

Rapid E-Learning: *What Works*TM

*Market Tools and Techniques and Best Practices for
Building E-Learning Programs in Weeks*

Abbreviated Version

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Executive Summary

In 2003 and 2004 the use of E-Learning has grown dramatically. Companies of all sizes can now rely on Internet-based training and education to roll out a wide range of informational and competency-based programs in a fast and scalable manner.

In our research we find that a revolutionary change is taking place. There are a broad range of training and learning problems that are time-critical. These problems have the need for urgent development (“get this program out in the next few weeks”). Often these programs have smaller budgets, smaller teams, and require intimate involvement of subject-matter experts. (product managers, sales managers, HR managers, etc.)

We call this new category of program “Rapid E-Learning.” It is a whole new approach to Internet-based training – one that changes the development model, leverages new tools, and dramatically changes the economics of content development.

89% of the organizations we surveyed need to develop e-learning in **three weeks or less.**

This report summarizes our Rapid E-Learning™ research findings – reviewing the market size, when and how to apply this approach, best practices, tools, and case studies. Our findings tell us that this new approach can revolutionize the process of developing and deploying information in organizations worldwide. With a compound growth rate of over 80%, this new approach is going to change the way training is built, deployed, and managed.

The Need for Rapid Development and Deployment

For decades, technology-based training has promised to give corporations, universities, government, and non-profit organizations the power to increase the scale and reach of training. When it is necessary to reach a large audience in a consistent and cost-effective way, e-learning is the answer.

As companies have rushed into e-learning, however, many have found that the time and cost to build excellent content sometimes overcomes these advantages. The “traditional” approach takes many months to build and can cost tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars per instructional hour.

The Biggest Challenge in E-Learning: Time

We have been watching this market for several years. In our most recent surveys to e-learning developers, we find that their biggest challenge continues to be time. Developers and managers complain that development times are too long and they lack trained resources to get programs developed.¹ Given the rapid state of change in most industries, this should not be a surprise.

¹ Spring 2004 survey of 228 e-learning developers, primarily in US.

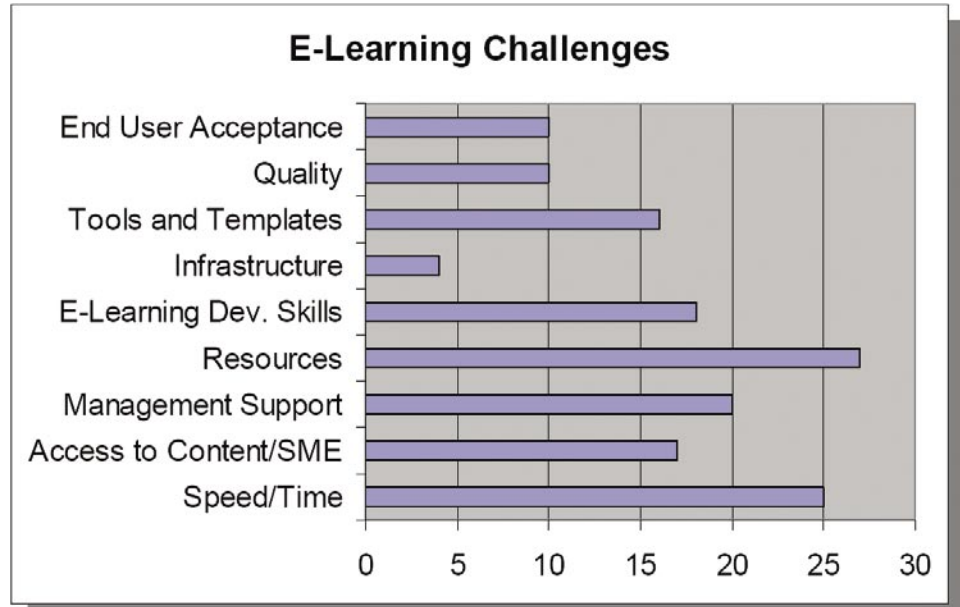


Figure 1: Top E-Learning Developer Challenges

Why is this? Today most e-learning programs are being developed with the waterfall approach. A subject matter expert explains the content; an instructional designer creates a design document and project plan; a web developer builds interactivities and HTML pages; a QA engineer tests the course; and then, a few months later, and online course is launched.

