

2007 E-learning Benchmarking Project

Research Paper No. 2

The role of employers in encouraging e-learning and flexible training delivery

I & J Management Services

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Australian Government

**Department of Education, Employment
and Workplace Relations**

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2007 E-learning Benchmarking Project

The 2007 Research and Policy Advice Project¹ of the national training system's e-learning strategy, the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Framework), conducted annual surveys of the uptake and use of e-learning in the vocational education and training (VET) system. In 2007 the E-learning Benchmarking Project – a sub-project of the Research and Policy Advice Project – conducted four surveys: registered training organisations (RTOs); VET students; VET teachers and trainers; and employers with employees undertaking accredited training. A full report on the 2007 E-learning Benchmarking Project, including the overall results and details on the survey methodology, is available from the Framework's E-learning Indicators website at: <http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/e-learningindicators>.

In 2007 the E-learning Benchmarking Project conducted additional analysis of the results of the surveys to examine the engagement of RTOs and VET clients in driving more flexible training delivery. As part of this research, the E-learning Benchmarking Project analysed the responses of employers to two specific questions from the 2007 survey of employers:

1. Would you encourage your employees to use e-learning if it was available?
2. Would you try to influence your training provider to deliver more flexible training to your employees?

The findings in this report will assist the Framework to better understand the current attitudes to e-learning of employers with employees undertaking accredited training and the role employers might play in increasing the uptake and more effective use of information and communication technology (ICT) in VET.

Survey responses

This analysis draws on information provided by 400 employers that participated in the 2007 E-learning Benchmarking Survey through a computer assisted telephone survey. It contrasts the responses from employers of different size, in different industries, in different states and territories, engaged with different types of VET providers and with different levels of knowledge of e-learning. The distribution of employers against each of these classifications is shown below.

Classification	No.	%	Classification	No.	%
NSW	107	27%	Private/industry provider	200	50%
VIC	74	18%	TAFE provider	172	43%
QLD	60	15%	ACE provider	28	7%
WA	39	10%			
SA	31	8%	Very little knowledge of e-learning	151	38%
TAS	30	8%	Little knowledge of e-learning	184	46%
NT	30	8%	Good knowledge of e-learning	65	16%
ACT	29	7%			
			Health and Community Services	122	31%
Less than 20 employees	251	63%	Business/Administration/Retail	58	15%
20 to 99 employees	80	20%	Government	58	15%
100 or more employees	69	17%	Metal, Electrical, Automotive	57	14%
			Hospitality and Tourism	27	7%
			Hairdressing	27	7%

¹ In 2008 the Research and Policy Advice Project became the Benchmarking and Research Business Activity.

Employer sample

In understanding the employer sample the following points should be noted.

- The employer sample was chosen to meet state and territory-based quotas.
- Employers with employees undertaking accredited training were asked to nominate their main training provider. For 50% of employers this was a private, industry, enterprise or government provider.
- Employers were asked if they had any knowledge of e-learning, with the response scored on a 5-point scale from 1 – Very little knowledge to 5 – Very knowledgeable. In this analysis the responses have been grouped into ‘very little knowledge’ (a score of 1), ‘little knowledge’ (scores of 2 or 3) and ‘good knowledge’ (scores of 4 or 5). Having very little knowledge of e-learning did not preclude employers from answering the subsequent questions about their support for e-learning.
- The classification of employers by industry is loosely based on industry skills areas. This analysis excludes those industries where there were fewer than 27 employers in each category (eg building and construction, education, engineering and technical).

All employers responded to the two open-ended questions about e-learning in the survey. Responses were later coded, with multiple codes allowed against each question. Therefore, the analysis allows for employers to give more than one reason why they would or would not encourage e-learning, and why they would or would not seek to influence their training provider to deliver more flexible training.

Would you encourage your employees to use e-learning if it was available?

Eighty-five percent of employers surveyed indicated that they would encourage their employees to use e-learning if it were available.

Within this group of employers, by far the single most common reason why employers would encourage their employees to access e-learning was the convenience that e-learning provides to employees, particularly in terms of ease of access to training and cutting travel time associated with training participation. Thirty-eight percent of employers identified this as a reason for encouraging e-employees to use learning.

