

The True Cost of Manual Training Operations

How training operations teams lose thousands of hours each year to manual scheduling, fragmented systems, and spreadsheet-based workflows—and what it actually costs their organizations.

82%

of buying decisions involve manual scheduling and spreadsheet pain as a primary driver

Based on analysis of enterprise training operations conversations across 30+ organizations including BCG, Deloitte, CDW, Farmers Insurance, and more.

What's inside

Six chapters on why training operations teams stay stuck in spreadsheets, what it costs them, and how to break out.

00	Executive summary	3
	The structural barrier behind training operations at scale.	
01	The scope of the problem	4
	Why spreadsheets remain the default operating model.	
02	The five hidden costs	6
	Labor, errors, duplication, visibility, opportunity.	
03	The breaking point	9
	When spreadsheets stop working — and why.	
04	Why the trap is so hard to escape	11
	Three reinforcing dynamics that keep teams stuck.	
05	The path forward	13
	A self-assessment for your organization.	
06	Conclusion: the cost of waiting	14
	What compounds while the team firefights.	

Spreadsheets are the default operating model for enterprise training, and it's costing more than teams realize.

Training operations is one of the most operationally complex functions in any enterprise. It involves coordinating instructors, classrooms, equipment, learners, compliance requirements, and dozens of stakeholders across multiple time zones and business units.

Yet despite this complexity, a striking number of organizations still manage their training operations using the same tool they use to track office supply budgets: spreadsheets.

This report draws on conversations with training operations leaders at more than 30 enterprises to examine why spreadsheet-based workflows persist, what they actually cost, and what happens when organizations hit the breaking point.

The findings are clear: the spreadsheet trap is not just an inconvenience. It is a structural barrier to growth, visibility, and strategic impact. And for most training teams, the longer they wait to address it, the more expensive the problem becomes.

82%

of buying decisions involve manual scheduling and spreadsheet pain as a primary driver.

CHAPTER ONE

1

The scope of the problem.

Whether training teams manage 200 sessions per year or 10,000, the pattern is remarkably consistent.

The default operating model for most training teams.

The spreadsheet trap is not a niche issue. It is the default operating model for the majority of training teams we spoke with. Whether they manage 200 sessions per year or 10,000, the pattern is remarkably consistent: scheduling lives in Excel or Google Sheets, instructor availability is tracked via email, resource allocation is managed through a mix of calendars and tribal knowledge, and reporting requires manually stitching together data from multiple disconnected sources.

Among the organizations we analyzed, manual scheduling and disconnected processes appeared in 36% of all sales conversations and were a factor in 82% of deals. Excessive reliance on spreadsheets specifically appeared in 30% of conversation and was the leading cause of 76% of investments into new L&D management technology. These are not edge cases. These are the baseline conditions under which most training teams operate.

36%

of conversations cite manual scheduling pain

82%

of buying decisions involve manual scheduling as a driver

76%

of tech investment involve excessive spreadsheet reliance

"We are managing in spreadsheets right now, and it's a little bit crazy. We do offer about 800 virtual learning sessions a year. So it's tracking and managing not only our instructors for those sessions, but the producers for those sessions and the calendaring to really try to figure out kind of where everything fits on the calendar."

— Training Operations Leader, CLA

"Much of what we're doing right now in terms of staffing is Excel based. It's very retroactive. It's very manual. There's a lot of clicks, there's a lot of duplicative effort."

— Training Operations Leader, Boston Consulting Group

A workaround that quietly outgrows the team.

What makes the spreadsheet trap so persistent is that it works—for a while. When a team is small and session volume is low, a well-maintained spreadsheet can handle scheduling and tracking. The problems emerge gradually as the operation scales, and by the time they become critical, the workarounds have become so deeply embedded that replacing them feels overwhelming.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Manual scheduling and spreadsheet reliance are not the exceptions in enterprise training operations—they are the rule. The longer a team waits to confront them, the more deeply embedded the workarounds become.