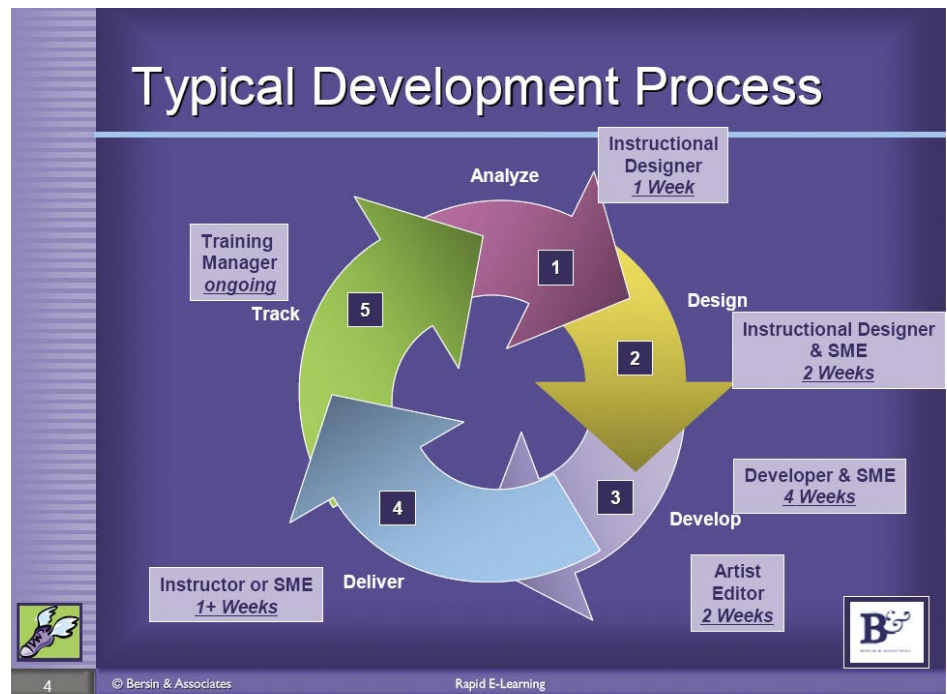


Figure 2: Traditional E-Learning Development Process

Although this approach is proven and works well, it breaks down for many time-critical problems it demands a team of skilled professionals and it can take months to complete. The results from our survey (Figure 1: Top E-Learning Developer Challenges) show that this waterfall process simply takes too long and costs too much for many business situations. Often time the business problem has changed during the development of the course!

Rapid E-Learning: A New Paradigm

Imagine the impact that the microwave oven had on cooking. It did not do away with the oven, but it did enable millions of people to each popcorn and instant soup. E-Learning needs a fast “cooking” option when you have to provide training NOW. As this study shows, Rapid E-Learning, when applied to the right problems, can solve a wide range of training challenges in a highly efficient way – freeing up valuable resources to focus on problems that demand the more traditional approach.

To illustrate the need for Rapid E-Learning, consider an example:

Rapid E-Learning is a fast, low-cost training option which can solve many business-critical training problems.

A product manufacturer sells its product through a network of distributors. One day the Chief Counsel of the company calls an urgent meeting with company executives including the Training Director. The company just lost a major lawsuit that forces a significant change in the company's contracts with distributors. By the judge's mandate, all Distributor Agreements need to be modified and re-signed by every distributor within three months.

To accomplish this task the company must design a process that involves the legal department, sales and distribution teams, and corporate communications. The Chief Counsel directs the Training Director to train the affected departments about the lawsuit, its implications, and the tasks that each department must complete to stay in compliance. The initial training must be completed in 30 days. The Training Director assigns you to work on the project. So what do you do? Clearly a three month development cycle to build a program will not work. Enter Rapid E-Learning...

This Industry Study reviews how six different companies are handling these types of training problems. We will cover processes and tools used to create Rapid E-Learning, as well as provide you with tips for getting started.

Rapid E-Learning Defined

In our research, we talked to companies who are creating e-learning content using rapid methods. We found that most of these methods are a cross between knowledge management and e-learning. *Knowledge management* uses collaborative technologies to encourage subject matter experts to share their knowledge and *e-learning* delivers skills and knowledge in a streamlined and methodical way. The intersection between knowledge management and e-learning seems to hold the solution for creating more- e-learning content in less time with fewer resources.

