

Learning Management for the Enterprise

Learning Management, Learning Management Systems (LMS) and most recently Learning Content Management Systems (LCMS) have become hot discussion topics. Most articles written on this subject focus on describing what learning management is, and detailing the various products and their main areas of functionality. Here, we would like to concentrate on some of the key issues that help determine successful LMS projects. "LMS" will be used as a generic term to cover the whole spectrum of learning management solutions, as the critical success factors in a project are not highly dependent on any specific solution.

The core points are:

- An "LMS" is not a single type of product but an aggregation of many very different types of product sharing some common functionality and purpose. Choosing the right one is critical.
- The LMS is the fundamental component providing access to, integrating and managing all forms of learning (classroom, online, self-paced etc.) across the company.
- Training and learning includes both internally and externally delivered components. The system needs to be capable of managing access to both internal and external courses and their administration.
- LMS Projects are both Training/HR projects and IT projects. The two departments traditionally haven't exactly been the closest of buddies.
- LMS Projects are big, complex projects that can easily go wrong.
- A successful LMS project is more than implementing a software product. It will involve a major change in the way that training and learning is accessed, administered, and managed. This change needs to be managed.

The Learning Management Spectrum

The term "LMS" commonly refers to a specific type of product segment, but in reality that is not what it is. The LMS products have evolved from many different starting points and although they are moving toward a common set of processes and functionality, individual products are currently very different in approach, purpose, and architecture. There is also considerable change in the market place. A recent report by Brandon Hall in the U.S. covered 60 LMS products, and of course, ignored lots of non-U.S. products in the process.

For enterprise-wide projects in such a marketplace, the risk factors around product selection become accentuated. Scale, integration and customisation become critical. Implementation becomes bigger than purchase in terms of budget and resources. Planning and integration of disparate products and players becomes more critical.

Selecting the right base product is obviously an important process and requires real insight. For all the effort, producing a detailed requirements specification or invitation to tender may not produce the expected results. With almost every vendor claiming their product is enterprise scalable, can handle multiple learning types and can be customised to your specific requirement, reading between the lines of the vendor responses is important. The IT department, although a critical part of this process, does not have the detailed domain knowledge to get into detailed functional discussions.

Integrated Learning Management

E-learning seems to be proving the death knell of many traditional training management systems used in companies. They were simply not designed to manage e-learning. The scope of the learning need is also changing. Organisations are focusing more on competencies and job profiling, on developing integrated learning programmes, and more recently, on capabilities for learning on demand - just-in-time learning objects. Since traditional training management systems don't support these concepts, most large corporate Training and Development organisations are in the process of defining requirements, selecting products or implementing a new system.

In selecting a way forward, it is important to remember the requirement to integrate many types of learning, not just one form - be it classroom or e-learning. "Integrate" is an interesting word in LMS land. It tends to get translated into "pass personnel and training data to my ERP/HR system" and "load in AICC-compliant content". It needs to mean a lot more.

Integrating at the back-end with the ERP or HR system is an obvious requirement, as HR is the ultimate owner of personnel-related data. As well as core personnel information, you will also need to track course information and results, competency information, assessments, financial tracking, and so on depending on the scope of information within the ERP environment.

Integrating with learning delivery is another issue. In eLearnity's e-Learning Technology Framework, we separate out Learning Management/Portal, Learning Delivery and Content into discrete layers of functionality and architecture. The delivery of e-learning is much more than accessing content. Although the market is increasingly recognising the limitations of a content-only model for delivery, when it comes to defining requirements for LMSs it gets strangely narrow minded again and seems to worry only about linking to content. Longer-term content is only one part of the mix. There should be more focus on integrating other learning tools including live virtual classrooms, collaborative learning tools, assessment and simulation tools.

Internal and External Learning Provision

So having said we need to manage all forms of learning, where is that learning coming from? If we look at the historical role of most training management systems, it has been to manage the internal training function. External training, while it may be tracked, tends to be outside the scope, as the course data and registration processes are handled by the vendor.

Within the last year we have seen the emergence of external learning gateways, or hosted course booking and tracking services that can be tailored to specific requirements. These services come from a range of external learning portal providers, content vendors and some focused gateway providers.

These types of external learning services need to be integrated into internal management services. Purely from a financial tracking point of view, if a large percentage of your training budget is spent on external training, it should be integrated to provide one single point of management and control.

Training and IT

This next point is more of a warning, and you will have to be honest and work out the potential significance to your organisation. Historically in most companies IT and Training haven't exactly been the best of bed-fellows. Training has tended to be fairly low on the corporate IT agenda, and in response Training has tended to be under-supported and over-willing to work outside normal corporate IT rules. Sometimes the interface between the two can be a little fraught, to say the least.

The fact is that LMS projects are core training projects and core IT projects. Both sides have little understanding of the other's requirements and both sides have to work closely for these

projects to work. Liaison is critical, and having a strong cross-understanding or making use of independent expertise can significantly de-risk the project.

Big, Complex Projects

LMSs are the key business process systems for the learning environment. They automate all the core administration and management processes, and they need to span the whole organisation. They also need to integrate many forms of learning including classroom-based, external courses, and web-based delivery. Therefore enterprise LMS projects are big and complex, involving many people and skills, both internal and external to the organisation. Apart from the requirement to bring together Training and IT (see above), they involve an external LMS vendor, implementation resources, third party content providers and so on.

Large LMS projects can easily be multi-million pound projects, with as much or more spent on implementation services as on the underlying software applications. Enterprise-wide projects also bring other problems in terms of scale of infrastructure, in particular the need to manage a distributed infrastructure. The idea of having a single big web server somewhere which everyone accesses, whilst desirable becomes difficult with a large complex infrastructure. Often the intranet is not as all-pervasive as it is supposed to be, and networks are still not geared up to handle many people downloading or accessing media-rich learning objects. Content may have to be managed in multiple places.

Customisation is also a big issue. The more of these kinds of projects we've been involved in, the more we realise that what comes out of the box is not what is really needed, however good the face-value fit. The degree and nature of customisability of LMS products varies enormously. While the web user interface for users is usually fairly easy to change, underlying processes and business rules aren't. Stepping into heavy customisation can be a bit like stepping off a precipice, going into free-fall and wondering when you might hit the bottom at all!

Customisation to fit is critical, but it is easy to get carried away or to take the approach that everything has to fit your existing requirements, even when current practices aren't that well suited to what you will need to do in the future. Make it fit, but keep it simple.

Managing the Change

Finally, like any major project, especially one that is changing the core processes and systems of how something works, an LMS project has a significant wake in terms of requirements to manage the transition and change. It is easy to focus on the technical side of the implementation project and data integration, but learning, learning administration and other business processes are going to change fundamentally and that change needs to be managed.

Roles and skills will change, processes will change (even if you do customise some things to fit how you currently work), new people will be involved, learners need to be transitioned to using the new environment and sold on the benefits to them. Installing the system is one thing. Using it is another.

In summary, LMS projects are very significant projects for any corporate training organisation. There is a danger of going through a detailed due process to select and implement a product, without making use of the core expertise needed to determine real requirements and more importantly determine the reality of the vendor responses to the requirements.

Assume LMS projects will be big and complex, and make sure you get some real expertise involved to help de-risk the process. Develop an understanding of your organisation's core processes, and make sure you are building something that will really support the integrated learning of the future, rather than just swapping one learning mode for another.