

MEDIA REVIEWS

LMS Breakdown

Reviewed by Michael Feldman for *Training Media Review*

The purchase of a learning management system is a big investment chock-full of considerations. But once you've decided that an LMS is the solution, you're left with one decision: Which LMS is the right one for my company?

This is the first in a series of LMS reviews conducted by *Training Media Review*. It doesn't provide guidance on whether and how to use e-learning; plenty has been written on that already. Its goal is to help you discriminate among competing systems. No single product or solution is perfect for every business or activity. *TMR* hopes that by providing information and analysis on key areas, it can help you find a successful match between your organization and an LMS provider.

Here are the highlights of the *TMR* report on GeoLearning. The full report is available on the *TMR* Website

www.tmreview.com.

The company

GeoLearning, an important player in this fast-developing field, offers a powerful and comprehensive suite of products and services based on an application service provider

model of Web-delivered e-learning solutions. As an ASP, GeoLearning computers provide all of the storage, delivery, management, tracking, and transaction capacity required. Clients need only a Web browser. For more on this issue, see the accompanying article "ASP or OMDB?" in *TMR's* full report.

Founded in 1997, GeoLearning is headquartered in West Des Moines, Iowa, with a data and hosting center in Ottawa, Ontario, and sales offices throughout the United States. In five years, the company has developed and deployed an extensive, yet easy-to-use, e-learning delivery, tracking, and management system. Its client list includes SITEL Corporation, Berlitz, and National City Mortgage, as well as public-sector clients such as the U.S. federal court system and Department of Commerce.

GeoLearning is privately held. Frank Russell, a training veteran, is president and CEO. Those factors combined make GeoLearning an exception in the tech-dominated e-learning industry. They also help to explain why a small company has carved out a good business for itself and, as far as *TMR* has been able to determine, established a reputation for good service.

A course for LMS success

Any large or medium-sized organization has multiple training and learning needs that cut across hierarchy, work groups, geography, and time. Those needs can cross organizational boundaries to include present and potential customers and collaborators. Those disparate needs often go unmet or are addressed by a mixed bag of people, functions, and technologies. Now we have learning management systems. During the past decade, a group of companies has emerged with product lines designed to offer comprehensive and robust solutions to learning, training, and information diffusion needs.

LMSs aim to deliver, administer, track, and evaluate learning interactions on an organization-wide basis. All of them can facilitate delivery of client-produced or third-party content from a variety of formats. Some of them include content-creation tools of varying degrees of sophistication and add-ons such as virtual classrooms, e-commerce, and competency management software.

The degree to which an LMS will successfully meet your organization's learning and training needs depends heavily on these factors:

Instructional competence. The capacity of the system to promote successful interactions between learners and content and among learners, instructors, and content.

Ease of use. Transparency and the training curve necessary for implementation.

Administrative capability. Registration, tracking, curriculum management, and feedback mechanisms.

Service. Support after the sale by the provider.

Compatibility and interoperability. Receptivity of the system to client-created and third-party courses and content; its ability to pass data to and from existing enterprise software systems.

Pricing. Level of investment required to purchase a system that meets organizational training needs.

Vendor stability. Likelihood that the provider will stay in business long-term.

Product basics

Clients, both administrators and learners, need only a standard Web browser to access all of the administrative, display, and interactive capacities of the system. All flavors of Netscape and Internet Explorer are supported, as well as alternative browsers such as Opera. Depending on course content, some standard browser plug-ins, such as Shockwave and RealPlayer, may be required but are easily available for download and installation.

GeoExpress is a streamlined LMS and e-learning delivery platform for organizations with fewer than 2500 employees. The company says GeoExpress can usually be implemented in 30 days or less. The cost of the system is US\$49 per user.

The principal product, the GeoLearning Center, is a well-designed, 3-D representation of a physical four-story educational institution. It can be visually and functionally modified to fit the design style and administrative needs of the client company. The center includes easily accessible built-in tools for learning management on the part of learners and administrators: virtual classrooms, course catalogues, student records, class schedules, academic calendars, server- and Internet-based reference materials, and tests. Interactive communication options include chat, threaded discussion lists, live voice-duplexed sound, instant messaging, instant polls, and internal email. Those options enable content creators to build multiple paths of interaction between instructors and learners, as well as between learners.

If all of that sounds busy and hard to sort out, don't worry. One of the strongest features of the GeoLearning Center is the clean, intuitive 3-D interface. In the lobby, for example, learners can one-click on the information desk to get basic information about the center or see a map of

the entire complex, from which they can jump to any destination instantly.

In the main lobby is the learning management office, where instructors and administrators can access GeoLearning's tracking, records, and course administration controls as well as the basic, functional courseware authoring tool. The administrative capabilities of the system are powerful and easy to use and cover various forms of training, including asynchronous online courses, streaming Webcasts, and instructor-led interactions.

