LMS Guide

Everything from selecting to implementing

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LMS Questions and Answers

Buying a LMS

This is probably the biggest stunner to people. They think when they purchase a LMS, it is theirs forever. Yes and No.

No, in the sense that you are actually "leasing" or "renting" the system. The length of this "lease" is the length of your contract. When the contract is up, you can renew for more years or months or decide to leave for another system.

In this regard, you do not "own" it. Sure, you have it customized (to a degree) of what you need - skin it, add children or sub portals, use e-commerce, and blah blah, but at the end of that contract, it either goes back to the vendor (in a sense) or you renew.

Are there systems, I can actually purchase?

Yes, but it is a challenge, because there is only a handful of vendors, who will actually sell you outright their system.

While, you may be thinking to yourself, "awesome", there are some caveats with this angle.

- Most of the vendors who offer this, will require you to "lease" the system initially - for a year or two
- After the "lease", they will sell it to you - but it is not cheap, nor is the price the same as the initial "buy (aka rent/lease)"
- If it is a SaaS system, you have to either host it on your own servers or host it on net server farms, such as Rackspace
- Updates, upgrades to the system are extra (yearly charge), support (same)
- You can decline the above options and go it alone, but if something happens - you are responsible for the fix, not the vendor

Free

Sometimes in education, the LMS is free, but again its misleading. Yes, its free- but again, you are renting/leasing it. At the end of your agreement, you either renew or you leave for something else.

The only spin on this of course, is a LMS that you build 100% yourself - either through open source or something else; or you download a 100% free open source system (files included).

In this case, you truly own the system - for as long as you desire.

When should I use a RFP?

Ideally never. I'm in a camp of folks, who believe that the RFP is an unnecessary document, that has outlived its usefulness.

They used to be worthwhile, when every system was hosted on your own servers and when many systems could be 100% customized. That isn't the case any longer.

A RFP is a time waster - for you and the vendors. Rather, I recommend the following

- Identify the systems of interest
- Schedule demos or some systems you can access and view the system without scheduling a demo
- After the demo, narrow down your list of top three or five
- From this list, send out a RFI- it should be no longer than a one page spreadsheet.
- 90% of all the features are similar regardless of the system, the difference is 10% - so, system X may not have a marketing component, system Y might, system A may have e-commerce with built in invoicing option, system D may have e-commerce but no built in invoicing option, etc.
- Next, test drive the products - i.e. trial. Any vendor worth their weight, is going to offer a trial. You want a minimum of 15 days, ideally 30. If the vendor only says seven, walk away. Any vendor that pulls that, clearly thinks that you have unlimited time and thus no work at the office, which is a joke, so why play the game?
- While you are test driving, send out inquiries to the sales person. I prefer e-mail only, until it is the final stage, and I make it clear in the initial call or in many cases, e-mail. If this disregard this simple request, they are out, because it tells me, they are not really listening to the customer

For people asking, "what about pricing", yes this should be part of the initial inquiry. It is only at the initial inquiry, do you ask for an estimate based on the following

- Number of users (seats)
- Any additional add-ons, whether truly an add-on or built into the system (it can be turned on/off)
- Customization, if applicable
- Support & Training (many systems, offer it for free, but some still charge)
- Extended Enterprise (if you go this route - cost for initial child or additional children)
- Length of agreement

When you are into the final round, testing it out and sending out any additional inquiries, you can start to negotiate pricing. I always go this route. I prefer initial negotiating, before even deciding if the system is the one I want to select or recommend for a client. Heck, I followed this route, when I used to purchase (lease) systems, themselves.

Estimates, when is it the wrong time?

Whenever a vendor, tells you the estimate is based on the hours of implementation or the project, this should be a red flag. Listen, if you are this far into the game, and have provided them the specifics they need, time line for the project, then there is no reason for them to use this angle.

A vendor should (and many do) tell you how long it will take to implement the system. If they don't, ask them. Realize that customization, or feature sets that are not already available, but you want into the system, will affect implementation time. Equally realize, that implementation times can be shorter with one system versus another, depending on the vendor, regardless if it is SaaS or not.

However, typically a hosted system (on your own servers) will take longer to implement, then a SaaS system.

The Gotcha! - Implementation Teams

A little known bonus that sometimes is the whammy, comes down to the implementation team. There are vendors, who have multiple implementation teams. While there are great benefits to this, there is also an occasional bad effect.

