Looking Ahead for Corporate Learning – What are Younger Learners Saying?

WAINHOUSE Research

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Learning, Talent and Education

Introduction

Wainhouse Research (WR) conducted a survey of 2,004 employed persons in October of 2017 to gauge preferences for learning methods. By segmenting the responses by age, we gain insight into younger employee learning preferences, which – over time – are likely to become more prevalent for the entire workforce. In 2015, Millennials became the largest single generation in the U.S. workforce,[1] and WR predicts those born in 1981 or later will constitute a majority of the workforce by 2023.[2]

Younger employees generally have greater exposure to new modes of learning (e.g., flipped classrooms, educational technologies, online learning). They also have the most experience with the social, mobile, and video technologies that are beginning to modernize corporate learning. Furthermore, older workers are becoming more proficient with modern technologies, catching up to younger workers. Given the greater pressure on L&D organizations to efficiently apply their limited resources, understanding how younger learners prefer to learn can help them shape their short- and long-term learning strategies and deliver more effective learning programs.

Top Level Findings

- When asked to rank their top three preferences for learning new materials, younger workers (those 21 to 32 years old) rate Instructor-Led Training (ILT) as their top choice.
  - Those who are under 50 score ILT significantly lower than those 50 and over.
- Short-Clip Videos, Coaching and Mentoring, and Informal Conversation with a Subject Matter Expert (SME) are essentially tied as a second choice for those between 21 and 32.
  - Short-Clip Video and Coaching and Mentoring are valued across all age groups.
  - Informal Conversations with

Figure 1: Younger Workers Top Four Learning Preferences and Other Age Groups' Scoring of Each

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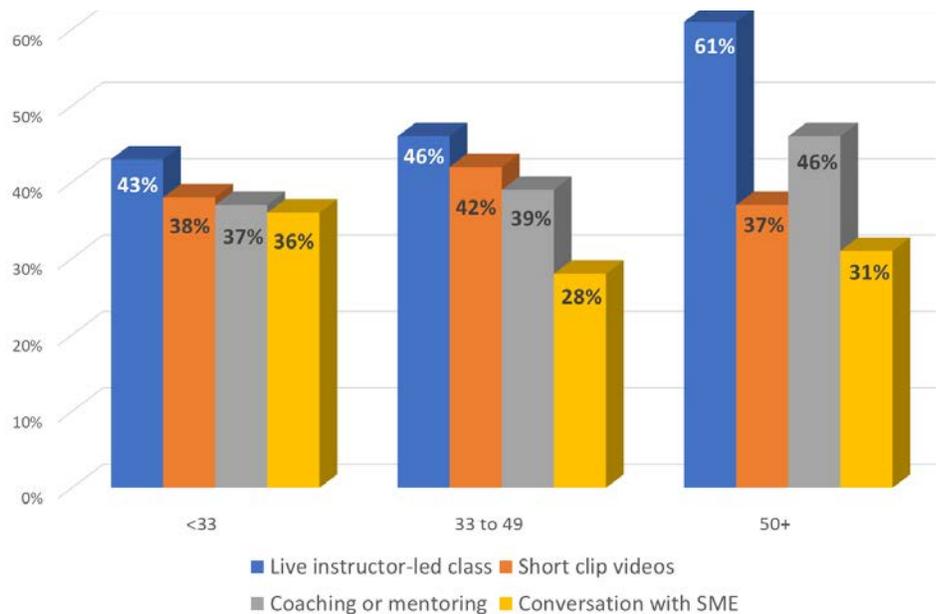
[1] Fry, Richard. "Millennials surpass Gen Xers as the largest generation in U.S. Labor force." *Pew Research Center*. May 11, 2015.
[2] Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor. "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey."

