

Leading Technical Professionals



Survey RESULTS: Leading Technical Professionals

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Overview

Over the last century, the global economy has gradually shifted from a capital and labor driven market to one fueled by information, and more recently one enhanced by human talent. With the education levels of the labor force rising steadily, corporations are becoming increasingly reliant on highly-skilled, technical employees. In today's fast-paced world, companies depend on their top talent, not only to develop ideas, improve processes and drive innovation, but ultimately to create a competitive advantage.

Despite the prevalence and importance of technical roles within today's corporations, many struggle with how to effectively lead Technical Professionals – whether Research Scientists, Accountants, Engineers, Legal or IT Professionals, Doctors or Analysts. As such, some companies are failing to leverage the knowledge and skills of their most talented employees – and their greatest assets.

BlessingWhite, a division of GP Strategies, has been examining the needs of technical and creative employees for several years. In their most recent research effort, with the participation of more than 900 Leaders of Technical Professionals and 300 Technical Professionals from a variety of industries, departments, and countries, they have further refined their understanding of what Technical Professionals and their Leaders require in work environments, along with factors that can help improve their leadership performance.

Their original research has identified six needs deemed critical for highly-skilled employees, each of which is described below.

- **Achievement:** accomplishing goals that require considerable skill or effort, and that make an impact
- **Autonomy:** controlling their work, conditions and pace, with little direction or input from others
- **Professional identification:** identifying with their profession or interest first, and company second
- **Participation in mission and goals:** being involved in setting goals and expectations, to ensure that their potential is maximized
- **Collegial support and sharing:** learning from experts in their field, and sharing their own knowledge in a competitive atmosphere
- **Keeping current:** being at the leading edge of their fields and trying or developing the newest technologies, products, designs, gadgets, etc.

Although these needs may seem apparent, training organizations are responsible for designing and developing training that will not only meet the needs of Technical Professionals, but will also take into account their learning preferences.

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In March 2013, more than one hundred Learning Leaders participated in a TrainingIndustry.com study exploring how training organizations currently develop and deliver training for Leaders of Technical Professionals. The goal of the research was not only to determine the effectiveness of training programs at cultivating Leaders of Technical Professionals, but to also identify:

- Best practices for training Leaders of Technical Professionals
- Most common challenges for newly promoted and experienced Leaders of Technical Professionals
- Training attributes that are critical for the success of Leaders of Technical Professionals

Definitions

To help Learning Leaders develop a frame of reference for contributing to the study, the following definitions for Technical Professionals and Leaders were provided.

A **TECHNICAL PROFESSIONAL** is defined as a highly-skilled employee in a technical discipline. This includes IT Professionals, Engineers (software, hardware, civil), Research Scientists, Doctors, Financial Experts and Legal Professionals.

A **LEADER** can be a Manager (the primary individual to whom the Technical Professional reports), or a Project Manager or Team Leader (an individual without an official direct reporting relationship, but whose deliverables depend on the contributions of one or more Technical Professionals).

A **LEARNING LEADER** is a professional who drives the development of an organization – which may include Human Resources Partners to the business, Performance Improvement Consultants, L&D Managers, Directors or Executives, or functional leaders like Sales Readiness Directors or Leadership Development Specialists.

Note: A Leader may or may not be a Technical Professional.

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Key Findings

- The majority of Learning Leaders (53%) said that their organizations *do not offer* specialized courses, workshops or a standalone program for Leaders of Technical Professionals.
- More than 75% of Learning Leaders from *effective organizations* report offering a standalone program or a specific module for Leaders of Technical Professionals.
- *Effective organizations* dedicate an average of 32% of their overall training investment to Leaders of Technical Professionals – 146% more than the average investment by *ineffective organizations*.
- Learning Leaders consider building trust within teams, building collaborative relationships throughout the organization, and communicating effectively at all levels as the most important skills to develop when providing training for Leaders of Technical Professionals. This is well aligned with the skills considered critical by Leaders of Technical Professionals.
- When providing training for Leaders of Technical Professionals, Learning Leaders cited live face-to-face instructor-led workshops or courses as the most effective delivery method. Leaders of Technical Professionals expressed different learning preferences.
- Learning Leaders identified the top three leadership challenges of Leaders of Technical Professionals as: self-development, encouraging team engagement and leading teams through organizational change.
- However, Leaders of Technical Professionals noted their top three challenges as: delivering on projects with fewer resources, recruiting the Technical Professionals with the talent/skills needed, and balancing their team’s coaching needs with their own personal responsibilities.
- A serious gap exists between the assumptions of Learning Leaders and the experiences reported by Leaders of Technical Professionals when examining workplace priorities. Developing a better awareness of these priorities allows organizations to both address the top needs of Technical Leaders *and* tailor learning initiatives to focus on these priorities.