CHAPTER TWO

2

Five hidden costs.

Far beyond the obvious inefficiency, five distinct cost categories compound over time.

The true cost extends far beyond inefficiency.

The true cost of spreadsheet-based training operations extends far beyond the obvious inefficiency. Our analysis identified five distinct cost categories that compound over time.

124

hours spent weekly on admin tasks.

\$248,000

annual cost of admin tasks.

1

The labor cost: hours consumed by low-value work

The most visible cost is the sheer volume of human hours consumed by manual data entry, schedule juggling, and administrative coordination. Training teams consistently describe spending the majority of their time on tasks that could be automated, leaving little capacity for strategic work like improving training quality, expanding offerings, or building the business case for their function.

"My team is manually doing a lot of work for 100 people every week. In order to automate it for the operational leaders. So they're not having to worry about it, but because it's not truly automated, we've got to send them a communication."

— Training Operations Leader, Baptist Health System

"The team is spending a lot of time doing that busy work. We definitely could see ourselves saving time with a better tool. It's just changing up the way we do it in a way that kind of modernizes the process."

— Training Operations Leader, Epic

2

The error cost: mistakes that multiply

Spreadsheets are inherently error-prone, and in training operations, errors have cascading effects. A scheduling conflict means an instructor shows up to the wrong location. A missed certification expiration means a compliance violation. A data entry error in one spreadsheet propagates to every report that references it.

Organizations often use 9-12 tools to complete manual tasks, so no wonder they describe their data as "garbage," "messy," and fundamentally untrustworthy. The result is that teams spend significant effort cleaning up problems after they occur, rather than preventing them in the first place.

When the data itself can't be trusted.

"The data is garbage right now. So even saying, hey, we'd like to get the full year view, the amount of effort that it would take to pull in the four months of crappy data and the confusion that would cause. I don't think it's worth it."

— Training Operations Leader, ASSA ABLOY Group

"I would like to have much cleaner reporting. They'll name it a little differently or they'll forget to check a box or something and then it creates issues later on and we're having to try to detect certain things to try to report on it."

— Training Operations Leader, Sport Clips

3

The data cost: error-prone data puts everything at risk

When training operations run across multiple disconnected systems, the same data must be entered in multiple places. A new class might need to be created in the LMS, added to a scheduling spreadsheet, posted to a shared calendar, and communicated via email. Each touchpoint introduces the possibility of error and consumes time that could be spent elsewhere.

"What I'm looking for is a pulling together of the systems, a streamlined process, only having to enter data once. We're using Xero, we're using Google Calendar, we're using all these different systems, we have a spreadsheet where we collect all the bookings. Everything has to be copied several times."

— Training Operations Leader, Work Better

"We have too many systems around. So people are becoming the interface between systems and we are looking to an integrated platform that allows us to have all processes in one system."

— Training Operations Leader, Complementair Groep

Decisions made in the dark.

4 The strategic cost: decisions made in the dark

Perhaps the most damaging long-term cost is the loss of strategic visibility. When data lives across dozens of spreadsheets and disconnected tools, leaders cannot answer fundamental questions: How utilized are our instructors? Which courses are most profitable? Where should we invest to grow? Instead, they are forced to pull multiple reports, manually combine data, and still end up with an incomplete picture.

"We've thought about building BI dashboards to see what we want to see, because we're not seeing what we want to see. We need visualization of data that we can't see on the actual dashboard here."

— Training Operations Leader, CDW Corporation

"We literally have no single system of record that's explained at the seller level or regional rollups or whatever, who's been trained on what. And when."

— Training Operations Leader, Emerson Electric

"I have to pull five different reports and then one of those reports I have to split out into three. So there's a lot of steps."

— Training Operations Leader, Maximus

Growth that never happens.

5 The opportunity cost: growth that never happens

When training teams are consumed by the daily grind of manual operations, strategic initiatives stall. New programs don't launch. Expansion into new regions or modalities gets deferred. The team becomes a bottleneck rather than a growth engine.

