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Rapid eLearning: Claiming A Spot In Your Content Developers' Toolkit

A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of
Adobe

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Executive Summary

In October 2009, Adobe commissioned Forrester Consulting to determine how the process of Rapid eLearning (ReL) impacts the eLearning creation process and ultimately the ability of workers to meet company goals. In this time of economic uncertainty, employees must have immediate access to quality eLearning to enable them to keep their skills up-to-date and razor-sharp as they work to drive the business forward. ReL helps to make this possible within the context of the work environment.

To evaluate current use and trends involving ReL, Forrester conducted a quantitative survey of large, medium-size, and small companies evenly spread across the major verticals and also conducted in-depth interviews with learning and/or HR professionals at organizations currently using Rapid eLearning tools. For the purposes of this study, ReL is defined as a process for rapid learning content creation in a template-based environment that requires no author programming skills. Specifically, the study examined the perceptions, adoption, impact, and long-term benefits of using ReL as an authoring tool to develop eLearning content.

ReL users surveyed touted the efficiency and budget-friendly nature of ReL. More than 90% of respondents in this study said that they have increased the amount of content created annually because of ReL use. Forty-nine percent of respondents said reduced cost of content development was one of the primary reasons they adopted ReL. One learning executive said that budget cuts severely limited her training capacity and ReL allowed her to deliver training which she would not have been able to deliver at all otherwise. The study also delved into challenges these users have faced with both implementation and user acceptance of ReL — factors that learning professionals should bear in mind as they consider ReL adoption.

Overall, professionals using ReL achieved four major benefits: 1) Companies create satisfactory content much faster than with traditional eLearning content development tools; 2) companies are able to better meet the needs of employees with short, focused learning; 3) ReL supports development of many kinds of content, including soft skills, compliance, and desktop and IT skills; and 4) ReL tools are easy to use, requiring no programming expertise. These benefits add up to time and cost savings, which are major drivers in this economic environment.

Key Findings

- **Lower cost of content creation is a big plus for ReL.** Reduced content development costs is one of the top three drivers for choosing ReL. Users also indicated that they chose the ReL content development approach over more traditional approaches because of the comparable cost savings.
- **ReL is changing the way content is developed and consumed.** Companies are developing shorter, single-concept eLearning modules, and ReL is bolstering that trend and growing in use. Seventy-four percent of companies surveyed indicated that they are increasing the use of ReL as an authoring tool.
- **ReL is not limited to routine content.** Technology skills such as desktop applications and IT processes are common to ReL, but this study shows that as use of ReL has grown, so has the breadth of training types for which it's being used. Now, compliance training, new employee orientation, as well as soft skills and other business and leadership skills with simulations and role plays, are also being created using ReL.

- **ReL is democratizing the content development process.** With ReL, the content developer role has expanded to a much broader team of people. Now, a subject matter expert or a staff trainer can create quality learning content that would not be possible without ReL. While the more complex methods of content creation are left to the programmers, content authors and instructional designers can also work together to repurpose content from instructor-led classroom training and create ReL courses on their own.
- **ReL content is easier and faster to update.** Learning content often requires frequent updates to stay on pace with learners, and the ability to easily change/update content drives up the value of ReL. With traditional content authoring tools, the update process takes longer, requires programming expertise, and may even have to be sent out for updates, adding time and money to the process.
- **Content authors using ReL find content development time faster.** Because ReL is template-based, the speed of creating content shifts from months to weeks or days. With limited development staff and the immediacy with which leaders demand content, ReL allows learning content to keep pace with the speed of the business.

Rapid eLearning Is Becoming A Valued Process

Rapid eLearning is a fast way to create eLearning content through the use of template-based tools. This easy-to-use content authoring process allows trainers, SMEs, and instructional designers to quickly design, author, and deliver Web-based learning content. As the ReL process has matured, eLearning too has grown in acceptance as an important and successful learning delivery method. In the past few years, financial constraints have tightened learning budgets and required content creators to find more efficient ways to develop content within a time frame that aligns with the business and the budget. The relatively low cost of ReL, along with a number of other factors, has raised the profile of ReL in the learning content creation community.

- **Fast content development gets training out quicker, enables more content creation.** Traditional content authoring can require months to complete the design, do the programming, create the visuals, etc. ReL combines the design, content development, and review processes into a shorter procedure that takes a few weeks or, if content is simpler, just a few days to complete the final product. ReL's speed allows authors to create more content in a shorter time frame. The growing need to develop this content more quickly was pointed out as a key driver for adoption of ReL by 58% of learning professionals surveyed (see Figure 1), and this drive has been borne out in respondents' view, with 65% seeing shorter content creation time as one of the top benefits of ReL use (see Figure 2). In some cases, because of shortened development time, ReL has become the main authoring process used in learning development. ReL users we talked to had a lot to say about the speed of development.

