

# Learning Management System (LMS)

The Foundation of Your Training Initiative

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## LMS: The Foundation of Your Training Initiative

In today's environment, your learning and development department must be many things to many people. Managing that environment may have become difficult, but Learning Management Systems are making all facets of training management more efficient-and easier. In this series, we are going to examine the Learning Management System as the foundation of your training initiative, so let's look at the basics first.

You may have seen or heard terms relating to learning management, like LMS or LCMS, or content management. To begin with, an LMS is a Learning Management System, while and LCMS is a Learning Content Management System. Both provide virtually the same services with one major exception: content development. An LCMS usually has a content development "engine", which allows you and your staff to develop eLearning content in the system and have it available for delivery fairly quickly. So what are the available features with Learning Management Systems? Keep in mind, we will discuss each of these features in detail in this series.

One of the main features of an LMS is the ability to deliver online learning interventions to your audiences, wherever they may be. The content you deliver may be your own, developed internally, or it may be outsourced from another vendor, or even outsourced from the LMS vendor. This standard delivery ensures that every learner is seeing the same content, being tested on the same outcomes, and learning in the same environment. Along with this, as we've

discussed, an LCMS allows you to create content, many times in a rapid development process. This allows you to deliver content quickly when it's necessary.

An LMS can track training for you, as well. This comes in especially handy when you need to show that a certain audience has attended training, such as regulatory courses. This is also helpful to managers who are interested in their employees' career paths. Along those lines, your LMS can "store" career paths for different job groups, and assign training and activities to those career paths. So an employee who wants to move from one level to another can manage the educational and development requirements of his or her career directly from the LMS. Plus, your LMS may even be able to remind employees when it's time to take a class.

An LMS is not limited to online learning, either. Keep in mind that the scheduling and notifications part of your LMS can also be used for instructor-led training. As long as the schedule is inputted into the system, it will be managed. Instructors can typically pull class rosters in advance of the class, record attendance, and even record grades. Imagine the money you can save on materials if instructors can plan fairly accurately ahead of time. You can also manage your facilities using the LMS and its scheduling. For example, you can keep track of each training room, its features, its seating capacity, and its operation via the LMS. If something occurs that makes a room unavailable, you can keep track of this in the LMS.

So who provides LMS and LCMS services? There are numerous vendors out there, including Learn.com, CapitalLMS, GeoLearning, Registrar,

Joomla, and Blackboard to name a few. Your choice of LMS provider is going to have much to do with how you want to use your LMS, what costs you're willing to pay, and what features are available. We won't discuss doing your due diligence on LMS providers in this series, so it may be wise to put together an advisory committee of your organization's training personnel, executives who need to buy-in, stakeholders, and audiences in order to come up with a wish list and review vendors. The worst thing you can do is pick a system that is just not going to work for your organization and its learners.

Why is the LMS the foundation of your learning initiative? As you can see, an LMS is a broad-based management tool for your learning and development organization. In our next few discussions, we will elaborate on the major features of LMS Systems and help you to determine how the system can be a major part of your learning initiatives.

### **LMS: Content Development, Delivery, and Management**

One of the most effective abilities of an LMS relates to your online learning content. Your LMS can help you not only to deliver and manage content, but also to develop it. And it typically does not matter what the source of the content is; most LMS vendors provide pathways for their own content, your internally developed content, and externally licensed content, as well.

First, content development can be an important part of your learning initiative. Suppose you've decided to develop your own eLearning content. Without a content authoring tool, provided by and LMS, you'll have to develop courses in HTML or using another content

authoring software, and then package the courses into SCORM-compliant formats. Although this may be a preferred way of doing things, an LCMS that provides content authoring can cut this process down in time and cost. With a content authoring tool, your edited content becomes course-ready as it's being created in the system. In this way, it also becomes ready to deliver upon completion. In some organizations, both Instructional Designers and Subject Matter Experts have access to content authoring. However you do it, content development via and LCMS allows you to provide rapid deployment for just-in-time initiatives, plus the ability to customize and brand the content to your organization and its various audiences.

