

A Guide to Selecting a Learning Content Management Solution



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Since the 1990s, e-learning has grown tremendously in academic, corporate and other organizational settings.

Along the way, Learning Content Management Systems (LCMS) have adapted to meet changing learning objectives and environments.

School systems (K-12), colleges, universities, companies and organizations continue to invest in LCMS technology to remain competitive and reduce online learning content costs.

The e-learning industry, including LCMS solutions, is expected to reach \$107 billion by 2015, according to a 2012 report from Global Industry Analysts, Inc.

In the United States alone, 6.7 million postsecondary students take at least one online course, according to Babson Survey Research Group's 2012 survey, "Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States." In 2008, there were 4.6 million online students. We believe online global online enrollment will continue to rise significantly throughout the world regions, such as Emerging Asia-Pacific, Europe and Latin America.

The annual Babson Survey Research Group report also noted that 69.1% of higher education institutions believe online education is a critical part of a long-term strategy (the highest percentage since the survey began in 2002).

Business owners, school leaders, and others continue to face the daunting task of trying to determine what LCMS technologies and methods they should embrace to:

- Become more efficient and limit errors
- Make learning accessible
- Decrease training and maintenance costs
- Support e-learning or blending learning initiatives (instructor led in the classroom and offline)
- Remain in compliance with regulations
- Improve learning path tracking and reporting
- Avoid redundancies
- Manage content producers

LCMS options abound for individuals and teams tasked with selecting the right vendor. But the choices can be tough given persistent confusion and misunderstandings. It's not

uncommon, for example, for someone to talk about a Learning Management System (LMS) when he's actually referring to a LCMS. The reverse is also true. To complicate matters, a LMS can include some features found in a LCMS.

In the most basic sense, a LCMS allows organizations to reference one central place or database while creating, reusing, storing, managing and cohesively distributing vast amounts of digital content in multiple learning formats. A LMS, on the other hand, is more focused on organizing learning content and establishing the right setting for students, instructors and course options (e.g. scheduling classes, registering learners).

Our guide diminishes ambiguity and identifies key considerations for a LCMS that can handle diverse learner populations while managing enterprise-wide initiatives within a structured environment. With well planned integration, robust asynchronous training technology can help organizations lower training costs and be more productive without sacrificing quality.

The best LCMS products allow for sophisticated integration with a LMS. However Vendors also have begun to use some basic integration using Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI). With LTI, learning tools developed in a LCMS can be accessed from a LMS by the manner of single sign on into both systems using the same user credentials (e.g. user and grade data can be passed between both the LCMS and LMS).

When you select a LCMS (with an existing or new LMS in mind), you want to ensure that virtual classrooms, collaboration, and the creation and publishing of rich content are all tightly integrated so they are easy to use and effective. Content can range from Word documents and PDFs to PowerPoint and sophisticated interactive video presentations. You want to ensure that the LCMS and the LMS are both designed for the educational and training process with suitable metaphors and features like monitoring tools for students who don't pay enough attention and affirmative assessments to incrementally control students' understanding subject matters.

Start with Your Business Objectives

Schools and companies sometimes fall short – either in failing to get the perspective of enough stakeholders or by giving a vendor an incomplete or unclear set of objectives. If you rush the process, you can easily overlook a need that the LCMS may or may not accommodate. LCMS owners who take sufficient time to think through their requirements will discover that the best LCMS automatically include many features that may serve them well over time, especially in the areas of live virtual classes and content authoring.

Weigh the Costs and Savings

The initial licensing fee is only part of the financial picture. You need to understand the charges for the subsequent years (Total Cost of Ownership). Additionally, there might be other ongoing consulting fees as well as hosting expenses. You also must account for the related training costs, third party content cost and time lost in bringing those content types into the system. The costs can vary greatly depending on whether a LCMS is a stand-alone or open source application.

All of those costs can be offset by the efficiencies that a LCMS offers. For businesses, organizations and schools, the immediate access to reusable content alone can provide enormous savings. Faculty can focus more time on developing and updating courses. Companies can introduce training more quickly, which will help their employees be more productive. Agile businesses can also gain a competitive edge while adding value to new and existing products and services that their customers buy.

The impact of a LCMS can be evident within any number of other organizations, including large health care systems that must quickly ramp up in the wake of regulatory requirements and standards tied to accreditation.

To limit costs, invest in contemporary technologies built for a SaaS environment (multi-user). It helps if the technology is hosted and delivered in the Cloud (as opposed to legacy systems that started out in a client-server environment).

Assess the Experience

Each LCMS solutions provider will bring particular strengths and weaknesses that you can evaluate in light of your goals – whether you influence online training for a K-12 school system, college, university or Fortune 500 company.

As we noted earlier, if your goals or requirements are unclear, you may have a tougher time deciding on the best vendor. As you weigh their experience, keep in mind that a vendor's most notable expertise may include features you don't need. Or, one of their apparent drawbacks may have only a minimal effect given what you need to accomplish.

