



# Rapid E-Learning:

## Maturing Technology Brings Balance and Possibilities

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### **Rapid e-Learning at a Glance**

- *Can be developed in 21 days or less*
- *Doesn't require specialist knowledge and skills or third-party support*
- *Can use subject matter experts to author directly*
- *Requires a low level of investment to create*
- *May have a short shelf-life*
- *May involve an element of virtual classroom delivery or be completely standalone*

In a 2003 survey of Fortune 500 companies more than 80 percent of respondents indicated that rapid e-learning would soon make a significant contribution to training efforts in their organizations. And while many of these early adopters found success in rapid e-learning initiatives, overreaching aspirations of both users and technology providers led some to disappointment.

Since that time, two important adjustments have occurred in the rapid e-learning space:

1. Organizations have better pinpointed appropriate applications for rapid e-learning
2. Rapid e-learning technologies have matured, broadening the scope of possible training applications

These adjustments from both sides of the rapid e-learning equation have brought the learning category into sharper focus and have aligned organizational goals with very promising, low-cost, rapid e-learning opportunities. Learning professionals who have discounted the effectiveness of rapid e-learning in the past would do well to take a second look—it's likely that their employers and clients already have.

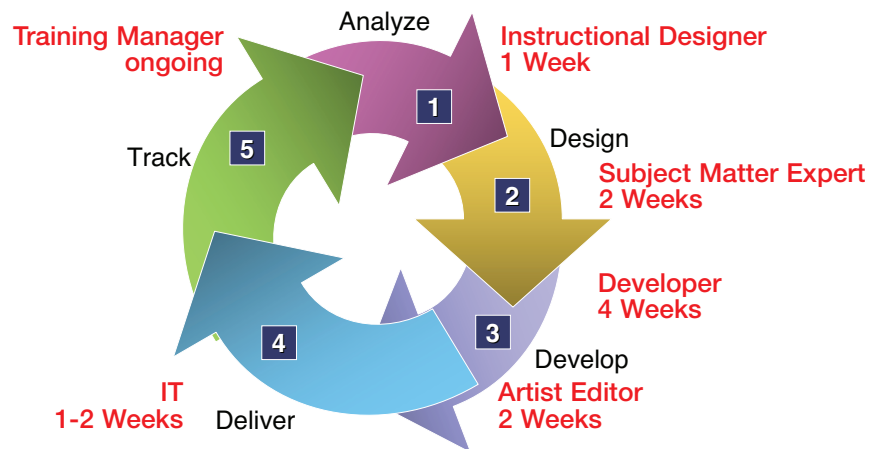
### **Rapid vs. Traditional**

According to The eLearning Guild's 2006 Rapid e-Learning Development Research Report, demand for rapid e-learning solutions has increased from 70 percent in 2005 to a whopping 82 percent among the companies surveyed for the report. And it's easy to see why. Recent industry estimates put traditional e-learning development costs anywhere from \$5,000 to \$50,000 per hour of learning. Much of this cost is due to the number of job functions required to develop customized programming for such courses.

In a traditional e-learning format, subject matter experts submit content to instructional designers who take the information and design a structured learning environment around it. The instructional designer then passes the design to a programmer/developer who creates customized coding to execute on the design of the course. Finally, the program code is reviewed and tested by a quality assurance team, design and coding problems are corrected, and the training is launched. The process, from start to finish, often requires months to complete (see Figure 1 on next page).

Figure 1. Traditional e-Learning Development Cycle  
Source: Bersin & Associates

Traditional e-learning development typically requires 10 to 15 weeks and the significant financial investment that accompanies custom programming needs.



*As product life-cycles decrease and speed-to-market pressures increase, the ability to train workers quickly and efficiently becomes paramount to a company's ability to compete in the marketplace.*

The challenge of this type of e-learning development is clear to any business in need of time- and cost-sensitive learning materials. As speed-to-market pressures increase and product life-cycles actually decrease in the marketplace, the ability to train sales staff, call center employees, customer service representatives, new hires, or any number of workers quickly and efficiently becomes paramount to a company's ability to compete. A survey of training and HR managers conducted in Spring 2005 indicated that 72 percent of their training projects had to be completed in fewer than 90 days in order to be timely (Bersin 2005). A 2004 study by the same researcher showed that 89 percent of companies need to develop some portion of their e-learning solutions within three weeks.