The effect? You get a bad team. We are not talking bad, as in nasty people, but rather they have a track record of delayed implementations, project management issues (not related to you or your "additional requests") and issues frankly with integrating the system with an ERP or whatever type of system you wish to interface with at your company (if you are going with this component).

How do you know, whether you are getting the superstars or the all "D" team?

You don't. Vendors who have multiple implementation teams, are going to say they are all great. Otherwise, that vendor wouldn't be in business for long. However, you can try to assess yourself, by asking the following questions.

- Do you have multiple implementation teams?
- If yes, do you have a team that has experience with implementing a system that does X (X could be interface with an ERP (specifically whichever one you are using), or X could be extended enterprise or X could be interface with salesforce.com or X could be integrate or interface with a social learning platform, etc.
- How many projects has this team worked on, and how many clients has the project manager worked with?

Some vendors have an array of people who help implement the system, rather than a specific team of three or four folks, who always implement. An array is not a negative. I know of plenty of vendors, who rather than having multiple sets of teams (always the same team of folks for say team A, etc.), have an array and it works quite well.

Implementation Time

Always find out how long it will take to implement the system. This can be part of your RFI, but I like to ask it via an e-mail. Why? Written proof. I have known vendors who have said it will take A and then it takes B, and they claim they never said to you, it will take A.

Verbal is okay, but written is better. Of course, always have it included in your contract as a line item. Thanks to SaaS systems, implementation times are decreasing, but if the vendor says on average it takes three weeks - get clarification.

Is it three weeks, with everything you are getting? Especially if you need some customization beyond skinning it, or adding a logo? If the vendor offers integration of APIs (from you), that will impact the implementation time (with many vendors). So, always clarify.

SCORM

What SCORM compliance are you? 2004 3rd edition? 2004? 1.2? SCORM (as it is known, when it is before 1.2)?

Why is it Important?

Because if you are using a content authoring tool that is SCORM 2004, then you must find a system that is at least 2004. Your tool will not work with a 1.2. SCORM is backward compatible, not forward.

What about AICC?

Irrelevant in my opinion. Unless you purchased a tool that is only AICC compliant, which in that case, time to ditch it and get another one. If you purchased an AICC only, then you have to find a system that is AICC compliant. It can be SCORM too, but the AICC is the key.

What about PENS or some other compliance standard?

Unless you must have PENS or one of the other compliance standards, it is not needed. PENS was created by AICC as an alternative to SCORM 2004, 3rd edition.

Certificates/Certification

Does your system generate certificates? Do you have templates built into the system?

For people who are working on certification, does your system provide e-mail reminders to end users whose certification is near expiration and thus they need to go into the system and complete it? What about e-mail reminders for the following (time frame) to renew?

Why is it Important?

Today many people are interested in systems that generate “certificates”, whether it be for a certification or as a “good job” approach for completing a course. They would prefer having templates built-into the system, where they can edit, rather than having to upload their own (although some folks like this as well).

For systems that include templates, find out what you can actually edit. Besides the name, can you edit or create the accomplishment (rather than just Math XYX course) to add personalization? Can you add your logo? People love personalization, rather than just canned.

Classroom Management

If you plan to track or have instructor led training, then this is relevant. If not, that it isn't.

Event Management

Do you offer the ability to have people sign up for multiple seminars within the system?

Does your system offer a waitlist feature? If yes, if someone cancels or decides not to attend, does your system notify the next person that they can attend?

Can you tie it to your e-commerce (if you have it in your system), so when people register and there is a fee, they pay it?

Where do the seminars, etc. appear? In the catalog? Elsewhere? Do you have a calendar whereas someone can click on the date and the seminars or webinars appear Or is it just a list of events (if you offer that)?

Why is it Important?

The more you know about what event management features they offer the better you are.

Can you generate a report that lists the attendees, when they registered? Can people self register for events? What about waitlists? If someone is added from the waitlist, do they receive an e-mail notification? What about e-mail notifications in general? Can you setup auto e-mail notification? Can you send out a SMS too?

Web Conferencing

(Again, for some people important): Do you have a web conferencing solution in your system? If yes, who is it? Is it your own system or a partner such as WebEx?

Is it included in the price or is there a separate price for it? Can you track the end users in it? What reports are tied to it? What features are included with it?

Why is it Important?

- Vendors who have partnerships with WebEx or whomever they use, typically require you to purchase a license, which is separate from the system. Many will offer or have the ability to purchase the license for you, rather than you having to go to the vendor themselves and purchase it

- It is optional. Even though it is integrated into the system, unless the vendor says it is included with your system – at no charge – you are not required to purchase it – if you use someone else or if you choose not to use it.

