

LEARNING EXECUTIVE THINK TANK INSIGHTS

What's the Future of the LMS?

**13 Learning Executives discuss the evolution of the LMS
and what the future holds**

trainingefficiency.com

THINK TANK DISCUSSION

December 7, 2010

THINK TANK PARTICIPANTS

- Brock Christianson Medtronic
- MaryAlice Cohen SuccessFactors, Inc.
- Bill Byron Concevitch CommVault
- Sharon Cresswell Baker Hughes
- Joe Gibbons Covidien
- Jill Guardia Symantec
- David Hare Trilogy Health Services, LLC
- Justin Mass Adobe Systems Inc.
- David McGeough PAETEC
- Kim Peretti Symantec
- Brian Pickett Avaya, Inc.
- Allison Rossett San Diego State University
- Chris Underwood Apple, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

“How has the LMS evolved in your organization in recent years and what do you believe to be its future?”

Today's learning executives seem to be sitting at a crossroad between the old and the new—between the “tried-and-true” and the “cutting edge.” As technology evolves making it easier for users to instantaneously communicate with each other—and in many instances, “learn” from one another—the learning organization, yet again, finds itself amidst rapid change and finding ways to adapt and capitalize on popular technologies to supplement training initiatives.

A technology that has become front and center in the debate of “old” versus “new” is the Learning Management System (LMS). The LMS has been a tried-and-true friend of the learning organization for decades. There are many well-designed learning management systems operating today that provide agile platforms to access a vast array of information and training to suit a variety of user needs. The LMS does what it was originally designed to do—and does it very well. However, have we pushed the LMS beyond what it was intended to do? Are we *expecting* too much from it?

In a recent Learning Executive Think Tank discussion, Tom Kelly, former learning executive at Cisco and Oracle, met with a handful of top learning executives to discuss whether or not the LMS has changed in their organization and where they see this technology going in the future. Think Tank participants represented a variety of industries including: medical technology, healthcare management, software development, financial services, education, business communications, and technology services. Specifically, think tank participants answered this question:

“How has the LMS evolved in your organization in recent years and what do you believe to be its future?”

KEY FINDINGS

“These findings reflect a schism between current needs and the original intention of the LMS. These findings also support the need for the LMS to utilize the collective knowledge of users to generate practical content that’s available in real time.”

To kick off the discussion, Gordon Johnson of Expertus shared some interesting findings from a recent survey of 144 learning professionals regarding the current functionality and future requirements of the LMS:

- **Poor Usability**—Most learning professionals reported their top challenge with respect to the LMS is poor usability. The LMS, as it is currently designed, has failed to adapt to the changing demands for learning.
- **Management Challenges Versus Learner Challenges**—Many reported that reporting and integration issues is a significant challenge, indicating they do not have the ability to add content that meets current needs, or track its use and effectiveness.
- **LMS Satisfaction is Mixed**—Nearly half (45 percent) of survey respondents graded their LMS a C or lower. Slightly more (47 percent) predicted that learners would grade their system similarly.
- **Users Demand Personalized Learning**—Survey respondents reported that personalized learning plans are the most important feature of the LMS. 62 percent identified this feature as being the most used and 44 percent listed the evolution of personalized learning plans in the top three most essential functions of the LMS in the near future.

These findings reflect a schism between current needs and the original intention of the LMS and begs the question: “What are we doing to modify the LMS so that it supports the learning organization?” Furthermore, these findings support the need for the LMS to utilize the collective knowledge of users to generate practical content that’s available in real time.

In light of these findings, participants were asked how the LMS is currently being used in their organization and whether they intend to modify the system to meet future needs. Many reported plans to either supplement or alter the LMS so that content is more tailored to individual needs. Some indicated they are in the process of developing a system that will **pull** information from the user to allow for more comprehensive and exact searches.

From this discussion, we identified the three action steps learning executives are taking to supplement their LMS to accommodate future requirements.

“The LMS serves a very necessary function in the learning organization—it does certain things very well.”

1. Accept the LMS for what it is and what it was designed to do.

The LMS is excellent and efficient in accomplishing the specific tasks for which it was designed—target, train and track.