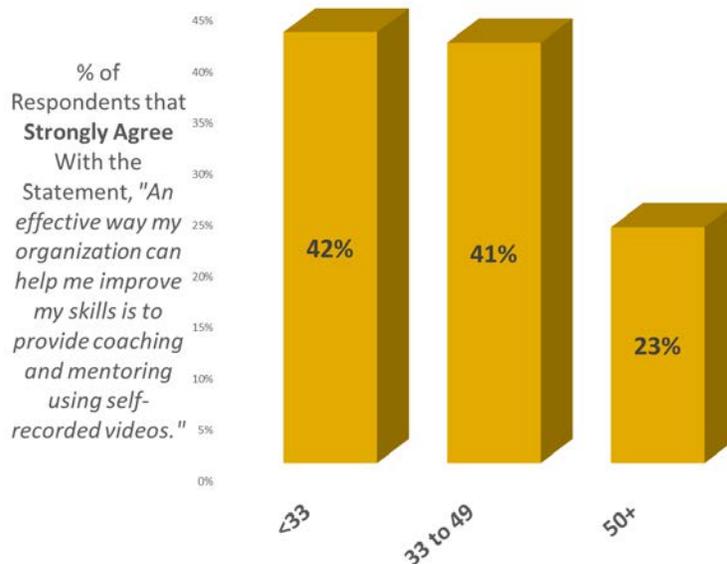SMEs ranks highest with youngest learners (21 to 32 years old).

- Contrary to popular belief, younger workers value human interactions *even more than some of their older colleagues* as part of their personal learning experience. While learners of all ages value human interaction in learning new material, younger learners (21 to 32 years old) rank approaches that rely heavily on human interactions among three out of their top four modes of learning: Coaching and Mentoring, Informal Conversations with SMEs, and ILT.

- Learners cite significant interest in all nine methods. WR believes this reinforces the value of blended learning approaches and that they should be used whenever possible. Where possible such programs also may best be customized based on age.

Additional data and findings on learner preferences are available later in this research note after the following guidance.

Guidance

- **Invest in Short-Clip Video, Coaching and Mentoring, and Sharing SME Expertise.** The data confirms what many organizations have been doing – shifting resources from ILT to other modes of learning. The data suggests enterprise L&D teams should be considering greater investments in Short-Clip Video, Coaching and Mentoring, and Conversations with SMEs as learning modes. The latter two are difficult – but not impossible – to scale, as we note below.

- **Coaching and Mentoring** can be made more efficient by focusing more on both shorter interactions and greater use of technology. Shifting away from in-person mentoring sessions to those done over video conferencing or even via asynchronous exchange of messages and videos will still enable delivery of personal advice, but cut down significantly on the overhead. More than two out of five workers under 50 are very open to using asynchronous video coaching, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Coaching and Mentoring Using Self-Recorded Videos

% of Respondents that **Strongly Agree** With the Statement, *"An effective way my organization can help me improve my skills is to provide coaching and mentoring using self-recorded videos."*

42% (<33)   41% (33 to 49)   23% (50+)

- **Recording and sharing SME expertise** so that it is readily available to learners can eliminate the need for redundant conversations held between an SME with every individual needing their help. Such videos can be coupled with discussion forums so that, after watching, learners can ask questions to which the SME can respond at a convenient time. Given the value they provide to an organization, SME best practice videos should be a core set in a Short-Clip Video portfolio.

- **Reverse Mentoring programs** can be helpful in capturing and sharing SME expertise. Recording their expertise may be a challenge for some SMEs, especially older workers. The data in Figure 3 shows that only 12% of those 50 or older strongly agree they have the skills to produce a video good enough to share at work. The data also suggests a solution, which would be to pair or group older workers with younger workers who are more confident in their video production capabilities. Such mentoring pairs or groups can yield additional benefits in terms of improving older workers' technical skills while helping younger workers deepen their knowledge of the organization's business.

Figure 3 "I Possess the Skills to Produce a Video Good Enough to Share at Work"
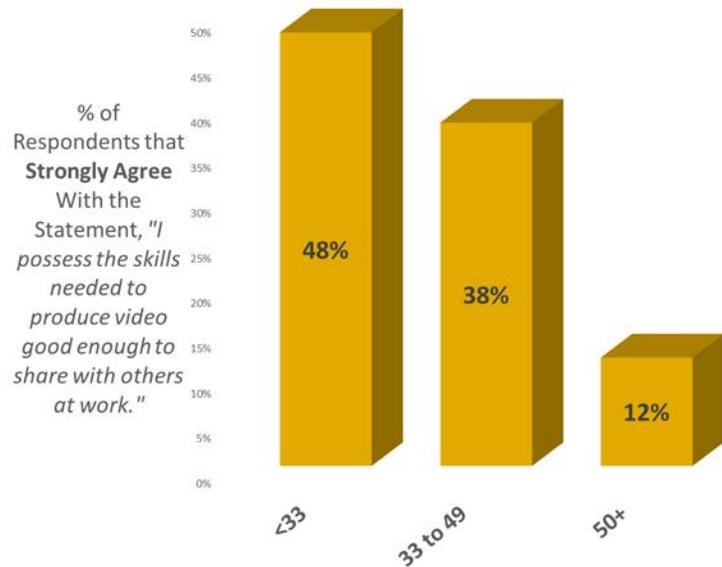
Methodology

