# digitalCHALK

# NO-NONSENSE LMS

# BUYER'S GUIDE

With 90% of companies across the U.S. currently using a Learning Management System (LMS) and adoption rates projected to continue to grow, LMSs are set to become as common in the workplace as the proverbial office water cooler (Training Magazine).The popularity of this technology is easy to understand when you look at the stats—organizations using an LMS report broad benefits:

**70%**
LMS helps them remain competitive

**83%**
LMS increases employee engagement

**87%**
LMS increases employee onboarding

(Source: Worldmetrics)

Integrating an LMS into your learning and development program can greatly improve the scalability, efficiency, and effectiveness of your training efforts. However, not all LMSs are created equal. Even market leaders and the LMS mega brands might not be the best fit for your organization based on costs, complexity and how features and functionality align with goals.

This ebook provides training and development leaders with a comprehensive guide for choosing an LMS for internal training based on the company's needs and strategic objectives.

# DEFINING LMS REQUIREMENTS

## Engage Key Stakeholders

Selecting an LMS isn't a decision that should be made in isolation. Involve key stakeholders to ensure the solution meets the diverse needs of your organization, including:

- **HR and Training Managers:** Focused on employee development and compliance.
- **IT Department:** Concerned with system integration, security and technical support.
- **Finance Team:** Interested in cost/budget and return on investment (ROI).
- **Functional Leaders:** Managers from other departments (e.g., sales, support,manufacturing, development).
- **End-Users:** Employees who will be using the LMS for learning and development.

This collaborative approach will help you set clear objectives and ensure the selected LMS meets expectations.

## Assess Training Needs

Before diving into various vendors' features and functionalities, it's essential to assess your organization's learning and development requirements. Consider the types of programs needed:

- **Compliance Training:** Ensures adherence to regulations and company policies.
- **Onboarding:** Introduces new hires to company culture, processes and roles.
- **Skills Development:** Focuses on enhancing specific skills and competencies.
- **Continuing Education:** Enables professionals to meet licensing requirements.
- **Reskilling/Upskilling:** Prepares employees for new roles or advancements.
- **Career Pathing:** Supports planning and progression along career trajectories.
- **Safety Training:** Educates staff on workplace safety protocols and practices.
- **Customer Training:** Delivers training to external audiences with ecommerce capabilities for customers and partners.

Evaluate the frequency and format of these training sessions. Are they delivered in person, online, or through a blended approach? Do you need self-paced courses, live webinars or microlearning modules?

# Set Clear Objectives

Once you've assessed training needs and gathered stakeholder input, it's time to set clear objectives for your LMS. These objectives should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART). A few year-one examples might include:

- Increase employee engagement with training programs by 25%.
- Reduce compliance training completion time by 50%.
- Achieve a 90% satisfaction rate among LMS users.

Defining goals will guide you when evaluating individual platforms and help you measure and report on post-implementation successes.

# CHOOSING THE RIGHT LMS

Armed with your primary requirements, you're ready to search for an LMS provider that fits your needs. Most evaluation processes include three main stages:

1. Identify an initial set of platforms (5 to 10) you want to explore further. For example, ask learning and development peers for recommendations or do a quick online search to find out which vendors competitors and companies with similar use cases are using.
2. Explore vendor websites and analyst/review site ratings to determine which solutions match your requirements. Use an LMS Evaluation Checklist to create a shortlist of potential providers (3 to 5).
3. Request proposals and schedule demos from your shortlist based on your company's purchasing process. This stage is an opportunity to dive deep into features, functionality and the value that the vendors are creating for customers.  It also helps you gauge what it's like to work with the vendor. Again, an LMS Evaluation Checklist is helpful here.

After narrowing your list to one or two vendors, you may want to ask for a sandbox (test software environment) and check references before entering negotiations and making your final selection.

# Evaluate Essential LMS Features

Here are some important considerations to keep in mind throughout the evaluation process.

