SELECTING THE RIGHT **LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM** FOR YOUR YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATION

IYF's Advancing Economic Mobility with Skills (AEMS) Project, with support from Microsoft Philanthropies and in partnership with Standard Chartered Bank, seeks to lower the barrier for organizations to launch engaging, impactful, inclusive, and targeted online skills training programs worldwide. This brief supports organizations in the selection of the right Learning Management System (LMS) for their projects.

An LMS allows youth-serving organizations to provide skill building opportunities on demand, promote continuous learning, and make courses available to a wider range of participants. Choosing the right LMS upfront is critical because the choice will inform your training design and the learner experience. Many organizations struggle with choosing an LMS due to the lack of experience in evaluating and understanding different options.

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Understand Learners' Needs

Your approach to Digitally-Facilitated Skills Training must fit with the current and future needs and abilities of your target learner. This involves understanding their access to technology and the internet, and the skills they have and need to develop. A needs assessment allows you to determine whether you should select an LMS that supports **synchronous, asynchronous,** or **blended learning**. Consider surveying or conducting group interviews with target learners. The following three key topics should be used to frame your research:

1. Access to Technology

It is important to understand how your potential learners access and use technology. Consider asking things like the type(s) of hardware (phones/computers) that are available, the cost of internet data and whether they would pay to use their own mobile credit for learning activities.

2. Digital Skills

Young people may lack the digital skills necessary to participate in structured online training courses. Seek to understand their basic digital competencies and how that might relate to their ability to engage digitally. It is very common for organizations to overestimate the skill level of their learners and underestimate the support resources and staff time required to troubleshoot issues.

3. Engagement and Interaction

Learners may also have preferences in the types of online learning they are looking for. This will help you determine features and structures in an LMS. Key questions might include:
- What skills are they interested in learning?
- Will they learn with a flexible or a fixed schedule?
- Do they prefer to work mainly offline?
- Do they need group interaction and engagement to stay motivated?
- What are some possible challenges that may be encountered by learners?

Is an LMS right for you?

Your participants have online access or can download content for offline learning.

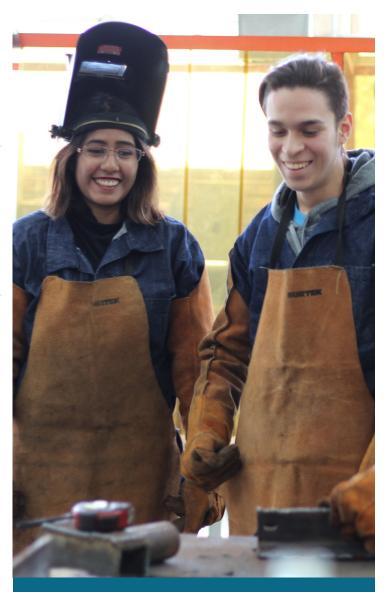**IF NOT:** Consider low tech program like group based learning or digitally enabled content that can be distributed via feature phones (SMS or calls), radio, or television.

Your organization has a long term financial and staff commitment for an LMS.

IF NOT: Prioritize in person learning and use existing solutions like LinkedIn Learning, Skills to Succeed, Google Learn, Allison or other course platforms to provide complementary digital learning opportunities.

Your organization needs to support individual learners and track their progress.

IF NOT: Consider posting videos, sharing external course options, and posting learning materials online using a website, through social media groups, or via direct messaging.

Understanding your learners' access, skills, and interests will be critical to your training design and will be the basis on which you select the features that you will need in an LMS.

Select Features

To choose the right LMS, it is critical to understand the features that are most useful for the design and implementation of your Digitally-Facilitated Skills Training. LMSs are all configured differently so it is important to understand which features they have and how they integrate to provide a learning experience. Remember, you might not be able to fully determine in advance all the features your LMS will eventually use, but it should be possible to narrow down what will likely be needed with a good needs assessment and an understanding of different features.

If you are selecting or managing an LMS for the first time, you might be overwhelmed by the range of options and features offered. To help navigate these choices, definitions of key feature sets that you might consider are provided in the boxes below. To get started, you can also find 7 LMSs compared in late 2021 along the same criteria HERE ↗.

Accessibility: Different LMSs have different accessibility tools, either via internal compliance with Web Content Accessibility Standards or via third party accessibility plug-ins.

Supported Files: LMSs support different types of files so check that your existing content can be uploaded. Some have special tools to convert your files (PowerPoints and video) into engaging training content.