"Our projects are time sensitive. The material is already produced in [presentation software] or [other] documentation, and we need to turn it around quickly in the form of a self-paced course which can be packaged and deployed widely. Often we don't have time for a full engagement cycle. We couldn't do it without Rapid eLearning as our development tool." (IT learning director at a healthcare company)

- **Ability to change, update, customize, and localize content quickly is a valued feature.** Quick and easy change to existing learning content, addition of new content, and adapting content to different audiences save authors time and save the company money.

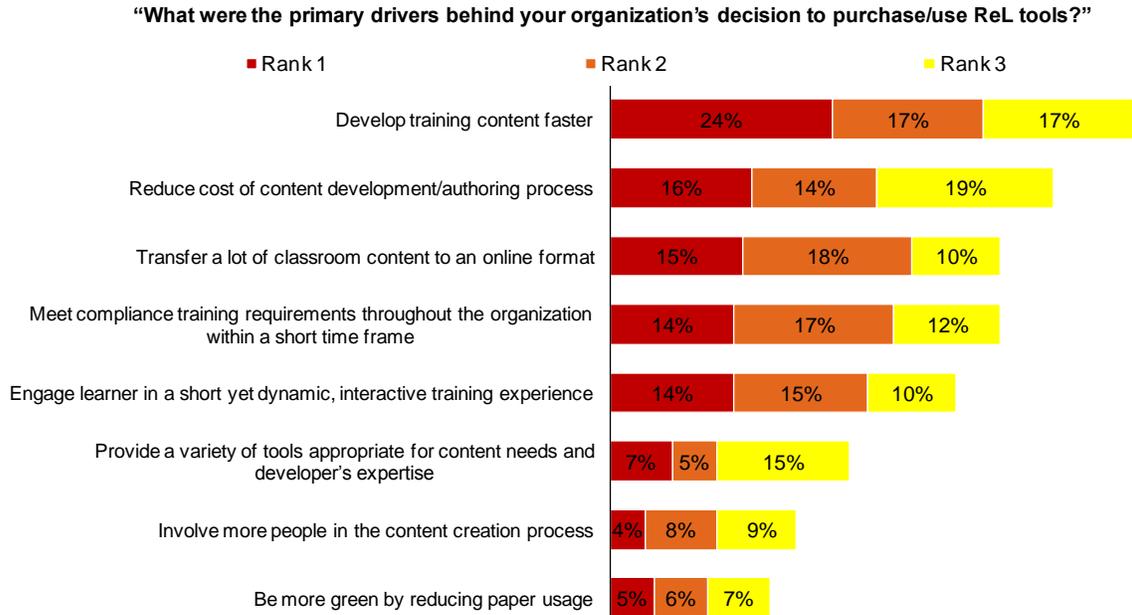
Traditionally, programming experts have made needed changes to content, which could take many days depending on their workload. Changes in externally developed content often meant sending content to the custom developer and getting in line to have changes made. Content needing quick creation and frequent updates are called out by 63% and 53% of respondents, respectively, as best-suited for ReL creation (see Figure 3), and for 66% of respondents, the ability to update/change content easily is one of the greatest benefits of ReL use.

"We don't have much time to spend on traditional eLearning, which takes longer, can't be adjusted as easily to each customer, and is more expensive. Depending on what kind of products [our client] has, we take out or put in learning pieces depending on their processes. We needed something to help with ease of this customization. A lot of our clients are competitors as well, so [the ability to adapt content using] ReL is key."
(Subject matter expert and training developer at a legal services firm supporting financial institutions)

"Before ReL, it was all Web-based [presentation software] — not suited for multiple audiences, and not very convenient. Now with ReL we can easily translate and localize in many languages." (Learning manager at a global machinery organization)

- **Breadth of content appropriate for ReL widens as content authors push boundaries.** ReL started as a tool for compliance training, with a heavy reliance on slides and assessments. ReL is now often the tool of choice for desktop training with simulations demonstrating application processes, soft skill training with simple role plays, and business processes that include a short video clip or user interaction around graphic placement. More than 50% of survey respondents are more likely to use ReL rather than other training methods for desktop application learning, compliance training, and procedural/business skills training. Content areas like new employee orientation and soft skills were most likely to be created using ReL tools by more than 40% of respondents (see Figure 4). One IT learning director at a healthcare company stated, "We've gotten so good at ReL authoring that it is now our primary tool."

