

Selecting an LMS

Technology has been changing how businesses and the world operate and engage. Adapting to change can seem daunting as old ways of thinking and doing evolve and grow. With shifts in typical working operations, many employers and training consultants are finding it necessary to offer development, learning and compliance trainings in virtual environments. How do small to medium-sized businesses (SMB) bring learning, development and training online while remaining effective and efficient in the delivery of the content? Enter a Learning Management System, an LMS for short.

Options abound when considering an LMS. With over 800 LMS vendors, finding the best fit for current and future organizational needs and budget can seem overwhelming. In order to navigate the learning management system options, SMBs should start with what they hope to achieve with an LMS – functionality, ease-of-use, creative control and customization, integration, blended learning, mobile learning, and the list goes on.

When looking for a learning system solution, key considerations should include the cost structure, core capabilities, course management, compatibility and the level of customer support. An LMS should be easy to use, easy to maintain and adaptable to future needs as an organization's L&D needs grow.

Cost Structure

In selecting an LMS, cost will most likely be the biggest, up-front consideration. An LMS is a recurring annual expense and an investment in the annual learning and development budget. Most LMS providers offer pricing models for registered users and active users.

Registered user pricing typically includes your total employee headcount plus any external partners who may access the system. As user count rises, the monthly subscription cost will rise, however, the cost per user will generally decrease.

Active user pricing is subscription based on the number of users who login or launch a course from the LMS during a given time period. This model introduces variability in month-to-month expenses due to spikes in peak or unexpected higher usage periods.

When researching an LMS, be sure to inquire about any additional fees that are outside of the per user subscription fees. These fees could include fees for implementation, training, support, maintenance and content creation.





Core Capabilities

After understanding the costs of an LMS, the next step would be to research system features. Consideration needs to be given to current business objectives as well as future learning, development and/or training needs. Given the volume of LMS vendors on the market, research will show that many systems offer comparable features, though no two systems will perform functions in the exact same way. Comparisons should be made by evaluating system cost against system capabilities (included and optional).

Key Decision Factors:

- Determine the features required at the desired price point
- Rank features in order of importance
- Determine the importance of system interoperability
- Inquire about “hidden” additional costs that factor into overall budget/price

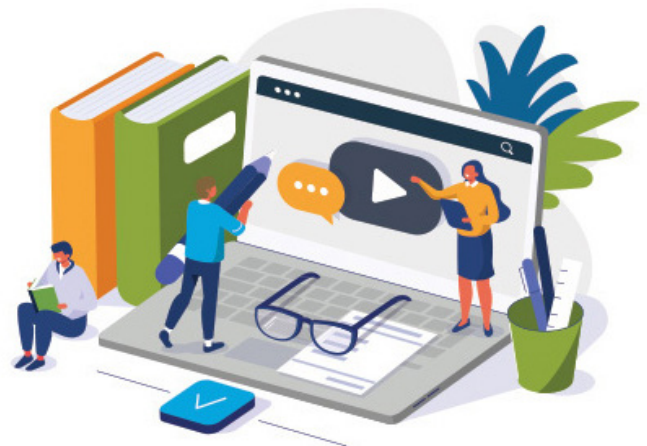
Course Management

There are several dimensions to course management to take into consideration when selecting an LMS – course modality, course content source and system administration and user experience.

Course modality refers to the delivery method for learning. Asynchronous learning is on demand, pre-recorded courses that learners complete when and where they choose. Synchronous learning is live, instructor led training (ILT) delivered in a virtual web classroom environment. Truly blended learning experiences combine asynchronous and synchronous with informal learning, social learning and performance support.

Course content source is the source of the learning and training activities. Organizations can create eLearning content internally using authoring tools such as Articulate Storyline or Adobe Captivate. eLearning content may be developed by third party specific to the organization or purchased as ready-made, off-the-shelf (OTS) training courses.

System administration is the flexibility and ease-of-use for the system administrator to monitor and manage online training and L&D initiatives. User experience is closely tied to this as it is how users interact with the training environment and the basis for a positive learning experience.





Compatibility

Independent of course content development approaches being used, a key consideration to confirm is that authoring tools, vendor-supplied custom or off-the-shelf content and the LMS are compliant with common industry standards.

Shareable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) is the primary and most widely used eLearning industry standard available. The biggest benefit of SCORM is interoperability. SCORM provides a communications method and data models that allow eLearning content and

the associated LMS to work together. System administrators are able to reuse existing content developed outside of the LMS by using a SCORM wrapper to convert existing video, PowerPoint and PDF documents to SCORM-compliant content. SCORM enables interoperability with all learning content authoring tools and third-party course libraries. SCORM allows for a high degree of tracking and reporting that is built into the infrastructure.

In addition to SCORM, xAPI or Experience API (originally called Tin Can) specification allows for more comprehensive tracking of online experiences, user behavior and activities outside of the LMS.

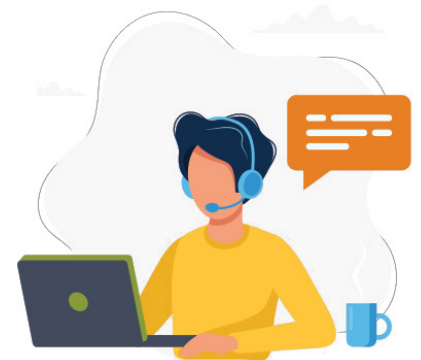
At minimum, an LMS selection should be SCORM compliant (preferably both 1.2 and 2004). If an LMS has a built-in course authoring tool, confirm that it can both create and export SCORM-compliant lesson objects (SCOs). This will be critical should a change be made to the chosen LMS vendor and migrating course content from the legacy system.

Customer Support

Customer support capabilities are important considerations in LMS selection and successful implementation of the system. Ensuring an ongoing relationship with the chosen LMS vendor after the system goes live is paramount.

Key Elements Include:

- System availability and performance commitments
- Procedures, response and communications for system outages, maintenance and upgrades
- User orientation and support – documentation, training, tutorials, support tickets, etc.
- Specific customer support levels – dedicated or shared account management, phone or email support, support hours, response time
- System integrations, customizations and managed services
- Help desk management



Choosing a solution that aligns with business needs and fits within budget is important. Choosing a solution provider with depth of knowledge who will be a trusted and reliable partner will prove to be invaluable.