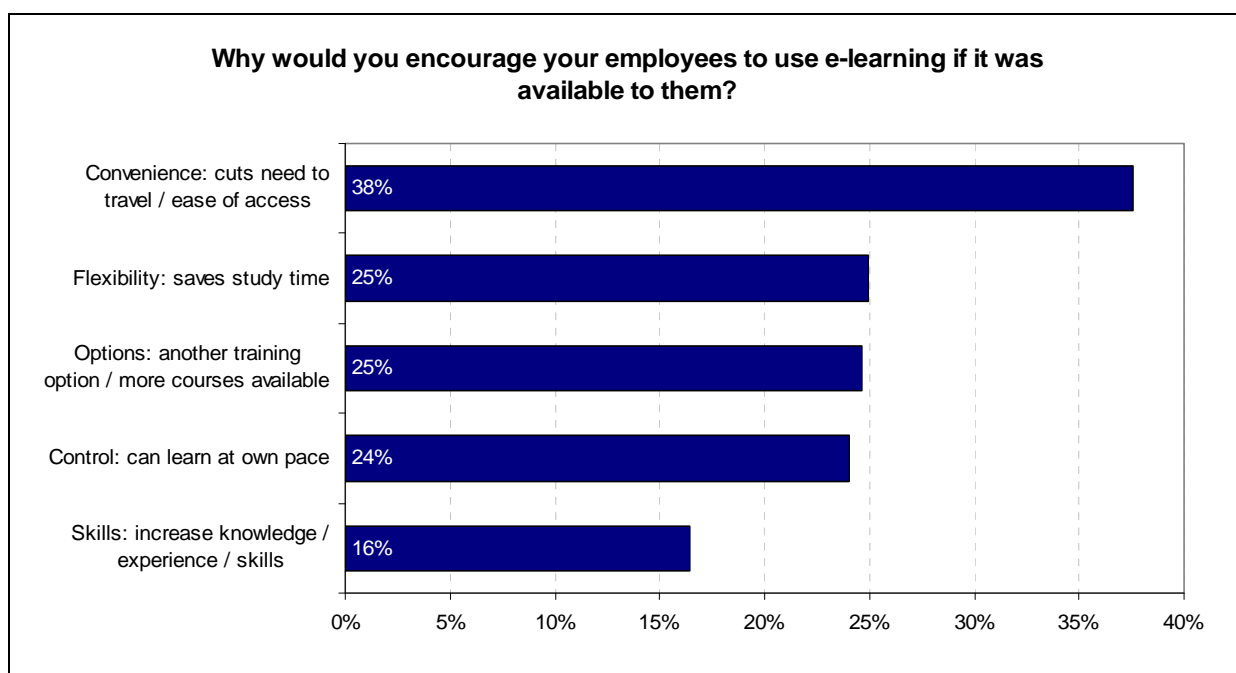
“The fact that we are located in the country, it’s harder to get formal training, so anything on the computer would be convenient.”

“I mean, she finds it a lot easier to get her work done than writing it on the piece of paper. She jumps on the computer and does all that.”

Twenty-five percent noted flexibility and study time savings for employees as a reason for encouraging e-learning. The ease of access to computers was seen as favourable by employers and allowing employees the freedom to study at work or at home in their own time, hence avoiding disruption to the workplace and increasing company productivity.

“(They) can go straight to it with no time constraints. Don’t have to turn up at any specific time. As long as there is a target date to get all the work done, but have flexibility to do it at their own convenience.”

The fact that e-learning provides another training option for students was listed by 25% of employers as a main reason why they would encourage their employees to consider e-learning. Employers suggested that use of ICT in training provided employees with a variety of learning options, as well as increasing their access to courses or modules that might otherwise be hard for them to undertake. This was particularly important for employees living in rural and remote areas.



Two other benefits of e-learning noted by employers related to control (24% of employers) and skills (16%). The ability of employees to study at their own pace, whether this be quickly or slowly, was seen as a positive aspect of e-learning. The skills benefits of e-learning, in terms of increasing employees' knowledge of computers and their experience and confidence in using computers was also mentioned.

So while many employers professed to having little or no knowledge of e-learning, most indicated that they thought it was an important training option for their employees. And while the reasons were primarily couched in terms of benefits to their employees – convenience, flexibility, control – there was also a clear acknowledgement that there were mutual benefits for the employer – less downtime due to training, access to more training, increased ICT knowledge and skills. For these employers e-learning had the potential to offer a win-win outcome for employee and employer. At the same time, while employers were encouraging of e-learning, there was no indication that they saw this as the only option or one they would compel their employees to pursue.

The alternative perspective

While 85% of employers were encouraging of e-learning, 15% (59 of 400 employers) said they would not encourage their employees to use e-learning if it was available.

When asked why, more than half of these employers said that they believed that there was much greater value in face-to-face learning than learning with a computer.

