

Level Up Customer Experience (CX) With Customer Education Programs

Driving Customer Loyalty And Revenue-Impact Through Learning

A FORRESTER CONSULTING THOUGHT LEADERSHIP PAPER COMMISSIONED BY ADOBE, JANUARY 2024



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Executive Summary

Learning platforms have evolved significantly in the past decade. What was once a tool that was primarily used for compliance and employee upskilling is now used to support a variety of critical business use cases. In particular, organizations are expanding their use of learning platforms to support customers and partners. This has driven changes in the structure and capabilities of learning platforms to enable these critical business needs, including employee, partner, and customer education.

Learning platforms help organizations build customer education (CE) programs, improve customer experience (CX), support customer retention, and enhance customer engagement.

In September 2023, Adobe commissioned Forrester Consulting to evaluate the current state of CE strategies, the challenges of embedding CE programs into CX strategies today, and to decipher the best practices that companies can take to define their CE programs as a strategic differentiator for engagement and growth. Forrester conducted an online survey with 269 US-based decision-makers responsible for their organizations' customer learning strategy to explore this topic. We found that CE and CX are closely monitored and managed by the same decision-makers — an encouraging sign as an organization's CE strategy is an integral part of its CX strategy. However, organizations need greater focus on developing CE programs with science-based principles. This could help them fully unlock the potential of CE programs and leverage its ability to improve CX.

Key Findings

CX and CE strategies are tightly woven. Decision-makers responsible for CE programs are also responsible for building CX maturity. CE programs are an integral part of organizations' overall CX strategy as they have a direct positive impact on the post-sale customer lifecycle, therefore improving post-sale CX. It is thus no wonder that decision-makers are implementing CE programs to improve CX.



Follow four key strategies to build an effective CE program.

Building an effective CE program can be tricky as it must be effective, integrate with a learner's busy work schedule, and be sustainable in the long run. This does not mean procuring technology to drive CE programs, as a technology-first approach will fail. Instead, leverage science-based principles that are backed by research to develop effective and high-impact CE programs that can deliver desired learning outcomes and improve CX.



CE programs fail to meet expectations today. The future of CE programs can be uncertain due to internal disagreement between CE practitioners and senior CX stakeholders. CE program leaders need to demonstrate the role of CE programs in driving superior CX and building a customer-obsessed enterprise. Furthermore, CE program leaders must be aware of the challenges around talent shortage and mitigate them, as those challenges can threaten to hinder their ability to realize the benefits of CE programs.



