



WHITE PAPER

# How Many eLearning Courses Do Your Really Need?

## Executive Summary

Executive Summary: When vendors offer off-the-shelf content for corporate training, the size of the content library is often touted as a selling point. While library size promises more value, that value evaporates when you consider how many courses are actually used. We outline three reasons for this: Large content libraries face problems with organization, updating, and delivering a consistent experience. We then suggest five questions to put to vendors that will reveal much more about their content's quality and relevance than simply asking "How many courses do you offer?"

Vendors of off-the-shelf eLearning content often make library size one of their main selling points. For example:

**BizLibrary:** "6,000+ online training courses"

**Skillsoft:** "120,000 pieces of content, including over 7,000 courses, 65,000 videos, and 46,000 book options and counting..."

**LinkedInLearning.com:** "400K+ daily active courses"

It's understandable why they would do this. If two libraries are comparable in price, the one with more content would be the more valuable one, right?

This is a common misconception in the eLearning industry. It is based on the idea that cost per course is the most valuable metric for measuring the value of a training library. To see why this isn't the case, compare cost per course with cost per course viewed.



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## Do the Math: Cost per Course Viewed

Suppose you have two vendors, one offering a library with over 5,000 titles, and one offering a library with only 1,500. If priced the same, the first library would appear to be delivering 4x the value.

Now consider viewership. Chances are that many of those 6,000 titles will go unwatched at any given organization. Employees will naturally gravitate toward the most engaging, most easy-to-find, and most immediately useful videos. Or they simply watch the required courses and nothing else. Even if 6,000 titles seems to be a better value, it's likely that the same number of titles actually gets watched, so the total cost per course viewed is exactly the same for both libraries.

**Cost per course viewed must also be balanced against organizational objectives.** The goal of training is to change behavior in positive ways. To do this, a given piece of content must be aligned with your strategic objectives and be created according to best practices in instructional design. The larger the library, the greater your chances of paying for titles that fail at one of these.

Larger libraries will tend to have a lower cost per course. But if those libraries are not being fully utilized, or are not meeting strategic objectives, there will be a lot of waste. That kind of waste is exactly what sours management on investing in training.

Is there evidence that larger libraries tend to be underutilized? Yes, we hear about it from new clients all the time. We argue that the underutilization of these large content libraries stems from the nature of these libraries themselves.



# Three Challenges for Large Content Libraries

There are three main ways in which large content libraries have the deck stacked against them from the start. The larger the library, the more likely they are to face challenges with organization, content updates, and consistent experience (and repetition).

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**Large Libraries Face an Organizational Problem**

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**Large Libraries Are Challenged When It Comes to Content Updates**

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**Large Libraries Fail to Deliver a Consistent Learning Experience**

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## Large Libraries Face an Organization Problem

According to LinkedIn Learning's 2017 Workplace Learning Report, roughly 46% of L&D professionals and industry leaders surveyed said that "Getting employees to make time for L&D" was one of the biggest challenges to L&D in their organizations.

The more time it takes to find the right content, the less time employees will have to actually consume and internalize that content.

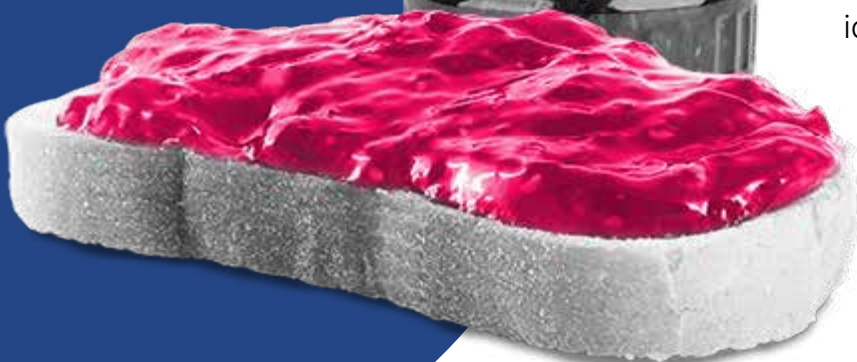
Part of this has to do with a phenomenon that psychologists and economists call choice overload. Researchers have found that when people are given too many choices, the abundance of choices makes it much more likely that people make no choice at all.