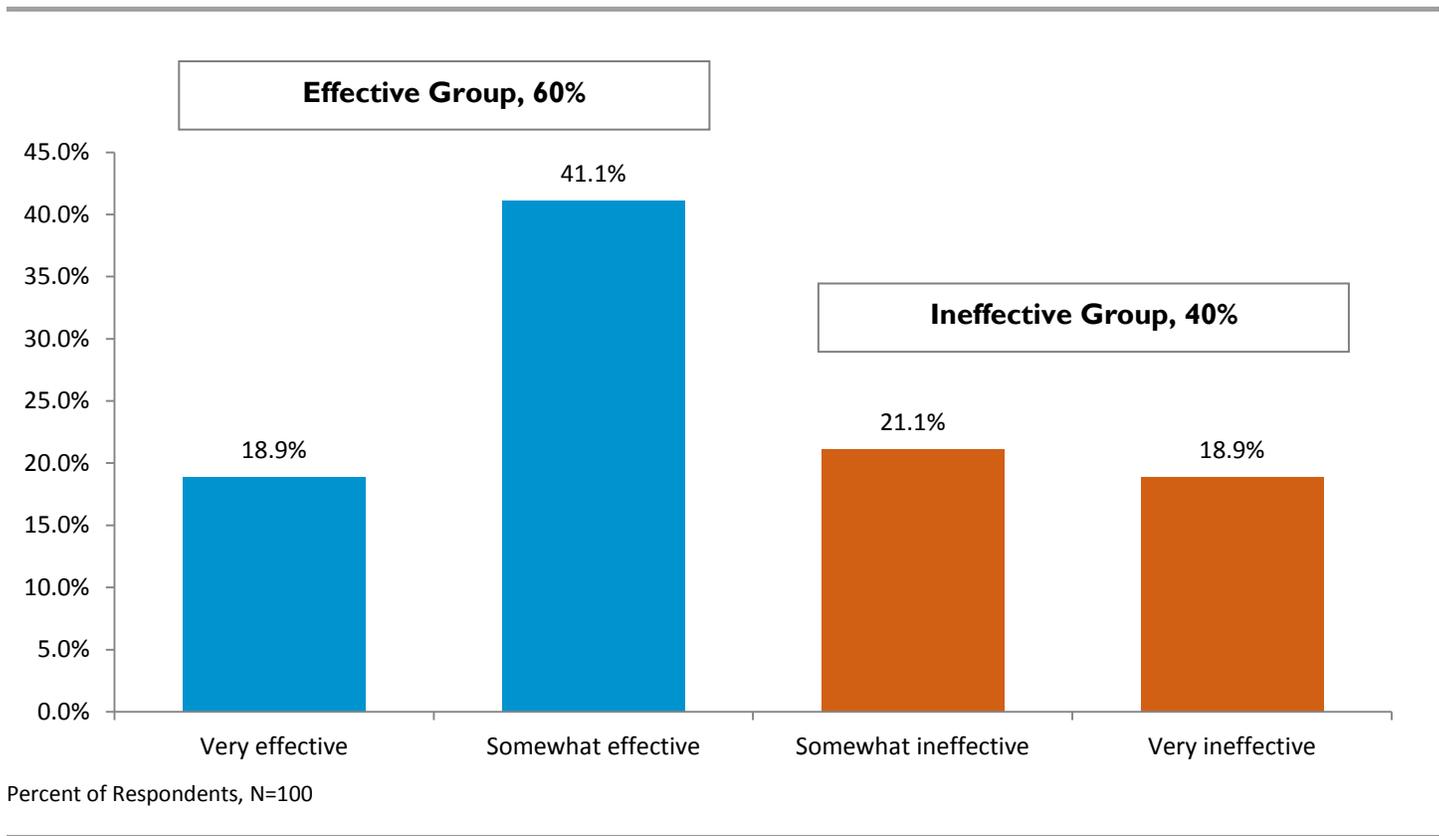
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I. Providing Training for Leaders of Technical Professionals

Effectiveness of Training for Leaders of Technical Professionals

When asked to rate the effectiveness of their training organizations at providing training to Leaders of Technical Professionals, 60% of Learning Leaders said that their organizations are either very or somewhat *effective* (Figure 1). Conversely, approximately 40% of respondents stated that their training organizations are either very or somewhat *ineffective* at providing training to Leaders of Technical Professionals.

Figure 1



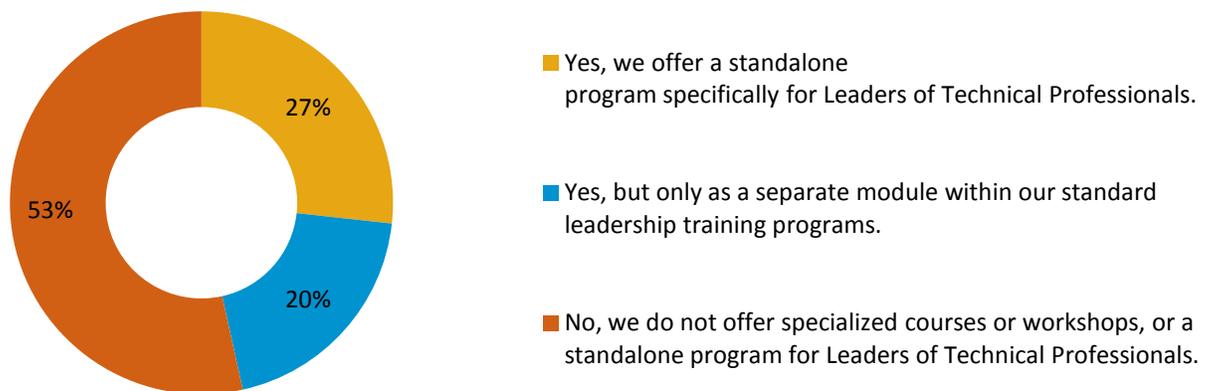
Throughout the report, the Effective and Ineffective Groups will be compared to identify particular areas of differentiation between the two groups.

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Specialized Training for Leaders of Technical Professionals

Learning Leaders were asked whether their organizations currently offer specialized training for Leaders of Technical Professionals. The majority of survey respondents (53%) reported that their organizations *do not offer* specialized courses, workshops or a standalone program for Leaders of Technical Professionals.

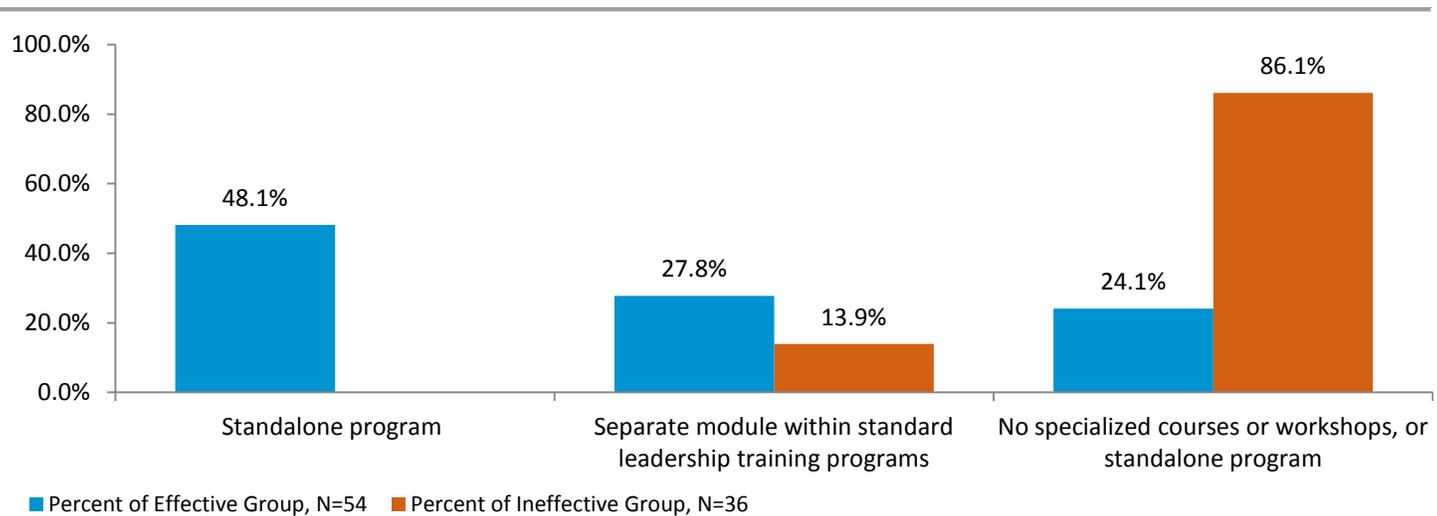
Figure 2



Percent of Respondents, N=101

When comparing the Effective and Ineffective Groups, 48% of the Effective Group offers a standalone program for Leaders of Technical Professionals (Figure 3). An additional 28% offer separate modules within their leadership training programs.

