

# SUPPLIER SAVVY



## LMS and e-learning content vendors: Can't we all just get along?

By Dave Egan

Without argument, e-learning holds enormous potential for learners, their companies, and those who sell learning content, technology, and tools. But there's a dirty little secret: Getting Web-based courses to work elegantly within learning management systems can be time-consuming, frustrating, and expensive. Forget the brochureware; we're a long way from the plug-and-play stage.

Even the biggest names in content and LMSs sometimes leave their clients struggling to access and utilize the e-learning courses they bought the LMSs to manage. The fact that an LMS and an e-learning course comply with industry

standards such as AICC or SCORM doesn't ensure that the content will work as expected. When customers describe the problem to the vendor, they get back finger-pointing, not solutions. Everyone loses, especially the customer who signed the purchase order and the company that missed an opportunity to improve performance.

Content vendors, LMS vendors, and clients had better learn to get along. Our livelihoods are riding on it.

Savvy customers are beginning to work closely with suppliers to ensure that the LMS they purchased will launch, track, and manage their cours-

es—proprietary and off-the-shelf. By forcing LMS and content vendors to get in the same room, lock the doors, and hammer out a plan to guarantee interoperability, users are seeing positive results and shorter time to true interoperability. They're also starting to realize that the days of paying a cut rate to their Uncle Harry for "custom courseware" are long gone; they'll only be disappointed when the courseware falls apart. But making courseware and LMSs interoperable doesn't happen by itself. All sides must come together to make compatibility the norm.

Industry standards such as AICC and SCORM are only partly the answer. On one hand, they're immensely important, and they bring LMS and content vendors into the same ballpark. In fact, customers should limit their courseware and LMS purchases to products that comply fully with the most recent versions of the standards.

There are three inherent shortcomings, however, in AICC and SCORM. One, they're recommendations—not fixed, rock-solid specifications such as the IEEE standards that govern the data going over network cables. So, some vendors don't comply.

Two, the standards are broad and soft in some spots. Therefore, they're open to wide variation. Two vendors can build their products to comply with AICC and SCORM standards and still end up with products that don't work together. It's similar to two people interpreting the color blue differently, one as sky blue and the other as ocean blue.

Three, standards are historical. They propose guidelines for established processes and capabilities. Innovations such as Web-based simulations fall entirely outside the standards—to say nothing of new learning content ideas such as noncourseware objects and mobile learning.

### Last resort

Those shortcomings in interoperability tempt customers to resort to single-vendor, vertically integrated e-learning solutions even if they limit customers to the courseware that the particular vendor offers. That's a narrow solution that may ease some headaches in the short-term but severely limit learning choices over the long-term. That's like having to buy all of your food from the convenience store next door: Selection will be simple, but you won't get the variety you need. To gain access to the rapidly expanding world of learning opportunities, compa-

content provider-LMS relationships where possible and appreciate the complexity of the interoperability task. Moreover, customers need to pay fair market value for content that has been tested and proven to work.

### Making it work

How will that look in real life? Here's what we propose.

LMS vendors need to swing open their doors and offer their software for testing. For example, they can create courseware-testing centers on the Web. Courseware vendors, custom-content providers, and

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nies need LMSs that play any content regardless of mode, source, or brand. And content vendors must work to ensure compatibility with the LMS that a customer chooses.

So there's consensus: Content providers and LMS providers need to work harder to get along. Content vendors need to be fully accountable for working with their target LMSs. They also need to seek any resources to that goal that the LMS vendor offers, including guidelines and testing facilities. The content suppliers need to force the issue of interoperability with LMS suppliers that aren't extending a hand.

LMS vendors need, in turn, to reach out to their preferred content suppliers and provide the appropriate guidelines and facilities. Customers need to foster

other courseware authors can upload course files to those sites and see how the content runs. They can see detailed diagnostic reports and event log files, and have ready access to support, diagnostic, and development consultants if needed.

To give courseware developers a fighting chance to get it right the first time, LMS vendors should provide detailed, open guidelines so that they can optimize the content in fine detail to work seamlessly and elegantly with any and all versions of a vendor's LMS.

LMS vendors should pick their top three or four content partners and nail down any and all interoperability problems so that they don't crop up on customer sites. Saving customers headaches will improve sales for LMS and content providers alike.

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LMS vendors should assign a senior executive to interoperability. It's a big job that will get done only through long-term vigilance enforced by senior executives who have made it a priority. At my company, for example, that particular buck stops with me.

Be an aggressive advocate of standards. Don't just read the articles and follow along as a spectator. Work with the standards groups and committees up close. Demand that the people who would sell you learning infrastructure or content adhere to a set of standards and best practices that help ensure that the stuff works. And most important, get your hands dirty in interoperability showdowns like PlugFest.

Interoperability is hard work, but we ignore it at our peril. Fortunately, e-learning's early adopters are generally convinced that its benefits outweigh the toil. But early adopters always have a little more stamina than the average customer. For the e-learning market to mature fully, we need to guarantee prospective customers that deploying e-learning really won't be a hassle going forward. If you had to adjust the chemistry of your gasoline before your car would work, wouldn't you rather just take a train?

Cisco chief John Chambers famously predicted that e-learning would make email traffic on the Net look like a rounding error. So far, not quite. E-learning looks like the rounding error. But many e-learning players—including me—are convinced that we share an opportunity to make Chambers's prediction come true. Every day, we need to work to remove the only obstacle that could foil his prediction: lack of interoperability. We can all overcome this challenge—together.

*Dave Egan is vice president, Content Strategy Group, for THINQ Learning Solutions, a leading provider of learning management systems, including the THINQ TrainingServer® Learning Management System; dave.egan@thinq.com.*