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LEARNING

Find out how learning management products can help you

Inside Learning Management

The world of learning management is a complex place – it can be challenging to even know where to start. We at Limestone Learning Solutions would like to share some of the things we've learned from our experiences that we hope will help you in your journey. If this guide leaves you with questions, please feel free to get in touch with us – we'd be happy to help you out.

If you're responsible for the ongoing learning for a department, a division or an entire organization, sooner or later you're going to need to look at managing both your learning content itself and the methods by which it's accessed by learners. Learning management software products have a wide variety of features (see below for more about these), but at a minimum they can help you manage and deliver your e-learning courses, analyze learner progress through displays and reports, or both.

Once in place, the benefits of using a learning management product are clear: it gives structure to your organization's training, which provides efficiency and cost savings to all aspects of its design, development, implementation and management. In addition, a learning management product can let your learners access learning material from virtually any computer at any time, so training can be available when it's most convenient for their work environment. Whether your organization is a global enterprise or a local operation, a learning management product can provide power, simplicity and scalability.

What are the options?

Learning management software products are generally classified into three main groups: Learning Management Systems (LMS), Learning Content Management Systems (LCMS) and customized solutions. It's important to note that where once these were clearly different products with different purposes and users, the lines of distinction have become blurred. Products have features that cross the boundary lines and the names LMS and LCMS are sometimes used interchangeably.

QUOTE TO NOTE

"Over 65% of organizations now have a learning management system (LMS) in place, with many of them utilizing more than one LMS. Learning management systems are now regularly considered mission-critical to the long-term success of most organizations, extending beyond the learning domain to include the convergence of learning, performance management, staffing, certification, providing just-in-time education to customers, providing instant access to learning content through 24/7 learning portals, and ultimately measuring the effects of all types of learning to help meet organizational goals and objectives."

Brandon Hall

Products can usually be accessed through the provider's servers and used entirely through the internet (often called 'managed' or 'hosted' solutions) or installed on your organization's computer network.

Let's take a look at the basics for these three groups.

Learning Management System (LMS)
We like to think of LMS products as the 'human resources'– driven learning management product type. In fact, two of the most recognized providers of LMS products are Human Resources Information Systems (HRIS) providers SABA® and Oracle/PeopleSoft. An LMS product manages learners, keeping track of their performance across all types of training activities within an organization. It also automates the administration of training events, managing the addition, deployment and tracking of learning content used for training administration and performance management purposes. LMS products are typically used by training directors and managers, instructors and administrators.

LMS products include functionality for searching and browsing course catalogs, launching courses, registering learners, presenting learning paths and competency mapping, tracking learner progress and assessments, certification and compliance and delivering reports. Some LMS products have add–ons for features like e–commerce, which allows you to charge for training courses and track revenue online. Many LMS providers will customize their basic products to meet your particular needs.

If you plan to develop e–learning courses yourself, you should know that many LMS products manage and deliver courses but don't allow for course authoring. E–learning courses hosted in the LMS are developed separately using a software tool for course authoring. Most course-authoring software generates SCORM– or AICC–compliant courses that can be imported into most LMS products. Some LMS providers, such as SumTotal®, offer their own course authoring software as an add–on for their product. There are also course authoring software providers like Articulate® that offer LMS functionality as an add–on.

Learning Content Management System (LCMS)
We like to think of LCMS products as the 'training development'–driven learning management product type. LCMS products are specialized types of content management systems used to manage chunks of learning content – usually called learning objects – for the purpose of creating training courses and programs within an organization. Learning objects can include text–based content as well as different

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COURSE AUTHORING TOOLS

Although an LCMS has more robust content management capabilities, an alternate course development solution is to use an e-learning authoring tool to create stand-alone courses. Courses created in this manner can be delivered in a variety of ways, for example imported into an LMS product, hosted on a website or delivered on a CD or DVD.

Most authoring tools allow you to add animation, audio and video while some are also capable of creating tests/evaluations and tracking results. The final result and the level of skill required to use these tools ranges from template-based and entry level to highly customizable and complex.

Content created in authoring tools can be imported into most LMS and LCMS products and content can usually be exported out of an LCMS to be used elsewhere, but it may not be editable. Regardless of whether you use an LCMS or an authoring tool to create training content, be aware that revisions to course content must almost always be made in the source authoring tool.

types of media like images, animation, audio and video. LCMS products are typically used by content developers, instructional designers, subject matter experts and training managers.

LCMS products include functionality for creating, collecting, storing, searching and re-using learning objects. In most cases, the learning objects can be used to develop content to be delivered in different formats, like via computer, in a classroom, or as self-study material. LCMS products also include delivery functionality, which allows the content to be assembled and presented to learners online in an interface that includes navigation controls, tests created from question pools and other utilities. Within a course, the LCMS may be able to function dynamically; that is, adapt to the user's learning needs based on the way they answer questions or make choices during the learning.

