Choosing an LMS

A Guide for the IT Manager

It's as simple as this: if a Learning Management System (LMS) is easy to use, people will use it. If it's not easy to use, they won't.

When selecting an LMS, it is important to keep "ease of use" as key criteria. We can get caught up in the fancy bells and whistles shown in demos of various LMS systems. They may emphasize 'gamification,' 'xAPI,' 'social learning' and all the other buzz words of the day.

Who wouldn't be impressed, right?

But, if using an LMS is too complicated, no one will use it. Learners will get frustrated and the goals of your business objectives will fall short – or fail.

While the Learning Department (if there is one) usually "owns" the LMS, there are also stakeholders involved. Your IT department usually has a lot of involvement, as do your front-line managers who are assigning and approving training for their teams. Most importantly, your employees, all whom you want to be true "Learners," need to feel at ease with the system so that they will use it.

The average employee is expected to learn many software systems at work (e.g. CRM, Microsoft Office). This can be overwhelming.

Technology changes fast, and employees must master the tools of their workday in a short period while remaining a productive member of the company. If the LMS, where they are supposed to learn those tools, is unfamiliar or involves a huge learning curve to use, employees simply won't use it. What will they do? Go to Google.

So what improves the Ease of Use of an LMS?

Ease of Use for software solutions usually come down to these things:

1. **Intuitive User Interface**. When a learner or administrator uses the system, it must be easy and they must naturally know exactly what to do without explanation.

2. **Customer Support**. Open and friendly lines of communication with your vendor's support team is a must because there will always be questions.

3. **Customization**. Tailoring the system to your business's specific needs will reduce unwanted clutter and/or features that won't be used.

4. **Automation.** The system should make it easier for you, not more complicated, by handling some activities automatically.

5. **Search Functionality**. It's important to be able to find what you're looking for with a system that provides speedy and seamless navigability.

During the LMS selection process, keep these features top of mind while exploring additional requirements.

The Selection Process

Most companies stay with their LMS from 3-7 years. People say that the main reason they switch is that "the technology won't work or meet their needs." The real reason, though, is usually that at the time of implementation, the LMS wasn't set up to be easy to use with how that particular company does business. What are their processes? What are the workflows? Also, as the business changes, does anyone bother revisiting the LMS to make sure its processes and workflows match the new business direction?

The frustration people experience with the technology actually circles back to this idea of Ease of Use and how it fairs over the lifetime of using the system. Can the system continue to grow with the company? Can the LMS be flexible and be customized? Is the cost of owning the system and access to updates with increased functionality appropriate for the business value?

Not all systems are created alike and not every system is right for every company. For example, if your company is not running SharePoint, then our solution, ShareKnowledge, is not a good choice. If your business is running SharePoint, then your employees are already familiar with how it works, so it might be the solution you were looking for.

Selecting the right LMS for your company is not an easy or a quick decision. There are many variables to consider. Ease of Use impacts the effectiveness of not only the system, but your Learning and Talent Development programs as a whole. Be sure it's one of your primary considerations in your selection process.

The more connected our world becomes, the more security has become a concern when it comes to purchasing software.

Is my Learning Management System (LMS) secure?

This question should be at the top of your list when it comes to selecting an LMS. Any new software immediately becomes part of your business ecosystem – and as they say, a chain is only as secure as its weakest link.

An LMS usually contains sensitive information. This includes employee data and confidential product or strategy details. A breach of the LMS could be disastrous. You could lose competitive advantage, or worse, commit a compliance infringement.

Would you want your LMS to be the weakest link in your enterprise network?

Data security is a huge issue. Thousands of websites are hacked every day causing businesses to lose their data and reputation. It can also cause financial harm, emotional distress and clients' confidence lost.

There is a trend toward training in the cloud, but this could potentially put the safety of your business at risk. Some Cloud LMS providers don't perform security audits, they might not deliver your data over secure connections or even store all of your personal and learner data in plain text.

It's really very simple. Once you put data into a SaaS system, you give permission to unknown entities who can and will access your data. So, it's imperative that you feel confident that the LMS provider you choose takes security as seriously as you do.

So what makes an LMS secure?

Here are some things to consider when choosing an LMS that will help keep your LMS secure:

1. **On Premise Deployment**. On-premise is the only way to have full control of your security, information and data.
2. **Single Sign-On with Active Directory**. An authentication system demonstrates who is accessing the system.
3. **Two Factor Authentication**. In addition to SSO, it's important to authenticate users outside of the system who access the LMS.
4. **SSL**. Encrypted communications provide optimal security conditions by industry standards.
5. **User Role Setup**. User roles determine what activities users are allowed to perform, what data they have access to and whom they can work with.