The exact feature mix that makes the most sense will vary across companies based on unique business needs. That said, every organization should keep several criteria in mind.
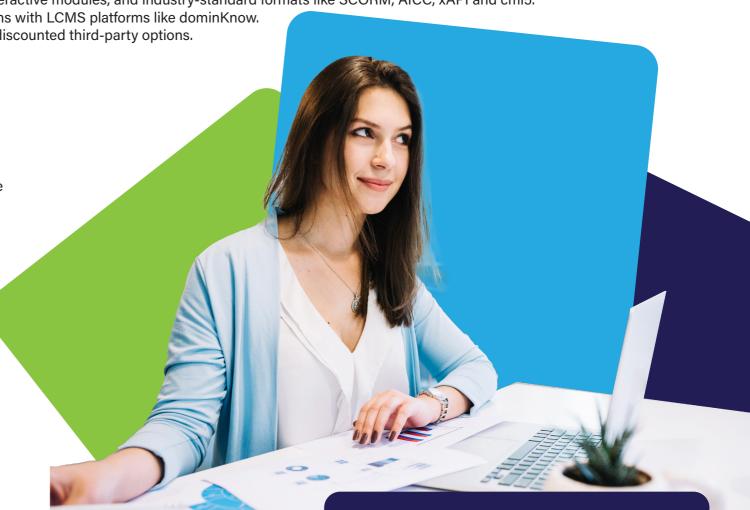
## Core Functionality

**Course Management:** The ability to create and manage courses efficiently is a core function of any LMS. Key areas to explore include:

- **Course Tracking:** Assignment, enrollment, progress tracking, and completion certification.
- **Content Types/Formats:** Videos, quizzes, interactive modules, and industry-standard formats like SCORM, AICC, xAPI and cmi5.
- **Course Authoring:** Built-in tools or integrations with LCMS platforms like dominKnow.
- **Pre-built Training:** Free course bundles and discounted third-party options.

**Learner Management:** The LMS should support seamless enrollment processes, allowing administrators to add or remove users easily and assign permissions and learning tracks based on role, group or interest.

**Reporting and Analytics:** An LMS should provide easily accessible data for compliance reporting and measuring training effectiveness to adjust strategies and maximize impact. Look for a solution that offers pre-built reports for standard metrics, custom reporting and data visualization options (e.g., charts and graphs), and export/ integration functionality for further analysis or reporting.

**Surveys and Ratings:** Ensure you can make informed decisions to improve training based on learner feedback. An LMS should include the ability to create surveys, capture pre- and post-course evaluations, and allow users to submit reviews and promote popular content.

# User Experience and Engagement

**Intuitive Interface:** An LMS should be easy to navigate and use for administrators and learners without extensive training. Look for a clean design that simplifies course enrollment, tracking progress, finding resources and other tasks.

**Flexible and Accessible:** Look for an LMS that users can access whenever and wherever they want. That means it should support responsive design across devices (e.g., desktop, tablet, phone) and audiences (e.g., WCAG and ADA guidelines).

**Personalization:** Ensure the LMS provides tailored learning paths that match users' needs and preferences, including content recommendations based on roles, skills, and learning history.

**Interactivity:** Look for features that will keep learners motivated and engaged, such as gamification (e.g., points, badges and leaderboards), social learning (e.g., discussion forums to encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing), and interactive content (e.g., quizzes, simulations and scenario-based learning).

**Artificial Intelligence (AI) Capabilities:** Some LMSs use AI to enhance learning experiences by providing personalized tests and surveys or individualized responses to user questions during courses.

**Customization:** Look for an LMS with customization options such as user-defined fields and the ability to change the logo, color themes, fonts, email notifications, etc., to match your brand.

## LMS Integration Capabilities

An LMS should integrate seamlessly with existing systems to streamline processes and reduce manual work. Important connections may include human resource information systems (HRISs), payroll applications, customer relationship management (CRM) platforms, or video tools like Zoom, WebEx and GoTo. REST APIs and compatibility with Zapier will allow custom integrations with other solutions in your tech stack.

