



How Executives Stay Informed

A Study of Resources Used and Time Spent
Locating Critical Business Information

Josh Bersin

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Introduction

In the summer of 2005, Bersin & Associates conducted a survey among business executives to help understand how they learn, stay informed, and access timely business information. The goal of this research was to better understand what forms of information and learning resources are most widely used and needed by executives.

The survey was distributed to 10,000 senior-level business executives. In total, 202 executives responded, with the following demographics:

- Age:** 43% were over 50
40% were age 36 to 50
- Gender:** 84% were male
16% were female
- Position:** 49% had titles of CEO, senior VP, or VP
51% had director-level titles
- Organization:** 26% worked in organizations with more than 5,000 employees
74% worked in organizations with fewer than 5,000 employees

This research was sponsored by Books24x7, a division of SkillSoft.

Staying Informed Is Time-Consuming and Costly

Most executives consider themselves well informed, but keeping pace has its costs.

"(It) takes a great deal of time to get the most relevant information."

Although 71% of the respondents felt that they were well informed, they did admit that they devote a significant amount of time to this process. Thirty-seven percent of the executives spend more than 4 hours per week searching for information to stay informed and current (see Figure 1). Considering the typical salary of a top executive, this translates into \$1,000 or more per week in time lost through information searches, to say nothing of the cost of not spending this time running their operations. This estimated figure does not include costs associated with lost opportunities, delayed decisions, or other business impacts.



Figure 1 - Average Executive Searching Time

Searching for information is unproductive and difficult.

When asked what challenges they face in obtaining current and relevant information, the executives overwhelmingly indicated that they are "too busy" to sort through the myriad information available to them to find the critical, authoritative information that they require. Comments such as "Takes a great deal of time to get the most relevant information.", were common among the

respondents who regularly utilize multiple information resources including newspapers, trade journals, analyst reports and business books. Interestingly, company training was not considered useful for critical information by almost all of the respondents.

Internet Recognized as Important Business Tool for Today's Executives

Executives defy Internet stereotype.

Despite the common belief that executives do not use the Internet, the vast majority of the participants in this survey said they use the Internet as a business tool to obtain critical information. While they are comfortable using the web to access on-line content, such as trade journals and analyst reports, they indicated, "there is too much invalidated information".

"There's more info available now than I can possibly stay up with."

Internet provides mixed results.

The major obstacle with the Internet is assimilating the vast amount of information available. Approximately half of the responses indicated frustration at "too much information" on the Internet and that it is hard to find just what they need. As one executive commented, "The Internet can be good but the veracity of much of the information is questionable." Content from trusted sources is more valuable to executives than random web content from unknown sources.

Executives Want More Time for Reading

Extensive amount of time spent reading to stay current and informed.

The surveyed set of executives is reading whenever and where ever they can to ensure that they are up to date. At least half of this group devotes upwards of 4 hours of reading time per week to stay current and informed (*see Figure 2*).

Portable knowledge is important to these executives because of their demanding schedules. So, it comes as no surprise that more than half of them are reading while traveling, and that 75% read at home on their own time.

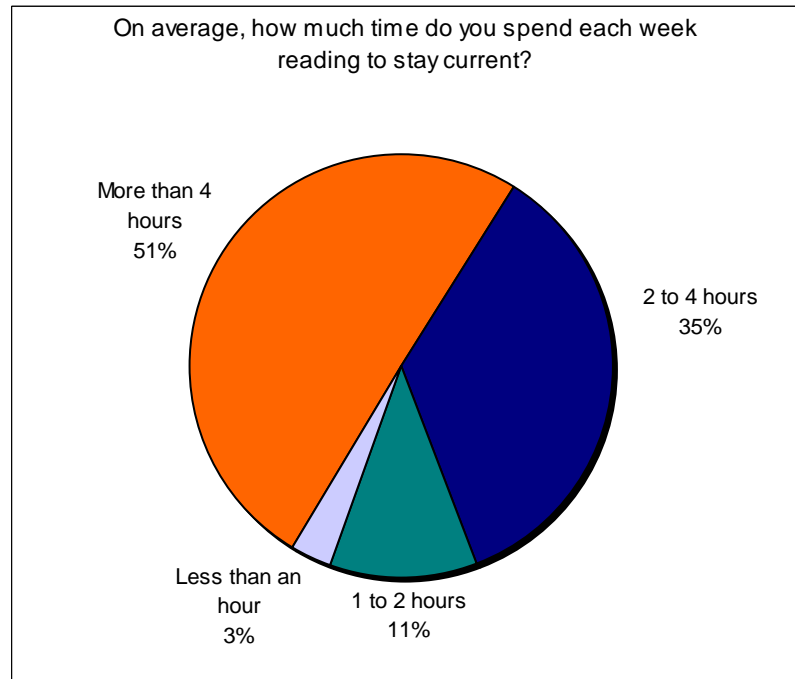


Figure 2 - Average Executive Reading Time

Not enough time to read business books.

Despite the amount of time spent reading and staying current, more than three-quarters of this group said they would like to read more business books but their biggest challenge is time. Only 10 percent of the respondents are able to find enough time in the year to read more than 10 books, while half of the group reads only 1 to 3 books in a year (see Figure 3).

