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Why LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS *Fail*

By W. Duncan Welder IV

Even though the learning management software (LMS) industry is still young, many corporate training departments are already migrating to their second, third and even fourth system. That's not a good sign. The dissatisfaction and subsequent desire to switch are often not related to the software but rather to its implementation. Understanding the needs of learners, organizing training data to meet a company's business needs and establishing governance around learning management are essential to sustaining long-term learning management solutions. Next to a company's e-mail system and its intranet, an LMS has the greatest scope of impact. Almost every employee touches the LMS at some point, making it critical that such a system deliver optimum results.

7 REASONS WHY IMPLEMENTATIONS FAIL

The success of a LMS is determined by how effectively it is used to support a comprehensive learning operating model. Organizations that have defined their learning operating model and the role the LMS plays within it are more likely to avoid the following mistakes.

Buying in a Vacuum: The most common reason why systems do not meet expectations is that they are selected without regard to the larger context. The software may meet the needs of one site or function, but not other groups who may have different learning, management and reporting needs. Start by establishing a common philosophy of talent development, a corporate learning culture and comprehensive training model that subsumes everyone's goals.

"A LMS is not equal to a training program," says Ben Shanks, training manager for INVISTA, which administers

training globally in multiple languages through a centralized LMS. "The LMS can provide a convenient medium for worldwide delivery and measurement of training, but it does not solve the problems of program structure and administration; development of content; risk mitigation in regard to regulations and compliance; or measures to ensure training is effective, relevant and timely."

Buying Wrong: When companies are dissatisfied with a system or are operating with multiple systems, it's usually because the decision-making process did not involve all the necessary stakeholders. For example, IT groups frequently choose the LMS for its ability to fit into the corporate architecture rather than for its ability to meet the needs of training. It's very tempting to make an executive decision in isolation when presented with attractive LMS features without consulting training professionals with diverse needs or asking the right questions. That's why it's important never to buy a system with a myopic, top-down viewpoint. It is critical to understand the expectations, goals and needs of training professionals at all level of the organization.

"We took both a centralized and a site approach to defining their needs," Shanks says. "From a global perspective, we evaluated our exposure to risk in the areas of commercial compliance and environmental, health and safety."

Getting Burned: A common reason why companies operate with antiquated software is because they customized it so heavily on purchase that they removed themselves from the upgrade track. An LMS should be highly configurable, but if it has been heavily customized, it may not be possible to integrate the next release or upgrade without reapplying the customizations or destroying what makes the system unique. "We try to avoid

customization whenever possible,” Shanks says. “Until the need arises for us to utilize the system beyond its current capability, there is no need to add bells and whistles.”

Bigger Is Not Better: In the absence of a decision matrix that prioritizes needs and defines the required system functionality, it’s tempting to buy one of everything. “Before you choose an LMS, identify your deal-breakers and must-haves,” Shanks recommends. “If you latch on to what looks like a great LMS without fully understanding what you need, you could end up with unnecessary functionality while missing some critical features. Remember the old adage, ‘don’t go to the grocery store when you’re hungry.’”

Lack of Communication: It’s crucial that employees know what’s coming down the line and how expectations will change. Will supervisors become responsible for monitoring their employees’ training progress? Will employees be expected to initiate participation in a course rather than being tapped on the shoulder as in the past? Will employees be expected to train online during their regular work shifts, rather than getting eight hours of overtime pay each quarter for attending classroom training on weekends? It’s important to anticipate potential issues so that targeted communications can be issued to explain the reasons for change, overcome objections and get the work force excited about the new system’s efficiencies.

“One measurement of success is what happens when employees log into the system,” Shank says. “If they don’t see their training plan and completion history in their native language, or if those items are inaccurate, they may not be able to use the system as well, which leads to frustration and inefficiencies.”

Rushing It: One of the considerations in implementing a complex system is whether it should be rolled out all at once or in phases. A phased approach allows people easy access to a relatively simple system so they can develop maturity, gain confidence and have early successes before they are thrown into a cockpit of complex functionality and expected to fly. Large organizations in particular benefit from carefully considering a limited rollout so they can learn from mistakes and adopt best practices before they take the plunge.

Other considerations are whether to migrate existing training history to the new system and whether to tie the LMS into HR information systems. Organizations that don’t give careful thought to such matters will waste money as they stumble through the rollout. If they also forget to communicate and market the system internally, the implementation will stall and the system may never be completely deployed.

“Have a realistic view of the timeline, goals and resources needed for implementation,” Shanks advises.

“Communicate clearly to get buy-in from company and site leadership. Before we implemented a global LMS, many of our sites had their own systems and their own way of managing and tracking training. We had to gain buy-in for a centralized approach by communicating the cost savings and efficiency advantages. Now, after some initial growing pains, people can see that the centralized LMS has much greater functionality and helps business and site leadership share knowledge and learn from each other.”

Not Looking Ahead: Even companies that do a good job identifying their current training needs and selecting system features accordingly sometimes forget to look a year or two down the road at prospective enterprise initiatives. Make sure the system is configurable, flexible and scalable.

An LMS is more than just software. As a tool for an overall learning infrastructure, it is an enterprise-wide system integrated with the organization’s daily processes and procedures. For this reason, it’s important to select a vendor that is a good fit for the corporate culture and to forge a strong partnership so that the system will be sustainable for the long term.

TAKING CONTROL

No software—learning management or otherwise—is a silver bullet for existing problems. What learning management software can do, however, is support other training processes provided they are well defined. It can make operations within a total learning operating model more efficient and contribute to the evolution of the training function.

As part of a comprehensive learning philosophy, the LMS is an effective tool if developed out of an accurate understanding of your training needs. Take the time up front to define goals, create and communicate plans and develop governance. Additionally, market the system as a benefit to employees and help them see the value of taking control of their own learning.

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