

How to Improve Your Company's Training Completion Rates

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How to Improve Completion Rates in Your Employee Training Program

You invest so much money in Learning & Development, how do you ensure your employees actually finish the training? Just because you build it doesn't mean they will come. Research shows that typical completion rates for online courses can be as low as four percent!

Whether your goal is to get employees to learn new job skills or to get them certified, maximizing your ROI depends on employees not just participating in training, but finishing it.

This white paper shares the current research on how to improve training completion rates—especially when it comes to online courses and other eLearning programs. The methods described include techniques that have helped some training programs achieve completion rates as high as 72 percent.

Course Completion: Why Does It Matter?

The importance of completion depends entirely on your business goals. Most companies invest in training in order to achieve a real improvement in skills and practices. Organizations with a strong learning and development program are 56 percent more likely to be first to market and 17 percent more profitable than their peers.⁴

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—David Mallon
Bersin by Deloitte

Some situations require a 100 percent completion rate. This is the case when training or certification is part of a corporate directive or government mandate, common in highly-regulated industries like banking, healthcare, and insurance. For example:

- › S.1550: Program Management Improvement and Accountability Act of 2015 (PMIAA) which will enhance accountability and best practices in project and program management throughout the federal government.
- › Ethics Awareness Act: 5 CFR 2638.705
- › IT Security Awareness Act: 5 CFR 930.301

The Society of Corporate Compliance and Ethics and NYSE Governance Services found that although 96 percent of organizations surveyed offer some kind of ethics and compliance training, 12 percent fail to achieve completion for mandatory code training and 26 percent fail to complete risk training.⁸

Beyond finishing a course, the additional step of certifying employees provides excellent, quantifiable benefits. Certification by an authoritative agency:

- › Assures everyone that the employee's skills are complete and current
- › Validates your employees' expertise to coworkers and customers
- › Increases company revenue potential by justifying higher client billing rates
- › Eliminates reliance on outside contractors.
- › Helps staff evaluate job applicants and even train new hires
- › Speeds project completion (companies with certified Project Managers experience an 84 percent increase in on-time project delivery)⁴

Ironically, just because companies meet completion or certification directives, that's no guarantee that employees will actually remember and apply what they've learned to their job. This is especially true if the training was done hastily.

“100 percent course completion is a great first step in meeting the business objectives, [but completion] is by no means a reflection of the usefulness of the course.”

—Srinivas Krishnaswamy
Learningpilgrims Blog⁶

A study of learners at companies with more than 5,000 employees revealed that as few as 9 percent of trained employees actually applied what they've learned to their job to achieve positive results.³

In some cases, course completion isn't critical to business objectives. If employees are able to demonstrate and apply the necessary skills even before they complete the full course, then that may be enough. For example, the training gained in the first few units of a cyber security certification course might be enough to fix an organization's key vulnerability.

What Stops Employees from Completing Training?

Issues that hamper completion rates stem from both human factors and course factors. Here are the top seven reasons why trainees fail to finish.

- 1. Course Difficulty.** Sometimes the educational materials, concepts, or the required skills are just too intense, too complex, too foreign, or too advanced for the trainees. This can be due to the newness or complex nature of the subject matter itself, or it can simply be beyond the trainee's interest or learning ability.
- 2. Time Constraints.** Whether because of employees' busy work/life schedules, duration or scheduling of the course, scope of material or assignments, or deadlines mandated by regulations, the pressure to complete training can be too much to overcome.
- 3. Lack of Motivation.** While for some, simply the process of training brings its own reward. Most employees require some additional motivation. This motivation can come from self-imposed, social, or management incentives or disincentives. Without clear goals or rewards, training is seen as a burden rather than a benefit.
- 4. No Management Support.** Without the buy-in of upper management, training programs can be devalued and deprioritized in favor of other projects or operations. This not only intensifies time constraints but also demotivates trainees. When managers fail to monitor training progress or provide motivation, learners fall back and drop out.
- 5. Technology Downtime.** If the company or learners lack the infrastructure to access the courses on a reliable basis (due to clunky hardware or software), training suffers, frustrating employees and making completion difficult.
- 6. Poor Course Design.** User experience and the way course materials are parsed and presented can greatly affect completion rates. Training becomes difficult when delivered in a lengthy, time-intensive manner without a variety of engaging content.

