

## **Do I need an LCMS?**

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Have you ever thought you had just got to grips with the idea of maybe needing a learning management system (LMS) to replace your current training management system, only to be told that what you really need is a learning content management system? You wouldn't be alone.

Learning Content Management Systems or LCMS's aren't particularly new, but I've managed to avoid the compelling need to write about them to this point. This seems to be mainly because most people I speak too, are either not particularly aware of them, or don't seem to be too worried about them. Potentially that is changing. Not only is the confusion about LMS greater now (see previous discussions of LMS versus HR management system), but having struggled to sell their LMS's, some vendors have repositioned as LCMSs providers with a seemingly different but same story. Lot's of confusion. Welcome to acronyms are us.

So what really is an LCMS? And what's the difference between an LCMS and an LMS? In essence, the idea of an LCMS is simple; it's a system to manage learning content. The emphasis here is on the last bit, learning content. LCMS's evolved out of the recognition in some companies that they had a big problem with lots and lots of learning content, and no coherent way of managing it, finding it, maintaining it, and tracking usage of it. Sure their IT people could talk to them about content management, but these systems didn't know anything about "learning" content and their associated standards such as AICC (Aviation Industry CBT Committee), SCORM (Shareable Content Object Reference Model) and the such like. Hence the evolution of management systems for managing learning content, and the LCMS was born.

So what's the difference between an LCMS and an LMS? Well, the theoretical answer to this is simple; in practice it's a bit more complicated. As we've already seen, LCMS's are about managing learning content. LMS's on the other hand are about managing learning, or more precisely the learning process and learners. Whilst the distinction may sound clear, it definitely gets more confusing when you realise the LCMS's, managing learning content, also typically include functionality for managing learners and the learning process. And that mainstream LMS's also provide some functionality for managing learning content, in particular, by supporting content management interface standards such as AICC and SCORM.

The difference is therefore mainly one of relative emphasis (learners versus learning content), and the depth of functionality offered by the specific products in these different areas. Whilst LMS's may have some content management capabilities, the level of granularity (detail) you can go to is limited. Normally, they are enabled to call learning modules and track progress and test results. They are also very uninterested in how that content is stored, created and updated. LCMS's aren't. With an LCMS, the learning module will itself probably be a combination of a number of more detailed pieces of learning content such as individual pages or documents, media objects and so on. The LCMS manages the content at a much more detailed level, and provides the associated processes to do this properly, including version control, distribution and storage.

As well as supporting standards like AICC for managing content, LCMS's need themselves to be AICC compliant. Learning modules described and stored in an LCMS, can easily be callable by an LMS as if it was a single learning object. The interaction between the LMS and the LCMS module would therefore be tracked using the same standards. At least that's the theory. LCMS's will provide base functionality to enable learners to access learning modules and specific content, and track them, but this functionality may be limited and not a substitute for a full-blown LMS when managing learning programmes, classroom training, competencies and skills gaps and so on. Getting clearer?

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So why would I want an LCMS? Basically because you've realised that you have big problems managing large amounts of detailed learning content. This could be in terms of managing it, maintaining it, or in tracking usage of it. An LCMS will provide a comprehensive environment to manage and leverage the content assets as well as providing a way of accessing it. But once the management of learners and learning programmes itself gets to some scale and complexity, you probably need an LMS component to management them as well.

Most companies have started with the LMS and learners, and are now starting to realise they have an LCMS need to. A few started the other way around, recognising that basic learner management was OK to start with, and they had a bigger content problem. Some vendors of course, will sell you with a suite that claims it does both jobs. But I think we better leave them for now, I'm acronymed out for one day!