This is especially acute for teams that are understaffed and overextended. Among the conversations we analyzed, 22% of conversations and 57% of investments involved teams that were explicitly struggling with resource constraints and an inability to focus on strategic work.

22%

of conversations feature teams struggling with resource constraints

57%

of purchases involve teams unable to focus on strategic work

"We are a small team with a lot of responsibilities and I need to focus more on the strategic part of our training offer. I don't have a lot of time to design the process correctly."

— Training Operations Leader, Bottomline

"We want to move away from the operation is running because of a solid 10 people that are really good at really tedious awful tasks, right? We want to move away from that."

— Training Operations Leader, Databricks

CHAPTER THREE

3

The breaking point: when spreadsheets stop working.

Every organization we spoke with reached a moment where the spreadsheet-based approach visibly broke.

The triggers vary, but they fall into predictable patterns.

Every organization we spoke with reached a moment where the spreadsheet-based approach visibly broke. The triggers varied, but they fell into predictable patterns.

■ Scale outpaces manual processes

Growth is the most common trigger. As session volume increases, instructor pools expand, and new business units or regions come online, the manual approach that worked at smaller scale collapses under its own weight.

"We're managing everything that we do via Excel spreadsheets which we're at the point of we've outgrown. It takes also a lot of time. So our time could be used so much more efficiently if we had something that was helping us build it."

— Training Operations Leader, Genetec

"We're at a point where we've got about 30 admin users and probably 50 to 60,000 students. We've reached the point and now we don't have the infrastructure in place to grow."

— Training Operations Leader, A to E Training & Solutions

■ Complexity exceeds human capacity

For training operations that involve complex resource matching—instructors with specific certifications, locations with specific equipment, sessions with regulatory constraints—spreadsheets simply cannot keep up. The cognitive load of manually optimizing across multiple variables becomes unsustainable.

"Our challenge is that we haven't seen within the tools that we currently use, any AI functionality being brought in. So we still struggle with when a change comes up or a proposed change comes up, a what-if scenario. We end up doing, we call it playing Tetris, but that shuffle of different trainers, different locations, different skills, who can do what."

— Training Operations Leader, Farmers Insurance

When the business demands consistency.

■ Standardization becomes a business requirement

Organizations that acquire new business units, centralize distributed training functions, or face new compliance requirements often discover that their spreadsheet-based approach cannot deliver the consistency and auditability the business demands.

"We are at this point where we are on the cusp of standardizing how field training is done and in this current state, subsidiaries manage their field training efforts. We are currently using Google Suite to manage that internally right now, but we recognize that tool will not suffice as we expand our efforts."

— Training Operations Leader, Dycom Industries

PATTERN

Growth, complexity, and standardization are the three pressures that consistently expose the limits of spreadsheet-based training operations. When any one of them hits, the workaround stops being a workaround.

CHAPTER FOUR

4

Why the trap is so hard to escape.

If the costs are so clear, why do so many training teams stay stuck?

Three reinforcing dynamics keep organizations locked in.

If the costs are so clear, why do so many training teams stay stuck? Our conversations reveal three reinforcing dynamics that keep organizations locked into manual workflows.

1 The team is too busy firefighting to plan an escape

The cruelest irony of the spreadsheet trap is that the teams most in need of a better system are the ones with the least capacity to implement one. They are stretched thin, handling multiple roles, and consumed by the very manual work they need to eliminate. This creates a vicious cycle where operational overload prevents strategic improvement.

"If we were suddenly to scale up like that, we don't have the team. There aren't enough hours in the day."

— Training Operations Leader, Syniti

"I'm doing two and a half people's job at the moment. So, yeah, I am struggling a little bit, just a wee bit busy."

— Training Operations Leader, First Intuition London

2 Existing tools were never designed for this job

Many organizations have invested in technology—typically a Learning Management System—but find it was designed for eLearning content delivery, not for the operational complexity of instructor-led training. The result is a system that adds work rather than reducing it, forcing teams back to spreadsheets for the tasks that matter most.

