DIGITAL CONTENT DELIVERY PLATFORMS
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Overview

Digital content delivery platforms (i.e., e-readers) have taken root in personal and educational settings, with some users preferring e-books, e-journals, and other digital content for both leisure and academic pursuits. However, the frequency with which these platforms are being used in corporate settings and the approaches that organizations are taking toward their use remain relatively unknown.

To address this gap, Training Industry, Inc. and VitalSource Technologies, Inc. conducted a two-part study to explore the ways in which digital platforms are used in corporate training and development initiatives. The first phase, in February 2014, included 280 learning leaders completing a survey reporting their organizations’ use and their own perceptions of digital delivery platforms. To further explore the survey results, 14 companies using digital delivery platforms in their corporate training programs were asked to take part in several focus group sessions in April, 2014. Both phases of this research examined current and planned use of digital content delivery platforms in order to identify features and benefits contributing to the decision to incorporate them into corporate training programs. Additional data to supplement this report was collected from 193 companies in July, 2015 and from 120 companies in August, 2015, and these auxiliary results are noted in the report where applicable.

The approaches used by organizations to incorporate digital platforms are highlighted throughout this report. Additionally, the report details the features that are most valued for enhancing trainee experience and facilitating training administration. Results provide information about how organizations can best utilize digital content platforms within their training and development initiatives.

Definition

To help learning leaders develop a frame of reference for contributing to the study, the following definition was provided:

A **digital content delivery platform** enables the on- or offline delivery of content such as audio, video and text (e.g., e-reader).
Key Findings

- ~60 percent of organizations use digital platforms in training delivery.
- More than 50 percent of organizations are using multiple platforms in order to accommodate the preferences of content providers and/or incorporate select features of specific platforms.
- ~70 percent of organizations are currently using or planning to use digital platforms for:
  - technical skills training
  - leadership training
  - soft skills training
  - new hire onboarding
- Policy, benefits, and procedural manuals are the most common content distributed via digital e-reader platforms.
- Common uses of e-reader platforms include the distribution of pre-training reading and post-training reference materials.
- The top benefits of using digital platforms are:
  - access
  - reduced cost
  - ease of use
  - improved consistency/version control

Nine Very Important Features of an e-Reader Platform:

1. Supports multiple media formats
2. Supports multiple browsers
3. Supports learning assessments
4. Search text
5. Integrates with LMS
6. Uses Single Sign On (SSO) experience
7. Analytics/tracking
8. Variety of formats supported (e.g., EPUB3)
9. Supports multiple devices

* Rated Very Important by more than 50 percent of respondents.
Effectiveness of Delivery Formats

Preferences for the media used to deliver training content (i.e., digital vs. print) are likely to vary across learners. In order to better understand learning leaders’ perceptions of each format, respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of both print and digital materials for delivering their organizations’ training program content. Ratings were generally similar across formats, with digital platforms being slightly more likely to be rated as effective. A little less than half of respondents rated print materials effective or very effective, whereas 55 percent of respondents rated digital platforms effective or very effective for delivering training program content. Further, the vast majority (91 percent) rated digital platforms somewhat effective, effective, or very effective, indicating that learning leaders are generally confident in the effectiveness of digital platforms for delivering training program content (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Effectiveness of Digital Platforms for Delivering Training Content

![Bar chart showing effectiveness ratings for digital platforms compared to print materials. The chart indicates that digital platforms are rated as more effective than print materials.](image-url)
Benefits of Using Digital Delivery Platforms

With such a large percentage endorsing the effectiveness of digital content delivery platforms, the advantages of their use in organizational training and development initiatives are likely to be numerous. Survey respondents most frequently indicated that access was the greatest benefit — they elaborated that digital content delivery platforms allowed trainees to access content at any time, from any location, and enabled their organizations to reach a broad audience. Other frequently cited benefits included reduced costs and resource requirements, ease of use and flexibility, and improved consistency in content delivery. Figure 2a on the following page depicts the percentage of comments relating to each benefit. Focus group participants echoed these benefits, indicating that each played a prominent role in their organizations’ decisions to incorporate digital content delivery platforms into their corporate training programs. Specifically, they emphasized that delivering materials via e-readers reduced the costs associated with printing, mailing, and transporting materials. Further, many cited a need to update their training and reference materials frequently, explaining that delivering content digitally enabled instantaneous updating and ensured consistency in versions. Learner preferences also played a role — the focus groups emphasized that learners appreciated the flexibility that digital platforms offer and expected this format in blended and virtual learning environments.
Results from survey respondents in July 2015 further elucidated the reasons that companies use digital content delivery platforms. Figure 2b on the following page displays a range of business and learning objectives and their endorsement as “very important” or “somewhat important” by respondents. As shown, the majority of companies seek to improve retention, consistency in training delivery, effectiveness, engagement, as well as metrics related to utilization, job relevance, and participation.
Figure 2b. Objectives of Digital Content Delivery Platforms (2015 data, N = 193)
Use of Digital Content Delivery Platforms

