Learning Without Limits

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KNOWLEDGE SOLUTIONS

White Paper

# Selecting an LMS That's Right for Your Association's Vision


## Introduction

Although membership levels are rebounding from their lowest points this decade, many member-based associations are searching for innovative ways to increase non-dues revenue. Educational content, while once reserved as an exclusive benefit of membership, is being seen in a new light as a revenue source. However, the logistics of delivering and monetizing that content can still be daunting to associations that lack the right learning management system (LMS) technology. This paper explores a time-tested, seven-step process for selecting an LMS that will help your association meet its objectives around revenue generation, member education and professional certification.

## What is an LMS?

First, what is a learning management system? Essentially, it is a software application that automates the administration, tracking, and reporting of training events. However, LMSs have evolved over the years, and there are now advanced features that add a whole new dimension to learning management. The table below shows some of the features traditionally included in the LMS, as well as newer capabilities that associations will want to consider for their learning initiatives.

| Traditional | Additional |
|---|---|
| **Enroll learners** | **Content authoring** |
| **Launch courses** | **Webinar/webcast capabilities** |
| **Track learning activity and completion** | **Classroom management** |
| **Test learners on basic skills** | **Collaboration and social tools** |
| **Generate reports** | **Sophisticated assessment** |
| | **Credit and certification management** |
| | **Competency management** |
| | **E-commerce** |
| | **Integration capabilities** |

As with many software applications, the LMS has evolved from a perpetual license model to a subscription model, with choices around deployment, including multi-tenant software as a service (SaaS), single-tenant hosted, or on-premise installations. This flexibility makes the LMS more accessible to associations that previously may not have been able to make the investment in technology infrastructure.

## Key Considerations for Acquiring or Replacing an LMS

Associations that are considering an LMS acquisition, or replacement of an existing LMS, first need to do some planning and assessment of their current environment. Exploring these key considerations before engaging with LMS vendors will ensure that you understand the broader implications of acquiring and implementing the system.

### Consider Your Entire Ecosystem

These days, no LMS should be an island, and in fact it should integrate with as many other applications as possible within the learning ecosystem. For example, learning data affects human resources, talent management and performance management systems. An LMS should also seamlessly integrate with your association management system (AMS), such as Personify or Avectra. Take the time to work with your IT to make sure the selected LMS can function across the existing ecosystem.

### Quantify ROI

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### Don't Overlook Change Management

While most people know that change is necessary, they still may not like or accept new applications and business processes right away. It is always important to create and implement a change management plan that involves frequent communication and training for all stakeholders. Consider the different audiences that will be using the LMS and tailor communications accordingly. Apply basic principles of training so that people will accept the system that helps them with training!

## The 7-Steps for Acquiring an LMS

It's always best to follow a defined methodology for identifying, evaluating and selecting any mission-critical application. The same is true for an LMS. Adhering to a process and completing each step will ensure the best possible outcome for a system that will address your association's immediate needs as well as enable your future vision.

## STEP 1: Identify and Clarify Objectives

Too often overlooked, the first step in selecting an LMS is to identify and clarify your association's objectives for the system. This is a higher-level discussion than identifying what the LMS should do – that comes next. Ask some of the following questions:

- How will the LMS support the association's short- and long-term strategic goals?
- What do you really want to accomplish with learning and educational programs?
- What are the associated people, processes and functions that will be affected by an LMS?
- What problems are we trying to solve?
- What other opportunities could open up to us if we take this direction?

Answering these questions and focusing on objectives is an important precursor to defining actual system requirements. Make sure the team represents a good cross-section of the organization so that there is strong buy-in and a solid business case.

Articulating your objectives also helps potential vendors understand how to position their solution, as well as what to focus on in the demonstrations.

## STEP 2: Specify Needs and Requirements

With clear objectives defined, the next step is to map those objectives to the functionality of an LMS – actual requirements of what the system must provide. Also coming into play here is what the association knows about its learners. For example, will learning be done at their desk, or on the go? This knowledge of how learners will receive and access training will drive certain requirements.

It helps to categorize requirements by function and to prioritize the requirements within each category. Prioritization can be as simple as "must have," "should have," and "nice to have," as long as not everything is critical. Setting realistic priorities will make a big difference in the final decision-making process.

