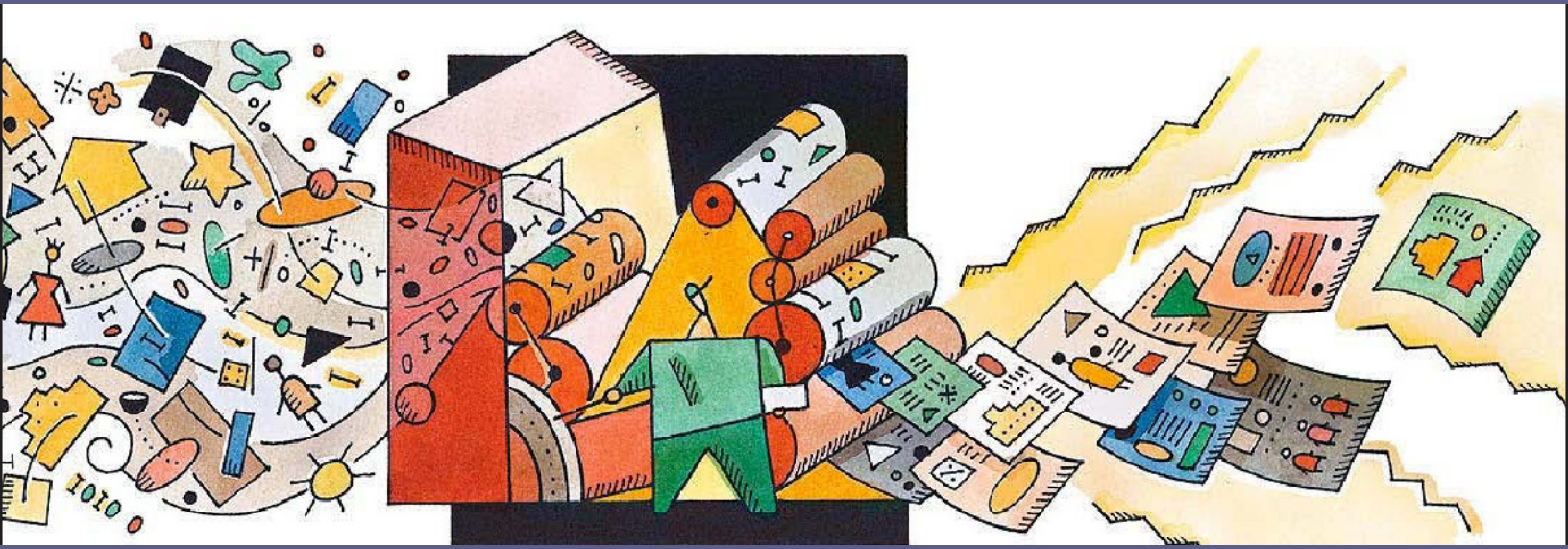


The LMS Evolution: Revolutionizing Form and Function

BY JOHN SCHNEBLE



Today's learning executives are at a crossroads between the "tried-and-true" and the "cutting-edge" – and the Learning Management System (LMS) is front and center in this old versus new debate.

Quite simply, our learners are demanding more. At home, they're collaborating and sharing via websites (and other tools) that learn who they are and predict what they like. Thus, they get quality answers to their questions, on-demand. They expect this same level of intelligence from their work systems, too.

The LMS still does what it was designed to do —track and report training. However, modern users' needs now surpass this basic functionality. So are we expecting too

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much from "legacy" LMSs? Can we push the LMS beyond what it was intended for? Do we require an LMS revolution?

For purposes of this article, we'll reference findings from a new survey of 144 learning professionals and a recent think tank discussion of 12 learning executives. Both address the existing functionality of and predicted needs for the LMS.

Surveying the LMS Today – Limited use, numerous challenges

A November 2010 poll uncovered a schism between the current needs

and original intent of the LMS. Key areas of concern included:

- **Poor Usability** – Most learning professionals reported poor usability as their top LMS challenge. As it's currently designed, the LMS has failed to adapt to the changing demands for learning.
- **Limited Reporting and Integration** – Many responded that limited reporting and significant integration issues pose major challenges. They would like the ability to add content that meets evolving user needs and enlist tools that track their LMS' use and effectiveness.
- **Mixed Satisfaction** – Nearly half (45 percent) of survey respondents graded their LMS a C or lower.
- **A Demand for Personalized**

Learning – 62 percent of survey respondents listed personalized learning plans as the most important/used LMS feature. And 44 percent placed personalized learning plans in the top three most essential functions of future LMS designs.

All told, these findings beg the question: “What’s being done to reinvent the LMS so it continues to effectively support learning organizations?” The results also support the demand for learning systems that help leverage the collective knowledge of users to generate and disseminate practical content.

