Open Source VS Commercial LMS

motivelearning

Open Source or Commercial LMS?

As eLearning becomes a more prevalent delivery method for business training, Learning Management Systems (LMS) are becoming more important to businesses as platforms for course registration, content storage, delivery, assessments, and reporting completion of eLearning courses. According to a 2010 survey by Learning Circuits, American Society for Training and Development's (ASTD) online magazine, 90 percent of respondents are using LMSs in their organization. This proves that organizations focused on learning and per-formance improvement use Learning Management Systems as a main component of their training strategy.

There are two competing LMS choices available: a commer-cial LMS or a license-free open source solution. Businesses today are finding themselves asking, "Which type is best for our needs?" Unfortunately there is no clear-cut answer without careful analysis. Deciding which solution is best depends on a variety of factors including training plan and budget, IT resources, on-going support and maintenance, security and industry best practice.

As a commercial LMS provider, we are often asked, "Why should I pay for something I can get for free?" Good ques-tion. Our short answer is "Nothing is for free."

Our long answer is the basis of this report, which strives to deliver an unbiased look at the similarities and differences between an open source LMS and a commercial LMS. We will first discuss the open source solution and then compare it with the commercial LMS addressing key factors an orga-nization should consider when choosing an LMS, including licensing and IT resources, customization and implemen-tation, technical support and maintenance, features, and project management.

Licensing and
IT Resources

Open Source
Free, open source software is desirable because it's "free." However, there is a price to pay and that can come in the form of IT resources (hardware, applications, development costs, and support). An organization may task an in-house programmer and IT administrator to create and support the Learning Management System, but integrating and maintaining an enterprise system is nothing to be taken lightly. Administration of some open source systems can be difficult and the IT staff will need significant experience.

In-house is not the only way to implement an open source option. There are companies who specialize in configuring, implementing, and hosting an open source solution – for a fee. So while an open source LMS initially saves money because it's free, there are costs for developing, implementing, and supporting an open source solution, whether handling in-house or contracting with an external firm.

Commercial
Commercial LMS products rather, require a licensing fee, which is sometimes rather high depending on the product, and range from basic systems to highly complex solutions. Most products today are hosted solutions so the client doesn't necessarily need a sophisticated server environment and IT resources to implement the LMS. The licensing fee (and service contract) usually includes implementation, hosting, maintenance, and support services. Because the fees usually include most of the technical resources, all that may be needed is a project or training manager to coordinate the LMS implementation and administration with the vendor. Thus commercial systems are ideal for organizations not wanting to delve too deeply into the technical aspects of the LMS.

Summary
Both solutions require project management resources; but they differ regarding technical resources and the amount of in-house staff and hardware/software required. A major difference between an open-source solution and a commercial LMS is the licensing fee required by the commercial solution. However, this is not to say open source option will be less expensive. Open source requires IT staff and other resources (unless contracting with an outside company) along with an instructional design staff, if creating original content. So, although it initially seems like open source is a less expensive option because it is license-free, there are additional necessary costs for an open source LMS that should not be overlooked when considering the overall budget. With commercial solutions the staffing and IT resources are usually included in the licensing fee and the only resource needed by the organization is a project manager. In addition, many vendors also provide custom course development.

Customization & Implementation

Open Source

0pen source solutions are not complete turnkey solutions like off the shelf LMS products. Open source solutions require an IT administrator to not only download, install, and configure the application but also to customize courses and continually maintain them to insure operability. Oftentimes a developer has to make adjustments to the course code to enable custom and 3rd party courses to operate, which can sometimes be tricky to plan for (and costly). If implementing in-house, a designated IT staff person will be required for implementation and administration. If creating custom courses, add on additional instructional design and content development costs to create the courses.

Free access to the source code, which offers almost endless customization options, is a reason some organizations choose an open source solution. Utilizing open-source code as the foundation for a company LMS can give an in-house or contract programmer a head start on the creation of an LMS solution. However, it can sometimes be difficult to create an appropriately scaled and reliable solution with open source, and ultimately this can have a negative effect in the organization and on its learners. Still, open source can be a great option if there is time and money built in for development, testing, and modifying the system.