Assessment: Ensure the system allows for the types of assessment approaches you need. This could be closed-ended questions like matching questions, drag and drop, fill-in type questions, or open-ended assessments like long text questions.

Languages: An LMS needs to be available in the languages used in your training. This might include existing system translations or the option to add new language scripts to your LMS. Right to left configuration may also be a key feature depending on your linguistic focus.

Offline Accessibility: Your learners may prefer or require the option to download the training for offline learning either via a mobile app or to a desktop computer.

Learner Communication: LMSs will provide you with different communication options. Synchronous options include live video/chat. Asynchronous options include discussion boards, blogs, and email. Communications can be streamlined by your LMS by automated emails for registration, reminders, and course follow up.

Video Integration: Video options might include live video that is either built into the system or via systems like Microsoft Teams. Some LMSs allow video embedding directly or via YouTube or Vimeo.

Customization: Most LMSs allow for customization to match your own colours, brand, and domain name. More technical customization might focus on your ability to run multiple projects or to add features.

User Registration: Different LMSs offer different options for registering new learners into their system. This might be done via logins with Microsoft/Facebook/Google accounts, as batches with emails, mobile numbers or usernames, or via a course code shared with participants.

Mobile: LMSs should be mobile-responsive. Their web application should display content and be responsive to learner interactions on a mobile device. Some LMSs have their own mobile app that your participants can download, with some allowing you to create your own branded app.

Administrative Flexibility: LMSs might allow for different types of users and administrators in their system. More administrative options help manage complicated roll outs. Simpler administrative systems are easier for basic projects but challenging when programs grow.

Reusable Content and Standard Access: Choose a SCORM-compliant LMS if you intend to use training materials across several different LMS systems, or if you want to be able to import content from another system. If you want detailed user information, consider xAPI or TinCap API compliance.

Selecting the Non-Negotiable Features

Once you identify the features that are most relevant for your training program, it is important to list the **non-negotiable** features for your potential LMS. These are features that are crucial for developing your training courses and supporting your learners. With this information at hand, you can eliminate some of the LMS systems that do not have these key features. For those that remain, make the distinction between features you **want** to have and those you really **need** to have. Know that LMSs with more features most often increase your costs. That's why having a well-defined feature list is important to guide your selection decision.

Understanding the Market

Now that you know what you are looking for in an LMS, consider finding vendors that fit with your requirements. Do a broad search online but also ask for recommendations within your professional network. Ask others who have gone through similar selection processes to describe their experience–what influenced the choices they made, what did they get right (or wrong), and what challenges did they face. You will learn more critical information speaking with a peer who has used an LMS in 15 minutes than you ever will online. Use this information to shortlist the LMSs that best fit your needs.

LMS vendors offer free calls to walk you through the demo version of your LMS. Remember, these are sales calls aimed primarily at convincing you to purchase their product. They may focus on the great parts of the software and may be vague in other areas. Make sure to prepare a list of questions about key features on your non-negotiable list to ensure that the LMS will work for you. Ask a lot of questions and do additional research on pricing and the exact service offerings because these issues often lead to cost and budget overruns.

This information provided by the vendor might not be enough for you to make a selection. It is important to find additional information that can support your choice.

Key assessment methods include

1. Reading reviews and watching videos from other LMS users:

This will give you an idea of the advantages and disadvantages of the system, what features work well and which of them present challenges.

2. Speak to other users:

Find other customers who have purchased the LMS to speak with them about their experiences. Be persistent as this might be the best source of information.

3. Get a demo:

Require the LMS vendor to provide you with a demo or 'sandbox' license that you can login to and test the features to see if they work as intended.

4. Audit a course or attend a promotional event:

Find a course/event using that LMS and participate in it.

5. Follow up:

Ask the LMS provider for additional calls to clarify key points. Post questions on message boards or on social media about the systems you are considering.

Digging Deeper: Key Selection Criteria

While some features are easy to determine based on vendor websites and sales calls, others require a more detailed assessment. These additional considerations focus more on how you interact with the LMS as an administrator and how it can support your training goals.

Support and Services: Launching an LMS requires many decisions about how you set up and use the system features. A key consideration in selection should be the type of support you can expect to access, receive, or purchase. Types of support include message boards and public forums, company-managed help and support pages, direct company support as part of your payment, or third-party consultants who can be contracted to support implementation. Remember, no matter what LMS you select, you WILL face problems, and there will be issues where support is key. Ensure that the system you select has lots of information and multiple ways of engaging with people who can help you solve the problems you will face.

