Get Real About Selecting an LMS

Organizations often fail to define what they need their new learning management system to do before buying it, leading to dissatisfaction with the vendor and additional customization costs after the purchase. By Jennifer De Vries, CPT

According to a Brandon Hall research report published in February 2014, "Learning Management System (LMS) solutions are underperforming in the eyes of the organizations that use them. Less than half of respondents (45.5 percent) give their LMS solution high marks in terms of overall value for the price they pay. Additionally, 47.7 percent of respondents are looking to leave their current LMS platform and move to a new provider."

The Brandon Hall report cites these top reasons for dissatisfaction:
- Poor reporting features
- Difficult to use
- Poor customer support
- Out-of-date appearance
- Inability to adapt to changing needs
- Lack of mobile features

Some of these issues are legacy problems, meaning that an organization's needs or the technology changed, causing the dissatisfaction. But I've worked with organizations that use LMSs, their requests for proposals (RFPs), and LMS vendors, and I believe there is an underlying issue with the LMS purchasing process that ultimately causes a great deal of this dissatisfaction.

I frequently encounter the following scenario. An organization needs an LMS, so…
- The organization researches LMSs by doing Google searches and asking for LMS vendor recommendations.
- The organization then sends LMS vendors an RFP without speaking to anyone there about what the organization needs and why.
- The LMS vendor receives this RFP, asks a few questions, then sends a standard boilerplate proposal with a small bit of customized information based on the RFP.
- The client's decision-makers choose the proposals they like best and/or the lowest-priced ones and ask for demos.
- The LMS vendors do their standard demos and show off the uniqueness of their LMS.
- Something in one of the demos captures the decision-makers' attention, and they choose that LMS.
- After the LMS is up and running, the client discovers something it wants the LMS to do and asks the LMS vendor about it. When the LMS vendor says it can't do that function out of the box, the client is dissatisfied. The LMS vendor will charge for custom work for this type of request or add it to the ever-growing enhancement list.

So, what's wrong with this picture?

The problem is not with the LMS or the LMS vendor. I understand no one wants to blame the client, but I'm going to dare to say it: One very large problem is that the client didn't define what the organization needed the LMS to do *before* buying it.

Be a Smarter Client

So how do we solve this problem? I know that most LMS vendors truly want to satisfy their clients. And most clients just want their LMS to help them successfully manage their training function. Beyond the standard registration and progress tracking, LMS features and functions can vary widely, so the key is to find the best fit for your organization.

I believe the solution is to be a smarter client. Writing a solid set of LMS requirements requires analysis of several aspects of your organization's training needs and business processes. Those needs and processes then get translated into a set of use cases and requirements that can help you choose the best vendor to meet your specific requirements. And they also will help the vendor set up the LMS to meet your organization's training needs from day one.

To learn more about what to include in your LMS requirements to increase the chances that you will be satisfied with your LMS purchase, come to my session at the Online Learning Conference September 22-25 in Chicago. **t**

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