

Rapid E-learning

By Sarah Boehle

Enter rapid e-learning development software, which allows organizations to create e-learning more quickly, more easily and at lower price points than is possible using conventional e-learning development tools.

Just how hot is the rapid e-learning market right now? A 2004 research report ("Rapid e-Learning: Market, Tools, Techniques, and Best Practices for Building e-Learning Programs in Weeks") from Bersin & Associates, an Oakland, Calif.-based research firm, predicts that rapid e-learning will account for more than 50 percent of the e-learning development tool market by next year. Josh Bersin, principal and founder of the company, says that of the 228 e-learning developers surveyed for the report, rapid e-learning accounts for more than one-third of all training-related projects.

But few seem to understand, let alone agree on, what rapid e-learning is. The eLearning Guild, a Santa Rosa, Calif., "community of practice" for training professionals, conducted a poll on the topic last February. Bill Brandon, editor of the organization's *eLearning Developers' Journal*, says that when asked, "Is your organization focused on rapid e-learning?", the most popular response by far was "What's rapid e-learning?"

According to the Guild, a precise definition for the term is in the eye of the beholder. For some, it may mean speeding up instructional design by streamlining certain processes, such as the storyboarding phase. For others, the term refers to how learners consume content (e.g., rapidly or at the time of need). Still another definition relates to the rapid e-learning development software tools to which the Bersin & Associates report refers.

While product specifications vary from tool to tool and from vendor to vendor, most rapid authoring tools employ a "templated" approach to developing courseware and feature "easy-to-use" interfaces that guide subject matter experts (SMEs) and others through the course-creation process.

The tools automate many of the processes, such as screen building and the generation of course navigation elements, that often consume e-learning developers' time. Instructional design typically is built into the tools, and content can be transitioned easily into them from commonly used business software like Microsoft PowerPoint or Word. Many tools include media elements, simple testing and feedback capabilities, and tracking mechanisms. k

Some claim that in order to earn membership in the rapid development club, a tool must allow courses to be developed within a certain number of weeks (three or less, according to some reports) and that users must be able to learn how to use it in a few hours or less. Precise qualifications vary, but proponents agree that all rapid development tools do the following: They allow courses to be developed more quickly and at a lower cost than conventional tools; they are easy to use and easy to learn how to use; they are affordable to purchase; and they make it easy to update content.

By contrast, Bersin's report estimates that a single hour of instructional content authored with traditional e-learning development software can take anywhere from three to 12 or more weeks and cost \$5,000 to \$30,000 or more to develop.

When Rapid Development Makes Sense

For overburdened training departments that can't respond to every e-learning request or get content out to the field as quickly as their stakeholders might like, rapid development software

can seem like a dream come true. Faced with several last-minute training requests? Just round up some SMEs with minimal technical expertise, show them how to use the tool in a few hours or less, and turn them loose. Sound too good to be true? That's because it is.

Experts say to avoid dumping all of your content into the software. Instead, you have to do careful, ongoing assessments to determine which courses are a good fit for rapid tools, and which are not. "It's in everyone's best interest to apply the tools as frequently as possible," says Bryan Chapman, an e-learning analyst with brandon-hall.com in Sunnyvale, Calif. "But you have to watch out that you're not sacrificing the quality of your courses by using them, and that you're not applying them to situations for which they aren't a good fit."

Most in the industry agree that rapid development tools are not effective for learning situations in which the goal is for trainees to acquire high-level, complex competencies or skills (think leadership, business acumen or teamwork training). Although rapid tools can allow organizations to realize significant gains in efficiency and speed, Chapman says, they aren't as flexible as traditional e-learning tools and don't generate learning experiences that are as deep or engaging as those authored through non-rapid tools. "I use the housing analogy," he says. "There is nothing wrong with prefabricated homes, but if you are striving for a certain level of quality, they aren't the best choice."

It is only when the learning objective is simple broadcast of information ("We just changed the price of the new Cadillac.") or critical knowledge transfer ("We just changed the price and everyone must know what it means to him or her."), according to Bersin & Associates, that rapid e-learning should enter the picture. Have a quick product update to share with channel partners and sales reps? Do recent regulatory changes require you to inform employees of new government mandates sooner rather than later? Need to do a quick demo on an update to your organization's enterprise software program or educate employees about a new corporate policy? In such instances, rapid e-learning may fit the bill.

