Blended Learning—Current Use, Challenges and Best Practices

Report 2013

kineo

THE Oxford Group

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Background and Methodology

The Oxford Group and Kineo both have a passion for learning and development and for providing solutions that result in measurable improvements in business performance. As organisations become more complex and more global, we've seen our clients trying to navigate their way quickly through the increasing variety of learning methods available. They want to create learning blends which reach their target audience effectively, rapidly and economically – but aren't always sure where to start.

As learning providers, we always aim to share our insights with our clients, and as The Oxford Group and Kineo work together on blended solutions, early in 2013 we decided to carry out a research project. We wanted to explore the current use of blended learning, best practice and the challenges facing those adopting a blended approach to learning & development.

As part of this research we surveyed a wide range of companies, asking a structured set of questions to build up a picture of how they use blended learning and the trends they are seeing, as well as to gather examples of best practice and learning. Over 100 organisations replied, from relatively small organisations to those with more than 50,000 employees. Irrespective of the size of the company, the majority (51%) of our respondents operate internationally or globally. They represent a wide range of industries: not surprisingly given the content of the survey, 31% work in learning & development and the wider education sector; however other major contributors were government, financial services, healthcare & pharmaceuticals, manufacturing, telecoms & IT. Companies represented include those as diverse as Deloitte, Siemens, Standard Bank, Telefónica and WaterAid. We would like to thank all of those who participated in the survey and provided such interesting insights.

This report highlights the key conclusions from this survey.

Executive Summary

Our research appears to show that L&D people have accepted that the learning landscape needs to encompass a wide range of learning methods, and are having varying degrees of success in using blended learning to its full potential. The survey identified five key conclusions:

1. Blended learning is well-established but not necessarily 'well blended': Blended learning solutions are an important part of the learning & development landscape, with 86% of our respondents combining technological and traditional learning methods frequently or sometimes. Combining more than one learning method into a solution is no longer unusual. Our respondents did, however, highlight the dangers of having a team of designers working in their silos on each different learning element, rather than there being a single vision for the blend to which each learning method contributes.

2. In designing a blend we take into account both learning objectives and organisation drivers: Whilst the most common factor used in selecting learning methods to include in a blend is 'appropriateness in meeting learning objectives', other key factors are linked to organisation drivers such as 'company infrastructure & resources to support learning' and factors which reflect the global nature of today's business, such as 'speed to reach all your learners', 'time to deliver' and 'geographical dispersal of the learner population'. However, given the number of factors that our respondents take into account, including cost, it's perhaps surprising that 51% never or rarely calculate the return on investment or construct business cases as part of the blended design process.

3. **There is a gap between the typical elements currently used in blended solutions and our expectations of how technology could be used:** Blends are currently being designed using the well-established learning methods such as face-to-face training, self-paced e-learning and learning resources – and on average designers are combining 4.8 different learning methods in a blend. However our respondents expect face-to-face training to reduce, and that there will be a significant increase in the use of mobile learning, virtual classrooms & webinars, access to on-demand learning resources and social learning. With the exception of learning resources, these learning methods aren't currently in frequent use; it appears that our respondents are looking for blended solutions to 'catch up' with what is technologically feasible.

4. **There are some significant challenges facing those wanting to introduce blended solutions, particularly in terms of dealing with the relative complexity of blended solutions and lack of internal expertise:** The time and complexity of designing and developing a blend are cited as key challenges, as well as lack of internal expertise. This lack of internal expertise is a particular barrier, with 57% of respondents saying that they have no or only few people in their organisation with the appropriate skills and experience to manage blended learning. In addition, only 26% have people who specialise in blended learning, rather than expecting traditional training or e-learning roles to fill the gap… and this, despite the fact that many surveyed recognised that you can't assume that good face-to-face trainers or e-learning designers will have the skills to design and map a truly blended solution. On a positive note, our respondents are less worried about the attitudes of learners to blended solutions, with only 16% citing 'dislike/suspicion of blended learning by target audience' and 25% 'concern that learners won't complete the learning' - far lower than we may have expected to be the case just a few years ago.

5. **However blended learning is used, there are some clear success factors which need to be in place, including a structured process for designing an effective blend:** Our respondents have introduced successful blended solutions for a variety of purposes, ranging from all-staff programmes to those focused on people in specific roles and covering a wide range of learning objectives, e.g. product knowledge, operational training and leadership & management skills. Across those different solutions, the success factors for blended learning highlighted were: needing a structured process for design which produces a cohesive whole, being rigorous in needs analysis and involving stakeholders, involving people with appropriate skills, and bearing in mind the organisation's constraints. As our respondents are experimenting with blended solutions and learning by trial and error, there's a need to share best practice so as to accelerate the development of L&D's expertise in blended learning.

In summary, L&D professionals are realistic about the challenges of blended learning and keen to move forward to make the most of new learning methods as they evolve. As our respondents highlighted:

"A lot of time, effort and consultation is required, but when delivering at scale, savings in time and cost are very significant" and blended solutions provide *"customisation and focus on individual needs and requirements which traditional methods just can't match".*

They also identified areas where blended learning is outperforming traditional approaches …

"it's critical to foster lasting learning. It helps ideas stick and creates an air of accountability that is critical to learner success."

"Blended solutions deliver customisation and focus on individual needs which traditional methods just can't match."

— a strong endorsement that blended learning is a positive development in L&D's future.

Survey Results – in detail

How is blended learning used?

In the first part of our survey we looked at how respondents are using blended learning: 40% combine technological and traditional learning methods frequently and 46% sometimes – so there is clearly an appetite for blended learning.