Figure 3



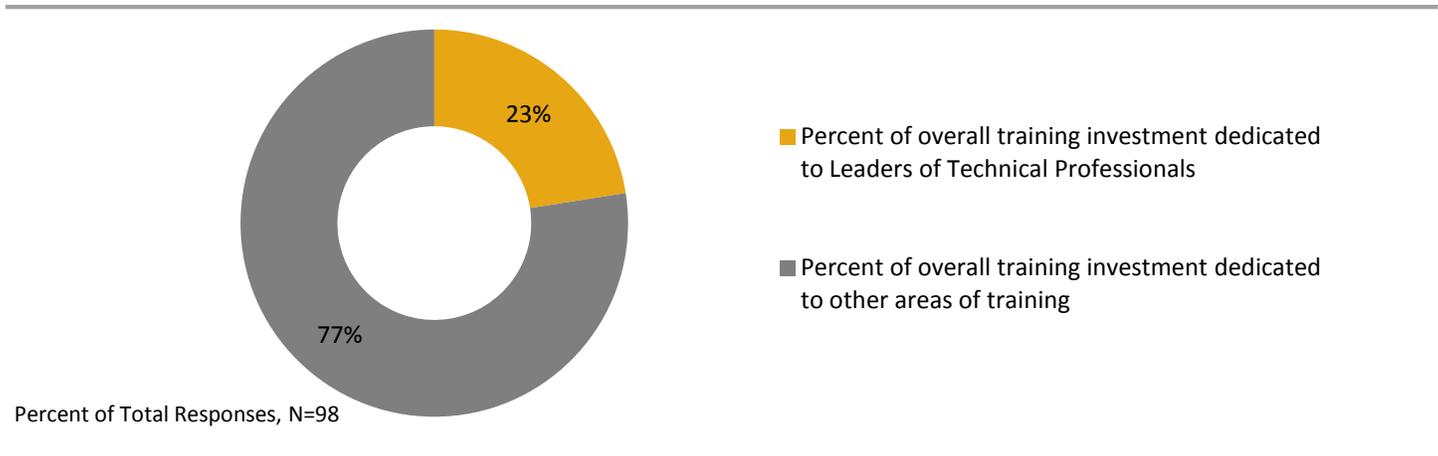
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II. Investment in Training for Leaders of Technical Professionals

Overall Investment

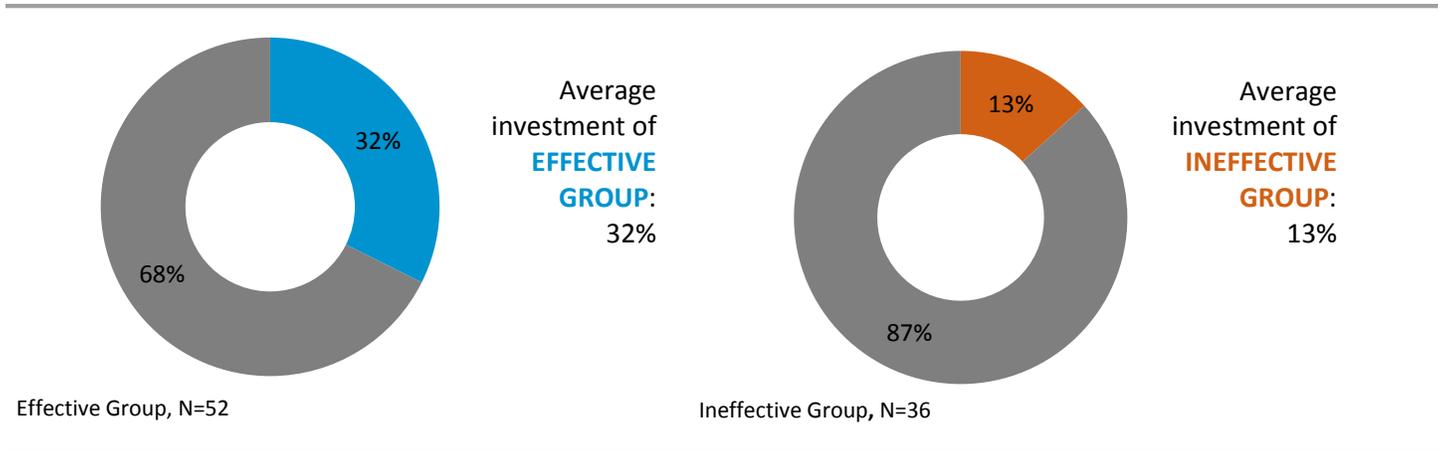
Learning Leaders were asked to provide an estimate of the overall training investment that their organizations dedicate to training for Leaders of Technical Professionals. Respondents reported that, on average, 23% of their overall training investment is dedicated to Leaders of Technical Professionals, which is demonstrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4



Further analysis showed that the Effective Group dedicates an average of 32% of their overall training investment to Leaders of Technical Professionals – 146% more than the average investment by the Ineffective Group.