Wainhouse Research conducted a survey of 2,004 employed persons in October of 2017 to gauge use, deployment, and perceptions of web communications and learning technology platforms. Within that survey, WR fielded a set of questions specifically related to the preference for learning methods as well as specific applications within enterprise learning. Analysis in this research note focuses on results from three of the questions posed in the survey,
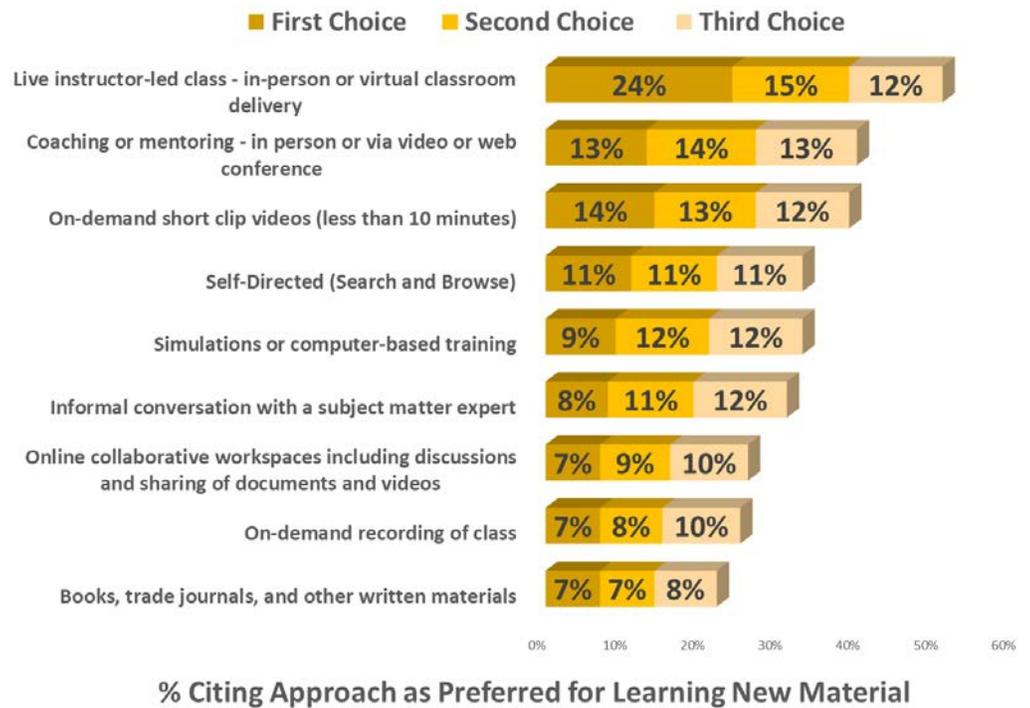
1. *Please rank the approach that you prefer to use when learning new material ("1" for most preferred, "2" for second most preferred, "3" for third-most preferred)*

   - *Live instructor-led class – in-person or virtual classroom delivery*
   - *On-demand recording of class*
   - *On-demand short clip videos (less than 10 minutes)*
   - *Coaching or mentoring – in person or via video or web conference*
   - *Informal conversation with a subject matter expert*
   - *Online collaborative workspaces including discussions and sharing of documents and videos*
   - *Self-directed (search and browse online resources)*
   - *Books, trade journals, and other written materials*
   - *Simulations or computer-based training*

2. *Agree / Disagree: An effective way my organization can help me improve my skills is to provide coaching and mentoring using self-recorded videos*

3. *Agree / Disagree: When considering the skills needed to produce video good enough to share with others at work, I possess the capability for making this video.*

Results & Analysis

Figure 4 shows how the entire survey pool ranks their preferences for learning new material.