Delivery of online content is also a big part of an LMS, and thus a major underpinning of your learning initiatives. First, any externally licensed courseware you have can typically be set up and delivered through your LMS. Without the LMS, participants may access the vendor's website directly. With the LMS, they are staying "inside" your organization and being funneled almost seamlessly to the external content.

Some LMS vendors may also provide a content library of their own. Generally, content is generic but covers many areas, such as customer service, management, communications, and leadership. You can have appropriate audiences access this content, as well. Plus, any content you have developed internally, whether it is LMS-authored or built outside of the LMS, can be delivered to your audiences via their login. In this way, any associate who has access to the LMS can log in, take courses, bookmark, return, and sign up for other courses. The delivery arm of an LMS is truly indispensable.

Content management is also a major plus with a Learning Management System. Your LMS allows you to decide who gets access to what courses. Then, you can create notifications and reminders to take the courses. For example, certain groups may need certain regulatory training that has to be completed on a deadline. You can have the LMS send notifications at various points throughout the timeline, without bothering associates who do not need that particular course or program. The LMS vendor's library is also part of content management. You can "open up" selected courses to selected groups, based on their career paths or current positions. Many of these vendor-provided courses can be used as additional training, corrective training, or even professional development.

Content management also includes control over content, even externally licensed content. For example, suppose you've decided to develop your own course in place of an externally licensed one. When you've got the internally developed course ready to go, you can "turn off" access to the external course. This way, everyone is going to the right course. In terms of internally developed courseware, you can easily take these courses down, edit or change them, and put them back up fairly seamlessly. This also gives you a great ability to update content to keep it fresh, relevant, and appropriate to its audiences. But if it isn't you can also repurpose content efficiently.

Content development, delivery, and management are a large part of the training organization's responsibilities. An LMS or LCMS can make these aspects efficient, cost effective, and quick when necessary, so an LMS provides a solid foundation for the content management portion of your learning initiative.

## **LMS: Training Management**

Your LMS can manage various aspects of your training life cycle as well as content. Consider how much manual management is involved with curriculum development and management, career-pathing, certifications, testing, and evaluation. With an LMS, once these items are in place you can allow the system to manage and track all of them. Let's look at each of these functions a little more closely.

In relation to curricula, the LMS enables you to build curricula based on business unit, position, or other criteria, and then place each curriculum on the system. When someone is hired or moves into a position, he or she will get access to that curriculum. From there, each learner, and his or her manager, can work on completing courses and learning interventions that better prepare them for the job. Some organizations may even have multiple curricula for one person. For example, your organization may require every employee to go through "basic training" in your industry or company. Then, you may have a curriculum that goes with that person's job or job group. Your LMS helps you manage all of these.

You can also create career paths in addition to curricula. A career path can show a potential candidate the professional and educational development that is needed to prepare for the next level. And the LMS can track and manage that career path, as well. For example, your organization may have positions that require further education, licensing, or internal education before a person can be considered for the job. But along with this comes the ease of management for the learning organization and the stakeholders. For example, if your stakeholder decides to add a new educational

requirement or professional development item, you can easily add it to the career path as it currently exists. This is another great example of seamless changes that can be accomplished within your LMS.

Your LMS can track and manage certification programs, as well. This is much like a curriculum but is more targeted within job groups. For example, people in certain jobs may need to be certified to carry out specific duties. Or, you may want to certify for merit increases or job level increases. Whatever the purpose of your certification, you can create the certification "path" on the LMS and track it. In addition, the employee and his or her manager can keep tabs of the certification process, as well. Some LMS systems even issue completion certificates for courses or tasks, which is an added incentive to employees and managers alike.

Testing is another training management function for the LMS. Imagine how much time your learning and development organization spends on recreating, scoring, and recording tests. With the LMS, you can input tests for both OLT and ILT interventions and let the system score and record the score. You can set minimum passing scores that will tell the participant whether he or she is allowed to re-test. The testing engine of an LMS ensures the follow-through of knowledge consistency, that each person is being tested on exactly the same outcomes. In ILT testing, the instructor can easily place participants on computers in the classroom.

But testing goes beyond OLT and ILT. You can also create pre-testing or test-out options using the LMS. For example, some corporate universities offer "test outs" for certain levels of knowledge and experience, much like a college CLEP test. If a learner is able to pass a pre-test,

he or she is sometimes exempted from the course or task requirement. If this is the case with your organization, you can create pre-tests and let the system track and score them, just like a post-test.