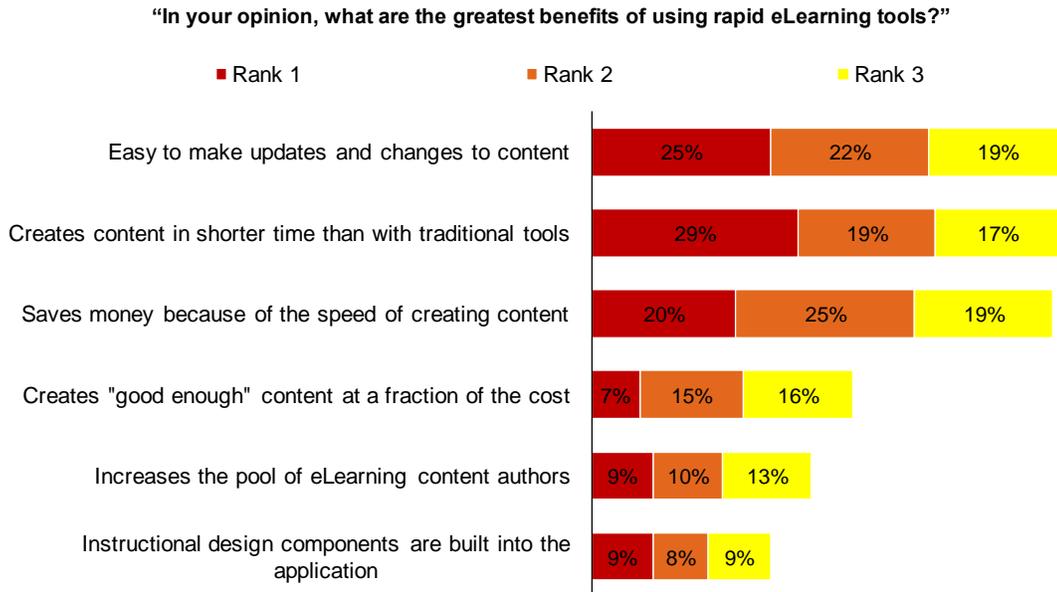
Figure 1: Speed And Cost Reduction Top Drivers To Adopt ReL Tools



Base: 103 online learning decision-makers

Source: “Rapid eLearning Trends,” a commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, November 2009

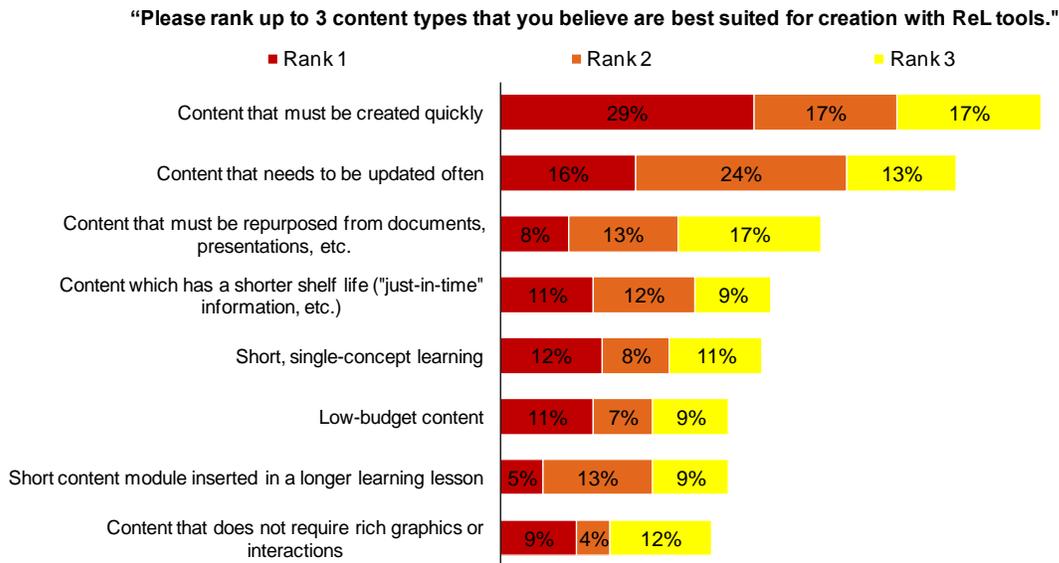
Figure 2: Top Benefits Of ReL: Ease, Speed, And Cost Savings



Base: 103 online learning decision-makers

Source: “Rapid eLearning Trends,” a commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, November 2009