Figure 5



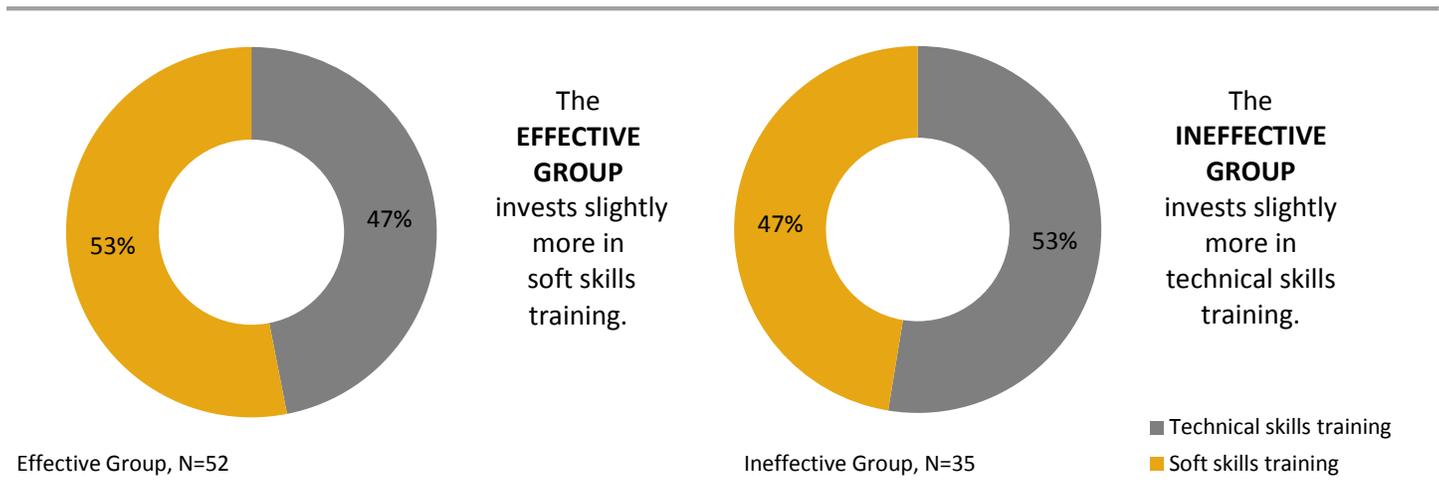
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Investment in Technical and Soft Skills Training

Of their investment in training for Leaders of Technical Professionals, Learning Leaders were asked to estimate what percentage is dedicated to technical skills training and soft skills training. Learning Leaders reported that their investment in training for Leaders of Technical Professionals was split evenly between technical skills training and soft skills training, with 50% dedicated to each area.

However, when comparing the Effective and Ineffective Groups, the Effective Group invests slightly more in soft skills training. See Figure 6, below.

Figure 6



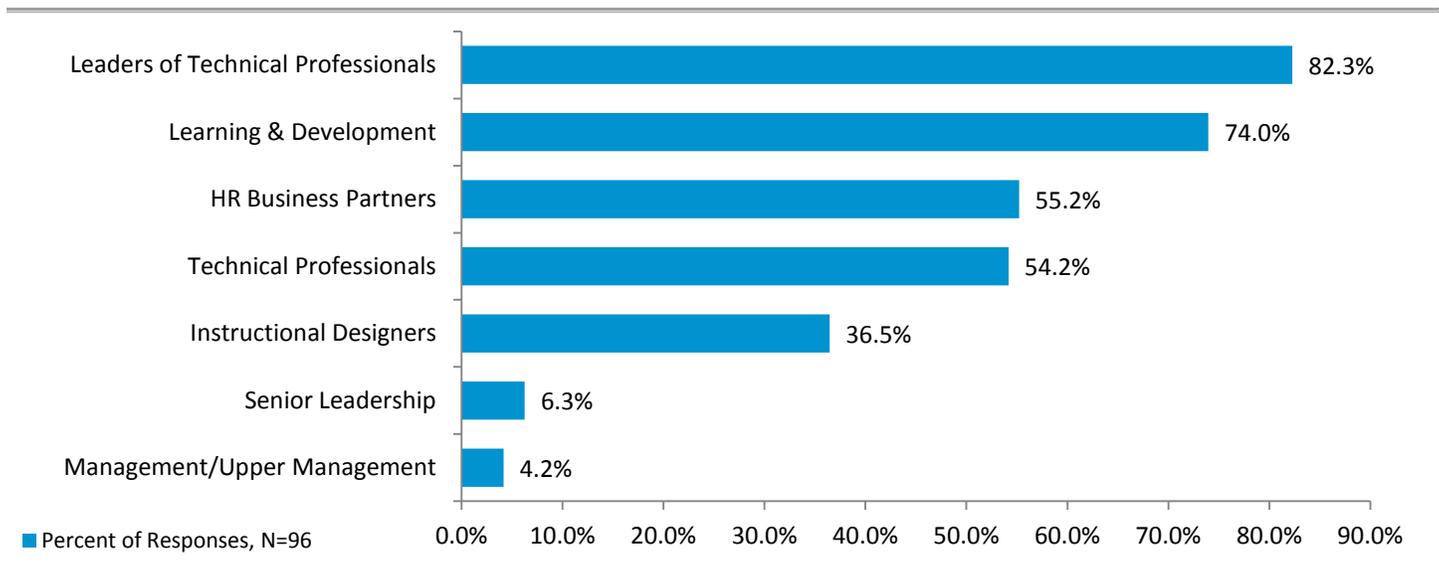
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III. Developing Training for Leaders of Technical Professionals

Stakeholders Involved

Learning Leaders were asked to identify the stakeholders involved in making decisions about curricula for Leaders of Technical Professionals. Approximately 82% of respondents said that their organizations actually involve those who will benefit from the training directly – Leaders of Technical Professionals. Seventy-four percent (74%) of respondents said Learning & Development personnel are typically involved in the process, as demonstrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7



In general, Learning Leaders from the Effective Group report the inclusion of stakeholders in the decision-making process more often. In fact, the Effective Group describes involving Instructional Designers more than *twice as often* as the Ineffective Group. By engaging key stakeholders, organizations can better ensure that the learning and developmental needs of Technical Professionals – and their Leaders – are realized.

