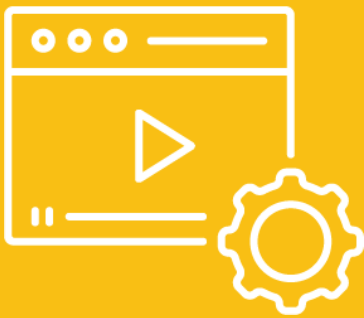


7 WAYS OFF-THE-SHELF CONTENT BRINGS VALUE TO YOUR ORGANIZATION



With Tips on Incorporating OTS Content into Your Learning Organization



Executive Summary:

Learning and development teams have a large number of duties, and limited time and resources with which to do them.

Content creation is only one of these duties. However, content creation is also the most time-intensive task, requiring the greatest range of talent.

Using off-the-shelf (OTS) content is an established, credible way to get up-to-date, professional learning materials, freeing your internal teams to focus on other tasks. Understanding the value OTS content brings to the table, as well as its limitations, can help you think strategically about your training programs.

Whether designing a new training program or simply searching for the right eLearning tools for your existing program, quality content is the first priority. But it is not the only one.

Today, more than ever, learning organizations are coming to realize that effective training is so much more than creating some content and hoping it “sticks.”

To illustrate, take what the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics lists as the typical duties of a training and development specialist:



Assess training needs through surveys, interviews with employees, or consultations with managers or instructors



Deliver training to employees using a variety of instructional techniques



Design and create training manuals, online learning modules, and course materials



Assist in the evaluation of training programs



Review training materials from a variety of sources and choose appropriate materials



Perform administrative tasks such as monitoring costs, scheduling classes, setting up systems and equipment, and coordinating enrollment

We would also add to this list of duties such as monitoring new regulations and training requirements, keeping up with existing employee training renewals, and demonstrating the value of training to the C-suite. That makes for nine general duties, each of which involves its own set of tasks. Notice that content creation is only one of these.

In other words, **learning organizations are being stretched thinner and thinner, having to do more with less.** With so many important tasks to monitor and complete, there's a danger that quality of instruction and of service can suffer. Those that succeed are the ones that find sound ways to free their bandwidth, allowing them to focus on tasks where their specific expertise is truly needed.

So why aren't more companies using OTS content? Having talked to many L&D experts, we've heard three main reasons:

1.

In-house teams, it's argued, know the company and the business best, and so are better positioned to create content.

2.

Some people worry about the quality of content offerings available.

3.

In many cases, the internal team might appreciate the need for OTS content, but has been unable to prove its value to decision makers.

This makes the use of "off-the-shelf" (OTS) content that much more important. OTS content can allow a team to immediately deploy needed training quickly and professionally, expanding its offerings without expanding head count (or overtaxing current resources). This is especially the case for smaller teams that need to focus on core tasks and might not be able to keep up with best practices in instructional design or recent developments in content areas (for example, keeping up with compliance laws for a compliance course).

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A classic study of CLOs found that 31% listed "communicating and measuring value" as their #1 challenge. As one CLO stated, "My biggest challenge is convincing senior executives of the strategic value of learning." The second-biggest challenge? Resource constraints (28%).

Each of these is a legitimate worry, but each can be addressed by appreciating both the value OTS brings to the table and the various ways it can be deployed in a successful training program. **Once you are able to find quality OTS content from a reputable, full-service vendor, it will free up your internal team to focus on those areas that most require their internal knowledge, leading to more effective training overall.**

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7 Ways Off-the-Shelf Content Brings Value to Your Organization

Using OTS content does not simply save time. There are a number of advantages to using OTS content, especially when it is well integrated into an organized training program. Understanding the value such content can bring will help learning organizations get leadership buy-in, make wiser purchase decisions, and better

integrate that content into their overall learning ecosystem.

