10 Questions Everyone Should Ask When Choosing an LMS

Written by Robert Schuetz

I f you're in the process of choosing a learning management system (LMS), or you've chosen one in the past, you know how challenging the decision can be. It requires a significant investment of time and, in many cases, expense without knowing whether or not your faculty will even use the system.

As the Technology Coordinator for Palatine High School in Palatine, IL, I was heavily involved in our LMS evaluation. And take it from me, knowing the right questions to ask can make this whole process much simpler.

However, before we dive into the 10 questions you need to be asking before choosing an LMS, we should take a moment to define what an LMS actually is.

The Ever Evolving Learning Management System

Traditionally speaking, the purpose of the LMS is to augment the classroom via blended learning experiences, a mix of face-to-face and digital instruction. The features provided by the system are meant to make educators more efficient and, in turn, enhance teaching and learning.

This is still true, but modern iterations of the LMS have evolved beyond the classroom walls to become the backbone of instruction, collaboration, and insight for entire institutions.

The process of choosing an LMS has also evolved. In the past, choosing an LMS was primarily feature driven. But choosing any technology based solely on a checklist of features has the tendency to result in dissatisfaction. The features often end up being too complicated to use or they simply do not work. Today, the focus is on how well the LMS supports the overall technology strategy, organizational goals, and personal learning experiences.

That said, if you are currently evaluating LMSs solely on the features they provide, take a step back and look at the bigger picture. These systems can now support professional development, PLCs, and PTA meetings in addition to blended learning. So if you are not thinking of how your LMS fits into your entire educational culture, you are missing the point.

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Now that you're thinking about your overall strategy and how the LMS fits into that, here are 10 questions you need to be asking when choosing a system of your own.

1. **Does the LMS Support your Institution's Goals, Technology Strategy, and Most Importantly, Personal Growth?**

A top-notch LMS will provide learning experiences suited to your learners, as well as, your organizational goals. Ask yourself: who will be using the system? What are the experiences you desire for these users?

Let's say, for example, your district is in the midst of a 1:1 implementation with iPads, and you want students to be assessed authentically through creative expression. Your LMS will need to provide seamless and effective classroom workflow that's compatible with the iPad, as well as, provisions for media files and rich text editing.

Most importantly, your LMS should provide a center-piece for your personal learning environment—a place to curate resources, connect with others, and create products of learning.

2. **Is the LMS Easy to Implement and Use?**

Ease of use is one of the biggest factors in whether or not your LMS will be a success. The reality is tools that don't feel readily familiar and require tons of training aren't going to be adopted except by a few very ambitious faculty members.

There are a growing number of LMS vendors that are catching onto this fact, and are placing a great amount of emphasis on user experience (UX). Schoology, for example, mirrors the designs of technologies both students and faculty use everyday.

After all, hundreds of millions of people use LinkedIn without ever having been trained. Why would you expect anything less from your LMS?

3. **Does the LMS Support Mobile Access and Learning?**

The world is in constant motion and learners are taking their classrooms with them. A modern LMS provides a robust mobile app that parallels the desktop experience. This provides students and educators with greater access to and easier consumption of content.

Like it or not, more and more of our learning is taking place outside the walls of a traditional classroom—e.g., MOOCs (massive open online courses), blended learning, flipped classrooms. Education is becoming increasingly digital, mobile, and globally connected.

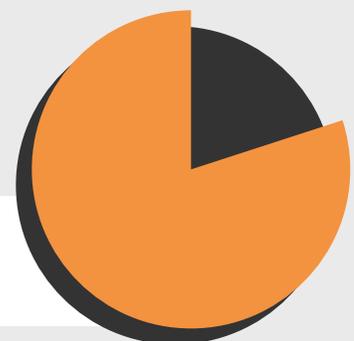There's just no need to be saddled to a desktop computer when your LMS can be carried in your

Mobile Learning and Meeting Students Where They Are

8 out of 10 high school students use smartphones regularly

8 out of 10 elementary students use tablets regularly

pocket. And with 1:1 initiatives and the proliferation of smartphones, one of your first questions when evaluating LMSs should be, "Is there an app for that?"

4. Does the LMS Provide Efficiency to Teaching and Learning?

Everyone wants to work smarter, not harder, and a great LMS will help you do just that. Through the ability to automate tasks and save time via productivity enhancing features, your faculty will not only become more efficient but also happier.

Examples of an LMS working for you include self-graded assessments, notifications and reminders, item banks for tests and quizzes, seamless integration of third-party content, and a well designed assignment workflow.

While most of the examples mentioned above are pretty straightforward, the assignment workflow deserves deeper consideration. Instructors spend a good portion of their day collecting and grading assignments and providing feedback. Understanding how they might accomplish everyday tasks as these via the LMS is crucial.

Your faculty should be able to distribute learning material, gather student work, and provide timely, meaningful feedback for students more efficiently with the LMS than without. It's also great to have options for personalizing feedback via audio or video commentary.

