

Selecting a platform for mandatory education programmes

This report is intended for organisations with large and/or internationally dispersed workforces who need to deliver education programmes

Let's start with a real-life story about what can go wrong. One of our clients recently changed their Learning Management System (LMS) platform. The new platform was selected by HR because it offered sophisticated talent management functionality. The compliance department regularly deliver firm-wide GRC e-learning programs to over 30,000 employees. When they found out that the new platform could only support 500 concurrent users it was too late to reverse the decision. As a result, these firm-wide programs now need to be rolled out over a number of weeks, increasing administration costs and reducing the speed at which important policies and compliance alerts can be disseminated.

Minimising your total cost of ownership

We come across numerous examples of organisations struggling to deliver programmes with platforms that are not fit for purpose. An increasingly common example is open source software such as Moodle. Organisations are attracted by the idea that there are no user licenses to pay for, but in the end the implementation, maintenance and administration costs result in a higher total cost of ownership than for commercial software designed to support an efficient education process.

In many cases the critical product features that get overlooked in the LMS selection process are not the complicated, attention-grabbing features that get listed in marketing materials. The table at the end of this report outlines some basic features of our Skillcast Portal platform which we feel are most important for supporting the efficient delivery of education programmes.

An additional consideration when selecting a platform is the level of support you are likely to require, the availability of this support and how much it will cost. Some software as a service (SaaS) vendors, like Inmarkets, include the cost of support services in the headline license fees. However, most vendors charge additional fees for support packages – indeed, traditional enterprise LMS vendors now make at least as much money from professional and support services as they do selling user licenses.

With open source solutions, such as Moodle there is no support service available from the developers, so you will have to purchase this from a commercial “implementer” or recruit employees to support the system in-house. The problem with support services that are not provided by the owners/developers of the software platform is that limitations in the platform become an excuse for poor performance or result in awkward “work-around” solutions to problems. These work-around solutions might seem like a good idea to begin with, but when the next version of the software platform is released you may find you cannot upgrade without reconfiguring the non-standard processes you've put in place.

Skillcast Portal

Inmarkets offer Skillcast Portal, a proven LMS platform and support service designed specifically for global GRC education requirements. In 2009 the system received a Brandon Hall Gold award for “the best advance in learning management technology for global training”. It provides all of the services in the table below.

The following table outlines the features we feel are most important for supporting the efficient delivery of education programmes. You may want to use this as a checklist if you are evaluating the suitability of a proposed LMS platform for delivering your programmes.

IT considerations:	
The system needs to support a sufficient number of concurrent users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If it can cope with ¼ of the workforce being logged in at the same time that should be sufficient
The system needs to be robust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An implementation of the SCORM and AICC run-time environments that minimises the risk of incorrectly tracked learning sessions • High availability • Effective provisions for the back-up of data and disaster recovery
The system needs to work across your global IT infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can the minimum specification for user workstations be supported in all locations? (browser version, plug-ins, memory/CPU/bandwidth requirements)

Basic functionality:	
The system should enable you to assign learning activities to employees with deadlines for completion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deadlines need to be personalised to reflect when the learning activity became a requirement for each employee
The system should provide support for programmes that require periodic re-certification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When an employee completes a programme, the system automatically creates the deadline for re-certification
The system should send automated invitation and reminder emails to employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You can create a schedule of automated invitation and reminder emails based on each employee’s deadline and status for the programme
The system should provide audience management functionality which enables programmes to be assigned to employees automatically based on their job roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automatically assign the relevant learning activities for new joiners • Automatically update the assigned learning activities if an employee changes job role
The system should provide functionality for involving line managers in the compliance education process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Line managers have access to reports which are automatically filtered to show information for the employees who report

	<p>to them</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Automated escalation emails sent to line managers when employees miss deadlines
The system should provide a complete audit trail for end-user and administrator activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Records showing when learning assignments are created and updated, emails sent, etc

International considerations:	
If the workforce is internationally dispersed, the system should provide effective multi-language functionality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employees default language preference is based on their work location, but they are able to self-select a different language Learning activities are delivered in the employee's preferred language Email communications are sent to employees in their preferred language Employee training records are independent of their preferred language – that is, the Spanish version of a programme should not be tracked as a different activity to the English version – employees should be tracked as having completed the same programme, regardless of the language they chose to complete it in