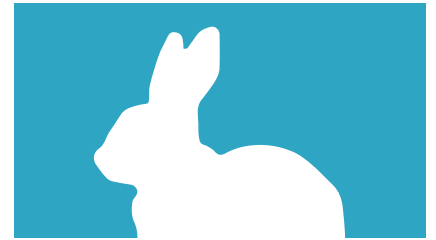




New study highlights security trends in legal organizations



Lawyers wanted... to discuss the Internet of Things



iManage begins its adventures in Wonderland





Realizing the promise of your learning management system

BY MIKE LOWE

Law firms are starting to adopt learning management systems, but they need to be more ambitious if they are to make the most of them, says Mike Lowe.



It's 9pm and an associate at your firm could use some guidance on how to draft a motion for summary judgment. Her colleagues have gone home for the evening. Where does she turn for help? Why is it that she can go to YouTube and instantly find instructions on an almost unlimited range of topics, but she can't get training specific to her practice other than through classroom training that is only offered once a year?

What if a simple search in the firm's learning management system (LMS)

or portal could pull up a recorded course that was offered in a different office a month ago? Better still, what if her search could locate a short video vignette providing specific guidance from the partner considered the firm's authority on that topic?

LMS is one of many opportunities for law firms to use IT to make significant and much-needed improvements to their ability to support attorneys and meet the demands of the market. Long in use at companies and other professional

service firms, LMSs are seeing increasing adoption at law firms.

This is a good thing. However, many firms are only scratching the surface of what an LMS can provide. Taking full advantage of an LMS requires a more forceful vision of the role of professional development in preparing attorneys to practice, and an acknowledgement that the real benefits of this technology (as with most technologies) will likely require changes to strategy, policy, process and organization.

Given their many technology imperatives, why should law firms implement an LMS?

- As has been well documented, clients are finding new associates to be unprepared to practice law and are unwilling to pay their rates. Firms face the challenge of providing their own training to bridge the gap between law school instruction and the requirements of real-world law practice. Client demand for more skilled attorneys applies not just to the practice of law, but also to the use of technology (e.g. Microsoft Excel) to support their practice.
- Efficiency is increasingly valued at law firms, both due to client demands and the requirements of alternative fee arrangements, namely fixed fees and capped fees. An LMS supports an efficient workforce through attorney self-service and access to just-in-time training, anytime, anywhere, by any device.
- Law firm training frequently develops in different organizational silos (professional development, staff training and technology training). An LMS provides a shared platform and single point of access to attorneys and staff for all their training.
- The spreadsheet-based method of managing learning and continuing legal education (CLE) tracking is becoming increasingly burdensome as firms grow, and increasingly dated given the available technologies.
- The technology is catching up to the need. Legal technology vendors have developed learning management systems tailored to the specific needs of law firms, such as the ability to incorporate CLE tracking into the larger LMS.

Developing learning management capability

The amount of value provided by an LMS depends in part on a firm's willingness to develop an ambitious vision for its use, and then on its ability to implement the technology together with changed policies, processes, and organization that are aligned with the vision. Those firms that desire an LMS solely as a tool for CLE tracking and online class registration

benefit from its use, but constrain its value to the size of their vision.

Based on my work improving learning management at top-tier law firms, I have developed a capability curve to describe the various levels of maturity that firms obtain, supported by their use of an LMS. Since we're on the subject of learning, I've named the levels after levels of education.

Learning Management Capability Curve

1 Primary

- Basic CLE tracking
- Online course registration and class tracking

2 Secondary

- Integrated LMS and CLE tracking
- Access to eLearning
- Automated notifications, certificates, evaluations

3 Undergraduate

- Searchable access to all types of internal and external content - classroom, video, eLearning
- Competency-oriented learning paths

4 Graduate

- Firm-specific need-specific content
- Data-driven analysis of courses, instructors, and students
- Integration with firm's competency model

Primary

At their most basic, and as used by many firms, LMSs are merely tools for the automated scheduling, management, and tracking of classroom training. Firms frequently investigate an LMS when they need to track the firm-wide rollout of a particular technology, like a new desktop image, for example. I've seen firms that actually have more than one LMS in use – such as one for technology training and one for CLE tracking. At this level, at least the LMS offers improved capabilities over spreadsheets, even if its capabilities are still underused.

Secondary

The next level of capability utilizes more of the out-of-the-box features of an LMS, such as the ability to provide access to eLearning, CLE status and certificates. At this level, firms gain the benefits of automation by eliminating steps that were previously manual, such as sending emails, creating sign-in sheets, and collecting feedback forms. Firms that replace their manual processes with an LMS without a commitment to a grander vision typically stop here on the curve.

Undergraduate

I think of this as the content level – in which firms start to take greater advantage of the LMS by integrating a broader range of content, whether that consists of classroom learning, videos of previous courses, eLearning or content from external providers such as Practising Law Institute or West Legal Ed. I worked with one Silicon Valley firm that developed short videos on how to perform specific tasks – relevant either to the practice of law or to the business of law, such as developing client relationships.

To the users, the LMS becomes the one stop shop for learning. Furthermore, at this level, firms tie content together in logical learning paths that develop firm-valued skills or competencies. The effort that the firm used to allocate to manual administrative tasks should now be redirected toward maintaining the content in a way that keeps it current, searchable, and tied to competency development.

Graduate

This final level is where firms leverage the analytical tools provided by LMSs to continuously improve all aspects of their learning capabilities – learning content, instructors, learning paths, and importantly, the contribution of learning to client delivery and to the professional development of attorneys and staff. With online course and instructor evaluations, automated reporting and linkages to an overall competency model, the professional development group can more systematically assess and adjust its offerings.

The analytical capabilities afforded by the LMS do not extend only to professional development. An LMS can support performance management ▶

conversations between partners and associates in which they review the associates' performance and identify learning that is available to support their development.

This is a level that firms often have the desire to achieve, but they fail to make the necessary changes to their processes and organizations. It's not enough to develop reports; firms must allocate people with the time and skills to analyze those reports, and implement processes for acting on the results of their analyses.

Selection and implementation considerations

You have choice when considering the LMS that is best for your firm. I've seen custom-built applications, CLE tracking tools, legal-specific applications and non-legal-specific ones. My primary guidance is first to identify the level of capability that is appropriate to your firm's vision, and then choose a system accordingly.

While I am generally drawn to non-legal-specific technologies, the particular requirements of CLE suggest that a legal-focused solution is likely to be the best option for law firms. As

Many firms are only scratching the surface of what an LMS can provide

for the implementation, my primary advice is to start with the vision. That compelling vision that generates enthusiasm among firm leadership will be necessary to guide you through the changes required to systems, data, policy, process, and organization. Without the vision, it's too easy to end the project at the secondary level and fail to realize the true promise of an LMS.

Secondly, be sure to include governance in your planning. This is likely to be the first time that your siloed training groups have had a shared platform. Use the

implementation project to improve ties between the groups and establish an ongoing method for maintaining the system collaboratively.

In a profession where attorney competency is a critical competitive advantage, a marketplace where clients are looking for more practice-ready associates, and an era in which technology enables instant search and retrieval of all types of information, the pressure on professional development to use technology to improve attorney training will continue to grow. Few firms, if any, have reached graduate-level capability when it comes to LMS-supported training. Will your firm be one of the first?

Mike Lowe founded HardingLowe in 2010 after spending twelve years in Accenture's strategy practice. Since then, Mike has worked with many of the world's top-tier law firms to improve operations in areas such as new business intake, learning management and knowledge management. He specializes in strategy, business planning, business architecture and process re-engineering. ■