EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today’s landscape of learning platforms is more complex than ever. In the last three to five years, we have seen explosive growth in the number and variety of solutions for delivering learning experiences, from enterprise class on premise systems to nimble cloud solutions. From the perspective of purchasing a solution that fits your needs, having choices can be helpful. However, the sheer number of options can be overwhelming. The purpose of this guide is to provide you with a framework for navigating the complex process of identifying and selecting a learning management system. While every organization has unique needs and goals, through our work providing guidance to organizations who are selecting an LMS, we’ve developed a defined best practice to streamline the process. This process consists of three stages, each of which includes specific steps to optimize the selection and evaluation process.

Step 1: Assess – We look at the pre-work required to establish a selection team, define business requirements, and build out selection criteria to align goals and needs across the organization.

Step 2: Refine – We review the vendor landscape, establish and document requirements, and prepare a formal RFP document for use in the vendor selection process.

Step 3: Select – We review vendor proposals and demonstrations, evaluate options, and create a roadmap for successful implementation and integration.

While the process itself is relatively simple, there are specific activities and decision points that make the difference between a successful selection process and one that does not fully meet the needs of the organization. As we proceed through the LMS evaluation phases, we will highlight areas of special attention and concern to ensure a smoother selection and implementation process.

WHY BUY A LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM?

Before we dive into the selection process itself, it’s important to start with a clear understanding of why a learning management system is a valuable investment for your organization. After all, an LMS requires a substantial commitment of both time and money for your business. Before you watch a single demo, you need to have a clear goal in mind for how and why this system will be used.

In years past, training was primarily provided in either a classroom or on-the-job setting. In the first case, everyone who needed to learn something for work came together on a single day (or series of days) to sit in a room and listen to an instructor. While instructor-led training is still common and can be used successfully, it has limitations.
1. **New Hire Gaps** – Instructor-led training is only efficient if you get a large group of people together at once. However, in between annual or semi-annual training sessions, new employees are hired, or people are promoted, and there can be a gap between when they start and when training is offered again.

2. **Productivity Issues** – Training in-person often means pulling everyone out of their day-to-day roles to attend the session. This means that for an entire day (or more), a selection of resources is completely unavailable. This can push back deliverables, and frustrate coworkers who need information or collaboration to move forward.

3. **Retention Problems** – Despite the best intentions, learning in the classroom often fades away and is forgotten within just a few weeks of people returning to their daily work habits.

4. **Tracking and Analysis** – While a sign-in list is great for knowing who was in the room for a training session, it doesn’t tell us much about what was learned. Paper systems and basic tracking solutions can’t provide the robust analytics and professional development tracking that is in demand in today’s environment.

As technology has evolved, so have learning solutions. Today we still see and utilize instructor-led training for specific goals and purposes. However, in many situations, online or blended learning provides a far better solution to deliver new information in a timely way. Online learning can be accessed immediately by new hires and people changing jobs. Because it can be delivered anytime, individuals can schedule their learning sessions around their work. And, with micro learning and personalized learning solutions, the instruction can be tailored to maximize retention.

To access these benefits and advances in learning science, a learning management system is necessary. E-learning and blended learning solutions are hosted and accessed via the LMS. Professional development and individual plans can be far more easily managed and shared via the reporting options of the learning system opposed to paper tracking or spreadsheets.

Simply put, a learning management system enables the development and delivery of today’s talent management, which is why there is such strong demand across industries and organizations of all sizes to select an LMS solution that’s right for the business. While we are often asked which LMS is the “right” one or the “best” one, there is no easy answer. Because there are so many options, and because each organization has different needs, goals, and budgets, the right solution is different for each organization. By following the process outlined in this guide, you will be able to identify and select the solution that meets your unique needs and goals.
PROCESS OVERVIEW

Selecting an LMS is similar to selecting any business critical software solutions. It begins with assembling a team of stakeholders and evaluating business needs. It then ideally proceeds through a business analysis and RFP process, a review of proposals and demonstrations, and finally the selection and integration of a solution.

As we have partnered with organizations to facilitate this process, we start with an overview of each stage to set expectations around the process.

Understanding how the selection process plays out is important for two reasons. First, it acts as a guide for activities around the evaluation of products and solutions, which is helpful for planning. Second, it provides an expectation management tool for communicating with organizational leadership, and other resources who are outside of the selection team. This overview serves as a roadmap for the process and can be tied to a timeline to clarify when and how the selection process will proceed.
In the first phase of the learning management system selection process, we define the scope of the project within the organization. The following checklist outlines the key steps in this process.

- Core Team Definition
- Stakeholder Identification
- Goals Definition
- Resource Alignment

The core team consists of those individuals who will be actively involved in the entire selection and evaluation process. This team should include representation from the leadership of the Learning and Development group, the IT department, HR, Finance, and Operations. Depending on the size and scope of your organization, this team may include other organizational leaders including Sales, Customer Support, Engineering, and/or Production.