Working closely with our own clients in implementing off-the-shelf content, we identified seven key areas of value:

1. Efficient use of resources

2. Quick deployment for immediate use

3. Range of topics and subject matter expertise

4. Leveraging best practices in adult learning

5. Compatibility with complex and changing regulations and laws

6. Service and context

7. Increase bandwidth for company-specific content

1. Efficient Use of Resources

L&D departments are in a tough position. While other departments now can rely on technology and automation to achieve greater efficiency, training is still very much a “hands-on” business that involves people directly. Not only are subject matter experts involved in creating content and leading classroom instruction, but others might be involved in scheduling, giving assessments, program review, production, and more.

That involvement shows, especially when it comes to content creation. According to a 2010 study done by Chapman Alliance, **a single hour of instructor-led training can take anywhere from 22 to 82 hours of work and preparation time, with the average being around 40 hours.** A survey by the Association for Talent Development found roughly the same results, also noting that digital content takes

longer to develop (on average), and that the time required varies directly with the complexity of the interactions involved.

When so much time is spent creating and deploying content, more strategic considerations often take a backseat. No wonder leadership begins to wonder whether the training they are paying for is actually producing a return on their investment. It's a little like having a construction company responsible for building a house, but the crew spends a full 40 hours a week splitting and cutting their lumber. In the end they have all the right materials, but the house never gets built.

OTS content can free up much of the time and talent being used to create “standard” content, focusing on areas that will deliver more value in the long run.



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2. Quick Deployment for Immediate Use

With an OTS content library, providing employees the information they need is simply a matter of enrolling them or giving them access. Theoretically, your entire workforce can have access to all of the content on day one of the implementation.

For example, suppose it comes time for everyone to refresh their compliance training, or that your sales team wants a series on handling objections in light of recent sales numbers. As soon as the need arises, you can match content to those needs and provide access with a few clicks.

Contrast this with in-house content, which can be deployed only at the rate in which your team can create the content. This becomes difficult when requests for specific courses start coming. Take the previous examples: How would that sales team feel when you explain that their courses have to be made over a 2-year period? Would the team be able to have a consistent learning experience, let alone remember the content they learned from video to video? How would HR feel when you have to explain that compliance training cannot even start for another eight months, since you have six months worth of content creation backlog? OTS content gives you the ability to immediately respond to their needs.



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3. The Range of Topics and Subject Matter Expertise

Employees need training across a broad spectrum of topics, from role-specific training to more general topics like safety, compliance, and communications. **Even if your organization has these “basics” covered, development creates the need for even more advanced topics**, such as decision making, problem solving, creativity, behavioral assessment (such as DISC), and so on. It's pretty rare to find an organization that has internal team members who are subject matter experts in all of these areas.

Quality OTS content is created in consultation with subject matter experts up to date on the latest research, techniques, and business practices. With it, you can guarantee that learners are getting the best education without having to have extensive expertise in-house.

This advantage is even more noticeable when learning departments get a one-off request from an internal stakeholder. For example, a new team leader could feel overwhelmed in his role and ask for leadership content to help with managing his projects and his time. Leaving the time issue to one side, is it worth the learning and development team's time to create a one-off video for this person?

Probably not. But if you have access to a library of OTS content, you could find something that fits this person's needs without having to reinvent the wheel—like our video on The Art of Saying No. That way, there would be no delay in delivering the content, and no wasted resources spent creating content that might not be used on a regular basis (although it is always available when you do need it!).



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4. Leveraging Best Practices in Adult Learning

There have been many developments in the training industry in the past decade. **More and more learners are taking microlearning courses and engaging in social learning, and doing so on mobile devices.** Keeping up with these developments, and putting them into practice, can easily overtax an in-house team.

There have also been strides made in both technology and creative design when it comes to visuals and acting/voice talent. Besides subject matter expertise, content developers need to be experts in graphic design, script writing, slide creation, video production, editing, and more.

A vendor that specializes in creating training content will invest in this kind of talent. For example, creating training content is what we do 24/7 here at ej4. We have invested heavily in our video production capabilities and post production editing tools, adding sound effects, and music in addition to the graphic design, writing, and acting talent. This leads to more polished and professional-looking videos that are more likely to grab attention and establish credibility. Employees will engage with it more, helping with retention and application of content.



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5. Compatibility With Complex and Changing Regulations and Laws



Some subject areas need to stay current with complex and changing laws and regulations. This is often the case with compliance training, environmental issues, safety training, and diversity.