Commercial

Rapid deployment is probably one of a commercial LMS's best-selling features. If an experienced vendor implements the product, they will know the system compatibility up front to ensure the implementation process runs smoothly. Often it is just a matter of installing the program on a virtual server, uploading employee data, and adding content to get an LMS up and running. The LMS vendor should manage the implementation and system testing but an organization will need to dedicate a staff member to coordinate these processes. Some commercial LMS vendors provide custom course development. Custom courseware is great for organizations wanting content that is truly effective and applies to their employees and their industry. However, the time and cost for course development must also be factored into the budget and schedule.

Customization & Implementation

Summary

Both open source and commercial products offer customization options. However, with open source products, customization requires IT and instructional design resources which should be factored into planning and budget. An in-house deployment, will be a large undertaking and require significant technical expertise. If hiring an outside company to create an LMS using an open source product, there will be similarities to contracting with a vendor for a commercial product, but the development time and cost for customization will apply.

Commercial LMS customization options vary but a system should offer branding and formatting customizations that are easily implementable. While there is an upfront licensing cost for the commercial product, an experienced LMS vendor should be able to streamline customization and implementation which saves time and could equate to, or be less than, the cost involved to create a custom system using open source code. It really all comes down to comparing product and vendor, keeping in mind the number of users, types of courses, level of assessments, and the organization's overall eLearning plan during time of implementation and for the future.

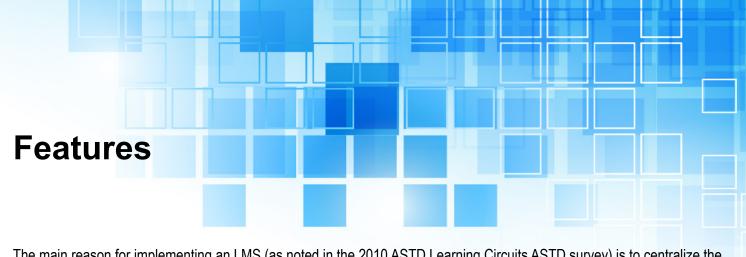# Technical Support & Maintenance

Open Source

Once a product is operational, technical support and course maintenance is critical to the success of any LMS. A significant difference between commercial and open source solutions is support and customer service. If implementing in-house, the organization will be left to fend for itself. Thus, an in-house user support process must be developed and a staff member, adept in technical trouble shooting and customer service, should be regularly available to handle support issues, course maintenance and software upgrades. Unlike the commercial LMS, there is no direct customer service number to call with questions and the IT staff often has to sift through discussion groups and knowledge base entries to find answers to questions, assistance with installation, and help with set-up problems.

Commercial

If working with an open source development firm or a commercial LMS vendor, support services are usually included in the service level agreement (SLA). Typically these solutions provide direct on-site training as well as on-line and telephone tech support. It will be up to the organization to thoroughly understand the service contract with the vendor before signing on the dotted line.

Summary

For open source solutions technical support is something that is hard to gauge. If you have a highly experienced and available in-house team and support process, then technical support may not be an issue. In the area of technical support and regular maintenance, the commercial LMS comes out on top. SLA's offer a piece of mind many organizations believe is worth paying for.

Features

The main reason for implementing an LMS (as noted in the 2010 ASTD Learning Circuits ASTD survey) is to centralize the management of an organization's learning activities. Other key reasons include tracking regulatory compliance, employee certifications, and projecting mandatory training.   When choosing an LMS solution, it's important for an organization to identify the most important features and confirm that they will be included.