Rapid E-Learning is defined as training programs that can be developed in weeks and usually authored by Subject Matter Experts (SMEs).

- The Rapid E-Learning category is defined by the following criteria.
- Courseware which can be developed in less than three weeks
- Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) act as the primary resource for development
- A well-known tool (e.g. PowerPoint) or user-friendly templates form the starting point for courseware.
- Simple assessment, feedback and tracking are usually provided.
- Media elements which enhance learning but do not create technology barriers may be included (e.g. voice)
- Learning modules can be taken in one hour or less, often in less than 30 minutes.
- Synchronous (Live or live) and asynchronous(self-paced) models may be utilized.

The two major elements in this definition are **short timeframes** and **ease of development**. The key to a successful Rapid E-Learning program is having a development process (including tools) that makes it easy and quick to develop a course.

Categories of E-Learning

Our philosophy is that there are different types of e-learning, just like there are different types of classroom training. In the classroom, there are roadshows, seminars, and hands-on workshops. Styles and timeframes vary by content, budget and audience requirements. E-Learning has the same types of variations. We think categories of e-learning also vary by content, budget, timeframes and audience requirements. When we surveyed the market about their e-learning development practices, we found that e-learning development practices generally fall into three categories:

- Rapid
- Traditional
- Strategic

Rapid E-Learning is sometimes called “disposable training” because it solves problems with short shelf life. We do not use that term because it diminishes the value and potential to build long-lasting programs rapidly.

Rapid: Rapid E-Learning is often developed in response to urgent business needs, such as a product launch or competitive situation. It may also be developed as part of a continuous update program, or when the content has a short shelf-life. Most Rapid E-Learning courses are developed in response to a request by a line of business organization. Rapid E-Learning is usually focused on awareness and immediate action and the modules are created in a matter of days or weeks they are developed internally, with little or no budget and the base content is often developed by SMEs who use PowerPoint or a set of authoring templates.

As you decide on your development strategy, you should categorize each of your programs into one of these three types.

Traditional: Traditional E-Learning is focused on skills. It's often part of an annual training build plan to meet skill needs within an organization or group. Sometimes traditional e-learning is developed in response to needs assessment findings or a recognized skill deficiency in the organization. It may also be developed as a preparation component for a professional certification program. With Traditional E-Learning, a build or buy decision may be made to ensure the best use of a training budget. These Programs are typically developed in 3-11 weeks by a team of training professionals who may work internally or be contracted externally.

Strategic: Strategic e-learning programs are developed in conjunction with an organizational development or change strategy. Typically, these major change initiatives take place over a matter of months or years and the learning components are developed for each phase as the organization processes through them. These programs are usually developed by cross-functional team of professionals and rolled-out over a period of 3 months or more. The team may consist of employees or contractors, or both. Many strategic programs are blended – mixing classroom training with workshops, instructor led programs, conference calls, and other media.

This table summarizes the differences between the three categories of e-learning

| Category | Development Timeframe | Budget for Development | Developed by ... |
|-------------|-----------------------|--|--|
| Rapid | < 3 weeks | Staff of 1-3 professionals and little or no budget | SMEs with templates and training professional guidance |
| Traditional | 3 to 11 weeks | \$5,000- 30,000 per instructional hour | Training professionals, such as Instructional Designers, Instructors, Course Authors, etc. |
| Strategic | 12+ weeks | Often blended, costs can go higher. | A cross-functional team that includes HR, Instructional Design and others. |

