

IN A MUDDLE OVER MOODLE?

Engineers Ireland CPD Accreditation Executive Catherine Sullivan charts the benefits and pitfalls of investing in a learning management system.

Given the swift pace of change in technology and compliance matters, today, more than ever, engineers have a challenge keeping pace with developments in their chosen field. Thankfully, in recent years the practice of ‘blended learning’ (e-learning, face-to-face instruction, group and individual study, and mentoring) has gathered pace too. In Ireland, among leading Continuing Professional Development (CPD) employers a growing number have invested, or are looking to invest in learning management systems (LMS) recognising that computer software platforms can offer a valuable solution for HR and training professionals.

What is a learning management system?

A learning management system is generally web-based. It ranges from basic software that manages the recording of training completed to more sophisticated packages that encapsulate the entire learning experience, such as performance management and multi-rater assessments (e.g., 360-degree feedback, which is employee development feedback that comes from all around the employee including subordinates, peers, and managers as well as self-assessment and even customers). The appeal of an LMS is its ability to cater for instructors, learners, and administrators. Instructors can be provided with methods of creating content and then ‘delivering’ it in a user-friendly manner, with aspects of the software enabling the monitoring of learner participation as well as assessing learner performance. The learner, provided they are computer competent, can plan, access and manage the pace of their own learning. They can have their knowledge tested periodically. Learners can also be exposed to features such as discussion forums, wikis (collaborative web pages) and on-line (or web) conferencing. Depending on the profile of the learner, before using an LMS they may need some PC skills training (such as ECDL).

Managers or administrators can use an LMS for scheduling training and invoicing vendors, as well as tracking learners through learning events.

Big investment, big returns?

Today, an LMS is usually capable of supporting a variety of delivery modes including online, instructor-led, self-paced and collaborative learning, making them suitable for adaptation to various adult learning styles. A major attraction for LMS users is that they can automate time-consuming and cumbersome processes such as learner enrolment, registration and record updating. Additional features often offer access to transcripts, curriculum schedules and an array of report creation functions. Evaluation and assessment capabilities mean an LMS can be scrutinised from a benefit-of-investment point of view. If learners can learn better, faster and right-first-time, the return on costs can quickly become evident. In addition, the web-based nature of most of these systems offers ‘any time’ access, promoting self-learning and allowing for classes regardless of the particular shift a worker might be on. The real-time aspect of the systems are useful to those working in regulated industries, such as the pharmaceutical sector, where current compliance and certification is essential. Aside from what might today be regarded as ‘standard’ features, the systems are evolving characteristics driven by the needs of businesses, many of which are in the engineering sector. Fast becoming part and parcel of any worthwhile LMS are features such as:

- auto-enrollment (enrolling learners in courses when required according to predefined criteria, such as role competencies or health and safety laws);
- integration with performance tracking and talent management systems;
- planning tools to identify knowledge and skill gaps at

LMS Platforms

Learning management systems are available through many different vendors including:

Open Source	Commercial
Moodle: www.moodle.org	Skillport (Skillsoft): http://www.skillsoft.com/products/lms/skillport.asp
SAKAI: www.sakaiproject.org	ANGEL Learning: http://www.angelllearning.com/
ILIAS: www.ilias.org	Blackboard: http://www.blackboard.com/us/index.bbb
dotLRN: www.dotlrn.org	ECollege: http://www.ecollege.com/index.learn

- departmental and at individual level;
- comprehensive curriculum-training requirements at an individual and organisational level, allowing for smoother promotion paths and cross-skilling; and,
- grouping learners according to demographic units (geographic region, product line, business size, etc.).

So why would organisations implement an LMS:

According to a study by US-based Bersin Associates (see Figure 1), the main reasons organisations purchase an LMS are to:

- manage training administration;
- manage and deploy learning;
- consolidate training information;
- align training processes; and,
- implement skill and competency management procedures.

LMS in Ireland

It is clear that in terms of usage, the world of higher education seems to be leading the way. Dr Eugene O’Loughlin (Lecturer in Computing in the National College of Ireland) is an enthusiastic believer stating that: “ Learning management systems have indeed made the management of students, lecturers and curricula easier. The open source platform Moodle is the dominant LMS model in academic institutions across the country but others are in use.”

Hot on the heels of academia, come multinationals and leading indigenous employers for whom managing learning is rapidly moving up the agenda now that the trial-and-error phase of recent years has passed. Dr. O’Loughlin says the “use of open source platforms is becoming more and more acceptable in industry”.

However private industry has additional requirements to educational bodies including the ability to measure performance, develop talented ‘high potential’ individuals and support blended learning.

The fact that performance management capabilities may be available on an LMS does not mean that they should be launched as a starting point for a new system roll-out. Ciaran O’Connell (e-learning executive with ELSOL) explains that “although some open source platforms have performance management capabilities they are not advanced enough for enterprise requirements”. He cautions that learning processes need to be established before an LMS can be implemented successfully.

“The when, where and how of learning, as well as a clear staff development policy must be well-communicated to all staff to ensure people are engaged”. For performance management to be the vibrant heart of any LMS, management must first sit down and scrutinise each role within the organisation.

By breaking down roles requirements into competencies each individual can be assigned training, using the LMS, that is a “best fit” to assist them complete duties more effectively (be it e-learning or classroom-based learning).

Again, an LMS can record assessment results and these can be factored into an appraisal. In this manner, the contribution of training can be measured against the individual’s actual performance.

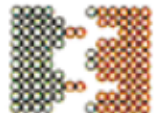
“The investment required to develop or procure competence modules relevant to an organisation can be substantial so using an open source platform to manage training while developing work practices and learning culture makes piloting the system at a low cost achievable and advisable,” according to Ciaran O’Connell. “A step-by-step approach whereby performance management is implemented some time

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(12 to 18 months) after the initial launch of the system can allow the organisational culture and work culture to evolve with the LMS.” Although the use of an LMS is increasingly common in multinational organisations, there is a growing uptake too in some leading, medium-sized enterprises in Ireland. One such company at the implementation stage is Creganna Medical Devices in Galway, which provides a complete range of solutions to assist medical device and life science companies get products from concept to production. Barry Davis, senior training and development co-ordinator has belief in Creganna’s LMS project as he trusts that upon implementation it will “accelerate the essential monitoring tasks in order to achieve realignment of training resources while supporting growing staff numbers with lower administration effort.”

Implementation

As with all new systems, challenges and barriers can be encountered. Very often starting the project with a realistic expectation of what you need to achieve is half the battle. Perhaps the greatest challenge to implementation is actually customising the system itself. As an administrative tool, the system must meet business requirements. Features such as reports, tracking, security, course catalogues, programmes and the user interface may have to be customised to reflect the organisation and its culture.

Customisation can be successfully realised by reflecting all stakeholders’ priorities and processes when developing the system via project research and focus group testing throughout the duration of the project. It seems then, with an LMS, as with other methods of training “content is king”.

The fact that an LMS can deploy, manage and record learning effectively does not guarantee its quality. The quality and relevance of modules must still be monitored for effectiveness for any LMS to gain acceptance. Otherwise, remember, users can just switch off. ☺



Catherine Sullivan, BA, Hip DipSc works as a CPD Accreditation Executive with Engineers Ireland and has recently completed a Higher Diploma in Computing and E-Learning in the National College of Ireland.

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