It Takes Two to Tango - Can Learning Executives Learn to Dance? (Aug 06)

August 2006 - David Fell

In a recent article ("Making your LMS Dance," March 2006), Elliot Masie suggested that learning executives challenge their learning management system vendors with the question "can you dance?" "It is time for learning executives to have a heart-to-heart conversation with their LMS," suggests Masie. "Ask them if they are ready to dance to the music of performance, profitability, talent management and extreme learning."

The truth is many LMS vendors are waiting by the phone for an agile learning executive with an open dance card to call. Like any successful relationship, it takes time to get to know each other and learn the others moves — and most importantly our experience has taught us that successfully automating organizational training using an LMS truly "takes two to tango."

Contrary to the popular belief perpetuated in the market, LMS software is only 50 percent of the equation for success, and fancy new dance moves won't take you the rest of the way. The ultimate contribution of the best LMS software has to be the inclusion of configurable business rules that can adapt to the rapid pace of organizational change. Customization should be a foul word in the LMS product space; configuration is the only practical way to manage organizational change. The other half of the equation for LMS success is a combination of sound educational/instructional design practices, and outstanding business analysis and project management processes.

As Gary Woodill argues "the disappointment in e-learning to date is the result of several factors, including 'speed to market' of poorly conceived products, a focus in the e-learning industry on the wonders of new technology rather than good instructional design, boring online materials, a lack of understanding of the learning process by software developers, and a lack of understanding of the unique teaching advantages of electronic networked media. A further reason for the problems with e-learning has been a common failure to follow sound e-learning project management principles. Often this is because e-learning projects are given to people without any experience or training in project management… most often it is instructional designers who are required to serve the dual roles of designing educational materials and project management." (Cited in Pasian and Woodill, 2005, p. 1)

Your LMS vendor can and should lead the "extreme learning dance." But keep in mind that dancing is a dynamic activity — software can't dance — but vendors and clients can. It requires a fluid give and take. Any repeatable process can be automated, but not all organizational processes are worth repeating (or automating for that matter). Finding a dance partner who is willing to negotiate the intricacies of organizational change, and who will try to take online learning to the next level, is a challenge for both vendors and clients.

Here is one LMS vendor's advice on preparing for an exciting and rewarding dance experience:

Learning executive, get 100 percent buy-in from your senior leadership team to ensure that you are empowered to successfully achieve your goals of automating the organizational learning process. Don't expect your vendor to make all the moves if you are being forced to hang out on the sidelines.

Learning executive, build a great relationship with your internal information technology team to ensure that they will support your goals and objectives rather than placing barriers and obstacles in your way.

Learning executive, unless your organization thrives on buzz, forget the buzz words of the new training organization (human capital, capacity development, performance management). Concentrate on aligning your training and development strategy with the culture and goals/objectives of your organization, and provide effective reporting on your strategic contribution. An LMS can deliver buzz, but if it doesn't provide value to the strategic direction, you won't be dancing for long.

Learning executive, keep an open mind about changing learning policies and procedures to make them more efficient and standardized across the organization.

Learning executive, the most successful clients view training and development as a combination of internal marketing, information exchange, skill building and assessment of employee readiness. Look for an LMS that will support all of these goals and objectives.

Learning executive, choose a best-of-breed LMS that integrates with your other enterprise technology applications. Don't buy a watered down all-in-one (LMS/LCMS/collaboration/portal) proprietary solution, and settle for second rate in every category.

Learning executive, dancing always has an improvisational component. Keep in mind that change is a given in modern organizations and your training business rules will change. In a time of globalization, organizations open and close, or buy and sell business units, companies and product lines — and each change involves the potential for changing business rules.

Learning executive, choose an LMS that will integrate with an enterprise-wide knowledge management solution so that learning objects and knowledge objects are not segregated in your environment. Don't ask your LMS to provide a proprietary knowledge management solution for learning only. Look for integration with enterprise document management, collaboration tools, enterprise communications and customer relationship management.

Learning executive, chose a vendor who can clearly articulate the project management and business analysis process. Make sure every aspect of professional services is clearly explained and fits into a coherent process that will help you to deliver your project on time and on budget.

Learning executive, chose a vendor who has clear documentation on the theory and practice of their system. There are no excuses for anything less.

Learning executive, if you really want your LMS to dance, don't think of your LMS as a software technology purchase only. Look for a vendor who can connect with you on the other 50 percent of the dance that will take you beyond mere bits and bytes.

Learning executive, if you want your LMS to integrate into your social networking systems, look for a vendor who has an open architecture and a configurable technology to match. Integration options are great, but they also need to be backed by a strong pedagogical and theoretical consulting team to fully understand and pull together the value of both formal and informal learning.

Learning executive, does your organizational learning dance have a particular theme or look and feel? Expect your LMS to dress in whatever style fits best for you. Look for a vendor who can dress up, or pare down to the basics, and one who is not afraid to give up proprietary real estate in favor of integrating with an existing enterprise system.

Learning executive, your LMS can likely deliver some great tools for rolling out new products, changing your strategy, realigning your workforce or adding new customers, but only if your

vendor has the consulting skills to engage and explore these topics with you to mutually figure out how to best use the tools.

Learning executive, are you interested in working with your LMS vendor to figure out where informal learning happens in your organization? You can't force people to share information, but when vendors spend time with you to discover where it happens in your organization, they can usually find ways to bring these new moves into the dance.

Learning executive, don't just settle for an LMS with multiple language versions. Look for a single LMS with language libraries so that you can configure the system to reflect your own contextual and organizational language(s) and do cross-language reporting.

So, what is a typical LMS vendor looking for in a dance partner? Vendors are often highly adaptable and flexible in working with learning executives, but they need partners who are also light on their feet. They are looking for organizations were the stakeholders work together and collaborate with vendors as co-developers of a solution that meets everyone's needs. Vendors need to become partners in making implementation successful.

Building great software takes time, energy, commitment and talent. In a time of rapid change, consolidation, globalization and more, look for a partner who is flexible, supple and passionate about the dance.

Yes, many LMS vendors are ready to dance — they are waiting by the phone for your call.

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