Introduction

Early use of e-learning dates to the 1960’s, when computer systems were being explored for applications in higher education. One of the main attractions of e-learning at the time was the ability to provide individualized instruction to learners, which mimicked the one-on-one interaction of a tutor. These nascent applications of technology to learning would not make significant inroads into corporate training, however, until the internet took the idea of computer-supported learning from static forms, such as a CD-ROM, to a more dynamic web medium better able to keep pace with the velocity of day-to-day business.

After the turn of the 21st century, e-learning began to pick up more steam as computers became more sophisticated, ubiquitous and connected at increasingly fast speeds. In 2001, none other than GE’s Jack Welch had been attributed with saying that the business importance of e-learning was the ability to build individual employees and increase intellectual capital for a company, which to him represented “the ultimate competitive advantage.”¹ As time went on, technology permitted e-learning to evolve from a proxy for one-on-one tutoring to its current form, which can include rich media, delivery across multiple types of devices, as well as virtual interaction between learners and even instructors in remote working arrangements.

For salespeople, the historically nomadic nature of their role often prohibited training unless it could be scheduled to ensure co-location. The adoption of e-learning in corporate training permitted more companies to deploy learning to salespeople on-the-job, making training easier for widely dispersed employees to

complete in addition to facilitating timely access to learning content. Indeed, the ability to engage with e-learning has allowed companies to arm their sales personnel with a range of knowledge, skills, and refresher trainings without the need to corral them into the same classroom or to bear the direct and indirect costs of doing so. In some industries, the “just-in-time” convenience of e-learning is vital to guaranteeing a sales force is adhering to changing regulatory and compliance requirements. Today’s e-learning often plays an integral role in the arsenal of training tools deployed to salespeople, engaging learners regardless of where they are in the world or what the learning topic may be.

Still, many questions linger about what constitutes effective e-learning in sales organizations. Though many employees in modern organizations are familiar with the general form and function of e-learning, their exposure to instances of e-learning in the past will partially dictate their attitude toward current curricula. As such, there is value to disentangling the prevalence of e-learning from perceptions about its use, while exploring how and why companies have adopted it into their global L&D strategy for sales training.

To examine such issues in greater detail, Training Industry, Inc. and Imparta conducted a study to examine how e-learning is being used to support a variety of training initiatives in sales organizations. In Q1 of 2016, a total of 235 companies completed a confidential survey reporting their organizations’ use of e-learning to support sales organizations when delivering training.

“There is value to disentangling the prevalence of e-learning from perceptions about its use.”
Key Findings

Sales E-learning Effectiveness

- 72% of companies were rated effective at providing training to sales employees via e-learning
- 74% of companies most often deployed e-learning behind a company firewall (e.g., LMS, company intranet/cloud)
- E-learning was most frequently made available on an on-going basis, particularly for induction/onboarding training (57%), internal sales teams (34%), sales managers (32%), and sales training reinforcement (32%)
- E-learning was rated as most consistently effective for the training purposes of induction/onboarding training (73%), internal sales teams (64%), foundational sales training (59%), and account management (58%)

Perceptions of Sales E-learning

- 74% of respondents agreed that sales e-learning is a highly effective learning tool
- 71% of respondents agreed that cost savings are a benefit of using sales e-learning
- 69% of respondents agreed that sales e-learning is aligned with their sales process at their companies
- 47% of respondents said salespeople at their company prefer e-learning over face-to-face training

Sales E-learning Implementation

- Most common e-learning topics offered for salespeople included product/service information (52%), negotiation skills (43%), sales management (41%) and market intelligence (39%)
- Training activities embedded in e-learning included skills simulations (54%), quizzes (53%) and video tutorials (49%)
- Measuring the impact of sales e-learning was most often accomplished through the use of quiz results (57%), followed by in-person assessments (40%), and correlations with business results (39%)
- The typical completion rate for employees engaging with sales e-learning offerings was 72.6% across all companies