- If you choose to use it, tracking is important. So, finding out what the system can and cannot do as it is related to their "partner" WC is relevant. If it cannot do the things you want, then what's the point of paying for that extra cost, unless it is for convenience?

- Just because the system is integrated doesn't mean it is the best system out there. Rather, "partner" is a dual revenue steam for the vendor and their partner – a business relationship deal

- You can use your own system – provider or locate one and use it with the systems. Typically there is no cost. If you choose this route, find out if their system can identify how many people attended, etc. – some can do this.

Curriculum Paths

Can you place end users (learners) in groups? By job role? Skill? Department (Division, Region)? Can you have X group see only x number of courses and Y group see only those courses? Can you create a curriculum, whereas student x has to complete A before going to B?

Why is it Important?

My personal rule of thumb for qualifiers, is to focus on features that are unique to your situation – for some people if they classroom management, for others they do not. Or they need certificates and specifically systems that have templates built into them for it.

The goal of qualifiers is to toss out systems that do not meet your needs. For the question above, you will find out quickly via the demo – on whether you like the way the vendor's system handles this or not.

Questions I often hear people ask (and you can save money)

3rd party content – off the shelf courses

The vendor either mentions it on their web site, or in their pitch or people inquire – if they can get Excel or How do to Sales, etc., with the system.
If the vendor offers it, they say yes – but here is the twist

- Only a tiny percentile include it at no charge. Rather the masses who offer it, charge an additional cost for it – thus it is not included in your system (ironically, they fail to mention this tidbit on their web sites, when they list they have courses)

- You are paying for convenience, not a better rate – even if the vendor says you receive a better deal with them (I have never found that to be the case)

- If you decide to leave the vendor and go to another system, you can face challenges when moving those 3rd party courses (if you so choose to) into the other systems, some vendors use it as a ploy to keep you "if you leave, you can't take these with you"

Save Money

- Go directly to the 3rd party vendor whose courses they are

- If you can, go with the price the LMS vendor offered you. In this case, I have always scored a better deal with the 3rd party vendor directly, then the LMS vendor. Why?

  LMS vendor and content provider have a business relationship deal – so LMS vendor takes X percent and the remaining goes to the content vendor. If you could get 100% rather than a split, wouldn't you want to deal?

- Your content provider will deal directly with the LMS vendor to integrate the courses, so convenience still exists. You never want to get in the middle of this, and I always clearly tell the content provider that they need to talk to xyz (whoever your sales person is) and work together. Typically I am on the first call, but after that – they take care of it.

- With the above, you do not pay – and state it as such – until the course or courses work with the system – 100%. Thus you have your LMS vendor test it, and you test as well – Q/A, as we say.

- If you decide to bolt from your current LMS vendor, you are not "hijacked" when it comes to your 3rd party. You just let the content vendor know of the switch and they can handle it from there – including working with your new vendor – to integrate the courses (assuming you still want the courses)

Content Authoring Tool

- Most systems that offer a CAT, include it at no charge, but sadly there are vendors that offer their authoring tool as an add-on
- The cost again is about convenience and I have yet to see a built-in authoring tool that beats a robust 3rd party authoring tool.

Save Money

- Select and use a 3rd party authoring tool

- Additional benefit – if you leave and go to another LMS vendor, the courses you created are still on your server or the RCAT's server and thus you can move them quickly and easily, rather than having your former LMS vendor involved, which sometimes can be painful

Seats

LMS/LCMS

99% of all LMS/LCMS (and for this topic, I will just call them 'LMS'), use a format called seats when it comes to placing your audience, end users, learners, employees, whatever into the system.

The 1% are open source such as Moodle, or your own built. There are a couple of vendors out there that use variances, such as an e-commerce mode : whereas they get paid based upon people buying courses (a percentile cut), or another component based on set negotiations, but tied into some derivative of stated above.

Here is how the typical conversation goes:

You want a LMS, have identified the vendor, and asked for the quote. The quote comes back and you see the price of the system and then a price for your users. Your eyeballs nearly fly out of your head. True? Every happened to you?

When you identify your LMS, you MUST find out the costs of the seats, which is separate from the cost of the LMS.   The LMS is just the infrastructure. It comes with this and that.. but the seats are an extra cost.

And how do you define seats?

One user name, one password = 1 seat.

