

The Future of the LMS

Learning and development needs are evolving past traditional systems • BY JOSH BERSIN



Josh Bersin is the principal and founder of Bersin & Associates, with more than 25 years of experience in corporate solutions, training and e-learning. He can be reached at editor@clomedia.com.

No other tool of the learning and development (L&D) trade has had as conflicted a relationship as the learning management system (LMS). These systems are an essential part of most corporate learning strategies as they manage employee, customer, partner and reseller training. Yet dissatisfaction remains consistently high.

- These systems are often bloated and overly complicated and frequently fail to deliver the basics.
- These systems can seem disconnected from work. They become a convenient stand-in for a general dissatisfaction with the current state of corporate learning, including a lack of business alignment and a failure to deliver at business speed.
- These systems have historically proven to be unfriendly to users.

We've watched the learning industry engage in a healthy debate on the long-term value of the LMS. In May 2010, we captured a snapshot of that dialogue on our blog. Some of the industry's most respected thought leaders — and at least one CLO — argued that the LMS has outlived its usefulness. At best, they say its value is as a means of tracking required training, and its role should be marginalized given the relatively small fraction of the overall organizational learning needs that such training represents. At worst, they say the LMS is the anchor preventing the evolution of L&D into something more learner-centric and environmental in effect.

So is the LMS dead? The short answer is no, at least not yet. Based on the findings in our latest LMS industry study, "Learning Systems 2011," these systems are alive: The market is growing — eclipsing \$1 billion in 2010 — and expected to grow up to 11 percent globally in 2011. Whether or not we can pronounce the LMS healthy remains to be seen. We do know that what constitutes an LMS is changing significantly enough to warrant an honest discussion as to whether or not we need a new name going forward. Future value may not be derived in the same ways as in the past.

The market itself is splintering into separate but overlapping fragments:

1. Integrated talent management suites.
2. Social learning platforms.
3. Specialists, such as for industry verticals or specific audiences.

It was somewhat shocking to find that few providers interviewed for the study were willing to claim traditional general-purpose corporate learning as their core target market strategy. Almost all attached themselves to one or more of the three aforementioned submarkets. Market forces — in other words, you the buyer — are telling them that full credit will not be given for just being a traditional LMS.

Why? The aforementioned three fragments correspond well to the driving forces that currently are transforming corporate learning. Our companies need more from us, so we need more from these systems.

Also, the organizations we serve are going through tremendous talent challenges. Companies are struggling to drive deeper technical and professional skills, globalize their operations and cultures, re-engage workforces and actively connect the generations to share knowledge.

Our businesses need much more than traditional training programs. They need us to:

1. Develop career models and programs to drive deep levels of professional skills.
2. Cultivate strong cultures of learning and knowledge sharing.
3. Modernize the L&D infrastructure to support continuous formal and informal learning.
4. Revamp leadership development to build the next generation of leaders at all levels.
5. Serve as the organization's business development engine, helping business leaders attract, develop and carefully manage the critical workforce in place.

The key technology issue going forward is to determine the best platform on which L&D will carry out this changing mandate. The LMS as we know it is changing, evolving into the talent management systems and the continuous learning environments we need to meet tomorrow's challenges. But is it changing fast enough? Can one system even meet all of these needs? Given the tremendous talent challenges that organizations now face, we suspect that even if the LMS as we know it dies, we will all be too busy to notice. **CLO**

David Mallon, a principal analyst at Bersin & Associates, contributed to this column.