



THE POWER OF TRUSTED PARTNERS IN LEARNING

How Mid-Market Companies Are Growing L&D Capacity



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INTRODUCTION

In the ocean of companies searching for training advice, there are the “whales” (i.e., companies with more than 10,000 employees, usually with wide-spread, globally complex training functions) and the “minnows” (companies with fewer than 100 employees that may have no in-house learning capabilities or a relatively nascent training function). Then there are all the other fish in the ocean that span the divide in size between the whales and minnows.

However, much of the advice and insights that are widely available to learning leaders largely ignores all the other fish. It’s not hard to find guidance for those taking their first swim in the learning and development (L&D) waters, nor is it hard to find case studies and solutions tailored to guiding giant, lumbering learning programs through rough seas. But what’s out there for those in the middle?

Now, all mid-sized companies aren’t necessarily aspiring to grow into “whales,” but they could use some support in becoming bigger fish. To grow, and to grow effectively and efficiently, mid-market companies need to find ways to take the next steps.

Based on our research, one of the ways that these mid-market companies can appreciably accelerate their growth is through an ongoing relationship with an external training provider that they trust. Why would they do this? As you will see in the following report, partnerships deliver results. Mid-market companies are continuously grappling with many of the same issues as larger organizations when it comes to employee learning, and the data shows that they are more successful when assisted by a trusted learning partner.

In 2021, Infopro Learning, Inc. and Training Industry, Inc. partnered for a research project that surveyed learning leaders and decision-makers at 296 companies across a broad array of industries to explore what mid-sized organizations are doing and how learning providers are guiding them.

In this report, we provide a snapshot of what the modern L&D landscape looks like for those in the mid-market, and along the way highlight how forming trusted partnerships with learning providers can make the difference between adequate training and best-in-class learning that drives business results.



THE LEARNING EFFECTIVENESS TARGET

Of the many types of potential learning outcomes that organizations consider — from learner reactions to downstream performance appraisals and so on — they all serve to speak to one overarching goal: effective employee learning. It is the litmus test that all learning efforts are subjected to. In many ways, other means of viewing learning outcomes are deficient in isolation unless, in combination, they serve to drive effectiveness.

When we asked learning leaders in the mid-market how their organizations were doing at training employees, 62% said that their learning was frequently effective (Figure 1). Not perfect, but good. Certainly better than the 31% of our sample who said employee training was only sometimes effective.

Among this 62%, there was no pattern in effectiveness ratings based on the size of the company. This suggests that mid-market companies across the spectrum of sizes can do things right when it comes to learning, or

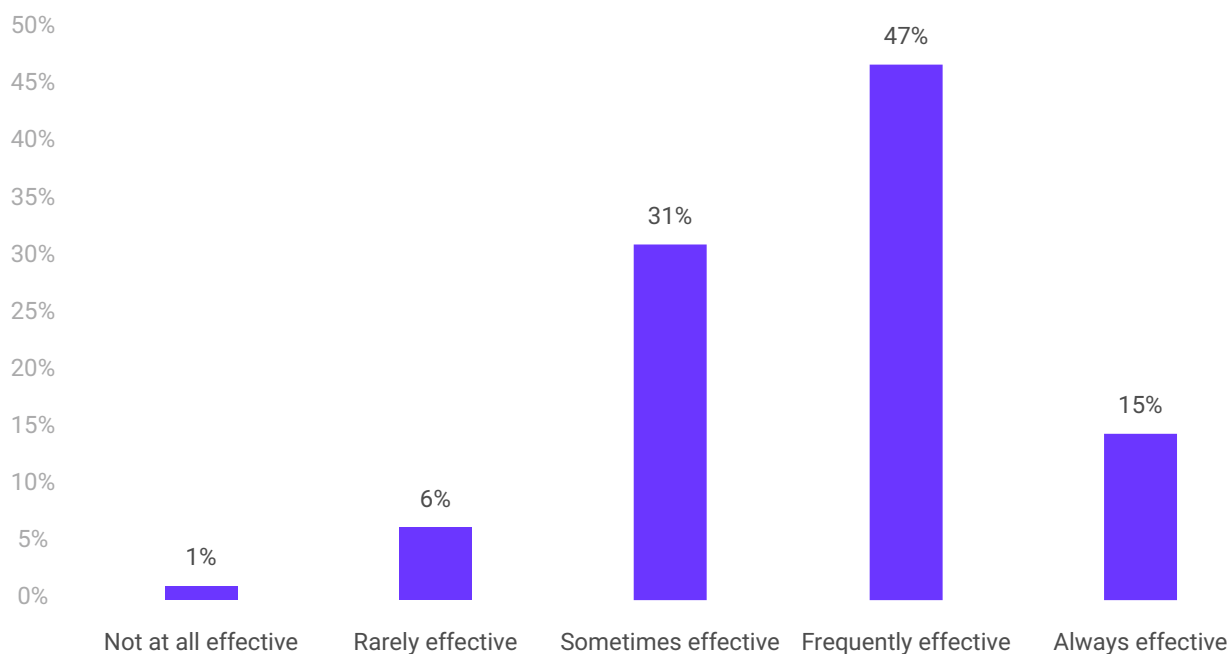
at least adapting to different challenges of scale and changing learning goals.