When the first documented case of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) occurred in North America in 2003, CHEX Knowledge Exchange, the learning and development arm of Child Health Corporation of America (CHCA) in Shawnee Mission, Kan., turned to a rapid development tool for help. Within 24 hours, says vice president of marketing Kristy Johnston, CHEX was able to create a full course about the virus, including information about detection and prevention. Within 48 hours, the course was deployed on the CHEX LMS. "We wouldn't have been able to do that using traditional development tools," says Johnston.

Rapid e-learning also can be used as an introduction to more involved training, pundits say, by helping workers get up to speed on a topic and ready to advance to more complex learning. At least when sharing information—as opposed to teaching complex skills and competencies—rapid tools also are ideal for content that goes out of date quickly or that changes continually and requires frequent updating.

Is rapid e-learning really as fast and lean as its supporters claim? Educaterra thinks so. In 2003, the organization received a mandate from its parent company Telefonica, the phone company of Spain and Latin America, to move 50 percent of its classroom training to e-learning by 2007.

Three years into the conversion process, Daniel Purlich, who is director of content at Educaterra, says that the results are encouraging. "This year, we are already at around 30 percent." k

Educaterra's success wouldn't have been possible without the aid of rapid development tools, he says. Back in 2003, the company employed between 40 and 50 full-time and freelance instructional designers, all of whom were responsible for creating approximately 50 e-learning courses per year. Each of those courses took between four to five months to develop. "Suddenly, we needed 500 courses per year and there was no way we would ever get the budget to hire 400 more people to make it happen," Purlich says. "We had to find a way to produce 500 courses per

year with a budget to produce only 50."

Today, Educaterra still employs the same number of instructional designers who develop the same number of courses each year. But now there is a separate department of five full-time staffers who focus solely on rapid e-learning development for "the kinds of just-in-time information and transfer of knowledge that the company's business lines need on a day-to-day basis," Purlich says. All told, this new department creates approximately 450 courses per year.

A Bunch of Hokum?

But for all of its selling points, rapid e-learning has its share of detractors. William Horton, the author of several books on e-learning design and delivery and a frequent speaker on the conference circuit, is one of them. "Speed is only one dimension of e-learning, and it doesn't do you any good to go faster if you're headed in wrong direction," he says.

When it comes to rapid e-learning, there is merit to Horton's argument. Indeed, it is commonly known that the most time-consuming portion of the e-learning development process has nothing whatsoever to do with the use of authoring software—be it rapid or otherwise. The bulk of the work takes place at the front end of the course-creation process, which is when instructional systems design occurs. "The hard part of e-learning isn't entering logic and text and graphics into a tool. The hard part is deciding what graphics and text and logic should be entered," Horton says.

When people rush or skip these important front-end steps, as they often do when using rapid e-learning, says Horton, the danger is that they'll end up with something that simply doesn't work. "In the end, you may be better off and more efficient with a slow development tool, if using a rapid tool means that you have to go back to correct mistakes and throw out a lot of earlier work."

Meanwhile, others pose this question: If all that rapid e-learning tools are good for is critical knowledge transfer and information broadcast, why are they necessary in the first place?

"Do you need to educate or inform people?" asks Horton. "If all you need to do is put information online so that people can access it when they need it, then don't build a whole course with tests and fake interactivity. Don't apologize for it. Just do it and tell them how to find it."

Tony O'Driscoll, a researcher at IBM Almaden Services Research in Raleigh, N.C., couldn't agree more. His On Demand Learning team spent the last several months analyzing the thousands of courses that IBM offers to its solution sellers. He wanted to determine which courses were conceptual and which were merely procedural or informational.

O'Driscoll discovered that more than 30 percent of IBM's solution seller courseware fell into the procedural and informational category. His team then immediately took steps to "strip out" such content from its learning offerings and better marry it to the workflow of solution sellers. The resultant portal, he says, is customized to individual solution sellers, allowing them to call up the just-in-time information and business data they need to do their jobs effectively from day to day.