That's it. 1 person = 1 seat. Simple. Regardless, if they are going to access the system 5 times or 5 million times in the course of a year, it is one user name, one password = 1 seat. Again, notice the key terms here: Seat, Year, User Name, Password.

Now, you may say, ***"Well, what if we just purchase 100 seats and then share the user name and password with everyone to lower costs?"***

Yeah, you can do that, but here is the catch.

1. Say goodbye to your tracking capability. Which for the investment of the system, is something you most likely will want to do. See, if Bob and Frank share the same user name and password, how will you know who - Bob or Frank - was actually in the system at that time, taking that course, assessment, learning path, whatever? You won't. You will only see the user name with that data. That is a big negative of "sharing".

If you do not care about the tracking capabilities, then sure, save on costs and share user names and passwords - but I would not let the LMS vendor know this - as they are not really hip on that game plan. See, they lose money when you go that route. Seats is big business.

The Best Way

Project the number of seats you will need for each year. Even if you do not use the seats, you have them -- but be realistic on the number of seats you need. Unless it is mandatory that everyone in the workplace has to use the LMS, do not believe that once you get it..everyone will be running to it..it will not happen. So, forecasting is THE KEY. Be honest.

After you purchase the seats, track the data...I cannot stress this enough...track the data..how often are they being used...just because x,y, z has them are they using them? This will enable you to monitor your seat forecast, and adjust accordingly.

My philosophy is simple: I always create projections over three years.

Always drive the seat projections and never let the LMS provider do it for you

Again, unless using the LMS is mandatory and you have unlimited funds or an enormous budget, then costs are going to play into this and trust me, while your salesperson may be the nicest person on the planet, their company's goal is to generate revenue. Never forget that. Seats = Revenue.

Bundles

Always find out what are the breakout - number of seats per bundle (25, 50, 100) and what the cost is per bundle. Discuss this, even before you sign that contract. This is different then buying your original amount of seats. But, you will want to know the cost(s) per bundle - in case you need to purchase additional seats. So, you just can't buy two seats. You purchase in a bundle. Find out the costs ahead of time and Negotiate.

Cost per Seat

I love this one. The number is always some arbitrary figure, that of course, they can fully explain, but really, how can you say to someone oh, 1-10 seats cost $45 per seat (i.e. one user name, one id - 1 person), 11-20 costs $35 and so on. Right. Always negotiate. What they are pitching is the "Street" cost. I never accept it. If you are getting in to your final selections, those seat pricing costs are going lower, end of story. I've walked before and even though my salesperson refused to budge, amazingly a few days later, they have budged. WOW!!! :)

Active vs. Inactive

You may have recently come across the “active vs. inactive” user angle. If you have you are not alone, as many vendors are starting to offer this new seat approach.

Here is how it works

- You buy your seats as you would normally do (see the above)

However here is the spin: you only pay per month the number of active users in the system. That is to say, if you have purchased 500 seats, but in May only 220 people used the system and in June 400 people, than in July 195, then you would pay only for those seat amounts.

Now you may be asking yourself, “Why should I buy a bucket of seats”? Because that is pricing approach with vendors.

Vendors are not fans of you purchasing one seat at a time. Frankly, I don’t blame them. It is easier for them and often times for you to purchase a bucket of seats.

With the active/inactive approach, vendors can achieve the pricing numerous ways. One way is to show a chart.

In this scenario, depending on the bundle/package of seats, you pay one set price for that seat range. Then in the next tier, the pricing changes for that seat range.

Example:

Vendor A offers the following seat pricing:

0-100 seats $19.00

101-250 seats $16.00

251-500 seats $12.00

You decide to go with 300 seats, however in the first month, only 110 people are actively using your system. So you pay the rate of $16 per seat, rather than the $12.00 a seat that you bought in the bundle. Now, if in the next month 325 seats are active, you pay the $12 per seat.

Some vendors will charge the yearly rate and then refund you the amount based on seat allocation in each month. Basically it is the same process as above but the other way around.

Many vendors identify active users as those users who are taking at least one course during that month.

While active/inactive has some nice advantages, they can create unnecessary chaos for the client, especially when you must follow active/inactive to verify the cost savings per month or even additional costs – in the assumption that you did not buy enough seats.

Unlimited Users

As the name applies – you have unlimited number of seats.

Demos

You want to see a learning platform, but you don't want to access the trial, first or perhaps you can't. What do you do?

You can try to figure out about the product via the company's web site, but many sites honestly are beyond awful.