In one experiment by researchers at Columbia University and Stanford University, people entering a grocery store were offered several samples of jam. These shoppers then had an opportunity to choose one of those jams for purchase. In one set-up, people were presented with two dozen (24) different flavors. In a contrasting set-up, store patrons were offered only six different flavors. The results were surprising: People said that they enjoyed tasting the various jams when a few dozen were presented, and rated the brand favorably; but when you actually

looked in shopping carts, people presented with fewer choices were much more likely to actually buy a jar of jam.

The same happens with eLearning. For example, when employees are looking for a relevant course, large libraries mean that they will need to go through a time-consuming process merely to find something that might help them. This can involve scanning the entire course inventory from a list of thousands of courses, trying to identify individual titles, getting frustrated, and making no choices. Some eLearning providers try to compensate for this lost time by "curating" their content,

Fewer choices...  
...more likely  
to buy.





for example, organizing programs by overall topic. While this does help, there is still a significant search effort required. Browsing doesn't help: Would a certain coaching skill be under leadership, supervision, management, coaching, or performance improvement? This means that employees often resort to using whatever search function is built into their LMS or portal. Unfortunately, this makes access to relevant material dependent on the robustness of the underlying search function.



Life is not so easy for L&D directors and administrators either. With thousands of titles available, it becomes almost impossible to create effective learning paths. All of the issues that employees face when trying to access titles themselves are multiplied when trying to build learning paths for each role and function within an organization.



Administrators can also face issues with quality control. Ideally, every course made available to employees should be vetted for appropriateness of content and compatibility with the organization's objectives and culture. Large

libraries make this almost impossible.

Modern LMSs are beginning to organize content along competency-based learning tracks, which saves both employees and trainers valuable time that would otherwise be spent searching, organizing, and vetting for relevance. The quality of a vendor's LMS is as important as, if not more important than, the size of their off-the-shelf library.



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## Large Libraries are Challenged When It Comes to Content Updates

Training content is in constant need of updating. If a content provider does not have a solid content strategy with review processes in place, there is no easy way to tell how old or out of date their content is.

This problem grows as the size of the content library grows. Reviewing 1,000 titles, tracking their creation dates, and determining which titles need updating is already a daunting task. When the size of the library gets to 7,000 courses, the task becomes almost impossible. One popular rule of thumb used by L&D professionals is that roughly 20% of training content will need to be updated every year. Using that as a guide, a library with 7,000 courses would need to have 1,400 of its courses updated each year. It is doubtful whether that happens on a consistent basis.

For example, one industry expert speaking at a 2017 industry event (who shall remain anonymous) estimated that reviewing her organization's 3,000+ courses, determining how old they were, and whether or not they were still in use would be a roughly three-year project. By the time that project would be done, many of the learning materials would be out of date again!

With a smaller, well-curated library, content can be better kept up to date, which means:



**You're more likely to find what you need.** Courses are more likely to cover topics your organization needs and provide information that is up to date and relevant.

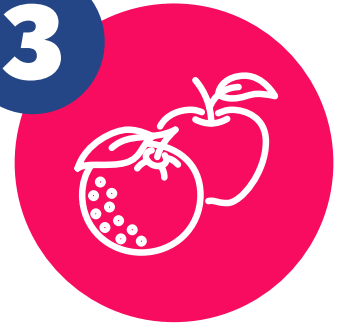


**Employees take training more seriously.** When you invest in quality materials with relevant content, it sends the message that training is important in your organization. Your employees and volunteers will then see it as important, too.



**The material is more engaging.** Outdated content has a way of wearing its age on its sleeve. As soon as employees feel that your content is out of date, they will begin to ignore it. Updated material, on the other hand, is more engaging. This helps retention and application.

## Large Libraries Fail to Deliver a Consistent Learning Experience



Updating content is one thing. Generating it to begin with is its own problem.

Vendors that offer large libraries are often not generating all of that content in-house themselves. They are either outsourcing to other experts, or collecting and curating content from different sources.

This may be why content consistency is becoming a huge problem. According to Training Industry's "The Anatomy of the Modern Learning System 2017," one of the most frequently encountered complaints from L&D directors is training consistency. Employees are doing their work less and less often at a single location, working instead from home or on the road. This means they often receive training in different locations, online or in person.