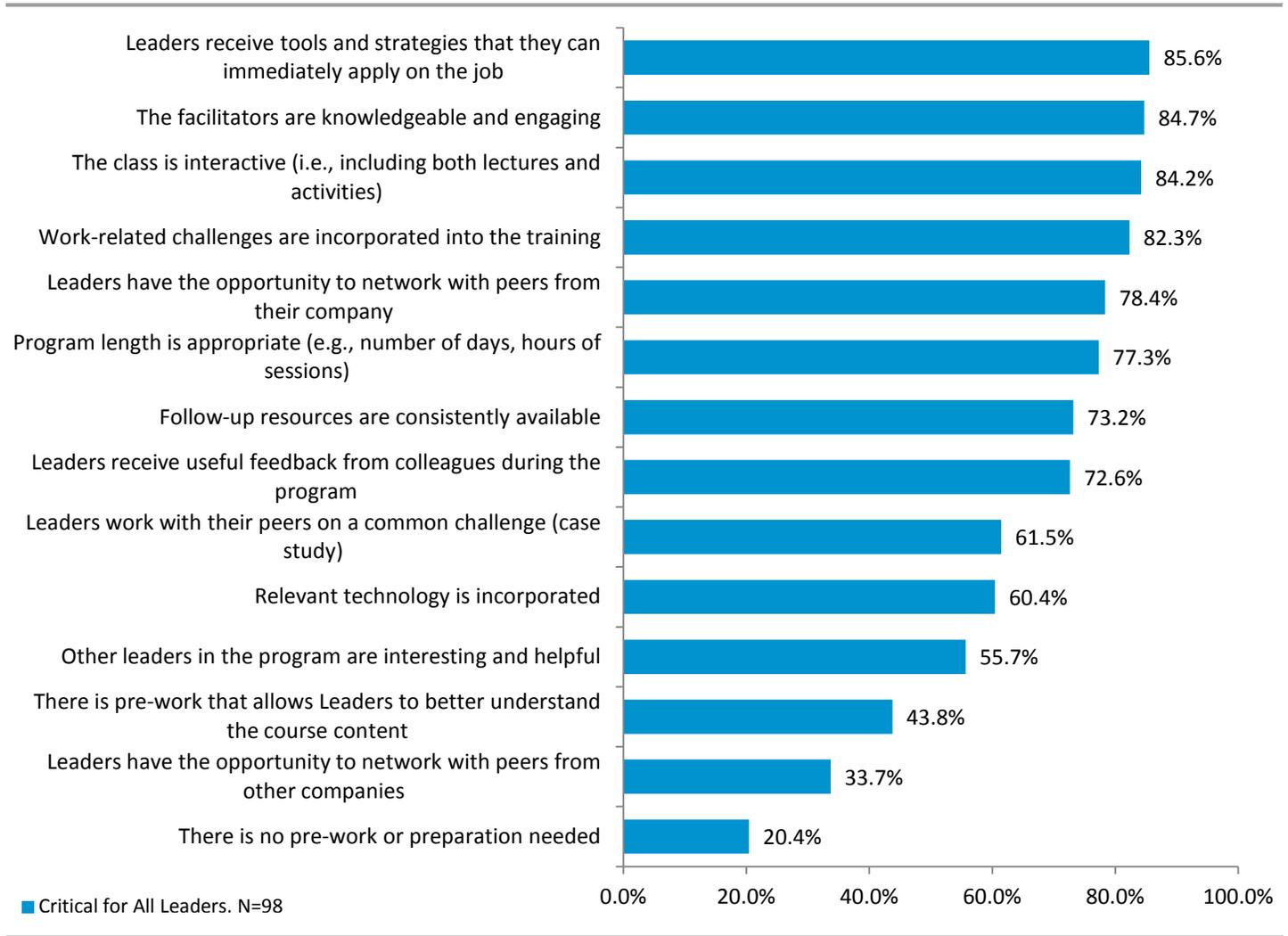
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Attributes of Effective Training

To understand which attributes they consider critical for training programs for Leaders of Technical and Non-Technical Professionals, Learning Leaders were asked to rate the importance of several training factors. Learning Leaders believe that for any type of leadership program, on-the-job application, engaging instruction and interactivity are most critical, which are visible as the top three responses in Figure 8.

However, 27% of respondents stated that incorporating relevant technology is also critical – *specifically* for Leaders of Technical Professionals.

Figure 8



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When comparing Learning Leaders' responses (Figure 8) with those of Technical Professionals and Leaders of Technical Professionals, the rankings are strikingly similar. In BlessingWhite's study, Technical Professionals and Leaders (or Managers) of Technical Professionals were asked to think about the attributes of those training programs they consider most effective.

Table 1 demonstrates the relative alignment between Technical Professionals, their Leaders, and Learning Leaders, regarding elements of effective training.

Table 1

Response Options	Technical Professionals Rank	Leaders of Technical Professionals Rank	Learning Leaders Rank
Participants receive tools and strategies that they can immediately apply on the job	2	2	1
The facilitators are knowledgeable and engaging	1	1	2
The class is interactive (i.e., including both lectures and activities)	3	3	3

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Importance of Developing Certain Leadership Skills

There are specific skills that are required to be an Engineer, a Psychiatrist, a Creative Director – and even a Learning Leader – but what skills are essential for leading Technical Professionals? Learning Leaders were asked what skills should be developed when providing training for Leaders of Technical Professionals. As Figure 9 depicts, building trust with their teams, building collaborative relationships throughout the organization, and communicating effectively across the organization were considered the most important skills for Leaders of Technical Professionals to develop.

Figure 9



Similarly, Technical Professionals and Leaders of Technical Professionals were asked which factors were critical to success when leading or managing Technical Professionals. The overall results were consistent with those of Learning Leaders, with trust and communication deemed most important. In addition, Technical Professionals also noted that their current managers could improve in two particular areas that also garnered attention: giving specific, relevant feedback and coaching and developing the Technical Professionals on their team.

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IV. Delivering Training to Leaders of Technical Professionals

Most Effective Delivery Methods

Depending on the skills being developed or the knowledge being shared, a variety of delivery methods could be incorporated into training for Leaders of Technical Professionals. When Learning Leaders were asked which methods they consider most effective for training Leaders of Technical Professionals, live face-to-face instructor-led workshops or courses was the clear winner (Figure 10).

Coaching was also considered an effective delivery method by Learning Leaders, but an area in which Technical Professionals felt that their Leaders could improve. This could signify a disconnect between which methods are truly effective for training Leaders of Technical Professionals, and which are considered effective for leadership programs in general. Leaders of Technical Professionals do not see coaching as a priority, even though this approach is known for its effectiveness, and is considered important by individual contributors.

Figure 10



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Preferred Learning Methods

Despite the differing views of Technical Professionals and Learning Leaders regarding delivery methods, there was general agreement regarding preferred learning methods. Technical Professionals and Leaders of Technical Professionals stated that their top three preferred methods for learning were to:

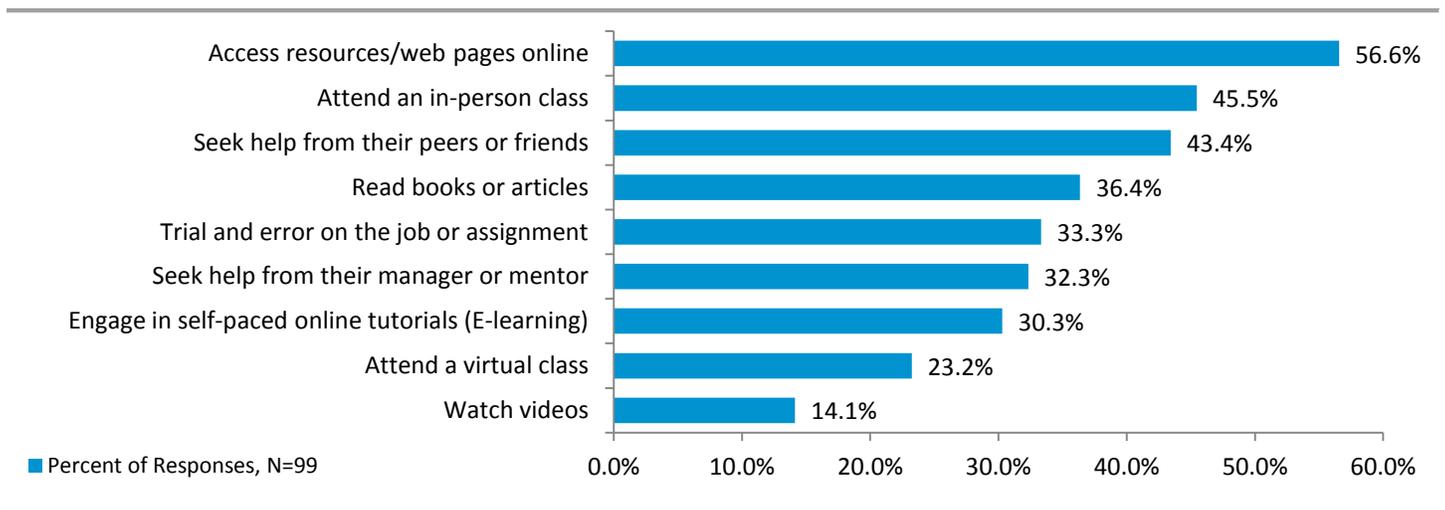
- Access resources/web pages online
- Read books or articles
- Seek help from peers

The majority of Learning Leaders agreed that Leaders of Technical Professionals would rather access resources online than use other learning methods (Figure 11). This method, partnered with the latter two given above, reiterate Technical Professionals’ needs for autonomy and collegial support.

As demonstrated in Figure 11, however, there is an apparent disconnect between what Technical Professionals *actually prefer* and what Learning Leaders *believe they prefer*. Learning Leaders rated attending an in-person class much higher than Technical Professionals, who rated it seventh out of nine possible learning methods.

In general, Learning Leaders seemed to consider the more interactive methods, such as instructor-led workshops, coaching, and live practice/role play sessions as those favored by Technical Professionals – which is not the case.

Figure 11

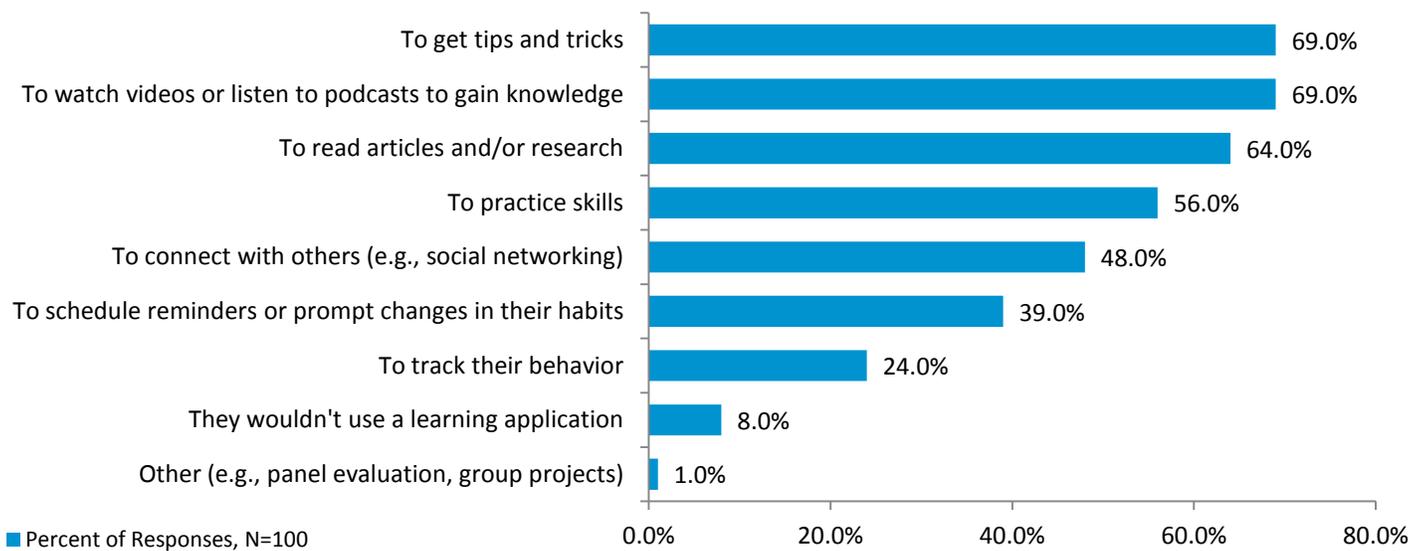


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Usage of Learning Tools & Applications

When asked their opinion on how Leaders of Technical Professionals use learning tools and applications, Learning Leaders were right on target with the responses of Technical Professionals and their Leaders. Across groups, the most cited responses were content-driven, with an emphasis on tips and tricks, videos and articles or research. Tracking, scheduling, and particularly social uses were mentioned much less often among Technical Professionals. Figure 12, below, depicts the responses of Learning Leaders.

Figure 12



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V. Challenges for Leaders of Technical Professionals

Understanding the Daily Challenges for Leaders of Technical Professionals

Leaders of Technical Professionals were asked to rank their top leadership challenges; similarly, Learning Leaders were asked to rate the challenges they consider most critical for the Technical Leaders in their organizations. The primary challenges identified by Learning Leaders focused on developing their team members and engaging and leading their teams, particular during change initiatives (Figure 12).

While these may be particularly important for general leadership programs, these were not the challenges that Leaders of Technical Professionals themselves highlighted. The top three challenges that Leaders of Technical Professionals reported facing daily include (Table 2):

- Delivering on projects with fewer resources
- Recruiting the technical professionals with the talent/skills needed
- Balancing my team’s coaching needs with my own personal responsibilities

In juxtaposing the answers from both groups (Table 2), there is an obvious disconnect. Only about half of Learning Leaders surveyed thought that these were significant challenges for Leaders of Technical Professionals – which further emphasizes the disparity between what Learning Leaders perceive and what Technical Professionals actually experience.

A proper understanding of leadership priorities ensures that training is relevant to Leaders of Technical Professionals, securing their commitment to the learning process, and also informs design processes so learning initiatives are built to address the pressures and challenges faced by this learning population.