Navigation is straightforward, intuitive, and multi-tracked. In this function, as in several other key areas of content delivery, the product provides alternative routes to the same information—designed to appeal to learners with differing learning styles and orientations.

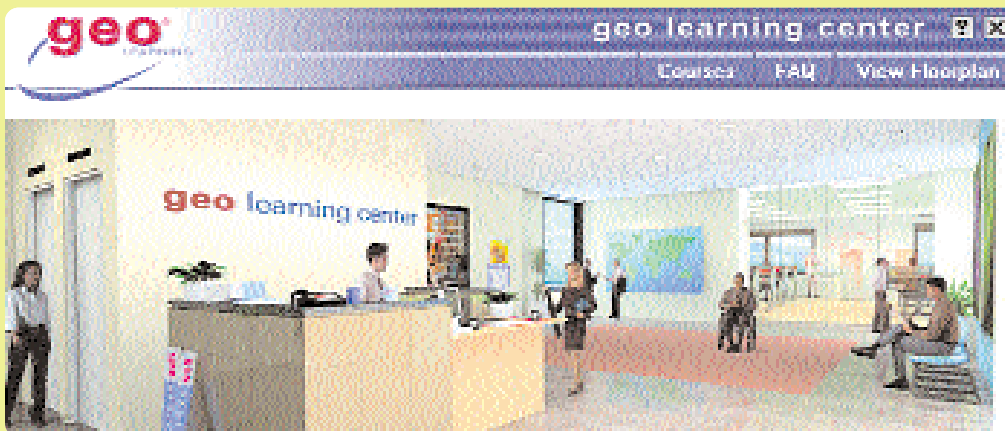
The second floor houses the registration desk and several virtual classrooms for the delivery of asynchronous Web-based courses. The customer determines, through the registration desk, which courses are available for enrollment. Courses can be arranged by area, level, or skill. Some courses are self-paced and available anytime, anywhere; others incorporate live Webcasts or instructor-led sessions.

On the third floor, users find a virtual classroom set up for live Webcasting of classes, meetings, and events. Using standard streaming Internet technology combined with voice- and text-based chat interactions, live events can feature video presentations, Q&A sessions, discussions, and optional features such as a shared whiteboard or software applications. Large classes or groups can split into smaller breakout sessions to discuss aspects of a presentation and then report back to the larger group.

That impressive capacity depends on the interaction of a variety of complicated and potentially troublesome technologies,

especially when delivered to different PC platforms over a variety of networks.

Noel Nicholas, of GeoLearning tech support, assured me that all functions, including video streams and voice chat, work fine over a 56Kbps modem connection, but I couldn't confirm this because I haven't observed an actual streaming presentation or learner interaction.



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Finally, the fourth floor has additional learning resources functioning as ancillary material to courses and presentations. The library has links to Internet resources and reference tools, arranged by category. Companies can customize those resources to include anything from the Library of Congress to specialized, subscription-only journals and technical libraries. A multimedia lab that's basically an FTP server area lets users download software applications, audio and video clips, large manuals or PDFs, and any other digital material a company may want to distribute to learners.

The fourth floor also holds a pair of commercial areas: a bookstore that can contain direct portals to online vendors such as Amazon.com or Barnes&Noble.com, and a store that similarly provides direct access to online vendors, selected by the client, offering CD-ROMs, videos, audiotapes, and other training materials.

Customization

The entire center can be customized according to customer needs and preferences, including corporate logos, graphics schemes, or an entire unique organization and visual style. For example, SITEL Corporation worked with GeoLearning to develop SITEL University, an online portal that employees from 18 countries use to access a wide variety of business skills and professional development training. As you will see, it has its own unique design.

Administrative functions

Another strong area in this LMS is its learner tracking and

report generation capabilities. Courses can be set up to input data directly, or instructors can do it quickly and easily through their Web browsers. Through ingenious use of checkboxes and pick-lists, you can filter information and generate a wide variety of lists, and reports can be quickly formatted for screen display or printing. Access to specific reports can be password protected.

You can generate student rosters for any one or all classes, class registrations for all employees, individual or total test results, course completion records, learner histories, survey results, item-by-item statistics for all tests, learner activity log reports, and student transcripts.

Customer service and satisfaction

Based on our direct experience and user input collected via a Web-based survey of GeoLearning users, the learning curve for this LMS seems smooth. The users we contacted have had a favorable experience with the system; the same is true of client learning coordinators. Keep in mind that our survey isn't statistically valid and users were referred to us by the vendor. Our control on any possible bias is our own experience with the system. For more details on customer reactions, see the full report at

◀ www.tmreview.com.