In addition to the core team, it is key to identify the wider pool of stakeholders and supporters who will be impacted by the selection of the LMS. While they will not participate in every aspect of the selection process, their opinions and needs are critical to the development of use cases and business requirements.

Once the teams are assembled, the first active step in the process is to define the business goals of the selection process. In some organizations, the selection of a learning management system is primarily an internal initiative to support learning and development. However, in other companies, the system will support revenue generation from outside the organization, and will support clients and prospects. Clearly defining the function and purpose the proposed solution will fulfill, as well as the primary needs and goals of the business units that will utilize the system is a key step.

The final step in the first phase is resource alignment. To successfully execute the selection and integration of a learning management system, resources must be clearly defined. These may include financial resources and budget allocations, technology resources and support, as well as human capital resources. It is important to consider not only the selection of the LMS in this phase, but also the resources required to develop and administer the course content that the system will ultimately host.

Once the initial scope has been defined and stakeholders are engaged, the next step in the process is to assess the needs of the organization, and to build a set of core requirements to guide the evaluation process.
NEEDS ASSESSMENT

As we mentioned in the previous section, different businesses utilize learning management systems in different ways. Whether you intend to use the solution to train and develop your internal staff, to deliver services to your customers, or to sell learning solutions outside of your organization, you will need to document and define the use cases and needs. Here are just a few examples of specific needs and uses.

- Internal Users
- External Users
- eCommerce
- Support for Multiple Currencies
- Mobile Learner Support
- Support for Multiple Languages
- Integration with Existing Systems (ERP, CRM, etc.)
- Analytics and Reporting
- Technical Architecture (On Premise or Cloud Based)
- Customizability

LMS solutions come in many different shapes and sizes, from off the shelf, cloud based products that can be setup in just a few hours to fully customizable, integrated solutions that connect to enterprise systems. Some solutions come with built-in capabilities for mobile users or for ecommerce. Others require custom development to build in these options. In the first phase of the needs assessment, the goal is to compile a comprehensive list of the needs of the users, administrators, and stakeholders in the process. The main activities in this phase are the functional and technical requirements assessment.
TECHNICAL ASSESSMENT

When considering the technical requirements of a learning management system, there are several key factors to consider.

- Architecture – Is the solution hosted by you or is it cloud based?
- Compatibility – Does the solution integrate with other systems?
- Bandwidth – What is required for learners to access the content?
- Content Format – How is content created and uploaded?
- Support/Administration – What is the process for support and technical administration?
- Security – Does you need, and does the system support, data security, encryption, auditing, etc.

These are some of the baseline technical questions that should be considered on the technology side. For highly regulated industries that need to consider compliance with regulations and privacy concerns, it’s important to have a compliance resource as part of the core team, and to ensure that all needs are met throughout the integration process.

In addition to questions of how and where the system is located, you will also need to clearly understand how the content is stored and protected in the event of a business disruption. If you will be selling courses to customers, you’ll want to inquire about payment processing solutions and compliance around storage and transmission of payment information.

The technical aspects of a learning management system implementation can be quite complex. The larger your organization, the more likely that this system will need to be part of the larger ecosystem of services and solutions providing business services.
FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT

Once the technical criteria for the system have been established, you will also need to assess and document the functional needs of the system. Here are a few examples of functional specifications that should be considered when selecting a learning management system.

- Certificates – Should the system provide certificates of completion or transcripts?
- Knowledge Checks – Will there be quizzes or tests delivered to learners? If so, in what format?
- Uploads and Assignments – Will learners be submitting homework or other deliverables into the system?
- Media – Should the system support video, audio, or other types of media content?
- Prerequisites – Does the LMS need to track pre-requisites or course tracks?
- Printing Security – Can students print the materials that are part of the course or displayed on the screen?
- Classroom Assignment – Will you offer blended learning or other types of courses where you need to assign classrooms?
- Class Size Restrictions – If learners are self-enrolling, is there a class size limit?

These are just a few of the hundreds of features and functions that learning management systems offer. The more thorough you are in establishing a consolidated list of features, the more easily you will be able to narrow the landscape of prospective solutions. While this can be time consuming and detailed, it is one of the most important elements of the assessment phase.
OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Once you’ve completed the technical and functional specifications of the system, it’s tempting to feel like you’re almost done. However, there are several other needs to document to help ensure that your selected solution meets the needs of all parts of your organization.

**Analytics:** Reporting is a core value of a learning management system, and while almost all solutions will list that they offer reporting functionality, it’s critical to understand what you need to measure, and whether those reports come with the system, need to be created on a custom basis, or are not possible to create at all. Cloud based solutions often come with built-in reports; however they may not be fully customizable. Enterprise solutions may not have a reporting functionality built in, and may rely on integrations with external data analysis tools.