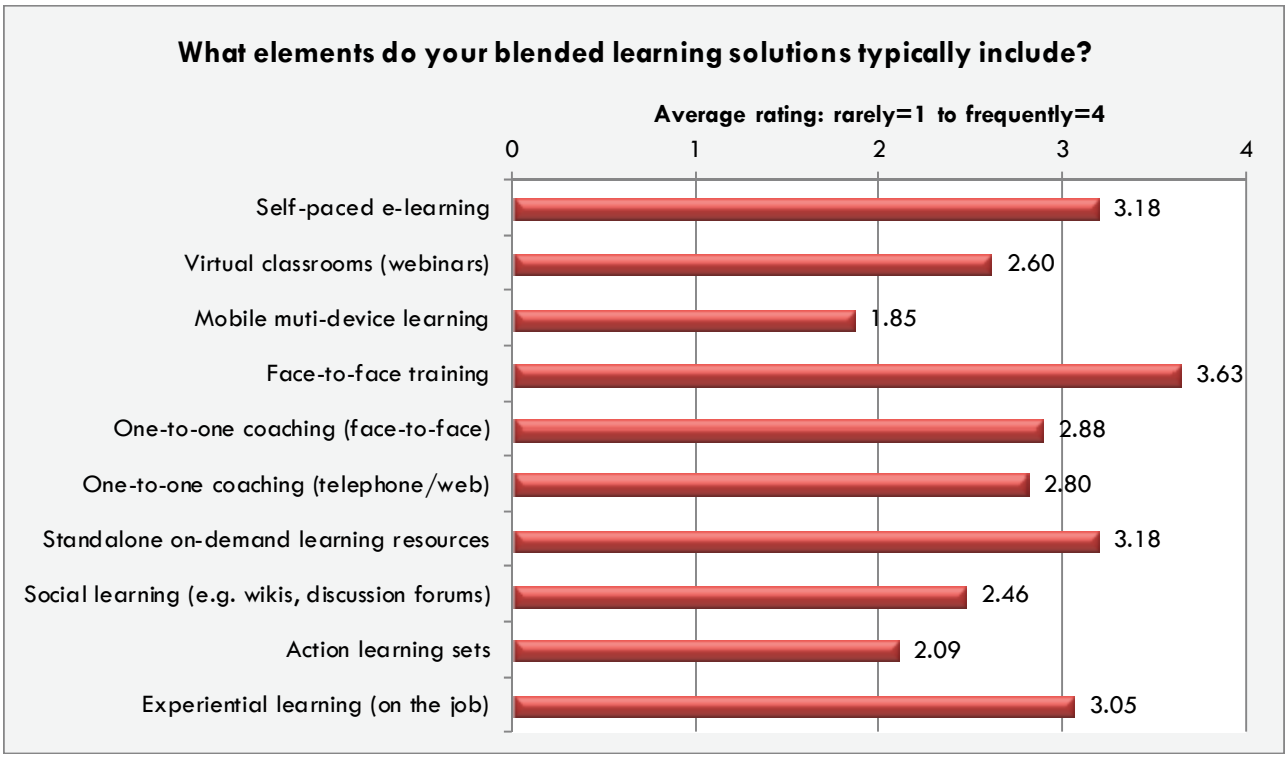
However, later in our survey when we asked how blended learning is being used, a large number of respondents highlighted problems in blends being 'disjointed' due to:

- Not taking the time to really understand participant needs
- Lack of understanding of how each learning method in a blend is best used
- Lack of communication between designers of different elements in the blend

There are clearly issues about how effectively blends are being designed.

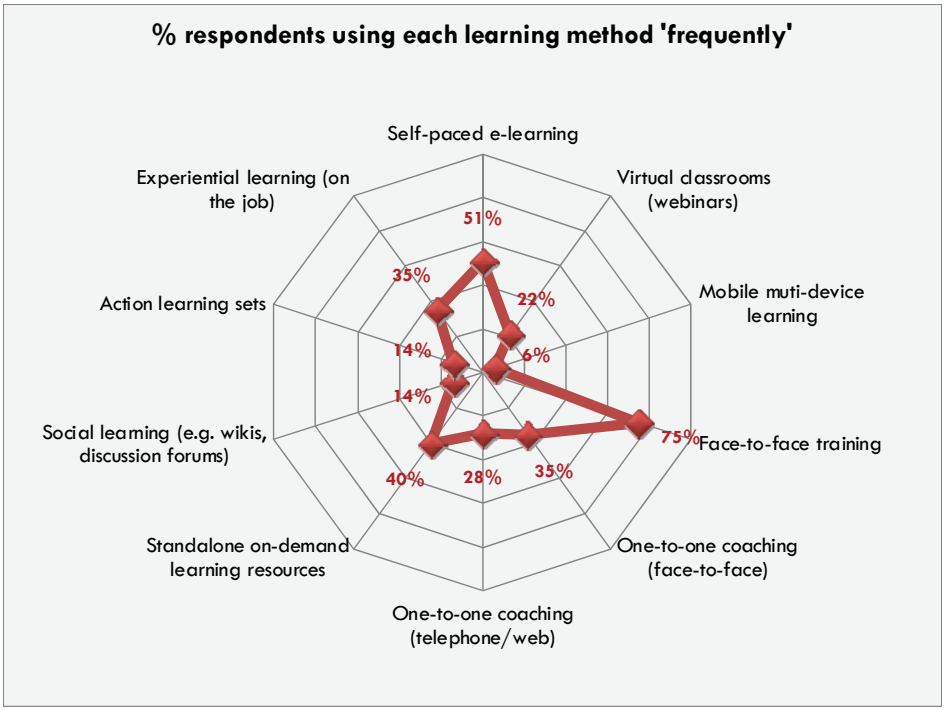
Conclusion 1: Blended learning is well-established but not necessarily 'well blended'.

A wide range of different elements (learning methods) are being used in our respondents' blends. We asked them to rate their usage from rarely to frequently:



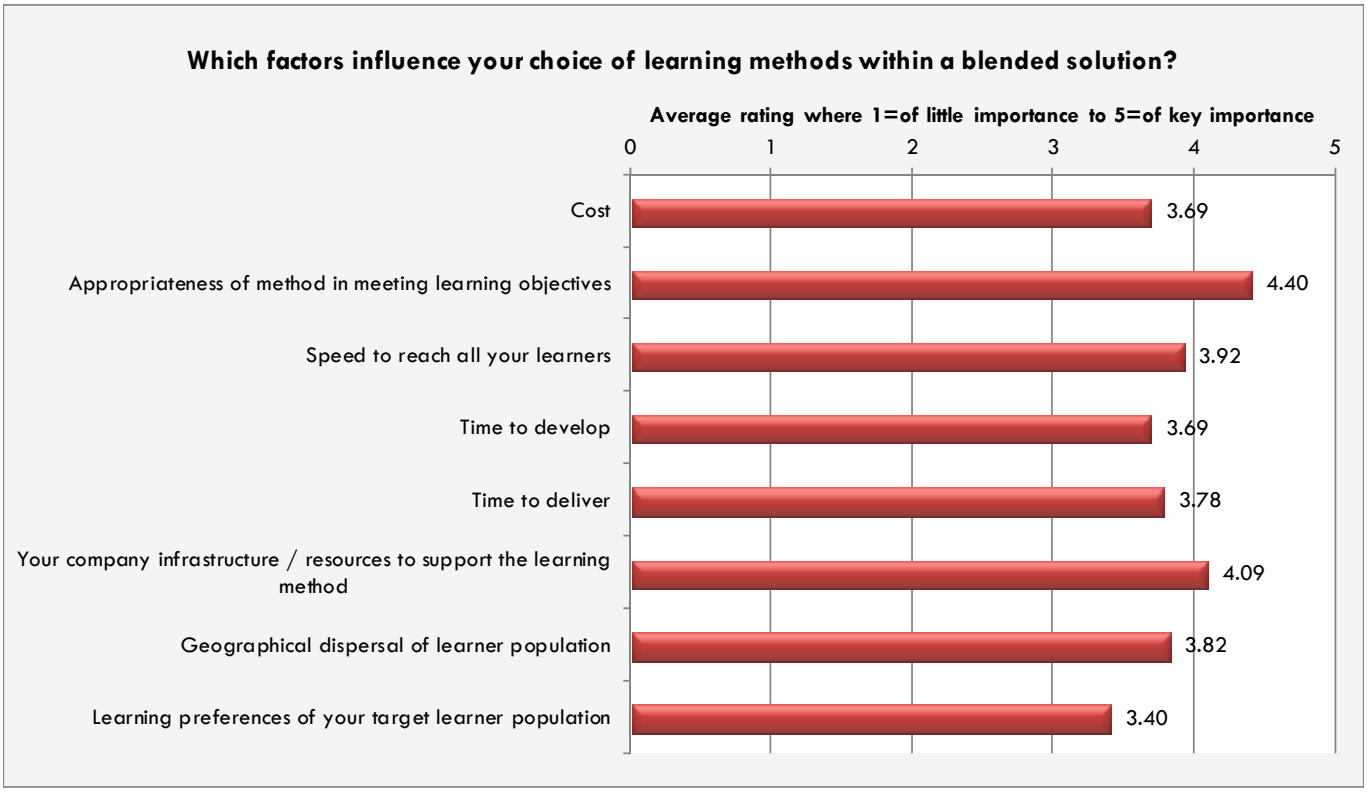
Then focusing in on methods that they used 'frequently', the diagram below shows that there was further reinforcement that:

- The most popular elements are face-to-face training (75%), self-paced e-learning (51%) and on-demand learning resources (40%) – not surprisingly the elements which have long been established
- The least popular elements are mobile multi-device learning (6%), social learning (14%) and action learning sets (14%) – an indication, for the first two of these perhaps, that adoption of these relatively new methods is still slow.



When asked what factors influenced their choice of learning methods to include in a blend, our respondents drew on a wide range of factors:

- As the diagram below illustrates, there is no one over-riding factor that influences choice; our respondents have to take into account a wide range of factors
- However, perhaps not surprisingly from a group that is focused on learning & development, the most popular factor was 'appropriateness of method in meeting learning objectives' (average importance rating of 4.4 out of 5); however this was followed closely by organisation factors such as 'company infrastructure / resources to support the learning method' (4.1/5), 'speed to reach all your learners' (3.9/5) and 'geographical dispersal of learner population (3.8/5).



Cost may not be one of the most highly rated factors, but it still rates at 3.69/5. It's therefore interesting that 51% of our respondents never or rarely calculate the return on investment or construct business cases as part of the blended design process.

Conclusion 2: In designing a blend we take into account both learning objectives and organisation drivers.

How does blended learning vary with different learner populations?

We wondered whether there were any differences in the way in which in which blends are constructed for different learning populations, for example different seniority levels. So we asked our respondents to highlight which methods they use with which populations. Looking at the five most popular methods used for different levels in the organisation, we actually saw some marked similarities:

	Frontline / customer-facing staff	Technical team members	Managers	Senior leaders
Self-paced e-learning	✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓	
Virtual classrooms (webinars)		✓		
Mobile multi-device learning				
Face-to-face training	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓
One-to-one coaching (face-to-face)	✓		✓	✓✓✓✓
One-to-one coaching (telephone/web)				✓
Access to on-demand learning resources	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Social learning (e.g. wikis, discussion				
Action learning sets				
Experiential learning (e.g. on-the-job)	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓

- Face-to-face training is still the most popular method; however self-paced e-learning has established itself with all but the most senior leaders and virtual classrooms are beginning to appear, albeit to technical team members in the first instance
- Access to on-demand learning resources is a key method for all levels in the organisation
- One-to-one coaching and experiential learning – both of which are in effect tailored to the individual – are also a key part of the mix, although more at the senior level in the case of coaching.

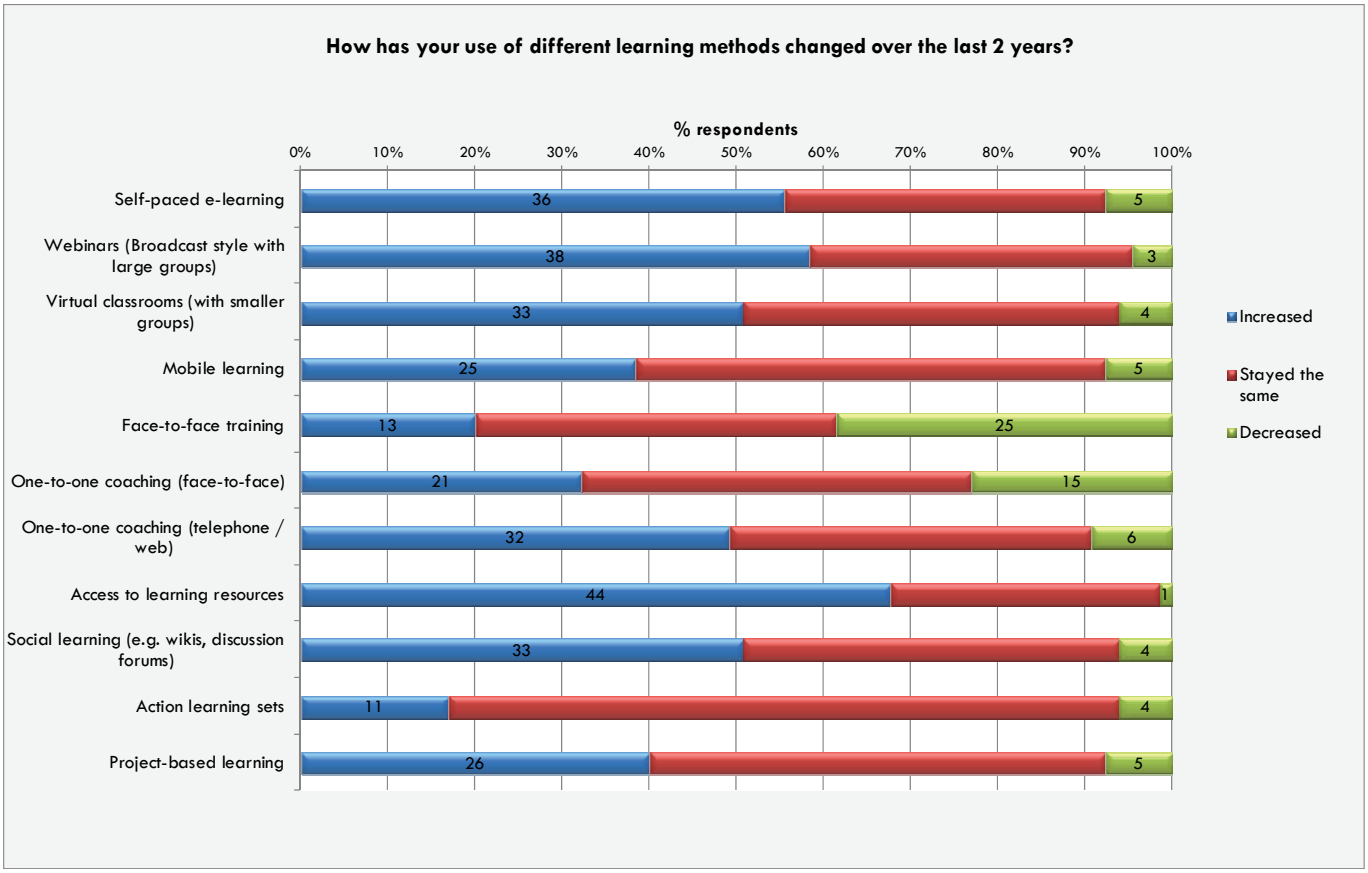
As the general population's ease with technology increases, and today's junior staff (who have grown up with technology) move into more senior roles, will the picture remain the same? So in our survey we asked our respondents to give us a picture about how the use of different learning methods has changed and is going to change…