There's a story, as well, in where this number has been in the past few years based on historical Training Industry research. In a 2019 sample of 396 companies, we found this same rating was 56%, and in another sample of 411 companies, this rating was 52%. In a 2020 sample of 342 companies, 69% said their training was frequently effective.

So over time, companies have been raising the bar, and we saw that reflected in our results. Compared to just a couple years ago, there has been roughly a double-digit increase (depending on which comparisons one makes) in learning programs that are doing a decent job of meeting the organization's needs.

However, among the 62% in our current sample, it's worth emphasizing that only 15% said their learning

Figure 1 | Ratings of Training Effectiveness in Mid-Market Companies



was always effective. As seen in the figure, 47% of the companies are doing well enough with training. While that's not a trivial percentage, it also means that relatively few are doing great. But could they?



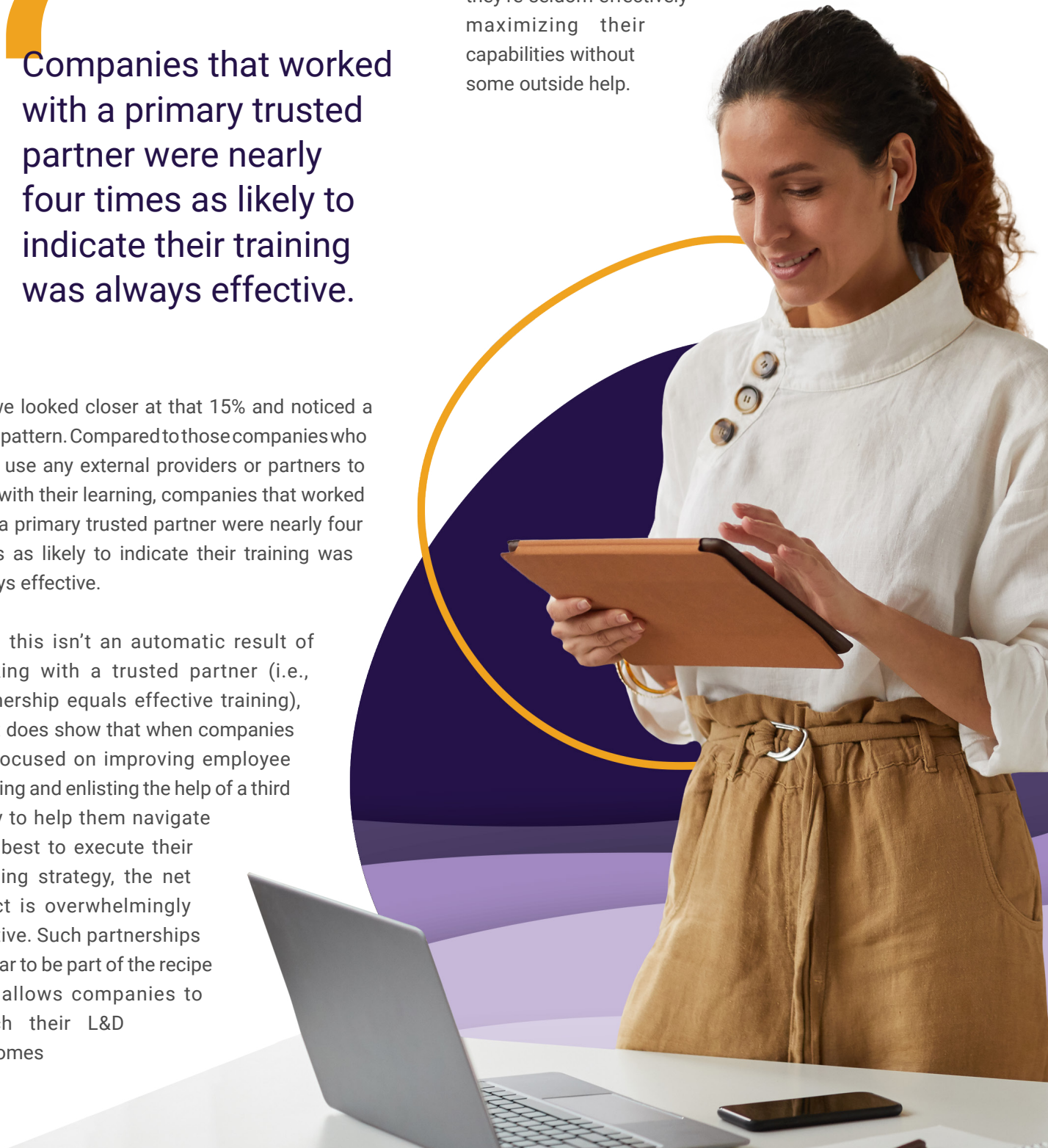
Companies that worked with a primary trusted partner were nearly four times as likely to indicate their training was always effective.