As with any product, experience does count. With mergers and acquisitions (as well as rebranding), it's not easy to determine who is a new or old player in this space. Challenge vendors on their command of a LCMS and their vision of how it fits into the overall e-learning industry. You will find that some have entered the market late, cobbling together aspects of a LCMS. Ask companies to explain what challenges they have faced and how they've changed over time.

In some cases, you may consider working with a company that has a long track record with a clear dedication to the technology that fosters collaboration with XML and blended learning. At the same time, you should determine how they've adapted over time to keep pace with changing expectations and new technologies.

Partnerships and Integration

Many LCMS providers have aligned with related products to offer their clients comprehensive and compatible solutions.

The number and types of partnerships may be impressive at first, but look to see whether they really align well with your needs.

For example, a LCMS vendor may have a new or existing alliance with a well known LMS (e.g. Moodle, Blackboard, Edmodo). The relationship could be a significant benefit given the convenience and how well the systems work together. But if you already have a LMS, then you must find out whether the LCMS will integrate with your existing LMS or another one you're considering. It should be noted that the most advanced LCMS solutions have LMS built into them, covering all your needs at one time.

Filter Out Vendors

Take advantage of a RFI (Request for Information) to start limiting the number of vendors. Prepare a RFP (Request for Proposal) to see whether vendors can understand and match your requirements. Coordinate on-site presentations so companies can provide how their products will support your unique learning needs. As you get to know the potential vendors, ensure that they are making an effort to know you as well – your e-learning experience and culture.

What to Look for in a LCMS

- Built-in Authoring – number and types of tools that can be used
- Synchronous (live classroom) or asynchronous collaboration
- Browsers – application can perform regardless of browser
- Platform - SaaS delivery model that can run on MAC, PC with operating systems like Linux, Windows and others
- Hosted and delivered through the Cloud
- Scalability – system can be adjusted based on your needs
- Security - block unauthorized users with a firewall
- Intuitive Interface – make learning as easy as possible
- Interoperability – support range of learning objects, third party tools, Student Information System (SIS) and HR management systems

- Learning Modalities – recognize how people learn (e.g. social networks, mobile)
- XML Based – to separate content from the presentations (including content tagging protocols)
- Compliance – follow widely accepted standards, such as AICC or SCORM
- Adaptive Learning – detailed set of capabilities, including personalization, tests, assessments, different languages and native formats
- Workflow Management Customization – how each LCMS guides the process from the first set of ideas to deployment
- Tasks and Roles – identifying each role (e.g. content creator, developer) and assigning permissions
- Content Versioning Controls – for capturing content history and updates
- Functionality – range and diversity of options
- Corporate Standards – for corporate branding and messaging
- Searchable Library – locate reusable content

Key Questions to Ask LCMS Vendors

- How does the LCMS bridge to the LMS?
- To what degree can instructors manage academic calendars, tests, create quizzes, manage gradebooks and communicate with students?
- Will the LCMS already include a synchronous software component for a live classroom experience to avoid the delays and extra programming expenses tied to manual integration of third party tools like GoToMeeting or WebEx?
- Does the system allow for interactive content, including live tests or next step instructions that can be embedded within recorded instruction, such as a video?
- Can users efficiently create and manage rich content with drag and drop features?
- Can you provide current and past clients in our industry?
- Does your LCMS work with an open source or proprietary LMS (or both)?
- What levels of support are offered (phone, online, time of day, etc.)?

Ultimately, a LCMS should focus on integrated technologies that can make your school, company or organization more efficient and provide ideal educational and training environments for your students and employees.

LMS and LCMS Compared

The focus of an LMS is to deliver online courses or training to learners, while managing students and keeping track of their progress and performance across all types of training activities.

LCMSs provide tools for authoring and reusing or re-purposing content (mutated learning objects, or MLOs) as well as virtual spaces for student interaction (such as discussion forums, live chat rooms and live web-conferences). LCMS technology can either be used in tandem with an LMS, or as a stand-alone application for learning initiatives that require rapid development and distribution of learning content.

While LMS and LCMS products have different strengths and weaknesses, they generally address the following areas of functionality:

LMS Functionality

- Student Registration and Administration
- Training Event Management (i.e., scheduling, tracking, and WBT delivery)
- Curriculum and Certification Management
- Skills and Competencies Management
- Reporting
- Training Record Management
- Courseware Authoring

LCMS Functionality

- Template-driven, Collaborative Content Development
- Facilitated Content Management (i.e., indexing and reuse)
- Publishing
- Workflow Integration
- Automated Interface with an LMS

About AMVONET

Alliance, Ohio-based AMVONET has created a comprehensive, integrated software suite consisting of an e-learning management system, a live web-conferencing and virtual classroom solution, and a content-authoring application. In addition to the K-12 and higher education markets, AMVONET offers distance-learning business and healthcare solutions for continuing education, corporate training, online collaboration and interactive recordings. AMVONET's online system provides educators and trainers with everything they need to create, manage and share multimedia course content. For more information, visit www.amvonet.com.

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