Trends in the use of blended learning

Respondents were asked how their use of blended learning has changed over the last two years, as well as how they expect it to change over the coming two years.

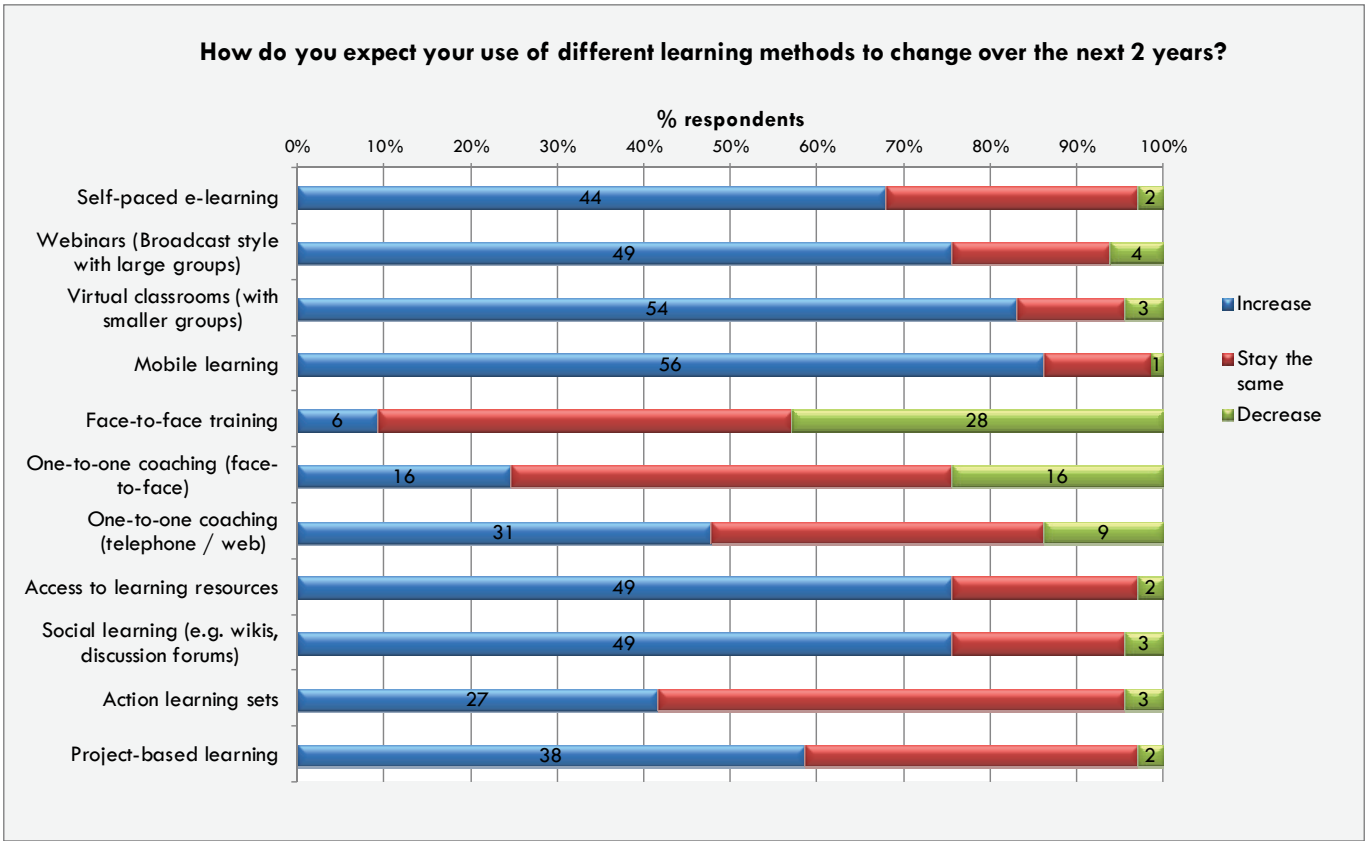
Looking at the past:

- The key 'winners' in terms of increase in use are access to learning resources (where 44% of our respondents have seen an increase), webinars (38% for broadcast and 33% for virtual classrooms) and self-paced e-learning (36%)
- The key 'losers' in terms of seeing a reduction in use are face-to-face training (cited by 25% of our respondents) and face-to-face one-to-one coaching (15%)… despite these currently being amongst the most popular methods that our respondents said they use.



Looking into the future:

- Our respondents believe that the learning methods which are most likely to increase are those which capitalise on recent and new technology: mobile learning (56%), virtual classrooms & webinars (49% & 54%), access to learning resources and social learning (both 49%), as well as more established technological methods such as e-learning (44%)
- Again, they forecast further reductions in use of face-to-face training and coaching, highlighted by 28% and 16% of our respondents respectively.



So how does this fit with what our survey respondents said they were actually using in terms of which learning methods are most popular in the blend? With the exception of e-learning and learning resources, there is a disconnect between what our L&D colleagues are using currently and what they think they're going to be using in the future.

Conclusion 3: There is a gap between the typical elements currently used in blended solutions and our expectations of how technology could be used.

Blended learning expertise

Earlier in the survey, our respondents emphasised how important it is to take into account their company infrastructure / resources to support the learning method, when selecting learning methods to include in a blend. So how geared up are our organisations to support blended solutions?