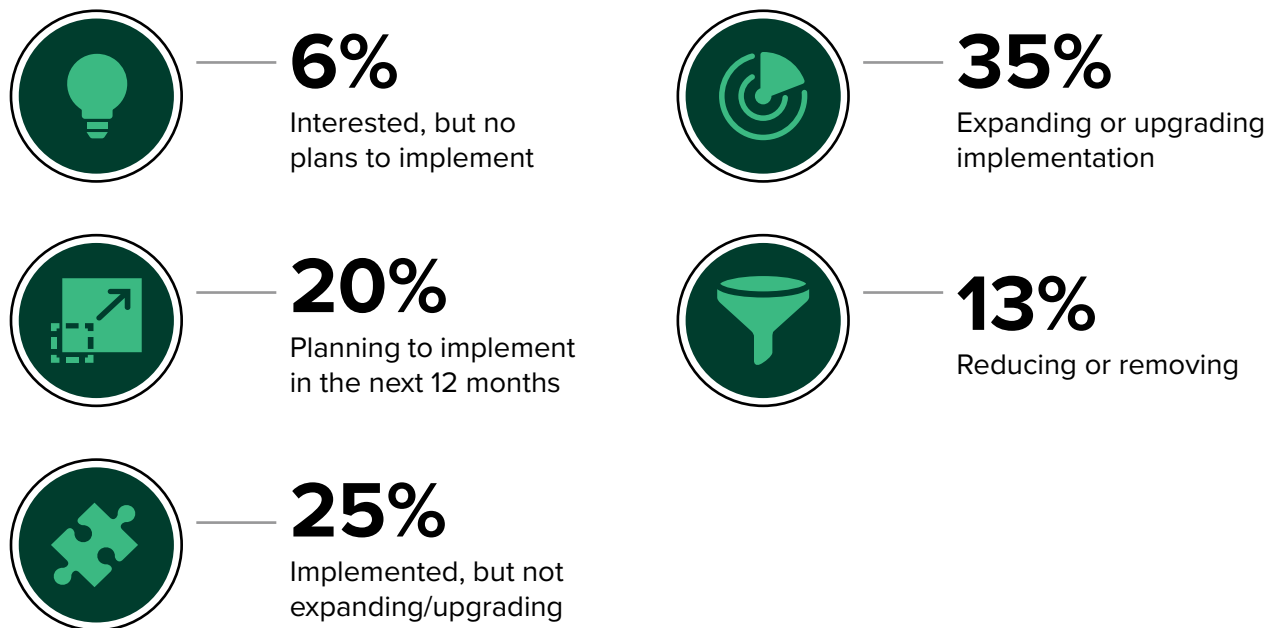
CE Is An Integral Part Of CX Strategy

CE programs seek to develop and deliver learning programs to support customer adoption and their use of products and services. They typically feature functionalities such as classroom- or instructor-led training (ILT) support, self-paced or e-learning, native authoring tools, analytics integrations, and adaptive learning or virtual coaching.¹ With this focus on customer learning toward adoption, organizations' CE strategy is heavily influenced by the overarching experience that leaders aim to provide for their customers. In fact, through our research findings, we found that decision-makers responsible for building their organization's CX maturity are also responsible for building their organization's CE programs (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

CE Program Plans And CX Management Responsibilities

“What are your company's plans when it comes to CE programs (or equivalent terminology)?”

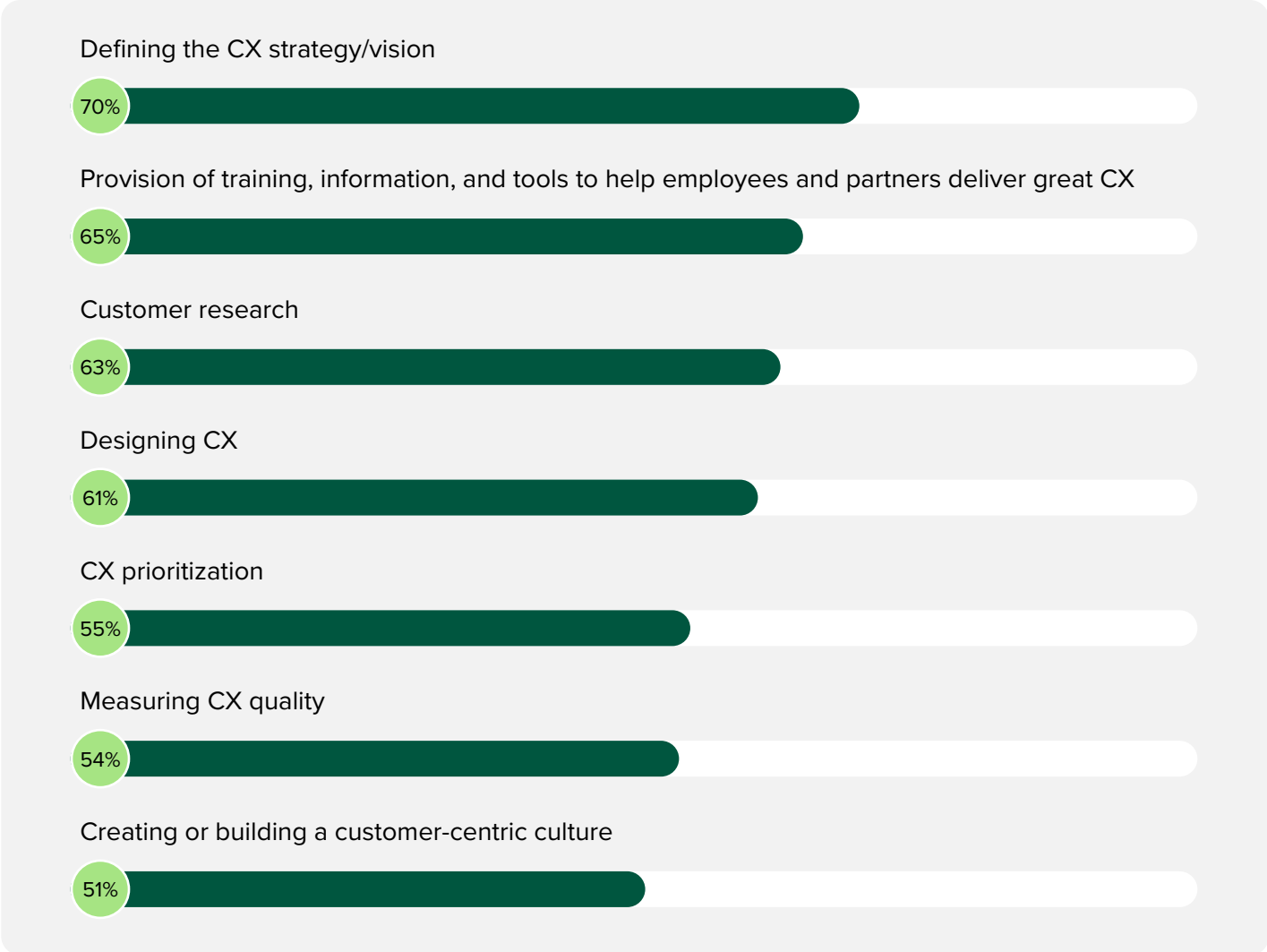


Base: 269 business leaders in the US responsible for their organization's customer learning strategy
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, September 2023

FIGURE 1 (CONTINUED)

CE Program Plans And CX Management Responsibilities

“What elements of CX management are you responsible for leading?”*



Base: 269 business leaders in the US responsible for their organization’s customer learning strategy

*Note: Respondents were asked to select all options that applied to their role.