Table 2

Response Options	Leaders of Technical Professionals Rank	Learning Leaders Rank
Delivering on projects with fewer resources	1	4
Recruiting the Technical Professionals with the talent/skills needed	2	8=
Balancing my team's coaching needs with my own project responsibilities	3	8=
Developing the skills of the Technical Professionals they lead	4	11
Encouraging innovation that meets customer and market needs	5	5
Retaining key Technical Professionals	6=	9
Developing myself personally and professionally	13	1
Encouraging engagement within my team, especially during times of change, uncertainty, and ambiguity	9=	2
Leading my team through organizational changes	6=	3

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Challenges for New Leaders of Technical Professionals

Learning Leaders were also asked to provide the challenges that they consider most common for *newly promoted* Leaders of Technical Professionals. Foremost, many Learning Leaders noted that new Leaders often have no management experience, or may have trouble managing their peers, so transitioning from a technical role to a leadership position may be difficult.

In addition, Learning Leaders believe that new Leaders of Technical Professionals often encounter challenges that are related to particular leadership and soft skills that need improvement or development. The leadership skills and soft skills mentioned most often are cited below. Interestingly, those with an asterisk (*) were also considered the most important skills to develop (p. 13) in training Leaders of Technical Professionals.

- Leadership Skills
 - Defining and delegating responsibilities
 - Coaching and mentoring*
 - Providing constructive feedback*

- Soft Skills
 - Building trust within the team*
 - Effectively communicating goals and responsibilities*
 - Motivating team members and managing conflict

Two additional challenges of newly promoted Leaders of Technical Professionals as reported by Learning Leaders were: creating balance between their own responsibilities and the priorities of their team and organization and understanding the business strategy and adapting to organizational culture or change.

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Figure 13



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Challenges for Experienced Leaders of Technical Professionals

When considering the most common challenges for *experienced* Leaders of Technical Professionals, Learning Leaders cited many challenges that are consistent with those reported by the Leaders themselves. Below are the challenges that Learning Leaders observed, in order of most to least often mentioned.

- Effectively recruiting new Leaders and employees and developing them professionally, specifically through coaching and knowledge transfer practices
- Staying up to date with industry advances and encouraging innovation
- Fostering collaboration and productivity, particularly among multigenerational teams
- Partnering with other business units and Leaders to ensure project buy-in, maintain business relevance, and garner respect and support across the organization
- Managing change
- Prioritizing projects and using/distributing resources (e.g., budget, technical staff, time) wisely and efficiently
- Inspiring their teams by effectively communicating goals and responsibilities, and maintaining motivation

While many of these reported challenges are similar, there is still misalignment regarding those that are most pertinent to Leaders of Technical Professionals.

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VI. Best Practices

Survey respondents were finally asked to provide a best practice to help other Learning Leaders develop effective and engaging training for Leaders of Technical Professionals. Learning Leaders shared the following best practices, in order of most to least often mentioned:

- Deliver and reinforce training using a variety of methods, particularly role plays, simulations, coaching, face-to-face instructor led courses, and e-learning
- Engage Business Leaders, Directors, SMEs, Technical Professionals and Leaders of Technical Professionals in the development of training
- Ensure training is relevant and applicable to their job; encourage knowledge transfer and job pairing between new and experienced employees, and incorporate specific real-world scenarios or case studies
- Evaluate the development needs and challenges of Leaders of Technical Professionals by performing needs assessments and garnering continuous feedback from Leaders and employees
- Provide targeted training in short modules
- Develop a network of experienced Leaders that other Leaders of Technical Professionals can interact with and learn from (including both Technical & Non-Technical Leaders)

Moving Forward

While many of these best practices may seem intuitive to Learning Leaders, one of the most important points is to consider and engage Technical Professionals and their Leaders in the development of training programs. While Learning Leaders and Leaders of Technical Professionals may agree on the importance of certain skills, or the usage of learning applications, there are other areas that are somewhat misaligned.

BlessingWhite's corresponding research not only identified the needs of Technical Professionals in the workplace, but also clarified challenges and preferences that Learning Leaders can build upon when designing training for Leaders of Technical Professionals, and the Technical Professionals they manage. Notably, the results indicated that Technical Professionals prefer multiple, shorter sessions (if attending an in-person class) and the incorporation of computer simulations, video and Internet resources as opposed to other, more social technologies.

By aligning training programs to the needs of Technical Professionals and the areas in which they believe their Leaders require improvement, organizations will be able to more effectively develop Leaders of Technical Professionals. And fostering their development will further engage these Leaders and gradually improve productivity, innovation and retention – all of which contribute to a competitive advantage in *any* market.

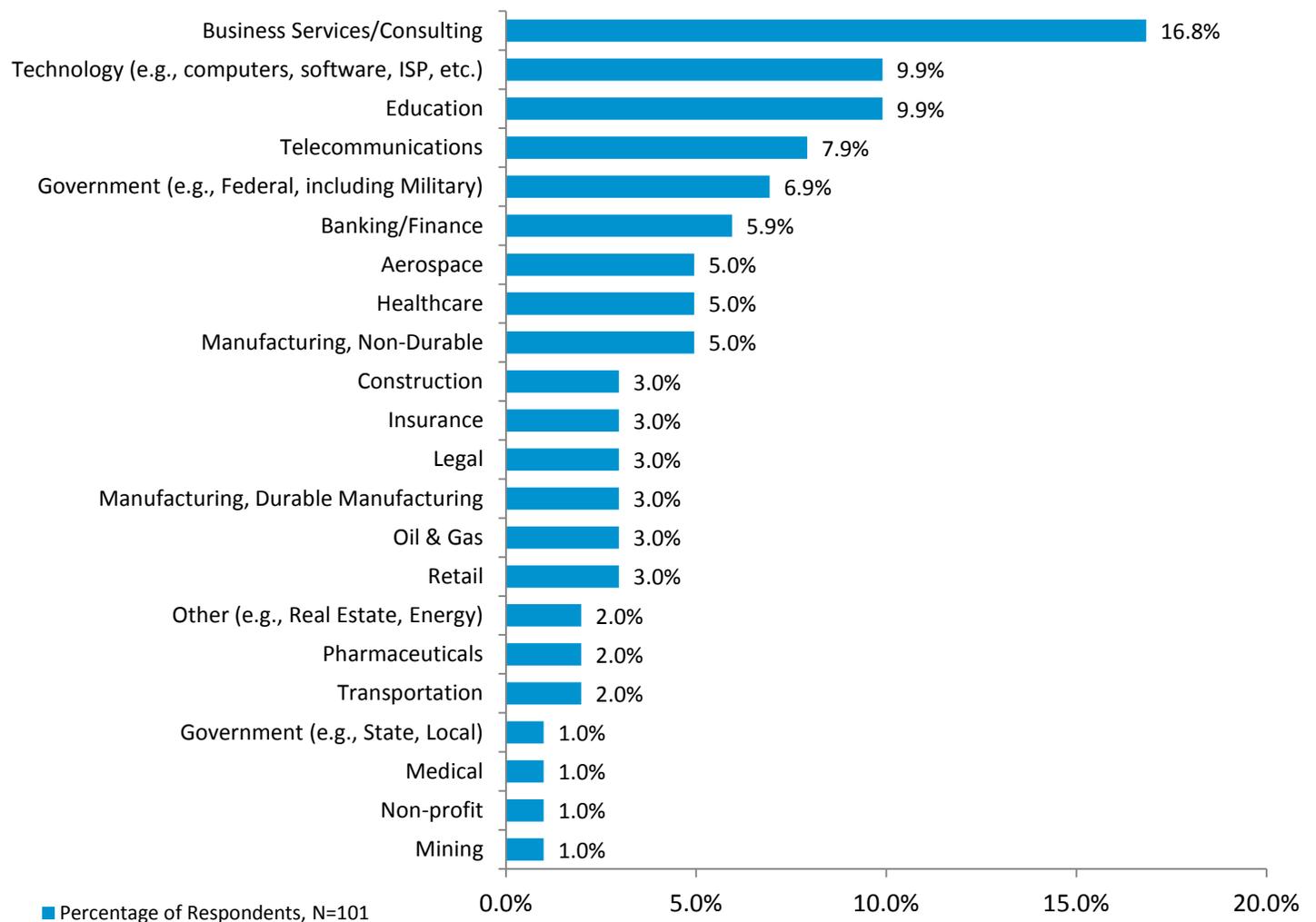
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VII. Demographics