Given their numerous benefits, it is perhaps unsurprising that 82 percent of survey respondents indicated that their organizations currently use or plan to use digital content delivery platforms as part of their employee or customer training programs (see Figure 3). Further, more than half indicated that they are currently using digital platforms. When we asked 120 companies the same question in August 2015, the results were similar: 82 percent of respondents indicated current or planned usage of digital content delivery platforms.

Figure 3. Current and Planned Use of Digital Content Delivery Platforms

Percentage of Respondents, N = 253

Interestingly, more than half (55 percent) of those using digital platforms as part of their corporate training programs reported using two or more platforms. Follow-up probing with focus group participants indicated that organizations chose to use multiple platforms in order to accommodate the platforms used or provided by third party vendors and to incorporate specific features that they could not find in one comprehensive platform.
Use of Digital Platform by Training Initiative

Because digital platforms may be most appropriate for certain types of training and development initiatives, survey respondents were asked about their organizations’ use of this delivery method in specific types of initiatives. Figure 4 depicts the percentage currently or planning to use digital platforms for each type of initiative — digital platforms were used most for technical skills, soft skills, and leadership training. New hire onboarding also represented a training initiative where digital platforms were frequently used and it was the number one type of initiative for which digital platforms were planned for use. However, results may be sample specific, as respondent organizations could be more or less likely to provide each of these training types. For example, respondents from organizations not engaging in sales or partner training would report not using or planning to use digital platforms for these types of training. By comparison, July 2015 data from 193 companies found that the topics most often delivered via virtual means were certification programs (42%), IT training (41%), safety training (40%), and customer service (39%).

Figure 4. Use of Digital Content Platforms for Specific Training Initiatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Initiative</th>
<th>Currently use</th>
<th>Plan to use</th>
<th>Not currently or planning to use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical Skills Training</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Training</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft Skills Training</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hire Onboarding</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Professional Education</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Training</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client/Customer Training</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT Training</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales Training</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Training</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage of Respondents. N ranges from 241 to 266
Effectiveness of Digital Content Platforms by Training Initiative

A potential reason for the variance in use across initiatives is that digital platforms are more or less effective at delivering content and engaging learners across the varied types of initiatives and associated learning outcomes. Figure 5 displays the percentage of respondents indicating that digital platforms are *very effective* for delivering each type of initiatives’ content. As can be seen, they were considered most effective for delivering product training content and least effective for partner training content. Focus group participants provided insight into why these effectiveness ratings may vary — the content typically associated with product training, technical skills training, and new hire onboarding tends to be the content that is most commonly distributed via digital platforms. For example, focus group participants reported that employee manuals are, by far, the most common content delivered digitally. Other common content types include step-by-step-guides, desktop procedures, benefits information, and on-the-job reference materials. In addition, the focus groups indicated that digital content delivery platforms are often used to distribute pre- and post-training reading materials.

**Figure 5. Effectiveness of Digital Platforms for Delivering Training Content**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Training Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product Training</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Professional Education</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Skills Training</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hire Onboarding</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT Training</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client/Customer Training</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Training</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales Training</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft Skills Training</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Training</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage of Respondents Endorsing "Very Effective," N ranges from 244 to 248
Use and Effectiveness Ratings Congruence

A comparison of the rank ordering of training initiatives for which digital content delivery platforms are considered effective and their current or planned use within those training initiatives points to areas of congruence and places where perceived effectiveness is not aligned with actual use. For example, as Table 1 shows, respondents felt that digital platforms would be most effective for product training and continuing professional education. However, these types of initiatives were ranked among the lower half of training initiatives for which platforms are currently used or planned for use. In contrast, digital platforms were very frequently used for leadership and soft skills training despite their lower rankings on the effectiveness of digital platforms for delivering their content. That learning leaders choose digital platforms for leadership and soft skills training regardless likely reflects the numerous benefits of their use, including reduced costs and greater learner access. There were, however, areas where usage aligned with effectiveness ratings well; the ranked effectiveness and use of digital content platforms for technical skills training and new hire onboarding were both relatively high. Interestingly, when asked about the types of training initiatives for which digital content platforms are best utilized, focus group participants offered resounding support for their ability to enhance learning experiences in almost any training initiative.