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, September 2023

CE and CX strategies are tightly woven. Seventy-nine percent of respondents said their CE program is an integral part of their overall CX strategy (see Figure 2). CE programs have a direct and positive impact on the post-sale customer lifecycle, and delivering great CX is achieved by delivering a great post-sale experience. At least 59% of respondents who are responsible for their organizations' CX strategy are also prioritizing post-sale CX.

CE and CX are closely monitored and managed by the same decision-makers. Business leaders responsible for their customer learning strategy are also responsible for leading and building their organization's CX management maturity. This explains why CX and Net Promoter Score (NPS) metrics (48%) are also used to measure the performance and value of CE programs.²

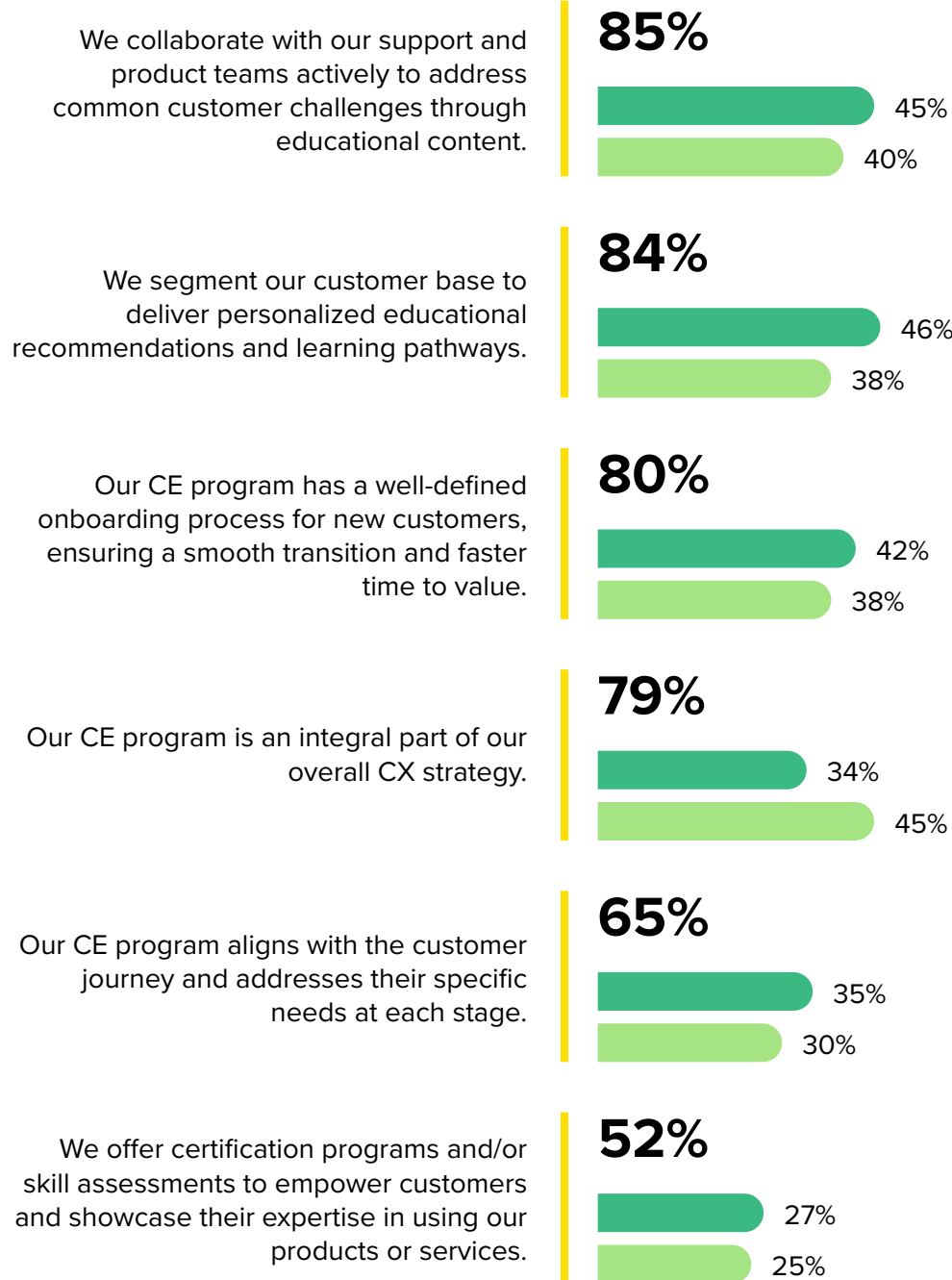
CE is seen as a differentiator in driving post-sale engagement and customer retention. Decision-makers are using CE programs to improve CX at their organization and ensuring that their post-sale effort leads to customer retention. Fifty-seven percent of respondents said their organization's CE program is part of their customer loyalty or retention strategy, and 48% said they are using CE programs to improve CX. CX is not complete without CE as it is an integral part of the customer lifecycle.