Open Source

An open source LMS, such as Moodle, initially developed for the academic arena, can be somewhat limited when it comes to reporting and learner management features that apply to the business world. Because new features are continuously being added to open source solutions by the developer community, supporting documentation may be difficult to locate quickly. However, more and more online tutorials are popping up as a result, so there is help available out there if one searches. An open source competitor of Moodle, Sakai, has better reporting features and is reported to be easier to customize and rebrand. Both Moodle and Sakai are lacking in the comprehensive learner profiling and management that commercial counterparts offer, which makes them unsuitable for some large companies.

Commercial

With commercial systems, the features vary greatly. Some LMSs have an abundance of features, sometimes more than an organization may need (yet will pay for) and other systems may not have enough. Oftentimes a commercial product was initially created and customized for a specific client/industry and is now being sold to other businesses. The upside of this is that an organization may gain helpful features it didn't originally consider. The downside is that some products come with features an organization may not need but are part of the package. When an organization is interested in purchasing an LMS to keep costs down, it's very important to identify what features are required. For many organizations inexperienced in eLearning, that's hard to know, and they rely on the sales pitch of commercial LMS companies.   As a general guideline, a commercial LMS should include customizable branding features, a quick and easy user registration process, user course completion tracking ability, assessments, and reporting in a format that is compatible for your business. Other features are icing on the cake and therefore it's important to decide how big of a slice you need to ice (and pay for). With regards to features documentation, commercial vendors usually release up-to-date documentation with each new release of their product and have resources dedicated to producing high quality online help guides, FAQ's, and other supporting documentation, as opposed to open source solutions which are often insufficient in documentation and rely heavily on their user community.

Summary

When it comes to features, both open source and commercial products provide a wide range of options. Open source solutions are a highly customizable, but the features are not always documented appropriately and they are more difficult to support. Commercial products vary in their feature set but are usually very well documented and offer dedicated support. Both solutions require careful analysis of company requirements to make sure the product fits with an organization's learning goals.

Project Management

Lastly, while it is hard to put a price tag on "experience," it can be a leveraging factor to an organization deciding between developing in-house and purchasing a commercial LMS.

A seasoned LMS vendor will dispense a wealth of LMS project management and experience and should provide a focused project schedule with appropriate timeline and milestones. This will ultimately save the organization time, money, and frustration. In addition, a vendor should be up to speed with trends and best practices in eLearning, and offer advisement on courseware development, delivery, and assessments in the best interest of the organization.

If creating in-house, the organization will definitely benefit from having an experienced LMS project manager, whether that is achieved through a current staff member, hiring a new staff member, or contracting with an outside firm. Experience in implementing similar products should prove worthy of the upfront effort and cost and can be the difference between a successful LMS deployment and one that is not.

Conclusion

As you can see from our report, there is no easy answer to whether an organization should choose an in-house solution or a commercial vendor. It is clear that open source offers the opportunity to create a custom solution that fits an organization's needs, while also saving money up front, but this is not without significant IT resources and technical expertise, and requires the project to be properly planned and managed. Commercial products, on the other hand, come with a higher up front price tag and often have more than the required amount of features. To some organizations this is a risk to consider. However, for many organizations, the support that an LMS vendor provides in LMS project management experience, technical expertise, and guidance proves well worth the cost. In the end, the right solution is the one that meets the organization's budget, time frame, resources, and training needs.

About Us

Experienced. Creative. Passionate. Value-Driven.

At Motive Learning, delivering the right eLearning solution to fit your training needs is our passion. We develop custom eLearning, mobile learning , and blended learning products that combine several technology platforms. Our team of experienced instructional designers, developers, and video professionals work together to build engaging products for a range of budgets.

In addition to custom courseware, our Motive 4.0 Learning Management System is an economical solution for hosting, delivering, and tracking your online training. We created the Motive LMS to fill the need for a comprehensive training system priced for small to medium-size oganizations.

And because sometimes the schedule or ROI does not warrant a high-end interactive course we have developed rapid methods to get your information to the end-user -- fast and inexpensively. Our On-site Video Capture Service for instructor led training events, repurposes PowerPoint presentations into on-demand solutions delivered via our Seminars Express portal service or your learning management system.

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