The Selection Process

Choosing an LMS is no small task. In order to have the best chance of success, it's imperative to put a team together that represents all stakeholders and their needs.

The IT department should be center stage when choosing an LMS. They bring useful insight about technical requirements needed in an LMS, such as:

- Deployment models
- Integration ability
- Customization strategy
- Feature development
- Enhancements
- Security

In the past year, 31 percent of LMS buyers switched to a new LMS system. Not meeting IT security requirements is one reason why they switch. Another issue is the LMS not integrating with other business systems.

Security is important in the selection of an LMS. Ask yourself these questions: Does the vendor provide enterprise-grade encryption? Do they show you a service-level agreement with clearly defined data policies? Does the platform comply with regulations for your industry (e.g., HIPAA, PCI-DSS, GLBA)?

For some companies, the nature of their business requires ultimate security. That means the cloud will never be an option. Even with the popularity of the cloud, larger organizations are still more likely to be running on premise. And, this generally comes down to the need for control.

Choosing an LMS isn't for the faint of heart. It takes a lot of work and due diligence before making a final decision. Your IT strategy must be considered and positioned as a top priority. As a result, there will be a higher chance that your LMS will fit cohesively within your business environment and contribute successfully to the goals of your company.

Choosing an LMS and implementing it comes with its own challenges. But, it doesn't stop there. It's important to think about the continuing support of an LMS such as updating software versions.

Bypassing this crucial detail in the LMS selection process could result in additional costs and staff hours.

Not to mention, if the LMS doesn't have regular updates, you'll be the proud owner of an outdated system that is no longer useful.

An outdated LMS is a big reason why companies choose to replace it with another system every few years. This can cause a significant investment in cost, time and potential disruption to your organization.

An LMS should be a helpful tool for the training and productivity of your employees – it shouldn't slow you down or get in the way.

It's important for your LMS of choice to have regular software updates. If not, this opens the door for huge security risks and means you'll miss out on improved functionality, too.

So, what should I know about software updates and an LMS?

Software updates are a given with any system. But, they are necessary.

Depending on the LMS system, there could be a huge discrepancy between software updates that are a breeze and those that are chaotic, time-consuming and generally a bad experience.

Here are a few key things to keep in mind that will help avoid this situation:

- **Existing IT Infrastructure.** An LMS that 'plays nice' with your existing IT infrastructure will make for an easier, seamless software update process. Staff in charge of updates will also have the benefit of familiarity.

- **Product Roadmap.** It's important to know not only what features an LMS has but also what the plans are for feature development. In order to access those new features, be sure to ask what kind of upgrade costs, if any, are involved.

- **Scalability.** A scalable LMS will continue to accommodate your business as you grow, saving you the time, effort, and resources it would take to find and implement an entirely new LMS.

- **Customization.** In order to not get outdated, an LMS should be able to be tailored to your specific training needs. Is it easy or difficult for IT staff to implement these changes?

- **Integration.** As times and needs change, integration is essential. Implementation of an LMS and any updates it has should be non-disruptive to your business. Utilizing your existing technology will help avoid lengthy, complex updates.

The Selection Process

Updated Software Versions & Feature Sets

The IT team has their hands full making sure all software for your business is up and running. **It's important when looking for an LMS to not only consider current features but also to understand the process of software updates and what that entails**.

Software updates are a critical piece of the LMS puzzle.

If an LMS hasn't been updated within a year or two, it's simply not keeping up with what is going on in your industry. You can do better.

Every time the software is updated it incorporates new user-requested features and also provides security patches for any issues that may have arisen.

During the selection process, ask a few simple questions regarding features and software updates:

- How frequently do you update the software?
- What is the process for installing updates and upgrades?
- What will it cost you to get upgrades?
- Will the IT staff need specialized training to maintain the LMS once it's installed?
- Will we be able to integrate other tools and technologies into the platform?
- Do they have plans to improve or upgrade the LMS platform?

Just as with any software, an LMS will fall behind in security and functionality if not properly upgraded. As your business changes, your LMS should also grow and change with the times. However, it shouldn't be a big ordeal. **Software updates should be hassle-free with minimal service disruption.** Software updates and features sets should be at the top of your list when choosing an LMS.

Choosing an LMS that isn't flexible creates a lose-lose situation.

If it no longer suits your learning needs then you face paying excessive amounts in time and money to break your contract and switch to something else.

Or, you continue using an LMS that remains inflexible but misses the mark on potential learning opportunities that could create a profound impact on your bottom line.

This is a painful mistake to make.

It's important when choosing an LMS to think about how the LMS will not only meet your current goals and situation, but also how it can adapt to your changing business needs.

