



If content is the heart of eLearning, then the learning management system (LMS) is the backbone. It provides a structure to house the instructional schema, connects learners to instructors and one another, creates a space for the exchange of ideas, and tracks learner progress. It also must be adaptable to satisfy the needs of learners in a rapidly evolving industry. So when cloud-based systems were introduced, they became a must-have for companies dedicated to learning and development (L&D).

A Brief History of of the LMS

In 1990, an early wave of interest in distance learning inspired the release of the first LMS, FirstClass, a desktop-based application that offered public forums, private email, and modem support—a true innovation at the time. The centralization of learning management quickly caught on, and in 2008, the first cloud-based LMS was developed by Eucalyptus. Instead of a company-hosted software installation, the system was SAAS (software as a service), hosted on the vendor’s server and boasting an easy-to-use platform that required no mainframe installation and was more adaptable and accessible than anything that had come before.



Who's Going to the Cloud?

By 2012, educational institutions were adopting cloud-based LMS platforms at a steady rate. At one point, thirty-four colleges that make up the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges moved from Angel LMS to Canvas in one fell swoop, praising the way the LMS “empowers instructors to use social media and mobile tools to engage students.” Three Scandinavian universities followed suit, rolling over to Canvas as their primary tool because of its “ease-of-use, open architecture and scalability.”

But the Global Next Gen LMS Market 2016-2020 report finds that it’s actually the corporate sector, not education, that dominates the LMS market. Today’s L&D experts are looking for learning platforms that meet the needs of learners while remaining cost-effective. The same report predicts a significant increase in cloud-based LMS platforms before 2020, which will have a significant impact on the market: market growth will inspire new LMS companies to emerge, creating more competition. This is great for companies, who will have access to more functionality and benefits as LMS platforms improve radically.



Why is the Cloud Good for L&D?

Corporate learning is tied to profits, employee engagement, and product knowledge. This means that in order to keep up competitively in today's market, L&D departments shouldn't just consider the cloud—they should move there immediately.

There are a few good features that explain why people are jumping on the cloud bandwagon.



Mobile-Friendly

Because learners are now used to incorporating most aspects of their life into their mobile devices, experts predict the trends for the next few years to lean heavily toward mobile-friendly designs, responsive programming, and better user experience. User engagement and learning outcomes are now inextricably tied to the platform's ability to adapt to an on-the-go culture, in which learners and instructors alike want access to content on demand. Cloud-based systems deliver the most exceptional learning for on-the-go audiences, with responsive programming, social-friendly tools, and an interface that encourages movement. Learners and instructors log into the system from wherever they are—no need to be on a company server—which makes learning more ubiquitous.

Cost Effective

Because they are scalable and features can be ordered to fit a particular company's needs, cloud-based systems can save companies quite a bit of money. With installed LMS platforms, companies have to purchase the software outright and then hire programmers to update the system with any changes or customizations that came up along the way. A cloud LMS can be tailored specifically to a company's needs, so that the only features paid for are the ones you actually use.

There's also a hidden savings: training costs for employees, who no longer have to travel or coordinate in-person workshops to get accustomed to the new system. For example, financial services company Edward Jones reported saving \$1million in training-related travel costs after switching to SumTotal's Maestro.

Global

Massively large-scale, international trainings can be rolled out as easily as those based in a home office, making cloud-based LMS platforms an especially appealing option for companies with satellite locations and global offices. This can minimize the risk for discrepancies in the ways that new systems and processes are enacted and protect a company's reputation and ability to handle transition seamlessly.



Marketwired, a “social communications leader” that distributes news releases through many outlets, used Litmos to launch a new global training. The company reported a highly successful experience: the new LMS enabled sales employees to access information 24/7, wherever they were, which ultimately increased product knowledge and expanded their international reach.

Engaging

Younger employees (under 40) find cloud-based systems attractive because of their mobility and social aspects. But enthusiasm for the LMS that is easy to access crosses generations. When Publicis Media used Adobe Captivate Prime to launch an employee training program in 2016, within 6 weeks they had over 1100 users asking to join the training platform, even though it wasn't mandatory. Employee engagement was sky-high, thanks to the availability of mobile, on-the-go learning that allowed learners to determine their own paths and levels of participation. In turn, Publicis increased employee skills and became a more competitive company.



Process for a Successful Migration

Though there are benefits on the final end, transitioning to a new platform is not a simple process. There are three distinct phases of an LMS migration, and each one should be considered well in advance to avoid unexpected obstacles.

Phase 1: Planning

The bulk of the work comes before the actual implementation, and even before a final vendor has been selected. Determining whether or not a cloud-based LMS is the best option for your company is the first priority. Communicating with all stakeholders and focusing effort on obtaining buy-in is crucial. A 2010 mixed-methods study following an LMS migration at a Canadian university uncovered a critical error made by leadership in the planning process: the faculty didn't receive communication about why the transition was necessary. This misstep led to a series of costly obstacles after implementation: instructors didn't attend training on the new system, so they felt lost when it came time to teach, and they weren't prepared for the time it would take to convert their courses and felt frustrated by the lack of transparency and compensation. The end result was a hasty, post-implementation effort to train frustrated instructors on a new system that was considered a nuisance rather than an improvement.

An important lesson is to know your reasons for migrating early on, communicate them widely, and gather feedback from employees, instructors, designers, and other stakeholders during every step of the process. Enlisting the expertise of change-management consultants who have experience in L&D can help streamline the process and avoid critical missteps that cost time and money.



Phase 2: Implementation

Once a vendor is selected, the implementation process begins. This includes configuration steps, such as defining user roles, administrative privileges, course catalog metadata, reports, and notifications. Consider as well what other systems you might need to integrate within your new LMS, such as Human Resource records, transcripts, or external registration platforms.

The actual migration process should proceed slowly and cautiously, with testing done first in a small batch to catch any major issues and minimize the potential damage from an error-riddled data dump. Allow plenty of time for user testing to ensure that every aspect of the system is working before you go live. If your timeline from the planning phase was padded well, you should never have to rush through any stage of the process.

Phase 3: Launch and Follow-Up

The most important aspect of the first week post-launch is readily available support staff. A help desk should be ready for an all-hands-on-deck approach, and clear communication should be provided to all employees and other users about how to find technical support. Avoid scheduling any important trainings on the new system during that first week or two. After the first training is launched, invite feedback from all stakeholders to evaluate the success of the process and develop a plan for improving the migration process next time.

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The Bottom Line

There's no doubt about it—a cloud-based **LMS** is the way to go for forward-thinking companies who are interested in investing in and profiting from successful L&D ventures. These systems are becoming more popular for their flexibility, mobile friendliness, and low cost.

Companies who are interested in migrating to a cloud-based system should begin by consulting with a change-management expert whose experience in L&D can help create a plan for transition. From there, create a team of instructional designers and learning technology professionals who can spearhead the review and implementation process. Having ample expertise and a carefully mapped-out plan of action will ensure a smooth transition into what is undoubtedly the future of learning management systems.