Industries Represented

Approximately 51% of respondents were from the top five industries represented: Business Services/Consulting, Technology, Education, Telecommunications and Government.

Figure 14

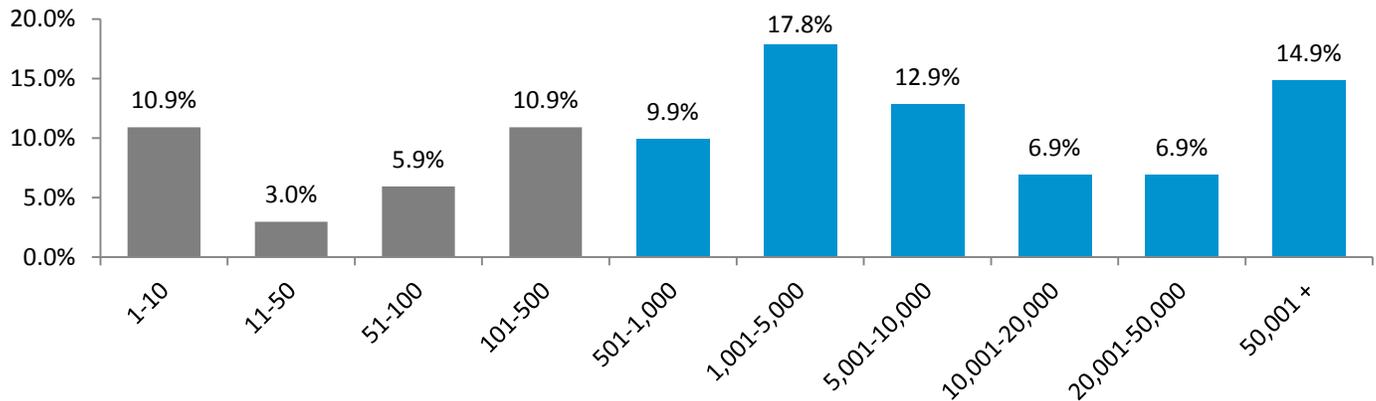


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Company Sizes

Of Learning Leaders surveyed, 69% are from companies with 500 employees or more.

Figure 15

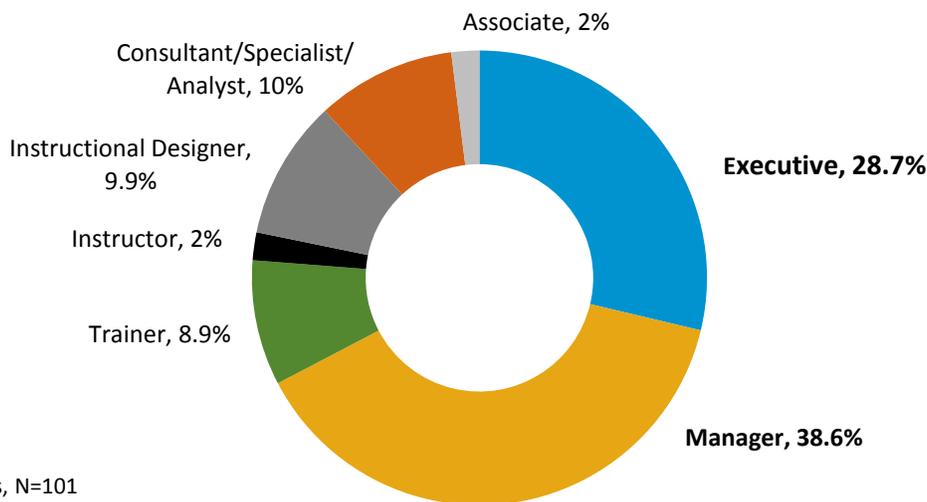


Percent of Respondents, N=101

Departments and Job Roles

Forty-six percent (46%) of participants have roles within Human Resources. Approximately 67% of respondents hold leadership titles, which includes management titles or higher (Figure 16).

Figure 16



Percent of Respondents, N=101

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About GP Strategies

GP Strategies is a global performance improvement company driven to help organizations solve business challenges and achieve impactful results by delivering innovative and superior training solutions.

GP Strategies' approach to teamwork is personalized and reinforced by a strong commitment to earning client satisfaction. GP Strategies' learning professionals are dedicated to providing the superior service and flexible solutions that have been the hallmark of the company for more than 45 years. From custom training, sales training and consulting to talent management and business process outsourcing, when working with GP Strategies, clients can count on a tailored approach that focuses on their business goals.

For more information, visit www.gpstrategies.com or call 800.727.6677.

About BlessingWhite

As a Division of GP Strategies, BlessingWhite specializes in Leadership Development initiatives and Employee Engagement. BlessingWhite conducts regular research into these specific areas of organizational development and their research reports can be downloaded from www.blessingwhite.com/research.

About TrainingIndustry.com

TrainingIndustry.com spotlights the latest news, articles, case studies and best practices within the training industry. Our focus is on helping dedicated business and training professionals get the information, insight and tools needed to more effectively manage the business of learning.

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About This Research

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