Table 1. Rank Orders of Effectiveness Ratings and Reported Use by Training Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Training Initiative</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Training</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing Professional Education</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Skills Training</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Hire Onboarding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT Training</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client/Customer Training</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Training</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales Training</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft Skills Training</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner Training</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Important Digital Platform Features

Digital content platforms are often touted for their enhanced features, which provide an enriched experience for learners and greater instructor and administrator control. To pinpoint the most critical of these features, learning leaders were asked about the importance of common digital platform features for enabling learners’ access to the materials, encouraging learner interaction, and facilitating training administration. They also rated the importance of e-learning standards and digital platform vendor service offerings. Organizations that are planning to adopt a digital platform can use this information to identify the platform that best fits their needs.

Features that Enable User Access to Content

As noted earlier, learners’ ability to access content at any time or location is a major benefit of incorporating digital content delivery platforms into corporate training programs. Thus, features of platforms that enable access are likely to be very important. Figure 6 depicts the percentage of survey respondents rating such features as very important for enabling access. As can be seen, more than half of respondents rated support for multiple browsers, a “Single Sign On” experience, and support for multiple devices very important. Focus group participants generally agreed, but added that language support and, specifically, the ability to accommodate non-Roman script was highly important for global organizations.
Figure 6. Importance of Features for Enabling User Access

- Supports multiple browsers (e.g., Internet Explorer, Safari, etc.) 63%
- Uses Single Sign On (SSO) experience (i.e., same credentials used to access content across devices) 53%
- Supports multiple devices (i.e., BYOD) 50%
- Allows full book download for offline access 37%

Percentage of Respondents Endorsing “Very Important,” N ranges from 227 to 242

Features that Encourage Learner Interaction with Content

Digital content platforms often combine features of print materials, such as annotation and highlighting options with uniquely digital features (e.g., keyword search). Survey respondents were asked about the importance of such features for encouraging learners to interact with digital training content. They overwhelmingly indicated that support for multiple media formats, learning assessments within materials, and text searching capabilities were important. Figure 7 depicts the percentage of respondents rating each feature very important for enabling interaction. Focus group participants tended to concur, adding that certain features may be more important in specific types of training imitative. For example, they indicated that text search was especially important for onboarding.
Figure 7. Importance of Features that Enable Interaction with Digital Content

![Bar chart showing the importance of various features for digital content platforms.]

Support for multiple media formats (e.g., audio, video) - 66%
Support for learning assessments within materials - 56%
Search text - 56%
Print capability - 41%
Support for impaired users - 30%
Copy/paste capability with bibliographic information - 24%
Sync comments/highlights across all devices - 24%
Add comments - 19%
Highlight text - 19%
Share comments/highlights across users - 16%
Subscribe to other users’ comments/highlights - 11%

Percentage of Respondents Endorsing "Very Important," N ranges from 232 to 246

Administrative Features of Digital Content Platforms

In addition to their potential to enhance trainees' experiences, digital content platforms also offer features that facilitate training administration. When asked to rate the importance of various administrative features, more than half of respondents indicated that analytics/usage reporting and support for a variety of formats were very important. The percentage of respondents rating each feature as very important is depicted in Figure 8. However, focus group participants painted
a slightly different picture. While they tended to agree that tracking usage and supporting a variety of format were important, they also emphasized the importance of digital rights management (DRM), security, and content editing, especially in reference to technical skills training.