“We’re in child care and it has to be face-to-face.”

“Because I’d rather train face-to-face all the time.”

“Because e-learning is only suitable for specific types of training. In the workplace you require a certain amount of practical training. The actual application of it can only be done in the workplace.”

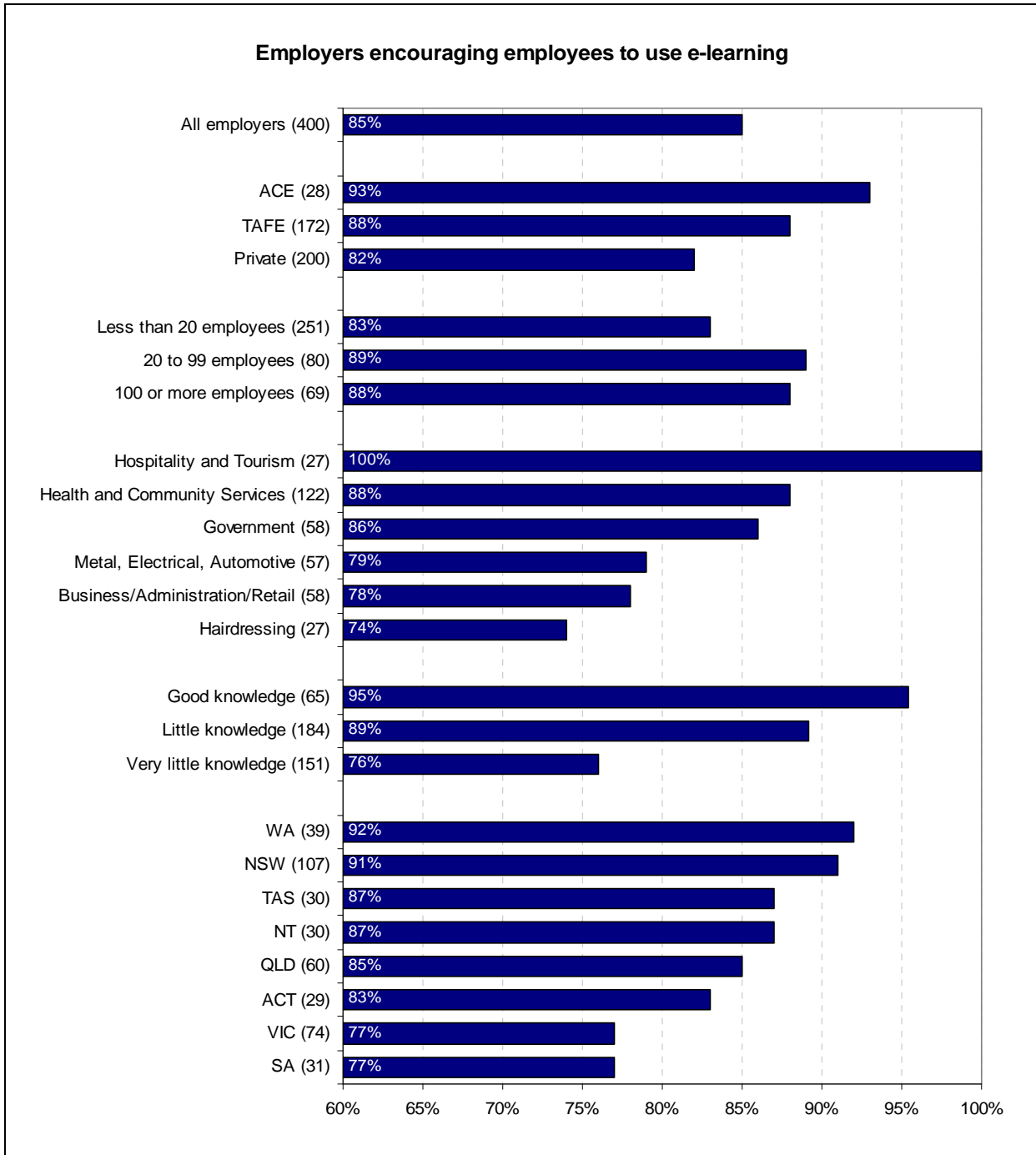
The rationale for the preference for face-to-face training was mainly couched in terms of the particular circumstances of the training required in the employer's industry sector, being 'hands on' and workplace based. Even where the response from these employers did not directly make a contrast between face-to-face training and ICT enabled training, there was a sense that among this 15% that 'e-learning is not for us'.

