# EFFECTIVELY USING TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED INFORMAL LEARNING

Survey Research Report | October, 2010

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## Survey Overview

Many believe most learning occurs informally. Until recently, however, informal learning was largely outside the awareness and influence of learning professionals. With the widespread use of technology-enabled informal learning, that is changing. Professionals responsible for learning and areas like sales effectiveness are now developing strategies that incorporate these new technologies to tackle their most important sales and strategic business objectives. This study shows that these technologies can be used to address business problems with success – but the content needs to be designed in a way that promotes learner use.

As with the implementation of any new technology, companies are on a learning curve of their own when it comes to using informal learning technologies effectively: fewer than one in three respondents said that their companies implemented technology-enabled informal learning well.  This study of 110 professionals across learning, sales and marketing functions reveals where, why and how well technology-enabled informal learning is used – and where it is best used – as part of both a broad learning strategy as well as to improve sales effectiveness.

## Key Findings

- There is high adoption of informal learning technologies: 47% or more have adopted nine of 15 informal learning technologies.

- Analytics/reporting continues to challenge respondents: while more than 78% said their companies performed at or above average in planning/assessing needs, repurposing/designing content and delivering content/connecting people, 36% said their companies performed poorly in analytics/reporting.

- Reducing costs and increasing access, sharing and the timeliness of content were among the top reasons why technology-enabled informal learning worked well for a variety of business and sales objectives.

- The most appropriate type of content for technology-enabled informal learning, by far, is short in duration, followed by content that is frequently changing and easy for many to create/update.

- Product training was the most common topic for technology-enabled informal learning. Product launch/update was the most common business problem and sales objective for using technology-enabled informal learning.

- Sales-related training (specifically product/technical) and new hire training were the best topics for technology-enabled informal learning. Among the least used areas for technology-enabled informal learning are interpersonal, management and leadership training.

- Companies plan to grow their use of technology-enabled informal learning in three areas: training for management/supervisors, new hires, continuous improvement (e.g., Lean).

- More than one in four companies plan to start using mobile, communities of practice, mentor networks and expert directories in their learning strategy.

# I: What Is Technology-Enabled Informal Learning?

The survey defined technology-enabled informal learning as continuous learning that takes place independent of instructors or courses through social, collaborative or on-demand tools that allow learners and experts to share content with each other.

Learning professionals play at least two roles in supporting learners' use of technology-enabled informal learning:

1) In providing technologies that enable people to easily create and share content
2) In developing content that is then shared informally rather than by instructors

In using the term technology-enabled informal learning, we seek to focus not on the technology, but rather on how it supports learners by enabling them to learn from each other and from experts, in addition to from those formally charged with training responsibilities.

In fact, technology-enabled informal learning shifts responsibility for learning to learners, who play a more active role not only in their own learning but in the learning of their peers. In other words, technology-enabled informal learning reduces learners' dependency on learning professionals and gives them an unprecedented ability to lead their own development in a way that learning professionals can observe.

What technologies support informal learning? A list of 15 technologies are included in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1**

**"Which of the following technologies does your company use to support informal learning?"**
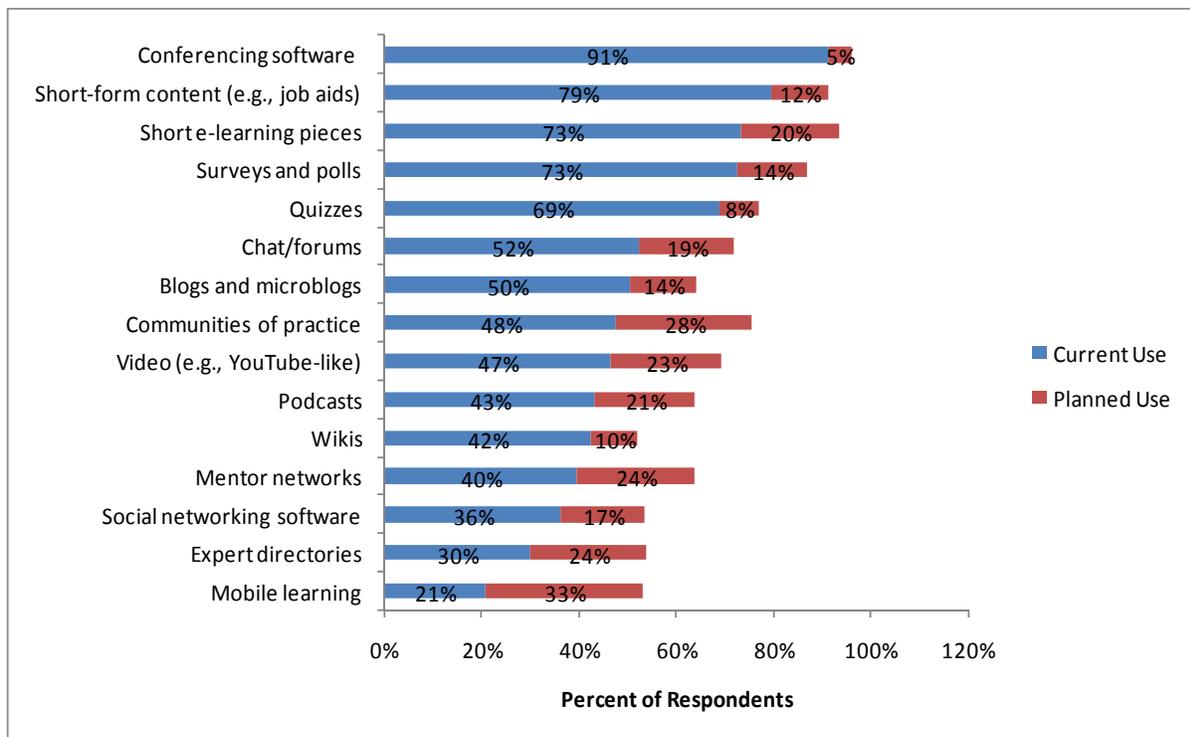


N= 108

Other technologies respondents reported using were the following:

- Standardized tag clouds
- Learning portals and informal learning platforms
- Devices like the iPad
- Virtual worlds
- Coaching libraries
- Question or assist lines

## II. Why Use Technology-Enabled Informal Learning?

### Business Reasons for Using Technology-Enabled Informal Learning

Before getting into why and where respondents use technology-enabled informal learning, we asked them about the most strategic business problems that they had been asked to address with a learning solution (regardless of method).

