

The future of LMS

Recent research found that many organisations seem to have a love-hate relationship with their learning management system (LMS). Alan Bellinger takes a look at what it needs to turn the LMS into a real enabler.



In my experience there's no subject (apart from compliance or the England soccer team) that generates such a polarised and heated discussion among learning and development (L&D) professionals as their expectations of the LMS.

When I chaired a recent session at the Learning Technologies Conference, one speaker referred to their LMS as an enabler, whilst another referred to it as an inhibitor. In the subsequent discussion it was clear that it all came down to the way they were using it – and their expectations.

User dissatisfaction

It's always refreshing when facts back up one's intuition, and recent research conducted by LMS supplier IMC did just that. It found that among larger organisations, most currently have an LMS, with over 90 per cent having been installed for more than two years (in fact, almost

50 per cent had been installed for five years or more). But when asked if they would recommend their current supplier only 23 per cent were in the 'very likely' category and the negatives totalled exactly 50 per cent. Now there are two aspects to the issue of recommending a supplier; either, you're completely comfortable with them, or you're reluctant to admit that a previous decision was questionable.

Future needs

When asked if they were completely satisfied with their LMS in terms of both current and future requirements, only 30 per cent agreed that they were; a 70 per cent level of dissatisfaction is really quite astounding.

An additional 30 per cent reported that their concerns were in relation to future requirements. After all, these LMS installations (other than Moodle, but that's

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another story) are high ticket items, and therefore you'd expect that the suppliers would be trend-setting innovators rather than lumbering giants. As such, they should be close to their clients and therefore able to anticipate their demands.

The other figure that's staggering is that only two per cent said they were not satisfied and would discontinue with the LMS – that implies that 38 per cent of respondents weren't happy, but saw no alternative.

LMS uses

There's another chart in this report that is really illuminating, and that is the one that asks respondents how they use their LMS. The first issue is who really benefits from the LMS – L&D or the learner? Of course, learners and the L&D function have shared goals and objectives, and so there is an argument that this discussion is pointless; but it isn't.

There are really three beneficiaries; the learners (for example, 'course management'), the L&D department (for example, 'management reports' and the company (for example, 'talent management').

The good news from this chart is that the needs of the learner are clearly prioritised over the needs of the L&D function. But the bad news is that the LMS is such an under-used tool in relation to that third group – the company. If only 20 per cent are using the LMS for competency/performance management, and only 13 per cent are using it for talent management, then how on earth are they doing it?

Value

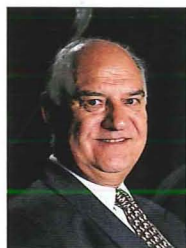
Another chart from this report shows the value respondents have derived from their LMS. It shows that there are really three groups. There is a substantial group (37 per cent) who feel they have achieved a good return from their use of the LMS – and, quite frankly, that's a good outcome. But 27 per cent didn't get much out of it and 36 per cent really don't have much idea.

So let's try and sum up these findings. Most medium to large organisations have an LMS installed. They are fundamentally using it to benefit their learners and they are capturing the benefits it brings to the L&D function as well. They have a remarkably low level of satisfaction with their current supplier, are under-using it for corporate benefit and most can't show a realistic return on their investment in the functionality.

IMC's Managing Director, Dirk Thissen, summed it up; 'This is a period of significant change and we have used this research data to verify that our development programme is truly aligned to the needs of our clients and prospects.'

Informal learning

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formal learning rather than informal learning. And from lots of material published recently, we know that formal learning typically only accounts for some 10 per cent of the skills gain; it's been a case of over-focusing on the area in which L&D has been most comfortable.

The fundamental concept of the traditional LMS is to push content to situations in which skills gaps have been identified. Its traditional premise is that it can provide the identification of a skills need, deliver those skills, monitor the intervention and record that skills transfer has taken place.

But informal learning relies on the pull of content at the point at which there is a need. To exist in this world, the LMS must be able to capture the fact that a skills gain has occurred informally; that's critical in order to keep the skills database up-to-date.

Social networking

The inclusion of collaboration, social networking, community of practice tools and so on (not to mention the task of re-engineering the functionality for a software-as-a-service architecture) is a critical development area for those LMS suppliers that are evolving. But is it really possible to retrofit all of the new functionality that is required, and will the product that results from this re-engineering be deployable?

There is a case that it's easier (and better) to add some management capability to the social networking tools rather than retrofit all of that functionality to the LMS giants. From a development point of view that argument has weight, but from the aspect of data migration, there's a completely different perspective.

Compliance

Compliance will always provide a case for the LMS – compliance needs evidence and the LMS provides it. Whether it's evidence

of training ('they completed the courses'), or evidence of performance ('they have the skills') may not matter – it's evidence.

The recent launch of InGenius by SkillSoft has brought this whole argument centre-stage – just where do social networking tools belong? There are three competing areas here; the first is the traditional (albeit evolving) LMS, the second is the enterprise 2.0 architecture (blogs, wikis, chat etc) and the third is social networking and collaboration. Trying to integrate them is a real challenge as the LMS fundamentally is a top-down approach, enterprise 2.0 is a facilitation approach and social networking is a bottom-up approach. As a colleague recently said to me, can you imagine setting up a friends list in the LMS!

Now if we restrict the LMS to its assessment-delivery-recording role, then there is a case for keeping both enterprise 2.0 and social networking separate. The LMS becomes a planning/ recording tool whilst the latter become skills development tools. Co-existence then becomes an issue of recording and data transfer.

The more we go down the track of encouraging informal learning and embedding learning into work, the greater the issue that skills assessment and recording become. And that makes the case for keeping these two areas separate.

But that makes an assumption that we actually need to keep these records. In the world of social networking and collaboration, trust becomes a critical issue and the community is the overseer of trust. When the value of an individual is based on their contribution to the community, and the community controls trust, do we really need those records?

Go to www.im-c.co.uk for a copy of the IMC report titled 'Learning Management Systems: are organisations making the most of them?'