- 7. Forgot About the Course.** Sometimes, employees (and managers) simply forget to complete the training or even that they signed up. This happens easily when there's a combination of self-paced learning, time constraints, and a lack of monitoring or motivation by management. The Compliance and Ethics Program Environment Report reveals that 71 percent of organizations rely solely on email reminders to achieve training completion goals.⁸

How to Spot (and Fix) Problems Before They Impact Training

The surprising thing about poor completion rates is that they often come as a shock. The ongoing nature of training provides many continuous opportunities to recognize issues in time to get an employee's training back on track.

- 1. Get periodic feedback during the course.** If you want to know how employees are taking to the training, ask them. Ways you can do this include:
 - › Surveys or brief questionnaires
 - › Informal conversations or short interviews with participants
 - › Focus group sessions with all participants together at once

Use what you learn from these midstream surveys to make immediate course corrections. Factors like session length, time constraints, motivation, management support, and even technology issues are relatively easy to fix and can improve completion rates by 50 percent.

- 2. Take assessments before and during the course.** Different learners come with different needs, experience, and familiarity with the subject matter. For training in some disciplines, such as digital marketing, pre-assessment can provide valuable benchmarks that enable all employees to finish at the same time and level by starting each learner at the best point in the material.

Some training experts even advocate letting employees test-out of certain training phases.

“Providing a test-out option gives trainees the opportunity to prove that they already understand the course materials, and skip past information that they are familiar with.”

—Anna Mazereeuw
Lifelearn.com¹⁰

Pre-assessment does more than provide companies with an honest snapshot of their team's actual skill levels beforehand. It also provides a comparative tool to measure training results and point out any needs for remedial/refresher training.

Periodic quizzes and practice projects throughout the training can also help keep employees on track. Such tests and applied learning projects not only reinforce what has been learned so far, they help motivate trainees to finish by showing them how much they have learned so far and discouraging them from abandoning all the work they have already done. Assessments can even improve learners' long-term recall of information.

- 3. Monitor training with dashboards.** The best training solutions include or integrate with a Learning Management System, or LMS. A good LMS includes dashboards that allow managers and trainees to see assigned and completed training modules, measure progress toward goals, and exchange feedback.

Tools like LMS dashboards and custom portals also enable managers to monitor who is advancing through training and who is lagging behind. An LMS can show managers when learners have last logged on, posted a contribution, or completed a quiz.

Such dashboards also let managers report to executives on the effectiveness of the training, even while it is underway. This eliminates unwelcome surprises, continuously motivates learners, and improves completion and certification rates.

Proven Ways to Improve Course Completion

Although there are numerous obstacles to training completion, there are an equal number of solutions. Here are some of the best techniques for helping people succeed in finishing their training and certification.



Did You Know?

During the 1950s, University of Wisconsin Professor Donald Kirkpatrick developed the Kirkpatrick Evaluation Model for evaluating training effectiveness. The first part of this 4-level approach is Reaction. Survey or talk to your employees before (not just after) the course to get their opinions of the learning experience.

1. Keep courses short or split them up

Time constraints and limited attention span are both major barriers that can be overcome by delivering training using shorter lessons.

Many employees feel overwhelmed with how they will undergo training while carrying out their everyday job responsibilities.

“A better approach is to assign no more than two courses to a learner at any one time,” suggests corporate training expert Robin McDermott. “As courses are completed, new courses can be added tasking learners with a doable assignment.”¹¹

“If you have a longer course, split it up into pieces e.g. level 1, level 2, level 3, says Thinkific’s Greg Smith. “Create shorter lectures (2-7 minutes is ideal). If you currently have longer lectures, it’s easy to cut them up into pieces and there’s no need to remake them.”⁷

“It’s better to have 10 one-hour courses than one 10-hour course. Keep each video under 10 minutes and ensure documents are less than 10 pages each.”

— Sarah Cordiner
eLearning consultant¹⁴

“Ironically it was sometimes easier to find a whole day for a face-to-face workshop,” recalls Clive Shepherd about a study he conducted for Fastrak Consulting, Ltd. “It was clear that participants were disappointed in their own ability to manage their time flexibly. To address this issue, the online courses were redesigned to take place over a very short time period, when participants were expected to concentrate on the workshop material and activities.”¹⁵



What is Chunking?

“Chunking” is a popular learning strategy that improves comprehension and retention of long strings of information by dividing it into smaller units or chunks that are easier to process and commit to memory. Chunking can improve online self-paced learning since it’s easier to find 10 minutes during a busy day than setting aside an hour for learning.