For example, a further 27% of employers from this group suggested that there was little value in e-learning as it was not likely to give their employees benefits or skills that would be relevant in their workplace.

Thirty percent of these employers also explicitly acknowledged that did not really know enough about e-learning and that this had coloured their judgement in saying they would not encourage their employees to use it.

Encourage e-learning? By employer type

The clear majority of employers said that they would encourage their employees to use e-learning if it was available. However, the strength of response was not consistent across all employers.



Looking at the responses of employers by type the proportion that would encourage their employees to use e-learning varies from 100% (for the 27 employers in the hospitality and tourism industry) and 93% for employers whose main training provider is an ACE organisation, to 74% for hairdressers and 77% in South Australia and Victoria. However, there was one primary distinguishing factor that significantly differentiated the likelihood of an employer having an 'encouraging' response versus a 'not encouraging' response. This was the employer's knowledge of e-learning.

Those employers with a self-reported 'good' knowledge of e-learning were much more likely (95%) to encourage their employees to use e-learning than those employers with very little knowledge of e-learning (76%). That is, employers who better understand the application and use of ICT in VET are more likely to see the benefits for their employees, and by implication, themselves. Those who are more aware of the ways in which ICT can be used, and when it can be used effectively are more likely to see a place for e-learning. And this outcome is true regardless of what industry they are in, what provider they use, their size and what state or territory they are in.

The fact that 76% of employers who assert that they have 'very little' knowledge of e-learning would still encourage their employees to use it if available still highlights the generally positive perceptions of the convenience and flexibility of e-learning. However, it is this knowledge of e-learning that is associated with more specific informed encouragement rather than perception-based encouragement.

Some additional commentary on the responses to this question by different employer types is provided below.

By provider type

Employers whose main training provider was an ACE organisation were more likely to encourage use of e-learning (93%) than those with TAFE or private/industry/enterprise/government training providers (88% and 82% respectively).

The main reasons for ACE providers encouraging the use of e-learning were evenly spread across the control it provides employees over learning pace (35% of employers), its convenience (35%) and its offering employees additional training options. In addition to training flexibility, the benefits of employees having access to more learning resources and online learning support were also noted by 19% of these employers.

Employers whose main training provider was a TAFE institute stressed the convenience of e-learning above all other factors (43% of employers). Reduced travel to attend TAFE and easier remote access to training were seen as key benefits. The e-learning benefits related to training options (26%), flexibility (20%), control (20%) and skills (18%) were also noted.

Employers associated with private and other training providers tended to be slightly less knowledgeable about e-learning. The main reasons why they might encourage employees to use e-learning were related to convenience and flexibility. Of these employers who would not recommend e-learning to their employees, 57% said this was because they thought face-to-face, and ideally workplace training, was the best way for employees to learn.

By employer size

There were no significant differences between employers' attitudes to e-learning based on their number of employees, although the reasons for the encouraging attitudes varied a little. Larger employers (100 or more employees) highlighted flexibility and time savings for employees, while medium-sized (employers with 20 to 99 employees) and small employers (with less than 20 employees) were more likely to talk about convenience, access and reduced travel times (49% and 42% respectively) linked to improved workplace productivity.

"It upskills them and helps us. They bring back skills to the business and we don't have to worry about sending people away."

By industry

While most employers from all industries said they would encourage employees to use e-learning, this response was stronger in some industries than others. All 27 hospitality employers had positive attitudes towards e-learning, stressing the benefits of convenience in accessing training and reducing travel times, as well as the capacity for employees to study at their own pace. Yet of 27 hairdressers questioned in the survey, seven (26%) said they would not encourage employees to use e-learning.

Eighty-eight percent of employers in the health and community services industry said they would encourage use of e-learning. However, although many of these were in the child care sector there were also employees among the 12% that would not recommend e-learning that were strongly of the opinion that e-learning was not an appropriate means of training for their organisation.

“We prefer more hands on because of the industry we’re in (child care).”

“It doesn’t suit the child care profession. I believe face-to-face, combined with working in the workplace with supervision and observation by the RTO is the best solution.”

The response was similar in other industries, where those employers not in favour of e-learning expressed concern about ICT not being the best option for their employees.

“I am in retail trade and the skill that you need is based on face-to-face – a personal skill rather than something you can get from a computer.”

“Sitting in front of a PC is not going to teach them.” (from electrical industry employer)

It is interesting that sometimes this response was actually couched in terms of the responding employer representative’s own personal learning preference. In fact, as suggested earlier, the reason that opposing views on the efficacy of e-learning exist within the same industry may be less to do with the potential application of e-learning to a particular type of training and more to do with employers’ knowledge of its application. For example, 70% of employers in the hairdressing industry said they had very little knowledge of e-learning, compared with 38% across all employers.