So, we looked closer at that 15% and noticed a clear pattern. Compared to those companies who don't use any external providers or partners to help with their learning, companies that worked with a primary trusted partner were nearly four times as likely to indicate their training was always effective.

Now, this isn't an automatic result of working with a trusted partner (i.e., partnership equals effective training), but it does show that when companies are focused on improving employee learning and enlisting the help of a third party to help them navigate how best to execute their learning strategy, the net effect is overwhelmingly positive. Such partnerships appear to be part of the recipe that allows companies to enrich their L&D outcomes

— not only are these companies aiming for the top, but they're reaching it.

In short, our data suggests that the companies striving to do their best work to help employees learn tend to have trusted partners backing them up. In other words, they're seldom effectively maximizing their capabilities without some outside help.



CHASING THE RIGHT INITIATIVES

Training is about more than effectiveness, though. It can shape the direction that an organization moves in the market. It molds the experiences of employees, upskills their current capabilities, ensures they're meeting compliance goals just as much as development goals. Without a doubt, the circumstances of 2020 and 2021 precipitated at least a temporary shift in how many organizations focused their efforts or prompted reassessment of what those efforts needed to look like in response to a suddenly dynamic marketplace. To that end, we asked our learning leaders about the initiatives they were focusing on in the next couple years.

What they told us was that in the mid-market, the following were considered high priorities:

- **Aligning training content with goals** to better ensure that the aims of the organization are not only represented in learning offerings but are cultivated in such a way that a company is better positioned to achieve them.
- **Using learning as a vehicle for employee retention** in the sense that a training experience is about engaging an employee with the organization that provides it beyond just meeting that employee's knowledge or skill needs.
- **Deploying competency-based learning programs** that take a holistic view of job knowledge in addition to both hard and soft skills to set the foundation for different pathways to success at the individual, team and enterprise levels.

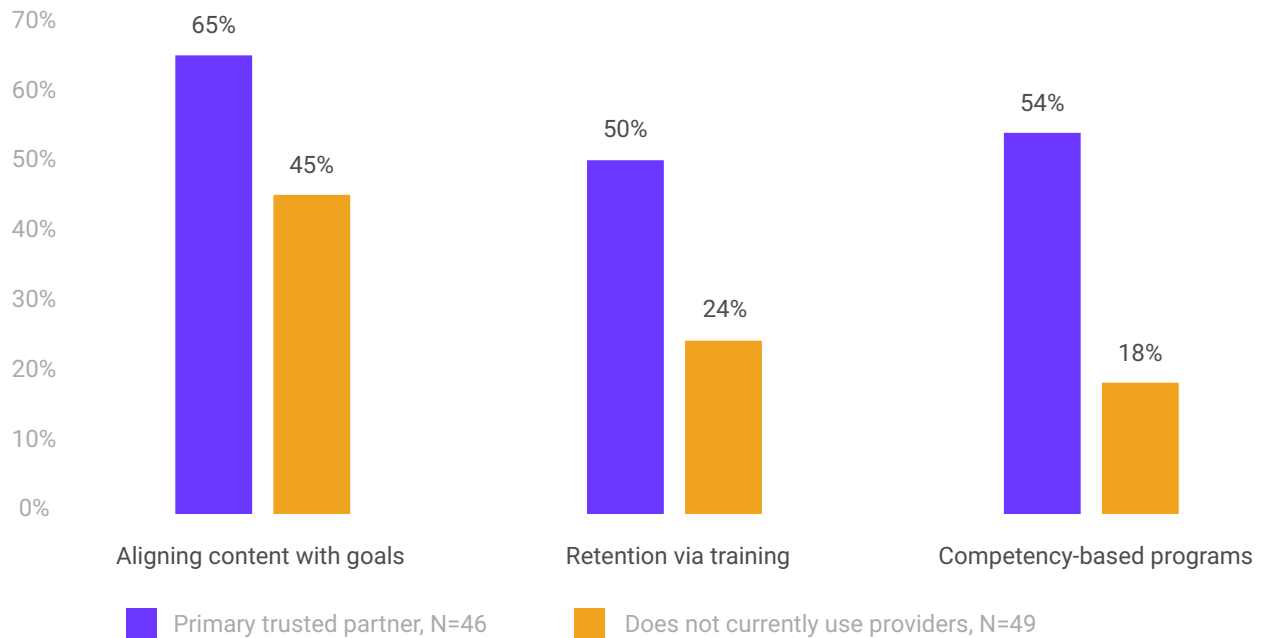
While these may sound like obvious objectives at first glance, it's worth noting how this focus has shifted. In mid-2020, most companies had a different set of priorities – we found that more than half of the companies in a Training Industry sample of 314 organizations identified