An LMS that isn't flexible can cause a ruckus of other problems too.

Some LMS systems claim to be flexible but when the time comes you're faced with hours of labor from your IT team, additional costs or both.

What the vendor didn't mention during the selection process was that flexibility doesn't come easy.

But, it should.

Change is a given. And your LMS should be able to easily roll with the changes of your business. Simple as that.

So, what makes an LMS flexible?

Flexibility for an LMS usually come down to these things:

- **Scalable and Adaptable**. As your business grows and changes, it's important for an LMS to easily be able to accommodate without a fuss.

- **Integration.** No LMS functions in a bubble. It must be able to integrate with a variety of business systems.

- **Permissions**. An LMS with flexible permissions gives a variety of people, from front line managers to learning administrators, access to the LMS and more freedom to do their jobs.

- **Reporting**. Flexible reporting options can give crucial insight into your learning programs and is a very important feature to have.

- **Features.** An LMS should offer the flexibility to do whatever kind of training you need. Create your ideal learning processes that are the most beneficial and effective ways to develop your people.

During the LMS selection process, keep these features top of mind while exploring additional requirements.

The Selection Process

There is a small percentage of companies that purchase an LMS and use it as-is. More often than not it will need to be customized to some extent.

In fact, according to a report by *eLearning Guild*, more than 62 percent of companies purchased an LMS and customized it to fit their needs.

So, how can you make the most of your investment, now and in the future? The answer is flexibility.

But, it's not good enough to just ask if an LMS is flexible.

Go into the process with specific questions that will help paint a picture of how the LMS will fit into the big picture.

· What types of learning paths are offered?

· Can the user interface be adapted?

· What are the authentication protocols?

· Can you adjust the look and feel of the LMS?

· What flexibility comes out of the box and what must be customized?

· How difficult is it to customize and how much man power will I need to get it to do specifically what we need?

· Does the vendor customize or will that fall on my staff?

· What kind of costs are associated?

Of course, it's also important that once a vendor is chosen that you maintain open lines of communication about what your business needs. In this way, the vendor can take your suggestions and possibly work those new features into their planned roadmap.

Choosing an LMS is a complex decision with lots of things to consider. Flexibility should be at the top of your list of 'must haves.' In an increasingly fast-moving world, it provides companies the ability to stay agile and competitive. It also improves training effectiveness because it creates a learning environment that is most conducive to the way people learn. Be sure an LMS with flexibility is top priority.

Simple and *easy* generally aren't words used to describe creating reports. More often than not the words *time consuming* and *tedious* are used.

Reports play a very important role in learning and development which is why it should be one of the top things to consider when choosing an LMS.

Creating a report is so much more than providing a document with checkmarks showing a staff member took a course. It should tell a story that clearly defines how your training initiatives have impacted your business goals. And most importantly, how to continue down the path of training success.

If front line managers have difficulty pulling the information needed, it's impossible to check what is working and what is not.

Common challenges that happen when it comes to reporting include,

- Difficulty accessing information due to permission restrictions.
- Creating a report that is too complicated and too many steps involved.
- There isn't an option to customize the report to fit specific needs.

These example scenarios are just a few of the problems that could be avoided by choosing the right LMS.

Information is power. That is why choosing an LMS with excellent reporting features will give you the tools to help make informed decisions about all aspects of your business.

So, what reporting features are a 'must have' when choosing an LMS?

It's true, no two businesses are alike and not everybody will have the same needs. But, here is a list of some of the most valued reporting features:

1. **Simple and easy.** When you need to pull information quickly, it's imperative that the report can, not only be created, but reviewed in a few simple clicks so managers can get the information they need to make business decisions.

2. **Integration.** The LMS should be connected to all your business systems so any report can easily and quickly be analyzed against data from your HRIS or any other system.

3. **Customization.** One size does not fit all when it comes to reports. Excellent data reporting tools can compile records from a variety of categories and organize them in any way you see fit.

4. **Permissions.** The LMS administrator shouldn't be the only person able to create and review reports. Each front line manager should be able to access the system without issue and create reports for their department or team.

5.   **Automation.** Nobody wants to spend hours every month recreating the same reports over and over again. The ability to save templates so that data can be shared each month automatically allows more time to analyze and use the data versus time spent compiling the data.

The Selection Process

There are a variety of reasons why a company chooses to switch their LMS. According to *TechnologyAdvice.com*, about 66 percent of the time it has something to do with issues related to reporting.

This means that a little more attention should be paid to reporting features during the LMS selection process.