Figure 3: Comparison of E-Learning Categories

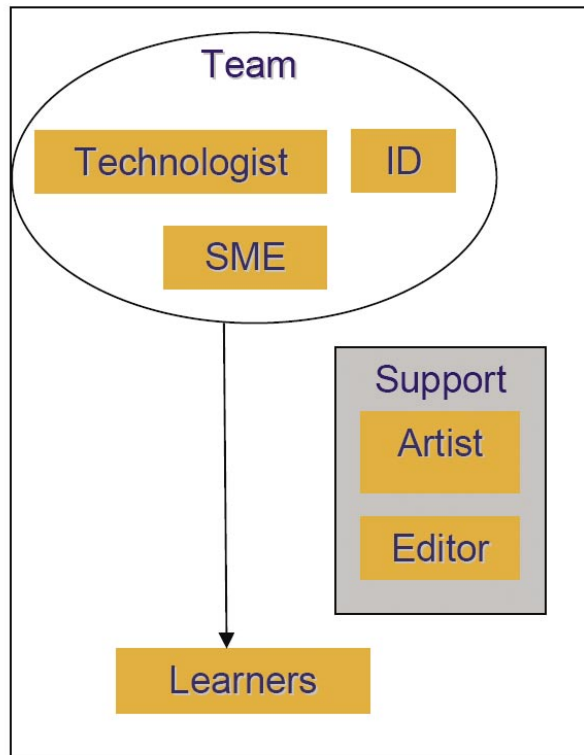


Figure 3 : Rapid Development Process -- Live Courses

In this case the SME would not only develop the material, s/he would also deliver it to the target audience. Instead of being the sage on the stage, the Instructional Designer becomes the coach on the side, acting as an invaluable resource to aid in the SME's success. The ID might help with designing the participant interactions for the virtual classroom, and may even act as an assistant instructor and facilitate some of the interactions. The technologist's role on the team is to support the SME in the development and delivery of training, and to support the learners as they access the virtual classroom system. Often times an assistant instructor (possibly the ID or Technologist handles ongoing chat discussions and questions during the event.

Respect for each other's knowledge, skills and abilities are a key determinant for success with this method of training. After delivering the training, the SME should be able to say to the ID and Technologist, "I couldn't have done it without you."

Rapid Instructional Design Tips

Changing your development approach from a traditional one to a rapid model requires some modifications to the standard Instructional Design process. Although this document will not fully cover the topic of Rapid Instructional Design, we will provide you with an overview and some tips on the subject.

Analysis – This stage is still a critical component to set a project on the right track toward meeting learners' needs. However, to fit into a Rapid Development model, the Analysis work needs to be done in a few days. Analysis should focus on these basic questions:

1. Who needs to be trained?
2. What are their jobs?
3. When do they need to be trained?
4. What do they need to be able to do differently? (include skill level required)
5. Why should they change?

The trick to doing rapid analysis is figuring out how to answer these basic questions as quickly as possible. To get the questions answered, you might:

1. Ask people who know the answers. (SMEs, HR, Executives, etc.)
2. Conduct an online survey or poll using one of the many free Internet tools, such as Zoomerang
3. Review existing company data. (HR systems, LMS, etc)

Use whatever means you can to get the answers to these questions, so that you can design the best solution you can in the time that you have.

Design – This stage is a combination of outlining and project planning. The end result of this phase should be a set of objective, a course outline, a project plan with task assignments and a project schedule. All of these documents will be in draft format. They do not need to be perfect, just thought-filled. You should be able to start to write this document during your analysis. The analysis and design phases together should take no more than 3-5 business days.

Include your learning objectives. Where it is rapid or traditional – you should clarify precisely what you expect the learner to be able to do at the end of the program.

Within a week of getting this important training project, you should be able to conduct a project kick-off meeting. This meeting is critical for getting the entire team moving in the same direction. You should invite the executive stakeholders, your manager, the subject matter expert(s), your Instructional Technologist, and possibly one or more members of the learner population. During this meeting, you will present the draft course design and project plan, and discuss it with the entire team. Be prepared to make changes, but the end result of the meeting should be that the entire group walks out of the room after agreeing upon an action plan

Development – As the SMEs will be doing the bulk of the development, you will need to make sure that they have what they need to produce a quality course. You should have a set of templates in place (PowerPoint or in your authoring tool) that includes templates for:

- Objectives
- Reason for learning this material
- Concept or definition
- Tasks, steps, or stages
- Demonstration
- Practice
- Assessment

There should be a training program in place to train SMEs to write courses using the templates and the tools. The training should include basic Instructional Design standards and your company's Rapid E-Learning processes.

When it's the first time a SME is developing a course, the Instructional Designer should consider going through the templates with the SME and discussing what should be included on each template with the SME and discussing what should be included on each template for this particular course. This collaborative development process can work really well to help a SME get off and running quickly.