compliance and safety in addition to focusing on the customer experience as the two biggest initiatives on the horizon. Comparing that sample with our current results, we interpret the shift as evidence that organizational strategies driven by reactive concerns in 2020 are yielding ground to more proactive priorities, despite lingering uncertainties.

What might be aiding these companies' focus on these current priorities? Who allows them to take this proactive stance toward meeting the needs of their business through the learning programs they provide to employees?

Trusted partners. Our data shows that companies were much more likely to focus on these strategic long-term initiatives when working with a partner versus working in relative isolation (Figure 2). For instance, when it comes to trying to use learning programs and the quality thereof as a driver of employee retention, companies working with a trusted partner were twice as likely to focus on this as a high priority. Given the state of many talent markets, being able to retain employees not only insulates these employers against losing precious institutional knowledge and skills, but it also represents a cost savings when compared to the expense involved in the

Figure 2 | Ratings of High Priority Initiatives are Higher in Companies Working with Trusted Partners



activity of talent acquisition at scale. Does this mean other companies don't care about retention? Of course not — but it does imply that actually tackling this initiative in a meaningful way is much more likely with some strategic assistance from a provider.

Sometimes it is easy to get lost in a sea of data, but not here. Figure 2 portrays significant differences between those companies that engage with a trusted partner and those that do not. Seeing a 20-point difference for “aligning content with goals” would be pretty compelling by itself, but then also seeing a 26-point difference in “retention via training” and a whopping 36-point difference for “competency-based programs” shows a drastic disparity in how trusted partners can help focus employee learning on business outcomes. Taken together, this was compelling evidence that partnerships matter in a tangible way, and in a way that sets up companies for future success. It is also worth noting that despite this shift, other initiatives such as compliance and customer experience are not ignored by companies working with partners. The learning leaders from mid-market companies responding to our survey identified these as worthy objectives, alongside goals such as diversity and inclusion and ensuring the effectiveness of onboarding programs.

So, to the extent that there is convergence on the priorities and objectives that mid-market companies need to not only succeed but to thrive in today's

“Partnerships afford mid-market companies a greater ability to accomplish more by amplifying the focus on priorities that matter.

competitive landscape, we saw that these crucial aims are unilaterally amplified by partnerships. This is not to suggest that other organizations ignore these goals, but for those wishing to actually achieve them (rather than simply aspire to them), trusted partners are vital in every instance. Simply put, partnerships afford mid-market companies a greater ability to accomplish more.

WHAT LEARNING LOOKS LIKE IN THE MID-MARKET

So, what might be different about the mid-market when it comes to employee learning? It's tempting to think that because these organizations aren't "whales," the toolbox they're working with is somehow simpler, that they aren't juggling quite as many pieces of learning technology and are instead relying on the so-called gold standard of classroom learning. If that were true, the impact of the circumstances of 2020 and 2021 could largely be solved through shifting to online learning.

But in-person classroom learning is not as prevalent in the mid-market as we might assume. In fact, our data showed that instructor-led training (ILT) accounted for 20 to 24% of training offerings in mid-market companies. That's notable because it doesn't appreciably diverge from what many large companies are doing. In fact, a sample of 324 companies from 2020 shows that the current mixture of learning delivery methods of the mid-market is well-aligned with the habits of their bigger colleagues.