Wrong tools, and the friction of change.

"Our current system is just too complicated for the average person that's not in Workday every day doing this stuff to just go in and add a class, enroll people, and grade it."

— Training Operations Leader, Lineage, Inc.

"We were forcing people into Docebo to register so that they could come to an instructor-led training. And they had absolutely no interest in being in Docebo."

— Training Operations Leader, ASSA ABLOY Group

3 Budget and risk anxiety block action

Even when teams recognize the problem and identify a solution, organizational dynamics often prevent action. Budget constraints, competing priorities, complex approval processes, and fear of implementation failure create significant barriers. Among the conversations analyzed, 21% of interviews and 43% of investments involved explicit budget or implementation risk concerns.

21%

of interviews cite explicit budget or implementation risk concerns

43%

of investments involve budget or risk hesitation

In their own words.

"Our CFO and people that are making that decision are more cautious. We're not hitting our revenue targets, so if the revenue targets were better, I think the purse strings would be loosened a little faster."

— Training Operations Leader, DDI

"The implementation of this is probably the, if this doesn't happen, it's because we are too scared of the implementation. We have no one really dedicated to do this work."

— Training Operations Leader, Interplay Learning

The reinforcing loop: Teams stay too busy to escape, the tools they have were built for a different job, and the budget and risk story is hardest to make when revenue is under pressure. Each dynamic protects the others.

CHAPTER FIVE

5

The path forward: a self-assessment.

How deep are you, and what should you do about it?

A framework for assessing your current state.

If any of the patterns in this report sound familiar, your organization is likely caught in some version of the spreadsheet trap. The question is: how deep are you, and what should you do about it?

Use the following framework to assess your current state and identify the most impactful next steps.

STAGE	SYMPTOMS	RECOMMENDED ACTION
Early	Spreadsheets work but are getting complex. Occasional scheduling conflicts. Reports take hours to compile.	Document your current processes and quantify time spent. Begin building the business case for change.
Mid	Multiple people manage overlapping spreadsheets. Frequent errors require manual cleanup. No single source of truth.	Audit your tool landscape and identify the top 3 time-consuming manual workflows. Evaluate purpose-built alternatives.
Critical	Growth is constrained by operational capacity. Teams are burned out. Data is unreliable. Leadership lacks visibility.	Treat this as a strategic initiative, not an IT project. Engage leadership with a clear ROI case and implementation plan.

The cost of waiting is immense.

The spreadsheet trap has a compounding effect. Every month that training operations remain on manual workflows, the costs accumulate: more hours consumed, more errors introduced, more strategic opportunities missed, and more institutional knowledge locked in the heads of a few overworked team members rather than captured in a system.

The organizations we spoke with are not unusual. They are some of the largest and most sophisticated enterprises in the world: BCG, Deloitte, Farmers Insurance, CDW, United Airlines, Emerson Electric, Databricks. If they are

struggling with spreadsheet-based training operations, chances are your organization is too.

The good news is that the path from spreadsheet-driven chaos to operationally mature training management is well-traveled. Organizations that make the transition consistently report faster scheduling, fewer errors, better resource utilization, and the ability to scale their training operations without linearly scaling their team.

The question is not whether to escape the spreadsheet trap. The question is how much it will cost you to wait.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The question is not whether to escape the spreadsheet trap. The question is how much it will cost you to wait.

ABOUT ADMINISTRATE

Let's talk about your spreadsheet problem.

Administrate is the training management platform built for complex, instructor-led training operations. We help training teams move from spreadsheets and disconnected tools to a single platform that handles scheduling, resource management, learner communications, and reporting. If you're interested in ditching spreadsheets for a smarter approach to training management at scale, you'll be in great company. We work with companies like Roche, Siemens, and Maersk. Book some time with us and let's talk about why you just read this entire report.

[Book time with Administrate →](#)