By knowledge of e-learning

The 2007 E-learning Benchmarking Survey asked employers to rate their knowledge of e-learning on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is ‘very little knowledge’ and 5 is ‘very knowledgeable’ about e-learning. Sixteen percent of employers rated themselves as ‘4’ or ‘5’ out of 5; 26% rated themselves at a ‘3’; 20% at a ‘2’; and 38% said they had ‘very little knowledge’ of e-learning.

Knowledge of e-learning was the most significant factor in determining whether an employer was likely to encourage e-learning among their employees. Ninety-five percent of employers with a self-reported good knowledge of e-learning would encourage their employees to use it if it was available, and the 5% (three employers) who would not encourage e-learning had each experienced e-learning in a context that they did not feel would be suitable for their employees.

Although the proportion of employers who would encourage e-learning was significantly lower among those with very little knowledge of e-learning, there was still a 76% response. This indicates that limited knowledge is not of itself a barrier to positive attitudes to e-learning, but that it is more likely to lead to scepticism or uncertainty about any potential benefits of e-learning.

By state and territory

There were clear differences between the responses of employers in different states and territories, with much higher responses in Western Australia and New South Wales than in

Victoria and South Australia. However, this is not due to inherently different attitudes to e-learning in VET in different states, but more a factor of the state of knowledge of employers.

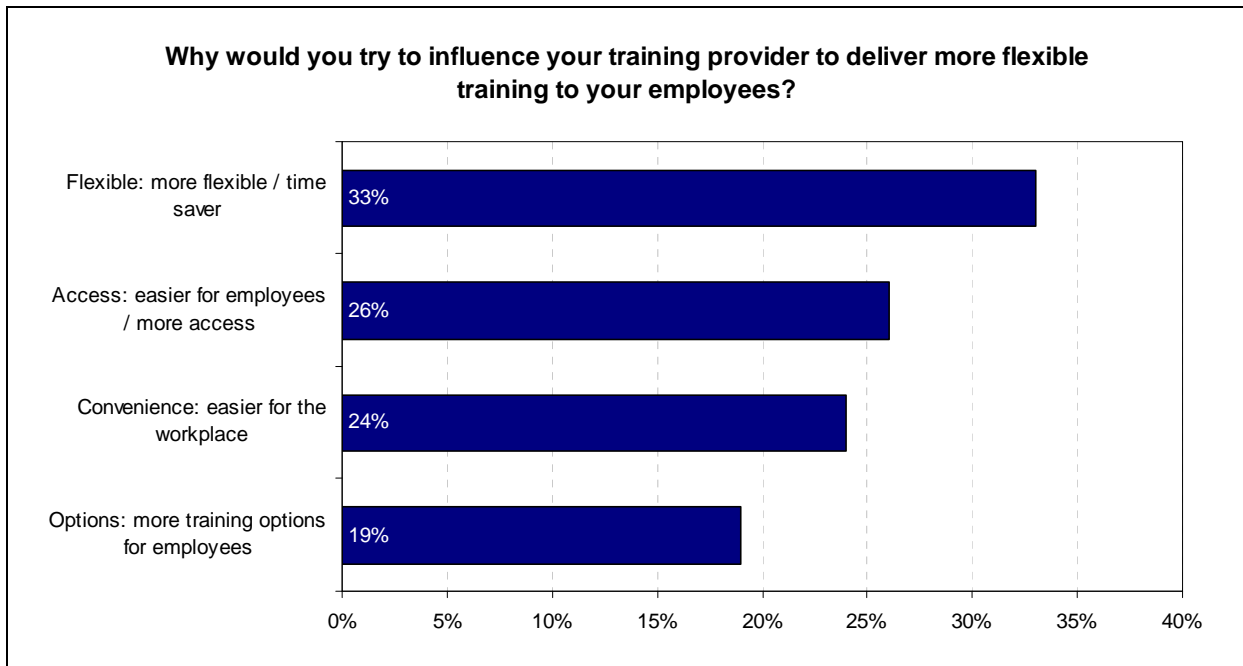
Would you try to influence your training provider to deliver more flexible training to your employees?

Of the 400 employers surveyed, 73% indicated that they would try to influence their training provider to deliver more flexible training to their employees. Employers were not asked how they might go about exerting this influence, just whether they might, and why or why not.