As Figure 2 shows, nearly half of respondents (45%) said that their most strategic business problems related to maintaining knowledge and skills for product launch/updates and sales methodology and effectiveness.

**Figure 2**

**"What is the most strategic business problem your organization has been asked to address with some kind of learning solution?" [open-ended]**
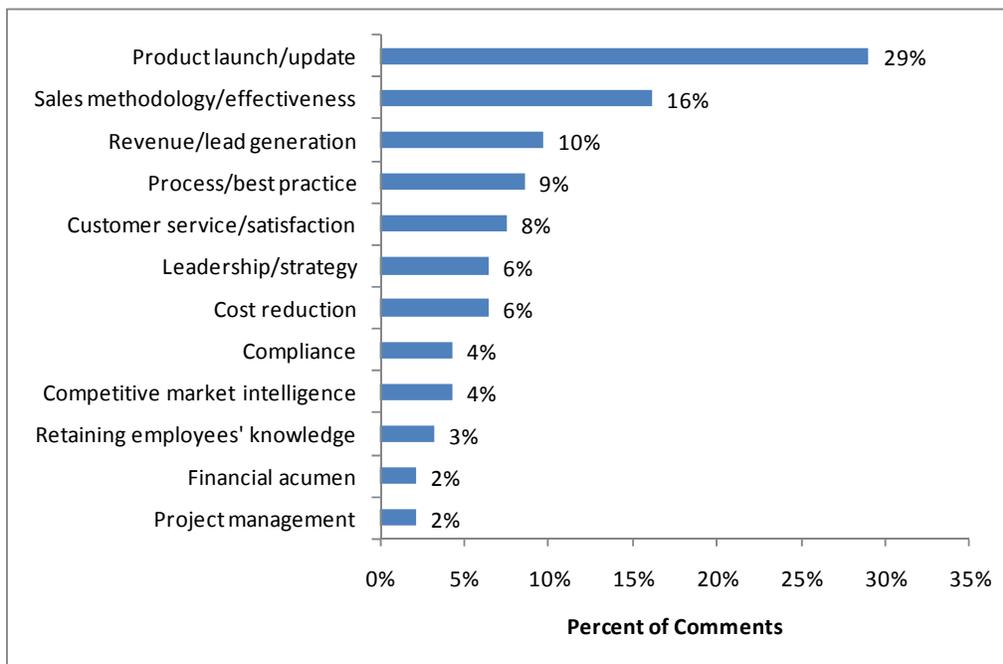


N = 93 Comments

## Performance of Technology-Enabled Informal Learning for Any Business Problem

Given these learning priorities, where does technology-enabled informal learning fit in? As the survey revealed, technology-enabled informal learning is used to help close gaps in knowledge and skills for a broad range of business problems. Over half of all respondents say that it worked well as part of the learning solution for their most strategic business problem, as illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

**"How well do you think technology-enabled informal learning did or would perform as part of the learning solution for the most strategic business problem your organization has been asked to address?"**



Pie chart showing: 8% Poor (blue), 35% Average (red), 57% Well (green)
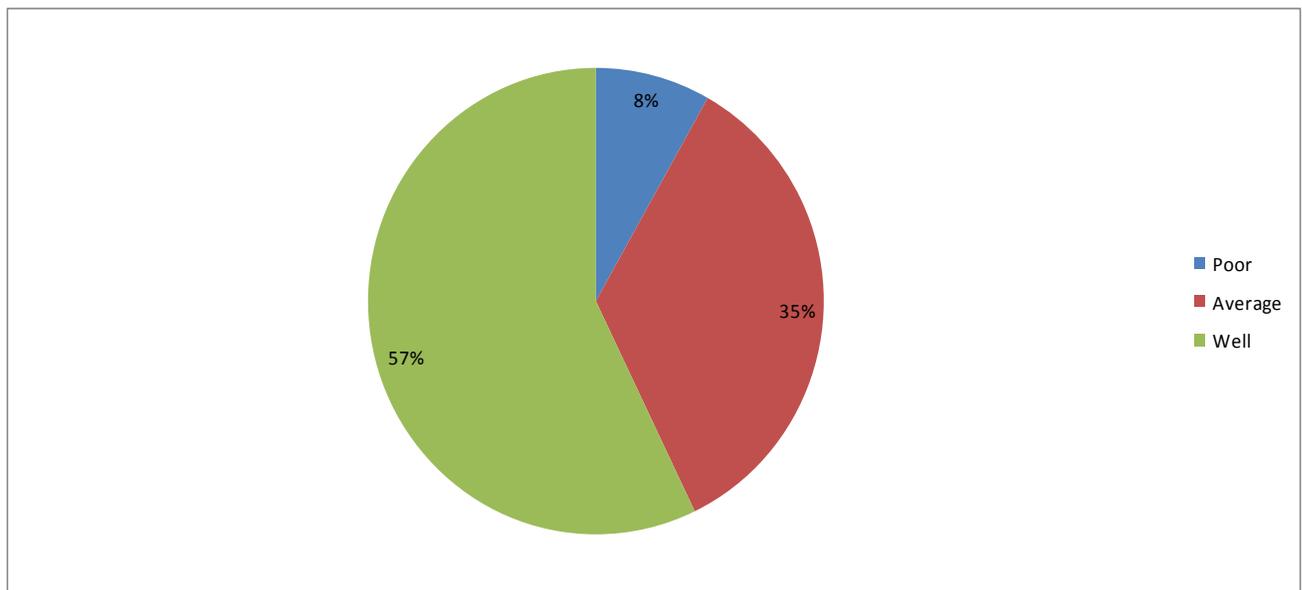
N = 98

When respondents elaborated on why it worked well or did not for their specific business problems, they gave the following reasons most frequently, listed below in order of most to least often mentioned:

**Most Common Reasons Why It Worked Well:**

- Reduced costs (e.g., by reducing travel expenses and time in classroom)
- Promoted sharing, connecting and collaboration among peers and experts
- Expanded reach to learners across multiple dispersed locations
- Encouraged learner participation and engagement
- Provided content when learners needed it (e.g., on the job, and to reinforce forgotten formal learning)

**Most Common Reasons Why It Did Not Work Well:**

- Learners were not interested in content or comfortable using the technologies
- Lacked support of leaders and managers (along with restrictive company policies and rules)
- Lacked strategy and preparation to deploy it successfully
- Topic required more personal interaction and the opportunity to practice with others

**"Please share an example of a successful use of technology-enabled informal learning to address a business problem at your company."**

Those who shared examples focused on three main uses of these technologies:

1) **Support for Specific Functional Areas or Groups** – using interactive discussion sites, communities of practice, social networking tools, blogs, chat and mentoring
2) **Employee and Customer Support for Product Rollouts** – using interactive and archived web conferencing and short videos to demonstrate product capabilities with both employees and customers
3) **Strategic Initiatives and Leadership Communication** – promoting awareness of initiatives and leaders' directions using blogs and interactive webinars

## Reasons for Using Technology-Enabled Informal Learning within Sales

Survey participants were also asked to select the top sales objectives for which they were using technology-enabled informal learning as part of the solution. As Figure 4 clearly shows, the most popular choice was providing quick and easy ways to share frequently-changing content.

**Figure 4**

**"What were the top three sales objectives your company sought to achieve by incorporating technology-enabled informal learning into the sales learning solution?" [from a list of options]**
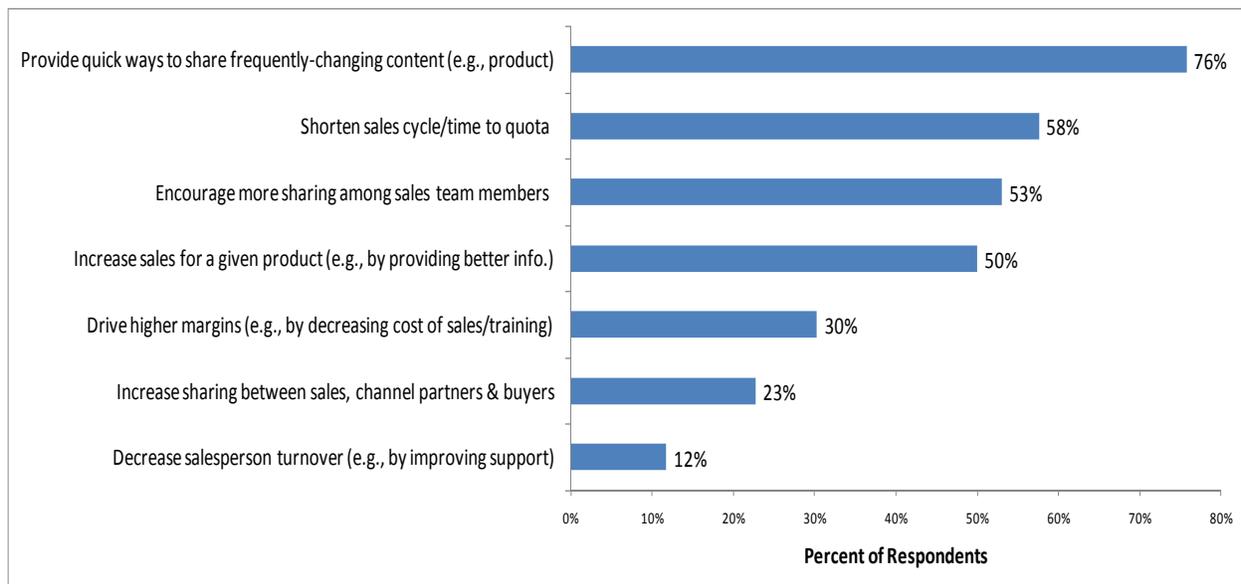


N = 66

Respondents were also asked in an open-ended way about their top sales objectives for using technology-enabled informal learning. Their responses were categorized into broad areas of sales learning needs. As Figure 5 shows, product launch / updates was the most frequently-mentioned target area for using technology-enabled informal learning in sales. When the results from figures 4 and 5 are viewed together, it is clear that being able to update rapidly-changing product information quickly is a key driver of using technology-enabled informal learning in sales. Sales learning professionals feel that they have finally found a delivery method that can keep pace with the learning needs that rapid or agile product development cycles create.

**Figure 5**

**"If your company uses technology-enabled informal learning in support of your sales organization, what was the top sales objective it was used to help achieve?" [open-ended]**
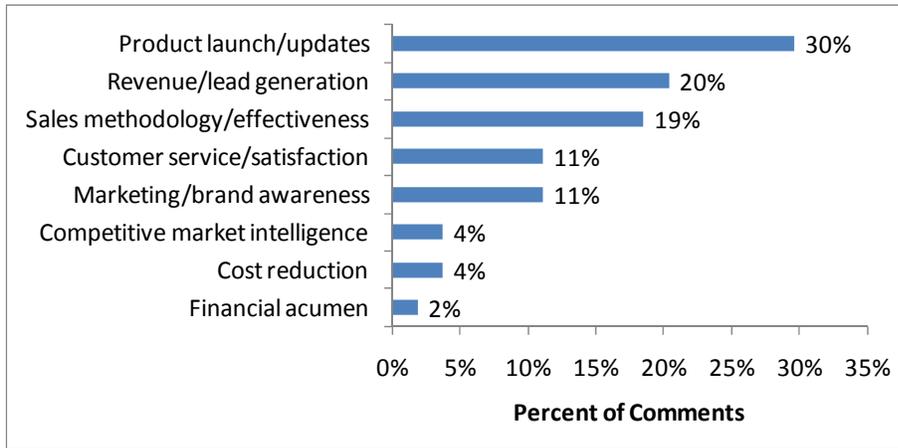


N = 58 Comments

## Performance of Technology-Enabled Informal Learning for Sales Objectives

Given that the sales objectives shown in Figure 5 were for technology-enabled informal learning *specifically* (and not just any type of learning solution), one might have expected a higher percentage of respondents to say that technology-enabled informal learning worked better for those sales objectives. However, about the same percentage said that technology-enabled informal learning worked well for their sales objectives (54%) as did those who said it worked well for their overall business problems (57%). Compare Figure 3 to Figure 6 below.