Rapid e-learning addresses both time and cost issues by using technology tools to shift the dynamics of e-learning development. Rather than requiring months to develop learning materials, rapid e-learning typically takes weeks.

Empowered with turnkey tools, such as Acrobat® Connect™ Professional, Adobe Presenter, and Adobe Captivate™ 2.0, subject matter experts (SME) are able to input content, add audio tracks, and publish e-learning courses by following simple steps and using common office software, such as Microsoft PowerPoint, Word, and Excel. In the rapid e-learning model, instructional designers function in a review or directorial role, assisting SMEs with structuring content to meet

learning objectives. The programming requirement is virtually eliminated, but testing the program is still a best practice. The upside of the testing process is that edits and corrections are far easier to make since complicated coding is out of the picture.

### Industry Perceptions

While the basic concept of "faster and cheaper" is unchallenged when comparing rapid e-learning to traditional e-learning, industry experts have been hard pressed to come to a consensus on a more precise definition that aligns rapid e-learning with specific training problems. The challenge to define the role of rapid e-learning stems, on the one hand, from the perceived functionality of rapid e-learning technology and, on the other, its continuous evolution that creates new possibilities in the rapid e-learning space.

See Figure 2 (above right) for a brief explanation of Bloom's Taxonomy and how it translates to instructional strategies. Learning professionals agree that rapid e-learning is an ideal application for Delta learning activities that promote awareness and recall of information.

**Awareness.** Awareness activities can include prerequisite information for more in-depth courses, updates in policy, compliance information, product pricing changes, and other organization-specific information that must be broadcast to employees and stakeholders. To accomplish this objective, rapid e-learning tools enable SMEs to create standards-compliant presentations and

Figure 2: Bloom's Taxonomy & Instructional Strategy  
Source: Bersin & Associates

Category	Example	Instructional Strategies
Awareness	There is a new pricing model being announced, and here it is	Read, listen
Recall	Learn to tell you customers about our new pricing model	Read, listen, discuss, and answer multiple-choice questions
Application	Learn how to apply the multifaceted pricing models to you customer's situations	Read, listen, discuss, case study or simulation-based practice
Mastery	Become a recognized pricing expert in the regional sales office, with authority to give discounts	Application-level strategies, plus practical experiences and testing

e-learning material in PowerPoint, complete with voice-overs, videos, and animations. Leveraging their existing familiarity with PowerPoint, SMEs can create personalized, narrated, on-demand presentations, or they can take advantage of imbedded templates and wizards within the e-learning toolset to guide them through the process. **Recall.** For training problems that require recall of information, rapid e-learning tools offer additional capabilities. Beyond providing self-paced materials, trainers can conduct live virtual classrooms and meet instantly with colleagues or learners to share real-time information from presentations, applications, and multimedia content. Rapid e-learning tools also provide assessment tools, such as quizzes and simple tests, that can be used in both self-paced and classroom formats to ensure learners absorb the information.

**Application and Mastery.** For more advanced learning activities for which the objective is successful application of information and mastery of concepts, training professionals debate the efficacy of rapid e-learning. The challenge has been twofold.

1. **Content developer.** By design, the primary content creation for rapid e-learning is performed by SMEs. In general, SME-generated content concentrates on the informational level of learning, not on the application or mastery level.
2. **Tools.** The rapid e-learning tools them-

selves have not been robust enough to achieve turnkey development of high-level learning objectives.

### Technology Evolves

As rapid e-learning technologies evolve, however, both of these aspects of the category are changing. Rapid e-learning tools now incorporate much more advanced capabilities to engage learners and develop skills, and the best tools

retain the production simplicity that originally coined them as "rapid." Many of these improvements surround simulation and demonstration that are the calling card of traditional e-learning courses. **Simulation tools.** The rapid e-learning space is garnering more simulation capability in several areas, such as software simulation, soft skills learning, and business skills development. Using advanced algorithms, today's tools can calculate

## Successful REL Development Now

Keep these best practices in mind as you develop rapid e-learning content.