Many LCMS products have grown beyond their initial learning content management focus to include functionality traditionally associated with LMS products, like user tracking and reporting, learning paths, skill gap analysis and even management of classroom sessions. Like LMS products, many providers will help customize their basic solutions to meet your needs.

Custom Solution

A custom solution is simply that: a solution that's customized for your organization and its specific needs. There are both benefits and things to be aware of when considering a customized solution.

Customized solutions ensure you get exactly the functionality you need and can make it simpler to integrate with other tools/products you're already using. You can also avoid workarounds or unnecessary complications that might occur when requesting customizations for off-the-shelf LMS or LCMS products.

Be aware that a custom solution can come with a hefty price tag and extended development and/or installation timeline considerably beyond a standard product. Look for providers that can build your custom solution on top of their well-established engine to mitigate this. Custom solutions require a certain amount of discipline to stay on track with the implementation – when the sky's the limit it can be tempting to include many bells and whistles that may not be necessary. This functionality 'scope creep' can definitely drive up the price. If you're considering a custom solution, be sure to ask the provider questions about scalability for future growth (your needs may change over time)

and the ability to export your information if you decide to go in a different direction in the future.

The planning process

We can't stress enough that planning ahead is a crucial step when deciding to purchase or migrate to a new LMS/LCMS. Some upfront legwork will make your decision-making process much easier and will provide you with a clear picture of your organizational requirements. It will also ensure a smooth transition into the new environment for your organization. Here are some of the key steps we believe are crucial to your planning:

o **Communicate**
  Create a communication plan up front and provide it to your organization to help get early buy-in. Continue to provide communication updates throughout the process to relevant parties, and at appropriate opportunities communicate with employees to build awareness and excitement about the new product.

o **Build a team of champions**
  You'll be fighting an uphill battle to adopt a new learning management process if you don't have supporters within your organization that will champion the process at every opportunity. Your support team should include an executive sponsor to support your decisions and provide the funding needed for the solution investment, other stakeholders (training, IT, administration and HR) who will be directly involved with the process, and committee members and union representatives who represent the opinions of employee groups.

o **Figure out what you need from the new tool**
  To be able to determine the best product for you, you need to think about what you need the tool to do and how it will function and be supported in your environment, as well as what sort of budget you have. Limestone Learning Solutions has developed a worksheet that can help you with this – request it here.

o **Involve IT**
  Determine administration and IT requirements and responsibilities for the potential product and discuss these with those responsible for the tasks. You need to ensure your organization is ready to take on the IT and administration of the product, or prepared to

make technology and people investments to make it happen.

o **Create a high-level training plan**

People who will interact directly with the product will need training on how they can use it for their particular needs. Be sure to document all these individuals as well as how they'll be interacting with the product, so you're ready to work with the solution provider to get them trained.

o **Be aware**

The difference between a potential disaster and a small bump in the road can all come down to being aware and prepared. It's important to determine the risks, impacts and potential solutions for the implementation of any product you're considering.

o **Project manage your installation and launch**

Once a solution decision has been made, assign a project manager to create a project plan and timeline to ensure the installation and training is on budget, on time and milestones are met.

Decision time

Once you've done your homework and have a clear picture of what your requirements are it's time to make a shortlist of products that might work for you.

o If you need to integrate with an existing corporate HRIS, require extensive tracking and reporting, an LMS could be a good fit for you.

o If you have an internal training development team, or plan to build one in the future, or if you need to train multiple audiences on the same content in different ways, an LCMS might be better suited to your needs.

o If managing learners and managing content are equally necessary for you, look at an LMS tool that has LCMS/course authoring add-on functionality, or an LCMS that includes learner management.

Whichever direction you decide to go, we recommend that you don't rush your decision-making process. One of the best ways to find out if a product will be right for your organization is to take it for a test drive. Most providers offer free trials of their products, and have extensive information on their websites that can be explored in a no-pressure situation. Current users are also a great resource. Look for official and unofficial product forums and blogs and you'll get the inside scoop from those who have had time to use the product in the real world.

Many organizations underestimate the time it takes to create and manage their learning content. If you have a limited internal team and limited time to get training created and organized, you may find that you don't have the bandwidth to create courses yourself, at least at the outset. We've found that organizations have a smoother journey if they start by working with a trusted partner to help develop courses. This allows you to ease into course development by maintaining and updating the initial courses, then developing new courses over time. Limestone Learning Solutions is a full-service learning company and we can help you with your learning needs - please contact us for more information.

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