**Figure 6**

**"How well did technology-enabled informal learning perform as part of the learning solution for your top sales objective?"**



N =55
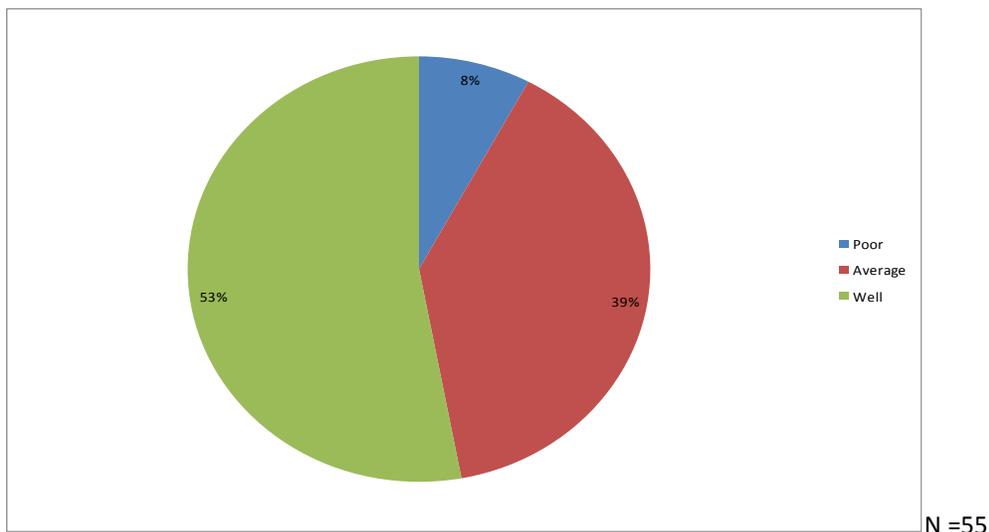
Several respondents provide some insight into why they thought technology-enabled informal learning worked well, listed below from the most to least often-cited reasons.

**Top Reasons Why Technology-Enabled Informal Learning Worked Well for Specific Sales Objectives:**

- Provided quick and convenient access to content for more people around the world
- Afforded learners and experts new opportunities to connect, solve problems and ask/answer questions
- Received executive sponsorship and support

Lack of experience was among the only reasons that respondents gave for not believing that technology-enabled informal learning worked well in sales.

## Learner-Specific Reasons Why Technology-Enabled Informal Learning Is Used

Independent of the strategic business problems or sales objectives for which companies may be using technology-enabled informal learning, they also had learner-specific reasons for choosing it over other methods for addressing gaps in knowledge and skills. These reasons have to do with the effectiveness and efficiency of technology-enabled informal learning over alternative methods. After all, with many corporate learning and training groups continuing to feel the effects of budget tightening, learning leaders are looking for ways to do more with less.

As Figure 7 shows, respondents were particularly focused on the benefits of learner access, self-service and ease of use. Respondents elaborated on their selections by emphasizing how informal web-based technologies allow them to expand their reach without increasing costs. In regards to building a community of sharing, respondents also included the responsibility for keeping content fresh.

**Figure 7**

**"What were the top three reasons behind your company's decision to adopt technology-enabled informal learning?"**



N = 108
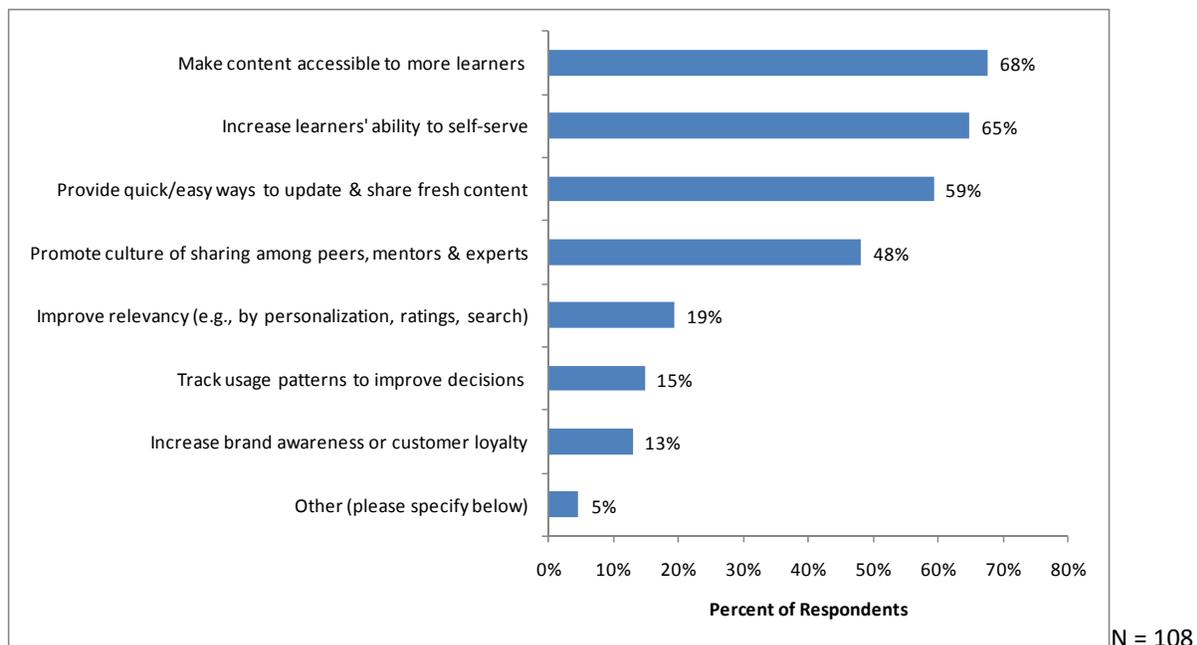
Among the other reasons respondents gave were the following:

- Make training more engaging and fun
- Reduce time spent in the classroom

# III. Types of Content for Technology-Enabled Informal Learning

Survey respondents were asked about general types of content and topic-specific types of content for which technology-enabled informal learning was best suited.