Aside from improving retention and making your courses less overwhelming, breaking your training into smaller pieces also enables several other advantages:

1. Gives trainees easy short-term goals to strive for and complete
2. Enables more frequent quizzes to assess and reward progress
3. Facilitates specific training tracks for different staff members based on their roles and experience, letting you deliver only the most relevant sections of the courses
4. Improves technology issues due to smaller video size and reduced bandwidth and processor speed requirements

2. Provide continual support from managers

If you want your employees to value training, it's essential to create and foster a top-down learning culture where management values training.

“Prioritizing training is the single biggest way to improve completion rates for employees.”

—Eric Skilling, Project Manager
Vantage Path¹⁷

First, your organization should understand your training goals. Next, communicate these goals to your employees. “These managerial actions help to ensure that training is valuable to the learner and is fully aligned with business goals,” notes John Mattox, II, Ph.D. in CIO Magazine. “The conversation and expectation-setting prepares the learner for the actual training event.”⁹

Brian Sutton, Chief Educator at training provider QA agrees. “Where training is closely related to job skills and may even be compulsory, there is no real problem with completion rates.”¹⁵

Here are a few good ways that managers can create an environment that encourages and improves training completion.

- › **Explain the importance of the training** to the employees (before training begins), what they can expect to learn from the course, and how it will help them in their daily job performance.
- › **Dedicate training time** into every employee’s schedule.
- › **Inform all supervisors** of the training courses, assignments, and schedules of their direct reports, and even give them LMS access to monitor their employees progress.

- › **Establish a Training Manager/Mentor** to oversee training activities, progress, and certification, as well as report progress to executive stakeholders.
- › **Have managers take pre-assessment tests** or even complete at least some courses so they can experience the training from the learner's perspective.
- › **Have manager acknowledge training progress** by giving learners a virtual pat on the back as they move through the course.
- › **Tie training (and completion) to employees' annual reviews.** Evaluate and reward progress over the past year. Also set future development goals. As Robin McDermott notes, "When completion of training is factored into that assessment, completion rates soar."¹¹

"The key to success is the clear link between the program and the goals of the business, backed up by clear senior management commitment."

—Clive Shepherd

Fastrak Consulting Ltd.¹⁵

3. Make the training relevant to each employee

When training is generic, it dilutes its relevance to the workplace and leaves the employee wondering, "How does this relate to me and my job?" You can improve completion rates by enforcing course relevance in several ways:

- › Choose or design the courses specifically for each team or employee. Lifelearn's Anna Mazereeuw says, "Assignments, scenarios or role playing work best when they are specifically relevant to the job the individual performs."¹⁰
- › Use pre-assessments to demonstrate any knowledge gaps and stage appropriate starting points.
- › Give students the option to "test out" of certain courses.
- › Customize your courses by incorporating applied learning projects using familiar, real-world scenarios and decision-making exercises that employees could even utilize in their actual jobs.
- › Schedule e-learning courses to coincide closely to when employees will actually use those new skills in their job. This not only reinforces the relevance of the training but also enables employees to retain the new skills long enough to put them into practice, which improves retention even more.

4. Make the training social and team-oriented

Live student interaction always improves student engagement and course completion rates. Luckily, on-site, instructor-led classroom training isn't the only way to take advantage of this interactivity. You can achieve this with online learning by creating virtual teams or online learning communities, and by conducting some lessons via live video conferencing.

A study by Open University suggests the success of team-oriented training is because learners may be motivated to finish courses out of loyalty to their buddy, especially if they work jointly throughout the course on a variety of tasks and assignments.¹⁵

Whether working in teams or as individuals, learners are often motivated by the achievements of others and by the pride of sharing their own. Ways that you can foster this type of motivation include:

- › Issuing printed certificates of attendance or completion
- › Sending congratulatory emails to employees when they finish
- › Featuring “celebrity” students or showcasing the work of trainees, like case studies or other applied learning projects they completed
- › Asking employees to publicly share updates on their own progress or projects, enabling team visibility into everyone’s milestones
- › Using “gamification” to make the training more engaging or competitive, with badges, leaderboards, or even progressive, game-like levels achieved through competing units or passing quizzes.



Did You Know?