- Just over one half of the 2,004 respondents rank *Live instructor-led class* (either in person or via virtual classroom) as their top preference for learning new material. ILT also scores nearly a quarter of the first-place votes, significantly more than any other modality.

- On the next tier, *Coaching and Mentoring* and *On-demand Short-Clip Videos* rank 2nd and 3rd.

- Least popular are the least interactive methods: *On-demand class recording* and *Books, trade journals, and other written materials*.

Figure 4: Ranked Learning Preferences - All Respondents

% Citing Approach as Preferred for Learning New Material

- While the rankings indicate significant differences, learners cite interest in all the methods. We believe this reinforces the adage that program designers should employ a blended learning approach to appeal to the wide variety of learning preferences. Where possible such programs should be customized based on age.

Instructor-Led Training

Figure 5 shows how the three age groups rank Instructor-Led Training.

- ILT is most popular with the oldest group of learners, those 50 and above. Over one-third of these learners say it is their first choice, and while ILT remains the top choice for all age groups, the younger groups are about half as likely to identify ILT as their most preferred approach to learning. Put simply, ILT is far more appealing to older employees than to those younger than 50.

Analysis:

- Many L&D groups have started to shift away from ILT, and Figure 5 confirms that in the eyes of learners, such a shift is an appropriate modern learning strategy.

Figure 5 Instructor-Led Training Segmented by Age

% Citing Instructor-Led Training as Preferred for Learning New Material
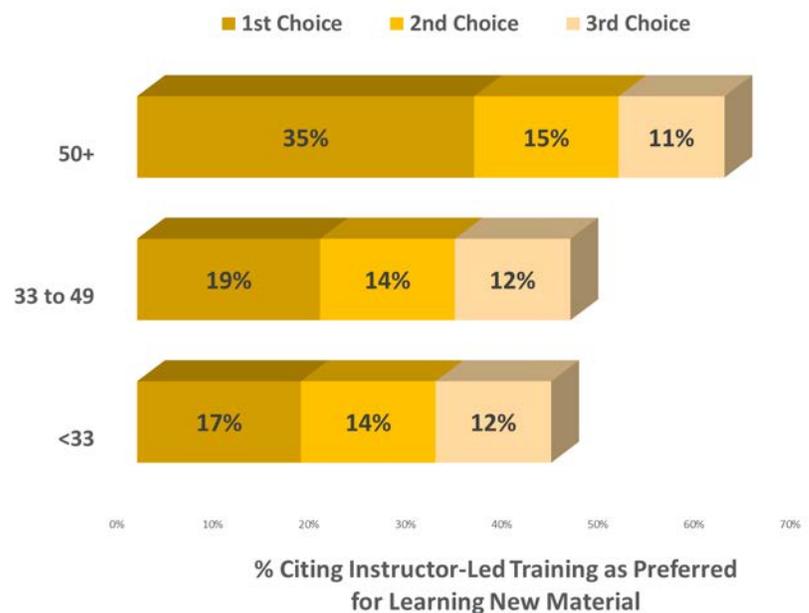
Short-Clip Video

Figure 6 shows how the three age groups rank Short-Clip Video.

- Short-Clip Video is generally perceived to be more of a content type for performance support and reinforcement, but learners across all age segments rank it highly.

- Short-Clip Video is the second most preferred approach to learning for those who are mid-career (33 to 49), behind only ILT.

- Short-Clip Video is third most preferred by the 50 and over and under 33 age groups.

Analysis:

- Learners value Short-Clip Video to a great degree because it gives them control over when and how they learn and allows them to learn in their moment of need. Learners are consistent in their preference for this approach to learning, and those who are 33 to 49 appear to like it even more than any other age group.