One of the biggest reasons for an LMS to have great reporting capabilities is that it should demonstrate a return on investment for your organization. And if your learning program is not meeting expectations, the report will help you identify where improvements can and should be made.

A helpful tip is to create scenarios of how you will use the LMS and what types of reports you may need. This will provide a guide outlining the various types of reporting features that will be most useful.

For instance, department managers often times need to run reports for their departments but some training systems only allow LMS administrators access. So, in this case, they will need an LMS that allows permissions for managers to run their own reports.

In other instances, it might be important for a business to get very detailed, granular information in their reports.

ShareKnowledge has a Question-Level Report that would be very useful in this scenario. It allows users to see how well learners did on a test but also assess the test itself.

If everybody got the same question wrong there is a high chance there is something wrong with the question and you can reword it next time. If the results show a mixed bag, learning professionals, instructional designers and course creators can decide whether it's something that can be addressed with more training or change the wording so the question is understood more clearly, or implement both.

Choosing an LMS is difficult as it is. Selecting the right feature sets for learning management systems is important but you also need to make sure that reporting is up to par as well. Being aware of your specific needs and pairing that with an LMS that can solve the problem will pave the way to a stress-free reporting process. And, the best part of effective reporting features in an LMS is the positive impact it will have on the success of your business.

The ability to scale is an important feature of a Learning Management System. If an LMS isn't able to grow with your business, there could be dire consequences.

One obvious issue is the inability to add more learners to the system in a fast, efficient way.

This is a huge and stressful roadblock.

Your employees are the foundation and success of your business. If they aren't learning and evolving, neither is your business.

Naturally, when a business grows this equates to more customers, more data and more resources.

It's a costly nuisance to discover that an LMS that worked sufficiently with a limited amount of users – crashes under the pressure of 10,000+ learners all over the world.

If your organization is unprepared to handle these increases, you lose efficiency and business agility – key factors to stay competitive in your industry.

Financially speaking, scalability is also critical.

A system that does not scale could wind up costing your business a lot of money. Payroll could be exceeded if the IT department are tasked to fix the issue or, if not solved, you could be faced with buying another LMS all together.

An LMS should fit the needs of your organization now as well as tomorrow.

What makes an LMS scalable and adaptable?

When selecting an LMS, it's important to look for features that promote growth and adaptability such as,

- **Users**. An LMS should be able to tolerate a large number of users accessing the system at the same time, from all over the world, without delays.

- **Data**. The ability to handle a large amount of data is imperative to scalability.

- **Administrative**. As the system grows, it's important that different branches of an organization can access the LMS in order to get the information they need.

- **Integrations.** An LMS will never operate independently, especially as a business grows, so having integration capabilities is crucial so it can link with systems such as a CRM or HRIS.

- **Automation.** With growth comes more work and processes. Automation features help streamline and removes the stress of managing a long list of tasks.

The Selection Process

Choosing a system that can change and adapt to the growing needs of your learning initiatives will be a key component in your organization's growth.

A scalable LMS will continue to accommodate your business as you grow, saving time, effort, and resources it would take to find and implement an entirely new LMS.

When it comes to scalability, it's important to know exactly what your business needs are.

- **Does you need an LMS that is built for corporate or an educational environment?**
  Most LMS systems will have their core niche in the market – corporate, educational or human resources. An LMS designed for corporate use can handle a user range of 80,000+ while other systems can manage not more than 5-10,000 users effectively. If the system is human resource focused, there is an even greater chance that the learning aspect is very small and limited in scope.

- **Does your business have simple or complex needs?**
  Some companies will always have very simple learning needs. But, if there is any chance down the road this might change, it's imperative to factor in scalability into an LMS. This allows for more complex workflows and the capacity to handle more data that comes along with multiple organizational units and very complex needs.

Every business knows that to stay competitive, it's important to be agile. The faster a company can make changes, whether in learning or other business processes, the more competitive they'll be.

Scalability in an LMS plays a vital role in the future success of your business and contributes to competitiveness, efficiency, reputation and quality. And, it should be one of the top considerations when evaluating a learning system.

It's never a good thing when a Learning Management System has major roadblocks right out of the gate.

The first impression you get from a new LMS is during the implementation process. So, if the experience is bad for the IT department from the get go, this doesn't bode well for the level of success expected for administrators, employees and managers. This could make or break how the daily use of the system will go.

There are a host of issues that need to be addressed during the implementation process that include, but are not limited to:

- Installation
- Security
- User account management and authentication
- Data migration from the legacy LMS to the new LMS
- System integrations

As with any software system, a number of things could go wrong during implementation. A complicated to use LMS only exacerbates the problem. In order to implement an LMS quickly without issue, it's important during the LMS selection process to prioritize an LMS that is straightforward and easy to use as well as provides a high level of customer support should the need arise.