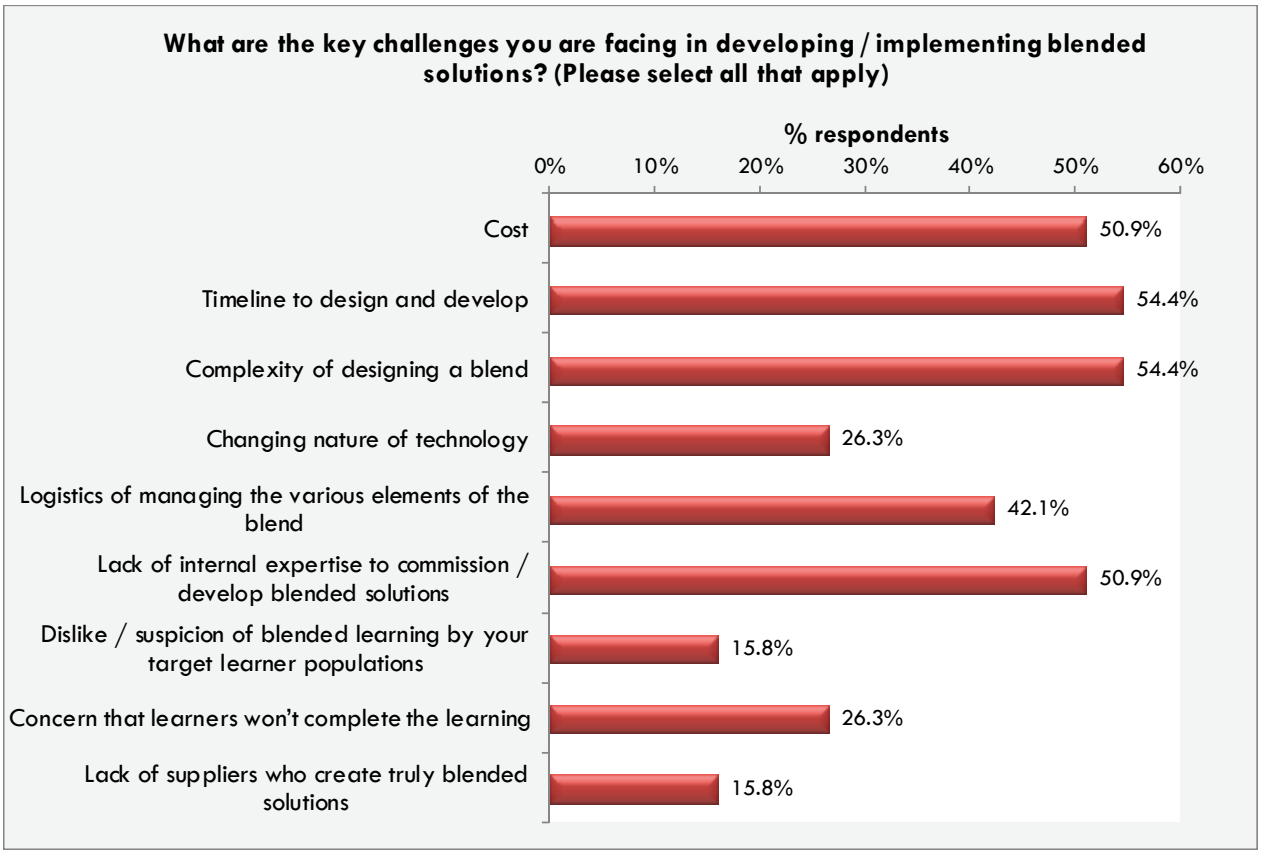
- 52% have no or very few people in their organisation with the skills and experience to design blended solutions, and only 11% have quite a few or many – so there appears to be a large skills gap
- When it comes to managing blended learning programmes and roll-outs, the situation is similar: 57% have no or very few people in their organisation with the appropriate skills and experience, and only 14% have quite a few or many
- Looking at where organisations get their expertise from:
  - Only 26% have roles specifically designated to blended learning
  - Of the rest, the most popular places to draw expertise from are e-learning (57%), learning consultants (49%) and face-to-face trainers (48%) – who, although expert in their own part of the learning blend may not have the experience in other learning methods to draw together a cohesive blended learning solution.

Blended learning in the future – key challenges

Given the benefits to be gained from blended learning and our respondents' views that blended solutions will increasingly be common in the future, what is stopping them now and how can they be better equipped for the future?

We asked our respondents to identify the key challenges that they face in development and implementing blended solutions:

- Not surprisingly, the time and complexity of designing and development a blend were key factors (54% of our respondents identified these) as well as lack of internal expertise and cost (both at 51%)
- However, our respondents aren't as concerned about the likely attitude of learners to blended solutions, with only a few (16%) citing 'dislike/suspicion of blended learning by target audience' and 'concern that learners won't complete the learning' (26%) - far lower than we may have expected to be the case just a few years ago.