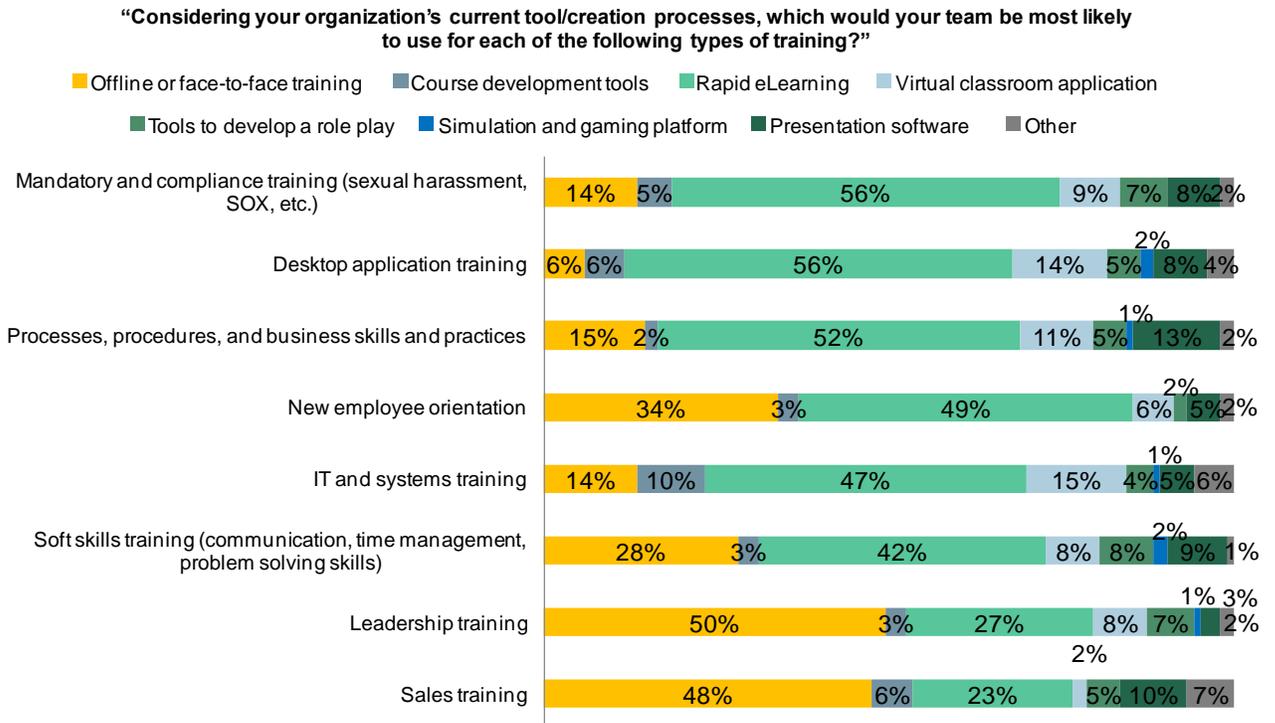
Figure 3: Content Best Suited For ReL Creation



Base: 103 online learning decision-makers

Source: "Rapid eLearning Trends," a commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, November 2009

Figure 4: Use of Creation Methods Across Training Types



Base: 103 online learning decision-makers

Source: "Rapid eLearning Trends," a commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, November 2009

ReL Impacts The eLearning Creation Process

With ReL, companies have a resource they can use to develop content quickly and simply. Before ReL, companies either created a slide-based presentation or used traditional eLearning content with designers, content specialists, and programmers to plan, storyboard, and create an eLearning course. ReL gives companies a middle ground for content development. It also allows people in different disciplines to author content, creating a democratization of the content authoring process. ReL does not require content creators to have programming expertise. Because the application has templates into which content is placed, subject matter experts, staff trainers, or lines of business people can use ReL to develop a training module. Often this is done with an instructional designer's oversight. The need to keep employees well-trained, but within limited training budget/resources, makes ReL very attractive to companies.

"We have a better mechanism for accomplishing required training, and we've been able to reduce the cost of that very training while retaining control of the process."