Align CE program to your customer journey. While 65% of respondents said that their organization's CE program aligns with their customer journey, this is not entirely true for all stages of the customer lifecycle. There is a need to push this alignment earlier into the lifecycle and not overlook customer onboarding.

FIGURE 2

CE Program Strategy

● Agree ● Strongly agree



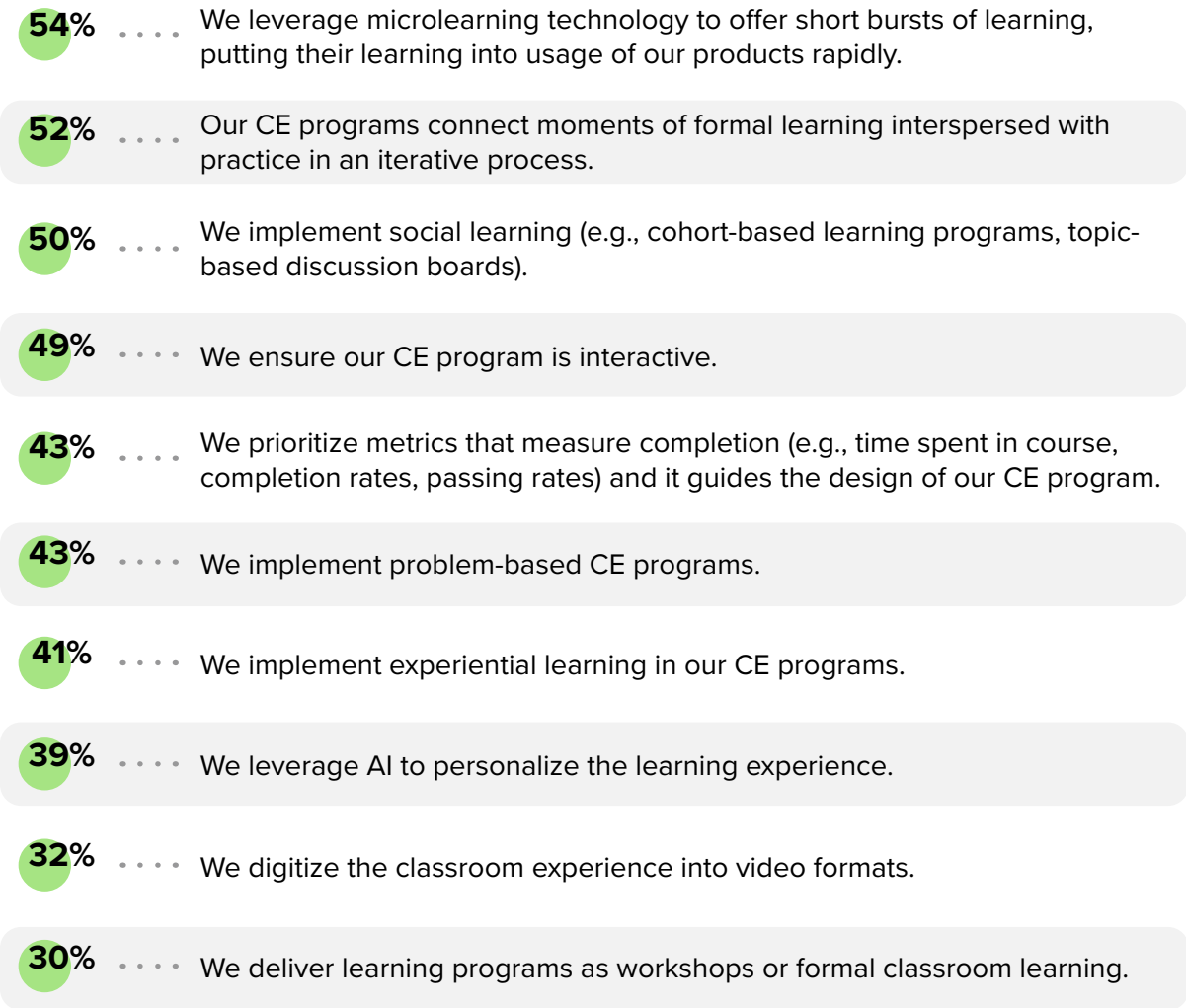
Base: 269 business leaders in the US responsible for their organization's customer learning strategy
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, September 2023

CE Programs Must Be Aware Of CX Needs And Learning Principles For Success

Organizations need to leverage science-based principles to design their CE programs. Nearly half of respondents said their organization is not doing what they need to do to ensure an effective CE program that delivers better learning outcomes (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