While some may assume that mid-sized companies don't have the infrastructure to use cutting-edge tools, our results suggest the opposite. Many types of platforms and solutions were already being used to support training in the mid-market.

Partially, this trend is driven by the existing technology stack for learning. Just like larger companies, most mid-market organizations have already invested in learning management systems, training delivery platforms, libraries of eLearning content and collaborative learning tools.

But mid-market companies aren't

mere mimics of their larger colleagues — they're expanding their toolbox. Our data shows that a significant portion of mid-market companies are planning to launch the following types of platforms and tools to deliver training in the coming year:

- Technologies that support social learning and collaboration among employees.
- Authoring tools that allow L&D staff to create new learning content.
- Learning experience platforms (LXPs) that facilitate learning paths and the personalization of training to meet individual employee needs.
- Virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) learning experiences.

As can be seen, the L&D experience inside many mid-market companies is not all classrooms and eLearning — far from it. Employee learning at these companies is more often comprised of a rich but complex array of modalities and learning strategies. When compared to a Training Industry research sample of 324 companies from 2020, we found mid-sized companies had been already moving in these directions with their technology stack. In other words, these are plans that may have been delayed but were already in progress, as there was interest in these solutions and tools before the circumstantial shift to virtual forms of training.

How mid-market companies are delivering training goes beyond the pieces of technology being used, however. It also shows up in the ways that employee learning is being reinforced. Our data shows that mid-market companies are supporting learning through coaching and mentoring programs. While generally popular, 73% of mid-market

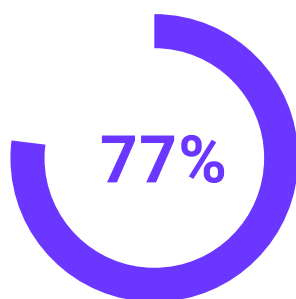
companies are using these programs. This is on pace with the extent to which large companies with 10,000+ employees are using coaching programs (71%).

And it's not just coaching. As companies in the mid-market get larger, they tend to stand up more video-based learning. When companies are on the smaller end of the spectrum, the focus is more on creating mobile-optimized experiences. In both cases, the endorsement of these means of supporting learning programs is on par with what we've found in large organizations.

This may beg the question: Are mid-market companies truly doing the same things as larger organizations to support learning?

Our data suggests that the answer is a resounding "Yes!"

Herein lies the challenge: If mid-market organizations face the same complexities in developing talent as a much larger organizations, how can they compete? It's easy to assume that the answer is spending more money, but as we've already discussed, larger companies do not have L&D functions that are comparatively more effective despite having a larger budget. Instead, it's about concentrating on solving the right problems for the business.



We found that 77% of mid-market companies are using three to seven different forms of support for their learning programs, including coaching, video-based learning and mobile learning. What's the parallel to that in large companies? Based on our data, it's 76%. In other words, what learning looks like at mid-market companies tends to be a mirror image of the complexity found in the L&D departments of their larger colleagues.

MID-MARKET CHALLENGES

With all this complexity comes more challenges. Typically, what [we've found when looking at challenges over time](#) is that companies are most often dealing with issues related to keeping learning consistent across the entire organization, managing a fixed amount of learning resources, and figuring out how to evaluate their programs to see if they have been effective. Training Industry data has shown that these are typical of many organizations in general, as well as large companies specifically.

But learning challenges are not one-size-fits-all. Our current data shows that there are challenges that while not unique to the mid-market, are experienced most often by such companies. These include:

- Keeping learners engaged during learning.
- Sustaining the impact of learning.
- Overloading employees at the expense of job performance.

Thematically, these challenges are about growth, whereas the general challenges mentioned previously speak mostly to issues of scale. While the scale and scope of training presents its own set of extra sharks in the water, it's a different set of problems than when the company itself is

growing, too. In other words, the sharks keep circling around as the fish grow bigger and faster. There's a good reason that the expression is "growing pains" and not "maintenance pains."

“Partnerships built on trust put mid-market companies in the best position to meet current challenges and anticipate those in the future.”

To manage all these challenges, navigate an array of learning technologies, and somehow make all those decisions fit into a larger strategic narrative, many mid-sized companies turn to outside help to battle the obstacles on their way up and outrun the sharks. Our data shows, however, that intermittent help isn't quite good enough to move the needle. Those shifts tend to come

from a company having a close relationship with a partner that understands the unique challenges, technology stack and strategic needs of the mid-market. It's the importance of being able to characterize a partnership as one that involves trust between an organization and the provider they're working with.