## General Types of Content

As Figure 8 shows, by far the most desirable type of content for informal learning is short content. Among the many respondents who went on to describe how short the content should be, the vast majority said under an hour. Of those who said it should less than an hour in length, most said that it should be less than 15 minutes long.

**Figure 8**

**"What content types (e.g., by length, creation source, change frequency) do you think are most appropriate for technology-enabled informal learning?" [open-ended]**
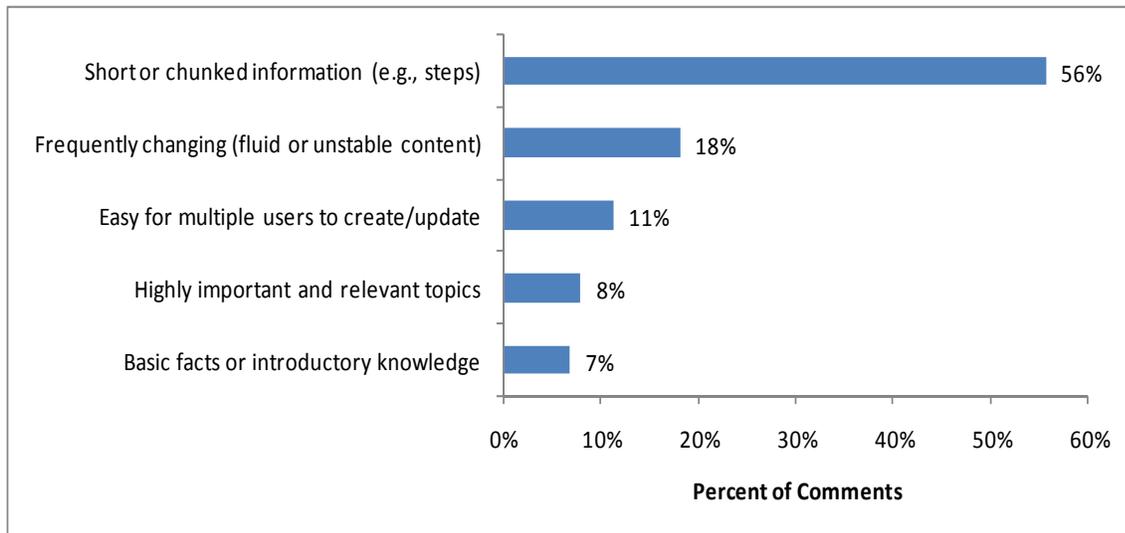


N =88 comments

## Topic-Specific Content

Nearly two-thirds of respondents use technology-based informal learning for product training, as Figure 9 shows. The strongest growth areas (where respondents indicated their companies plan to use it) are in management/supervisory training, continuous improvement, customer service, new hire orientation/onboarding and leadership development.

**Figure 9**

**"For which of the following topics does your company incorporate technology-enabled informal learning into the learning solution?"**
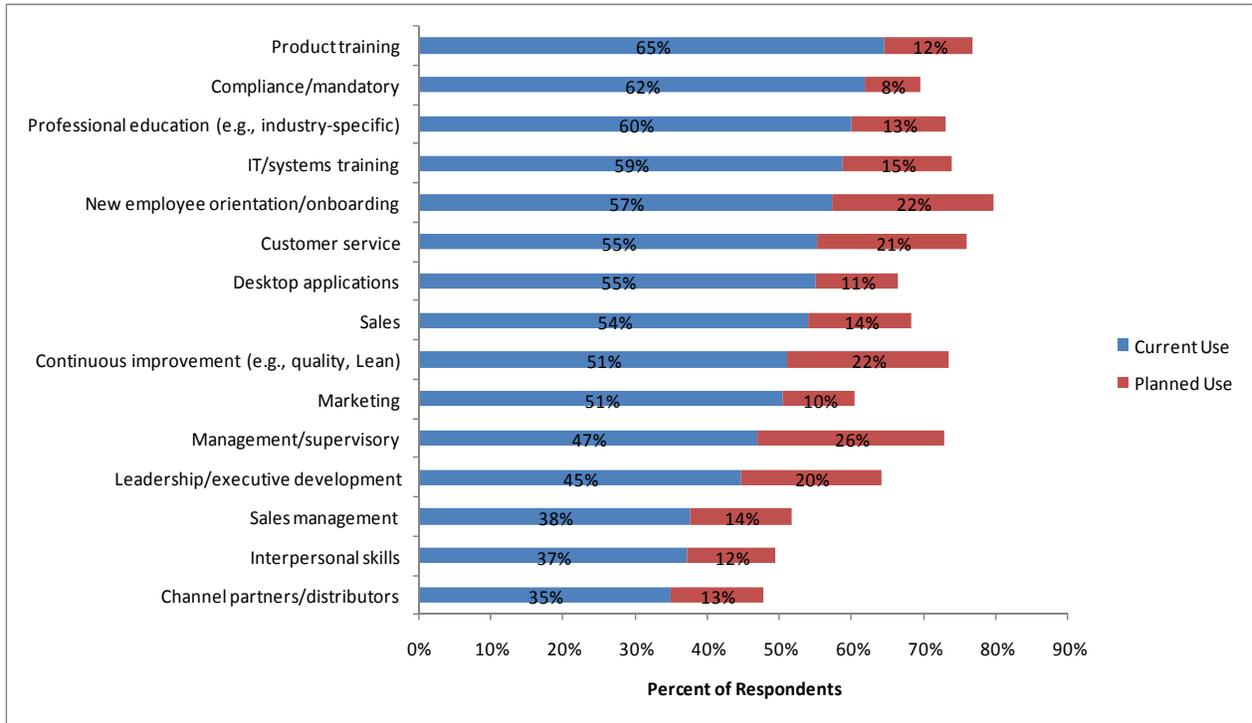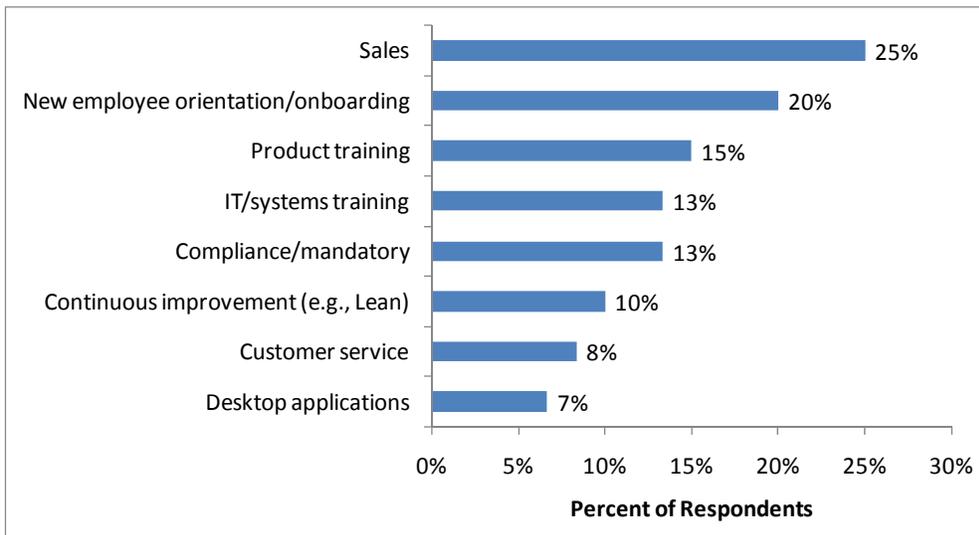