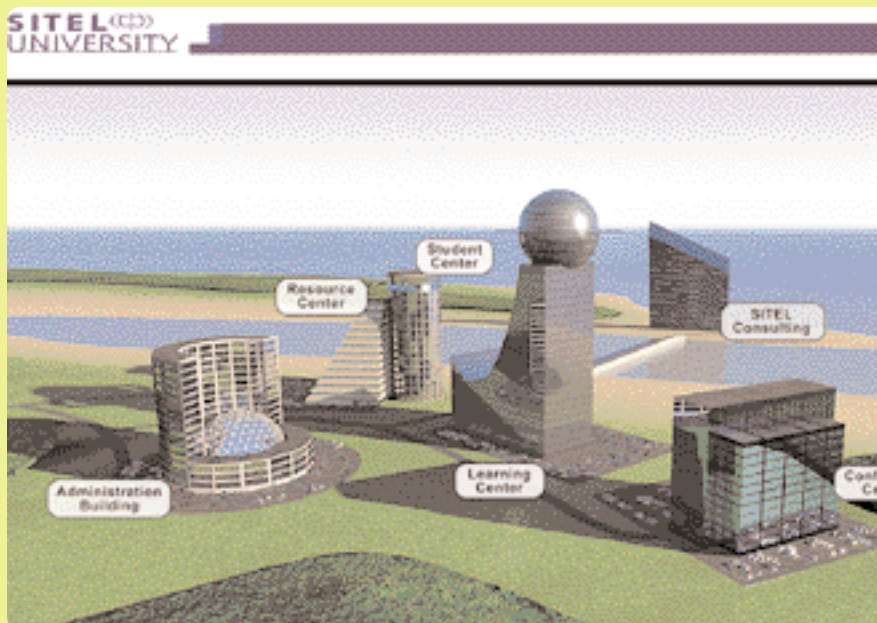
Compatibility

One final area to judge the utility and cost-effectiveness of an LMS is its ability to incorporate a variety of media and file formats and to "talk" to other enterprise software systems.

Most companies have a great deal of time, expertise, and money invested in legacy training materials (manuals, texts, videos, and courses). The ability to absorb such material can be a crucial factor in a purchasing decision. The GeoLearning LMS scores high, with an ability to use almost every format available.

GeoLearning Center is compliant with the two major standards for online courseware, AICC and SCORM. It can also play content that isn't compliant. Under current courseware standards, plug-and-play content is rare. For more information on standards and the GeoLearning products, ▶ www.geolearning.com.

TMR's full report also has a quick guide to the competing standards and a full list of GeoLearning's compatibility with e-learning products and file formats.



GeoLearning Center

★★★	Ease of Implementation
★★★★1/2	Presentation
★★★★1/2	Production quality
★★★★★	Ease of use
★★★★★	Value of purpose
★★★★1/2	Value for the money
★★★★★	Documentation
★★★★1/2	Overall rating

Pricing

LMSs are by definition enterprise systems: software that serves an entire organization. They're complex systems that operate around the clock and are a major, long-term investment. Pricing for the GeoLearning Center LMS and several add-on components is shown in the full report under "Basic Vendor Information."

All prices are annual leases and include application service provider (ASP) hosting services, maintenance, and 24-hour, seven-days-a-week technical support. The actual pricing of add-on modules can be substantially discounted depending on the customer's LMS investment.

Recommendation

An organization's first decision about an LMS is whether to make a substantial commitment to e-learning. The next is whether to forgo the LMS installation and instead pursue an ASP. Aside from all of the other pros and cons, the early stage of e-learning may argue for the ASP path as a prudent way to deal with uncertainty. With few exceptions, organizations don't have a clear or complete vision yet of how e-learning can help them. An ASP can be a starting point with less risk than a full installation.

On the other hand, the ASP choice means you're buying a service, not a product. You're crucially dependent on an outside party for an important function. Although the training world is rife with horror stories about LMS installations run amok, you end up in control of the system. If you take the ASP route for an LMS, we strongly recommend that you ask for a client list from any vendor you're serious about and contact several about the vendor's reliability and responsiveness. Because it's privately held, GeoLearning's finances aren't disclosed, and potential customers have no direct way to measure its financial strength. The company doesn't figure prominently in analysts' discussions of dominant players in the LMS market. But private companies, which don't have to live and die on quarterly results, can avoid some of the traps of fast-growth strategies.

In the unsettled, highly competitive field of learning management systems, GeoLearning stands out. It has a comprehensive product line with a well-thought-out design and interface leading to functional transparency and ample ease of use. It also appears to provide reliable service. Perhaps the elegance and functionality of its design is due to the company's strong background in the learning rather than the "e" side of e-learning. Its corporate philosophy of making the delivery system as transparent as possible places the emphasis on the content and interactions, where it belongs.

Contact


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RATINGS KEY

★★★★★	Outstanding
★★★★1/2	Very good
★★★	Good
★★1/2	Above average
★★	Average
★1/2	Below average
★	Poor