Choosing an LMS? Avoid These Four Deadly Traps!

By Kathleen Waid
Introduction: Finding an LMS for Today's Learner 03

Trap #1: Focusing on Quantity of Features Instead of Usability 05

Trap #2: Incorrectly Evaluating the Usability of an LMS 07

Trap #3: Undervaluing the Importance of a Modern Technical Architecture 09

Trap #4: Believing that Mobility Is only About Replicating Functionality on Mobile Devices 12

ExpertusONE: A Case Study in Modern LMS Design 13
Introduction

Finding an LMS for Today’s Learner

Are you thinking of replacing your old learning management system (LMS)? Or perhaps you’re already in the process of investigating solutions?

Good luck. Choosing a new LMS is a very daunting and complex task, even if you’ve done it before. In fact, your deep expertise in LMS technology might actually lead you astray, focusing you on the wrong criteria and keeping you from selecting the best LMS for your organization.

Times have changed – dramatically – in just the last five years.
Sophisticated Learners. Sophisticated Needs

Today’s learners are different; they’ve become far more sophisticated in their use of technology, and their expectations for usability have skyrocketed.

Technology has also changed significantly from five years ago, when a web-based user interface and administrative console was state-of-the-art. But then came smartphones, tablets and Facebook, and everything changed.

With a new generation of learners and vastly different technology possibilities, you now need different criteria to select the most suitable LMS. Using the same criteria you used five years ago, or one published by an “old guard” LMS vendor, simply won’t do.

Read on to learn how to avoid the four most common mistakes that today’s organizations make in selecting in the best LMS.
Trap #1:

Focusing on Quantity of Features Instead of Usability

As a category, enterprise software – including learning management systems – is famously difficult to learn and use. For much of the last decade, usability was an afterthought compared to sheer quantity of features.

This is because early generation LMSs, built in the ‘90s, were built only for administrators to use. Subsequent product generations, built five to ten years ago, evolved and gradually allowed end users (learners), more and more access to functionality. However, learner functionality was built on top of the complex administration functionality... more as an afterthought than as a true focus.

The results were what you’d expect:

- Systems with a huge breadth of complex features that could support very esoteric use cases – some of which were only useful to administrators at a handful of customers.
- The price for this breadth and complexity of functionality was huge.
- Usability was abysmal; workflows were non-intuitive and cumbersome.
- Functionality was inconsistently or incompletely implemented across the product.
- All users, including admins, managers and learners, needed to take training classes to learn to use the LMS (which, ironically, was the system they were supposed to use to take training classes).
Poor State of Affairs

However, in the early to mid-2000’s, businesses shrugged and accepted this poor state of affairs because:

1. **At the time, most LMS selection processes focused on the quantity of features for administrators.** Some old guard vendors strongly encouraged these “feature wars” by providing potential buyers with free LMS RFP templates. These RFP templates were huge checklists, listing each and every minor feature a “model LMS” (read: their LMS) “should have,” even if many of these features provided scant benefit.

2. **Very few, if any, LMSs on the market then emphasized usability for end users.** On the contrary, LMS vendors just added more and more features, to give them an advantage in feature-driven selection processes. But having too many features actually degrades usability – rapidly.

3. **End users didn’t have particularly high expectations for usability.** They simply didn’t know what was possible. Remember, this was an era where Microsoft Vista was touted as a pinnacle of usability!

Things are different now, though. Since those days, end users have experienced several intuitive, easy-to-use applications in their personal lives that require no training and get great results: Facebook, Gmail, Apple Facetime, the iPad, etc.

These users now expect their LMS to have as good or even better of a user experience than their consumer applications. And if their expectations aren’t met, they simply won’t use the LMS. If needed, they’ll go outside their organization for more expensive training that’s not necessarily aligned with the company’s mission.

But even though today’s learners are very different and demand extreme usability above all else, some LMS buyers don’t recognize the paradigm shift. They still, unwisely, use the same feature-driven LMS selection process that was in vogue five to 10 years ago, and focus on the needs of the admin over the end user.