N = 103

A different picture emerges when respondents were asked to list only a few topics for which technology-enabled informal learning works best: Figure 10 shows the eight topics they selected most frequently.

**Figure 10**
**"For which topic areas does technology-enabled informal learning work best and why?"**



N = 100 Comments

There was significant overlap among respondents' reasons why technology-enabled informal learning was well-suited to any given topic. Those who selected specific topics reported that technology-enabled informal learning worked well in those topic areas because the content:

- Needed to get to a large number of physically dispersed learners
- Changed rapidly and needed to be updated frequently
- Already existed as formal content so could be repurposed
- Was able to be chunked into shorter segments, steps or levels
- Was in an area that required reinforcement by repetition and practice
- Could be used to help build community, connect people and encourage peer-to-peer sharing
- Was the same for all learners

## Sales Topic-Specific Types of Content

As with the general topic areas, 47% of respondents used technology-enabled informal learning for most of the sales topics, as Figure 11 shows.

**Figure 11**

**"For which of the following topics does your sales organization incorporate technology-enabled informal learning into the learning solution?"**
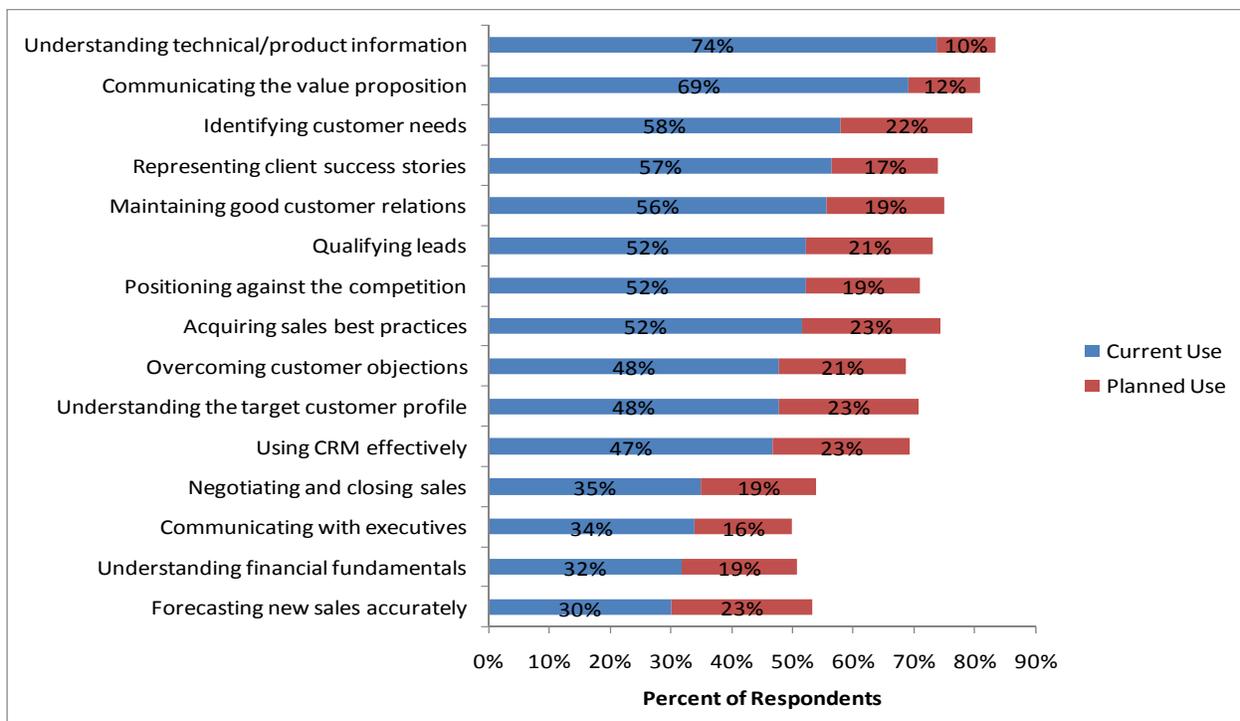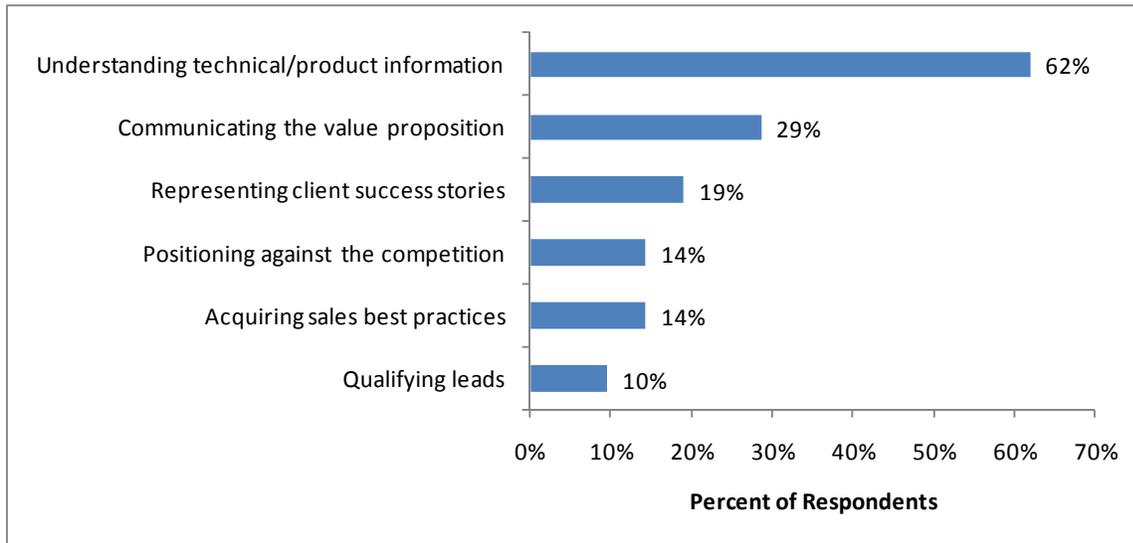