They fail to even clearly show their product, let alone present the product sans the standard PPT intro that comes with "learn more" about the solution.

What then, is the option for you, beyond closing your eyes and imagining the product?

Demo Time!

Talk, Talk (and no, not the **band**)

Let's not get ahead of ourselves. At the end of the day, many of us, want to actually download or access the product via the "cloud" and take it for a test spin (i.e. trial). Yet, for many vendors that objective, comes at a price, you have to talk to them.

Whether it's by e-mail (my preferred choice), phone (often their preferred choice) or a combination, at the end of the day, it's about the conversation.

Because the conversation will drive what happens next, seeing the demo.

What They Need to Know

Regardless of the learning platform, most vendors want to know a few tidbits about you and what you are seeking before you see the product (i.e. demo).

You might think to yourself, that the goal of this approach is to identify what you are really seeking and thus when it comes to the demo, to focus only on that, rather than the entire system itself.

Sadly, you would be wrong.

Don't misunderstand me, there are quite a few vendors that seriously follow the "tell me" and "I will show you only what you want to see" angle (kudos to them!), but there are plenty who seem more interested in whatever, rather than truly "listening".

How can you tell the "whatever" scene? It is quite simple.

E-Mail

You clearly state whom you are (financial company, etc.), employee size, what you are looking for in a solution, and that you want to see a demo of the product.

You can go further into details if you wish, but really, there are certain key items, most vendors request or inquire about to see if they are the right product for you.

STOP!

Right product? It should be right salesperson. You see, for some vendors (not all mind you), depending on the employee size and where you are based, you may be switched from an internal sales person to a regional sales person or sales manager.
Thus, in this scenario, the “listening” is more about whom is going to get the “lead” and not about you.

Phone

For many vendors it is all about the phone call. Even if you explicitly state that you want to be contacted by e-mail, many will ignore that and try to call you.

If they get you on the line, the questions aforementioned above, will eventually be asked along with some other particulars.

Even if you request quickly that you would like to see a demo, many sales people will continue to press for details over the phone.

I recall talking about a few key items needed to move forward on the call and then requesting a demo from one well known vendor. Instead of saying, lets schedule a time, it was ignored and more questions were asked.

The call went on for another 25 minutes until, I could get them to commit to a demo.

Combination

I am glad to see more vendors responding by e-mail, especially when they require you to fill in the “more information” form on their site, and include your e-mail address.

At one time, even requiring your e-mail address, resulted in them calling you and not e-mailing you.

Yes, this still occurs, but for many vendors, the light bulb has come on, and they are getting it.

After the initial e-mail, the vendor will try to push to having you talk to them, to learn more about your situation, even if you post it in the e-mail.

Thus the duality of contact has been established. I have had vendors be so pushy on this front, that it becomes an exasperating experience.

Regardless of the three methods, the objective of viewing the demo is nearly in place. I say nearly.

Who Views Who?

The demo is in sight, the date is about to be scheduled and then you hear words that are not for the faint of heart, "we schedule our demos twice a week on blah blah and blah blah. Which date works better for you?".

WARNING..BE VERY AFRAID

A bell should be ringing in your ears, because when vendors specify days for only demos, you can pretty much bet, that there will be other people on the line. Thus your demo call is not truly one on one, but rather one on lots of people.

There isn't a x number of people required to do a "scheduled" demo in this manner, but walkthroughs (as they are often called behind the scenes), should never contain more than three people on the line, besides the host (salesperson).

Yet, I have been on these types of calls, and seen via the "conference" room as many as nine people.

Shall I just go with this approach?

No. You want to have the demo, one on one (i.e., just you and your staff or just you and not people you don't know). Even if the vendor says this is their policy, tell them you don't care. If they want potentially you as a client, they will need to schedule a one on one demo.

Why "No"?

When scheduled demos are pre-set, i.e. they are scheduled on Tues/Thurs at xyz time, you can guarantee that the vendor is following some type of script. It may not be a paper script, but it is a script in the sense, that it follows a certain pattern or structure. Everyone will see this first, then this, then this, then this.

Even if you ask questions, which slows down the presentation, and which they will respond to, you can assured that it will be made up later on.

Made up? The time.

You see with these type of scheduled demos, the demo is typically 60 minutes. So, at the 60 minute mark, the demo is over. Now, if people are asking lots of questions, that eats into time. So, as a thank you, the host may speed through other areas or ignore some areas to finish up. You want a one on one demo. But, here is the kicker. You want to schedule it for 90 minutes.

