

HR Field Guide: 5 Tips To Effective Learning Management

Learning management systems (LMS) manage all aspects of education by automating and managing the administration, management, delivery, and end user experience of blended learning programs. This field guide will explore five critical steps to ensure that you get the most out of your learning management investments.

Introduction

Learning management systems (LMS) manage all aspects of education by automating and managing the administration, management, delivery, and end user experience of blended learning programs. Organizations that have invested in these systems cite a number of significant benefits, including:

- Automate and standardize learning and training practices, processes, and content
- Reduce administration and delivery costs while providing faster delivery
- Enable blending learning programs (online and instructor-led curricula, courses, classes, and coaching) to increase reach and impact
- Meet and maintain compliance, certification, and quality requirements
- Align learning programs to overall organizational goals and strategies
- Enhance internal talent pools for succession and promote talent mobility
- Measure and track the effectiveness of learning programs to facilitate continuous improvement
- Facilitate a more holistic talent management strategy by linking learning to other talent functions such as performance and goals, employee development, and on-boarding
- Automate student registration, approvals, notifications, and communications

This field guide will explore five critical steps to ensure that you get the most out of your learning management investments.

Tip #1: Link Employee Development To Learning Delivery

Development plans help employees improve in their current role, better prepare them for a future role of interest (which is important in the context of succession planning), or both. While employee skill, competency, and behavior gaps are typically identified during the performance assessment process (or a 360 feedback process), learning delivery is the mechanism to close the gaps.

Learning for learning's sake is an ineffective strategy. But learning to close skill, competency, and behavior gaps and therefore improve an employee's contribution in a current role or help the employee better prepare for a future role, is something altogether different. Therefore, development and learning processes must be seamlessly linked from both a process and underlying technology perspective. Yet only 29% of organizations have actually made this connection, with another 23% planning to within one year, according to a global survey of 300 HR leaders conducted by Softscape in November 2009. [Note: this survey data will be referenced throughout the report]

The impact of linking these functions is significant. In the same survey, organizations that have linked employee development and learning delivery report:

- Improved workforce alignment to overall strategy
- More quickly respond to changing business needs
- Higher revenue per employee
- Better internal talent mobility
- Improved workforce productivity

A few key questions to consider to link employee development to learning delivery are:

1. Are recommended courses and programs automatically presented to users within their development plans to facilitate training and coursework?
2. Is the transition between employee development planning and learning management seamless to users (e.g., same user interface, look and feel, does not give the user the impression of a disconnected process)?

3. Is systems integration effort and cost required to tie development and learning delivery together, or do all the requisite capabilities reside on a common technology platform that natively connects the functions out of the box?

Tip #2: Align Learning Activities to Business Objectives

Part of the promise of integrated talent management is improving alignment between workforce activities and overall business strategies and objectives. This alignment is typically achieved through performance management and goals. Managers and their directs establish goals as part of the performance management process and align the goals up through the organization. Alternatively, the organization cascades goals down to the workforce. In either scenario, it is often the case that employees need specific training to achieve their goals.

If employees are not provided the proper learning resources to complete goals, the impacts can be severe:

- Poorly trained employees who cannot achieve their goals
- The organization is unable to complete its strategic goals and objectives
- Turnover at all levels due to frustration and inability to complete goals

Today, only 34% of organizations have linked learning and performance management to enable training as a key component of employee goal completion. An additional 31% of organizations plan to do so by 2011.

Part of the challenge in linking these functions has been technical in nature. Many organizations continue to use multiple systems (e.g., performance system, learning management system) that are not integrated. Yet as many organizations continue to gravitate toward single platform solutions that natively connect functions such as learning, performance, and goals, the technical integration challenges can be eliminated. These single platform solutions also make it much easier to report on key metrics such as the effectiveness of learning programs on performance since all of the data resides in a centralised repository. With this data in hand, HR leaders are better equipped to monitor and continuously improve their learning processes and programs.

A few key questions to consider to align learning activities to business objectives are:

1. Does your current learning system enable you to dynamically link business objectives and goals with specific learning activities?
2. Does the system natively integrate learning, performance, and goals vis-à-vis a broader talent platform? If so, does it also provide a robust reporting and analytic capability that enables you to monitor and continuously improve your processes and programs?
3. Does your learning system provide capabilities to dynamically push content to users based on their goals? Can assignment rules be easily created to support this dynamic push?

Tip #3: Maintain Regulatory Compliance

Learning management systems (LMS) are an important mechanism for managing compliance and certification training within an organization. Without a central tracking repository, and no way to report globally, organizations can quickly fall out of regulatory compliance. The potential negative impacts to this are fines and work stoppages, not to mention the high overhead and costs associated with managing compliance activities and reporting in a manual fashion.

