

## From Learning Management Systems to portals

Originally published on BCS.org.uk

**Charles Gould, Managing Director of e-learning specialist Brightwave, explores the transition from LMS to learning portal and how this move is destined to benefit the learner and the business.**

For too long now many learners have been struggling to engage with the interface presented by their organisation's LMS. A learning management system - as the term suggests - has, I believe, wrongly prioritised the management and administration of learners over the learning experience itself.

Over the past decade, learning management systems have become almost ubiquitous thanks to maturing interoperability standards. But their roots are in the vast, database-driven enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems. ERP systems were intended to manage all of an organisation's information and functions from shared data stores.



Implemented and configured at huge expense, they are the domain of IT and finance directors seeking to drive efficiency and cost reduction. Sure enough, early LMS were developed by companies who had spun off from ERP providers.

So where was the learner in all of this? Of course, learners were treated in much the same way as any other resource. The stake that learning and development

departments had in the emergence of the LMS was small and peripheral. Their voice was often not listened to (or respected) by the IT fraternity.

As a result, while an LMS has the technical oomph to organise hundreds of courses and query oodles of data to provide detailed management information, the question remains: Does it actually help people learn and - in turn - be better at their jobs?

## **An open door to better engagement and performance**

Unlike LMS, learning portals are designed to put the learner at the centre, rather than the system or the manager or the database. In many ways, what they do is not dramatically different from a conventional LMS, but what they achieve is potentially far greater.

A learning portal - as the term suggests - is a 'way into' the learning, offering a user-friendly interface. It's an open door that should instantly invite the learner to enter and engage them when they're in. This, in essence, is the difference between a conventional LMS and a learning portal.

Scale is also not a problem as learning portals can be designed to meet organisation-wide strategic goals. For example, Bupa successfully implemented the SWIFT Learning Centre, which provides mission-critical systems training and support for a large-scale change programme - something that had an impact on 4,000 members of staff.

Similarly, Glasgow City Council introduced the GOLD (Glasgow Online Learning Development) learning portal - a ground-breaking portal that reaches 37,000 council employees with a full online training programme. Since its launch the Council has seen a six per cent increase in customer satisfaction.

Another benefit of the learning portal is focus. Learning portals can be geared towards a specific subject or a specific job function. The focus could be compliance, product knowledge, an onboarding portal to engage new starters and accelerate their time to target performance or, in the case of Hays, 'Masterclass' management training.

Behind each of these portals is the functionality one would expect from an LMS in terms of the database, personal records, reports and so on. However, instead of a library uninspiringly listing hundreds of off-the-shelf courses, the learning portal can provide a context that is immediately relevant to the learner.



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## Helping learners to be responsible and accountable

It's worth stating that a learning portal is not just a conduit, a 'front end', to reams of learning resources and back-end data wizardry. While a portal gives access to formal e-learning, it also offers more informal learning in the form of social networking and questioning with peers, as well as providing additional resources such as links to interesting sites and reading around a subject.

There has been a lot of discussion in the last couple of years about informal versus formal learning. I prefer to see it as a spectrum. So, at one end, we have chatting at the water cooler and at the other classroom lectures. Formal learning is organised to suit the employer. Very informal learning, by definition, can't be organised, but it can be encouraged and cultivated.

That's the challenge for the LMS in the next decade - the move along the spectrum to support more informal learning. Let's ditch the term LMS. Let's be honest and call them compliance management systems. And let's think instead about learning services or learning and performance portals.

Smart employers will treat their staff as customers of learning. They will present an array - a market place - of learning opportunities. They will put the onus to learn and perform firmly on the learner. They will remove any excuses and barriers. They will give learners the responsibility to learn and expect accountability in return.

So, what should a corporate learning service look like? It will be portal-driven. It will include Facebook, YouTube and eBay features that offer recommendations, feedback, sharing and networking. It will make it clear what the employees have to do and encourage they want to learn. It'll refer to personal incentives and goals that are also business goals. And it'll be relevant to their job and industry.

The context, relevance and engagement of these portals translate into real business results. Sky, for example, has dramatically reduced the time it takes new joiners to get up to speed through a pioneering onboarding portal. This in turn has improved customer service, sales results and halved Sky's attrition rate.

But a good learning service won't just support bottom-up learning. Not surprisingly, 96 per cent of US CEOs want evidence of the business impact of learning, but only 8 per cent see it now in their own organisations. Learning and performance portals can be focussed on solving key business challenges. Where

mission-critical change is needed, these portals can be used to support specific campaigns.

For example, when a telecom client of ours launched a major new product, we set up a performance portal to help their people use, sell and support it. Although it was an LMS, the learners didn't realise it. Games, simulations, video clips and adverts were brought together to capture the product and immerse the learner. Underneath, there was some seriously sophisticated data that provided evidence of return on investment.



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## The best of both worlds

The new generation of people entering the workforce for the first time are sophisticated managers of information who use and expect the full gamut of online tools and resources. Everyone, regardless of their innate technical nous, uses information technology every day. This is no longer a world defined by and geared towards the geek. Employers will need to offer similar and equally effective services in the workplace to enable staff to learn to improve their performance.

So, successful learning service platforms from 2010 will meet the needs of learners and employers alike. Through the portal approach they will support 'bottom-up' learning through tools, resources and informal networks. And they'll meet business goals by making it clear to the learner what they need to do and why. In short, learning portals will make learners want to learn what the business needs them to learn.

### Note to editors - About Brightwave

Brightwave is the UK's leading provider of highly engaging work-based e-learning that delivers results and helps change behaviour. Brightwave works in partnership with complex global clients to provide a complete e-learning service, from content development to innovative tools, hosting and management, performance support and evaluation.

Clients include BT, Bupa, DHL Logistics, EDF Energy, IKEA, ScottishPower, Sky, Swiss Re, T-Mobile, TUI, The Royal Bank of Scotland, Virgin Atlantic Airways as well as public sector organisations like the Healthcare Commission, City of Edinburgh Council and Office for National Statistics.