This is deadly, and a trap you must avoid if you want your users to willingly use your LMS...

- Be sure to focus your selection on usability for the end user, first and foremost.

- Focus on the subset of LMS functionality that’s truly essential for your business, recognizing that all extra functionality will just make your LMS more difficult to learn and use.
Trap #2: Incorrectly Evaluating the Usability of an LMS

Let’s assume that you’ve side-stepped Trap #1, and you are determined to thoroughly evaluate each LMS’ usability. The problem is, every LMS vendors claims their products are the most usable.

So, how do you actually do it? That is... evaluate usability for end users before you've actually used the LMS day-in and day-out for many weeks?

Watch out, herein lies Trap #2: Incorrectly evaluating the true usability of an LMS. Unfortunately, it’s too common for organizations to see a product demo and give it high marks in usability, only to find out weeks or months later that the product is actually so cumbersome that end users won’t willingly use it.

Here’s some advice to evaluate a product’s true usability and avoid being dazzled by a demo:

1. Understand that true, deep usability is more of an editing function than an adding function. To make it obvious what the user should do next, the LMS should intelligently use what it knows about the specific user to remove wasted steps, hide extraneous information and reduce the number of choices available to the user on the screen. This is called “profile-based” or “heuristic-based” user interface design. The goal is to focus the user’s attention on precisely what needs to be done at the appropriate time.

For example, if a staff user must take four courses to be compliant, then when the user is selecting classes to take, the user interface should only display those four courses... or – even better – only the classes of the four which the user hasn’t already taken. The user interface then automatically adapts to a management user who has 20 classes available to him.

2. Focus on the workflows that end users will use almost every time they use your LMS. Look at usability for the most commonly performed tasks over the long haul – not just the first few months, but once everyone is all setup and all your courses are live. You want THOSE tasks to be as intuitive (self-obvious) and streamlined as possible.
User training can’t overcome usability deficiencies in your LMS. Training might work for some products, but it doesn’t work here because LMSs are not used every day by your typical end user, or even every week. More typically, a learner will use the LMS intensely for a few days as they search for training, register, take a few courses and update their training record. But then s/he won’t use the LMS for another few months. Since they use the LMS so sporadically, users can easily forget how to use it in-between uses. Offering training to users doesn’t help because it, too, is quickly forgotten when they only use the LMS every few months.

Instead, you need an LMS where the user interface makes it obvious what each user needs to do and how to do it. This can only be achieved by streamlining the most common workflows and by displaying only essential information.

Realize that an attractive visual design doesn’t, on its own, improve usability. Many old guard LMS vendors have recently given their decade-old products a cosmetic makeover: changing to thin San Serif fonts, using brightly colored square buttons and avoiding color gradients, shadows and 3D effects. While these changes make their products more pleasing to the eye, on their own they don’t improve usability. True usability can’t be had without streamlining the most common workflows and without removing inapplicable choices and steps based on the user’s profile and context.

Don’t neglect usability for admin. While the emphasis should be on end user usability, usability for administrators is also very important. Again, the LMS should streamline tasks that admins do on a regular basis when the system is in regular use. Typical workflows should use sensible defaults, but provide your administrators with ways to override and access more powerful settings.
Trap #3: **Undervaluing the Importance of a Modern Technical Architecture**

Five years ago, a feature-laden web user interface with a cloud-based service was considered state-of-the-art for enterprise LMSs…but no longer. To support learners in the post-iPhone, post-Facebook era, today’s LMS needs to support entirely new modes of interaction with learners, in order to meet their high expectations.