Figure 6 Short-Clip Video Segmented by Age

% Citing Short Clip Video as Preferred for Learning New Material
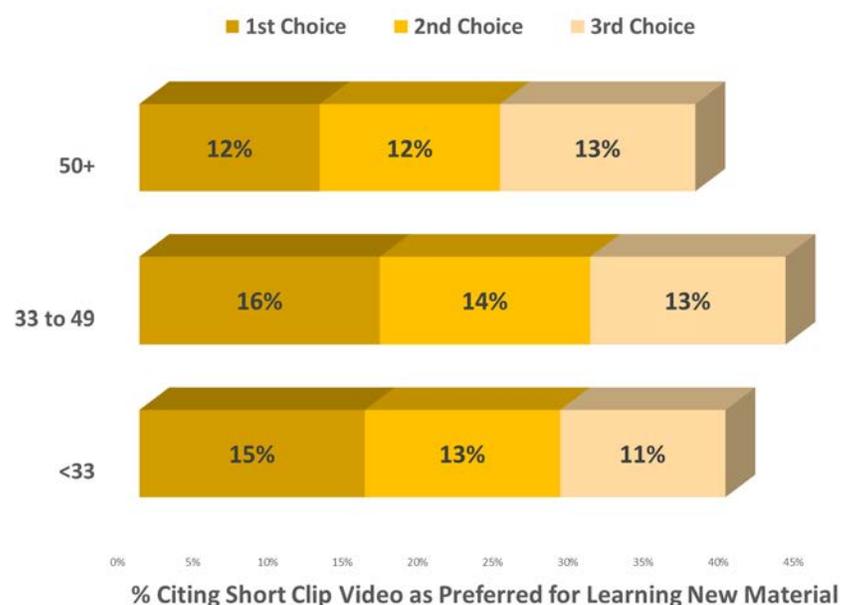
Coaching and Mentoring

Figure 7 shows how each group ranks Coaching and Mentoring, but because of some significant differences in opinion between those early-stage, mid-career, or 50+, we offer a more granular view into learner attitudes.

Figure 7 Coaching and Mentoring Segmented by Age

- Essentially the same proportion, 12%-14% of all age groups, choose Coaching and Mentoring as that group's first choice.

- The youngest and oldest groups, however, are more likely to choose Coaching and Mentoring as their second and third most preferred choices.
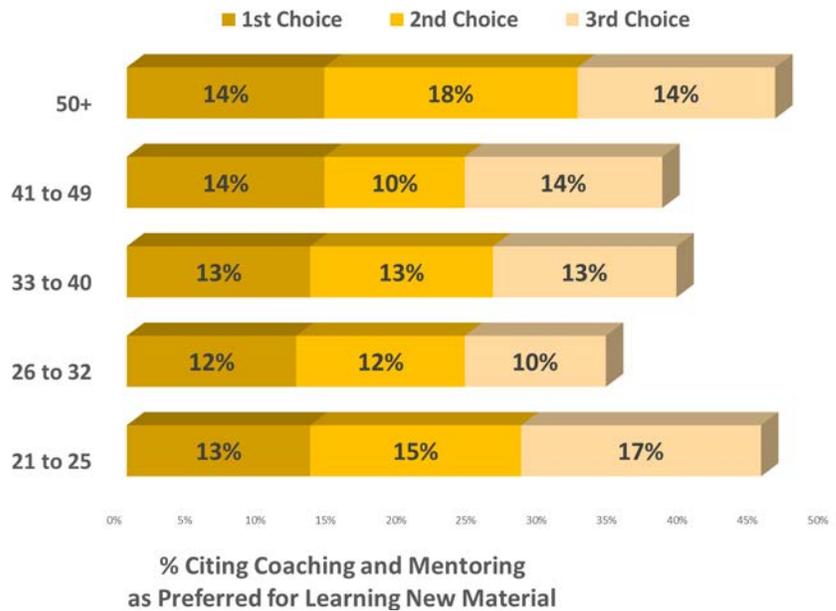
Analysis:

- Many organizations create Coaching and Mentoring programs primarily for organizational leaders and high-potential employees, as any organization's supply of

% Citing Coaching and Mentoring as Preferred for Learning New Material

qualified coaches and mentors typically is limited. However, because it is the second-highest preferred approach to learning among the entire survey group, WR believes organizations should seek ways to expand the reach of their coaching programs by making those programs more efficient.

- A substantial proportion of the very youngest group – those who are 21 to 25 – favor Coaching and Mentoring. This rebuts a common popular stereotype: that they are more self-absorbed and prefer to live their life online.