5. Does the LMS Boost Communication and Collaboration?

Real-time communication and sharing are the hallmarks of modern technology, yet only recently has this trickled down into education. Let me be blunt—your LMS needs to enhance communication and collaboration both inside and outside of the classroom.

Why? The benefits of effective messaging and effortless sharing of content cannot be overstated. How else do you plan to incite sweeping change across a school or district? Instructors need to be on the same page, students need to be organized, parents need to be informed, curriculum needs to be distributed effectively, and this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Real-time communication and sharing is essential for the institution to run smoothly, and there's simply no better vehicle for it than your LMS. Imagine having your messages, updates, notifications, calendar events, upcoming due dates, and shared resource repositories all in the same place. If you don't, you and your faculty are left juggling all the tools you need for this separately.

Keep in mind that there is a difference between an LMS with a messaging feature (traditional LMSs) versus one with communication and collaboration built in (Schoology). The latter helps you go beyond simply boosting communication to actually establishing it as a central piece to your educational strategy.

6. Does the LMS Provide Accessible and Usable Data Reporting?

One of the main reasons for using an LMS is the insights it can provide you and all of your organization's stakeholders. After all, frequent user-specific feedback is a leading intervention for academic achievement.

But just because every LMS has some sort of data reporting, doesn't mean it will be useful. The platform you choose should provide clear, timely, and specific insights, so you don't have to dig through mounds of data to find them yourself.

7. Does the LMS Integrate with Other Services, Content, and Tools?

One of the biggest considerations of anyone choosing an LMS is whether or not the publisher content and tools currently in use will carry over. As the saying goes, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

What is working for you now should continue to work with your chosen LMS. In fact, if the integrations are good quality, you may even get more value from your existing tools and content.

Pay close attention to the workflow needed to use your favorite tools, such as Google Drive. Using an LMS's Google Drive app should be less cumbersome than using the tools separately. Otherwise, all promises for greater efficiency goes right out the window.

8. Is the LMS Adaptable and Scalable to Changing Needs?

It's been said the one constant is change. Organizations and situations change and you need an LMS that is flexible and responsive to these sometimes unpredictable shifts. This year, your district is implementing 1:1 devices, but next year, standards-based grading. Will the LMS be an asset, or a hindrance with your initiatives?

Now there are two basic types of scalability that you'll need to evaluate—instructional and technical. Instructional scalability boils down to whether or not your LMS will support the varying pedagogies of your instructors over time. Let's say, for example, some of your instructors flip their classrooms and others implement a gamified mastery model. Will they be able to do so using the LMS?

On the technical side of scalability, it is very important that your LMS has an open API (application programming interface). This will allow it to connect and communicate with new and existing third-party tools. Nowadays if your

LMS doesn't work with your SIS or allow for you to connect new tools down the road, forget it.

9. Is the LMS Reliable and Dependable?

We've all been there. It's test time, and all the tedious preparation flies out the window because the internet went down, the server crashed, or the computers aren't cooperating. The fact is, these things are bound to happen, but if you choose a reliable LMS, then you'll have one less thing to worry about.

> **A Few Hidden Costs of "Free" Self-Hosted LMSs**
>
> $ Hiring dedicated IT staff
> $ Purchasing, maintaining, and updating server
> $ Upgrading and maintaining platform
> $ Investing in disaster recovery infrastructure
> $ Delays waiting on fixes

If your LMS provider can't promise better than 99% uptime, move along because there's nothing to see here. It's also important to have great support for the 1% of the time you need it. Great LMS companies provide prompt support by communicating status and promptly resolving the unforeseen issues.

And remember, if you choose to host your own LMS, instead of going with a cloud-based one, you are your own IT and support team. While self-hosted LMSs such as Moodle are free to use, the cost of maintaining them can be far higher than you'd expect.

10. What is the Feedback from Your Faculty and Students?

The last, but definitely not least, question you need to address when choosing an LMS is all about where your faculty and students are now. Do they already

use an LMS? If so, what do they like most and what do they wish were different?

When you consult the people most likely to use the LMS on a daily basis, you accomplish two things. First, is getting your faculty and students involved in the decision making process—a huge boon when trying to ensure school or districtwide adoption.

Second, seeking feedback from faculty and students will help ensure the LMS you choose works for them. If you don't know what your faculty need from the system, then you run a greater risk of failure.
Conclusion

An LMS can be the center of your personal learning environment and is an essential element of your overall technology strategy. Choosing the right one for your institution is seldom an easy decision.

While many institutions have become enamored with a collection of features, this has often led to dissatisfaction and implementation failure. The key to successful LMS implementation rests in its ability to deliver learning experiences complementary to organizational goals.

Thinking about these ten critical questions will invite focused conversation, put many doubts to rest, and provide a foundation for making a smart choice. ●

* Read more of Schoology's best practices and guides

About the Author

Robert Schuetz is a veteran educator of 25 years, all at Palatine High School in Palatine, Illinois. He is a National Board Certified Teacher and has spent the last 14 years serving as technology coordinator at his school. He manages a 1:1 iPad program, runs a gamified professional development initiative in his district, and believes that lifelong informal learning is quintessential to happiness.

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