Ease of Use: If you have a demo of the LMS, it is important to determine how easy it is for you to create, develop, and deploy courses. For learners, the user interface and logic of the LMS might influence course enrollment, understanding, and completion. This may involve subjective judgements about how simple or well integrated the user interface is to use. It could also be based on how connected the features are, or whether they work together right away or need a more specialized understanding of how they connect and interact. Try to demo the LMS and judge the system based on how intuitive and easy it is to use.

Reporting and Analytics: Reporting in an LMS helps you understand how your training is working and for whom. Different LMSs may place more or less emphasis on these functions, so make sure that tracking and reporting features are aligned with your needs. Key features to look out for include course enrollment and completion, time logs for activities and courses, grades and scores on assessments. Also important are pre-built dashboards to show results or integration with any external data analysis/visualization tools. Make sure your LMS can run reports and match outcomes on segments or cohorts of learners aligned to your donor reporting.

New Technologies or Trends: LMSs often make big claims about their platforms and describe basic features with sophisticated but unsubstantiated terminology. This can include using impressive-sounding psychological terms, or emphasizing trendy, high-tech concepts like gamification, Artificial Intelligence, or Machine Learning. It is important to understand what they mean, how they differ in the marketplace, and whether they add value to your work or not. Make sure to ask specific questions about what these features mean and how they concretely add value.

With this additional information in hand, you are in the best position to make an informed choice about the LMS that is right for you.

Make a Choice

Once you have your final LMSs shortlisted, your next challenge is determining the price of each option. The selection of an LMS is often a multiyear investment, and your selection should align with your ambitions and budget. LMSs often have different ways of calculating how much to charge for using their systems, which may lead to unexpected expenses.

To determine your costs, create a comparison between the features you need and modifications you expect for different systems, and estimate the anticipated number of users. You may not know exactly as this is a new area of work, but you should be able to estimate the range of options based on your current projects and future ambitions. It may be helpful to create a low, medium, and high LMS usage scenario for your organization. This can help determine which LMS will be more cost effective with different use cases.

Using this information, you can approach LMS providers for a quote or use their own costing tools to determine how much different systems might cost. While the cost of an LMS to the vendor is a major consideration, there are large internal staff costs associated with the roll out and the management of the system which should also be considered. Combine external and internal costs to determine which systems might work best for your organization.

Pricing Model

PAY PER USER: Each person in the LMS system is charged on a per learner basis, with the vendor being responsible for hosting and updates.

PAY PER USER: Best when number of users is predictable.

LICENSING OR PURCHASE: You pay a monthly or annual license or a single purchase price for the use of an LMS. Usually allows unlimited or tied number of users.

LICENSING: Best when budget is fixed.

FREE SOFTWARE/PAID HOSTING: LMS software that is free to use and deploy but requires payment to host it and consultants to support deployment.

FREE SOFTWARE: Best when in-house IT support is available.

Decide Together

This decision about which LMS to select should be made by a team of people to ensure multiple perspectives are considered. Doing so will minimize the tendency of colleagues to second-guess the choice. If you are leading the process, document your justifications and comparisons between different systems to clearly define the benefits, challenges, and tradeoffs associated with each system.

It is incredibly rare to find any organization that is 100% happy with their LMS. You should aspire to find the best fit, not a perfect fit. Once the decision is made, consider going back to your LMS provider or supplier with final questions about contract and service level agreements, and make any other requests or requirements you might have to finalize the sale.

Conclusions

Selecting an LMS is crucial to moving to a Digitally-Facilitated Skills Training. An LMS can facilitate and automate much of this work, but the selection process can be challenging with all the different features and pricing models available. Getting it right means understanding your learners, assessing product and market features, and making a collaborative choice. Following this process, you will be able to make informed decisions about a LMS that is aligned with your organizational goals and participant needs.

LIST OF TOOLS AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

LMS Requirement Checklist	Michigan Virtual Services ↗
Synchronous vs Asynchronous: How to Use Both	Thinkific ↗
Pricing Guide for LMS	Acorn LMS ↗
LMS Checklist	On Learning Point ↗

ADDITIONAL AEMS RESOURCES

Brief 1: Developing Engaging Digitally-Facilitated Skills Trainings ↗

Brief 2: Making Your Digitally-Facilitated Skills Training More Accessible ↗

Brief 3: Selecting the Right Learning Management System for Your Youth-serving Organization ↗

Brief 4: Encouraging Diversity and Inclusion in Your Digitally-Facilitated Skills Training ↗

Resource 5: Overview of Leading Learning Management Systems ↗

Resource 6: Available Curricula and Learning Material Library for Skill Building ↗

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