90 minutes

Why 90? Because if you really want to digest the product and ask lots of questions, you need time for that.

Even if you have the demo tailored to what you only want to see, having 90 minutes set aside, guarantees you that everything you will be covered and any questions that come up will be answered.

If the session ends at 55 minutes, so be it. At least, the 90 minute block has been set aside – for you and the sales person.

It eliminates the “oh, I have a meeting” or something else event, that a salesperson may have booked, because it breaks away from the typical 60 minute demo.

We are all busy and have lots of things going on. Blocking out 90 minutes, sets aside those other items, for a bit, and enables you to focus on what will be the biggest purchase of the year, if not years for your company, school or organization.

Time now becomes your ally, not your enemy.

Finally, The Demo

I have a set of rules that I follow with every demo I see.

- I state up front my experience with e-learning and LMSs: many salespeople are following a “script”, they often communicate to the person, under the assumption that the person is “new” to e-learning and learning platforms.

  If you are new to e-learning and learning platforms, tell them up front. This will help them when explaining the system, because as aforementioned, while they typically assume you know nothing, they will still use jargon or state things that can easily confuse someone.

  If you have been buying systems in the past, telling them up front, will eliminate the assumption and eliminate some unnecessary conversation.

  I hate to sound mean on this, but your objective here is to see the product and ask questions, not to become their new BFF.

- I explicitly state what I want to see: even if you state this clearly in the e-mail to them up front or on the initial screen call, you would be surprised how many salespeople forget it or in reality, aren’t listening or truly reading what you are saying.

- Now, I do want to be clear, that this is not universal in this industry (thankfully), but it is still an issue.

Some salespeople will repeat what you wanted to cover, before the product demo begins. I like this, because it tells me, they were listening or reading what was requested and they get it.

- During the demo, I clarify that what I am seeing in the demo, is what was discussed prior to – i.e. what will be in my system – and not extra or not in my system
  This may be somewhat of a shocker, but there are plenty of vendors in the space, who show you one thing, but in reality you get something else. This isn't a trick of hand.

  Rather, they fail to mention to you, that what you are buying (perhaps a lower priced edition), is not what you are seeing (the ultimate edition).

  You have no idea this happened, until you get the product and "surprise".

  I have heard horror stories about this from customers of some systems, and when they complain to the vendor, the vendor retorts that this is the system you bought.

  When they state that isn't what was in the demo, the vendor responds that the demo included everything and you can have that too, you just have to pay extra.

  To eliminate this potential whammy, ask up front or during the demo, is this the product we talked about and is everything I am going to see, be in the product I am buying.

  A word to the wise, you should always inquire if you are buying a system that has add-ons (they are built into the system, but you "pay" to turn them on).

Contracts

Ahh, you have found your vendor, everything in the world is at peace. You love the company, it is perfect, they have pitched you a price - you have verbally accepted - and now it is time for them to finalize the deal, put together the contract, sign and move on... But Wait!

Important info below (before we get to the contract info. stuff):

There are some very detailed information in regards to LMS contracts and this blog is not a legal representation of contracts, rather it is based on personal experience with LMS vendors.

Legal Departments at your Company or Legal Representation:

If you have a legal department at your company or a legal representative associated with your firm, always have them review the contract prior to you signing off on it. If they make changes to the contract, send it back to the vendor and have the vendor make those changes in the contract before they send it back to you.

Again, even after everything is ready to be signed and delivered, have your legal department or representative review the contract and "green light" it before you sign off on it and send it.

If you do not have a legal department, nor have legal representation, please read everything very carefully and make sure that everything is accurate, fair, and correct.

Make sure that you are not handing them - the vendors - unfettered rights to your stuff - your proprietary courses/content, right to use your name without your permission, etc.. and more importantly, they are not ripping you off.

Now, without further adieu:

Your Requirements - **IF THE VENDOR BALKS - DO NOT BACK DOWN - YOU MUST HAVE THIS IN YOUR CONTRACT** -

1. **You Want everything itemized**. That's right everything. How many seats are you getting and what is the price of those seats? What about that e-commerce module you decided to buy? Or that additional talent development module? What about the cost of customer service (more on that in a second)? What about discounts?

   Reason: It is simple, if you went into a car dealership, and looked at all the cars, test drove one and said okay, I want it.. the car person makes a pitch, you say okay and then here comes the paperwork. Do you just sign it without looking? Do you look for breakouts?