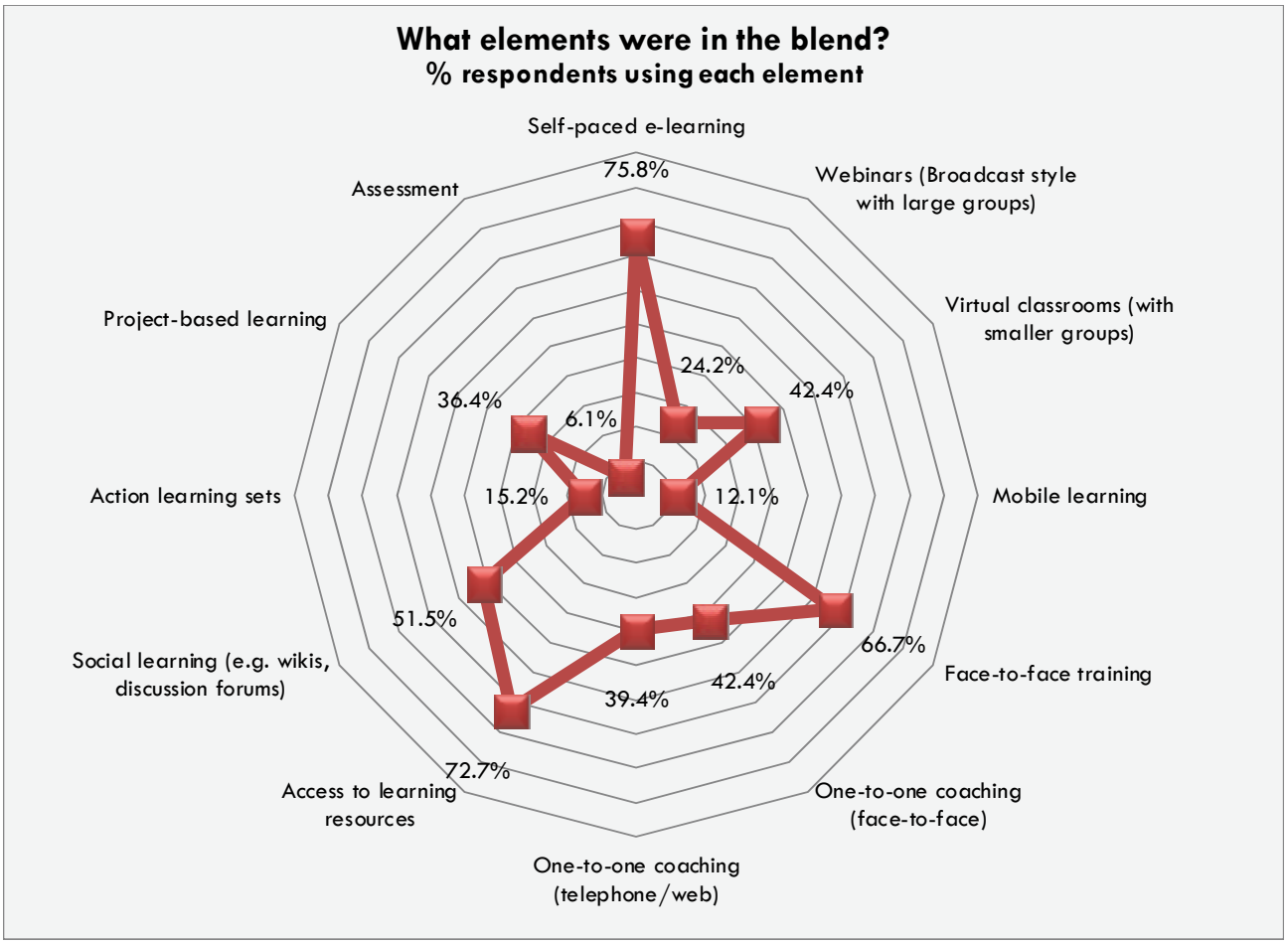


Conclusion 4: There are some significant challenges facing those wanting to introduce blended solutions, particularly in terms of dealing with the relative complexity of blended solutions and lack of internal expertise.

Best practice and learning

We wanted to learn more about how blended solutions are being used, what is and isn't working, and key lessons that L&D people are learning about blended. So we asked our respondents to describe specific examples of the most successful blended learning solution that they have introduced into their organisation:

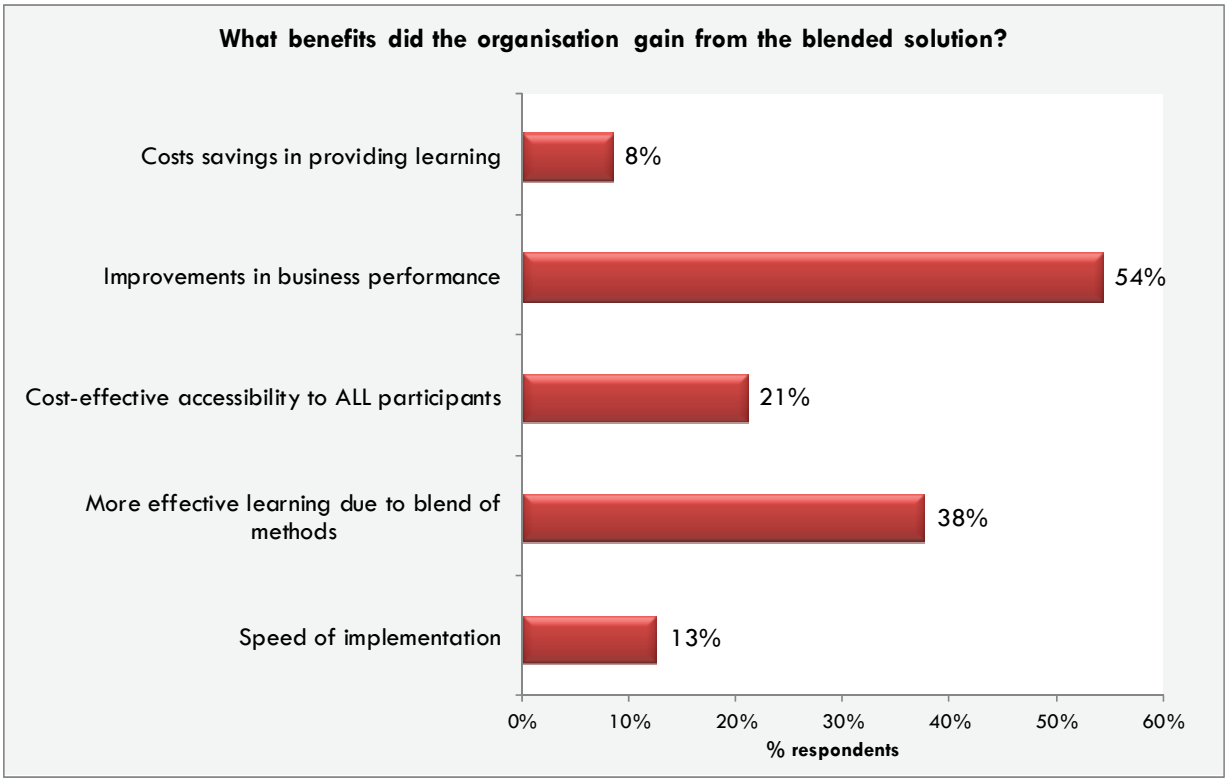
- The examples ranged from all-staff programmes to those focused on people in specific roles
- They covered a wide range of learning objectives, e.g. product knowledge, operational training and leadership & management skills
- The popularity of the learning methods used within the blends tended to mirror the more general responses earlier in our survey (i.e. the most popular elements to appear in their example blends are e-learning, face-to-face training and access to learning resources; the least popular elements are mobile and action learning sets).



- On average, they are combining 4.8 different learning methods within their blends, with the most ambitious blend including 9 elements.