When training is done in person by different people in different locations, they often add their own slant or emphasize different points. This frequently means there is no way to guarantee that employees hear the important points you want them to hear.

When training is done online, the sheer abundance of information available on the internet makes it almost impossible to guarantee consistency. For example, if an employee does a search for a topic via YouTube, they are just as likely to see a video that is out of date, irrelevant, or contains incorrect information as they are to see a video consistent with your organization's message.

That very issue plagues many large learning libraries. When content is aggregated from multiple sources, it becomes impossible to provide consistent messages, let alone a consistent look and feel. This can lead to conflicting information and frustration on the part of your learners.

Repetitiveness is the opposite problem, but it stems from the same source. Huge libraries are likely to have a large amount of topic overlap, especially if aggregating content from multiple sources. It is not uncommon to have five, 10, or even 15 courses on the same topic in larger libraries. Does having so many courses on the same topic really add value? The best practice would be to have a single, best-in-class course on a topic for your organization, and to guarantee that course is what is viewed by your workforce.





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## Another Way Engagement is Hurt: Limited Access Options

If the true metric of an eLearning library's worth is not cost per course, but cost per course viewed, what can organizations do to get the most value out of their training dollars?

Framed this way, we can see why increasing the number of courses does little. What is needed is better engagement. That starts with better access. After all, what good are thousands of courses if employees can't access them when and where they want?

For example, the 2017 Workplace Learning Report (mentioned above) summarizes some revealing industry statistics about access:

52% of employees tend to access content right at the point of need. While 42% of employees access content at their work desk, 47% do so during weekends and evenings. 27% of employees access content going to and from work. 30% of employees will access a piece of content when sent an alert or update.

Suppose, then, that your organization limits the times when employees can access information. That could be limiting nearly half of your workforce!

While many companies do not limit access strictly by time, they might be doing this inadvertently by choosing a platform that is not compatible with mobile devices, for example. If a content library cannot be easily accessed by mobile devices, content probably won't be consumed on the commute to work. Likewise, if getting access to content via the internet is complicated, employees might be less likely to do so at home, on the evenings and weekends.

**46% of L&D professionals and industry leaders claim that "getting employees to make time for L&D" is a top problem for their organizations. 18% point directly to employee engagement as being a top problem, too. There is a strong correlation between these two problems.**

## Stats on Engagement and Usage:

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of employees tend to access content right at the point of need

**42%**

of employees access content at their work desk

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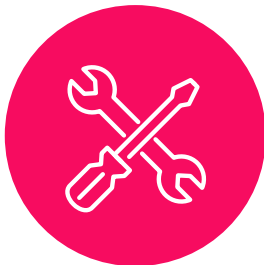


## Questions to Ask Your Potential Vendors

Asking a vendor about the size of its library might not be useful information when shopping for off-the-shelf content (or an LMS to go with it). So what are some more productive ways to ask vendors about the quality, consistency, completeness, and curation of their content?



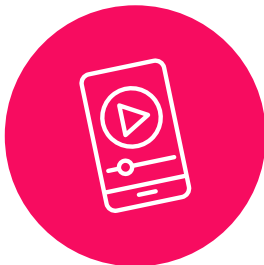
**Do you have a content strategy?** Specifically, does the vendor have a plan in place for developing new and relevant content? Do they have processes in place to review, and possibly update or retire, older content?



**What tools do you offer to help us organize the library?** The vendor should have more options than simply offering categories or a search tool.



**Do you have learning paths created? How easy is it to create our own learning paths?** Your aim should be more than just finding a relevant video or course. The vendor should make it relatively simple to assign an entire training path to your employees.



**Do you provide mobile access? (Is your LMS mobile?)** Content should be accessible—and look good—on mobile devices. The LMS should also be mobile-ready in order to give your employees access to important tools for topic discovery, feedback, quizzes, and social learning.



**Is your content created according to best practices in instructional design?** Larger libraries, particularly ones that aggregate content, might not have content created this way—or might simply not know. Asking about principles of instructional design can give you clues as to their content's quality.

## Further Reading

**Training Industry's 2017 report:**

["The Anatomy of the Modern Learning System"](#)

**On keeping an organized content library:**

["4 Best Practices for Keeping an Organized eLearning Video Library"](#)

**More on content curation and vetting:**

["The Complex Levels of Content Curation and Vetting"](#)

## About HSI

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