

“Learning Management – HRMS or LMS?”

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I have previously highlighted the frequent lack of joined-up thinking between HR, learning and knowledge management. This month, I want to take the theme on a bit further, focusing on one of the thornier issues underlying the development of integrated people and learning processes; why do I need an LMS when my HR management system says it manages learning?

Ever since the LMS vendors became early active drivers of the e-learning market a few years ago, the possible need for an LMS, has been a constant question for most large companies. Some organisations realise they cannot better manage their overall learning provision, unless they can first understand what training and learning activity they are doing today. Others, driven by specific business projects, quickly find the need to automate the management and tracking processes associated with large-scale learning activities. Either way, the question of LMS comes up eventually.

To be truly effective, the management of learning ultimately needs to be integrated into other people-related processes including people development, skills and competencies. As HR management systems (HRMS) increasingly provide functionality for managing training, organisations have become more confused about the role and overlap of the LMS versus the HRMS. This is a big question for any large company considering a corporate LMS. Answering the question is often a matter of organisational politics and funding as well as component functionality and scope.

My premise is that ‘enterprise learning management’ is a fundamental piece of the learning infrastructure jigsaw ¹ for any major company going forward. This will include:

- Management of all forms of learning including classroom training, e-learning and self-paced learning
- Management of both internal and external learning activities including management and control of budgets and costs
- Self-service access for learners across the business, tailored to the specific needs of the business, the organisation and the learner
- Automated administration, registration and approval processes
- Automated tracking of all activities with comprehensive reporting
- Integrated learning and development plans linked to competencies and skills
- Customisable interfaces, business rules and processes
- Integration with key financial, human resource and collaboration systems

By these standards, the historic training management functionality (focused on classroom training) offered by the primary HRMS products often proves to be inadequate. But justifying a large incremental expenditure on an enterprise LMS can also be problematic when the HR system says it already manages learning, and you’ve already invested a large amount of money adopting the HR system across the company.

So what should you do if you’re faced with this kind of consideration? Firstly, is to realise that resolving this problem is an issue of corporate strategy as well as functional need. Even if you can present a clear case why your HRMS cannot currently deliver the LMS functionality you need, you still have to deal with the politics of making a “non-strategic” choice, assuming the HRMS is identified as strategic that is! Many large LMS projects have foundered at this stage because a strong enough case wasn’t made.

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Secondly, understand that the main HRMS providers are all making the justification of an incremental LMS harder. Both SAP and Oracle have now released their own learning management components to complement their existing HR and training administration modules. In July 2002, PeopleSoft acquired an LMS company called Teamscape as a clear statement of intent to provide this capability as well. It may still be early days for them, but the addition of explicit LMS functionality within the integrated HR suite, makes the HR Director or CFO even more likely to try and hold firm.

The result may mean that if you do need to purchase and implement a separate LMS immediately (and lots of big companies do), the LMS project potentially takes on a more tactical nature. It may also ultimately become disposable, as the likely long term desire to move to one fully-integrated people and learning management platform becomes stronger.

But there will be an awful lot of water under the LMS bridge before you reach that point. The HRMS vendors need to prove they can develop LMS components that can offer comparable functionality to the best of breed LMS providers, who will be continually evolving their products forward. This will become an increasing challenge.

But ultimately it will come down to how you as a customer use their products. If all you use is basic management of classroom training, and launch and track of e-learning content, the HRMS products will prove more than capable of doing that fairly quickly. The more sophisticated your usage, the harder it will be replicate it in a suite. That doesn't make it impossible to move, just more challenging!

¹ "Enterprise Learning Management: LMS versus HRMS"; eLearnity. 2002