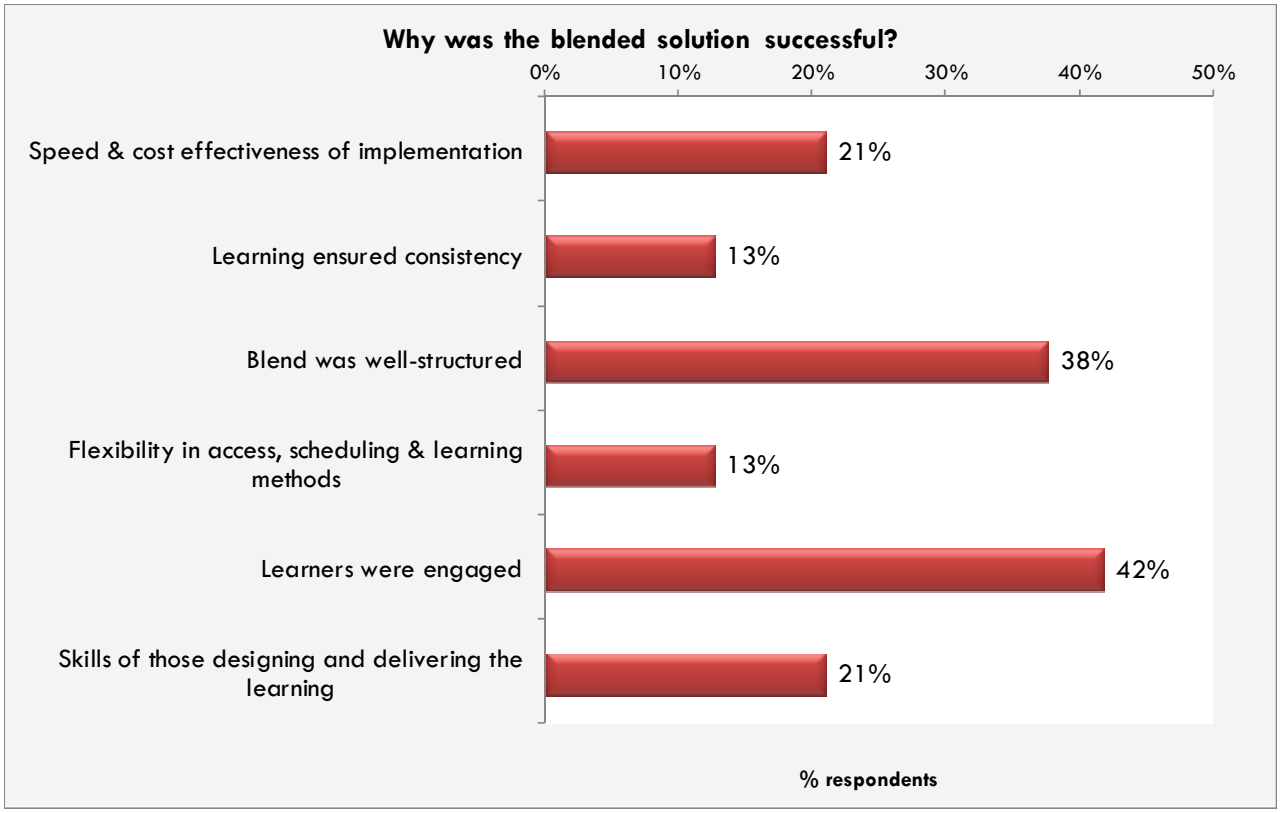
Our respondents were enthusiastic about the benefits they've gained:

- The most common benefit (54%) was improvements in business performance: productivity improvements, increased sales, more consistent adherence to standard procedures, greater management skills
- Many of our respondents (38%) highlighted that the learning blend led to more effective learning than simply using a single learning method, for example *"catered for all learning needs"*, *"online pre-work allowed classroom time to be more constructively utilized... this made classroom time more experiential, reciprocal and active"*, and there were many comments that this led to *"more engaged learners"*
- The also gained from cost-effective accessibility to all participants – meaning that they could roll out the programme to everyone, wherever they are; using a blended format also meant that they could use different methods for different groups who may otherwise not have had access to the learning.



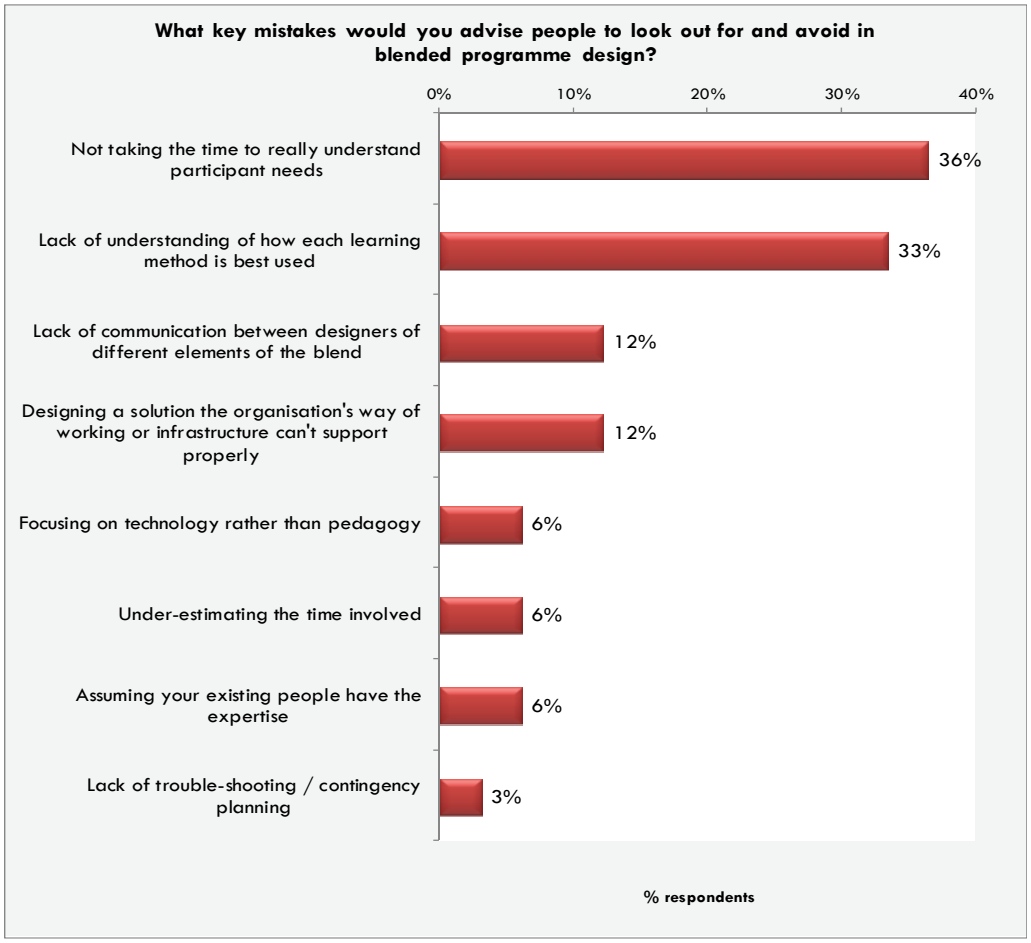
When asked to reflect on what contributed to the success of the blended solution, our respondents identified factors linked to:

- The design and roll-out in terms of characteristics that would sum up an effective blended solution, such as: a sound structure which accommodates flexibility of access, scheduling and learning methods; consistency of content; speed & cost-effectiveness of implementation… *"The whole of the customer-facing population (several thousand people) were able to be fully trained on the service by launch date, to be able to competently sell/ support it"*
- The extent to which learners were engaged… *"learners enjoyed the experience and the flexibility of the approach"*
- The need to have people with the right skills involved in the design and delivery.