CE Program Practices



Base: 269 business leaders in the US responsible for their organization’s customer learning strategy
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, September 2023

Build your CE program on four science-based principles.³ Shift your focus to leveraging existing decades of research on adult learning theory, rather than on metrics related to the consumption of learning content. There is value in designing CE programs grounded in the science of learning that improves learning outcomes. There are four key strategies:

- **Problem- and experiential-based learning.** Applying theory to practice results in more engagement, greater retention, and better learning outcomes.
- **Iterative process to learning.** Intersperse formal learning with practice results to master skills over time.
- **Learning on the job.** Most learning opportunities happen outside of the classroom — the format of learning should not hinder its efficacy. Avoid letting formal learning weigh down your CE program.
- **Social learning.** Existing research has shown humans are social learners, and most human behavior is learned through modeling.

Adopt science-based principles to deliver better learning outcomes and CX. Decision-makers tend to view the completion of learning courses as a measure of their organization's education program's success. However, the real measure of learning is behavioral change — organizations need to ground their CE programs on science-based principles. One in two respondents noted that their organization is not implementing social learning. Only 52% of respondents said their organization connects their CE programs with practice in an iterative process. Less than half of respondents said their organization implements problem-based learning (43%) and experiential-based learning (41%). Designing CE programs on strong scientifically-backed research could help organizations deliver better learning outcomes and CX.

CE Programs Today Fail To Meet Expectations

Forrester’s study revealed that there is a simultaneous acknowledgement of both the benefits that CE programs can deliver toward uplifting CX and achieving the practical reality of current shortcomings with existing CE programs at organizations (see Figures 4 and 5).

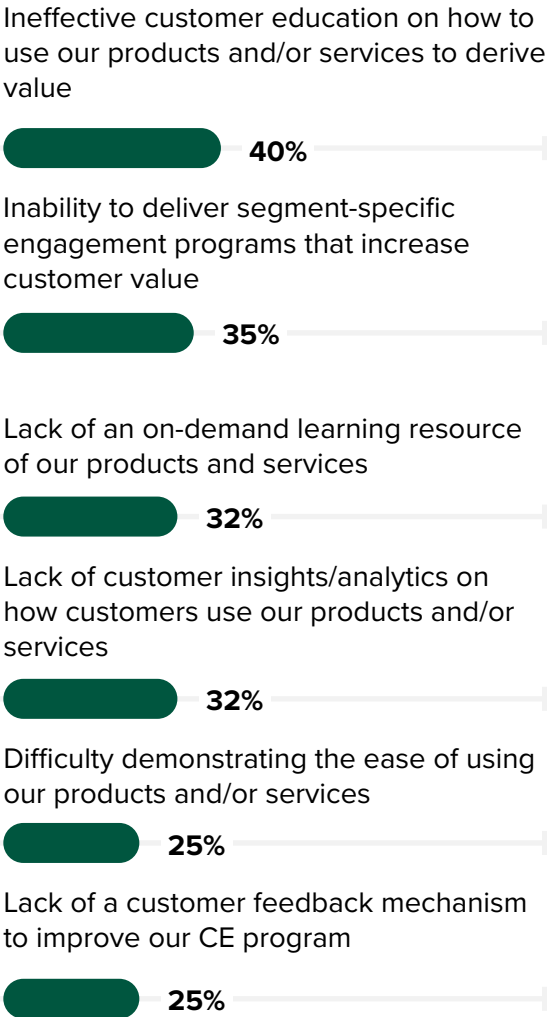
FIGURE 4

A CE Program Can Bridge These CX Gaps Most Effectively



FIGURE 5

Functional Challenges In CE Program Initiatives



Base: 269 business leaders in the US responsible for their organization’s customer learning strategy
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, September 2023

Despite the best of intentions, CE programs struggle to close gaps in CX, and are held back from achieving desired outcomes primarily due to the critical human element that underpins learning platforms (see Figure 6):

FIGURE 6

People Challenges In CE Program Initiatives



Base: 269 business leaders in the US responsible for their organization’s customer learning strategy
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, September 2023

CE programs do not live up to expectations today. A good CE program fulfils its purpose in helping customers realize value from their investments. Although 53% of decision-makers want their organization’s CE programs to drive better CX by educating customers on how to effectively use products and/or services for example, a significant proportion (40%) believed that current implementation struggles to meet this objective.

CE practitioners and their senior CX stakeholders disagree on CE’s importance as a driver of CX. Where 79% of respondents agreed that their organization’s CE program is an integral part of their overall CX strategy,

another 42% highlighted that it is a major hurdle to convince senior CX stakeholders of the same. This internal dichotomy between senior managers could spell disaster for an organization's CE strategy and its place in building a customer-obsessed enterprise.

Organizations face multiple hurdles in developing their CE strategy. Talent and resource shortages, ways of working and poor change management stand firmly in the way of CE program initiatives. The effectiveness of CE programs is undermined by issues such as employees' technical debt (77%), shortage of talent (74%), employee resistance to change (73%), and lack of stakeholder buy-in (70%).