(Manager of learning at large consulting organization)

- **ReL allows more contributors to play a role in the eLearning final product . . .** Ninety-eight percent of respondents confirmed that ReL has changed the way their organizations create content. Forty-eight percent of respondents said that a significant amount of content is now created by instructional designers, SMEs, and trainers, rather than teams of skilled programmers, content experts, and Web and graphics designers using the prototyping process of storyboarding (see Figure 5). Nontechnical employees like SMEs and training staff can create content because of the simplicity of the ReL template-based authoring tool. Fifty-seven percent of the respondents said this ability for nontechnical staff to develop content was, in fact, a reason for choosing ReL tools specifically as opposed to others available. With ReL, authors do not need to have any programming knowledge to be successful. This ease-of-use interface allows a broader group of content authors to create or participate in the process.
- **. . . so the learning team may get a new look.** Rather than spending months designing and creating eLearning, today's teams are a blend of programmers, SMEs, and training people who may all be creating ReL courses or converting classroom courses to online courses. Teams' roles are less defined as they all work together to meet content delivery deadlines. Twenty-one percent of ReL users surveyed, in fact, indicated reduced need for highly skilled programming authors as a direct result of ReL use (see Figure 6). But these authors retain their value, being available to provide the higher-end content development needs. Even in ReL content creation, the instructional designer's role will remain important, to make sure that the principles of adult learning are addressed, that authors have the authoring templates they need, and that engaging content is the end product. A strong majority of ReL users surveyed, 66%, reported that instructional designers are still involved in ReL content creation by providing templates and/or guidance to SMEs. The results-based trend exemplified by ReL and democratization of training content creation is summed up by an interviewee:

"[Since we started using ReL] we focus now on the results and not the process. . . . I'm looking for content rather than form, and with traditional [authoring], it's the opposite."

(Director of global development in the public sector [education])

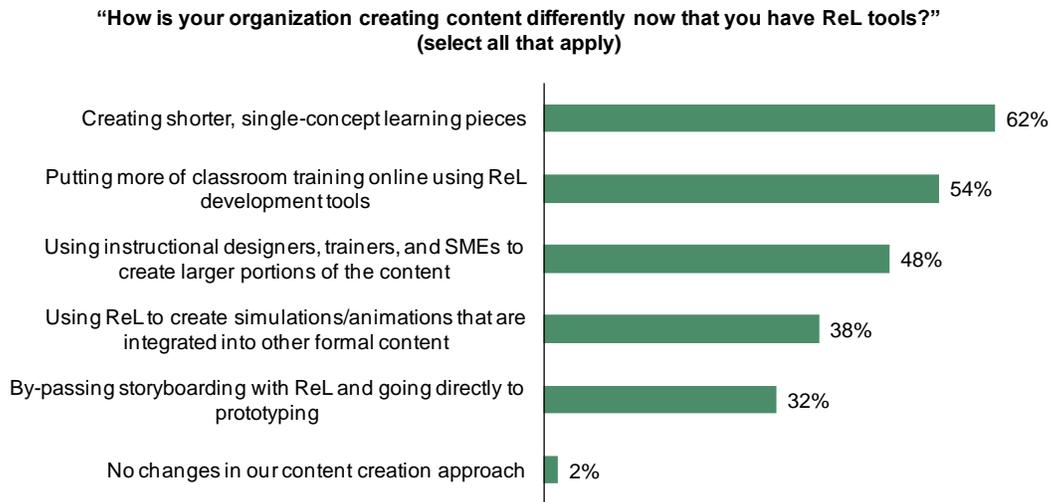
- **Employees learn from and like ReL content in today's fast-paced business world.** ReL users interviewed confirmed the need for content development to align with the speed of the business and the schedules of today's learners. The leading positive outcomes of

ReL on learners include a greater acceptance of learning content and a higher number of completions due to the short, 10-15 minute learning chunks, which easy fit into learner schedules (see Figure 7). Just as organizations evaluate the effectiveness of other authoring tool results, 98% of organizations evaluated ReL effectiveness, indicating that organizations are taking ReL seriously as a content development approach.

- **ReL enables companies to create more content even with decreased budgets.** Fifty percent of respondents are creating between 11% and 29% more content annually because of ReL, and 20% of respondents are creating more than 30% more content annually. The courses are shorter, more focused, fit well into the fast-paced work environment, and are less expensive to develop.

“ReL use is increasing, but we are spending a lot less on training because of the efficiency of this tool. We’re also saving a ton on in-person training by using ReL instead.” (Subject matter expert and training developer at a legal services firm supporting financial institutions)