When asked why, the main reasons cited were consistent with the benefits that employers expressed in response to the earlier question about whether they would encourage employees to use e-learning – convenience, flexibility and increased training options. As before, these were primarily expressed as benefits for employees, but in answering this question many employers made more explicit the benefit the employer gained from employees having greater time flexibility, being able to study in the workplace and at their own pace, and being able to access a more diverse range of training options.

“Sometimes we get really busy. It would be much easier if we can pick their times.”

“The more flexibility they have the more variety they have to choose and help out.”



There was also, in a small number of cases, acknowledgement that the client-training provider relationship should allow for such influence to exist.

“Flexibility has to be worked into this type of thing because it’s client-based.”

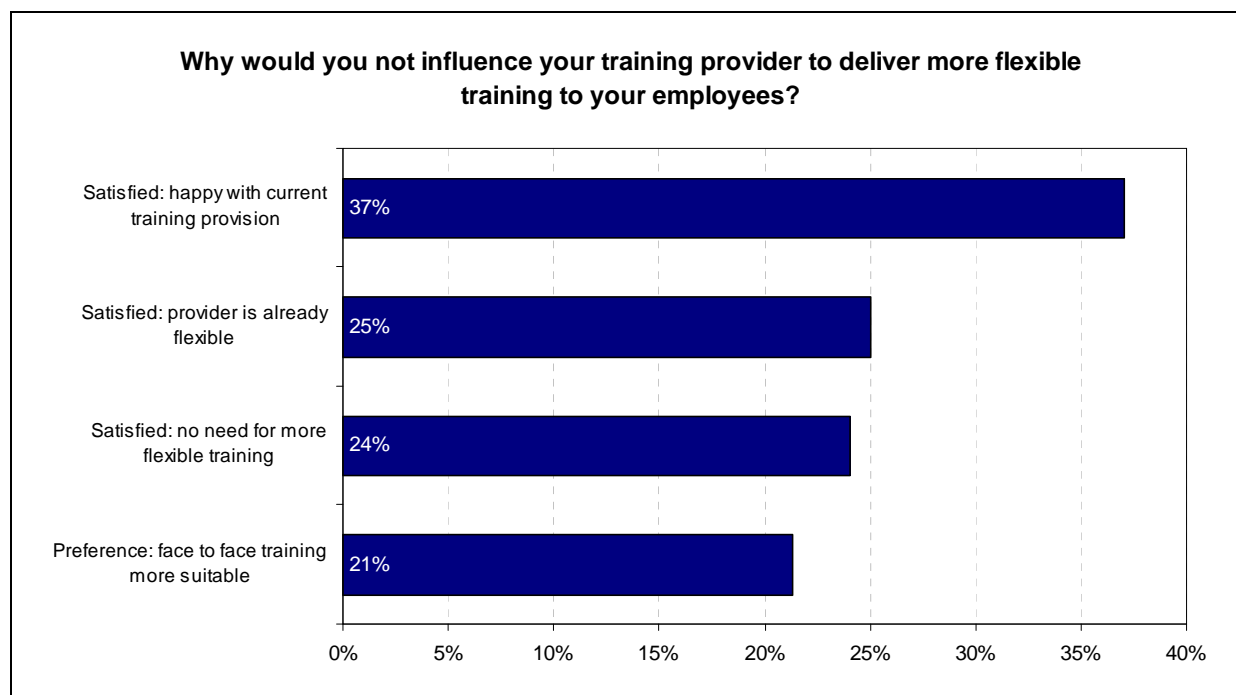
“To ensure that flexible learning is available, and that we can tailor the learning packages to individual needs of the client or student.”

The alternative perspective

Twenty-seven percent of employers said that they would not seek to influence their training provider to deliver more flexible training to their employees.

There were four main reasons given, three of which were related to a current level of satisfaction. Thirty-seven percent of these employers said that they were happy with the

current training provided to their employees. Twenty-five percent said that they thought their current training provider was already flexible and 24% saw no need to introduce greater flexibility into the training their employees currently receive.



Among the employers who gave these responses were some who said they would encourage their own employees to use e-learning if it was available, meaning that they had different responses with regard to their intention to influence internal actions versus having an external influence on training programs. The reasons for choosing not to influence a training provider in this case included:

- Employees' satisfaction and comfort with their current training provider ("He is really happy with them", "It's the employee's choice")
- Not seeing it as the employer's role to influence another organisation's operations ("It's not my place", "I couldn't tell someone how to do their job")
- Not seeing it as an area worth the time, cost and effort ("We don't do too much training", "I couldn't be bothered").

