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Looking at Learning Management Systems: Finding Neutral and Comprehensive Information in the e-Learning Jungle

White Paper

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Finding Neutral and Comprehensive Information in the e-Learning Jungle

This White Paper is for Training Professionals who are considering embarking on an e-Learning project, namely the selection and implementation of a Learning Management System.

This White Paper is also for Learning Management System providers as a source of reference and help for their clients.

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This White paper explores what Learning Management System Providers face when approaching or being approached by Potential clients, and why it is in the clients' best interest to research the market well before starting to look at systems.

Clients' Expectations

In the "real" world, when a client is shopping for an item, the supplier is usually expected to provide the client with a minimum of information. This information is in relation with the product that is purchased and rarely encompasses more than the minimum information required for the vendor to sell the product. Although we have recently seen a trend toward expanding customer service to supply complementary services and a more complete and satisfactory shopping experience.

When looking at a Learning Management System, the provider is expected to supply the client with the necessary information to sell its product. However, given the novelty of e-Learning and more specifically Web-based training, clients have higher expectations from potential providers. Very often, providers have to spend a lot of time and resources to fully educate their potential clients about e-Learning, Web-based training and various management system aspects.

Although it is the provider's job to provide information to potential clients, one

cannot reasonably expect providers to supply them with comprehensive and totally unbiased information. After all, they have a specific product to sell and it is a very competitive market.

In the current market, we often see providers going well beyond the role they should have in representing their product. This is often done on an individual basis. That is why we see an increase in group presentations: they are being organized to maximize providers' resources that are often stretched to their limits. However, providers should not have to supply clients with a complete education, especially on an individual basis. This is far too taxing on their resources. Their role should be to suggest solutions after their clients have identified their needs.

Clients' Responsibilities

Potential clients, i.e. training professionals, have the responsibility of educating themselves and gathering the necessary information if they want to be able to correctly assess the products presented to them. This means doing some basic research beforehand. In a field that is just emerging like e-Learning, finding complete information is sometimes difficult to do. Not that there is a shortage of information: on the contrary, there is currently a deluge of information available. But it is not always well organized. One can get drowned into more or less confusing promotional literature. Keywords are not the same from one search engine to the other. Expressed points of view might take into account certain situations but not others. And there are few places where neutral and complete information can be found. It is hard for potential clients to find their way into such a jungle.

On another level, training professionals need to survey their own company to identify

its needs but also its current resources. Depending on the company's resources, e.g. its corporate structure and goals, its computer infrastructure and networking, its equipment, its security requirements and the audiences to be served, some solutions will be more appropriate than others. Getting a general idea about the above elements is the first step to narrow down the options. If this has not been done, potential providers will have to guide the client toward doing it.

It will be also in the client's best interest to be well prepared before looking at any product. First of all, being informed will allow the client to ask the right questions and to verify important points and features, namely compatibility, interoperability, security, delivery and so on.

The Importance of Being Prepared

It is impossible for training professionals with little or no previous knowledge about e-Learning to grasp the subtleties and evaluate the full potential offered by a Learning Management System. Furthermore, training professionals will be less captive of one particular provider if they have done their homework carefully.

Purchasing a Learning Management System or any other system related to e-Learning is a major investment. It implies looking at strategic planning, corporate and training objectives, training material production, industry standards, Web-based training and classroom management, asynchronous and synchronous delivery, delivery systems, bandwidth allocation, student tracking and motivation.

Implementing a Learning Management System often implies integrating the Learning Management System with other systems such as Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP)

systems. It sometimes involves Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems.

The ramifications of e-Learning can be enterprise-wide. There are important decisions to make before considering the options offered by vendors.

One of the concerns, for instance, is deciding between an ASP or ISP solution. The Application Service Provider solution offers to take care of all technical aspects for the client. The Internet Service Provider solution has the client purchasing the software license and installing it on its servers or on any other ISP server.

Making the Right Decisions

Fundamental decisions such as the above have major consequences on the company's infrastructure and resources. The ASP solution will greatly relieve the workload of the company's IT Department but may have an important impact on security issues.

Furthermore, one needs to look at more than just the system or solution's price because implementing a system and having to make certain changes to it later on can represent major costs if the system is not flexible enough to allow such changes without a lot of work. For example, some systems leave clients with nothing they can use if they change systems, meaning that they have to completely redo their training material. Flexibility is the keyword here, but don't expect providers to advertise their system's lack of flexibility.

It is therefore in the training professionals' best interest to establish a comfortable position in order to deal with providers. And it is in the providers' best interest to have educated clients. They will both benefit from this.

Available Resources

Here are a few independent sources for neutral information about e-Learning and Web-based training:

Web Site

www.daniellevallee.com

Free Online Seminars

www.daniellevallee.com/seminars

Live Seminars

www.daniellevallee.com/events/en

Resource Center

www.daniellevallee.com/rescent

White Papers

www.daniellevallee.com/whitepap

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e-Learning as a Business Asset From A to Z, Everything e-Learning and Web-Based Training Can Be

2001, 478 pages

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This book contains a wealth of information about all aspects related to e-Learning, from technical to strategic, from conversion of existing training material and production of new Web-based training to selecting a learning management system. From obtaining high level management support to following-up after implementation. For more information:

www.daniellevallee.com

White papers available for free distribution:

- *Looking at Learning Management Systems: Finding Neutral and Comprehensive Information in the e-Learning Jungle*
- *Helping Learning Management System Providers better serve their market*

Both are available at:

<http://www.daniellevallee.com/whitepap>

Other useful links:

American Society for Training & Development www.trainingmag.com
www.astd.org

The Masie Center
www.masie.com

Online Learning Magazine
www.onlinelearningmag.com

Brandon Hall
www.brandonhall.com

e-learning Magazine
www.elearningmag.com

Learning Circuits
www.learningcircuits.org