These new expected LMS capabilities include:

- **Extreme end user usability**, as explained earlier.
- **Mobile computing support** that goes beyond modifying the LMS’ web UI to display nicely on an iPhone web browser. True mobility takes advantages of the unique capabilities of mobile devices to do what the traditional web-based user interface couldn’t, to solve some of the biggest challenges learners and instructors face. (Mobility will be explored later in this paper.)
- **Social collaboration** to let today’s learners build community and share what they’ve learned with others. These capabilities include a lot of social functionality inspired by Facebook, LinkedIn, forums, etc. The goal is to enhance the interactions that learners have with each other and instructors, both in person and online.
- **Gamification** to engage learners and to motivate them to achieve new levels of mastery.
- **Online person-to-person interaction** via online meetings.
- **Advanced analytics and reporting functionality** that can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your learning organization.
Avoid the “Bolt On”

New era capabilities (such as the ones listed to the left) must be built into the very foundation of your LMS’ architecture so they can be carried through all workflows and interactions. These are not mere features that can simply be “bolted on” later:

1. Attempts to do so typically undermine usability because the late additions overcomplicate the existing user interfaces and workflows.

2. Plus, the results often don’t really accomplish what they need to, or they become a drag on performance.

The “bolt on” approach is akin to heating your home with space heaters in each room instead of using a furnace... or claiming you’ve added plumbing to a home by installing an outhouse and one sink in the kitchen.

Instead, look for an LMS that’s the equivalent of a home that already has modern plumbing, electric and heating installed and working in tandem. Find an LMS that has modern mobility, collaboration, gamification and analytics built into its core architecture.
A Word About REST APIs

In addition to providing these next-gen capabilities, an LMS with a modern technology architecture must be designed to easily communicate with a host of other systems, be they in the cloud or on-premise. This includes both inbound and outbound communication, and includes systems that we don’t even know about yet.

Fortunately, most modern applications use the same mechanisms to integrate: REST APIs.

REST APIs provide a standards-based method for any application to communicate with any other system – in a lightweight and robust fashion using standard Internet communication protocols. Because it’s the overwhelmingly dominant way for remote systems to connect in 2014, it’s very important to select an LMS that supports it.

In evaluating technical architecture, be aware that Web Services APIs and REST APIs are not synonymous. REST APIs are, in fact, built on top of Web Services; but not all Web Services APIs are REST APIs.

There are earlier versions of APIs (such as those based on SOAP) that are clunkier and more difficult to use than REST. So, be sure that your LMS has an API actually based on REST, instead of “old school” Web Services APIs or a proprietary API. And consider it a red flag if the REST API doesn’t provide access to nearly ALL LMS functionality, instead of a tiny subset. An API not based on current standards or that’s incomplete is an indication of an outdated technical architecture, and one that likely lacks in advanced social, mobile and analysis capabilities, as well.

In short, don’t fall into the trap of assuming that all LMSs have robust underlying technology that will be able to take you five to 10 years into the future. To even handle today’s users (never mind the future’s), your LMS needs social, mobile, gamification, analytics and usability built into its core. These are next-gen capabilities, so look for a newer LMS that was built from the ground up within the last five years.
Trap #4:

Believing that Mobility Is only About Replicating Functionality on Mobile Devices

Today, mobile and computing-anywhere devices like cell phones and tablets are pervasive. Many companies have stopped issuing computers to some classes of workers, and instead, lower costs by giving them tablets or smartphones. **In fact, by 2015, shipments of tablet devices to enterprise customers should outstrip PCs.**

It, thus, goes without saying that users and admins must be able to access your LMS from the mobile devices of their choice. But just reworking the web user interface to display nicely in a broad range of mobile devices only scratches the surface of what can, and should, be done.

Ask yourself the following critical questions when evaluating an LMS’ mobile capabilities:

- Does the LMS provide a full-featured iPhone app, as well as an Android app? Are there also versions of the apps tailored to tablets (as opposed to phones)? Native apps provide the best user experience; they perform well and can work without being connected to the Internet.
- For the Android app, are all devices supported?
- Are the website and any web-based user interfaces tailored for the needs of your mobile users? Is the UI able to automatically reorganize depending on the size of the display?