Finally, your LMS can handle evaluation of training, especially the first few levels. For example, your level one evaluations for both ILT and OLT can be handled via the LMS. When a participant completes a course, he or she is automatically placed into an evaluation. But what about higher level evaluations? You can create them on the LMS and then send participants a notification to go to the evaluation, much like a course notification. This functionality allows you to evaluate learners, supervisors, or colleagues at certain points after the training intervention.

Next, we will examine tracking and reporting via the learning management system.

### **LMS: Tracking, Notifications, and Reporting**

Your Learning Management System can be used as a valuable tracking tool, not just for the training and development department but also for employees, managers, and even executives. Most LMS systems provide you with tracking features, but some also include notification and reporting features, so that nothing is lost in the shuffle of a large training initiative or a push to complete required training within a certain time period. Let's look at some ways you can employ these features.

On the tracking side, your LMS is first a tool for learners. Once they know how to use the system, a learner can log in, determine where he or she is on a career path, an assigned curriculum, or a certification program, and make adjustments for completion. In this way, the LMS data serves as a self-management tool

for careers and development. But the employee can also maintain the tracking data to be used as a record when he or she is up for a performance appraisal, merit increase, or promotion. In addition, if your organization employs required training programs on a regular basis, the employee can also use this record to prove that he or she has completed required training. From this standpoint, the LMS and its data is a retention tool. After all, an employee who can manage his or her own development may be more likely to stay with an organization.

When you input career paths or curricula into the system, you can assign timeframes or completion dates. For example, the curriculum for a level one employee may say that he or she needs to complete a certain core of courses within the first 120 days after employment or promotion into the position. Your LMS can track this and send an appropriate notification to that employee, reminding him or her via email that there is a deliverable coming up. Plus, you can link the employee directly to the login with this notification, making it easy for him or her to complete the intervention or mark it as finished in a timely manner.

On the other side of the notification feature, the LMS can remind managers of important deliverables or dates, as well. Suppose your organization must have certain regulatory or product training completed within a certain amount of time each year. The LMS can send a notification to managers to remind them of the deadline, and the managers can then determine if their employees have completed the training.

Reporting is another important feature for the LMS-and for anyone who uses it, including training and development. Many LMS systems have "point and click" reporting, that allows you

custom build a report based on your own selected criteria. From the training administration side, you or your LMS administrator can pull reports that detail course completions, grades, or pass-fails, for any of your training initiatives, including special programs like compliance or new products. Administrative reporting that you may find helpful can include course attendance, course evaluations, location evaluations, and number of completions per course. This data provides you with immediate information on how a particular course, whether online or instructor-led, is being evaluated, as well as how well it is being attended. The conclusions you draw from your reporting may help save the organization money on programs that are not quite on target at a given time.

Your organization's managers can pull reports for their employees, as well. Typically they can use the same interface you use to pull reports, so that you're all using the same selection criteria. A manager can pull a report on how individuals or employee groups are progressing on career paths, curricula, or required training. If they have the tools to do it, managers can proactively manage training deadlines, especially for regulatory or required training, which is another good reason why the LMS is so important. On the other hand, managers can use reports just as employees can when it comes to performance appraisal, promotions, coaching, disciplinary actions, and even human resources issues.

If the LMS data is properly inputted upon its inception, the tracking, notification, and reporting features can serve as valuable tools for everyone in the organization. Next, let's look at how your LMS can benefit your external customers.

## LMS: External Customer Service

A Learning Management System can be a valuable tool for not only your internal customers, but also your external customers. Consider with whom your organization does business. Do you have clients or customers who purchase your products or services, such as machines, software, or business processes? Do you have suppliers, vendors, or contractors who need to be aware of how your organization does business? What about partner organizations? Do you share business or process with other organizations? All of these questions can help you determine who your external customers are-and how you can employ your LMS to help them.

