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SMALLER ENTERPRISES CAN THINK 'LEARNING PORTAL' TOO!

Peter Gray highlights the benefits of 'portal lite' technology for small scale enterprises — learning technology initially developed for big enterprise players.

Increasingly, there is greater clarity among learning solution providers about what differentiates an LMS from a Learning Portal. But does that same clarity exist out there, in the real world? If discussions held at January's *Learning Technologies* exhibition are an indicator, there would seem to be a lack of understanding between what constitutes an LMS and why a Learning Portal is a different animal altogether.

Enterprises thinking about dipping a Learning & Development toe into technology, inevitably say they are 'looking to get an LMS in place'. After a few minutes discussion it becomes clear that they are

not looking for a learning management system at all but a wide range of learning technology functionality more akin to the attributes of a Learning Portal.

But Learning Portals are targeted at global players, aren't they? Not any more, it seems. Increasingly, large-scale Learning Portal concepts are being adapted and made accessible to organisations employing hundreds of people rather than thousands. Understanding the distinction between a Learning Portal and a LMS reveals why this is possible.

The LMS has a minimum basic set of technology features, which can deliver,

track and report on (often SCORM compliant) online training materials. Spend a lot more, and the LMS will have additional capabilities such as the ability to use the system to author and manage content. In addition, a myriad other capabilities support trainers and administrators responsible for delivering training. It is now well recognised that the standalone LMS, although fine for tracking learning, does leave learners feeling isolated.

The Learning Portal is a place where all sorts of activities relating to training and individual performance come together. It certainly has many of the normal LMS



features. However, alongside this, there are many more informal capabilities such as forums that help with collaborative learning, or social tools promoting content.

ENGAGEMENT AND INTERACTION

A Learning Portal is a place where learners are engaged and interact with each other. A place where learners proactively find information and learning, specifically relevant to them and their roles. They may well be able to contribute and share their own knowledge and work-based experiences. So, rather than feeling 'LMS world' isolation, Learning Portal users access a hub with a wide range of interlinked routes.

Importantly, the learning portal also has to have the reporting and management information capabilities expected of any self-respecting LMS. Everything in the portal must be trackable. In addition, the portal should be able to pull in data from other systems so that administrators can understand the impact of interventions on company performance. In fact, any available metrics can be utilised to demonstrate the impact of learning on the bottom line.

The following definition hits the spot (forgive the lack of credit to the originator): *'A learning portal creates a self-service environment for users that can't be beaten. They can go, search, find what they need, and move on. It's a Google-like experience, for what has generally become an information-on-demand culture.'*

Reading this succinct definition, you wouldn't be entirely wrong in thinking that until now, learning portals have been the domain of 'large' enterprise organisations, i.e., firms with more than 1,000 employees. Indeed, TWM continues to be at the

forefront of portal development for a number of their large enterprise clients — working closely with them to develop bespoke learning environments that fall exactly in line with the self-service thinking mentioned earlier.

But what exactly does 'develop bespoke learning environments' mean? It means regularly rising to several challenges. Firstly, observing what is already in place in terms of learning technology, then listening to what is needed by the organisation, and finally adding further functionality. All these elements are fused into a single-login environment forming an engaging hub with a wide range of interlinked routes.

Large organisations seem far more inclined to augment existing learning with new functionality, and integrate with existing assets. The skill of the technology provider is (hopefully) now measured by its ability to integrate legacy implementations with current and new initiatives, creating a learning portal in the process. But what about the vast number of organisations employing less than 1,000 people? They too need to get more 'savvy' about people development options and training delivery. They too need to reap the benefits of the learning technology revolution.

TWMs 'big organisation clients' have created massively engaging and successful learning by 'gluing' new tools to existing technologies to present engaging multi-function and purpose-built portals. This approach has led us to consider how an entry-level proposition could be implemented, and supplemented by additional tools and capability as the organisation grows — a proposition much more within the grasp of the 'smaller' organisation.

The L&D environment of 2014 is enormously complex. But smaller organisations have to start somewhere, and the solution must be future-proof. Critically, it must come at a price unheard of only a couple of years ago. So what does an entry-level learning portal look like in terms of capability and cost effectiveness?

As an absolute minimum, we at TWM think of it as a 'portal-lite' solution. A rapidly deployed turnkey learning portal that offers a wealth of highly capable and core functions. One that will get any business employing hundreds (rather than thousands) of employees, up and running at around £10,000.

These highly capable and core functions have already been developed and deployed in the large enterprise arena. Working with these players has pushed the boundaries, and harnessed a wealth of ability, knowledge and development savvy, which can be applied to smaller organisations.

Being clear about initial objectives, re-moulding and understanding where to apply 'the glue'; and accommodating future growth with bolt-on tools and additional functionality, is the basis of any 'portal lite' solution.

Course booking systems, online workbooks, Q&A forums and collaborative environments form the staple diet of enterprise-level organisations. 'Portal lite' thinking brings these capabilities to L&D professionals and consultants, to much smaller environments.

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