 2 yrs.)
Competency/skills assessment	64%	82%
Individual learning plans	48%	68%
Learning resources linked to organizational goals	55%	76%
Learning communities with collaboration technology	21%	51%
Process and technology to share individual knowledge	46%	66%
Technology to provide access to knowledge captured	44%	70%
Access to e-Learning by the entire organization	34%	71%
Learning/knowledge accessible through project or human resource management system	35%	65%
Online registration and administration of learning	49%	81%
Electronic catalogue of learning resources	48%	77%
Tracking and reporting of learning and knowledge	48%	75%

The survey indicates that respondents are aggressively pursuing an integrated, collaborative, and technologically-enabled model of learning.

Individualized Learning: Respondents are adopting competency and skills assessments as well as individual learning plans to create learning and development that is relevant to the employee’s individual needs.

Knowledge Sharing: The number of companies providing technologically-enabled learning communities is expected to grow 150 percent, from 21 percent to 51 percent. In addition, respondents are investing in technology to capture relevant knowledge and to share individual knowledge.

Technology: Even if the projections in the research were reduced by half, we would still be in the midst of a learning revolution. Technologically-enabled learning—in the form of online content delivery, tracking, enrollment, registration, and catalogue management—are projected to have nearly universal implementation within 2 years.

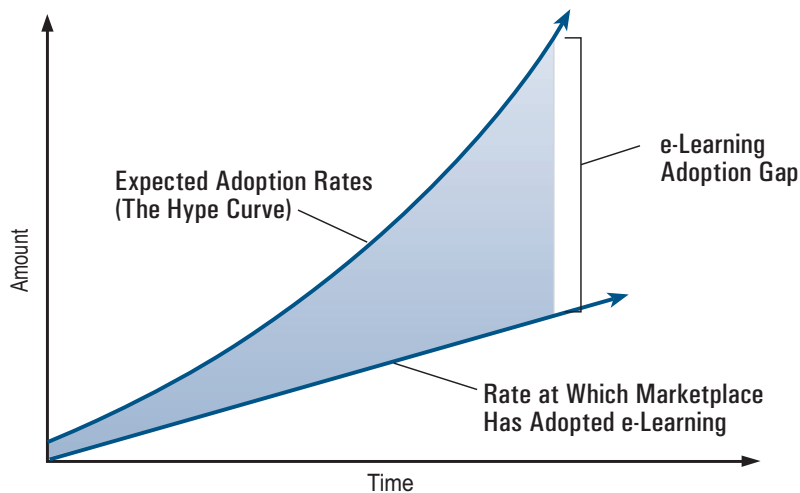
At the same time that companies are moving quickly to adopt e-Learning, they are encountering unexpected barriers that hamper their efforts. Respondents rated barriers to the implementation of an e-Learning system. Their responses, starting with the strongest barrier, were:

1. Time employees have available for training/learning
2. Cost versus value
3. Difficulty in measuring results
4. Quality of learning content
5. Perceived difficulty of using such a system
6. Technology infrastructure
7. Internal resistance to using technology instead of face-to-face learning

Insight

How realistic are the respondents' projected adoption rates? In recent years, conventional wisdom has not accurately reflected the actual adoption rates for e-Learning. Research by The Forum Corporation and leading industry associations, such as the American Society for Training and Development, has shown that actual adoption rates are slower than expected. In fact, while expectations for the adoption of e-Learning have grown significantly over each of the last 3 years, the actual adoption rate has remained steady.

Figure 2. The Gap Between Hype and Reality—Dataquest: Worldwide Services Group, 1998



The barriers to adoption identified by respondents reflect Forum's experience in developing and implementing e-Learning strategies for large, global companies. Technology issues, such as bandwidth and infrastructure, are critical to the success of e-Learning but are only the first hurdles to overcome.

The ability of the employee to find time for learning and the difficulties in measuring results represent the major barriers. In addition, learner resistance to e-Learning, while ranked by respondents as a relatively low barrier, should not be underestimated. A Harvard Business School Publishing study revealed a significant divergence of preference between learners and buyers for training delivery methods. When asked to choose from pairs of learning preferences, 87 percent of learners selected instructor-led training versus 12.7 percent who prefer to learn using a computer.

In-depth interviews with executives from eight companies at the vanguard of e-Learning reinforced the finding that technology is only one of several barriers companies encounter. "Technology is not a constraint. The assumption that [is] wrong is that people would be willing to use it at their desk ... People are drowning in a sea of learning opportunity [and do not have the time]," said the senior vice president of Human Resources for a *Fortune* 500 network communications company, which has an advanced technological infrastructure.

Implications

Clearly, the future holds tremendous opportunity for enhanced approaches to learning. To be effective, companies should pursue e-Learning with an informed approach that balances hope and hype, addresses the needs of the learner, and recognizes that e-Learning is one, albeit critical, part of an overall learning strategy.

Through our research into e-Learning, adult learning, and learning strategy, and through our work with our customers, Forum has identified four critical factors that influence companies' approach to e-Learning:

1. **Collaboration:** Technology should provide access to content *and* other people.
2. **Integration:** Learning solutions must be based on proven principles of adult learning that leverage multiple delivery media.
3. **Relevance:** Embedding learning into work processes results in significant and sustainable performance improvement for both the individual and the business.
4. **Fundamentals:** In their haste to adopt e-Learning, some companies lose sight of the fundamental principles of adult learning and focus more on the technology involved. Technology, or any other delivery medium, is a means to deliver effective learning and not an end in itself. ●

The Forum Corporation, an FT Knowledge company, is a global workplace learning corporation that helps large, leading businesses create learning strategies, develop learning solutions, manage their learning organizations, and deploy their brands. Its clients include more than 130 members of the Fortune 500.

For three decades, Forum has helped companies improve leadership, management, team-building, sales, sales management, and service excellence. It is the largest provider in the world of outsourced training management services. Through its Branded Customer Experience® service, Forum helps businesses turn their brand promises into employee behaviors and processes that create lasting customer loyalty.

Forum offers comprehensive approaches to curriculum design and management, facilitator services, e-Learning, executive coaching, implementation planning and measurement. Performance Compass™, the company's award-winning web-based development system, combines cutting-edge technology with comprehensive job performance feedback and immediate access to world-class learning resources.

Headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, Forum employs 700 associates and has offices in seven U.S. cities, Canada, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand, with affiliates around the globe.

For more information about Forum, visit www.forum.com.

Acknowledgments: Forum thanks the participating companies for their time and cooperation. Special thanks go to Michael F. Corbett & Associates and our friends at insightForum.

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Methodology

There were three stages to the study:

- Stage 1** Existing e-Learning research and literature were reviewed.
- Stage 2** Eight in-depth case studies were conducted of companies identified in stage 1 as leaders in e-Learning. Data was collected by Forum's research partner, Michael F. Corbett & Associates, through phone interviews with senior human resource and learning and development executives from each company. A survey protocol was developed from the findings of stages 1 and 2.
- Stage 3** A phone, fax, and web survey was conducted by Michael F. Corbett & Associates. Five hundred companies were targeted from seven industries identified in stages 1 and 2 as being advanced in the adoption of e-Learning: business services, consulting, financial services, healthcare, information technology, biotechnology, and a targeted population of high-technology manufacturing firms. Respondents were senior executives with representation from all organizational functions.

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