E-learning in Sales Onboarding

- New salespeople across all companies spent an average of 46.4 hours on e-learning in the induction/onboarding process
- 47% of companies utilize e-learning to deliver onboarding content
E-learning Effectiveness in Sales Training

First, respondents were asked about the overall effectiveness of their sales organization at providing training via e-learning. As shown in Figure 1, 72 percent of companies were rated as being very or moderately effective at using e-learning to support sales training. Although this is a relatively favorable outcome, it is nonetheless indicative that there are definite shortfalls in current e-learning implementation, as less than a third of respondents indicated their company is very effective at sales e-learning. This is especially true of the combined 17 percent of respondents who rated their companies as very or moderately ineffective at sales e-learning.

**Figure 1. Effectiveness of Sales Training via E-learning**

Figure 2 shows the means through which sales e-learning is made available to employees. As shown, 74 percent of e-learning is delivered to employees behind a company firewall, whether via an LMS or through a company’s intranet. While some of these responses may reflect uncertainty as to whether e-learning is delivered via an LMS, though not altogether surprising given the seamless nature of most modern learning technology platforms, it is plain to see that few e-learning offerings (e.g., 20 percent) are accessible to individuals outside of the organization. For the 6 percent of respondents that comprise the “other” ratings, the clarifying comments they provided most often described a combination of intranet, internet and/or an LMS.
Figure 2. Typical E-learning Deployment

Next, respondents were asked about the frequency with which e-learning is offered to various learner audiences within sales organizations. As can be seen in Figure 3, the bulk of e-learning offerings are available to sales employees on an on-going basis, regardless of the type of program. However, there is a clear dominance of onboarding being the most frequently offered sales e-learning application. It is noteworthy, however, that with the exception of e-learning for channel partners, other applications of sales e-learning are offered with roughly equal frequency.

Figure 3. Frequency of E-learning Offerings by Purpose
Not only was onboarding the most frequent training application for e-learning, it was also the purpose for which the largest proportion of companies were rated as effective (73 percent, combining “Very effective” and “Somewhat effective” ratings), as shown below in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Effectiveness of E-learning by Purpose**

Also notable is the comparative strength of onboarding training compared to the less emphatic ratings for dispersed sales teams (53 percent, combining “Very effective” and “Somewhat effective” ratings). This suggests that many companies have success leveraging e-learning when a salesperson joins the organization, but may not be as effective when utilizing e-learning after that salesperson is deployed to the field.

Cumulatively, the results of this section portray the current use of e-learning as an effective, multi-purpose delivery modality that can be (and is being) used by L&D and sales organizations to address a variety of training needs. However, as seen in the preceding figures, not all organizations are enjoying the same degree of success. In short, though e-learning can clearly be a central tool in efforts to upskill and educate sales employees, most organizations fall along a continuum of efficacy where there is room for improvement.

**Perceptions of Sales E-learning**

Next, perceptions of the advantages and effectiveness of sales e-learning were examined. As shown in Figure 5 on the following page, a combined 74 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that sales e-learning is effective as a learning tool, and 71 percent combined agreed that using e-learning leads to cost savings. Also notable is that nearly half (47 percent) of respondents indicated that their sales personnel prefer e-learning to more traditional classroom training.
Respondents were also asked to identify the challenges their companies face with developing and implementing e-learning, covering aspects of learner motivation, development costs, technological barriers to implementation, and training evaluation. As shown in Figure 6, between 35 and 47 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with all four potential challenges listed.
Next, respondents were asked about the alignment of sales e-learning with their company. As shown in Figure 7, strategy for sales e-learning is generally aligned with both overall business strategy (63 percent, combining “Strongly agree” and “Agree” ratings) and the sales process (69 percent combined). In addition, relatively few respondents indicated misalignment between e-learning and business strategy (9 percent, combining “Strongly disagree” and “Disagree” ratings) and the sales process (10 percent combined). However, nearly a fifth of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that e-learning is aligned to business strategy, and a sixth of respondents felt the same about the sales process—in other words, while few e-learning programs are patently misaligned, there are many that are falling short of supporting business objectives and driving sales outcomes.