First, let's look at one of the more obvious LMS features when it comes to external customers: training delivery. Suppose you have new process initiatives, new products, or upgrades to existing products, like software. You can use your LMS to link customers directly to your training via notifications. In fact, why not set up curricula or course "cores" for your clients? This could be an excellent sales tool: consider the impact when the sales team can say, "and here's your customized training plan for our products". If your courses and data are set up correctly, your customers can manage their training just like you do via your LMS. And remember that you can also schedule training that may not be delivered via the LMS, such as Webinars or classroom training, via your LMS. Some organizations look at their customers as simply another learner group within the organization's existing family. Why not carry this into the training and development function using an LMS?

If you have a top-notch training and development function, why not consider

packaging and selling industry-related training to other organizations? For example, if your customer service program is an evaluated and proven success, you could "generalize" the courses, develop them for LMS delivery, and sell the package to organizations that provide the same level and style customer service as you do. If you have an LCMS, you can develop and deliver packaged courses that are ready to deploy via the client's LMS. Or, just as your externally licensed vendors create training and deliver it through your LMS, you can do the same thing.

If you use the LMS to deliver training to customers and clients, could you also use it to deliver to prospective clients? A short online piece about your company, its products, and its culture could be something that is delivered to prospects after their first contact. Your marketing department can develop something that goes a little further than the information on the company website-and the LMS can deliver it. This is an added touch that can "train" prospects on what to expect.

If your organization uses contractors, vendors, or suppliers, the LMS can take a role in their training, as well. Perhaps a contractor or vendor needs to take a short course on the terms of their contracts, non-disclosure agreements, or non-compete contracts. Or maybe it could be something as simple as the invoicing and payment process. The idea here is that you can deliver training via the LMS to this population segment and ensure that they are all getting the same information. Your organization's suppliers can fall into the same field-a short online course can educate key people on your organization and its supply chain processes. The supplier can record completion and also have a quick reference for future use.

Another external area could be partner organizations. For example, airlines "code share" with each other, an arrangement where they share flight routes and passengers. If your organization partners with others in this way, you could use your LMS to deliver training to them, as well. Again, it's a great way to get everyone on the same playing field.

The good thing about using your LMS for external customers is that you can control how much access and the types of access these audiences have. If you just need to deliver a ten-minute training program to vendors, this is the only access they will have. But if you want to allow customer managers to pull reports to see who has completed training, you can also grant that type of access.

If your organization has audiences that fall into any of these categories, your LMS can have a direct impact on your interaction with them. Next, we will look at scheduling and facilities management via your LMS.

### **LMS: Scheduling and Facilities Management**

When you bring your Learning Management System online, you can say goodbye to hand-written schedule books and inputting class lists in Outlook and Excel. Your LMS manages scheduling and facilities, and provides information and data that is easily accessible, just like reporting and tracking. Let's look at how you can use the LMS to become efficient in scheduling and facilities management.

First, consider scheduling on the highest level, that is, scheduling classroom training. If your organization only uses a couple of rooms in one location, this may not seem like a great leap forward. But if your organization manages

multiple training rooms in more than one location, the scheduling "arm" of an LMS can change the way you manage training and development. The LMS can most likely hold information about each of the training rooms, its equipment, its seating capacity, and even its classroom style, i.e. technical or soft skills / seminar. Anyone in the organization that has access to this feature can see the training room availability and plan accordingly.

The other piece of scheduling involves managing instructors and facilitators, and this can sometimes be the worst part of the management function. The LMS will probably allow you to set up instructor profiles that show who is qualified in what areas. From these profiles, you or your administrator can plug instructors in to the classroom schedule as it develops-or as it changes, which is usually a given. The instructors can record their attendance and grades, and this by default creates a record that the instructor has taught the class. From this data, you can pull reports on instructor usage to see which ones are in the classrooms, for what lengths of time, and as a percentage of their time. You can use this information to manage instructor scheduling and have the same information at your fingertips when and if scheduling and availability changes.

Facilities management is another area of effectiveness for a Learning Management System. If your organization is one of those with multiple locations and rooms, you may frequently use those rooms for other events or meetings in addition to training. If you filter this schedule through training and development, either the administrator or other department admins can have access to room availability immediately. The LMS can also track who is using what rooms and for what purposes, which

can be helpful if another area is using training rooms on a regular basis. As most of us know, new initiatives come around whether we are ready or not, so if you have one that is classroom based, you can plan facilities easily and from one computer, instead of using multiple methods.

