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WHITE PAPER

10 Things You Can't Afford to Overlook when Selecting a Learning Management System (LMS)

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STRONG TEAM, STRONG BUSINESS.

Not all Learning Management Systems are created equal, however you might not know that by reading the promotional literature. While the purpose of an LMS is simple: *improve operational efficiency and report on learning effectiveness*, solutions vary drastically. And the complex technical nature of these solutions does not help in the selection process. So here are 10 pieces of LMS functionality that will help your organization manage learning better, and help you avoid those unexpected “gotchas” that inevitably add to additional cost and frustration down the line.

1. Real Time Content Upload Capability

You won't find this out unless you ask, but many LMSs do not provide learning administrators the ability to upload content by themselves. Instead, they have a complex upload procedure that often depends on vendor involvement to get courses up on a server. This can cause a serious delay in the time it takes to upload content, a delay which is often further compounded by content integration issues.

According to a recent industry survey of LMS buyers, *content integration was ranked as the second-biggest challenge*. Do not overlook this factor when selecting an LMS.

Ideally, you should seek out an LMS that provides administrators a method to upload content themselves, such as a Web-based upload form within the LMS. Once uploaded, the content should also be instantly available for assignment to a learning activity.

It's also important to look for automatic detection features that recognize standards-based content objects (like SCORM) with proper versions (i.e. SCORM 1.2, SCORM 2004).

2. Automated Data Syncs

Any LMS that you consider should provide built-in integration tools that automate the import of external training data or “people data” from your HR system. Ensure that validation and error logging features are available, along with the ability to refer back to any job status to confirm its success. It's also beneficial to adopt tools that leverage newer technologies (e.g. Web Services, HTML forms) while also providing example code or even actual client tools to get the jobs scheduled from internal system.

When managed correctly, the entire deployment of the import tools should require minor involvement from your IT teams, and the ongoing administration should be able to be handled by your learning management teams, rather than the LMS vendor.

3. Ad Hoc Reporting

Almost all learning management systems provide some sort of reporting to gauge training effectiveness and demonstrate compliance; however, even the most clairvoyant vendor will not be able to provide every out-of-the-box report you will need.

It is important that any LMS you consider provide an ad hoc reporting tool that has the ability to create, save, and retrieve reports “on the fly”. Your reporting tool should offer real-time field additions and filter updates, show reports either through graphs of matrix views, and ensure LMS security is inherited for each user when viewing the reports. This way users will only see the data they should see.

4. Self-Service Data Extract

Flexible ad hoc reporting tools are crucial to an LMS. However, ad hoc reporting tools alone do not preclude the need for exporting learning data in a usable form. It is important to be able to easily export all of the learning data you need into a readable, reusable format.

Make sure that any LMS you evaluate has the ability to:

- Set up real-time or scheduled data extracts to a variety of formats (e.g. XML, Excel, CSV)
- Specify dynamic parameters for data filtering
- Run your data extracts through the LMS's user interface

5. Organizational Hierarchy Logic

When evaluating LMS vendors, it's important to fully understand how well the LMS can map to your organization. Ideally, your LMS will automatically sync the organizational hierarchy through your HR system's data integration. This will provide you the ability to strategically assign training by jobs and organizations, without the constant need to update roles in the LMS. Whenever the HR data changes, roles in the LMS should change automatically and learners' training allocations should adjust accordingly—saving administrators hours of manual data entry.

Some LMSs provide multiple segmented learning portals as a workaround to this precise mapping capability. While this functionality is valuable, it will not typically align down to the job level and will not properly sync up with HR data. Press vendors to show you exactly how they will map their system to your organization.

6. Email Notifications

Email notifications that remind learners of upcoming activities can quickly become a training administrator's best friend or worst enemy. It all depends how easily the notifications can be configured and the level of flexibility provided to set them up. A one-size-fits-all approach rarely works.

Here are some important questions to ask when evaluating an LMS's notification capabilities:

- Can the notification templates be edited with both text and html formats?
- Can notifications be customized for each learning activity level?
- Are additional services or tools needed to administer the email notifications, or is an email based engine (e.g. SMTP) embedded in the LMS?
- Can your notifications set up multi-timed distribution (for example, an immediate confirmation and then a couple of reminders later)?
- Can notifications provide iCalendar attachments to add to a user's Outlook™ Calendar?

A growing number of firms are also requesting that users, with or without email addresses, be able to read their notifications from the LMS home page. Evaluate how you envision using your LMS, and then consider whether you'll have any of the same requirements.

7. Easy Blended Learning

Any learning administrator will tell you that you don't need to have 300,000 employees to have complex learning activity requirements. *Blended Learning* is the combination of multiple approaches to learning and it can be accomplished through the use of multiple virtual or physical resources.

For example, you may find that you want learners to download and sign a prerequisite document prior to taking an instructor led course. Or you may have a compliance requirement that can be fulfilled by either an instructor-led or online course, and you want the system to report on compliance in either of those activities. If you think about it, learning structures can become complicated very quickly. And no matter how simple your processes, you will benefit from blended-learning flexibility.

If your LMS doesn't provide the flexibility to manage these countless combinations, you'll be challenged with either doing everything manually or burdened with developing and maintaining multiple workarounds.

Also, when evaluating an LMS, don't overlook the value of simplicity. If the LMS is too complicated, you'll struggle to take advantage of the functionality. The key is to choose a vendor with the needed flexibility and an intuitive activity building structure.

8. Online Collaboration Functionality

In many organizations, Web 2.0, the ability to facilitate online collaboration and sharing between users, is getting a lot of attention. There are few places in the organization where collaboration can be more valuable than in a corporate learning environment.

Ideal collaborative functionality provides learners the ability to capture and store additional knowledge, expand their learning experience into broader discussions, and leverage subject matter experts to answer questions and create independent knowledge banks.

Other collaborative functionality to look for in an LMS includes the ability to:

- Upload documents
- Report on collaborative activity
- Leverage additional communication channels before & after activities
- Use optional email notifications

9. User Interface Configurability

Gaining organizational adoption of your LMS often depends on how easily you can configure its look and feel. This all starts with the User Interface (UI). While most LMSs provide little to tailor this experience, the best UIs are able to be configured to meet your organization's use cases.

Look for options, such as the ability to:

- Upload your own branding skins and logos
- Provide users with an updated 'news' page
- Provide easy configuration of user preferences

10. Single-Sign On Authentication

All learning management systems house sensitive information that must be secured. However, each additional system means additional user headaches as they have to remember yet another password or request another reset.

Single-Sign On (SSO) is a session/user authentication process that permits a user to enter one name and password in order to access multiple applications, including the LMS. The process should authenticate the user for all the applications they have been given rights to, eliminating further prompts when they switch applications during a particular session.

If SSO is a necessity to your organization, make sure the LMS can provide:

- The ability to integrate with Active Directory, LDAP, or Session Management applications
- Sample code for immediate deployment to your internal servers
- Encrypted communication to the LMS servers using MD5 packaging with customer-specific tokens

ResultsOnDemand™ is a best-in-class learning management system with unmatched functionality that is available at an affordable cost to organizations of all sizes. The majority of features listed above are available out-of-box.

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