

Choosing a Learning Management System

Seven Steps to Success

You have the go ahead to improve your training department with a new Learning Management System that will automate the tedious tasks necessary to work more efficiently. It is exciting, and it sounds so easy! Just look and see what products are on the market, pick the features you want at the price you can afford and that's it! Sounds easy enough, but...Don't spend less time planning the implementation than you did deciding which software to purchase. Learning management software is a strategic business application, necessary for the efficient operation of a corporate training department. It requires planning, planning, and more planning before the system is operational. Too often, trainers judge the cost of the software itself as the biggest expense of installation. While significant, it is only part of the total expense. Here are some basic steps that will help make implementation of a new learning management system go smoothly.

1. Accurately determine your needs

When implementing training management software, first determine what the problems are and why you need (or want) a new learning management system. Often the needs are different for various departments, so thoroughly research each departments' expectations. Don't forget future requirements and settle for solving only today's problems. Plan not only for the future growth in classes and enrollments, but also for incorporating training in the strategic planning process. Other considerations include:

- How much time do you have to implement the system?
- How much budget, staff, equipment, and management commitment do you have?
- Who are the other players involved in the solution?

Never forget what you are trying to accomplish. It is not unusual for the goal to change, whether it changes or not, keep the goal clearly in focus.

2. Selecting a Team: Software and Vendor

There will be tradeoffs in any application that you choose. There will be no perfect application for your exact needs, so study the choices available, and the functionality of each product, and test each function to understand how you would use the application. Don't be afraid to buy a more powerful product than you need initially, as you will soon grow into it, and hopefully will not have to repeat this process in the near future. Other important considerations:

- Make sure there is functionality behind the features and the functions of each feature are complete. It is easy to add features to an application; it is more difficult to add the functionality behind the features.

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- Newer training management software includes a feature for building relational databases. This kind of design is preferred. Choose a solution that offers not only a relational database, but also normalized data structures. Have your MIS department do a technical evaluation of the product.
- Carefully evaluate the vendor behind the product. The vendor will provide the expertise and support you need before, during and after the sale. You are buying more than disks and manuals; you are buying a strategic business solution. Make sure the vendor offers not just a solid product, but also a team able to help you make the solution work.
- Be wary of a software vendor that does not offer a full range of professional services, either through a local representative or one that the vendor provides. This means having more than a support person on the other end of the phone. Choose a vendor willing to come to your site to help with implementation and user training, and the ongoing support services that you need.
- Consider the ability of the vendor to provide their products and services when you need them and confirm in advance that your software vendor can schedule the services when you need them.
- Learn about the vendor. How long have they been in business, will they provide references? Is his software the main part of their business or is it just an add-on product? How knowledgeable are their employees?

3. Know your Computing Environment

Computer systems today are a complicated structure of operating systems, networks, database management, communication, and applications systems. Introducing a new component to the existing system can be a disaster if careful evaluation and planning is not done before implementation. Understand your computer environment before implementation of any new application"

- Who does backups and system recovery? Backup and recovery is normally the responsibility of the MIS department, but don't assume. Learn who is responsible and what the procedures are.
- Test your recovery procedures. The first time that you test the procedures should not be the first time that you need to use them!
- Understand your network. Networks are responsible for storing and retrieving programs and data for multiple users and multiple applications. A network includes:

File servers: Network file servers physically store data shared by many people. File servers also provide some security access protection and other services such as printer sharing.

Database servers: DB servers (such as Oracle, SQL Server, and Sybase) are used for large record volumes and when quick response is needed, or when data is dispersed across wide areas. These servers require specialized skills to administer but can be justified for the security and performance they provide.

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Workstations: Check the vendor requirements and generally make the recommended mini-mum. Go for quality. This is a long term investment, and it will pay off.

Communications: Computers must use a common language. Two important communications terms are protocol layer and bandwidth. Protocol layer defines the network language. Exam-ples include TCP/IP, IPX, and SPX. Bandwidth determines how much data can travel from one computer to another in a given time; wide bandwidth can carry more data traffic.

4. Working with Data

Replacing an older system sometimes requires running both the old and new systems concurrently for a while. This is an excellent way to fine tune the new system. Usually the new system is used for tests and the old system contains the "live" data. Data conversion always takes long-er than anticipated, so make sure the MIS department understands the underlying technology of the old system and can format its data into a file that the new system can import. You may also want more data from other applications to the new system. Human resources data, accounting, billing, even payroll data are often integrated with corporate training data. Work with your MIS staff, the owners of the other data, and your vendor to make this process as seamless as possible.

5. Evaluate the Processes

Implementing the new software applications will change the processes in your department. There may be new tasks to perform, obsolete ones to remove, or just a different way to do the tasks. Here are some brief examples.

- Identify your reporting needs. Entering data is one process. Extracting information from the data is another.
- Decide what parts of the new application are most important. As tempting and exciting as a new application can be, you may not need to use all features of the sys-tem immediately.
- Standardize your data. Have consistent ways to define course titles, students, trainers, classrooms, equipment, and so forth. Identify the exceptions.
- Verify imported data and make sure it matches new standards. Otherwise, you will be generating the old mistakes into the new application. Enforce your standards.

6. Installation

Product installation is usually the easiest part of the implementation process, but be aware that there can be problems such as defective disks, lack of disk space to load the new application, or conflicts between applications. Often installation of hardware must be coordinated with the installation of software. When replacing an older system, an absolute must is to back up the old system before

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installation. This is true even if the new system is an upgrade from the old system. Make sure there is enough hard disk space for both the old system and the new system until you are ready to turn off the old system. Install any customizations to the system for example, custom reports. Also, install any complementary software such as word processors, calendars, or spreadsheets that may be used.

7. Training

Users get the most intense training. Management training may focus on the benefits and paybacks of the solution with examples of the information that they will be interested in. Train the support staff on their responsibilities as well as the importance of the system so that they will understand the significance of their roles. They should understand backup, recovery, security, and performance.

What's Next

As soon as you have completed all seven steps, prepare for upgrades. Any upgrade to any component needs to be planned including the opening system, network, and DBMS. Continually review your goals and know how your application changes as your business changes to keep your software current and working hard for you.

Costs: Time and Money

Attention is usually focused on the initial cost of the software license rather than total costs of implementing the application. Installation, conversion, and training can cost many times more than the software license, so make sure you choose a long term solution for your training department.

- Get the best price that you can, but beware of trying to save a little money now by for a product that will cost more in headaches later.
- How much time do you have allocated to complete this project? That time includes any calendar requirements (by the end of this or next quarter, before next training session starts?) plus the implementation team's personal time constraints.
- Balance the time between software selection and software implementation. Do not fall into the trap of postponing the selection process until the last minute, expecting to have a fully implemented system by the project end date.
- Choose a time to implement that has the least impact on your training department and uses your MIS department resources most wisely. Poor planning and implementation can doom even the best products. During the actual conversion process, there will be time when neither the old system nor the new system will be available. Plan this outage for a convenient time for the user of the system. Work with your MIS department to minimize the outage.