If there is a glitch during implementation and nobody to provide answers, staff is left to research on their own on sites such as Google or other forums.

If this is the route taken, it results in more staff hours. And, more staff hours equals more money spent.

The more complicated an LMS is the more resources may be needed to implement it as well. For instance, if there are too many options available it can actually make the system harder to use than if there were fewer out-of-the-box options. As a result, you may run into the issue of staff that need to have a certain skillset to even operate the LMS, additional equipment needed and more money for customer support.

When you purchase an LMS, it's expected that implementation shouldn't be the obstacle that inhibits learning programs from getting started so that business goals can be achieved.

An LMS that is difficult to implement, sets the tone for more problems down the line.

If employees are delayed in getting the training they need, this results in an unhappy learning department, front-line managers and CEO. And, of course, you are not any closer to reaching your business goals.

What Makes IT Implementation and Support 'Easy'?

During the LMS selection process, there are a few things that should alert you that it will be 'easy,' including:

1. **Utilize existing infrastructure**. An LMS that can piggyback onto an already established mainframe will immediately make installation easier because it will inherit all existing authentication protocols, processes etc.
2. **Integrations**. It's important that your LMS can 'play nice' with all of your other business systems. The LMS should easily and seamlessly integrate without any fuss.
3. **Data migration and content management**. Data and content play an enormous role in eLearning. A system that integrates both an LMS and CMS will simplify the task of managing information.
4. **Updates.** There will always be updates to any LMS so it's imperative to choose an LMS that makes ease of use a priority and provides your business the tools needed for success.
5. **Customer support.** If help is needed, an LMS should provide timely customer support. It shouldn't be an afterthought nor a pricy add on.

During the LMS selection process, keep these features top of mind while exploring additional requirements.

The Selection Process

An LMS that is quick to set up and easy to use is only complimented by fast and thorough support, available 24/7.

As you're evaluating various LMS systems, ask yourself "what requirements are needed to implement a new LMS?" Are there infrastructure limitations that will eliminate a type of Learning Management System?

Being aware of this important information will help narrow down the list of potential LMSs that will better fit your specific situation and most likely won't cause any problems getting it set up.

It's also important to consider what kind of additional training, if any, the IT staff will need to maintain the LMS. If there is more than average training needed just to work with the LMS, this could potentially be a red flag that the system is complicated.

Be sure not to overlook customer support when selecting an LMS.

The responsiveness of the LMS vendor from the initial inquiry stage should give you a realistic idea of what to expect throughout your time as a customer. If a vendor is slow to respond to your initial sales inquiry, it's unlikely their customer support will set any industry records.

Here are some additional tactics that help explore beyond marketing speak:

- Ask for testimonials or references from customers in similar markets and territories
- Read independent reviews available online
- Submit test support tickets during your trial period

An LMS is an important investment to make so it's crucial to make sure you choose the right one for your business. Ease of Use will be an ongoing theme during the process, and for good reason. The faster and easier you can implement an LMS the faster you are to creating learning programs that will reach your business goals and benefit the success of your business.

Keeping the IT department running smoothly keeps you busy enough. Putting out unnecessary fires related to Learning Management System (LMS) reporting can easily be avoided by choosing the right LMS in the first place.

When your staff gets pulled away from important projects to deal with LMS reporting issues, it can quickly surpass allocated staff hours and lower productivity in your department.

It also doesn't fair well since you most likely had a hand in choosing the LMS.

If features such as reporting don't work as expected, how do you explain to the CEO or CFO that the LMS was a good technology investment? Especially since reporting is so important for these folks.

There are multiple systems in place within any organization. And, integration is extremely important.

But, from an IT perspective, this could prove to be a huge burden if the process is too complex and time consuming.

A system that is too complex can even mean that in order to work with the LMS, your staff may need special technical skills.

Compliance is another headache that falls into the IT department's wheelhouse. Good reporting will be necessary to see how employees are complying with learning programs required for industry and federal requirements.

If employees fall behind, your company could face major fines and penalties.

So what reporting features should I be looking for in an LMS?

There are specific reporting features that bode well for the IT department's needs, including,

- Simple and easy. Reports should be intuitive so anybody, no matter their technology expertise, can pull the information they need – leaving the IT department to focus on other jobs.
- Integration. Integration is necessary to get the full picture of your learning programs. Your LMS should easily be able to 'talk to' other systems without unnecessary steps.
- Automated Compliance. While you handle the security side of things, ease your mind knowing that compliance reports can be automated so you know exactly where your business stands at any given point in time.
- Customization. The reporting needs of your business will always be changing to the ability to easily customize is crucial.

