

Will Your ELearning Be Ready for the Future?

Learning leaders must work with IT to ensure the tech infrastructure can handle any new gadgetry.

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With the rapid growth of eLearning comes an exponential rise in the number of tools, technologies and flavor-of-the-month market trends that appeal to chief learning officers looking for ways to weave new tools into their development strategies. Consequently, the information technology department is on the receiving end of requests for a variety of new online learning apps, gamification software, social, microlearning or adaptive learning.

So, how does a CLO get all of the features they want from new eLearning technologies without completely disrupting — or, worse yet, replacing — the current infrastructure? There are definitive steps a learning leader can take to help their IT peers prepare a learning ecosystem for transformation, while minimizing business risk and cost.

The goal is to create a flexible eLearning environment that enables an IT leader to support current and future eLearning trends in ways that allow the technology infrastructure to flex but not crack. For example, organizations 10 years ago did not put much focus on how people accessed their content because most learning was conducted on a desktop computer. Now, CLOs must manage employees who consume learning on desktops, tablets and mobile phones. If an organization was still using the same 10-year-old platform without upgrades, many learners won't be able to access content in the way they prefer to consume it.

Businesses must consider how to future-proof their technology so they don't paint themselves into a corner. If IT departments don't mindfully set up their core technology platforms — like learning management systems — it will be more difficult to migrate to a new system or add new eLearning applications and tools.

John Meiners, chief of mission aligned businesses at the American Heart Association, said his organization strives to keep its educational programs not just up to date but also ahead of the curve. "We have several technologies and tools in place to support our educational activities," he said. "It's been critical for us to develop a positive user experience for our learners, one that allows for access to the various programs quickly and easily. We have carefully connected our learning ecosystem by implementing a single sign-on solution. This enables a seamless learner experience while meeting our business objectives."

To achieve that kind of success, CLOs must be aware of their IT departments' top challenges.

Align Technology Solutions With Business Needs

When a CLO wants to implement innovative learning tools and applications, they first must ensure the intent aligns with an organization's strategic business needs. Using the overall business objectives as a framework, a learning leader should have a three-year eLearning technology plan formulated in conjunction with IT. By reviewing this plan annually, they can create a system of checks and balances to ensure eLearning technology investments stay on point with the overall vision.

The annual review also lets the IT team take proactive steps to ensure the eLearning ecosystem can accommodate future growth. For example, if an IT director knows the CLO will require an e-commerce capability in the coming year, they can prepare the environment and create the conditions for a successful implementation via system and application program interface, or API, upgrades.

Further, learning leaders should ask themselves several key questions before requesting an IT change: What will this new tool accomplish? How will it benefit the company's learners and enable them to better achieve the company's overall business objectives? Have the learners asked for this tool, and are they likely to use it?

By analyzing data from the learning management system, such as learner usage and post-course survey information, a CLO can conduct an education gap analysis that is key to organizing needs in a request for proposal. Then, IT can vet options, including open-source platforms, to find the most viable solution.

Prioritization is also important and can be accomplished by carefully examining the company's business needs and goals. The CLO must take a hard look at all of the possible technologies and think carefully about which ones are most imperative. By identifying learners' biggest education gap, it will be easier to work with IT to identify the most beneficial solution.

Close communication and coordination between the CLO and the IT director is crucial here. IT must take a close look at existing applications and platforms to verify the desired outcome isn't already available. Further, the CLO must work with IT to do a general assessment of the company's current technologies to ensure they are compatible with the desired innovation.

For example, the IT department must verify that key legacy platforms expose modern APIs, facilitating the addition of new systems, and reducing integration time and cost. This reinforces the need to conduct regular IT maturity-level assessments to gauge the real capability of the system to integrate new technology.

One may not think it is necessary for a CLO to be involved at this level of technological detail. But for a learning leader to successfully implement the new technologies they want, they must ensure those tools are compatible with the existing technology platform.