O'Driscoll says the system is more like a Web search engine such as Google than an LMS filled with courses—and he believes that's a good thing. "When they are looking for information or procedures, people need instructions—they don't need instruction," he says. "If I need to learn how to download software for my PC, for example, I don't need a course on it. All I need to know is how to do it."

That's why O'Driscoll believes that any content that is "procedural, declarative or fact-driven" should never be shackled to an LMS or course. Instead, he says, "it should be delivered directly on the glass within the context of workflow."

Rapid e-learning proponents counter such arguments by saying that rapid development tools do what databases like IBM's can't: They allow training managers to track completion rates and assess what was learned. Some also say that there are certain forms of information that need to be presented in a more engaging format than databases or Word documents allow.

But proponents can't argue with IBM's results. The business case for the solution seller portal predicted a time savings of 10 percent and an increased ability to identify opportunities. So far, preliminary results bear that out, although O'Driscoll wouldn't have final results until the pilot was complete.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

Even if you use rapid e-learning software for the right content, however, there are still several pitfalls to avoid.

Establish a Gatekeeper. CHEX's Johnston says that people tend to get excited about having a new vehicle to provide large groups of workers with information in a consistent way, but there's a danger that an organization's information channels can become inundated by staff, educators, managers and others who want to transfer everything they have to the new software. "It's wonderful that they get excited," says Johnston, "but you don't want indiscriminate use of the tools to occur." At Educaterra, Purlich's team prevents this by posting gatekeepers who are responsible for deciding whether content is worthy of a course and, if so, whether it should be rapidly authored or assigned to Educaterra's formal e-learning development team.

Train SMEs. Most companies turn to rapid tools because they take some of the pressure off of the training department and place responsibility for content generation in the hands of SMEs. But Anita Rosen says few SMEs have instructional systems or Web design experience, or know how to create good e-learning. "A lot of times, SMEs are more focused on getting courses completed and off of their desks than on students' learning needs," says Rosen, CEO of ReadyGo, a Web-based training software provider in Mountain View, Calif.

"That's why it's so important to properly educate your SMEs on proper course design techniques," says Nick van Dam, global chief learning officer of professional services firm Deloitte Touche Tomatsu in New York, N.Y., which uses rapid development tools extensively. "It's not a matter of simply saying, 'Just download this tool and good luck with it.' As a learning function, you have to establish minimum requirements and take care that the people who use the tool have gone through training and that you have developed templates and examples for them to use and defined minimum criteria from a quality perspective."

Develop a Toolkit. Another best practice, says Bersin, is to provide content authors with access to a development toolkit featuring templates and standards governing use of color, font, number of words per slide or page, audio usage, etc. At Deloitte, for example, every individual interested in authoring courseware is presented with a pre-packaged toolkit that includes quality standards, templates and strict branding guidelines concerning color, font, look and feel.

Involve the Professionals. "Typical training people hate rapid tools because [the tools] go against their job and they bypass and short-circuit everything that they learned in school," says Bersin. "[Training professionals] will always push back on it." Still, he says, professional developers must play a major role in the process if rapid e-learning is to succeed—whether that entails shepherding the development of standards, templates and processes or serving as a resource for content authors.

Perform QA Checks. At both Educaterra and Deloitte, a quality assurance (QA) check is performed on each and every course before it is distributed to learners. QA checks are invaluable to ensuring that courses meet certain quality standards, says van Dam, but trainers should also be mindful when conducting them to avoid adding unnecessary layers of bureaucracy to the

process. "The training department should not become the compliance police," says van Dam. "The goal is to show people that you are there to help—not to make their lives more difficult."

Follow Up. Most rapid e-learning tools feature built-in tracking and assessment capabilities. Eric Vidal, product marketing manager for Santa Clara, Calif.-based Web meeting provider WebEx Communications, says that many SMEs tend to go "on and on for 55 minutes or more, covering content that learners don't really want or need to know." That, he says, is where analytics enter the picture. "Try to manage and measure the success of each course or object," he says. "If learners are repeatedly logging out of an hour-long course after only 12 minutes, you need to go back to the drawing board and polish that course."

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