Common industry nuances persist within CE programs (see Figure 7).

Financial services organizations, especially their functional teams, are vulnerable to operating in silos. This is consistent with the fact that 88% of respondents from the financial services, banking, and/or insurance industry highlighted that a key people challenge their organization faced was that functional teams operated in silos, compared to the average of all other industries which stands at 73%.

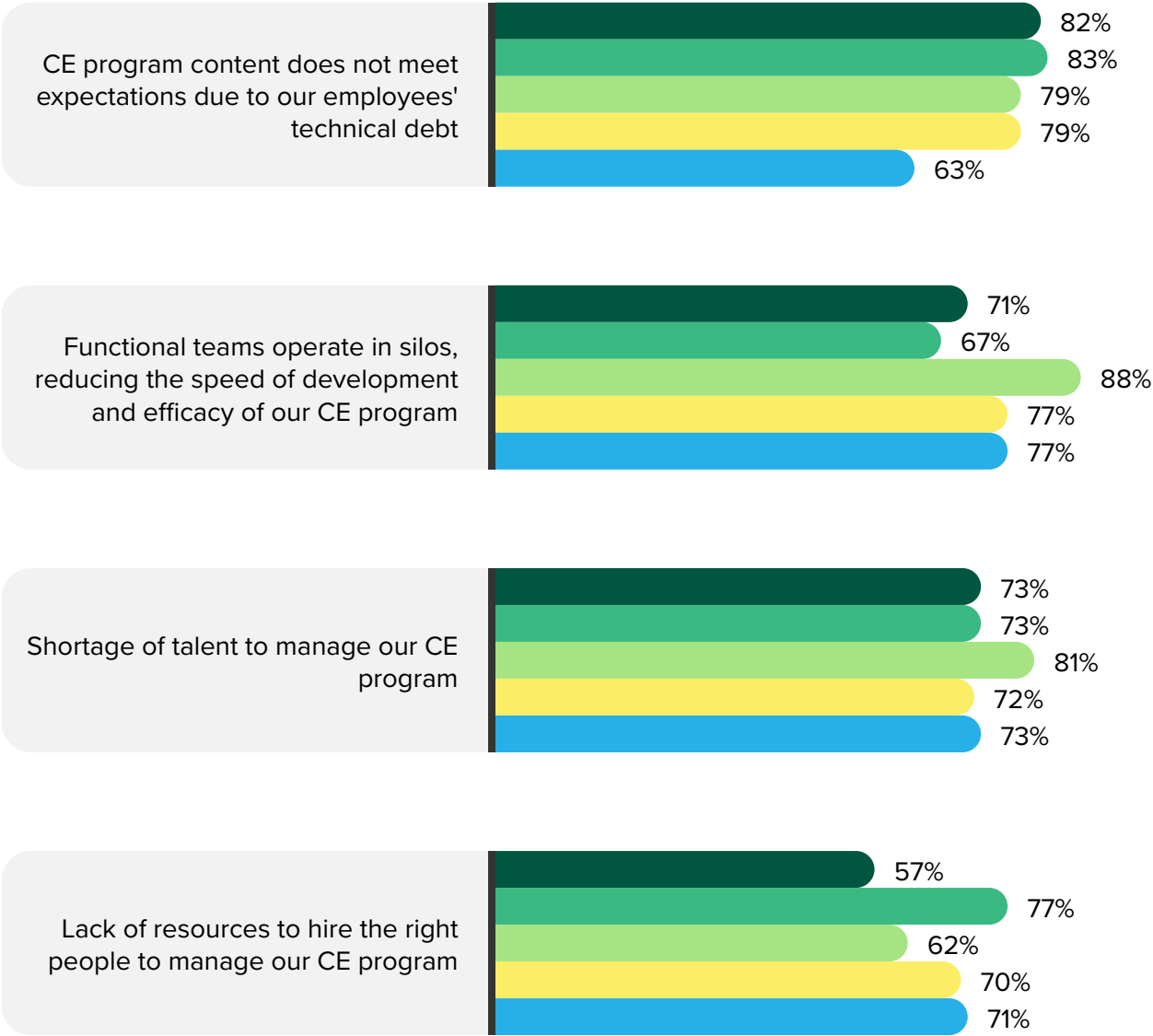
Business or professional services tend to place greater emphasis on having the right people or expertise in place and do not seem to face as many issues with resources for hiring. Only 57% of respondents noted the lack of resources as a challenge, compared to the average for all other industries which stands at 70%.

Interestingly, only 63% of respondents from the manufacturing and materials industry highlighted that their organization's CE program does not meet expectations due to their employees' technical debt, compared to 81% across other industries. This could be influenced by the fact that 68% of respondents listed that a key action for their organization was to improve digital CX more than the average of other industries (55%), indicating a more forward-looking approach.