**Figure 7. Sales E-learning Alignment**

Though perceptions of the effectiveness and strategic alignment of e-learning suggest that many companies are having success with this training delivery, the challenges show that there is still room for improvement. To the extent that companies source e-learning rather than develop it in-house, respondents were asked about their opinion of the sales e-learning market. As shown in Figure 8 on the following page, a combined 66 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that sales can benefit from best-in-class e-learning products. However, not all respondents share a positive perception of current e-learning offerings, evidenced by a combined 47 percent of respondents rating e-learning products as too generic to apply to their sales applications, and 40 percent agreeing that e-learning products are ineffective.
**Figure 8.** Sales E-learning Industry Perceptions

**Sales E-learning Implementation**

As discussed earlier in this report, the most frequent application of sales e-learning is for purposes of onboarding new employees. However, a variety of sales training topics are gathered underneath the umbrella of e-learning, running the gamut between entry-level sales skills and managerial development. As shown below in Figure 9, knowledge training (i.e., product and/or service information) was the dominant topic for which e-learning is most often deployed. However, at least a third of all respondents also indicated that e-learning is used for an assortment of content areas ranging from negotiation skills to market intelligence to prospecting sales leads.

**Figure 9.** Topics Delivered via E-learning
Respondents were also asked what activities were component parts of their typical e-learning experience. As can be seen in Figure 10, skills simulations and quizzes were used by just over half of the companies represented by the survey. Video tutorials and knowledge checks integrated into e-learning modules were also used frequently, while incorporating gamification in e-learning may still be in early stages of use.

**Figure 10. Training Activities in E-learning**

Despite the variety of training activities described above, a stark contrast exists between these activities as used in sales e-learning and the subsequent metrics utilized to gauge training impact. Figure 11 on the following page shows that although skills simulations were the most frequently used activity in e-learning, data collected from such simulations were least likely to be relied upon as a learning metric. Conversely, quiz results were the most frequently used metric while also being utilized nearly as often as an e-learning activity as simulations. Notable also is that in-person assessments were the second most frequently used metric. This is likely to be an opportunistic metric insofar as in-person assessments may not always be able to consistently follow completion of sales e-learning courses.

Of particular note is that 15 percent of companies do not use any metrics to measure sales e-learning impact, according to the results in Figure 11. While many of these companies also comprised the 17 percent of companies in Figure 1 that were overall ineffective at sales e-learning, they do not entirely account for all the companies not using any metrics. The lack of metrics is similarly not relegated only to smaller organizations—while they are slightly more likely not to use any metrics, organizations with more than one thousand employees accounted for roughly 40 percent of those who are not currently measuring the impact of sales e-learning.
Respondents were also asked to provide information about the typical completion rates for sales e-learning at their companies. As seen below in Figure 12, the average completion rate across all respondents was approximately 73 percent. The 50th percentile, or median, being higher than this average indicates that the distribution of completion rates is slightly negatively skewed toward lower scores. This is to be expected, however, given that the majority of the completion rate distribution is concentrated around higher percentages with a ceiling of 100 percent completion.²

Figure 12. Sales E-Learning Completion Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Respondents (N = 235)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25th Percentile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50th Percentile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75th Percentile</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should also be noted that the overall average includes a small portion of companies for whom e-learning completion is mandatory (e.g., 100%). While it was not possible to distinguish these instances from those where mandatory completion was not required in order to provide a non-

² Note the skewness of completion rate data does not affect the interpretation of these results, as the descriptive statistics presented here do not rely on the assumptions of inferential tests.
mandatory average, the median completion rate of 80 percent (i.e., 50th percentile) nonetheless indicates that half of companies see completion rates above this number.

**E-learning in Sales Onboarding**

As established earlier in this report, onboarding is both the most frequent application of sales e-learning as well as the purpose for which most companies are the most effective. Anticipating this typical use case, the survey instrument used for this research was designed to explore the use of e-learning in onboarding for sales employees in greater detail.