THINKING BIGGER BY PARTNERING

One of the ways that having a trusted partner can benefit mid-market companies is when it comes to thinking about the “big picture” concerning training.

When we asked learning leaders what their companies hoped to accomplish with their investments in learning, the results were striking (Figure 3). Without an outside voice at the learning strategy table, the top concern was “toeing the line” of compliance or regulatory requirements. With the aid of a trusted partner, we see a much broader cluster of concerns — not excluding compliance but working with it as one of many aims. The fact that companies without partners focused on ensuring compliance over and above other concerns suggests that this training, in many instances, might be better characterized as “checkbox training,” as opposed to being one ingredient in a larger strategic learning plan.

What Figure 3 shows for companies working with a trusted partner is a much greater strategic focus on moving the company forward based on what can be thought of as “higher order” concerns. In these organizations, training as an activity serves a bigger purpose than mere upskilling or staying on the right side of regulators. Employee learning promotes the culture and values of the organization, drives inclusion and diversity, in addition to bringing learning into an arena of greater accessibility via accelerating the already ongoing shift to online learning.

It’s important to note that the four reasons companies invest in learning that are shown in Figure 3 were not selected at random. Overall, these are the most common reasons that mid-market companies invest in employee learning. We asked learning leaders about other reasons, such as keeping up with the pace of change in

Figure 3 | Companies Working with Trusted Partners Invest for Strategic Reasons

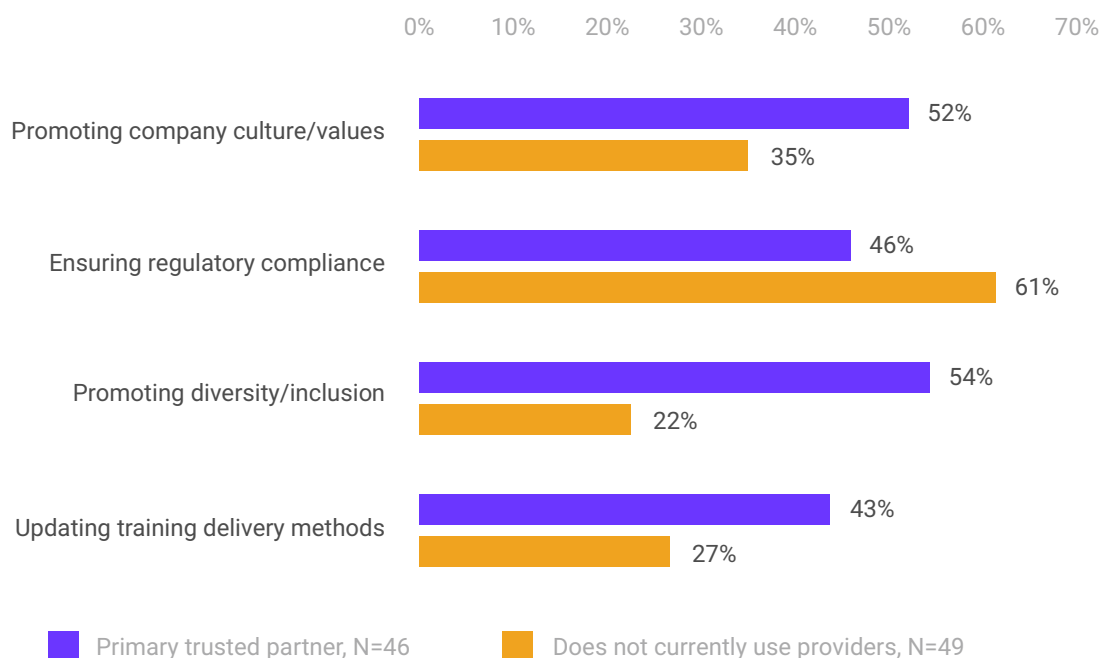
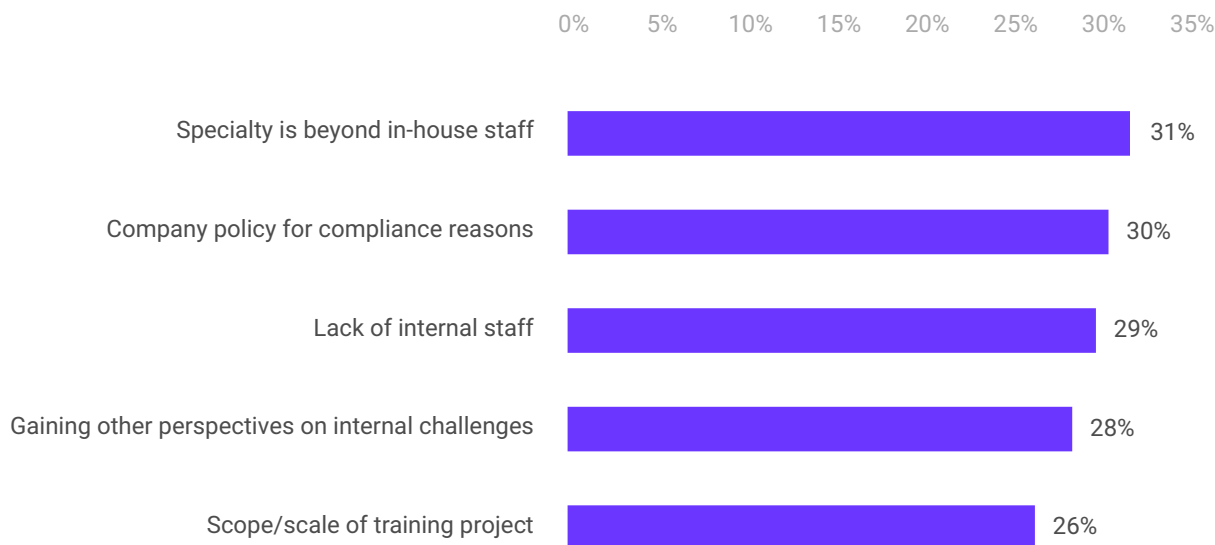