FIGURE 7

Industry Nuances In CE Programs

- Business or professional services
- Electronics
- Financial services, banking, and/or insurance
- Technology and/or technology services
- Manufacturing and materials

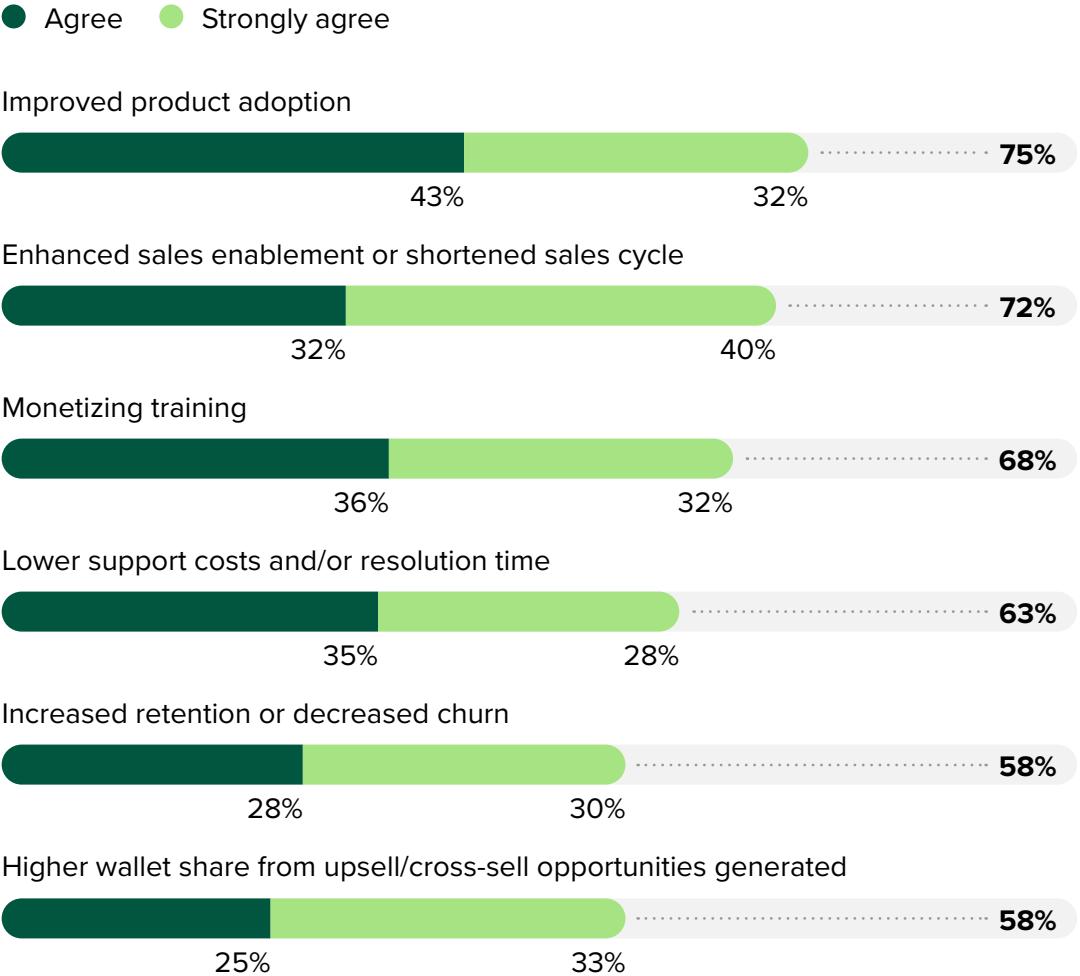


Base: 269 business leaders in the US responsible for their organization's customer learning strategy
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, September 2023

Tangible Financial Outcomes Drive Investment In CE Programs

The onus is on CE programs to both deliver and measure significant CX impact to prove their value to the wider organization. CE practitioners must ensure that prior investment can achieve both long-term outcomes and quick wins in terms of selling opportunities and product adoption to demonstrate immediate value (see Figure 8).

FIGURE 8
Financial Impact Of Customer Education



Base: 269 business leaders in the US responsible for their organization’s customer learning strategy
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, September 2023

Customer-focused outcomes alone are not sufficient to secure organizational investment. While increasing customer satisfaction, loyalty, and empowerment are recognized as benefits that can be delivered by CE programs, these are not the greatest factors to justify investment. Organizations need to see a clear uplift in sales in the form of upselling and cross-selling opportunities (83%), strengthened relationships with key accounts (81%), and improved product adoption (77%) (see Figure 9).

Many CE leaders remain underwhelmed by their current program. Forty-one percent of CE leaders reported either dissatisfaction or indifference with their organization's existing CE program. CE practices and capabilities must be improved to enable better customer education.