During the LMS selection process, keep these features top of mind while exploring additional requirements.

The Selection Process

Reporting is a very important piece of the learning puzzle for a variety of job roles from learning managers all the way to the CEO.

But, if things go wrong, who do they run to? The IT department.

With that said, it's imperative to listen to the reporting needs of each LMS selection team member. And, jot down notes that particularly relate to your job and the effect it might have on time and resources.

Does Jennifer need a complex report that might consume a lot of time? Maybe David needs to be able to export a report for comparison with other departments and then be able to share it with his manager?

Does the existing system offer a direct integration, or will developers need to configure an API?

There could be a variety of scenarios that must be considered. That is why it's important for the IT department to be included during any LMS demonstrations.

Another way to be as thorough as possible during the selection process is to ask to speak with current clients. Were there any reporting issues and if so, how did customer service handle it? Selecting an LMS is a big decision and one that can create business value for your company. Good reporting is an important feature to consider because it plays a big part in successfully reaching business objectives. Wouldn't you love an LMS report that is so easy and intuitive that managers can pull the data they need without needing help? It's possible when you choose the right LMS with great reporting features.

In today's business environment, it's more important than ever that systems 'play nice' together.

Be very careful about choosing an LMS that doesn't offer the flexibility to integrate with a variety of software systems.

If you do, be prepared to face an uphill battle of challenges.

Learning goes beyond what is just inside the LMS. In fact, more often than not, various components of the learning infrastructure are being handled by other systems.

Failing to connect means you probably won't be able to make the most out of the LMS, and/or fail to utilize its full potential and even miss out on critical data.

Without flexible integration included, this leaves no choice but to burden the IT department with manual integration which increases time, money and resources to do so.

So, what features promote flexibility to integrate in an LMS?

The long-term success of an LMS is often as much about technology integrations as it is about delivering learning content. These integration features can help with flexibility of an LMS.

1. **Single Sign-On**. SSO simplifies the identification process. This is especially useful when there are multiple systems in play. It eliminates redundant processes, streamlines workflows and reduces the number of authentication problems.
2. **Active Directory Integration**. Active Directory helps you organize your company's users, computer and more.
3. **API integrations**. API integrations offer much more control and extensibility to an LMS. This is especially important as your learning needs change and grow.
4. **Customization**. Without the ability to customize an LMS, it reduces your ability to be flexible. It's that simple.

The Selection Process

Flexibility to integrate with other systems is imperative when it comes to choosing an LMS.

Most organizations expect their LMS provider to help them connect with other systems but there is not a lot of LMS integration actually occurring. According to the Brandon Hall Group, 52.2% of organizations say the inability to integrate with multiple systems is a significant barrier to satisfaction with learning technology.

With that said, when it comes integration flexibility, there are a few things to consider before selecting an LMS.

Thinking through your needs of LMS integrations is the first step to asking the right questions during the process. For example,

- **Where will your content be hosted**? Will you be uploading content to be hosted directly by the LMS or integrating and embedding content from external resources like Google Docs and YouTube?
- **What user data will be needed (e.g., department, company, job title) and how will the LMS obtain it?** Should new course registration data be sent to your company's HR, CRM, sales and marketing systems? What about course progress, completion data and certifications? Should financial data integrate with internal accounting systems?

These are all very important details to consider.

Just because an LMS says it can integrate doesn't always mean it will be a smooth process. It's important to dive into the details of your use cases and needs when talking to LMS providers and discuss their experience with integrations and what kind of resources will be needed from your company's IT department, if any.

This will provide the tools to make an educated decision on whether the system will be able to meet your needs now and in the future.

When you put the required time and effort into the LMS selection process your business will reap the benefits. Integration flexibility in an LMS will provide improved productivity, increased data accessibility, more efficient workflows, greater profitability and more accurate decision making.

Let's face it, most off the shelf LMS solutions will not be a perfect fit for your company.

And, if your LMS doesn't provide the flexibility and customization needed, you're faced with trying to adjust processes and staff behavior to fit the software (rather than the software fitting your business).

This is a very large hidden cost of an LMS.

Possibly an even bigger issue than the cost and time involved in the initial implementation of a customized LMS solution is when, in two or three years' time, you want to upgrade to the latest version of the software to get access to new features that are now available.

When that happens, are you prepared?

For the IT department, upgrades can be even more difficult and create unnecessary stress on your department.

When you upgrade to a new version all your customizations need to be reapplied, sometimes reworked if they no longer fit the new architecture, and retested, bugs fixed again, etc.

Flexibility and customization is a necessary feature of an LMS but it shouldn't create more work for the IT department.