Assemble the requirements in a spreadsheet or document that you can distribute to the LMS vendors. Let the vendors understand your priorities and any other details about the requirements that might not be straightforward, such as a business process that needs to be explained. Remember to avoid subject language and be as objective and concrete as possible, so vendors can answer whether they meet the requirement with a simple "yes" or "no."

## STEP 3: Pre-Vet and Shortlist Vendors

The purpose of pre-vetting and short-listing vendors is to eliminate some of the vendors so you're left with those that best match your association's objectives and requirements. Pre-vetting may consist of viewing online demos, reading white papers, watching webinars and learning as much as possible about the vendor without yet actively engaging them.

You may also want to reach out to peers through organizations such as the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), the State Association Executive Society, or the Leading Learning group on LinkedIn.
Once you've done your due diligence, you can whittle down the list of vendors to which to send your request for proposal (RFP) to between three and five.

## STEP 4: Develop and Issue an RFP

This step is where all the hard work, thinking, and research are put down on paper as you develop and issue the RFP. An RFP must include components like:

- A narrative that describes your association, the situation, objectives and rules of engagement
- The spreadsheets that list the requirements
- A cost sheet where the vendor can fill in the cost of the software license, implementation and support
- A grid for 3-5 references

An RFP must be structured and consistent, so that each vendor can be evaluated fairly. Be sure to give vendors enough time to respond with a quality proposal.

## STEP 5: Review and Score Responses

Once you've received responses from your short-list vendors, then it's time to review and score them. In this step, it is important for the whole team to have an understanding of how to evaluate the proposals.

Each team member must commit to a thorough review of each proposal and a group discussion should take place to remind everyone of the objectives and requirements set out in steps 1 and 2. The group should agree on a standard ranking scale by which they rate the vendors according to their ability to meet the requirements.

Using this kind of system makes it easier to arrive at a score that considers both the association's priorities and the vendor's capabilities.

## STEP 6: Engage in Demonstrations

Depending on how many vendors were on the shortlist, and how they ranked, you'll probably want to invite at least two or three to give detailed demos of their systems. The best way to ensure comparable demos among vendors is to provide a demo script that refers back to the objectives, requirements and priorities of the team.

Usually a script covers about eight major areas, with 1-3 key use cases within each major area. Share the script with the vendors with enough time for them to tailor their demo to the association's needs. Plan for demonstrations to take 2-3 hours per vendor and leave time for any questions the vendor may have.

## STEP 7: Select and Negotiate

The final step in the process is selection and negotiation with the preferred vendor. Your team will bring together all the quantitative and qualitative data that was collected in the previous steps as the foundation for making a decision. Sometimes, one vendor may stand out from the rest, but if not, then it is time to make a pros and cons list for each vendor. This list should include any risks associated with the vendors that might not have factored into the scoring process.

Once a single vendor has been selected, you should review the contract and negotiate on cost. Every vendor should be willing to negotiate and present a "best and final offer," sometimes just called a BAFO.

Once negotiation is complete, and the contract is signed, then get ready for the kick-off meeting, because it is time to start implementation!

## Use of Outside Resources

In some instances using outside resources — such as a specialized consulting firm or a board member — makes sense. Outside resources bring four main benefits to the process, including:

- Supplement available staff — if internal resources are constrained, an outside resource can do a lot of leg work that might otherwise bog down an internal staff person
- Get a fresh perspective — an outside resource might provide a different take on the organization's learning objectives and requirements from a neutral position
- Facilitate decision-making — if the team finds itself at a sticking point or impasse, an outside mediator can often bring about a resolution
- Benefit from depth and breadth of experience — someone who has assisted many associations with this process can anticipate and avoid problems that might slow the project

## Conclusion

While it may be tempting to skip over some of these steps — "we know what we want to accomplish" "we know what the system should do" "we already have a first choice vendor" — your association will be poorly served by those omissions. Resist the urge to cut corners or save time, and use the 7-step process.

By using the 7 steps, you'll have a documented and defensible record of your selection process. You'll also be assured that the process was inclusive and resulted in the best possible decision for a system that you'll have for many years. Ultimately, you'll know that the LMS you selected will help your association fulfill its vision for the future.

## About Meridian Knowledge Solutions

Meridian Knowledge Solutions provides technology platforms that empower enterprises, governments and member-based organizations to develop their people by delivering learning, assessing performance and fostering collaboration.