The LMS Revolution — Current needs and a roadmap for change

In December 2010, senior learning executives from numerous industries (including: medical technology, health care management, software development, financial services, education, business communications and technology services) met to discuss the general well-being of the LMS. Specifically, how it has adapted to their organization’s needs and where they envision it to further evolve.

The overall consensus reflected significant gaps between the traditional LMS design and current user demand. And three action items were identified to accommodate future learning organization requirements.

Additional Resources

- The Current and Future State of Learning Management Systems – Survey Results
- What’s the Future of the LMS? – Think Tank Report
- 2010 ‘Best’ Best Practices of High Functioning Learning Organizations – Think Tank Report
- More Articles, Surveys, Reports and Webinars from TrainingEfficiency.com



1. Accept the LMS for what it was designed to do.

The LMS excels in accomplishing the specific tasks for which it was designed – target, train and track. All are very necessary functions in learning organizations. However, the LMS hasn’t changed enough in the last 20 years. So, it functions well for the 20 percent of training that is formal learning (organizing, housing and tracking user progress). But what about the remaining 80 percent of training that is informal or social learning?

“The LMS is a misnomer. It’s really a Training Management System. Training is something that is pushed to the user in a uniform fashion – with content being determined from the top and delivered to all in the same way. Learning is user-generated (informal) – finding and using the content that meets an individual’s unique needs. This is much more difficult to manage.”

That’s why these learning executives agreed that we need to accept the LMS as it exists today and de-

cide, individually, what adaptations and additions are needed to suit our users’ informal and social learning requirements.

“Understanding the purpose of the LMS and the scope of learning it serves is critical. We’re in the final stages of implementing a new LMS, and I’m confident it will help us become more ‘prescriptive’ in our training efforts. We know what it can do and what it can’t – and we’ll make full use of its functionality.”

2. Link the LMS with new systems to handle growing demands.

Today’s LMS is not flexible enough to meet the growing knowledge demands of users – and it’s quite difficult and expensive to get it up to speed. Thus, learning executives are looking for ways to link their existing systems with new technologies that deliver a robust learning experience. The desired result? Users can locate the information they need and implement it in a timely manner to drive performance.

Identified areas for LMS supplementation include:

- **Career Development Paths** — Create a place where job competencies and career paths are communicated so users can do their current job better or progress to the next level.



- **User-Generated Content** — Leverage the valuable knowledge and experience of users by making it easy for them to publish content and make it available to relevant audiences.
- **Streamlined Communication** — Provide a quick and easy way to communicate with direct supervisors and company departments.
- **Dashboard Service** — Empower users to customize training views/access to meet specific wants and needs:

“We’re developing a dashboard to distill the tremendous amount of information that is generated so it can be easily searched and accessed. The new dashboard will make our LMS more flexible and agile – it will allow us to capture news feeds, blogs, YouTube content, web-based information and internal content.”

- **Federated Search** — Facilitate universal searches inside and outside the LMS for all-inclusive information-gathering.
- **Mobile Learning** — Fully integrate and leverage mobile devices across the learning process.

“Learners have universally adopted mobile technology, so we need to make it a better two-way learning tool... push for training to go where learners are in their daily activities... and create original content for the mobile learner – not repurpose existing material.”

In summary, the group agreed that the user will play a vital role in the LMS revolution. Implementing devices that push and pull informal content will impact

user learning and productivity exponentially.

3. Continue to track and measure new LMS capabilities.

By adding new systems to augment LMS functionality, it is necessary to track and measure each tool’s use (where users are going for information) and effectiveness (how well their needs are served).

“It’s vital to get your ‘arms around’ the different venues for learning. With the huge number of tools available to users, it’s important to use the LMS (or other technologies) to track and determine their value. This enables us to focus on creating content and devices that utilize what is effective and avoid what is not.”

Conclusion — Keeping the LMS relevant

The transition from a top-down training model to a federated approach has necessitated a new look at the LMS and its future role in learning organizations. The rate of technological change requires adaptable informal and social learning tools that provide just-in-time knowledge that fits individual user needs.

Learning executives are still experimenting with processes, technologies and techniques that will best complement today’s LMS. As organizations discover effective methods that blend well into their present system, it is likely the LMS will continue to be an important part of the learning organization infrastructure.

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Takeaways

Today’s LMS Challenges:

- **Poor Usability** – The LMS has failed to adapt to users’ learning needs.
- **Limited Tools and Functionality** – Reporting tools are insufficient and development costs/difficulties are high.
- **Mixed Satisfaction** – Many users grade their LMS effectiveness at the C, D or F level.

The LMS Revolution:

- **Embrace User-Generated Content** – Make it easy for users to submit “informal” content so that formal learning is supplemented by more actionable, relevant information.
- **Integrate New Technologies** – Link existing LMSs with other enterprise applications to deliver a more robust learning experience (i.e. federated searches, dashboards, personalized learning paths, mobile learning, etc.).
- **Improve Reporting** – Implement tools that track LMS use and effectiveness for ongoing improvement, relevance and value.