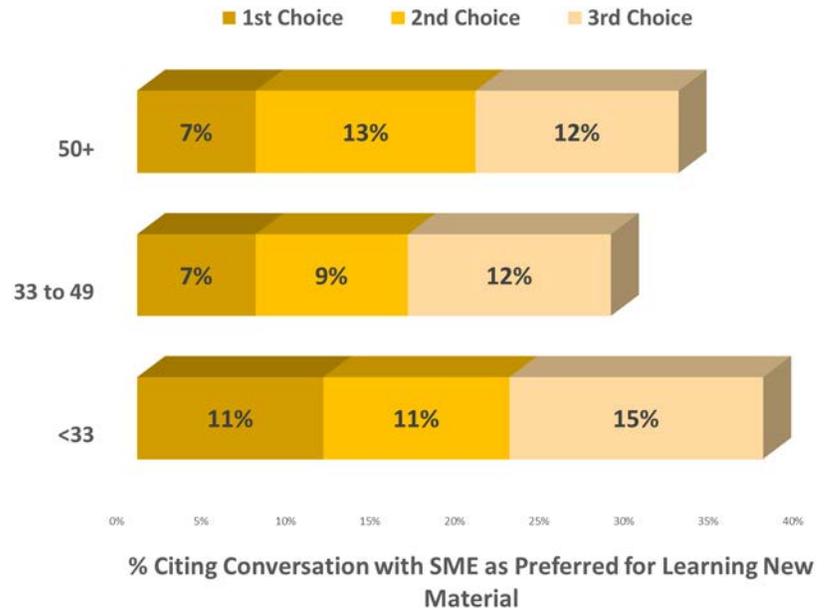## Informal Conversation with a Subject Matter Expert

Figure 8 shows how the preference for Informal Conversation with an SME is ranked by age groups.

- As age increases, Informal Conversation with an SME becomes less of a top priority. Yet counter to expectations, the 50+ group shows greater interest in Informal Conversation with SMEs than those who are mid-career.

Analysis:

- The challenge for L&D groups is to make available SME knowledge and interactions between SMEs and those who would like to learn from them, without taxing the SME. WR believes this is an excellent reason for using user-generated video and social groups to capture and share SME expertise. The discussion forum

Figure 8 Informal Conversation with a Subject Matter Expert Preference Segmented by Age

% Citing Conversation with SME as Preferred for Learning New Material

allows learners to ask questions after watching the video. We realize this is not the same as a live conversation, but given the realities of today's hectic business environment, this mode of sharing expertise has proven to be effective. The video and/or social collaboration system should collect data and support analytics, so L&D can monitor the quality and surface trends to their business partners.

**Appendix: Survey Demographics (n = 2004)**

Survey respondents were recruited on a random basis from a managed survey sample pool. The only sample recruiting filter employed in the survey besides educational institutional affiliation ensured equal representation of respondents in the overall survey pool from large organizations (2,500+ employees), mid-sized organizations (250 to 2,500 employees), and small organizations (fewer than 250 employees.)
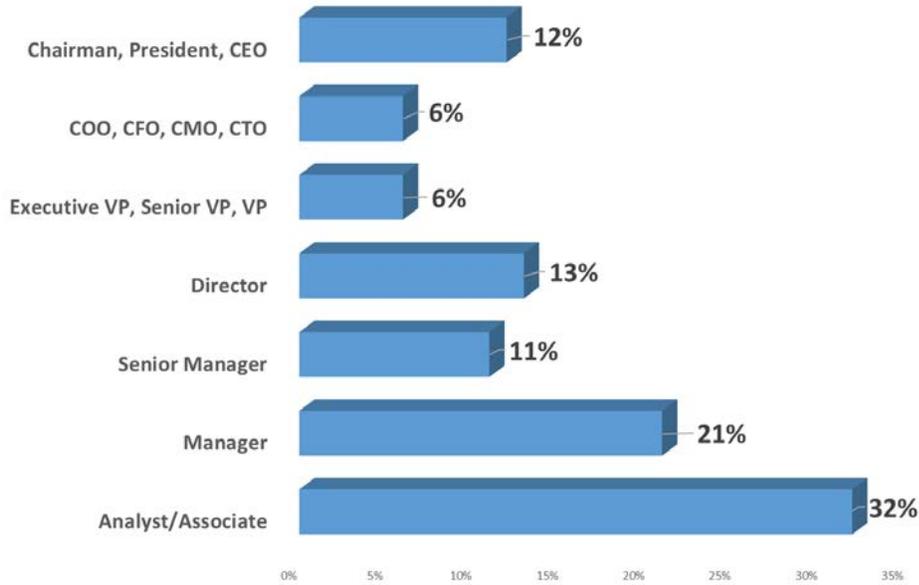
A1: Survey Respondent Age