Some Learning Management Systems may also have a notes or comments feature in relation to facilities, which would allow for more efficient facilities management. For example, an instructor can leave a note about computer stations that aren't working or the fact that the LCD projector needs a replacement bulb. If you or your LMS administrator keep tabs of this, you'll be able to schedule maintenance as it's reported, instead of changing classrooms or facilities at the last minute.

You can use the reporting feature in facilities management, as well. For example, you may be able to determine that a particular facility is not being used. From there, you can either schedule it or recommend its removal. When you consider the abilities of the LMS from this angle, you can also imagine how you may be able to save organizational funds through effective facilities use.

There is one important thing to remember when you are looking at scheduling and reporting: the information and data that the LMS produces is only as good as what data goes into it. So when you or your administrator are inputting data, be sure that it is the latest and most accurate information available.

Next, we will look at the LMS as a new media tool.

## **LMS: The LMS as Social Media**

Social media is a big part of our lives, and it is the future of learning and development. The Internet and social media allow people to blog, tweet, collaborate, post video and content, discuss, and even rate experiences. Training and development should be ready to embrace these things and use them constructively as part of the learning framework. In fact, you may start to see a newer term in relation to Learning Management Systems: SLMS, or Social Learning Management System.

Depending on your vendor, new media features may be part of your LMS. Or, you may choose to create applications internally and apply them as part of the LMS. Some organizations may even make the learning open source, that is, part of Facebook or Twitter. However you incorporate social media, you should first and foremost create a culture that supports social media. In other words, get buy-in on the use of social media from stakeholders and audiences. And if you use it, find a way to both monitor information and measure its effectiveness. Let's discuss some social media interactions that you can incorporate into your Social Learning Management System.

Discussion threads are a good way to encourage learners to share experiences both before and after training. For example, an instructor can post a question or topic that is related to the course outcomes, and have learners discuss it based on what they've encountered on the job since the training. Alternatively, the discussion can begin before the program, allowing a measurement of where participants are before the training starts. Be sure that the instructor moderates the discussion to ensure that any information imparted by the participants is accurate.

Blogs can also be used in the same manner as discussion threads. In fact, a blog can be a little more creative. For example, use the blog to post a pre-course thought or statement and have participants add their comments. Again, this is also something that can be used after training. From the blog, the instructor can determine what items are the most discussed and debated, and tailor learning to meet that need. After training, the instructor-moderator can examine the blog data to determine what issues exist in the work environment versus those that can be affected in the training environment.

Online collaboration is another tool within the concept of SLMS. A project can be just the right intervention after a training course has taken place, allowing participants to apply what they learned in a classroom environment. On the other side of this, participants can take what they've learned on the job and apply it to the project. In addition, an online collaboration project allows for further interaction among class members and the instructor, which sets up a culture of lifelong learning and interaction.

A final example of social learning is an instant Q&A section. Quick Reference Guides (QRG's) are a great tool and should remain a part of

your training and development framework. But imagine the use of an online, real-time question and answer section where participants can post questions and get answers right away. This not only encourages a network between learners, but also provides information that the training team may have missed. This is another example of the monitoring that should take place in a social media environment. And again, many social media tools like these may be purely experimental at your organization.

Whatever you choose to do in relation to social media and your LMS, run a pilot program first, using a small portion of a larger audience. See how things go before you roll it out to the organization as a whole. And be aware that some things may work and some things may not.

In this series, we've looked at the Learning Management System as the foundation of your training initiatives. With the potential for content management, development, and delivery, training management, tracking, notifications, reporting, scheduling, facilities management, and social media, a Learning Management System is not only the foundation of your training initiatives, it is a necessity for efficient training management.

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Bryant Nielson – Strategic Alliance & Acquisitions Director at [Financial Training Solutions](#) a division of [CapitalWave Inc](#) – offers 20+ years of training and talent management for executives, business owners, and top performing sales executives in taking the leap from the ordinary to extraordinary. Bryant is a trainer, business & leadership coach, and strategic planner for many sales organizations. Bryant's 27 year business career has been based on his results-oriented style of empowering.





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