

HOW TO PICK **THE PERFECT** LEARNING TECHNOLOGY SOLUTION

The Working Manager's Peter Gray explains how to identify the right solutions by asking the right questions.

Learning systems used to be relatively simple but now they are much more complex, leaving many organisations at a loss about making the most of their technology investment. What is learning technology? What do organisations really want from it? Can we recycle what we've got and reuse it with what is new? Or must we start from scratch? The *Learning Technologies Exhibition* is the ideal environment in which to discover the range new L&D products and services on offer.

But how much do you need to know before talking to providers? Will you be able to do the best by your people if you haven't got a software engineering background? These are straightforward questions but they are of great concern to many learning professionals. The answer is equally straightforward. You don't need to understand learning technology but you do need to understand what you want from it.

PURE GENIUS

Some technologies are old, some are new, some are rising to maturity and some have long since passed their sell-by date. Indeed, some are so old that it is fruitless to try and understand them, dinosaurs that should be left to fossilise.

Clearly, we need to have a basic understanding of the different types of learning technologies to be sure we're getting the most from what we already have in our organisations. This is the challenge – to act wisely and make the best decisions on behalf of those we're charged to train, teach, mentor and manage.

Learning technology is a solution deployed using some form of software engineering, to offer a learning outcome with recorded and measurable outputs. Or at least that's what it should be. It should be about solutions. If it isn't, it's not learning technology – it is just technology. The solution is key. So, if it is all about a solution, what question is learning technology trying to solve? This is where the genius bit comes in. Learning technologists are people who apply the solutions to business issues.

RECOGNISE DIFFERENTIATORS

L&D and the multitude of spin off disciplines in our industry are driven – or at least should be driven – by high-level business needs. These are requirements and problems thrown up by the processes aligned to business goals, such as communication, succession planning, talent and performance management. For example, the thousands of L&D professionals that will attend this year's *Learning Technologies Exhibition* are testament to this fact and patronise the event with a sense of purpose.

Some believe that learning technology holds the key to solving their problems or business needs. Others are keen to discover the capabilities of the latest offerings. Technology should make learning easier and more cost effective but we rarely spend enough time questioning how these technologies will achieve their stated business outcomes. They provide clever and user-friendly interfaces but the 'back office' has become much more complex. And while anyone can understand why a Bentley costs more than a Ford, distinguishing between different learning technologies isn't much more difficult.

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Things you need to know...

Exactly how much do you need to know about learning technology before buying a new system? Start by regarding suppliers as consultants rather than sales people, and be prepared to articulate exactly what you think you need.

- Think about your business need. Will a \$/£/€ spent here, deliver more \$s/£s/€s there?
- Think about the technology you've got and whether you might be able to get more from it with the right learning technology partner
- Don't be afraid to tell a supplier about your problem in order for them to be able to offer possible solutions
- Allow the exhibitor to ask questions about your perceived need – technology almost always offers several solutions
- Think about learning technology as part of the business optimisation equation
- Understand that it is possible to link all learning technologies together in an engaging single login environment

Look for flexibility on the part of the supplier. The digital revolution now means that one solution for 100 organisations competes with 100 bespoke solutions for a 100 different needs.

CUT THROUGH THE JARGON

Ask questions to understand where the value lies in relation to the cost. In this way you will deny the seller the opportunity to hide behind a wall of back-office jargon to justify the expense. For example, key questions to ask are: What contribution can your offering make to my organisation's L&D needs? Or, can you explain how your solution will optimise my organisation's performance?

Questions put to you should be designed to uncover the business case attached to your learning and development need. But beware of being asked: How many people do you have? This is normally geared to establish the immediate worth of the conversation. Similarly: Do you have this LMS? Or, what level of maturity do you have in your performance management process? These are simply probes to establish further lead qualification.

Being an informed buyer is not about understanding the intricacies of a learning management system, or knowing the power of a performance management or talent management solution – this can be left to the engineers. It is about

appreciating whether or not the power of the system can be successfully harnessed to achieve your business goals.

PROOF OF SUCCESS

Organisations plough millions of pounds into L&D and training initiatives. But often they do so without first understanding the effectiveness of their investment. Often they don't consider or measure business impact. This might be blindingly obvious to some but it's the analysis that matters.

You don't need to know about learning technology *per se* but it helps hugely to know about optimising the performance of your organisation's learning investments. Learning technology creates a relationship between the pounds invested and the pounds extracted. It provides the solution, the measurement and the evidence of business success.

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