

The Corporate LMS Reality Check

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It is always interesting to see which elements of your work generate the greatest interest or furore. It tends to imply you've either pointed out something important, or just as likely, touched a raw nerve!

Such was the reaction to some research Elearnity published in April concerning the adoption of LMS's within large corporates. The result of many background discussions with major corporate adopters, and analysis of private roundtable discussions from our LMS Symposium event before Christmas, this analysis yielded some important and quite controversial results. The reaction to this has been interesting to say the least. As well as being picked up by the training press in Europe and the US (including e-learningAge of course!), we have also seen significant follow-up interest from corporates and vendors alike, seeking to understand our conclusions, and seeking to extract particular messages to use for their own ends. A raw nerve, or have we identified something important in the corporate LMS story? I think maybe a bit of both!

In case you missed the research findings, what we basically concluded is that large corporates are too slow in embracing LMSs and too limited in their aspiration for them. We also concluded that many corporate LMS implementations are too focused on reducing the admin burden, rather than enabling the business to meet its future challenges.

As well as the main plot line, there were also some interesting sub-plots as well, in particular:

- LMS decisions are often plagued by corporate politics, poor organisational alignment and a lack of strategic understanding and vision, resulting in long and expensive procurement processes with a limited chance of delivering real value
- Corporates struggle with a lack of skilled implementation resources and poor support, focusing too heavily on technology, and insufficiently on process and cultural change

At face value this sounds quite damning, and as I said, it's interesting to see the magnitude and the nature of the reaction these statements have provoked. The US commentators have, as often they do, chosen to interpret this as "European", as opposed to US-based corporate LMS adoption, and to use this as ammunition in their US vs. Europe war of progress.

Whilst it is true that the organisations involved in the research are UK or European based primarily, they are also FTSE100/Fortune500 companies with significant multinational presence, including in the US. Yes, we do see differences between the US and Europe regarding LMS adoption, but it is not one-way traffic. Whilst US organisations are typically faster to engage with LMS's (like most new technology), their implementations may still suffer many of the weaknesses identified, not least the focus on cost reduction of admin processes rather than truly enabling business change.

Some of the press have also chosen to use the perceived criticism of corporate adoption as a stick to beat the vendors. Whilst I too am often critical of the vendors, I think this is rather missing the point. The vendors are culpable for many issues in the LMS market, but not these ones. These issues are the domain of the corporates not the vendors, and it is important they are recognised as such.

I believe the research highlights some key flaws that need to be understood and addressed for organisations to extract the real value they need from LMS's longer-term. Firstly, like it or not, and despite all the messages to the contrary, learning & development is just not treated as strategically critical, it is seen as a tactical cost, and managed as such. The corporate ducks are just not well-enough aligned to make fundamental business change happen. Whilst in big companies, LMS projects may be

large, they are still small compared to strategic business change projects and do not get the engagement from senior business leaders needed to drive through a radical change agenda.

Couple that with the almost universal inertia of the training community, and business change becomes very difficult. But difficult doesn't mean impossible, and difficult doesn't mean it is not necessary. Our analysis indicates that the capability gap in organisations is growing. Addressing this gap requires a major shift in approach from the learning community, and effective use of LMS's are a key part of that shift – not only to streamline the learning management process, but also to ensure the integration and alignment of learning, capability and performance. LMS's need to be vehicles for change, not just transactional efficiencies!

And on a final note, to come back to the tactical nature of LMS projects; how many of you large corporates have implemented your enterprise-level LMS projects managed by people who have never implemented an enterprise LMS before? All the time we see this. A major company goes through a big procurement project with an internal team of learning, HR and IT people, with almost no experience of implementing an LMS at an enterprise level. They buy in vendor expertise, but the (internal) people directing that expertise are on a massive learning curve. And seemingly, they repeat the same mistakes or failed assumptions, time and again. Would this happen if the company truly viewed the complete success of the LMS project as mission critical? No, it wouldn't! Mission critical projects recruit mission critical experience to ensure their success. That just doesn't happen with enterprise LMS projects, regardless of all the evidence to show that these projects are complex and difficult, and frequently fail to achieve their long-term goals. Time for a corporate LMS reality check?

Elearnity is currently planning a research project looking in more detail at key issues around Learning Management Strategy and would like to hear from major corporates interested in getting involved. Key themes will include business strategy/change alignment, integrated performance, capability and learning management, and the drivers for LMS strategy. For further information on this or the above research, please contact me at davidw@elearnity.com.

See: <http://www.elearnity.com/news/ournews?070405> for the full LMS release