N = 72

As with the general topic areas, respondents were also given a chance to list the sales topic areas for which they felt technology-enabled learning worked best. Figure 12 shows the top six most-selected topics.

**Figure 12**

**"For which sales topic areas does technology-enabled informal learning work best and why?"**



N =21

Those who selected specific sales topics reported that technology-enabled informal learning worked well for topics that:

- Have frequent changes (e.g., product, competitors) that need to be communicated quickly
- Are considered basic, "hard" or factual (e.g., technical or message) vs. "soft" or interpersonal
- Lend themselves to interaction (e.g., two-way discussions, questions & answers and sharing)

## IV. Effectiveness in Using Technology-Enabled Informal Learning

Besides providing details on how and where they used technology-enabled informal learning, respondents also rated their own performance in the following four areas:

1) Planning & Assessing Needs (e.g., content, usability, governance)
2) Repurposing & Designing Content (e.g., processes for short-form, rapid, user-generated content)
3) Delivering Content & Connecting People (e.g., personalization, search, suggestions, communities)
4) Analytics & Reporting (e.g., dashboards, ratings, views, polls)

As shown in Figure 13, only analytics/reporting implementation continues to challenge a significant number of respondents. More than 78% felt their companies performed at average or above in planning/assessing needs, repurposing and designing content and delivering content and connecting people.

30% said that their companies performed well in both areas involving content: delivering content and connecting people as well as repurposing and designing content.

**Figure 13**

**"The lifecycle of implementing technology-enabled informal learning includes the four steps below. How well does your company perform in each of these areas?"**
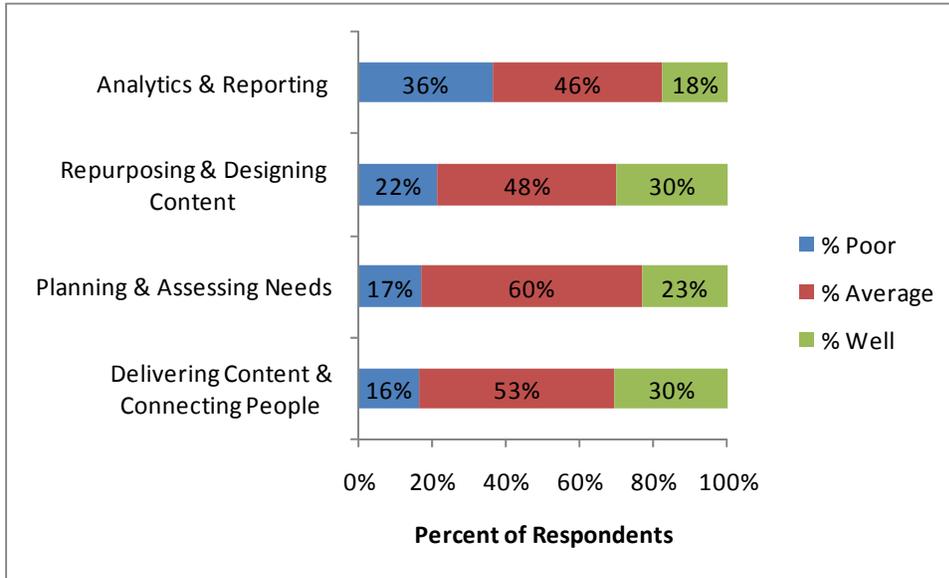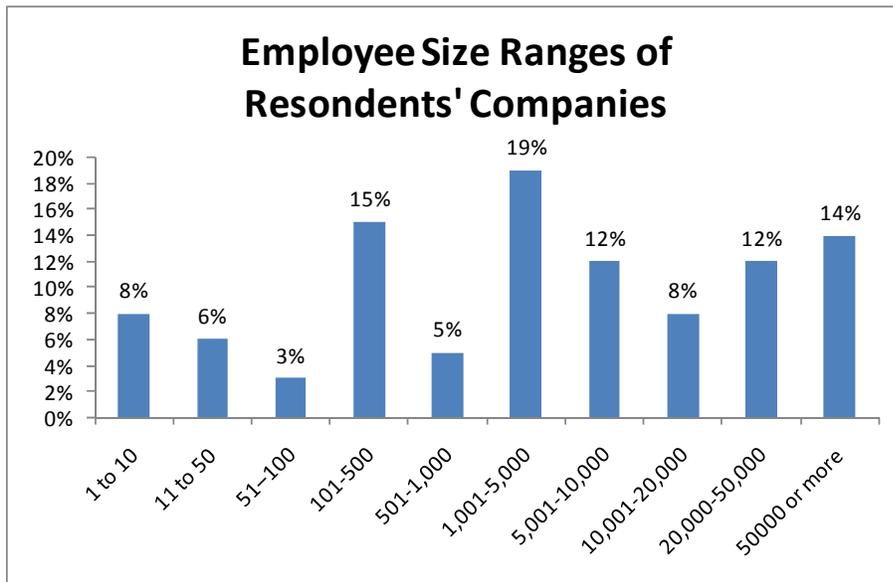