A 2003 study by Chuck Eesley, Assistant Professor at Stanford University, showed that students who worked in virtual teams were 16x more likely to finish it. Of the 23,577 students who worked individually, only 2 percent finished the course. By contrast, of the 2,671 students in teams, 32 percent graduated. The same study showed that completion rates were even greater (44 percent) for teams that had a virtual mentor present.²²

One international company, Tesco, created a dynamic, animated leader board that provided real-time tracking of the number of staff who had completed the course, enabling them to successfully train more than 4,000 staff members across a number of countries in a four-week course.²¹

Cordiner believes this type of social involvement in training gives employees a “fear of missing out” when they see the progress of others. “Nobody likes to miss out and get left behind,” says Cordiner, “So using the FOMO method is a great way to increase your online course completion rates.”¹⁴

5. Give trainees reminders & deadlines

Employees are busy and often distracted, making it easy to forget to continue or finish training courses they’ve started. An automated reminder email campaign can have a profound effect on your completion rates, says Thinkific’s Greg Smith. “Simply reminding people regularly after they sign up will bring them back to finish the course.”

Deadlines also help to motivate completion. You can even offer employees a bonus for completing the training within a certain period of time.⁷

When establishing deadlines, it’s important to set a realistic target completion date. “In most cases, thirty days should be ample time to complete a course, but there may be times when it makes sense to shorten the schedule,” notes Robin McDermott. “If the skills will be required sooner, the expected completion date should be synced with the timing requirement.”¹¹

A learning management system or other monitoring dashboard makes this especially easy because it can alert managers to each individual learner’s progress. As the deadline approaches, managers can remind employees who haven’t completed their training that the deadline is near. If necessary, managers can grant extensions and reflect those in the employee’s training records.



Simplilearn offers dashboards that allow managers to oversee a breakdown of course completion, courses in progress, attempts at end-of-course exams, certificate achievements, students pending activation, and more for total visibility into a team’s progress.

6. Provide rewards or incentives/disincentives

Some employees are self-motivated and make time to undertake training on their own, just for the love of learning. However, many employees need the extra draw of secondary rewards or the fear of potential risks.

In his book, *E-learning's Greatest Hits*, Clive Shepherd categorizes several types of training motivators.¹⁵

The motivation matrix

	Incentives	Disincentives
Tangible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Eligibility for job advancement › Direct financial or non-monetary benefit › Certificates and qualifications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Re-paying fees to your sponsor/ employer › Wasting fees paid personally › Lack of necessary qualifications / prerequisites for advancement
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Recognition from tutors and managers › Recognition from buddies and peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Being seen to fail › Letting down your buddy or group › Breaking the conditions of your “learning contract”
Personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Sense of satisfaction › Increased ability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Guilt › Sense of failure

Incentives don't need to be expensive to be effective. Even cash itself is not necessarily the best incentive. Training programs researched by the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) rarely relied on cash payouts.²⁴

According to a survey of 248 U.S. organizations by Training Industry, the most common incentives used to engage participation in employee learning and development included certificates (38 percent), flex time (24 percent), and offering promotions (23 percent).²³

“Our people respond better to gear incentives than they do to cash,” explained Hudson Outfitters general manager Sandy Cohan. “We’ve tried everything when it comes to training incentives, and we found that our people work twice as hard and get twice as jazzed when they earn a free jacket as opposed to a bonus check.”²⁴

Before you consider disincentives, recognize that there are drawbacks to using more sticks than carrots to mandate training, especially if the skills learned are outside the scope of an employee’s original job. If training will be part of their job review, Karen Frankola recommends, “Tell employees it will be looked upon favorably in their evaluation, rather than threatening punishment.”¹⁶

Penalties for less-than-stellar performance often build resentment and result in people taking fewer risks, stifling creativity.

Certification as an incentive

External certification by a third-party, industry-respected organization also makes an excellent motivation to complete training. It also provides numerous benefits to both the employee and the organization alike. Certification after training can:

- › Motivate during learning by providing a quantifiable goal
- › Improve retention of the newly-learned material
- › Demonstrate to the learner that the course is relevant
- › Validate the employee’s expertise to colleagues and customers
- › Improve employee satisfaction, retention, and employer reputation
- › Provide employees with a valuable career advantage they can keep

Completing Your Plan for Success

The best work for improving training completion happens before the training even begins. First, it’s essential that executives make the training a business priority. That includes:

- › Providing sufficient budget for development or provider costs
- › Dedicating ample time for employee training
- › Using effective course design (short, engaging units)
- › Providing training incentives

- › Ensuring management supports and monitors learners
- › Making the course relevant through customized content and applied learning projects
- › Providing employees with the optimum software and hardware for the training
- › Establishing a learning culture that promotes the value of training

CEOs should think of employee development not as an expense, but as an investment.