Competencies also play a key role, especially from a quality standards (e.g., ISO 9000) perspective. A rigorous competency-based training program is a key mechanism for ensuring ongoing compliance to quality standards. As such, competency management plays a critical role in learning management strategies. The system employed, whether an LMS or a broader talent management platform, must instantiate a flexible competency library as a central component that is seamlessly exposed to all other functions within the system or platform.

A few key questions to consider to maintain regulatory compliance are:

1. Can compliance-related courses be automatically assigned to new hires as a part of the on-boarding process? Can triggers and alerts be established to automatically inform employees when they need refresher training?
2. Does your current learning system provide a library of pre-defined

competencies? Does it provide tools for managing competencies, including competency categories, supporting definitions, behaviors, on-the-job activities, and development opportunities? Can you easily import your existing competencies into the system?

3. Does your learning system include robust reporting and analytic capabilities to facilitate compliance reporting? Does it come with out-of-box standard reports? And is the complexity of the reporting and analytic engine abstracted so that non-technical users can run their own reports without IT intervention?

Tip #4: Track Learning Effectiveness Throughout the Organization

Within many organizations, there is no systematic way to track the impact of learning programs on organizational outcomes. These outcomes may include workforce productivity or even individual performance. In fact, only 21% of organizations are currently measuring the impact of training on performance, with another 34% planning on doing so by 2011. Overall learning program effectiveness fares somewhat better, with 35% of organizations currently measuring overall learning effectiveness.

The impacts of not tracking learning effectiveness can be significant:

- Money spent improperly on ineffective curricula and courses
- Employees spending time in courses that are not effective
- Inability to distinguish between which courses are working and which are not

Part of the challenge lies in the fact that data is spread out in various silos across the organization and there is no common employee system of record. A single, fully-connected talent platform that covers the gamut of HR functions and processes, including learning, can alleviate some of the problems since the data is all in one place. And with a robust analytic and reporting function, previously unavailable insight can be gained.

By shifting to a more measurement-oriented approach to learning, organizations can realise numerous benefits:

- Spend the right time and resources on effective courses
- Eliminate or change ineffective courses
- Allocate training budgets more accurately
- Increase employee engagement (employees are not wasting time in ineffective courses)

A few key questions to consider to track learning effectiveness throughout the organization are:

1. Does your current learning system leverage a robust and industry standard analytics engine which provides interactive graphical displays of all data?
2. Does the system abstract the complexity out of the analytics engine so that non-technical users can conduct their own analyses via an intuitive, web-based interface?
3. Are you able to conduct reporting and analysis across modules? For example, can you easily glean insight into more strategic metrics such as the impact of training on performance?
4. Does the analytics system reduce administrative overhead by leveraging the same comprehensive security access rights and rules as the learning system so that security policies only have to be established once?

Tip #5: Create Seamless On-Boarding Plans for Employees

An effective new hire orientation and on-boarding program is essential to ensuring the long-term success of new employees. Yet employees – and their managers in many cases – often find it difficult to know which training courses to take, especially if development planning is not a part of the on-boarding process. As a result, a lot of time and frustration can occur early in a new employee's career within the organization, which can lead to an early engagement deficit or even increased turnover.

Today, only 32% of organizations have linked learning with hiring and on-boarding to facilitate automatic scheduling of courses for new hires. Fully 46% of organizations have no plans to link the processes at all. To fully understand the impact of integrated learning and hiring/on-boarding, Softscape's global survey of HR leaders conducted reveals that organizations that have explicitly made the linkage report:

- Improved workforce alignment to overall strategy
- Better internal talent mobility
- Decreased voluntary turnover
- Faster on-boarding (time-to-productivity)
- Improved workforce productivity

This data reinforces the importance of integrating disparate talent functions, and the role that single platform HR solutions can play in facilitating the integration. Single platform solutions also make it much easier to report on and analyse key cross-functional metrics such as on-boarding effectiveness.

A few key questions to consider to create seamless on-boarding plans for employees are:

1. Can courses and curricula be automatically assigned to new hires as a part of the on-boarding process? This is especially important for compliance.
2. Do new hires have transparent visibility into their on-boarding plans, including learning and training activities, so that expectations are aligned from the start?
3. Does your current learning system have the capability to measure the impact of learning programs on hiring and on-boarding effectiveness (e.g., time-to-productivity, voluntary turnover, new hire engagement)?

Conclusion

To get the most out of your learning management investments, linking and aligning seemingly disparate HR and talent functions is essential. Learning, development, performance and goals, and hiring and on-boarding. All must come together seamlessly to fully realise the benefits of a learning-driven culture. Single platform solutions that natively connect all of these functions facilitate the linkages, and also provide the mechanism to measure, analyse, and relate deep analytic views across functions.

To summarise the top five tips to effective learning management:

1. Link Employee Development to Learning Delivery
2. Align Learning Activities to Business Objectives
3. Maintain Regulatory Compliance
4. Track Learning Effectiveness Throughout the Organization
5. Create Seamless On-Boarding Plans for Employees