N =108

## V. About this Study

110 learning, sales and marketing professionals primarily from corporate or private businesses responded to the survey. They represent a wide variety of company sizes and industries, as shown below.

### Size

**"Please select the appropriate employee and revenue size range which best describes your entire company or organization (not just the training organization you represent)."**
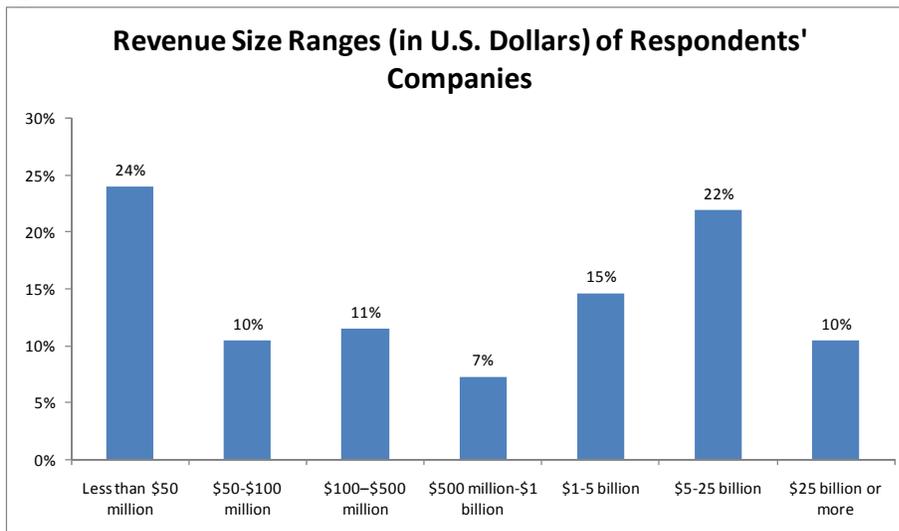
Company size was measured in two ways – by number of employees (in ranges) and by total annual revenue in U.S. dollars (again, in ranges). Both are reported in figures 14 and 15 below.

**Figure 14**



Employee Size Ranges of Resondents' Companies

N =106

**Figure 15**



Revenue Size Ranges (in U.S. Dollars) of Respondents' Companies

N = 96

## Industry

Respondents were well distributed among 21 different industries, as Figure 16 illustrates. By far, the greatest number of respondents (one in five) came from the technology sector. Slightly more than one in ten came from business services/consulting as well as retail, with 7% or less of the remainder coming from any one of 18 other industries.

**Figure 16**

**"Please select the appropriate industry which best describes your entire company or organization."**
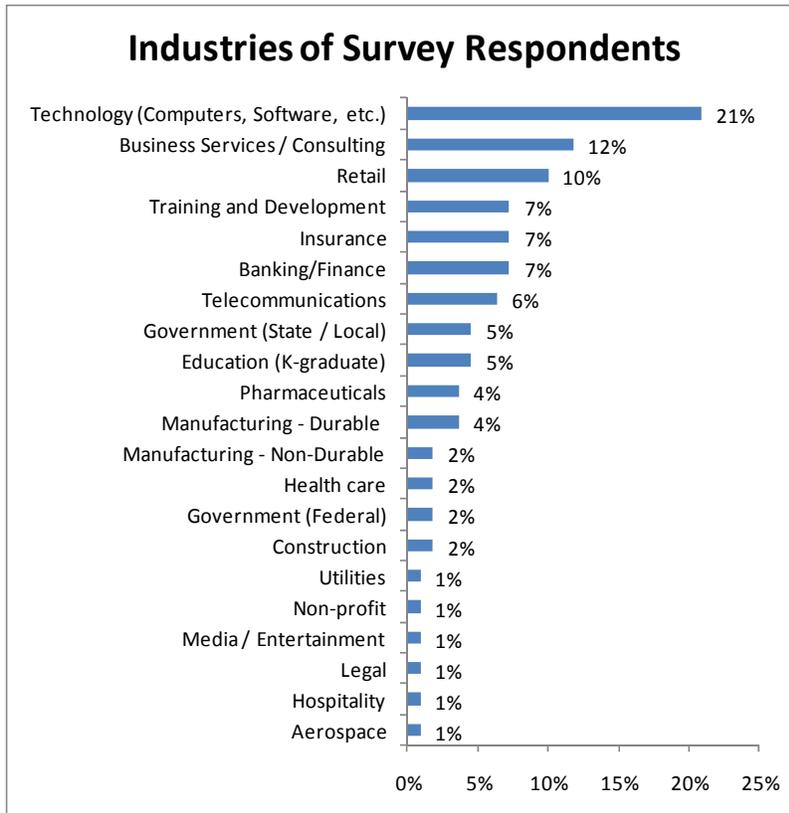


N= 110

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Intrepid's mission is to apply our expertise as learning strategists and technologists to help companies keep pace with the evolution of learning.  The ways individuals access and process knowledge continue to evolve.  At Intrepid, we design technology-enabled learning solutions that not only adapt to how and when individuals learn best, but that also solve your company's specific business challenge – whether it be to quickly on-board new employees, launch new product training faster, reduce costs, educate a globally dispersed workforce or even build a more loyal base of customers.

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## About This Research