**Compliance:** Depending on your industry and business practices, you will have a unique set of compliance requirements that need to be met by all systems in your organization. Most LMS solutions offer options to comply with a variety of regulations, including privacy and security measures, data encryption functions, accessibility options, audit trails, and other features. However, it is often up to the purchaser to configure those options in such a way that they maintain the levels of security and reporting that are required for their specific needs.

**ROI:** While we would all like to select products and solutions based solely on their ability to perform at the highest level, budgets often dictate how closely the ultimate solution aligns with the ideal platform. Learning management systems can play a revenue generating role in some organizations, but typically they are considered part of the cost of attracting, retaining, and developing talent. In evaluating the needs and goals of the organization, it is often useful to create a business case or financial justification to describe how the learning management system will improve efficiency and benefit the organization from a financial and operational perspective.
REFINE

REVIEW VENDOR LANDSCAPE

The assessment phase of the selection process is largely an internal assessment of needs and goals, as well as resources and a team to execute on the second and third phases of the process. As you move into the second phase, it’s time to turn to the external perspective and survey the landscape of vendors and solutions.

The number and variety of learning management system and related platform vendors has grown exponentially over the last five years. Where once there were just a few choices, today there are literally hundreds. The first challenge in evaluating the vendor landscape is curating the available options based on the needs you have defined.

The largest LMS vendors in the corporate space are:

- SumTotal (Skillsoft)
- Saba
- Meridian
- IBM Smarter Workforce
- SuccessFactors (SAP)
- Learn Cloud (Oracle)
- Cornerstone OnDemand

In the education sector, the largest vendors are:

- Blackboard
- Brightspace (formerly Desire2Learn)
- Moodle
- Canvas
- Sakai

While these are the largest, there are a variety of other players, particularly in the cloud and ecommerce space.

- Absorb
- Litmos
- DigitalChalk
- Accord
- Ziiva Prosperity
- LearningZen
When thinking about narrowing the landscape in order to create an initial list, the most important factors include your industry (education or corporate), system architecture (servers onsite or a cloud-based solution), and integration capabilities.

**DOCUMENT PROCESSES**

An important step in the selection process is a thorough documentation of the processes that will be impacted or transformed by the learning management system implementation. Typically, these processes touch a variety of departments and roles. These process documents can take the form of use cases at a high level, and then can be expanded into detailed, step-by-step procedures.

Example Use Case:

New Hire in Marketing

The marketing department hires approximately five new hires each year into entry level roles. A newly hired employee in the marketing group will use the LMS for the following purposes:

- Welcome/Onboarding Courses
- Marketing and Sales Department Overview and Introduction
- Social Media Best Practices Training
- Ongoing Professional Development

**Technical Pre-Requisites**

To gain access to these courses, the learner will need to do the following:

1. Login to the system using their system access credentials.
2. View the course catalog and see the courses they are scheduled to take.
3. Access the courses based on their role within the organization.
4. Complete the courses.
5. Receive a certificate of completion.
6. See the courses in a transcript.
7. Receive an automated notification of the completion of each course which is also delivered to the new-hire’s supervisor

Use cases typically need to be created by role within the system, so in this case we are looking at the learner role. Other common roles would include administrator, course author, analyst (for reporting) and others.

Using these scenario and function-based use cases allow you and your team to identify in detail what features are necessary, where points of integration with other systems need to be configured, and what levels of access and permissions are required within the system.
PREPARE RFP

Compiling use cases and an understanding of how the system will be used is the first step in preparing a formal request for proposals that you can submit to vendors once you have narrowed the field, and identified your specific organizational needs. The RFP will define the scope and functionality you seek, as well as clear specifications around your architecture and infrastructure goals.

The RFP finalization stage marks the end of the second phase of the learning management system selection process. At this point you should have your full decision team assembled, including stakeholders, critical decision-makers, any consultants you have selected to facilitate this process, and any other external vendors who may be involved in the support or development of solutions for the learning management system.

It is also worth mentioning here that most learning management systems are just that, systems. They are platforms designed to host, deliver, and measure learning content. They do not typically come with any courses or content pre-made. As such, this is also an important time to consider when and how course content will be developed for the system, to achieve the larger goals of the learning strategy.
SHORTLIST VENDORS

In the final stage of the learning management selection process, it’s time to narrow the long list of vendors who were invited to respond to the RFP. This may take several rounds. It can be valuable to utilize a selection rubric or matrix and have various individuals from the selection committee refine the selection down to 3-5 finalists.

