# Why I Hate LMSs (Oct 15)



by Marc Rosenberg

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"A colleague of mine sometimes refers to working with an LMS as an 'LM-mess.' But it doesn't have to be. An LMS is not the center of the training universe. It is not a strategy or the answer to a poor performing learning program. It's a tool, plain and simple. Now, what are we going to do with it?"

First I hated instructional objectives, and then I hated ADDIE. Now I hate learning management systems.

Full disclosure, I had a teeny, tiny part in hastening their creation. Twenty years ago, I worked for VBG (Very Big Company). Our immense course registration call center cost a small fortune to run. So, in the mid-1990s, I put together a team to build one of the first LMSs from scratch. Rudimentary as it was, it cut our call center usage by 70 percent. Initially, it focused on classroom-training management, but as we got into eLearning, the problems started.

## A little background

The nascent eLearning companies at the time would sell us courses and "throw in" their so-called LMS. Problem was, *their* LMS only worked with *their* courses. We had to run different courses from different companies on different platforms. It was the razor and razor blades scenario.

We wanted interoperability, consistency, and enterprise reporting across all eLearning products. Early vendors wanted exclusivity, locked-in contracts, and control. We got angry, as the legendary and fictional Howard Beale would say, "We were mad as hell and we weren't going to take it anymore."

Along with other large companies, we pushed hard for an integrated, single-platform approach that would run *all* eLearning programs. Fortunately, the advent of eLearning standards, first, most notably AICC and then SCORM, as well as the scrappiness of interoperable upstarts, changed the LMS industry.

Modern-day LMSs were born out of the new transactional capabilities of the Internet in the late 1990s and early 2000s. They are as much eCommerce as eLearning. Like the then new online retail giants such as eBay and Amazon, LMSs could offer many products, process thousands of transactions, handle payments and delivery, and keep track of it all. This is a great value of LMSs then, and now. Without a good LMS, there would be an awful lot of chaos in the training and eLearning world.

**So, why do I hate LMSs?**

Actually, I don't hate LMSs; they do what they were designed to do quite well. But I am not so sure we fully understand their limitations, or what we are getting ourselves into with them. Here are nine key concerns:

1. *They can stifle creativity.* There are many great examples of innovation in the eLearning world, but too often, despite the best of intentions, the limitations of the LMS and the underlying SCORM construct, can be inhibiting. When a new idea comes up against a system and software that can't handle it, more often than not it's the idea that gets tossed rather than the system that gets upgraded.
2. *They can force a path to the least common denominator.* Whether it's the testing tool on the LMS or the authoring tool on a companion LCMS, designers are usually stuck with the options and capabilities provided. To deviate runs the risk that you will not be able to track or easily update the resulting courseware elements.
3. *They generate a multitude of reports that can yield important insights, but the organization needs to know what to do with those insights.* Making the best use of LMS data in a timely manner requires analysts who know what they are doing, what to look for, and how to make sense of it all, as well as leaders who know how to use the information to improve the system.
4. *They can be very expensive.* Loaded with bells and whistles, some LMSs are so costly that getting one consumes the entire L&D development budget (and a pile of IT money as well); nothing else gets done. And sometimes, companies end up with more than they need, or less than they need, and a year or two later, they're back at it, starting over. More cost.
5. *No LMS can meet all organizational needs exactly.* Some compromise is likely. But there is always a temptation to customize the LMS or build workarounds to make the system perform precisely as envisioned. As the LMS drifts from the standard solution offered by the vendor, keeping up with new versions becomes difficult and pricey.
6. *They can be a pain to implement.* Buying the LMS is just the beginning. Now you have to implement it. This can take months or years and lots of consulting help (another cost). More built-in configurability is a good thing. Still, setting it up can be quite an endeavor.
7. *They can be too focused on just managing training assets and systems.* Classroom, virtual classroom, and eLearning deliverables … no problem. But as the field gets more into information, collaboration, social, and performance support-based solutions—more of a [learning and performance ecosystem](#)—most current LMSs are limited in what they can do.
8. *They can be used for the wrong purposes.* Want to put out a memo to everyone in the company and track if they've read (I mean "opened") it? Just give it a course number and put it into the LMS. Want to use LMS attendance reports as the main measure of compliance? No problem, but remember, attendance does not equal competence. Trying to force-fit LMSs into tasks they were not really designed to do is fraught with unintended consequences.
9. *They can be seen as a substitute for instructional design.* Technology will just as easily distribute and track bad training as it will good training. There are, undoubtedly, tons of lousy courses being built and delivered very efficiency by LMSs (and LCMSs). This is not a technology problem; it is a design problem.

Many of you will say that these concerns are a result of our inappropriate use of a well-designed LMS, and there's a lot of truth to that. But like the tail wagging the dog, despite our best intentions, we often succumb to the limits of the technology—*any technology*—and the enticements of easy, if ill-advised solutions.

**Bright spots**

Don't get me wrong; I'd prefer these concerns be addressed rather than for LMSs to go away. Here are four signs that that's happening:

1. *Configurability and upgradability is on the rise.* As more LMSs become more flexible, the need to get a new one every few years will hopefully diminish because you'll be able to more easily integrate new

product capabilities into existing systems. Furthermore, a more configurable LMS will have a longer life expectancy than one that has to be customized every time a new feature is needed.

2. *More cloud-based solutions and more flexible pricing options.* With cloud-based solutions, implementation becomes easier. Users take only the features they want and turn the others off, and the LMS company takes on more of the operational responsibilities. This results in pricing plans that more closely match what each customer actually needs and can afford.

3. *Instructional designers are getting better at designing effective learning programs in spite of any LMS or SCORM limitations.* Increasingly, designers do not have to rely just on the features and tools that come with the LMS. For example, for those who want a more robust testing environment, there are now better tools they can use that are compatible with many LMSs and SCORM.

4. *LMSs are starting to get into the informal side of learning.* The impetus for this comes from two main sources. First, LMS customers are getting smarter about what LMSs can and can't do, and are more articulate in what they want from next-generation products. Customer-driven enhancements can be far more impactful than vendor-driven enhancements. Second, and even more important, is the rise of [xAPI](#), which gives LMSs that adopt it the capability to engage workers in the context of job performance and track other forms of learning that are *not* courses. This can be a game-changer. Another specification that is soon to be released is cmi5. Working on top of xAPI, the new cmi5 standard is designed to support course packaging, installation, tracking, and LMS interoperability into the future.

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