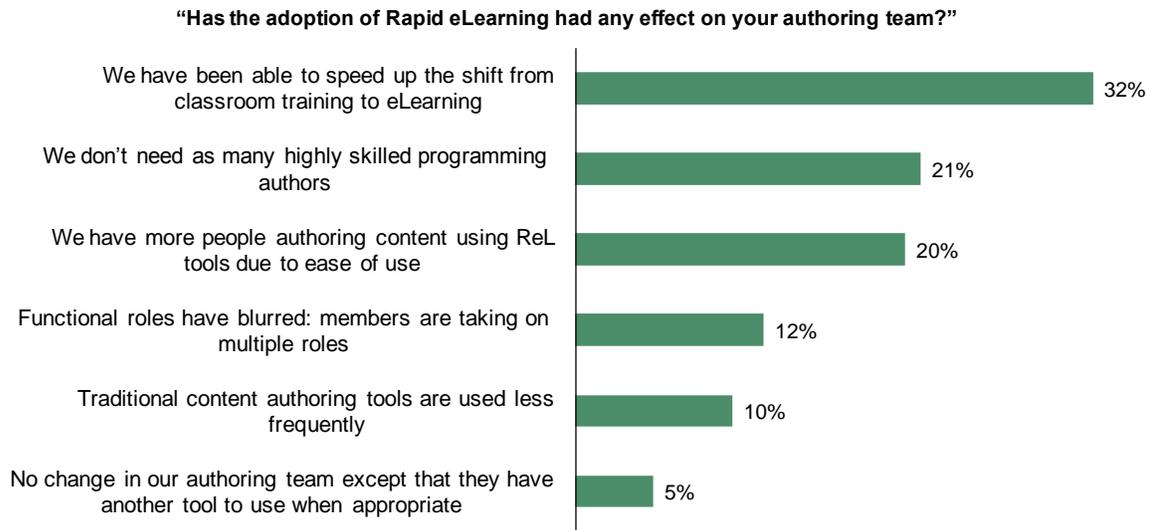
Figure 5: How Content Is Changing With ReL Use



Base: 103 online learning decision-makers

Source: “Rapid eLearning Trends,” a commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, November 2009

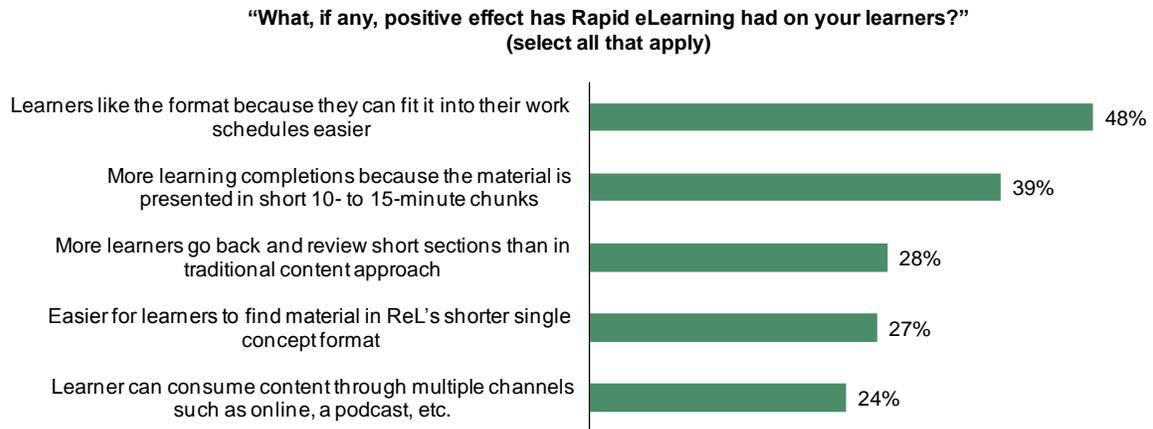
Figure 6: Changes To The Authoring Team



Base: 103 online learning decision-makers

Source: “Rapid eLearning Trends,” a commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, November 2009

Figure 7: Learners Appreciate Short, Adaptable Nature Of ReL Content



Base: 103 online learning decision-makers

Source: “Rapid eLearning Trends,” a commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, November 2009

Is ReL The Solution For Your eLearning Team?

Given the changes to content and personnel that ReL use can encourage, a number of factors should be considered in the decision to adopt this growing method. In deciding when to use ReL in content development, learning professionals should first think about the complexity of the content. ReL excels in single-concept, shorter learning where content needs to get out to learners to be consumed as quickly as possible. The content is good enough to meet the learning goal. If content is multifaceted, with many layers of complexity, a choice of a more traditional tool approach might be best. But not all eLearning requires the same level of content development, and budget often dictates the time and effort that content developers can devote to a course. It's also important to note that ReL is not without its own set of challenges. This study found that overall, there was not one single challenge presented by ReL use that bore a huge impact, but there are some factors that learning professionals should heed as they consider ReL adoption in their own organization:

- **Make sure authors know the range of ReL functionality.** Although fast content creation is the essence of ReL, the tool provides deeper functionality like animation, video clips, or other multimedia content which many content creators don't use either because they are unaware of the features or they are under pressure to produce so quickly that they don't take the time to explore these features – what they are doing is “good enough.” Only 48% of users surveyed add interactivity on a regular basis and 36% of learning professionals surveyed reported that authors' non-utilization of features beyond the basics of presentation to multimedia platform conversion is an issue in their use of ReL (see Figure 8). The resulting quality tradeoff was stated frankly by an interviewee:

“A lot of ReL isn't much more than the page-turner, but we've tried to put in some templates to get good instructional design basics. We don't consider ReL to be our highest quality work. It's just the right solution for projects we need to complete in six weeks. . . . The whole point is to be fast.” (IT learning director at a healthcare company)

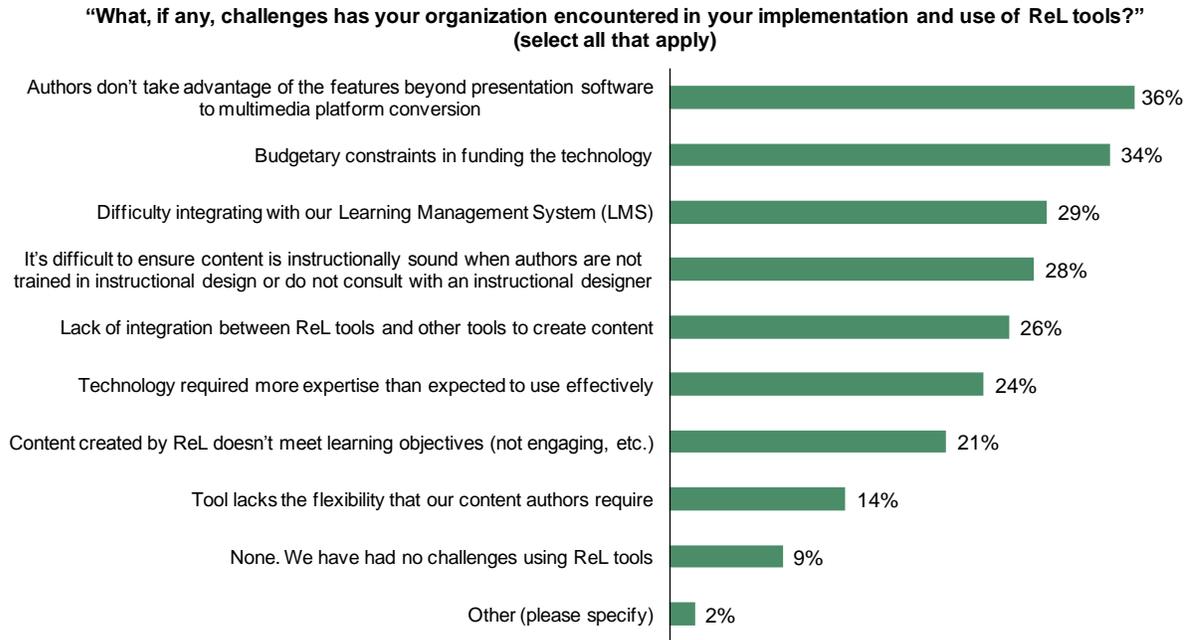
- **Get buy-in from content developers around tool functionality.** Many developers resist ReL because they do not feel they can get the same quality using ReL as they can with traditional tools. With some experience using the ReL tool, these developers experience the benefit of quickly creating shorter and less in-depth content and reserve traditional tools for more comprehensive eLearning content development.

“There is the challenge of perceived 'lower quality,' and thus the conclusion that anyone can do it. We have to justify why we are on the project rather than just giving LOB the tool . . . [Meanwhile] folks who really like the high end stuff get to thinking they are spending all their time cranking out these courses, and wonder 'when do we get to do some of this higher end development?’” (IT learning director for a healthcare company)

- **Work on integration with other content creation tools.** Integration with other authoring tools and integration with LMS applications are not always as seamless as content developers would like. Forrester found that 29% of respondents feel that it is difficult to integrate ReL with their LMS, creating a challenge to their overall use of the tool. This challenge can limit how the tool is used in the learning environment and the effort that the developer puts into using interactive features. Learning professionals should navigate their own deployment accordingly.

- Get buy-in from users.** Overall, most learners like the ReL format because it's shorter and to the point. However, 38% of professionals surveyed reported the challenge of users skimming through content and not taking it as seriously as traditional content (see Figure 9). ReL necessitates that authors understand the functionality of ReL and develop engaging content just as they would for more traditional content.