There are several ways to narrow the field. First and foremost, you can typically eliminate outliers from a pricing perspective. If there are vendors whose solutions are either an order of magnitude higher or lower in price than the others, they should typically be eliminated. Further, any vendors who clearly did not respond to all elements of the RFP, or whose responses show that they do not clearly meet minimum requirements or capabilities should be removed from contention.

Once the obvious outliers have been weeded out, the more challenging aspect of finalist selection begins. We recommend creating a score sheet or other rubric, including a variety of elements that are considered critical to the project. Using this scoring system, each member of the team should evaluate proposals separately, and then submit their scores to the project leader, or another designated resource. At this point, you should begin to see clearly which vendors seem to have the most promising potential to provide a solution that meets or exceeds the needs of the organization.

These reviews can be done with or without pricing information, although if a strict budget applies to the project, it’s a good idea to remove any proposals that are already over that budget prior to beginning this elimination round.

Finally, once the shortlist has been developed, you can move to invite the vendors who are most promising to offer presentations and demonstrations to help finalize your decision.

PRESENTATION EVALUATION

As you invite vendors to present, it will be important to request and guide any demos. While all vendors will be able to showcase their product to great effect, it’s less important that you see the bells and whistles. Based on your use cases and key needs identified in the functional and technical requirements, you should request that the demo cover the specific activities that are critical to your selection process.

As with the proposal evaluation, a rubric and scoring system can be an important tool. Whether you choose to involve the same resources to review demos as you did with proposals, or choose to invite a larger selection committee, you should provide a scoring system. You may want to include a group discussion process before or after each demo to compare notes. Ideally, scores should be submitted individually.
Depending on the number of finalists you have in the presentation phase, it may be helpful to narrow your choices down to a final two, and then request a more detailed demonstration of specific differentiators.

### SELECT A PARTNER

After all of the proposals and demos have been reviewed, it’s finally time to make a selection. At this point, your choice may be clear – you may have found in going through this selection process that you can see exactly which product and vendor is the best fit for your needs. It’s important to consider, however, that to this point you have been in the sales process. As such, you’ve been seeing the very best that each tool and system can offer.

When selecting a partner to work with you on a learning management system integration, keep in mind that this truly should be a partnership. You will be working closely with both the vendor, their integration team, and their product for an extended period of time. As such, you should be certain that you have 100% confidence that the product you choose, and the team that supports it, is going to be a strong partner with your organization for the future. Beyond the proposals and demonstration review process, there are several other ways to evaluate vendors as prospective partners.

- Check References
- Interview Integration Resources
- Request a Sandbox or Temporary Live Demo to Test Integration and Functionality
- Due Diligence of the Vendor’s Business Stability

While most organizations will give you their best clients as references, there is quite a bit that can be learned through talking to someone who has been through the integration process. Take the time to make those phone calls and ask as many questions as you can about how the process evolved, how they responded to challenges, and what surprises or lessons-learned emerged along the way.

The day-to-day support staff and integration team will be your points of contact throughout the actual implementation and use of your learning management system. While many organizations include some representation of the integration team during the demos or proposals, it’s important to identify and engage with the resources who will be supporting you over the longer term.

Static pictures and live demonstrations can only tell you so much about how a system will work. While the answer in the sales process is almost always “yes we can do that”, it’s helpful to see the reality of how to create content, take courses, and utilize the system. Requesting a demo area where you can create or take a course, as well as getting a more detailed look at how any integrations will work is also an important stage. While you won’t want to do this with 5-10 vendors, when you have narrowed your choice to the final one or two, this is an important step.
Finally, do your homework on the company itself. While startups can be great in terms of having innovative products and solutions, if their business is not yet stable, or if their product line may evolve in some way away from your needs, they may not be the right choice. Similarly, while established organizations may have a more stable product, they may not have new features on the roadmap, or be able to be responsive to your changing needs. Taking a close look at each vendor can help you avoid surprises in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

In today’s rapidly evolving landscape, delivering learning solutions quickly and at scale is more important than ever. A learning management system is an important resource for many organizations to do just that. However, the landscape of products and solutions has been expanding rapidly over the last few years. New players and technologies have come into the marketplace, and new theories on learning are changing how systems deliver content.

While selecting a system can be complex, with the right process and a clear understanding of the needs and goals of your organization, you will be in a better position to be successful. If your needs are complex, or you don’t have the internal capacity to facilitate the selection of a learning management solutions, why not work with the experts?

CoreAxis has deep expertise in providing LMS selection services to a broad cross section of industries and organizations. Our experience in guiding businesses through this complex process has allowed us to develop a repeatable, scalable and measurable process by which to evaluate LMS vendors. This process is truly end-to-end, from the phase of generating an organization’s requirements, creating scoring rubrics, long and short listing, crafting scripted vendor demos, and developing custom recommendations tailored to your needs.