Respondents were asked about the typical amount of time new employees spend on sales e-learning during the onboarding process. As shown below in Figure 13, new sales employees spend an average of roughly six business days using e-learning after first joining the company. As can be seen by the large standard deviation, respondents reported a wide range of time spent in e-learning during onboarding.

**Figure 13.** Onboarding Duration in Sales E-Learning (in Hours)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Respondents (N = 235)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>46.4 h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>76.8 h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25th Percentile</td>
<td>8 h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50th Percentile</td>
<td>20 h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75th Percentile</td>
<td>50 h</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the variation in e-learning onboarding duration can be attributed to the differing training needs across industries. For example, companies in the financial sector (e.g., banking, accounting, etc.) had the highest average duration of 76.7 hours, compared to companies involved in manufacturing, who averaged only 24.8 hours. Further, it was found that regardless of their industry, companies who were globally effective at using e-learning to support sales training (i.e., crossing onboarding duration with the results from Figure 1) averaged approximately 25 more hours than companies who were ineffective at onboarding.

Lastly, respondents were asked to indicate all of the delivery methods being used at their company to support sales onboarding, including e-learning. As shown below in Figure 14, a wide variety of methods are used to deliver onboarding training to sales employees. Notable is that on-the-job coaching, on-the-job training, and classroom-based instructor-led training were used with nearly equivalent regularity—and all three of these delivery methods
ostensibly require in-person interaction. E-learning, however, was utilized by almost half of the companies, over and above other virtual means of delivering training content.

Figure 14. Delivery Methods for Sales Onboarding

Exploring the data from this survey question in greater detail, an average of 5.9 modalities were utilized for onboarding new salespeople across all companies. However, for companies that indicated they use e-learning as one of their delivery modalities, the average number of delivery modalities was 7.9. This suggests that companies using e-learning in their suite of onboarding offerings tend to use a slightly higher number of total modalities, providing their employees with more avenues through which to consume training content. Such a finding also reinforces the role of e-learning as a convenient supplement to other training modalities, or a means through which to reinforce material presented in a face-to-face or on-the-job context.
Recommendations for Improving Sales E-learning

Taken together, the results of this research describe a fairly mature sales e-learning landscape, where many companies are not only using e-learning tools to deliver training content but are doing so on an on-going basis and for a mixture of sales-relevant topics. This research also shows that e-learning is an effective means through which to deliver information across topics, and that in general, it is regarded as a highly effective learning tool by nearly three quarters of respondents. Sales e-learning was found to be seen as cost effective, and in a majority of cases was aligned with both the sales process of a company and their overarching business objectives. Further, it bears repeating that 47 percent of respondents agreed that sales staff at their companies prefer e-learning to the type of predominantly face-to-face training methods commonly used for purposes such as onboarding. In all, e-learning is an established, effective, cost-saving means through which to upskill a sales force on a range of content areas.

Still, not all companies are enjoying the same degree of success with sales e-learning. Besides the 17 percent of companies who were universally ineffective at using e-learning, between 7 and 17 percent of companies never use e-learning for each of the purposes shown in Figure 3, such as training for sales managers, dispersed sales teams, account managers or channel partners. In addition, companies continue to wrestle with issues such as learner motivation and development and implementation costs associated with e-learning. Lastly, respondents’ perception of the e-learning market shows a hesitancy about the effectiveness and relevance of these product offerings with the business needs of their companies.

So, what factors might be driving success, or the lack thereof, when it comes to successfully implementing sales e-learning for an organization? What faulty assumptions might many companies be making about e-learning that are holding them back? Though certainly not exhaustive, three recommendations offer some insight into how a sales organization can nurture a work climate that supports and values e-learning.