Besides keeping current with the best practices in adult learning, **some subject areas need to stay current with complex and changing laws and regulations. This is often the case with compliance training, environmental issues, safety training, and diversity.**

This creates a one-two punch. On the one hand, changes in law may require different kinds and amounts of training. California, for example, has made many changes to its laws increasing the amount of anti-harassment training required and the topics covered. Such changes can easily render your current anti-harassment courses obsolete.

On the other hand, the content of the courses itself may become obsolete with time. What were considered best practices a decade ago surely would not be adequate today. Even if your training requirements do not change, the information your employees need to receive might.

When shopping for OTS content, it is vitally important to make sure the content provider has a process in place to stay on top of these changes, and make the needed changes on an ongoing basis. This should happen every few years at the very least.

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6. Service and Context

Learning a skill is more than just absorbing content. Content itself is just one part of a more complex learning ecosystem that includes strategy, technology, learning culture, management attitudes, and more.

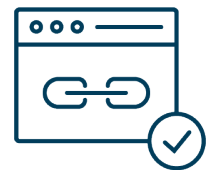
This means that finding the right content for your organization is more than a matter of finding an article or video on a particular topic at a team's request.

To be effective, a learning organization also has to:

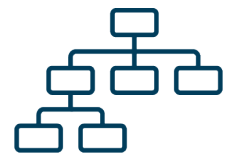
Choose content that aligns with the organization's goals and values



Match content to competency-based learning tracks



Organize content into learning paths for professional development



Record completion and measure retention



If you find a reputable content vendor, it should already have processes in place to help you do these things—and answer any questions you may have along the way.

7. Increased Bandwidth for Company-Specific Content

Some content cannot be created ahead of time by a third party, simply because it is specific to your organization. For example, an onboarding course that discusses your company's specific policies, benefits, and mission could not possibly be an OTS offering. The same would go for training materials that discuss industry-specific language or reporting.

Using OTS content for topics that are not company specific frees your team to work on these more custom projects. With more time and resources dedicated to them, there's more

opportunity to create a quality course and keep that content up to date.

For example, topics such as warehouse safety, anti-harassment, and selling skills all lend themselves to using OTS content. A manufacturer that uses this content for those specific topics can then focus team resources on content specific to their own manufacturing process. This can help the team reach the 40 hours needed to create each hour of quality training material.



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Challenges That Come With Outsourced OTS Content

OTS content obviously brings many benefits to the table. We also need to recognize that it comes with some limitations. This does not mean OTS content is a bad idea for organizations—only that OTS content might not be a good fit for all situations, and that some common sense needs to be applied when shopping for content and integrating it into your own training programs.

Consideration #1: Familiarity

When your team creates a training course, they are intimately familiar with it. Over time, you and your team will know your library inside and out. When you purchase OTS content from an outside vendor, everything is new and unfamiliar. Getting familiar with that content takes time—even if you are diligent about watching every one of the hundreds of videos in a library! A quality vendor should be able to help you navigate the new titles. At the very least, they should provide search functionality that is sophisticated and simple so your administrators can easily find and assign courses.

Consideration #2: Control

With content created in-house, your team is 100% in control of what gets said and what gets seen. You have the ability to tweak and change things as the content is created. This is not the case with OTS content (although some companies—ourselves included— will happily discuss options for custom content as well, including the option to customize a video using our authoring tool).

Consideration #3: Customization

As discussed above, not every topic will lend itself to OTS content. Even if the majority of your training content can be satisfied with an OTS offering, there will be some topics—company policies, or industry-specific language, for example—that will require custom content.

Consideration #4: Depth

Some OTS content has a reputation for being superficial. This happens because educational materials have to walk a fine line between being maximally informative and widely accessible. A good library, however, should have content at different levels of depth and expertise. For example, harassment policy videos for HR specialists should be more technical and in-depth than the ones for employees. A safety course should cover topics differently for employees on the warehouse floor versus the people who manage them.