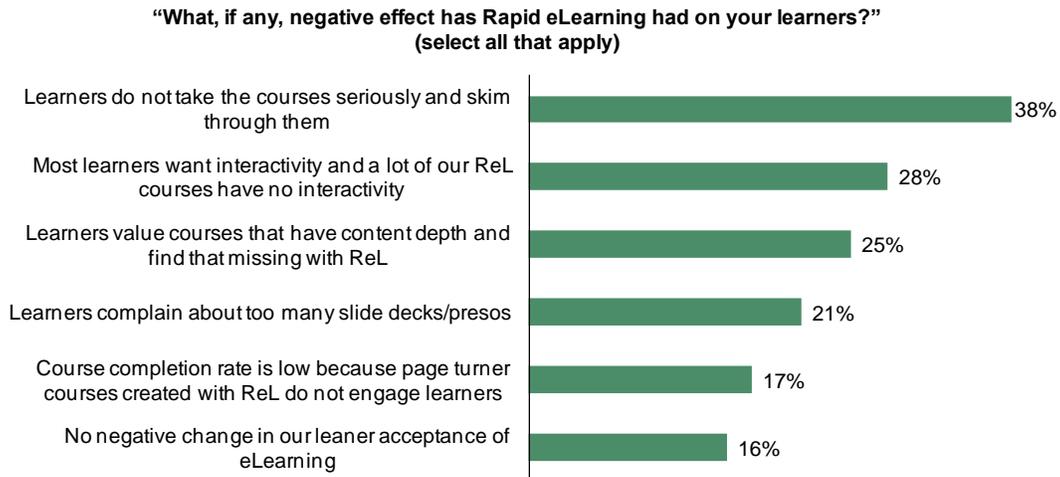
Figure 8: Challenges Of ReL Use: Status Quo Creation, Budget, And Integration Top The List



Base: 103 online learning decision-makers

Source: “Rapid eLearning Trends,” a commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, November 2009

Figure 9: Challenges To Learner Acceptance Of ReL Content



Base: 103 online learning decision-makers

Source: “Rapid eLearning Trends,” a commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, November 2009

Future Bodes Well For Rapid eLearning

Employees want to learn in order to be more successful in their jobs and to improve their chances for promotion. But the demand is increasing for short, to-the-point content that is highly customized to those goals. ReL is a way to meet these needs. Expect to see these future developments:

- **ReL use will continue to grow, even in economic recovery.** It's no surprise that in the down economy, the learning team has been subject to some new challenges that have increased the value and desire for cheaper tools requiring less man-hours. In some circumstances, these tools have gone from helpful to critical in an economic respect.

"I've been able to do training this year, given the economic downturn that I simply wouldn't have been able to deliver at all without ReL." (Training and project manager at a financial services firm)

Tight training budgets coupled with the need to keep employees' skills razor-sharp, will continue to drive use of ReL. Even with economic recovery, ReL use will grow because it meets content and learner needs and speeds up the overall trend of taking learning online.

- **ReL will continue to fill an important gap in learning content creation.** ReL will not replace all traditional online approaches to training. Rather, it is a method of addressing a unique need in the continuum of online learning content creation. For short and speedy projects, and where adaptability/change is a requirement, ReL use will likely continue to grow, saving heavier creation processes for more in-depth content.
- **The content development process will spread outside of the learning realm.** Because the ReL tool requires little training or programming skills, expect further democratization of content development. The tool offers greater levels of independence to SMEs, trainers, corporate communications, public relations, and lines of business in the content creation process, with the option to ask for assistance as needed from content development staff.

"We now have a high quality product which we develop quickly. We get good looking training in a short turnaround, which is appreciated. If it truly is something where an instructor who normally does in-person can self-author, we support them since often they have limited design experience." (IT learning director at a healthcare company)

- **Instructional designers' roles will change.** Instructional designers understand components of good learning and spend weeks designing excellent custom courses. In the future, they will work closely with SMEs or corporate communications directors to give advice and suggestions and even help them design on the fly. Instructional designers will also create design templates that new content developers need for specific projects.
- **Content developers will become more sophisticated with the ReL tool.** Today, many developers are using little more than presentation files converted to multimedia for their content creation process. This will change as developers learn more about the capabilities of ReL tools and use their creativity to extend the tools further.

It's clear that ReL tools will have a seat at the table in content development departments as a powerful tool for the everyday content development and even beyond as adoption of ReL grows, and maturity of both the tools and their users continues to increase.

Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester Consulting conducted an online survey of 103 and interviewed eight learning decision-makers using Rapid eLearning tools to evaluate adoption and use trends. Survey participants included learning decision-makers at a manager level and above. All respondents to the study work for large organizations with more than 1,000 employees. Questions provided to the participants asked about drivers to adopt ReL tools, the impact of ReL use on their learning team and learners, as well as challenges in using the tools. The study began in November 2009 and was completed in December 2009.