   Do you ever see extra costs hidden in there and say to them, uh what is this? What if they tell you they will give you an extra $500 off, wouldn't you look to see if it is in the contract? And want to see it spelled out? Of course you would.

2. **Out clause or Exit clause**. One note: This is under the assumption you are signing a multi-year contract for your system. **Out clause:** At the end of each year, it will auto renew, unless you give them 30 days notice prior to the end date of the contract (for that year), at which point you have exercised your right to exit the contract, without penalty,

or occur any additional charges. (Something along these lines or choose your own terminology).

Avoid them saying 60 days.. you will already be pulling out sooner than that, in terms of changes on your side, but what if something happens with your new LMS partner and you need some extra time... the 30 days gives you leeway. *In a future article, I'll talk about leaving your new BFF and switching to your newest BFF at the end of a contract or mid split..and taking care of worse case scenarios..* :)

3. **Your Content**. Everything that is yours, remains yours. It is as simple as that. If it is proprietary (which means, you created it, you own it - i.e. ur company), then it is yours forever. So, if you leave or whenever, all content remains yours. Including any materials you upload into their LMS, files, ebooks, mp3's, media, etc.

4. **Your Company name, logo - your rights**. They cannot use it without your permission. That includes a facsimile of it. If you need to be specific you can, but again, your legal department can help you out here. Most contracts already have it in place, but always check.

5. **Total Costs and Discount Breakouts**. Clearly the total cost is obvious. That said, you want to see the discount % breakouts for each year (again, assuming you did a multi-year contract). You should see total cost, then discount break %, then the final total cost. Not, total cost and they tell you the discount is in there. Example: Total costs: Year 1: $25,000 Discount: 15% Final Cost: X, Year 2: $24,500 Discount: 15% Final Cost: X, Year 3: $25,000 Discount: 20%, Final Cost:X

What YOU Will NOT Pay ONE CENT FOR (Repeat after me..I am not going to pay for this..I am not going to pay for this..)

Customer Service

- **Telephone and E-Mail**. It is Free. Why pay to have someone help you with something that is wrong with their system? I am not talking about training here. Just customer service. This is for your administrator of your system or yourself - not for your employees/customers.

- **Key:** Find out what are their customer service hours and what is their turnaround to respond. Are they on the east coast, west coast? Answer on the weekends? What about on holidays? What if it is an emergency? Again..have it listed in that itemized part of your contract, and of course..next to it..it says "FREE" or no charge. - if it is not listed, then you have real no idea if you are paying for it or not, regardless of what they are saying.

Tech Support

If it is your system and I'm buying it (in reality leasing it), and it stops working and has a bug or issue, why do I have to pay you more money to find the problem and fix it? Isn't that included in my contract? Oh, wait, I never asked for it and had it included..oops.. - Again, only for your administrator of your system or yourself..not for your employees/customers..

Training - Free? Yeah, right.

I would love to tell you that 100% of all vendors provide training for free for you and your administrator, but then I will have to tell you that my dog Diego is helping me write this. (uh, he isn't).   Here is how it often works (again, not with all vendors):

- Some will train one person (you pick) for free - via a webinar or a series of them and you will get training materials (in the form of a PDF or if you really want it as a hard copy).

- If you want your administrator as well, many vendors will charge extra. Some won't. Which of course begs the question, if it is a webinar and I'm viewing it, how will they know? They won't unless you have a web cam as well and they can see you (but I didn't say that out loud).

- If you want a "live" person to come out and train you or whomever - it will cost $$, plus you pay for travel expenses on top of that. You go there, it costs $$$.

What a lot of them love to do is - have the "webinar" angle, either pre-recorded for you to view on your own when you have a problem, or live ones to view (sometimes listed as a "live conference event")- which you are with other clients as well (again, a negotiation component - to have your own without others on the call), PDF materials to download and many have a FAQ to view.

IMO, a lot of LMS vendors need better training for their trainers.

All Done..Everything is Green Lighted by Legal, etc. and You have Signed..Now...

After you sign the contract - even if they ask you to fax it back to them - go ahead - but have them - sign it - fax/scan and email back (many companies sign it, scan the copy and email you the scanned file) back the copy ASAP and also send you a hard copy of the contract - with their signature on it. Some may ask for your signature too and then you send a copy back..that is okay.. Bottom line.. you want two copies..and definitely want a hard copy and not just a faxed or the emailed copy.