All of the think tank participants agreed the LMS serves a very necessary function in the learning organization—it does certain things very well. A system designed in the 1990s, the LMS has changed very little over the last 20 years. It functions exceptionally well for the 15 to 20 percent of training that is procedure based and does an excellent job organizing, housing and tracking user progress.

But what about the remaining 80 percent of training that is process based? Many learning executives agreed that we need to accept the LMS as it exists today and decide individually what adaptations and additions need to be made to fit the unique demands of users. One participant noted that accepting the LMS begins with a single recognition:

*“The LMS is really a misnomer. It’s really a Training Management System. **Training** is something that is pushed to the user in a uniform fashion—with content being determined from the top and delivered to all in the same way. **Learning** is user-generated—finding and using the content that meets an individual’s unique needs. This is much more difficult to manage.”*

Another think tank participant, who recently replaced the LMS in his organization, stressed the importance of having realistic expectations. Understanding the purpose of the LMS and the scope of learning it serves is critical. He indicated that we should not expect the LMS to be or do something for which it was never designed.

“The LMS does exactly what I need it to do—target, train and track. We’re in the final stages of implementing a new LMS and I am confident that it will help us become more ‘prescriptive’ in our training efforts. We know what it can do and what it can’t—and we’ll and make full use of it’s functionality.”

One participant, from a software engineering company, is very pleased with her LMS, and uses it primarily as a mapping tool.

“Our system is built on a consumer model. We don’t use the LMS as a content repository, but rather as a mapping tool to other content systems.”

“Learning executives are looking for ways to complement their systems with additional methods to provide a more robust learning experience.”

2. Integrate the LMS to new systems in order to get the job done.

Today's LMS is not nimble enough to meet all users' knowledge demands.

All think tank participants agreed that it is too difficult and expensive to change the current LMS to meet new learning demands. Instead, they're looking for ways to complement their systems with additional methods to provide a more robust learning experience. The end goal is to ensure users can locate the information they need and implement it in a timely manner.

One learning executive from a business software company, indicated that users are wanting a place to get the knowledge they need to perform their jobs more efficiently and grow professionally. She is looking to supplement her LMS to include:

- **Career Development**— A place where job competencies and career opportunities are communicated. Users are requesting information that will help them perform their current job better plus provide information on skills needed to get to the next job level.
- **User-Generated Content**—A space where conversations are happening in real time that address current issues and demands. Users want to be able to search for tips and find instruction on specific tasks.
- **Direct Communication**—A simplified method for communicating with direct supervisors and other areas of the company.

Another think tank participant is supplementing her LMS with a Dashboard Service, allowing users to customize training content to meet specific wants and needs:

“We're developing a Dashboard to distill the tremendous amount of information that is currently being generated, so that it can be easily searched and accessed. However, this is a very complex process. The new dashboard will help make our present LMS more flexible and agile—it will allow us to capture news feeds, blogs, YouTube content, web-based information and internal content quickly and easily.”

Another participant is supplementing her LMS with an add-on program that allows users to perform universal searches inside and outside the system, for even more robust information-gathering.

“The key was to find a system with robust search capabilities. We went with a system that allows for searches to reach beyond the company server to generate larger, federated type searches.”

"The user is going to play a vital role in the evolution of the LMS. Implementing devices that facilitate a push and pull of content will impact learning and productivity exponentially."

Another executive whose company develops and implements network security software, is implementing a consumer-based system into her LMS to distill all search components down to what is important to the individual user.

"The objective here is to help users locate the training they need to complete from a compliance perspective and to search out useful instruction."

Another executive who is implementing a similar system noted:

"Our users want to be informed of what they need to know and then have the ability to search for and link to that information."

As technology becomes more portable, mobility has become a key factor in learning. The push is for training to go where learners are in their daily activities. One learning executive commented:

"Our learners have universally adopted mobile technology, so we need to figure out how to make it a better two-way learning tool."