Personalization and a superior user experience are key features of a CE platform. Aligning with the importance that organizations assign to features such as diverse content formats, certification, and customer support integration; user experience (UX) in particular is an area in which organizations overwhelmingly choose to invest internally. Ninety-six percent of respondents reportedly aim to improve their organization's UX, with the most common draw being AI-powered learning recommendations (54%).

Tools are critical to building a CX-centric culture. Organizations are taking action to ensure their post-sale efforts lead to customer retention. Forty-six percent of respondents said they are transforming their organization's culture to be more customer-centric, but only 35% said they are creating a consistent single view of their customers. Without a single source of truth, it would be an uphill task to build a CX-centric culture.

CE leaders need assistance with platform capabilities. Support is required across every capability category presented, such as analytics and reporting to measure platform effectiveness and identify areas for improvement (79%), as well as various elements of personalization, administrative features, and engagement to drive customer value.

FIGURE 9

Investment Drivers For Customer Education

● Agree ● Strongly agree



Base: 217 business leaders in the US who are planning to implement CE at their organization in the next 12 months, have already implemented but not expanding/upgrading, or are currently expanding/upgrading implementation
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Adobe, September 2023

Key Recommendations

It is clear that organizations can successfully enhance CX with CE programs. By collecting data on customers, analyzing, and drawing insights, CX and CE maturity can be enhanced to deliver superior CE programs.

Forrester's in-depth survey of 269 US-based business leaders responsible for their organizations' customer learning strategy yielded several important recommendations:

Avoid the pitfall of a technology-first approach.

Organizations are offering a wide variety of digital content formats, from virtual training to published training documentation available on online forums, communities, or blogs, to roleplays or video submissions. There must be a clearer focus on which channels are actually worthwhile in terms of customer uptake. A good strategy matters, as good technology amplifies your CE strategy.

Embed CE programs seamlessly into the overall product or service experience.

CE programs must not be treated as a separate initiative. They must remain tightly woven with the core customer experience so as to enrich, not detract, from CX.

Establish a vision with clear goals for your CE strategy.

CE strategy involves cross-functional collaboration. Assign roles to each individual by leveraging frameworks such as the RASCI model, and prioritize initiatives that secure quick wins. Establish a measurement program to track performance of your CE strategy, prove its business value to your organization, and obtain further buy-in from stakeholders.

Measure beyond content consumption or engagement.

Adopt good practices for your CE strategy — leverage microlearning, connect formal learning interspersed with practice, social learning, and problem- and experiential-based learning. Metrics such as customer adoption or retention are more valuable than time spent by employees on courses or completion rates.

Leverage subject matter experts or vendors who can provide valuable expertise and solutions.

Talent shortage on managing CE programs or content authoring is a primary people challenge. A key CE program challenge is an ineffective CE program that struggles to educate customers on the use of your products or services, and struggles to improve CX, sales, and retention. Look internally for SMEs or managers who can provide expertise and coaching, and vendors who can provide solutions to help you buy or build training materials to overcome these challenges.

Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester conducted an online survey of 269 CE decision-makers at organizations in the US to evaluate the current state of their organization’s CE strategy, the challenges of embedding CE programs into CX strategies today, and to decipher the best practices that companies can take to define their CE programs as a strategic differentiator for engagement, growth, and retention.

Survey participants included decision-makers in marketing, advertising, sales, IT, customer success, CX, learning and development, and human resources who are responsible for their organizations’ customer education strategy. Questions provided to the participants asked about CE’s role in the post-sale customer lifecycle, practices adopted to drive CX with CE programs, metrics used to measure performance of CE programs, and the challenges with formulating CE strategies. Respondents were offered a small incentive as a thank you for time spent on the survey. The study began in August 2023 and was completed in September 2023.

Appendix B: Demographics

ANNUAL REVENUE	
\$1 billion to \$2 billion	32%
More than \$2 billion	68%

INDUSTRY	
Business or professional services	21%
Manufacturing and materials	21%
Technology and/or technology services	20%
Electronics	19%
Financial services, banking, and/or insurance	19%

POSITION	
C-suite	25%
Vice president	34%
Director	41%

DEPARTMENT	
Marketing/advertising	23%
Sales	20%
IT	16%
Customer success	13%
Customer experience	13%
Learning and development	12%
Human resources	2%

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Appendix C: Endnotes

¹Source: “[The Learning Management System And Experience Platform Landscape Q4 2023](#),” Forrester Research, Inc., October 13, 2023.

²Net Promoter and NPS are registered service marks, and Net Promoter Score is a service mark, of Bain & Company, Inc., Satmetrix Systems, Inc., and Fred Reichheld.

³Source: “[What You Don’t Know About Learning Design Is Costing You More Than You Think](#),” Forrester Research, Inc., September 8, 2022.

The image features the Forrester logo centered on a background of overlapping, curved shapes in various shades of green, from dark forest green to light lime green. The logo itself is the word "FORRESTER" in a white, all-caps, serif font, with a registered trademark symbol (®) to its upper right.

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