Implementation Game Plan – Start the Process

Often the voice is heard or the decision is announced to go and get a LMS. Research is conducted - RFPs are developed and preparation is made, yet one of the biggest components is typically left to the end - or forgotten until it is too late - your infrastructure.

What does this mean to you and your end users? Customers? Who is going to access this LMS and how are they going to do it?

Accessibility

1. How are your end users going to access your LMS? (BTW, an end user is the person - accessing your system)

2. Are you planning to have them access the LMS only at work or off-site/home or all the above? If at work, what type of browser and OS (operating system) and computers are you using? What about Macs, do you have any at your workplace?

Do your computers have sound cards installed and do they work? How old are your computers? Browsers - what version of IE? Do you allow the use of Firefox? If at work: Access via the Intranet?

Is your LMS going to be on your servers or on the vendor's servers (i.e. hosted)? If at work only, how are you going to stop them from accessing via home? Security must be set accordingly.

Intranet

If you plan to have your LMS access through your Intranet - how are your end users going to access it? Clearly, in the workplace it can be achieved. But what if you are going to allow them access at home?

If you plan to have it on your Intranet, then you will need the ability of your end users to access via a VPN (Virtual Private Network). Do you offer this? What about security? You will need it. How do you set it up? Who gets access to what?

What about accessibility speed? If you offer a VPN - how does it work if the person has a modem at home or a Mac?

Internet

If your solution is going to be hosted on the vendor's site, and you plan to have your end users access at work or at home: you still most ask yourself the questions in #2 for the workplace and then even at home.

Of course, for security issues - at the workplace - you will need to setup security for what they can access (if you have a protocol that end users cannot access the Internet or is limited on time). When you purchase a LMS, they all provide the capability of user names and passwords, so that will not be an issue for you, regardless if you host yourself or host on their servers.

Home Access

Have you conducted a survey/assessment to find out about your end users and their capabilities? Can the LMS work with multiple browsers: i.e. Firefox, Safari, and what minimum version of Internet Explorer?

What does your LMS vendor recommend for a computer? What about access speed? DSL, Cable, Modem - if yes, 56K? What about home computers: Again, does your LMS vendor work with Macs? What about Linux - this would only apply to a very tiny percentile of your end users, if any at all. But it is always a nice to know. That said, it should never be a deal breaker, unless your company uses Linux OS.

Home/Work Computers

Do they have Flash installed? What about Shockwave? BTW, the argument that it is already installed on people's computers or that people know how to download it, is erroneous. The biggest problem you will find regarding these two apps is that most work computers do NOT have them installed (they are free and a quick install) and many people at home, may have them installed but not the latest version.

What version of Flash and Shockwave is required for your LMS to work? Do you need any other net apps to have your LMS work - i.e. Quicktime, RealPlayer and if yes, what version?

Again, what about the Mac issue? (not all LMSs work with Macs, so this is important to inquire about, since Macs are becoming more popular)

Let me state something very important about accessibility differences between the workplace and home and speed.

Typically, but not always your company has servers that can handle the traffic for access to the Intranet or Internet. At someone's home, though it is quite different, and yet many people fail to realize this when they are planning for a LMS/LCMS or even courses.

DSL and Cable

If you have either of these, you need to realize that depending on where you live in your town or city, your speed may be affected by the time of day you are accessing. For cable, there are hubs setup in your town and so, depending on your distance from the hub, will impact your speed.

Modems

They are not a thing of the past. A recent report found that due to the economy, many people were switching back to 56K modems as a cost cutter.

Now, access on a 56K modem is severely limited versus access on a DSL/Cable/Satellite/T1, etc. And, depending where you live, that speed is seriously misleading. Some communities, a person may be hitting at 40kbs.

Your Administrator

Who is going to be your administrator? What does the back end of the LMS look like - i.e. how easy is it to navigate and enter in data, as well as generate reports? The back end refers to what the administrator will see and NOT what the end user (employee/customer) sees.

What type of training is included for the administrator side? How does/and how can the administrator upload data into the LMS? i.e. Do they need to have the names of the employees and info. in a .csv file or .txt file?

Does the LMS provider upload this information for you?

If yes, how often? Do you have the capability from an IS/HR standpoint to provide new employee names and information on a day or weekly or whatever time frame you set up for upload into your LMS? Can you change the file into the one or ones accepted by the LMS vendor?

About the Author

Craig Weiss has been involved with the e-learning space for over 14 years. He has been identified as a thought leader and expert.

He is the CEO of E-Learning 24/7, a global advisory and e-learning analyst firm for consumers and vendors.

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