## Key Stakeholder Considerations

Selecting an LMS isn't a decision that should be made in isolation. Ensure the solution addresses the diverse needs of your organization, including:

- **HR and Training Managers:** Focused on employee development and compliance.
- **IT Department:** Concerned with system integration, security and technical support.
- **Finance Team:** Interested in cost/budget and return on investment (ROI).
- **Functional Leaders:** Managers from other departments (e.g., sales, support, manufacturing,development).
- **End-Users:** Employees who will be using the LMS for learning and development.

While these stakeholders don't need to be part of a large buying committee, keeping their questions and requirements in mind will help you set clear objectives and select the right LMS.

## Security and Technical Requirements

Security is paramount when dealing with sensitive education data. Work closely with IT colleagues to ensure the LMS has the appropriate protocols in place, such as data encryption, multi-factor authentication (MFA), role-based access control (RBAC), single sign-on (SSO), secure API access and robust hosting/ Cloud security. Ask about data backup and recovery, security patches, audit logs and monitoring, and compliance with data protection and privacy regulations relevant to your region (e.g., GDPR).

# Look for a Partner, Not Just a Provider

Features and functionality are important, but behind every LMS platform, there's a vendor. You want one that treats customers like partners and is invested in your success rather than simply closing the deal and moving on. Key differentiators to be on the lookout for include:

## Vendor Reputation

Research vendor history, customer reviews, and case studies to gauge reliability. Sites like G2Crowd can be valuable for understanding how an LMS performs in real-world scenarios and the provider's ability to meet your needs. Examine ratings for features and functionality. Also, look for providers known for excellent customer service and that have been in business for a while, so you know they'll be there when you need them.

## Support and Customer Service

A great LMS partner will provide excellent service every step of the way—from evaluation and onboarding to implementation and ongoing training and support.
Key questions to ask include:

- What types of support are provided? Does the vendor assist with implementation, integrations, onboarding, training, etc.?
- Is the support free and unlimited, or are there additional fees?
- What channels are included? Phone? Email? Live chat? Or is it solely an online self-service portal?
- Who's included? Is support just for admins, or can learners also get help?
- What hours/time zones are covered for live support?
- Are customer service and support provided by in-house employees or outsourced?

## Implementation and Onboarding

A full LMS implementation can take three months to a year, so a well-structured plan is critical for a smooth deployment. Ask vendors about their approach and the timeline and resources that will be needed. Do they include implementation and data migration in the price, or are these additional costs? Do they have in-house experts who will work closely with you, or do they outsource these services?

Also, explore what onboarding and training resources will be available for administrators and end-users during the initial launch and ongoing. Again, confirm whether there are additional costs associated with this support or if it's free.

## Pricing Models

Understanding LMS providers' pricing models is crucial to ensuring the solution fits your budget and avoiding unexpected costs. Common pricing/licensing options include software-as-a-service (e.g., monthly or annual payments for cloud-hosted software) or a one-time fee for a perpetual, self-hosted license. In both cases, the number of users and features can affect price.

Beware of vendors that tout low licensing fees and hide additional costs, such as extra storage, advanced features, implementation or premium support. Evaluate the total cost of ownership (TCO) to determine the best value for your organization.

# TAKING THE NEXT STEPS

The corporate learning landscape is constantly evolving, and an LMS is a powerful tool to help companies stay competitive. Whether you're implementing an LMS for the first time or upgrading to a more advanced system, we hope the insights provided in this ebook assist you with your decision-making process.

Here are additional resources to help you select an LMS that meets current needs and supports your organization's long-term growth and success.

**LMS Evaluation Checklist**

**8 Questions to Ask on a Demo**

**Free Learning Strategy Assessment**

# ABOUT DIGITALCHALK

DigitalChalk offers a full-featured LMS that is top-rated by analysts and loved by our customers. Our technology powers employee and customer learning and enables training companies and associations to drive profitable growth. Don't settle for an overpriced LMS with inferior features and poor service in this crowded marketplace. DigitalChalk is the LMS you want and the PARTNER you deserve. Visit us at www.digitalchalk.com.