Article Side
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I think a lot of people in our space are like my Dad. Very smart people who are either new to the space, non or somewhat tech savvy, and find themselves hearing a lot of terminology, a lot of confusing marketing spin and get confused â€“ at no fault of their own.

Wake Up!

The reality of e-learning is that ambiguity still plays a big role in the space. Interchangeable words, marketing spin that goes awry and yes, an entrenchment of terms that are passe, but still seem to hang on in hopes they will be saved for future use.

The challenges are two-fold

a. E-Learning is still growing and with that growth, comes people who are brand new into the space unfamiliar with the terms, the applications and thus are left to either surf to find out or rely on people who on occasion donâ€™t know themselves, but just wing it.

b. New systems, terms and information

The end result?

The difficulty in explaining to others â€“ either the person who needs to green light it, the end users â€“ i.e. your learners, committees of people who come from different departments, salespeople who are unfamiliar with the space and thus tend to either wing it or are honest and just say, â€œI do not know.â€• Hopefully, this will eliminate some of the confusion without sitting in a seminar listening to someone who loves jargon but forgets to explain it â€“ in everyday terms (a huge peeve of mine).

The main term

One of the easiest ways to understand e-learning is to think of it as an umbrella term. It is the core term. The main man, as my Dad would say to me.

This term is often interchanged (without people necessarily knowing it) with online learning and virtual learning. They are one in the same.

If it was up to me, I would prefer to just say e-learning rather create mass confusion. Confusion benefits no one.

Under the Umbrella

So, we start off with e-learning, but what fits under that umbrella.

They are (in no particular order)

â€¢ Systems (LMS = sometimes people call it a portal), LCMS, CMS, Traning Mgt or Online Authoring, Platform) â€“ Talent mgt systems are starting to enter as well

â€¢ Genres (Mobile learning, Social learning, Game based learning, Virtual Worlds)

â€¢ Content Authoring Tools (often referred to as â€œRapid Content Authoring Tools (RCAT)

â€¢ Simulation tools (can be in a CAT or RCAT, but also can be a standalone)

â€¢ Web conferencing (some folks call them virtual classrooms â€“ because in order to achieve the VC, you have to be online communicating with one another via text chat, VOIP with/without video) â€“ another spin term is â€œweb meetingâ€•

â€¢ Assessment tools (Online proctoring can be placed into this category)

Iâ€™ve created a flowchart, for those who prefer a visual experience â€“ E-Learning Flowchart

Systems

A LMS is the cornerstone for anyone who jumps into e-learning and desires a place to house courses/content, files, curriculum paths, group learners to take x courses versus another, track among other things. Some LMSs have built in content authoring tools (RCATs), web conferencing, assessment/survey (actually most do), mobile learning, social learning, game based learning and a slew of other items. Yes, some also have talent management components such as succession planning, leadership development, 360 feedback and more.

So How do I explain it?

Think of a LMS as the infrastructure, such as a house.

A house with a rich set of amenities (think features!) at no additional charge.

You can get additional perks for your home (often at no charge) and choose the style you want (if you want more robust design â€“ you pay for it).

A warranty (support/maintenance) comes with your house too (often for a fee, but sometimes free).

People will visit your home, stay awhile, hang out or leave quickly (think learners!).

You will remember how many times Sarah stopped by and brought over her awful lamb meatballs or Steve and his unremarkable chicken and eggs dinner. (think tracking!)

You may even analyze everything that goes on in this home. Are the televisions in the kitchen worth it? When do my neighbors most often appear? Why does Steve bother us at 8 p.m. every night? (Analytics!)

Other houses in the neighborhood

Personally, I think a LCMS (Learning Content Management System) is hanging by its toenails on a cliff. Many people believe that the â€œCâ€• means a course authoring tool, but that is not the case.

To put it in its most basic wordage, itâ€™s a giant file repository with multiple sub-folders that contain a variety of content (materials, docs, audio/video, whatever), where people can access it, view it, download it (depending on how it is built) and share it.

Yeah it does other things, but the huge component is listed above.

However you are seeing more and more LMSs offer the file repository with the ability to create sub-folders and do all those wonderful capabilities above or at least a component or two.

A CMS (Content Management System) can be of a value to some people, but again, at the end of the day it is a LMS.

Platforms, Portals â€“ Often contain less features and are good for people who just minimal. Exception: Assessment platforms. These are standalone systems that offer the specific capability of â€œassessmentâ€•.

They usually offer analytical data/tracking. A twist for an assessment platform (not all can do this, mind you) is the ability to integrate with your LMS.

You often see platforms under the following genres â€“ i.e. a mobile learning platform, etc.

â€¢ Mobile Learning

â€¢ Social Learning

â€¢ Game Based Learning

Analytics, UI and features are the keys, IMO. On the mobile side â€“ tablet capability is HUGE, especially with the iPad series.

Training Management Systems â€“ can also be referred as an Online Authoring System (which honestly is exactly what they are)

They offer some very basic LMS functionality â€“ typically some reports, analytics/tracking, e-mail notification, templates and a few other items.

Their core is the authoring tool, which is built around these whole system. Many of these systems do not offer the capability of you using a third party authoring tool â€“ you have to use their tool only.

Pros and Cons

Systems in General

â€¢ As noted above, with the exclusion of say a mobile or social learning platforms â€“ which are standalone systems, a LMS is the best way to go for housing e-learning content, analytical data/tracking, content and additional components that either come with it or are offered as an add-on for an additional cost

â€¢ A LMS can also contain mobile learning, social learning and game based learning sometimes in its most minimal form â€“ incentive based

Can be a Con, but also a Pro

Seats

â€¢ By bundle â€“ you pay for a package of seats â€“ each seat is one user name/one password â€“ so, m you start off with 500 seats, another new approach is paying only for active users, so if you purchase 500 seats, but only 200 people are taking at least one course in month â€œXâ€•, then you pay only for those active users. Some vendors offer both options. I admit for an end user it can become confusing.

â€¢ Pay as you go â€“ some use the above approach regarding active users, some charge by number of courses you can upload (IMO â€“ the pay based on number of courses is a horrible idea)

â€¢ Unlimited â€“ If there was one option people would really want in a system â€“ this is it. Especially with multi-tenet or where you are offering e-commerce either to B2B or B2C. Also applies to a company that has a lot of employees.

I like unlimited, but I fully understand the seat packaging â€“ it has always existed and for many people it is a nice route to go. Option for some people: going open source (which has pros, but honestly has a lot of cons)

â€¢ E-Commerce â€“ very rarely used, but does exist in some systems. They follow the unlimited, but take a percentile of each sale of your courses/content/etc. If you have 10,000 users or more for example and you plan to sell a lot of content/courses, see if you can negotiate this type of offering to the vendor.

Caveat: some vendors have done this in the past, gotten burned and then said never again. Itâ€™s a risky proposition for a vendor, so donâ€™t be surprised to hear â€œnoâ€• â€“ and I wouldnâ€™t blame th

There are quite a few other pros/cons of a LMS â€“ but that will be a future post â€“ but at the end of the day, if the UI rocks then the system will rock. If the UI stinks, the system well â€“ you get the idea. The UI is more important to me then the features, because if you looked across the board of LMSs, they contain 90% of the same features â€“ the requirements needed in any system to be worth its weight.

Bottom Line

The cool thing about e-learning is its recognition that it is not a passing fad or just a solution for people who are cutting edge.

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