Years of Age
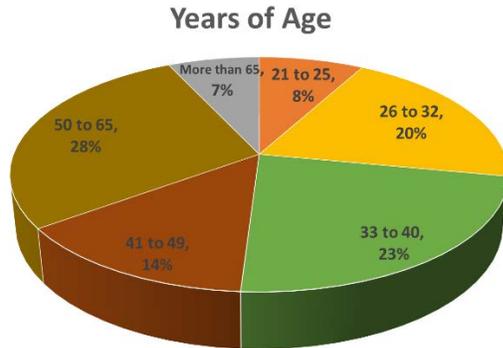
Correlation of Survey Respondents' Age to US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016 Data = .88[3]

A2: Gender

Gender
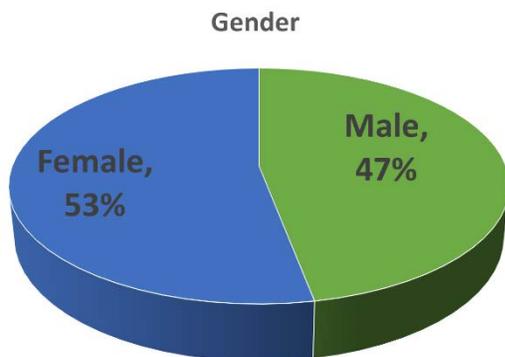
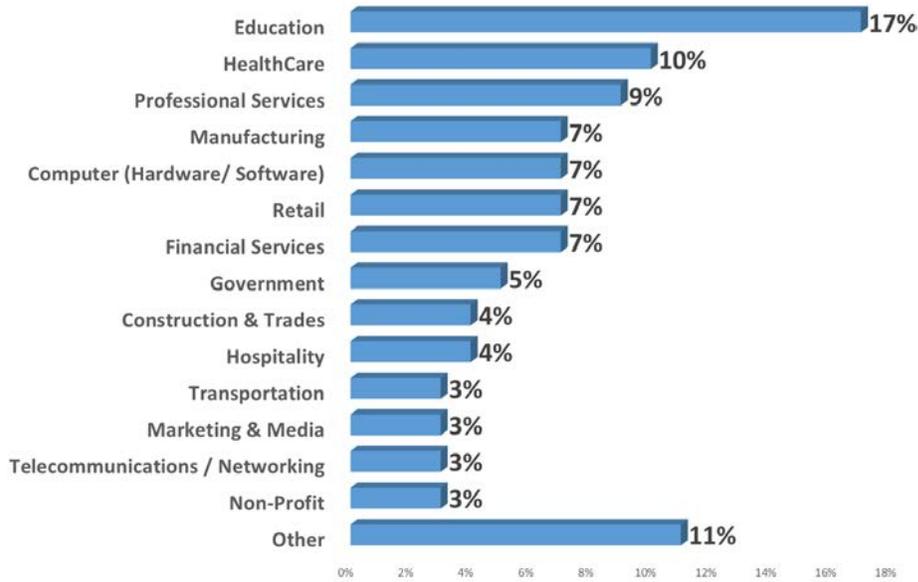[3] Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor. "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey."
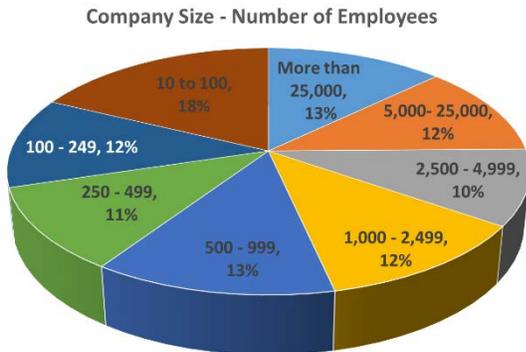
A3: Respondent Title