Figure 4 | Companies Work with Trusted Partners to Enhance Capabilities



their customers’ business or meeting talent management needs, but none were endorsed to the same degree. In other words, if a mid-sized company hopes to achieve a cluster of these important aims through its learning investments, our analysis shows that a trusted partner is critical to making that happen.

Yet, why would a mid-market company need to partner with an external provider? Is simply driving culture enough to warrant diving in? Given the perceived time and inherent cost of nurturing a trusted partnership, the logic behind making that decision obviously extends beyond what an organization hopes to achieve, or the broader challenges they’re hoping to solve.

When we asked learning leaders at mid-market companies, they indicated a variety of motives for engaging with a trusted partner (Figure 4). While stemming the demands of compliance and regulatory needs was part of the formula, what our data shows is that mid-market companies rely on partners to broaden their capability set in ways that allow them to be more agile and responsive to the learning needs of their employee base. Notably, the top reasons shown in Figure 4 have to do with the benefit of having an extra set of hands, so to speak — whether to address a lack of expertise, a lack of capacity or simply a lack of staff.

In addition, when we asked this question, learning leaders tended to indicate multiple reasons for why they leverage the help of a trusted partner. In fact, 57% of the companies represented in our data engage with providers for two to four reasons. In this regard, trusted partnerships can help mid-market companies address multiple simultaneous demands with their learning programs.

We’ve discussed why mid-market companies invest in partnerships and the reasons that compel them to do so, but what does this assistance look like? What do mid-market companies need help with?

The short answer is, “it depends.” But as we’ll see, that’s not a deficiency of the question so much as it reflects the richness in the variety of possible answers.

It’s important to emphasize that the type of partnerships we’re describing can manifest in many different areas of learning programs. It may mean that a company is entirely sourcing a learning service from their partner, but it can also mean that a company is leveraging that partner to augment their in-house capabilities.

In our data, we found that the types of services most likely to be fully sourced through a trusted partner included:

- Technology services (e.g., LMS/CMS support).
- Training evaluation (e.g., impact metrics, ROI).

- Learning strategy/consulting.
- Machine learning/AI recommendations.

When the partnership is collaborative, the types of services that mid-market companies augment their in-house capabilities with include everything listed above, in addition to:

- Custom content development.
- Instructional design and curriculum development.
- Training delivery (e.g., instructors, facilities).
- Administrative services (e.g., registration, planning).

The breadth of services that mid-market organizations are using their trusted partners for can look different from company to company and could be handled in full by the partner or in collaboration. But these efforts and investments all serve similar objectives when it comes to compensating for capability gaps and driving the learning agenda of the organization.

Now, it is true that not all companies approach partnerships with learning providers this way. Some are seeking short-term engagements to address issues and shortfalls in the here and now. And while this tactic can work, it addresses only the here and now. In other words, most of the advantages and benefits of working with a partner that we've discussed in this report either evaporate or fail to emerge at all when there's no longevity to the partnership.