So what improves flexibility and customization of an LMS?

 Flexibility and customization in an LMS usually come down to these things:

1. **IT Infrastructure.** Naturally, when your LMS fits seamlessly into the IT infrastructure that is already in place within your business, it will make customization and the ability to be flexible much easier.
2. **Vendor Support.** If you have issues, having a software support team to consult with is very important.
3. **Integration.** Features that allow for integration with other business systems is a major bonus when it comes to flexibility .
4. **Flexible User Interface (UI) and User Experience (UX).** Be sure that the features and functionality your business needs is available when you need it, now or in the future.
5. **User Management.** Often times, people in your company will need to access the LMS, not just administrators. Are you able to configure the system to be accessed by anybody?

  During the LMS selection process, keep these features top of mind while exploring additional requirements.

The Selection Process

On average, companies stay with their LMS from 3-7 years, citing that 'the technology won't work or meet our needs' as to why they switch systems.

LMS Customization and Flexibility

When an LMS provides flexibility through customization, this allows for changing business and training needs. And, of course, since the system is able to adjust, you won't have to buy a new one. Win-win!

During the selection process, there are some key things to consider and questions to be asked,

- How difficult is the LMS to customize? Will it require copious amounts of time from the IT staff?
- Are there additional fees for customization?
- What is the timeframe to make changes to the system?
- Do you have federal, industry, or company security requirements that will require customization?

An out-of-the-box LMS may sound easy but with that comes features and functionality that you may or may not need. So, the question is...how difficult is it for you to turn on or add the features you need while turning off the others?

During the selection process, it's important to think about what you're trying to solve. For example, maybe you will continuously be updating content to the site and need to have a content management system tied into your LMS.

Business needs vary wildly with the size and nature of the company, existing systems and processes, and - of course - the specific function of the tool itself.

Utlimately, the LMS you choose should fit your business, instead of your business fitting the software. Staff will not need heavy retraining, nor will they have to adjust their normal work processes. The software will not become a hindrance and will instead save time, and with saving time comes saving money.

Usually it's a good thing when IT needs to scale up a particular technology, like an LMS, quickly – maybe sales are growing or new employees are being added.

However, there is an expectation that when it comes time to scale that IT can quickly and easily roll out any needed changes.

For the IT department, it isn't quite as easy as a few clicks or call to a provider.

This is because not every LMS is designed to scale, and as such, a business might not have realized this during the selection process.

What happens is that, as a company's needs grow, the LMS isn't able to keep up and they either have to a) buy a new system, or b) try to adapt the LMS (if at all possible).

From an IT perspective, both options will far exceed time and resources available.

For instance, temporarily patching the LMS will alleviate some of the early issues, but with that comes added complexity. Complexity makes diagnosing problems on an on-going basis more tedious (i.e., pricier and less effective).

Other issues arise too when an LMS is not scalable.

The more data stored or simultaneous users the LMS collects, the more strain is put on the software's architecture. Limitations that didn't seem important in the beginning become a huge barrier to productivity.

And, as the workload rises past the LMS's ability to scale, performance also drops.

So what improves scalability of an LMS?

An LMS is considered scalable when it doesn't need to be redesigned to maintain effective performance during or after a steep increase in workload.

Scalability for software solutions usually come down to these things:

1. **Users and data.** Can the LMS handle an increase in users and data? This is critical when it comes to scale. Whether the maximum stored data can scale quickly depends heavily on database style (SQL vs NoSQL servers), but it's also critical to pay attention to proper indexing.
2. **Automation and workflows.** Streamlining processes is essential when scaling, so it's especially important that any prospective LMS is well-equipped.
3. **Customization.** Customization helps with flexibility as well as scalability. These are very important as a business grows.
4. **Load balancing software.** The LMS should use an algorithm to spread the workload across servers to ensure no single server gets overwhelmed. It's an absolute necessity when scaling out.
5. **Asynchronous processing.** This refers to processes that are separated into discrete steps which don't need to wait for the previous one to be completed before processing. Asynchronous processing removes some of the bottlenecks that affect performance.
6. **Maintenance.** Set the LMS up for automated testing and maintenance so that when it grows, the work of maintaining it doesn't get out of hand.

During the LMS selection process, keep these features top of mind while exploring additional requirements.

The Selection Process

Some businesses fail to prioritize scalability because they don't see the immediate utility of it. Scalability gets pushed aside in favor of speed, shorter development cycles or lower cost.

But, as a general rule, scalability is much easier and less resource-intensive when considered from the beginning.

For one thing, database choice has a huge impact on scalability. Migrating to a new database is expensive and time-consuming; it isn't something that can be easily done later on.