—Paul Sarvadi, Human Resources coach
Entrepreneur.com²⁵

Attrition rates are highest in the early part of a course, so it's important to ensure that the beginning units of training are especially inviting, easy, and compelling.¹³

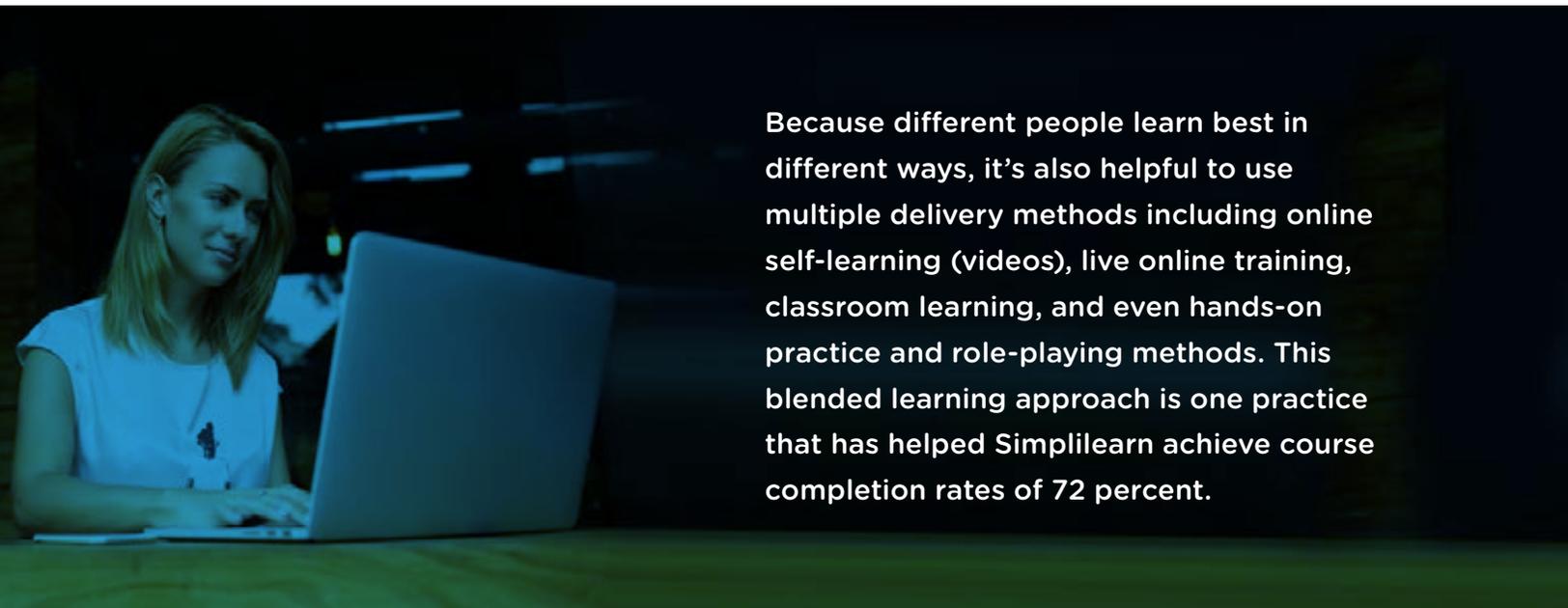
There is no single “silver bullet” when it comes to guaranteeing course completion. However, by applying as many of these proven methods as possible, your training program will be more easy to complete, more effective, more enjoyable for your employees and more applicable to their jobs.



About Simplilearn

Founded in 2009, Simplilearn is one of the world's leading providers of online training for Digital Marketing, Cloud Computing, Project Management, Data Science, IT, Software Development, and many other emerging technologies. Based in San Francisco, California and Bangalore, India, Simplilearn has helped over 500,000 professionals and companies across 150+ countries get trained, acquire certifications, and acquire the skills needed to succeed.

Its 400 training courses are designed and updated by world-class industry experts. Simplilearn's blended learning approach combines e-learning classes, instructor-led live virtual classrooms, applied learning projects, and 24/7 teaching assistance. More than 40 global training organizations have recognized Simplilearn as an official provider of certification training. The company has been named the 8th most influential education brand in the world by LinkedIn.



Because different people learn best in different ways, it's also helpful to use multiple delivery methods including online self-learning (videos), live online training, classroom learning, and even hands-on practice and role-playing methods. This blended learning approach is one practice that has helped Simplilearn achieve course completion rates of 72 percent.

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