

Learning Portals: **How LMSS** **are Evolving**

LEARNING PORTALS DELIVER
EXTENDED ENTERPRISE LEARNING

BY JERRY ROCHE

The implementation of effective e-learning strategies no longer remains solely the responsibility of learning professionals. With the introduction of Web-based learning portals, it can grow and thrive to serve the entire enterprise and beyond, to channel partners and customers.

“Learning comes out of the Human Relations Department, but it can be extended to the entire business,” says Todd Premo, director of Product Management for SumTotal Systems. “One of challenges

of any organization is the number of times information is produced and altered for different 'customers.' If you have channels, the channels audience needs the exact same information that organizations can give to their sales staff. You don't have to rebrand it or rewrite it, because synergies exist between the business side and learning side of things."

This new paradigm charges learning portals with being a means to cast a wide net over an entire corporation's or organization's knowledge dissemination. Those that do not accept this efficient new way of imparting information are forced to live in a world where human resources, sales, customer service and so many other business-driven objectives are segmented — to the detriment of the organization or corporation.

"A portal is one place to go, no matter what kind of training you're seeking," says Lee Stayton, vice president of E-learning Services at nSight. "Extended enterprise learning is targeted not directly at employees, but an organization's partners, which includes the sales force, distributors, installers and customers. The idea of a learning portal adds genuine information that's really informative to build relationships that have traditionally been viewed as the marketing role. It's being implemented both in manufacturing and information-laden industries like insurance."

Learning portals instantly give an organization the power to store any kind of content (Word, Excel, PDF, Flash, etc.); manage where, what, when and how content is viewed; and, in many cases, track performance and results. If they are easy to use and flexible, portals can be the perfect solution for:

- >> Employee training
- >> Channel partner training
- >> Sales training
- >> HR communications
- >> Product demonstrations
- >> Compliance training
- >> Dynamic marketing
- >> Customer surveys
- >> Change management
- >> Corporate communications



EMPHASIS ON EDUCATION

The extended-enterprise learning portal approach does not diminish an organization's commitment to educating and training employees.

"It does provide an avenue for more prescriptive learning based on specific learner needs," says Ruth Kustoff of Knowledge Advantage, a consultancy. "Enterprise learning or front-end portals are defining what the new LMS looks like and the features it must include."

"Learners are more involved in their own learning, defining their needs and finding the information they need at the moment they need it," she says. "Just-in-time or on-demand learning is becoming the way of learning in organizations; this includes social, collaborative and informational learning. The value of working together and sharing makes for collaborative learning. Social groups and communities of learning are creating new ways for employees to learn."

Some experts believe that effective learning organizations must indeed move beyond just managing training delivery and controlling the cost of learning activities. With technology being such a big part of the learning experience, it's crucial to achieve a high rate of LMS adoption — and that requires a user-centered training Website or portal.

Portals do have other advantages. For one, portal technology means reduced support load on a company's IT staff and decreased cost of ownership. A portal also improves the system's user interface, while providing administrators with the ability to maintain a

high degree of control. The objective is not to provide everyone with all the information available but to make the right information more accessible, when and where it's needed.

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY?

In most cases, a team below the C-level manager is usually tasked with implementing and rolling out the portal.

"The biggest problem can be that clients don't have any kind of organized workflow or naming conventions, and they don't have a workflow of how to get from script to screen," says

Jacquie Beck, senior vice president of E-learning for Brookwood Media Arts, another consultancy. "Large organizations tend to be very decentralized. Everybody kind of plays in their own sandbox, and when you try to get everybody to play together, it's hard to break bad habits when teams have always done it their way."

Implementing standards that will be consistent through all applications and all portals is usually a challenge, because even large multi-national companies lack the international talent that has been through

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the process of constructing an efficient learning portal. Very few have an established workflow, standards, and/or communication guidelines. That's when an outside advisor comes in handy.

"Committee members or teams have

never done anything like this, even if they're 10- or 20-year veterans of the company," notes Beck. "We'll be called in as a trusted advisor to help with strategizing and high-level needs assessment. Our clients come to us and say, 'We need to build this portal, and here's what we have in place in our different locations' — and it's three completely different comparative samples. At that point, we start the streamlining processes. We figure out which tools are validated and whether there's a learning management system to integrate that adheres to SCORM standards or AICC standards. We ask a lot of high-level questions early in the process."

Project plans are normally devised, at which point companies like Brookwood will leverage the client's internal teams and mix its talent pool with their own skilled experts.

BUILDING A PORTAL

The first step — taken in-house or with the help of outside contractors — is to analyze all the user groups.

"Interview power-users and find out what resources they access on a regular basis for learning and looking up information," says B.J. Schone, senior learning technology specialist for Qualcomm. "Find out what information is most important to them and find out how you can aggregate it in a way that is simple, clean and useful. [Then] contact vendors or systems specialists at your organization to find out if this information can be extracted and displayed on a learning portal."

Most consultancies advise companies to start small. Aggregate some useful resources and slowly add features and functionality based on users' feedback. Interview users and put a poll on the portal. Get as much feedback as you can. It will improve naturally over time if you listen and respond.

"Finding what you need can be a frustration," observes nSight's Stayton. "If people haven't thought about informational architecture, it can get really confusing and frustrating."

QualComm groups its resources together by topic or project. Some password-protected areas are limited to upper management. "You could handle this two ways," Schone suggests.

"One, only show the restricted items (on the portal) to upper management; or two, password-protect the resources themselves (so users must log in once they click the link on the portal). My best advice would be to do what makes the most sense for your users."

At some advanced point, the expertise for outside assistance can be transferred to in-house personnel. Crocs Footwear, which hired Pennsylvania-based Brookwood, is a case in point. Brookwood built Crocs' e-learning platform, trained its personnel, and assisted with the first global roll-out of a software application.

"Now they're following our development workflow and producing training from our templates that is branded and set up with the proper options selected for two-way communication with their LMS," says Brookwood's Beck. "They no longer need us to assist them, because they have a validated template, workflow with proven success, and a documented model that allows any new hires to build consistent learning objects because standards are in place. In just a few months, Crocs became completely self-sufficient, loading content, tracking, and doing a great job. We come back quarterly to monitor, coach and do very, very lightweight help. This is a perfect example of leveraging an e-learning solution partner early in the game and saving thousands of hours by having experts guide you and teach you how to do it the right way in the beginning."

FEEDBACK

Not all learning portals are built for feedback. So sometimes you have to wrap it in a larger context like a Web portal that is more generally set up for two-way communication and comments.

"You have to make an extra effort to solicit the info, gather it, and act on it," says Stayton. "You have to cull out old information, make sure new information is loaded. Companies should be looking at how to revise it, how to improve it, and how to take it off when it's no longer avail-

able. That's an effort that's sometimes forgotten. It's a different kind of maintenance issue. It calls upon collaboration, and it does break down a lot of barriers, but it can be a point of resistance."

CONCLUSION

"People are seeing the connection," says SumTotal's Premo. "More than ever before, portal technology is becoming very, very prescriptive. Yes, it's a bit of a change, but there's more collaboration and information exchange on the Internet than ever before. A learning portal can give employees and customers alike quick, easy access to primary information, ancillary information and/or discussion.

"An LMS portal can go beyond aggregating information or access. It does so in a way that's engaging, that has as much of a marketing approach as learning path approach. To some degree, you wouldn't recognize it as being the same thing as what LMS's have been in the past." 



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