This participant indicated that the key to this process is to create original content for the mobile learner—not re-purpose existing material. Currently, mobile content is concentrated on serving specific informational needs—such as for salespeople in the field. A significant challenge is how to more fully integrate mobile devices into the scope of the entire learning process. One participant commented that the future of the LMS is dependent on the user:

"The user is going to play a vital role in the evolution of the LMS. Implementing devices that facilitate a push and pull of content will impact learning and productivity exponentially."

“As organizations discover effective methods that blend well into their present system, it is likely the LMS will continue to be an important part of the learning organization infrastructure.”

3. Continue to track and measure

With the integration of new systems to supplement the LMS, it is necessary to track their use and measure their effectiveness in achieving desired outcomes.

It is important to know and understand where the user is going for their information and how well it serves their needs. One participant from a business communications company, expressed:

“It is vital to get your ‘arms around’ the different venues for learning. With the huge number of tools available to the user, it is important to use the LMS (or other tools) to track the value of these resources and determine their value. An accurate assessment of value enables us to focus on creating content and devices that further utilize what we know is effective and avoid what is not.”

Another learning executive, added:

“We track clicks, click-throughs, exit links, downloads, and other online activities. To accurately assess what these behaviors mean, we needed know what we want to learn from it and the analytic strategy we were going to use to measure results.”

CONCLUSION

The transition from a top-down training model to a federated approach has necessitated a new look at the LMS and its future role in the learning organization. The rate of technological change requires learning tools that can adapt quickly and provide just-in-time knowledge that fits individual user needs. Learning executives are still experimenting with processes, technologies and techniques that will best complement the LMS. As organizations discover effective methods that blend well into their present system it is likely the LMS will continue to be an important part of the learning organization infrastructure.

ABOUT THE LEARNING EXECUTIVE THINK TANK

The Learning Executive Think Tank, sponsored by Expertus, was created to bring key thinkers together to generate insights and best practices in order to help learning leaders run more effective organizations. For the future viability of the training industry, it's important to look at key issues affecting learning organizations so that we may give back to the training industry and learn from each other.

Learning Executive Think Tanks are by invitation only and are held six times a year—five via conference call and one face-to-face roundtable discussion. Think Tank participants are proven, senior-level learning executives who have long track records of successful leadership. In our discussions, we concentrate on real results and the business aspects of training.

About Expertus

Expertus is the leading global provider of services that optimize the business impact of learning. For more than a decade, the firm's 500+ learning management professionals have defined and implemented plans, processes and technologies that transform training organizations—creating measurable value for the world's most successful corporations. Clients include ADP, Cisco, ConocoPhillips, EMC, NetApp and Schlumberger. Every day at these and other companies, more than a million employees, customers and business partners are educated as a result of Expertus' innovative business strategies, outsourcing services and technology-rich solutions.

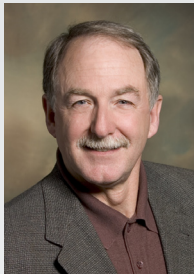
Based in Silicon Valley, Expertus serves its clients from offices in the US, UK and India. For more information, visit www.expertus.com, or call toll-free 1-877-827-8160

ROUNDTABLE HOSTS



Tom Clancy

Tom Clancy is Vice President of Education Services at EMC Corporation. At EMC, Tom has held various field and corporate roles, primarily in Sales Productivity and Partner Management, focusing on field development, best practices and change execution. Since 2002, his primary responsibility has been leadership of the education role for all internal and external audiences.



Tom Kelly

Tom Kelly has more than 25 years of experience in the education and training industry and has held positions at NetApp, Cisco, Oracle Corporation, Sun Microsystems, NeXT Corporation and Control Data Corporation. Tom is currently a trusted advisor for a growing list of clients, including small to mid-sized companies focusing on learning organizations systems and strategies.



Gordon Johnson

Gordon is the Vice President of Marketing at Expertus, where he develops value-added customer communications, integrated direct marketing, and customer advisory programs. He also helps corporate training departments boost their training adoption through internal marketing and change management initiatives. Some of those clients include ConocoPhillips, United Way, GlaxoSmithKline, UPS and Lockheed Martin.