Also when evaluating an LMS’ mobile capabilities, think of what mobile devices can specifically accomplish that desktop-only LMSs can’t via geolocation, always-on access, etc. True LMS mobility takes advantages of the unique capabilities of mobile devices to do what the traditional web-based user interface cannot, which solves some of the biggest challenges learners and instructors face.
ExpertusONE: A Case Study in Modern LMS Design

Before Expertus developed its own LMS product, we spent over 10 years as an implementation and enhancement firm for other “old guard” LMSs. So we know, firsthand, how difficult it is to adapt a legacy LMS to meet the heightened expectations and sophistication of today’s users. And ExpertusONE was born from our – and our customers’ – frustrations with these old, rigid products.

Best-in-Class Usability

In developing our award-winning ExpertusONE LMS, the first thing we did was tackle usability – not just for the administrator, but for the end user… your learners.

For more than a decade, we observed and built best practice workflows for the world’s best training organizations. So we know which workflows are the best over the long-term (not just in the first few weeks), and which are the most frustrating, for both administrators and end users. We used this knowledge to streamline the most common administrative and end user workflows in ExpertusONE…:

Our next-gen LMS leverages all available information about each user and his/her context to dynamically adapt the user interface to that specific individual. So:

1. Unnecessary steps get eliminated.
2. Irrelevant detail is not shown.
3. Used functionality is rarely hidden.

The result is what we term “sophisticated simplicity”. Even though it rests on a highly complex and sophisticated technical architecture, ExpertusONE has a clean, simple to use interface that guides all users through each task at hand, and requires no training to learn.

We also, on a continual basis, exercise great restraint in adding new features, because each new feature has the potential to add complexity and detract from usability.
Modern Technology Architecture

ExpertusONE was built from the ground up within the last five years, and, thus, has advanced social, mobile, gamification, collaboration and analytics built into its core.

Additionally, ExpertusONE provides a complete REST API that can be used to programatically access all the functionality in the entire LMS. In fact, the entire administrator portal for ExpertusONE was created using these REST APIs, and no proprietary APIs were needed.

Mobile Design at Its Core

Mobility was also designed into ExpertusONE’s core. That’s why it’s the only LMS with fully native apps for iPhone, iPad and all Android devices.

Note: these are not mere “app wrappers” around web pages (a mobile enablement approach that can be very frustrating for users expecting an app), but full-fledged native apps that can operate when offline. It’s the first enterprise LMS to provide true offline sync between your phone and the LMS, too.

You’ll see that we didn’t just take our web user interface and make it display nicely on your phone. We looked to see where we could leverage the unique capabilities of mobile devices to improve learning management in ways that you can’t with a laptop, such as:

- Using phones to track classroom attendance, so no roster sheet is needed
- Enhance in-person training by the instructor sending out instructor evaluation forms/surveys to attendee phones
- Sending notifications to supervisors about the status of employees
- Letting supervisors check the status of employees while on-the-go

These innovative uses of mobile technology increase learner participation, reduce paperwork and increase the accuracy of record keeping. Plus, more unique capabilities are coming soon.
Want to know more on how we can best help you avoid the four deadly traps of LMS selection? Or do you have questions specific to ExpertusONE’s next-gen features and usability? Please contact me directly at kathleenw@expertus.com or visit www.expertus.com/expertus-one now.

Well versed in LMS and eLearning technology, Kathleen solves key learning challenges for Expertus’ numerous global Fortune 100 companies by overseeing client relationships, technology implementation and business analysis.

Kathleen Waid
Sr. Director of Client Services, Expertus

Corporate Headquarters
Expertus Inc
3945 Freedom Circle
Santa Clara, CA 95054 USA

Expertus Europe
18 Rue Pasquier
75008 Paris
France
Tel: 33-7-7867-2654

Sales
sales@expertus.com
Information
info@expertus.com

Toll Free USA
877-827-8160
International
+1 408-703-2508

Website
expertus.com