Be Mindful of Time and Cost

Obviously, it is important for a CLO to consider the cost of a new eLearning tool and to weigh the benefit of that investment against other items competing for budgetary attention. From an IT perspective, it's also necessary to evaluate the cost in terms of implementation time, data migration requirements, personnel resources, and training for learners and LMS administrators.

The IT department can help the CLO keep costs down by conducting the aforementioned maturity assessment. By knowing what is already in place, the IT director will be able to advise the CLO about realistic cost and implementation time based on the degree of required integration. For instance, does the LMS need to be completely replaced to accommodate the new technology? Can the same thing be accomplished by upgrading the legacy system to a new version, which would be less costly and time-consuming? Can the current team accomplish this, or do additional personnel resources need to be added?

At this point, the IT department also must assess which key platform houses critical user data. If the majority of the learners are plugged into the LMS, for instance, this becomes a key platform in the eLearning ecosystem. Trying to completely replace a key platform full of critical data is a difficult and risky endeavor, especially because of data migration. Avoiding data migration — particularly if the data set is large — is extremely important. Data migration projects require a data migration specialist and often end up over budget, seldom finish on schedule and require a long stabilization period.

A better approach would be to ensure the IT ecosystem is flexible enough to plug in new applications. To accomplish this, IT must maintain a large set of APIs supporting modern standards and protocols. For instance, it is preferable to use lightweight representational state transfer APIs over the more heavyweight simple object access protocol, or SOAP, versions. Also, IT should make sure the learning systems are compliant with xAPI, or Tin Can, standards so all the learning data can be shared across different platforms and devices. Finally, if IT has kept up with system updates, this will enable the eLearning ecosystem to evolve more easily. It's less disruptive, time consuming and costly to integrate into existing platforms than to start from scratch or completely replace them.

Take Steps to Ensure a Positive User Experience

When a new eLearning technology has been selected, utilizing all of the aforementioned criteria, the CLO and IT department should be united in their efforts to protect the user experience during and after implementation. After all, no matter how valuable a tool is for learners, if it is difficult to use or limits their ability to access the company's education system, learners are likely to reject it.

When IT tackles the integration, it will need to estimate how long the system will be affected. Two hours? One day? Three days? There's a big difference from a user standpoint. It is important to realistically identify the effect so it can be communicated to learners.

IT also must decide what to do with existing learners during the transition. Will users be locked out of the system completely, or can they access key components of the LMS during the integration? Further, IT must integrate the new tool in such a way that enables learners to seamlessly re-engage with the system after implementation.

A positive user experience requires seamless transitions between the legacy systems and the new application. The integration of the new application within a single sign-on, or SSO, mechanism based on standards such as security assertion markup language or an open standard for authorization will avoid multiple authentications and ensure a smooth experience.

Finally, the CLO and IT department must work in tandem to pinpoint the specific changes users will notice when logging into the system post-installation. Then they can develop a communication and training plan to help learners navigate the new tool. Depending on how robust the change is, the communication could vary from a tutorial explaining the new features to a simple pop-up message informing learners of the enhancements.

"With the launch of our online board review course, we wanted to ensure our members derived maximum benefit from the program without disrupting their member login and overall experience," said Jeff Williamson, vice president of education and academic affairs at the American Medical Informatics Association. "It was important for us to integrate our association management system [AMS] into our eLearning platform so this value could be realized, and we could ensure a smooth member experience. By linking up these two technologies, we are able to serve and bring greater value to our members."

How can a CLO determine if their company is designing a future-proof eLearning ecosystem? First, they must check to make sure the LMS and other applications and tools have updated APIs and at least standard SSO capabilities. The eLearning platform also should be able to share data with third-party applications.

Finally, after developing a strategic eLearning plan, the CLO should review this plan with the IT director annually to ensure it's being followed, and identify if any updates are necessary.

However, the real measure of a future-proof eLearning investment is not just about technical details, it's also about the user experience. At the end of the day, CLOs must ask themselves: Can learners navigate among various educational activities efficiently? And, is the training making a difference in both professional development and company growth?

If the investment isn't furthering an organization's long-term strategic business objectives, it may be more risk than reward.