



THE LMS HAS ASSUMED A FAR MORE PROMINENT ROLE THAN IT DESERVES

WE NEED TO SUPPORT LEARNING, NOT MANAGE IT

Over the past decade, learning technologies have assumed a prominent place in the infrastructure and budgets of HR and training departments. The main technology deployed specifically for learning has been the learning management system (LMS).

Although there is no doubt it has helped automate the administration and tracking of structured learning activities, the LMS has assumed a far more prominent role than it probably deserves. There is an argument that a focus on the LMS as the principal “manager of learning” has been one of the main reasons many learning departments are now finding it difficult to effectively support talent development across their organizations.

Almost all of today’s LMSs are based on the concept of the integrated learning systems of the 1960s. In reality, these were training administration tools. They replaced manual record-keeping and scheduling of classes. They were certainly more efficient and probably more reliable than their manual counterparts, but were designed for a world that’s long gone.

The term “LMS” was originally used to describe the management module of the PLATO Computer Assisted Instruction system developed at the University of Illinois in 1960. PLATO emerged in response to the challenge of the post-World War II veteran influx into education and training when ideas about automation and factory production were at their peak. There was a requirement for learning departments to match the efficiencies that were being made elsewhere across organizations with financial and other people management systems. If technology could replace manual systems and improve efficiency then this was seen as a good thing and something to be aspired to.

In fact, most of today’s LMSs are still recognizable as children of PLATO – built primarily as delivery and management tools for “Automated Teaching Operations” (the “ATO” in PLATO). The challenges of the 1960s are no longer the challenges of 2013. We now know that learning needs to be closely integrated with work if talent development is to be effective. The days when we could leave the workplace for extended periods of training is behind us.

Additionally, our understanding of how learning occurs has moved on. Performance improvement is most effective (and fastest) when we learn in the context of day-to-day activities in the workplace rather than away from them.

WHO SHOULD MANAGE LEARNING?

The only person who can manage learning is the individual in whose head the processes are occurring. We need to remember that fact. Learning management is an oxymoron when it isn’t referring to neural processes going on inside flesh-and-blood. A little like “stagnant growth” or “Your call is very important to us; your approximate wait time is 15 minutes.” It sounds sensible on first hearing, but doesn’t hold up to any analysis.

MANAGING LEARNING PROCESSES

There’s no doubt, however, that there’s a need to manage the processes around organizational learning in some situations, but certainly not all. The principal value is not in the management of learning processes but in its facilitation and support as an ongoing and continuous activity. This poses a set of different challenges for HR and learning professionals.

USING TECHNOLOGIES TO SUPPORT LEARNING

One way to approach the effective selection and use of technologies to support learning is to first consider the interplay of needs of the learning department with wider organizational needs. New technologies, new media and new social tools will be in use by colleagues supporting the brand and communication functions, knowledge management, and other areas.

The learning department should explore how these can be adapted in preference to developing or buying in bespoke “learning” solutions. Technology is important to support learning, but it doesn’t need to be learning technology.

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