Title	Percentage
Chairman, President, CEO	12%
COO, CFO, CMO, CTO	6%
Executive VP, Senior VP, VP	6%
Director	13%
Senior Manager	11%
Manager	21%
Analyst/Associate	32%

A4: Functional Discipline

Discipline	Percentage
Information Technology	17%
Administration	16%
Instructor	10%
Accounting/finance	8%
Sales / Business Development	7%
Customer support	7%
Top Executive	6%
Engineering/R&D	4%
Physician / Nurse / Caregiver	4%
Manufacturing	3%
Human resources	3%
Marketing & Communications	2%
AV Management	2%
Other	11%
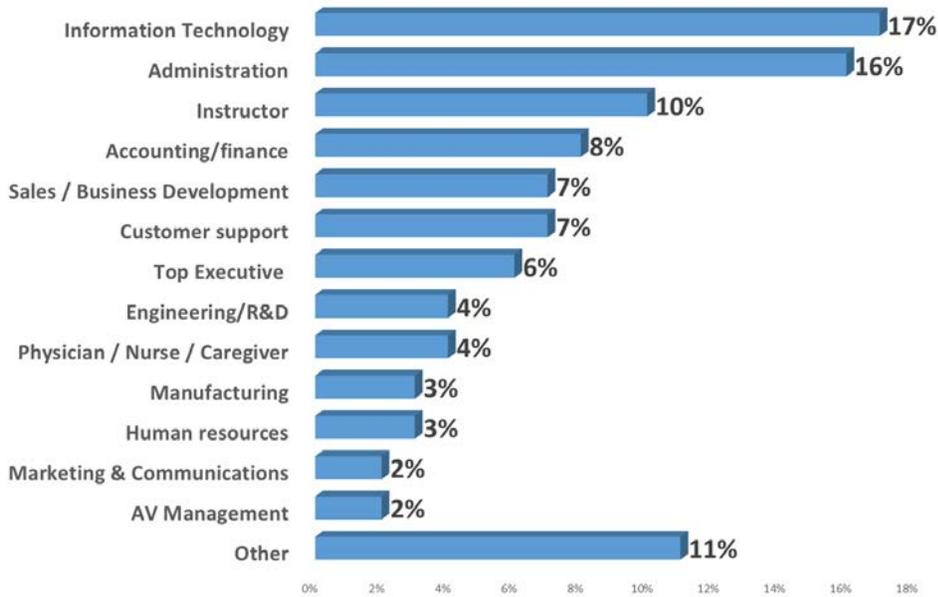
A5: Industry Vertical

A6: Company Size-Number of Employees

A7: Company Size-Annual Revenue

About the Authors: *Alan D. Greenberg* is Senior Analyst & Partner at Wainhouse Research. Alan co-leads the WR Learning, Talent and Education (LTE) practice and most closely covers lecture capture, video conferencing, interactive whiteboards, educational LMSs, web and mobile conferencing, and the suite of unified communications technologies as they are applied for education, e-Learning, and collaboration. He also contributes to the Wainhouse Research Blog and consults to many end user organizations. He speaks frequently at conferences and industry events, and was recipient of an Outstanding Leadership award in 2010 by the United States Distance Learning Association. He can be reached at agreenberg@wainhouse.com. More about Alan.

Charles M. DeNault is Senior Analyst at Wainhouse Research and covers learning and talent management, with a focus on solutions that use communication and collaboration technologies. Charles has published in a variety of L&D venues and spoken at leading industry events, such as the CLO Symposium, Workforce Live, and HR Tech Europe on a variety of topics including learner engagement, employee coaching, social learning, and program assessment. Prior to joining Wainhouse Research, Charles defined and launched solutions for learning, talent management, and collaboration at SuccessFactors, Saba, WebEx, and Apple. Charles has a BS in Applied Mathematics and MS in Operations Research from Stanford University. He can be reached at cdenault@wainhouse.com. More about Charles.

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