One of the most notable findings we uncovered in the responses of learning leaders from mid-market companies was when we asked what goes



into the decision-making process about using a trusted partner. Many might assume it boils down to the breadth of services that a partner can provide, or some manner of alignment with corporate strategy, or how stable the provider organization has been, or cost. Those aren't completely unimportant, but one factor rose unambiguously to the top:

“Partners are chosen based on a mutual fit of culture and values.”

If a company uses several partners, we found that the decision is typically based on both mutual fit and a provider's particular specialization. But culture was still the main driver.

The importance of culture is significant because of what else wasn't quite as important to selecting a provider — namely, things already mentioned like the breadth of

services or their stability and size. But on the heels of cultural fit were factors such as a provider's expertise and their ability to demonstrate success in similar projects. Mid-market companies, just like everyone else, want access to the best resources and the most knowledgeable partner to help them meet their goals. Some mid-market companies may erroneously assume that when deciding to source services, their options are limited to niche providers, if they want to harness the best available resources, or at least the best resources that a particular partner can provide. On their half of the equation, best-in-class providers understand that the strategic aims of companies differ, and what they can offer to help companies is not necessarily dependent on whether they're dealing with the “whales.” Bigger isn't always better. What truly matters is being in touch with how much room there is to grow. For mid-market companies, trust in a provider as a partner in their growth is crucial, but the more aligned the two sides are in how they see the ocean, the farther and faster everybody can swim.

What does this ultimately mean? Finding the right long-term partner, the best partner for your company, is a matter of finding a provider that meshes with who your company is at its core.



CONCLUSION

Mid-market companies face a complex set of issues with employee training. As we've discussed through the data in this report, these companies must contend with an expanding palette of technologies while grappling with challenges of scale, strategy and delivery.

Most importantly, mid-sized companies shouldn't be afraid to reach out for help. Larger companies already do so on a routine basis. According to our past research, only 32% of larger companies handle their learning needs entirely in-house. They're getting help, and as we discussed earlier in this report, our data shows that those that get help tend to have more effective learning.

Most of all, our data show that mid-market companies are already more likely to have trusted partner relationships with vendors in place than large or small companies. Further, mid-sized organizations tend to source learning services more often than larger companies. In other words, they lean more heavily on outside expertise to aid their growth. And again, those that do, based on our findings, are those that have learning programs that are effective and address the initiatives and

objectives important for mid-market companies to grow the knowledge and skills of their employee population.

Across the findings in this report, we've seen that mid-sized organizations, like their larger competitors, want to better align learning content with business goals, want to offer learning experiences that fuel employee retention, and want to better manage (and conscientiously expand) the learning technologies they use. They must address challenges related to engagement, learning sustainment and employee burnout, in addition to filling the gaps in their in-house L&D operations when necessary. But most of all, mid-market companies need learning that not only reflects but steers the culture and values of the organization. They need effective employee learning that isn't simply training for training's sake.

While the specific path to any of those goals can lead a company in an assortment of directions, and knowing the seas can get rough, it's much easier to swim through the ocean with the help of a trusted partner.



ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

About Infopro Learning, Inc.

[Infopro Learning](#) is an award-winning workforce transformation company that unlocks the potential of people — employees, clients and partners. Unlocking the potential of people unleashes higher levels of performance, resulting in outcomes aligned with your company's strategic objectives. Infopro Learning helps you grow, manage change effectively — and ultimately — transform.

People are a primary source of an organization's competitive advantage. Over the past 25 years, Infopro Learning has built services and solutions around training, upskilling and developing people.

As a global leader in talent development and managed learning services, Infopro Learning offers a full service of solutions that support the entire lifecycle of learning, including strategy, curriculum design, content development, training delivery, learning administration and talent sourcing. Their digital platforms and global infrastructure enable accelerated realization of the outcomes associated with full-service solutions.

Infopro Learning offers its “unlock” series of innovative leadership and talent development programs designed as a blended learning journey for individual contributors as well as first time, mid-level and executive leaders. Infopro Learning's specialized learning solutions are outcomes based and helps organizations improve performance in areas of product adoption, customer education, sales, customer service, IT/ Tech and onboarding.

To learn more about how Infopro Learning can unlock your organization's potential, please reach out to us at info@infoprolearning.com

About Training Industry

Our focus is on providing dedicated business and training professionals the information, insight and tools needed to more effectively manage the business of learning. Our website spotlights the latest news, articles and best practices within the training industry.

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