Consideration #5: Leadership buy-in

Change can be hard, and many decision makers are more comfortable with the idea of keeping training content creation in-house. It is up to the L&D leadership, then, to explain the value of OTS content and justify the investment. Even then, the new content and delivery will be under the microscope, making measurement and reporting critical.

Consideration #6: Investment

If you have a large L&D department that has already invested heavily in content creation (for example, if you already have your own video production equipment and talent in-house), leadership will want to know these resources are being used so their investment in them is justified. In these rare cases, investing more into OTS content can be a difficult decision. On the one hand, it could free up those resources. On the other hand, people might fear that you plan on cutting back. Best case scenario, your learning provider should allow you to upload your own internal content into their platform so you can leverage both the OTS and internal content in the same environment.

Incorporating OTS Content into Your Learning Organization

Even if you invest in a large library of OTS content, this does not mean all of your training must revolve around it. **OTS content works best when you find smart ways to blend that existing content with your own custom content and form it into well-considered learning paths.**

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Here are a few ideas for doing so:

Build specific learning paths, using OTS content as the building blocks

Several shorter videos can be used together to create a training sequence for employees. For example, perhaps you have a sequence for onboarding, or for employees who want to try for a management position. You can also create learning tracks around specific competencies. (Our content, for example, comes already organized around competencies defined in the Lominger model.)

Use an OTS video as the basis for a custom course

Suppose you have a video showing some important sales skills, but you also need to address specific product information. Or maybe you need a compliance course but require a section that reviews your company's policies specifically. You can start with an OTS video and then customize it, adding not just your company logo and introduction but content specific to your needs. (We do this all the time for clients here at ej4, and it saves a lot of time and investment.)

Assign OTS content as a course prerequisite (or refresher)

You may already have courses developed for certain topics. If these are in-person training courses, assigning a short video course is a great way to expose learners to those topics before they even step foot in the classroom. They can also serve as a good refresher after the course, too.

Start incorporating OTS content during periods of change

One client we spoke with while preparing this whitepaper mentioned he wanted to change his longer lecture-style training sessions into a microlearning format. He confessed he had no idea where to start. Fortunately, most of our OTS video content was already in a microlearning format! We had kept current with best practices in the adult learning trend toward microlearning. Instead of having to reinvent entire courses, our clients can simply pick and choose from an existing library and deploy their updated training processes faster.

Sign up for a free 15-day trial of Thinkzoom

If you are interested in seeing our library of off-the-shelf content, you can check out some of our free video content online, or—if you want a deeper dive—**sign up for a free 15-day trial of Thinkzoom**, our learning management system. This will give you access to videos on a wide range of topics, and let you explore Thinkzoom's other features at the same time. In the meantime, we'd love to hear your questions and thoughts too!

Since 2004, ej4 has delivered the unexpected in the eLearning industry with our 'Everything but Ordinary' training solutions. Our unique style of microlearning training videos combines instructional design with adult learning theories and is delivered via contemporary video design methods. Our modern learning management system is simple, intuitive and mobile so employees have the freedom to learn anywhere, anytime.



Contact us for a demo

People Grow Business. We Grow People.

Further Reading:

Slide deck from Chapman Alliance:
Bryan Chapman, "How Long Does it Take to Create Learning?"

https://www.slideshare.net/bchapman_utah/how-long-does-it-take-to-create-learning

A good, objective look at outsourcing eLearning:
Andie Burjek, "To Outsource or Not to Outsource"
<http://www.clomedia.com/2016/08/15/to-outsource-or-not-to-outsource/>

Good general article with steps for calculating the ROI of a learning program:
Ryan Eudy, "5 Steps for Proving the ROI of Your Training Investment"

<https://www.ej4.com/blog/5-steps-for-proving-the-roi-of-your-training-investment>

Our own advice on maintaining a quality eLearning library:
Kathy Irish, "4 Best Practices for Keeping an Organized eLearning Video Library"

<https://www.ej4.com/blog/4-best-practices-organized-elearning-video-library>

Advice on the number of OTS courses you will need from a vendor:

ej4 staff, "How Many Courses Do You Really Need?"
<https://www.ej4.com/how-many-elearning-courses-do-you-need-whitepaper-o>