Writing good and fair assessment items requires a great deal of skill and training. If the results of your program need to be accurately measured, (e.g. legal compliance or skills certification) you may want to consider having the Instructional Designer take the lead in writing the assessment questions with the SME(s) input and review.

Deployment – When you make a course available to the learners, there are a number of factors to consider in making the course easy for the learner to take. These factors are not really different than in a traditional e-learning environment, and they may include:

- Ensuring the learners have the time, place and equipment to take the training
 - Offering offline options for those poor or no connectivity
 - Establishing waking hour options for all learners who need to take a scheduled live course
 - Address accessibility issues for those with disabilities
 - Recording Live sessions for those who cannot attend at the scheduled time

- Provide technical support for those who have trouble accessing or taking a course
- Provide content support for those who have questions about the course material
- Prior to delivering the course, test the course on supported platforms and hold practice sessions for Live courses
- For Live programs, ensure that learners test their connection to the virtual classroom, prior to their assigned session date.
- Communicate the availability of the course and provide clear instructions for accessing the course.

Evaluation – For summative evaluation (demonstrating results) purposes, Rapid E-Learning courses are typically only evaluated at Level 1 (satisfaction) and possibly Level II (mastery). For Awareness programs often no assessments are used. To insure that Recall objectives are met, assessments may be used to ensure the critical information was learned.

For formative evaluation purposes (course improvement), if the course will have a long shelf-life (non-disposable), you may want to consider adding a course survey or another means for learners to provide constructive feedback about the course.

Since Rapid E-Learning programs are usually business critical, the benefit to the organization is implied because of the imperative nature of the training. A simple report stating that the business need was met within the given timeframe, along with a high learner satisfaction rate is usually all that's required to show the value of the program.

Learn.com CourseMaker Studio

Several major players in the IT training industry are using the full-featured products created by Learn.com. In September 2003, Learn.com's CourseMaker Studio won an Innovative Technology silver medal. CourseMaker Studio also won first place for the "Best of Class Multimedia Authoring tool at a Web-based training conference in Anaheim, California because it can reduce development cost and timelines by up to 60%.

Microsoft Business Solutions has standardized on CourseMaker Studio and they use it to develop over 300 courses per year.

CourseMaker Studio's intuitive and template-driven interface makes it easy to position graphics and animations. With the question creation tools, anyone can quickly generate interactive content such as True or False, Multiple Choice, or Drag and Drop questions and link those questions to specific lessons within the course to create prescriptive learning paths. The Index wizard automatically generates a comprehensive index style search through all selected courses within seconds. Also, the CourseMaker Studio template automatically creates the menu and navigation as you add lessons and modules to the course. This product imports PowerPoint files, as well as many other file types.

CourseMaker Studio was one of the few products to specifically point out their Section 508c compliance, so if you need to train an audience that also includes those with disabilities, or are created courseware that will be viewed by any Government Agency (it is the law), take a look at this product. The underlying award-winning multi-patented StreamMaker Authoring platform assures the delivery of your finished dynamic and engaging content will start in less than 4 seconds and play at amazing speeds even over connections as low as 18.8 kbps. This product is the only one on the market that has true streaming and advanced compression capability for multimedia tutorials. This is something to consider if you need to deliver e-learning to low bandwidth audiences. Furthermore, because of the template and wizard approach in the entire environment, Subject matter experts can quickly and easily create dynamic and engaging courses.

Learn.com LearnCenter

The LearnCenter is an integrated learning platform that includes a Learning Management System, an easy to use course authoring tool, a content management system, Skill and competency management and a robust and easy to use portal development kit. This all-in-one package provides a great platform for an organization that wishes to create, edit and manage their Rapid E-Learning program with no vendor intervention (or additional costs), without giving up comprehensive and essential functionality. The Learn.com LearnCenter is great for an organization that needs flexibility and the ability to rapidly create, modify and deploy courses.

The U.S. State Department used the LearnCenter product to enable 25 SMEs to develop 100,000 learning objects that are deployed to 37,000 employees.

The course authoring tool has a “what you see is what you get” (WYSIWYG) interface that makes authoring a course as easy as creating an office document. The LearnCenter’s assessment and polling tools make it easy to include questions and interactions within a course and the Learning Management System automatically tracks and reports on the scores.

[Click here to receive a product demonstration.](#)