In addition, scalability lets a company purchase only what is immediately needed, not requiring the implementation of every feature that might be useful down the road.

When there are many extras and/or 'features', there is a high likelihood that they won't all be utilized – but they will most certainly inflate the LMS cost.

Instead, a company can buy an LMS solution that is scalable. So, when it grows large enough that handling multiple tasks becomes difficult, they can easily add the functions to the LMS they need. Approaching it this way, they are preparing for future growth while buying a leaner LMS that suits current needs without extra complexity.

There is also a lower initial investment.

Another bonus of a scalable LMS is that it leaves room for changing priorities. That off-the-shelf bundle could become less relevant as a company shifts to meet the demands of an evolving marketplace.

These are all things to consider when it comes to choosing an LMS and the role scalability plays. By prioritizing this feature in an LMS, a business can protect their technology investment and will be able to continue using the LMS for much longer because it was designed to grow along with them. And, when the time comes for change, building onto a solid, scalable LMS is considerably less expensive than trying to adapt to less agile systems.

Features are exciting and tend to take center stage when selecting an LMS. But, an often overlooked quality of a Learning Management System is security.

An LMS usually contains sensitive information. This may include employee data, company policies and confidential product or strategy details.

If your LMS isn't secure or the methods you use for training outside of an LMS are not secure, it leaves the door open for multiple problems including loss of reputation, legal issues, financial losses and compliance infringement, to name a few.

It's simple, if you're looking for an LMS, be sure security is firmly placed at the top of your list. If you have an LMS already and it's not secure, you might want to seriously rethink your current LMS provider.

All companies need to take security seriously, but never more so than those in highly compliant industries such as government organizations, financial institutions, health care providers and insurance companies.

According to the 2017 "Cost of Data Breach Study" by the Ponemon Institute, the most vulnerable industry is health care followed by technology. An LMS falls into the technology category – making it even more important to pay attention to security when selecting an LMS.

In addition, the study goes on to state that the average cost of a data breach is $3.62 million. And, just one lost or stolen record that contains sensitive and confidential information will cost your business on average of $141.

With the new GDPR law (see below) in effect, it will introduce an even greater challenge for all organizations that process personal data.

It's your choice. Pay attention to how secure your LMS is or risk steep consequences.

So what improves the security of an LMS?

Every organization needs to know that their LMS offers the level of security needed to protect their data.

Security for software solutions usually come down to these things:

1. **Single Sign On (SSO) and Secure Sockets Layer (SSL)**. An SSL protocol to encrypt data essential as is providing authentication for who is accessing the system.
2. **Two Factor Authentication**. Users accessing the LMS outside the system also need to be identified. Two factor authentication will do this.
3. **Regular Updates**. Old, outdated LMS systems will never be on the same page as current security protocols. Be sure your LMS provides regular updates to address the evolving nature of security needs.
4. **Deployment that matches your security recommendations (self-hosted or cloud).** Every business is unique and it's a good idea to choose an LMS based on your company's particular security requirements.
5. **Roles and Permissions**. User roles determine what activities users are allowed to perform, what data they have access to and whom they can work with.

During the LMS selection process, keep these features top of mind while exploring additional requirements.

Things to Consider Before and After the Selection Process

An LMS that lacks in security is a big problem.

If you're new to the LMS market and/or realize you need a new LMS with more robust security features, keep this top of mind during the selection process.

Not all LMS products are the same when it comes to security and privacy. There are a handful of areas you should review before choosing an LMS. If you already have a system in place, now is a good time to review its features to make sure it is up to industry standards. Key areas you should evaluate include:).

- Network Security
- Secured Connection
- User Access
- Third Party Certificates
- Data Recovery

Data security has become such a prevalent issue throughout the world that some countries have introduced legislation to protect personal information (e.g., GDPR).

The United States takes a sectoral approach to data legislation. Companies are expected to implement their own security policies while individuals are expected to self-regulate who gets their private data.

Once you have chosen an LMS and implemented it, there are several things you and your organization can do to work with your system's built-in security protocols.

- Make sure all employees are well-trained in proper use, management and storage of data.
- Dispose of sensitive data that is no longer needed as soon as possible.
- Keep all operating systems, software and malware protection up to date.
- Control who can physically access your computers and related equipment.
- Verify security protocol used by all third-party services your organization relies on.
- Limit access to sensitive data to those who need it as part of their job or role.

Selecting the right LMS for your company is not an easy or a quick decision. There are many variables to consider, one of which should be security. With proper security, your business can rest easy that employee and business data are safe, you're able to avoid costly fines and maintain company reputation.