1. Fostering high employee computer literacy

Despite the influx of millennial workers into the larger workforce, many sales employees may not have experience learning through technology. In other words, a history of use of computing technology as a personal and professional tool does not necessarily signify an ability and comfort to learn structured, job-relevant content through those same technologies. Accordingly, past research has found that employees’ levels of confidence and anxiety when using computers were significantly related to the transfer of knowledge and skills acquired via e-learning to their jobs3, as well as how user-friendly and effective e-learning is perceived to

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be4. As shown earlier in this report in Figure 6, 39 percent of respondents agreed that e-learning involves too many technology issues, 29 percent were unsure, and 28 percent disagreed. To the extent that it represents the general attitude about e-learning implementation, there may be many employees who are unable to fully benefit from sales e-learning due to their own limitations with navigating information technology, rather than shortcomings of the delivery modality itself.

2. Fighting the perception of subpar e-learning market offerings

We all know there’s a big difference between what defined “cutting edge” technology circa 2000 versus what defines it now. A bad experience with e-learning 10 or five or even two years ago should not discourage its use. However, the opposite is true—previous experience can inform the key adoption levers, as research has shown that perceptions about the overall usefulness and ease of use are vital to e-learning adoption5. Further, it should surprise no one that some providers in the e-learning market will be better aligned to a company’s workflow than others. So to the extent that the appetite for e-learning exists within a company, external providers of sales e-learning content can function as a trusted partner in upskilling an employee base—provided the client company is aware of their own history with e-learning and how individuals may respond to it. Technology, by its nature, continues to improve in ways that better facilitate virtual learning, and wary employees need to be encouraged to engage with this next generation of e-learning tools.

3. Remembering that instructional design is paramount

The effects of instructional design on e-learning is key for companies to understand. Research has shown that instructional design characteristics have a complex relationship with learner participation, such that learning design can encourage or discourage learners, but also influence how people interpret barriers to participation6. If companies focus on the learner experience, they can better align e-learning with the day-to-day workflow of their sales personnel. The disconnect between the use of skill simulations as a training activity and the lack of subsequent data being used as an impact metric may be a symptom of a common L&D misstep when it comes to collecting and evaluating training based on transparent, appropriate data sources.

Study Demographics

Figures 15 through 18 provide context on the 235 survey respondents who participated in this research. The figures that follow summarize the companies the respondents represent and the functional areas/departments supported by their roles within the organization.

**Figure 15. Organizational Size (by total number of employees)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational Size</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;1k</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-50</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-100</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101-500</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>501-1k</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1k-5k</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5k-10k</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10k-20k</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20k-50k</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50k+</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;1k</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 16. Industries Represented**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Durable Goods/Consumables</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banking/Finance/Insurance</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care/Medical/Pharma</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Services/Consulting</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology/Telecom</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and Development</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment/Hospitality</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilities</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-profit</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 17. Functional Areas Represented

- Sales: 32%
- HR: 29%
- Learning and Development: 11%
- Customer Service: 7%
- IT: 6%
- Marketing/Advertising: 4%
- Operations: 3%
- R&D: 2%
- Finance/Accounting: 2%
- Other: 4%

Figure 18. Organizational Roles Represented

- Manager: 30%
- Associate: 29%
- Consultant: 11%
- Trainer: 8%
- Specialist: 8%
- Analyst: 8%
- Instructor: 3%
- Instructional Designer: 3%
About This Research

About Imparta

Imparta improves its clients’ business performance in the areas of sales, marketing and service, using highly practical and researched approaches, and an integrated solution that goes well beyond simple training interventions. Imparta’s Capability Building® system combines assessment, training, coaching, application tools and impact measurement, using leading-edge technologies to create sustainable performance improvement.

With offices across the United States, Europe, Asia Pacific and Australia, Imparta has the capabilities to deliver worldwide programs in multiple languages with local knowledge and experience. Delivery to a global audience, has positioned Imparta as a leading blended learning provider as well as a pioneer in the field of business simulations. Clients include GE, Intel, Cisco, Telefonica O2, Lloyds Banking Group, Intelsat, Hewlett Packard, Intel, and the WPP Group.

For more information please visit www.imparta.com If you would like to discuss any of the topics above or Imparta’s offerings, please contact us or call us directly +1(512) 514 6638.

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