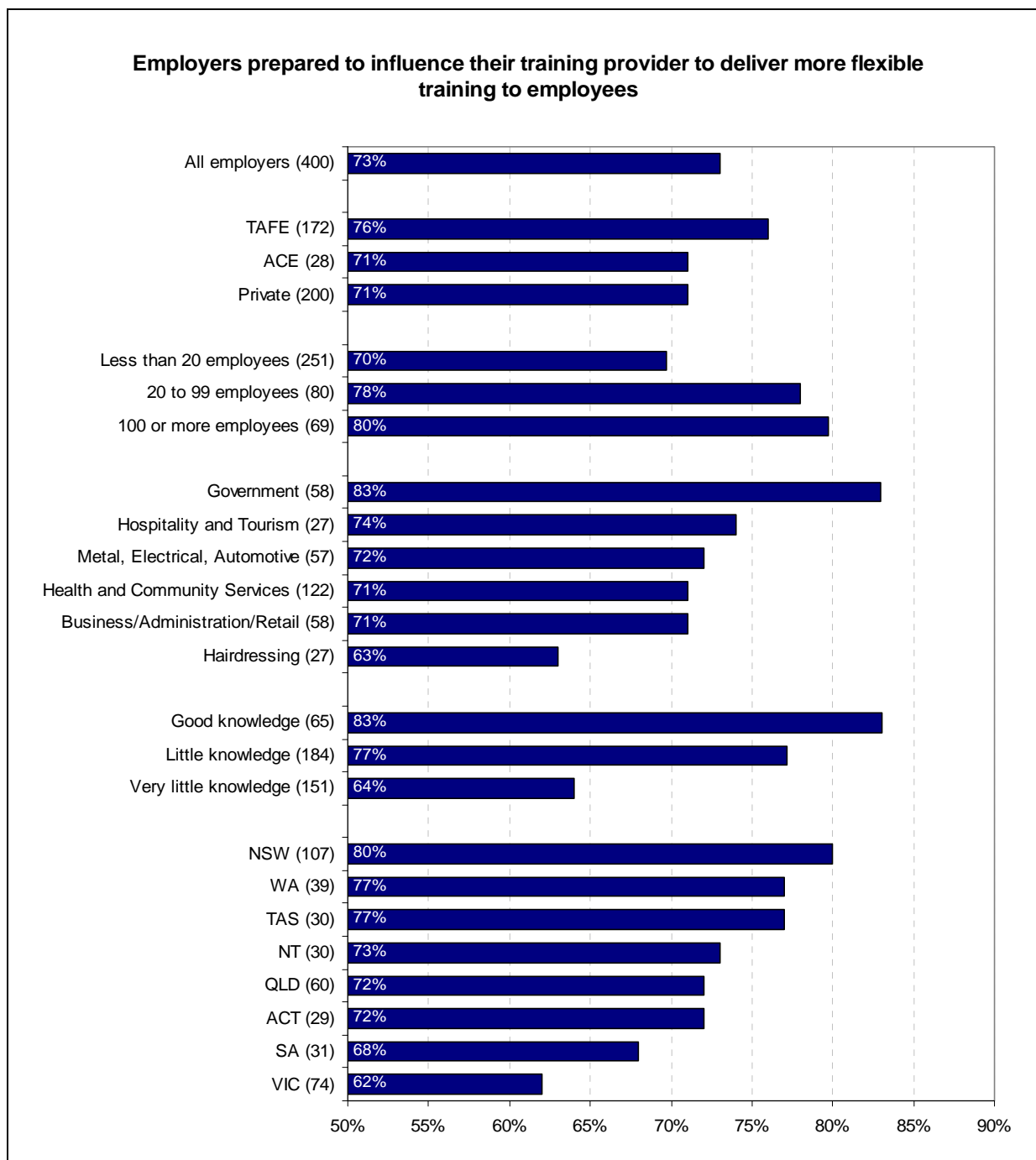
The preference for face-to-face training was also mentioned, as many employers who said that they would not encourage their employees to use e-learning also said they would not influence their training provider to deliver more flexibly.

Influence training provider? By employer type

While the majority of employers said that they might influence their training providers to deliver more flexible training, the strength of response was not consistent across all employers, as shown in the following table. The proportion of employees that said they might influence their training provider was highest among government agencies (mainly local government agencies), employers in New South Wales and large employers (100 or more employees). The result was lowest among hairdressers, and in Victoria and South Australia.