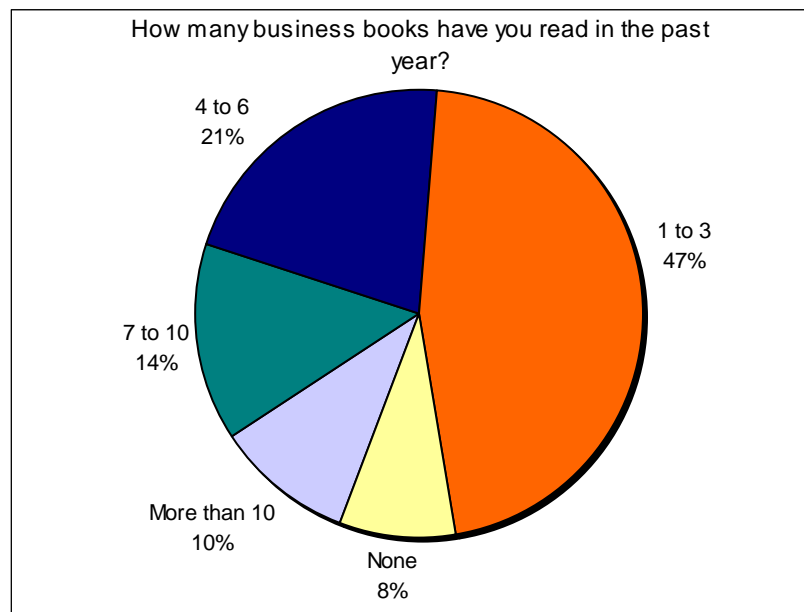


Figure 3 - Business Books Read

The topics of interest vary widely but the books most frequently relied-on are focused on four areas, including books on business strategy, major business trends, and by authors who are major business leaders.

Content And Delivery Method Are Critical Factors

"There are too many sources of information. I would like one source that can pull together everything of interest to me and put it in one place."

Executives look for resources that are short and to the point.

In this study, less than one-quarter of respondents typically read books, articles, or journals in their entirety. The majority of the responses, two-thirds, indicated that they read summaries, skim the material, or read just the sections of interest. Comments from respondents strongly support that executives want easy-to-read, to-the-point, highly relevant pieces of information that can be accessed easily and digested quickly. One executive echoed views frequently cited by stating that, "materials that are easy to read and to the point are best." Another executive commented that he wished there were "more headline/mini-readings like, Cliffs Notes."

Timeliness is critical for demanding executives.

Executives value information delivery that matches the speed of business. They see the Internet as a means to provide quick and easy access to information where and when needed but the volume of trusted information is far outweighed by the amount of unauthorized information, making searching time-consuming and wasteful.

Conclusion: Executives Require On Demand Solutions

Executives demand information from a variety of sources.

Executives clearly are an information-seeking group. They have limited time so they want information that is concise, relevant and easily accessible. The speed of the Web is an important part of their information gathering strategy.

Traditional books and training does not meet this demand.

For professional development, they rely heavily on expert sources (trade journals, books, conferences, peers, and analysts) and do not regularly view the training organization as a credible source of learning. Further, executives highly value the information in leading business books but cover-to-cover reading is difficult given the pace of business.

Learning on demand is a key new solution.

In our four stages of e-learning research¹, we identify the growing trend toward “learning on demand”: the ability for an individual to find “just enough” learning to solve the problem at hand. Unlike performance support systems, which provide online help for a task, learning on demand helps a knowledge worker (such as an executive) get information used for making complex decisions. Executives aggressively seek learning on demand, although this is not a phrase they would use.

Online resources and search meet this demand.

Online information and learning resources give executives the ability to reach out to industry experts, search for just what they need, save time, and access information from home, work, or while they travel.

Online learning resources, such as Referenceware[®] from Books24x7[®] and other online reference databases, allow users to easily choose the amount of information needed. One can get a brief overview of a topic, read several pages, or review whole chapters to get more in-depth understanding.

Training and HR organizations should address this need.

Corporate training and HR managers should consider online resources a critical part of learning strategies for managers and executives. Such resources can be used efficiently on a day-to-day basis for a wide range of information needs. When blended

with traditional e-learning and instructor-led programs, these on demand, expert-written materials add credibility and relevance to traditional management and executive education.

We believe that the time for on demand learning is here. Organizations that want to support and enable executive development and decision-making must consider well organized, high value online references a valuable business tool.

¹ *The Four Stages of E-Learning: A Maturity Model for Online Corporate Training*, available at <http://www.bersein.com/stages>.

About Us

Bersin & Associates is the only research and consulting firm solely focused on What Works[®] enterprise learning research. With more than 20 years of experience in e-learning, training, and enterprise technology, Bersin & Associates provides a wide range of services, including market research, best practices, benchmarking, vendor and product analysis, corporate workshops, corporate implementation plans, and sales and marketing programs. Some of Bersin & Associates innovations include a complete methodology for Learning Management Systems (LMS) selection and application usage, an end-to-end architecture and solution for training analytics, and one of the industry's largest research studies on blended learning implementations.

Bersin & Associates offers the industry's first enterprise learning research subscription, "*The Enterprise Learning Research Center*" (<http://www.elearningresearch.com>), which offers up-to-date research, product selection guides, white papers, and access to other experts online. This service enables corporate training managers, vendors, and consultants to make faster, better decisions about enterprise learning strategy, programs, and technology.

Bersin & Associates can be reached at <http://www.berstin.com> <<http://www.berstin.com/>> or at (510) 654-8500.

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¹¹ *The Four Stages of E-Learning: A Maturity Model for Online Corporate Training*, available at <http://www.bersin.com/stages>.