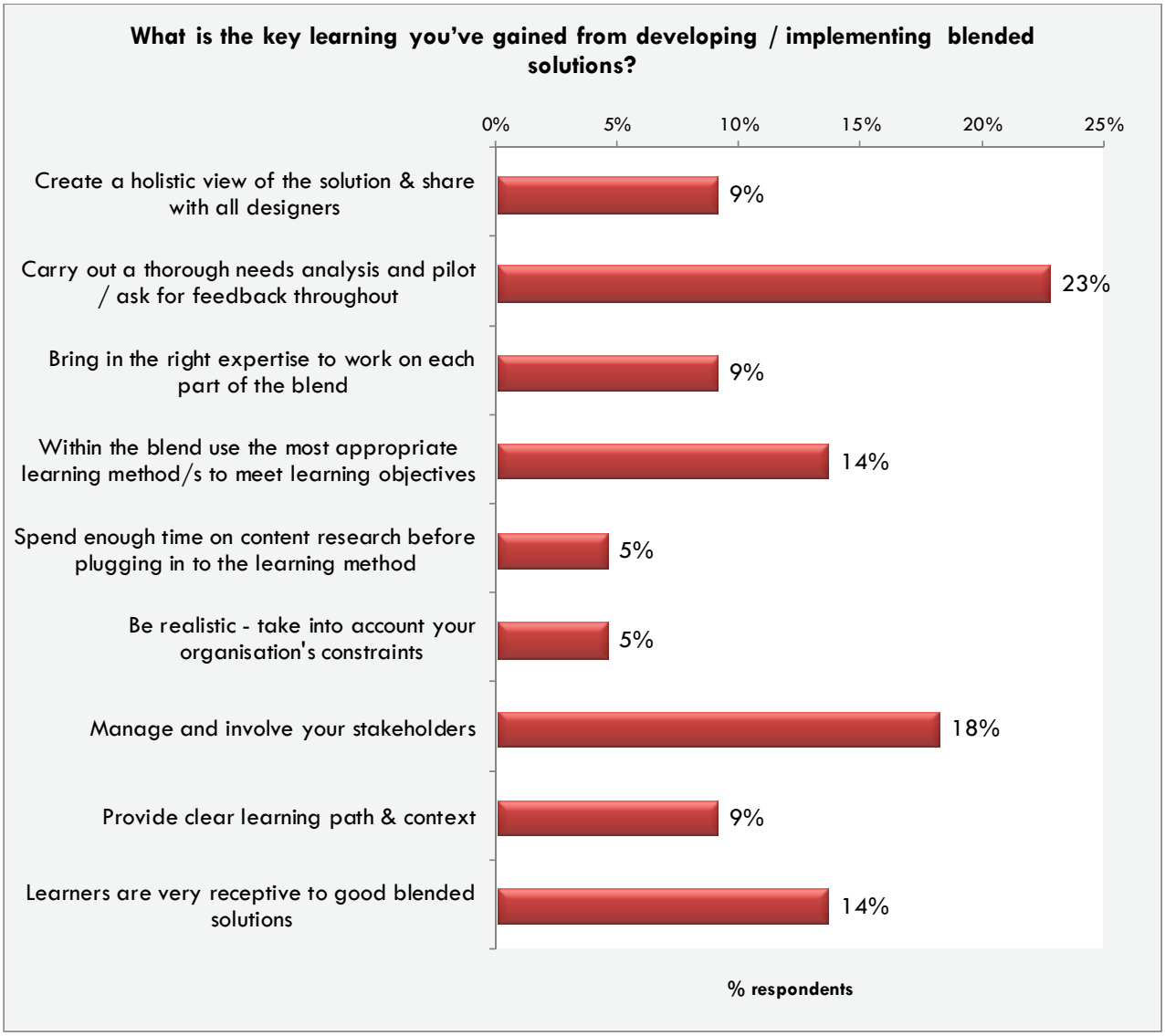


Despite the enthusiasm, it was obvious that some hard lessons had been learned by our respondents in implemented blended learning, so we asked them to highlight the mistakes that they would advise other people to look out for and avoid. The graph categorises these but doesn't fully convey the strength of feeling which came out in the comments, including:

- Not understanding participant needs: *"Make subject matter experts focus on what learners actually need, rather than what the SME knows"*… *"It's not a one size fits all"*… *"[don't make the] assumption that learners have time and inclination"*
- Despite have experts in learning, 33% of our respondents still felt that there was a lack of understanding of how each learning method is best used: *"Design the solution to optimise skills development and performance - don't try and re-create the classroom experience. The model has completely changed, and people don't recognise the extent of that change"*… *"Less is more - as usual a blend doesn't mean you have to use all possible methods. Think quality not quantity!"*… *"[don't] focus on the technology, at the expense of the pedagogy"*
- Lack of communication between designers working on different elements of the blend *"result in a disjointed approach"*… and which can lead to "clunky changes between different delivery styles or media"
- Making a lot of assumptions, whether that's about participant needs (*"make sure that the various elements are workable and practical within the organisation's set-up and the daily routine of employees - don't sit on the moon and design for earth"*)… or the skills of your people (*"Avoid the assumption that good face-to-face teachers, trainers, instructional designers and quality assurance colleagues have the skills to design and map blended solutions to surface strategic or deep learning performance / results"*).



So a lot of learning has already gone on in terms of what does and doesn't work when designing and delivering a blend. Our respondents also shared key learning, for example:



Our respondents have developed their expertise in blended learning through trial and error and the strength of feeling behind some of their comments indicates that a 'short-cut' to learning would be helpful in accelerating the L&D function's expertise – and willingness – to use blended learning.

Conclusion 5: However blended learning is used, there are some clear success factors which need to be in place, including a structured process for designing an effective blend

Blended Learning – 10 Tips

What does this mean for you as the L&D professional wanting to make the most of blended learning?

There are lots of books and courses which provide design processes for different learning methods, but there's little available about what to do when you're creating a blend of different methods.

Having worked with a number of clients on blended solutions, Kineo and The Oxford Group have developed a guide which helps us develop solutions in a structured way – saving us time and money – and it echoes much of the learning identified in this survey.

We've identified 10 'tips' for you to think about:

Tip 1	All good blends have a spine
Tip 2	Be systematic in your blended design process
Tip 3	Work out your assessment strategy right from the start
Tip 4	Use personas
Tip 5	Keep asking why
Tip 6	70:20:10—a blend formula?
Tip 7	Think of a blend as a learning journey
Tip 8	Test your blend
Tip 9	It doesn't stop after you have designed your blend
Tip 10	Manage the campaign

The full guide ("Blended learning today – 10 tips for designing blends in the new learning architecture") is available from www.kineo.com and www.oxford-group.com.