Once again, as was the case with employers' likelihood to encourage employees to use e-learning, the key differentiating factor was the employer's knowledge of e-learning. The profile of results was not exactly the same as for the earlier question, indicating that there are some random differences among individual employers in different locations, of different size, in different industries and with different training provider relationships. However the key factor remained the same. While many employers would influence their training provider to

deliver more flexible training, they are more likely to do so if they have a good understanding of e-learning.



Some additional commentary on the responses to this question by different employer types is provided on the following page.

By provider type

Employers whose main training provider was a TAFE institute were slightly more likely to influence this provider than those with ACE or private and other providers. Flexibility and convenience for employees was the most commonly stated factor for TAFE-related employers, with flexibility and time saving noted by private provider-linked employers (36% mentioned this) and access to training raised by ACE-linked employers (45% said this).

By employer size

Larger employers were more inclined to influence training provision, with reasons mainly based on individual employee benefits related to convenience and flexibility. In some cases increasing training options through ICT was an approach consistent with the organisation's own training directions.

"We are going down that track now, trying to offer e-learning on our intranet and oracle learning management system. It's the way the business is moving, and gives people more independence in their learning."

Among smaller employers the individual employee benefits were also cited as a reason for seeking more flexible training, although proportionally fewer employers said they might do this.

"It's convenient. It's easy to access for people who don't have cars so they don't have to leave the premises. And it would give them competence with the computer."

"Because we get a better trained hairdresser at the end."

Smaller organisations expressed the benefit of their training provider delivering more flexible learning as more convenient and easier for the workplace. Smaller organisations felt more strongly the absence of an employee for training purposes, with flexible learning allowing that employee to remain in the workplace and complete their training at a time that is more convenient to the organisation.

By industry

Government agencies were clearly more likely than employers in other industries to seek to influence their training provider's flexible delivery (83% for government, compared with 71% to 74% for most industries). The reasons of training convenience and flexibility were both mentioned, as was the opportunity for employees to access more training options and courses.

"We want to give flexibility to the people who are learning, and the option to finish the course even if they can't go to class."

"Because it would open up a whole lot of opportunities as this a rural area."

Again, hairdressers were less likely to influence their training providers (63%). Nearly all of those who said they would not influence their provider said they were satisfied with their current training arrangements ("*Happy with the services they provide*" ... "*Happy with how we're doing it*" ... "*Happy as it is*" ... "*Happy with the situation I have now*") and only a couple saying they could not be bothered or it was too hard.

"They're very good. The girls go down once a week and have a full day, so they deliver what we like, and we're happy with that."

By knowledge of e-learning

Most employers, regardless of their level of knowledge of e-learning, indicated that they would influence their training provider to deliver more flexible learning as it provided their employees with greater flexibility and allowed them to save personal and work-related time. However, the response was significantly more positive with regards to influence among those employers with a 'good knowledge' of e-learning when compared to those with 'very little knowledge'.

By state and territory

New South Wales, Western Australia and Tasmania were the states where the highest proportion of employers said they might influence training providers to deliver more flexible training, with South Australia (68%) and Victoria (62%) having the lowest results. There were no marked differences between states and territories as to the reason for answering 'Yes' or

'No' to this question, with convenience and flexibility stressed on the positive side and most 'No' responses attributable to satisfaction with current training arrangements.

Conclusion

The 2007 E-learning Benchmarking Survey asked employers about the extent to which they would act to encourage the uptake and delivery of e-learning and more flexible training. In both cases the majority of employers said that they would:

- encourage employees to use e-learning if it was available (86%)
- influence their training provider to provide more flexible training (73%).

The reasons given for encouraging greater use of e-learning were mainly based on benefits to employees – convenience, flexibility, increased access to training, more training options, control over the pace of learning – with acknowledgement that these would deliver work-related skills and productivity benefits.

These responses were fairly consistent across the workforce, although there were some differences between the responses of employers of different size, in different industries, and in different states and territories. There were also some slight differences depending on whether the employer's main training provider was a TAFE institute, an ACE provider, or a private, industry, enterprise or government RTO. However, clearly the most significant differentiating factor between responses was whether the employer had an understanding of e-learning.

While many employers said they did not have much knowledge about e-learning, most still said they would encourage employees to use e-learning and influence their training provider to be more flexible. But employers were much more likely to respond in this way if they had a good knowledge of e-learning. This strongly suggests that a critical component of demand side influence on training provision is the knowledge of employers about what flexible options are available and the potential application of e-learning.

For more information

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