

DELIVERING TRAINING



By Paula Ketter

TECHNOLOGY has changed the way learning is delivered, and that means that it also has changed the expectations of what a learning management system (LMS) can and should do.

"Buyers are no longer willing to endure 14-month implementation cycles and endless maintenance costs," says Adam Miller, CEO of Cornerstone OnDemand. "Customers expect LMSs to be easily deployed, to have a single interface for seamless access to content from multiple modalities, and to have the flexibility to deal with a continuously changing organizational structure, configuration of workflows, and content availability."

Michelle Newell, senior product marketing director for Oracle HCM, agrees, and adds that demand for disconnected learning and the delivery of measurable outcomes are crucial components of today's LMS.

"Demand for disconnected learning has increased as the cost of delivering learning from an office or physical classroom has continued to rise and as more organizations have workers who frequently travel or work from remote locations," says Newell. "There also is a trend toward delivering improvements to the budgeting, cost tracking, and reporting functionality of LMS software."

Expectations of what an LMS should do are rising.

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These new capabilities will increase an administrator's ability to plan, track, and report training expenses for both budgeted and actual costs."

User-friendly systems

On-demand learning, according to Mary Keith Resseau, a learning technology consultant and instructional designer based in Atlanta, Georgia, begs for a LMS that is transparent to the end user.

"If it is too complicated or time-consuming for users to find and launch the information they need when they need it, we've lost them."

Many customers want an LMS with all the bells and whistles on a customized system, but they do not want to employ the information technology (IT) department to support it.

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"As a consumer, I long for an LMS that is flexible and configurable, but doesn't require the support of an entire IT department," says Resseau. "The last LMS I implemented took an internal staff of seven to support. Not many businesses have the spare resources for that kind of support. A learning department's core competency should be employee development."

The current trend also favors performance management, according to Don Cook of Learn.com.

"More people are looking for an integrated solution that has LMS (LCMs), learning content management system, and performance management functionality in one solution," he says. "Many companies are using the LMS for change management and not just training."

Challenges

"LMSs have matured, so it is increasingly difficult for suppliers to differentiate themselves based on pure LMS features," says Newell. "To have their products viewed as strategic initiatives, suppliers must be able to articulate a long-term talent management strategy that meets several market needs. The strategy must consist of vendor viability, product implementation capabilities, and a product roadmap."

Chris Howard, principle analyst of Bersin and Associates, agrees that no supplier possesses an overwhelming market share. He adds that LMSs are being expected to deal with employee performance issues.

"LMS vendors are being forced to deal with the convergence of learning and other HR systems (particularly performance management), as well as the growing requirement for on-demand systems," Howard says.

"They face the ongoing issue of customer satisfaction with an ever-increasing demand for features and integration options as training technology and Internet tools grow and evolve."

Talent management

Succession management tools are becoming a must-have for companies wanting to achieve best practices in employee development, according to Miller.

Howard agrees, adding that LMSs are being expected to fill more and more roles in training and development.

"Learning and talent management convergence is taking place very quickly, and most LMS buyers today are already asking for some statement of direction, integration, or product functionality in performance management," Howard explains. "The performance management vendors, by contrast, are building and partnering with LMS vendors. The two business functions overlap in many ways. We believe we are at the beginning of a major convergence that will take three to five years to complete."

Incorporating talent management into LMSs is becoming a standard, Newell says. "Talent management components, such as recruiting, performance man-

The Ever-Changing World of LCMSs

The expectations of learning content management systems are outpacing the functionality of the systems, according to some suppliers.

“In the LCMS space, customers are still struggling with return-on-investment and scalability,” says Ed Cohen, chief technology officer for Plateau Systems. “Customers are looking for LCMS products to become true content management systems and to provide security and scalability.”

According to Chris Howard, principle analyst of Bersin and Associates, the LCMS market is divided into these broad segments:

- rapid e-learning systems that store

content and provide tools and templates for rapid content development

- team content development systems that enable teams to share content, manage workflow, and collaborate over large distances
- asset-based enterprise content management systems that enable organizations to share, reuse, version, update, and publish content to multiple formats in a highly scalable and efficient manner.

“The LCMS is still a fertile area for new research and development, and organizations have found that traditional content management systems do not provide all the features needed for effective content management,” Howard says.

agement, and succession planning, are incomplete without a robust integration with learning management,” she adds. “Learning must become integrated into the natural business processes a worker undertakes.”

Future of LMSs

Changes to LMSs and LCMSs are happening at a rapid pace. Technology and the demands placed on workplace learning and performance professionals to integrate learning into employees’ daily routines are forcing suppliers to buck the status quo.

“The LMS of the future will manage an employee from onboarding to well after the employee has left the business,” says Ed Cohen, chief technology officer for Plateau Systems. “The HR world has a well-defined area of what it manages and, while that information is managed extremely well today, businesses need to implement a more extensive process that focuses on leveraging and reusing the data collected by the HR system and applying business decisions to optimize the process.”

Newell says that the LMS of the future will provide the right amount of learning to the right audience at the right time.

“Participants will be in charge of their learning, with great assistance from system automation,” she explains. “Business rulers will be easily configurable, so administration is minimal. Content will be available to learners through multiple channels, while content management is centralized. Events and triggers will ensure that workers learn efficiently and effectively, without needing to seek the training they need. The system will push training to them as appropriate.”

The perfect LMS system, Howard says, would have built-in tools for web-casting, podcasting, template-based development, and management of instructor-led training.

“It would be highly configurable to make the user interface very easy to operate, and it would have basic features to support blogging, discussion rooms, and other tools used in blended-learning programs. The ideal LMS would be an integrated corporate platform for training, e-learning, and other forms of knowledge sharing.” **TD**

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