**Value traditional roles.** Do not expect rapid e-learning tools to transform SMEs into instructional designers. Involve your traditional course designers to guide the process, review the final product, and make necessary changes.

**Train the trainers.** Take the time to train individual users on the new technology. Not only will this prevent mistakes, it may also broaden the application possibilities.

**Create standards and templates.** In addition to standardizing fonts, graphics, and slide deck formats, instructional designers should customize

templates that will guide SMEs to build content in a controlled and effective manner.

**Know when to intervene.** For more complex training solutions, some organizations gather content from SMEs through a questionnaire and provide that content to learning professionals who can work with templates to construct courses with multimedia content, quizzes, and more complicated branching.

**Understand the limitations.** Rapid e-learning is not the ideal solution for all training problems. Analyze your objectives and deploy the solution as part of an overall training strategy.

consequences for errors and accurately replicate real-world scenarios based on choices made by individual learners.

**Gaming technologies.** Game-based templates are often incorporated into today's rapid e-learning tools. By reducing development times, these templates encourage instructional designers and SMEs to break from presentation- or information-based courses and make rapid e-learning more engaging and effective.

**Intuitive applications.** Importing, exporting, and editing video files and other Flash elements has greatly

improved in the most recent releases of rapid e-learning tools.

**Improved branching.** Mapping/storyboard views make complex branching configurations easy to follow by allowing users to see all the pathways and possible choices. This feature has been borrowed from more traditional e-learning tools, enhancing the rapid e-learning tools but also blurring the lines between the two camps.

**Exporting content to mobile devices.** As learners and workers become more mobile, learning technologies—including rapid e-learning—are engaging these dispersed groups and encouraging interaction

through content scaled to handheld devices and gaming consoles. Rapid e-learning—with its low-cost, quick development, and, often, short format—is ideal for this type of application.

### What the Future Holds

Rapid e-Learning becomes a more pervasive and disciplined practice as it struggles with and solves problems common to all e-learning design and delivery efforts (eLearning Guild 2006). As rapid e-learning tools become more robust, they will no longer be considered a simplified tool targeted at SMEs in order to relieve the training bottleneck that is often created by slower, more customized, e-learning course development.

Instructional designers have already joined the community using rapid e-learning tools, and for good reason: As the tools are developed to make the job of creating learning solutions more efficient, the entire learning community benefits from greater distribution of knowledge. By the same token, as more skilled learning professionals use these tools, the more functionality they will demand from technology suppliers—and learning professionals will expect to get solutions that can keep pace with their business demands.

## Choose the Right REL Tools

The success of rapid e-learning is inextricable from the tools used to create it. When shopping for a technology provider, make sure to look for the following features and capabilities.

**Ease of use.** Rapid e-learning tools should be intuitive and easy to learn. Non-technical users should be able to achieve competency with today's REL tools in a single day with some guided training.

**Software savvy.** At their most basic, REL tools should leverage common office software to achieve rapid results. Microsoft PowerPoint, Word, and Excel are fundamental. Additional programs can include Adobe Dreamweaver™, Photoshop®, Illustrator®, and Flash Lite™.

**Flash delivery.** Adobe Flash Player is currently installed on 98 percent of internet-enabled desktop computers. REL tools should facilitate the creation of Flash animation and automatically publish content in a Flash format. This is the de facto standard for creating and deploying interactive learning.

**Customizable templates.** Utilizing templates has become a best practice among companies developing effective rapid e-learning. REL tools should now incorporate the capability to create and

customize these templates.

**Collaboration environments.** In addition to self-paced learning, virtual classrooms with live, guided instruction can create a richer learning experience. Look for hand-raising, note-taking, polling, and other learning features that facilitate discussion and interaction.

**Assessment.** The ability to incorporate quizzes and tests into both self-paced and guided learning courses is vital. Look for a variety of response formats, such as short answer, fill-in-the-blank, true/false, matching and Likert rating scale.

**Leverage existing LMS system.** Rapid e-learning tools should leverage your existing learning management system and allow you to track and control individual access to rapid e-learning courses. Tools should also be SCORM & AICC compliant.

**Security.** Investigate the security of hosted servers or choose a product that can be licensed and hosted behind a firewall on your organization's own servers.

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