**Figure 8. Importance of Administrative Features**

- Analytics/usage reporting: 52%
- Variety of supported formats (e.g., PDF, Reflowable, EPUB3): 52%
- Content file editing, as needed: 47%
- Content production support: 36%
- Flexible licensing options (e.g., expiration dates, consumption limits, etc.): 36%
- Digital Rights Management for both copy/paste and print: 36%

Percentage of Respondents Endorsing "Very Important," N ranges from 224 to 266

**e-Learning Standards**

The technical standards used in digital content platforms could impact learning outcomes. In order to identify differences in e-learning standard preferences, learning leaders were asked to indicate the importance of three e-learning standards. Sharable Content Object Reference Modeling (SCORM) was rated consistently higher in terms of its importance for use with digital content delivery platforms. The percentages of respondents endorsing each e-learning standard as very important are presented in Figure 9.
Enterprise System Integration

Integration of digital content delivery platforms with already established enterprise-wide systems is likely to be key, given the importance learning leaders place on tracking analytics. Indeed, more than half of respondents indicated that integration with the organizations’ learning management systems (LMS) was very important. Figure 10 displays results regarding respondents’ ratings of the importance of integration with the organizations’ LMS and other enterprise systems.

Figure 10. Importance of Enterprise System Integration

Percentage of Respondents Endorsing "Very Important," N ranges from 205 to 266
Digital Content Platform Services

Finally, digital content platform providers offer a number of common services that organizations may value. When asked to rate the importance of such services to their organizations’ decision to use digital content delivery platforms in training and development, content development services received the strongest support, with 46 percent of respondents rating them \textit{very important} to the decision. Figure 11 provides more information on the percentage of respondents rating each service as \textit{very important}.

\textbf{Figure 11. Importance of Services in the Decision to Use Digital Platforms}

![Bar chart showing the percentage of respondents rating each service as very important.](chart)

Percentage of Respondents Endorsing "Very Important," N ranges from 224 to 266
Summary

Digital content platforms have taken hold in personal, academic, and corporate settings. With more than half currently using them and another 23 percent planning to use them, it is clear that these platforms have much to offer by way of corporate training programs. Indeed, learning leaders agree that the improved access to materials offered by these formats promotes learning and permits flexibility on the part of the learner. Further, digital platforms have the potential to reduce the costs associated with printing, transporting, and carrying materials throughout training and on the job.

While learning leaders agree that digital platforms can be applied in virtually any corporate training program, they highlight the utility of this mode of content distribution for training programs related to technical skills, products, continuing education, and new hire onboarding. These particular programs coincide with the types of content that tend to be distributed digitally, including policy, benefits, and procedural manuals, pre-training reading, and post-training reference materials.

Finally, the digital platform features deemed most important will vary based on the type of training initiative, the preferences and experience levels of learners, and the desired learning outcomes. Still, nine features emerged as being generally important across training types. First, important features for enabling learner access to the content include support for multiple browsers and devices and the use of a “Single Sign On” experience. Additionally, features that allow the learner to interact with content are also important; among these, support for learning assessments and the ability to search text are considered critical. On the administrative side, the ability to track analytics and usage and support a variety of content formats emerged as the most important features. Lastly, learning leaders considered it very important that a digital content platform integrate with their organizations’ LMS.
Demographics

Two hundred and eighty companies completed the survey and 14 participated in the focus group sessions. The following provides more information about the sample of respondents. Figures 14 and 15 provide further information about the variety of titles, departments, industries, and organization sizes represented in the study.

Figure 14. Survey Respondent Demographics
Figure 15. Focus Group Participant Demographics

14 Companies
43% large companies
64% managers or executives
79% HR or manufacturing departments

Industry
Transportation, 22%
Banking, 15%
Telecom, 14%
Manufacturing, 7%
Technology, 7%
Biz Services, 7%
Gov’t, 7%
Other (e.g., Edu, Pharm), 21%

Department
HR, 36%
Manufacturing, 43%
IT, 7%
Customer Service, 7%
Sales, 7%

Number of Employees
1K–5K, 36%
5K–10K, 7%
20K–50K, 14%
50K+, 43%

Title
Executive, 29%
Manager, 36%
Trainer, 21%
Instructor, 7%
Instructional Designer, 7%

Other (e.g., Edu, Pharm), 21%
Gov’t, 7%
Biz Services, 7%
Technology, 7%
Manufacturing, 7%
Banking, 15%
Telecom, 14%
About This Report

About VitalSource

VitalSource Technologies, Inc. offers a robust digital content delivery platform and content enhancement capabilities that enrich learning programs, engage learners in new ways and bring instructional content to life.

Combining nearly 20 years of technology expertise and higher-education market leadership of VitalSource with the industry resources and visionary direction of Ingram Content Group, VitalSource is firmly positioned as a market leader in the digital learning technology space.

About Training Industry

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About This Research

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