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LMS and LXP, let's have some clarity

LMS and LXP follow two opposite yet complementary philosophies about the relationship between content and expertise, and between subject matter expert and end user.

Corporate training is a delicate function of personnel management. Trained, motivated and competent employees make an essential contribution to teamwork. But competitive advantage cannot be achieved without careful consideration of ways to grow and preserve this asset. eLearning has proven to be a prime tool for this purpose: content libraries, user benefit analysis and the ability to explore other resources are irreplaceable tools. So much so that they deserve an in-depth look at the ways in which they can be used. LMS and LXP follow two opposite yet complementary philosophies regarding the relationship between content and skills, and between subject matter expert and end user.

The training problem: a practical example

Imagine that you are in charge of a team. Imagine that it is important to your business that your colleagues develop the skills and knowledge to do their jobs well, that they obtain the required certifications and qualifications, and that they gain the confidence and awareness to help you achieve your goals. Imagine also being responsible for their professional and productive growth, or at least having a voice in it. How would you set up the training?

You might start at the end, and assess learning objectives. If your company has clear procedures and experience with the market it serves, you may find the task easy to define. If your goal is to obtain certificates or certifications, part of the problem will be even easier to consider.

With that done, it will be worth considering what skills you already have on your team. A new graduate on an internship will have very different knowledge and training needs from the employee who has been there since the years when you were still a small group of colleagues. Already your task becomes more complicated. You may have all the theoretical skills but need your team to understand how to put them into practice. Or you may need to take the knowledge beyond its usual scope to move from know-how already acquired to know-why, to understand how to improve your processes. Or, you may need a simple update of your practices. Or again, all of the previous answers, but different for your different employees, each with their own specific mix of needs.
The last step you'll face, once you've established arrival and departure, is figuring out how to get there. Here, fortunately for you, the possible choices work in your favor. Job search engine Indeed lists the following training methods:

- Learning through technological support
- Simulations
- On-the-job training
- Coaching and Mentoring
- Instructor-led training
- Role-playing games
- Movies and Videos
- Case Studies

By its nature, learning through technological support is the most malleable. In an eLearning course, simulations can be presented, possibly combined with the use of technical tools, if the training has a practical-executive objective; instructional videos are normally provided, to clarify and exemplify the concepts expressed; case studies and scenarios can be presented, if the objective is to develop analytical and problem-solving skills; and it is not excluded that role-playing games are proposed, perhaps combined with appropriate **storytelling**, if the skills to be developed allow for autonomous decision-making at the time of execution. In addition, thanks to **microlearning**, the course can be followed during normal workflow, integrating with on-the-job training. In addition, coaches and mentors can refer to the material presented on the electronic medium as well as train themselves through appropriate eLearning courses. Your choice will be guided as much by the goals you set at the outset

as by the resources you have available, in terms of time and budget. In addition, due to its ability to scale, the eLearning solution offers a cost advantage to consider: no off-site travel required, less disruption to workflow, faster feedback.

On closer inspection, the classification does not fully capture the scope of eLearning as a staff training mechanism because this category is capable of encompassing and being encompassed by the others. But if this is the case, then can any audio-visual content with possibly some text be eLearning? The answer is no, unless we consider this to be a simple library of content.

The Learning Management System and its tools

Mind you, that said eLearning has not yet been said of its technological qualities. Remote learning is such an innovative concept that the first shorthand lessons by mail were advertised in the Boston Gazette in 1728. As is often the case, not much new is invented: the problems you solve are always, more or less the same; what changes is how you do it. After three centuries, computer architecture is helping us make education more effective for the needs of the job.

It is thanks to technology that eLearning has transformed itself from a simple collection of documents and audiovisual content to a true system of performance management and verification of the degree of learning of the end user. To fully understand the scope of this innovation we must introduce the concepts of LMS and LXP. The first acronym indicates a Learning Management System and LXP, that is, a real learning management system. The second, more recent, designates a Learning Experience Platform. The greater emphasis on user choice is the basis for the distinction between LMS and **LXP**.

A **Learning Management System** is software that allows for the administration, documentation, tracking and reporting of data about the use of an online course. That is, metrics related to user performance are recorded by tracking user behavior once the course has begun. More in detail, it measures all those parameters that allow to interpret the level of attention to the content provided and the quality of participation: how much he follows a movie, how he responds to test questions, statistics on the distribution of right or wrong answers. This software can be deployed both locally, through installation on the user's or employer's terminals, and through the provider's cloud, under the Software as a Service (Saas) formula.

These functions are enabled by tools such as SCORM and xAPI. The first defines "the specifications related to the reuse, tracking and cataloging of **learning objects**", i.e. it allows the eLearning platform to manage a learning object (the lesson of a course, for example), indexing it by means of metadata on the author or the date of creation, or on its latest modifications, or to exchange it with other platforms and track user behavior. The second extends the scope of user behavior that can be tracked, even outside the single web browser: in this way it is possible to integrate other elements to the fruition of the course, such as participation in the forum connected to it or the complete consultation of the audiovisual material supporting the lesson. Basically, labels (tags) are added to the contents of the course that provide indications on how it has been manipulated by the user, to what extent a film has been watched carefully, which answers provided are correct and what considerations and advice on questions and answers users have exchanged in the forum. The second concept mentioned, the LXP, differs from the first not so much in the metrics measured differently, but in the way content is presented and accessed.

LMS and LXP, two distinct philosophies

LMS and LXP follow two opposite philosophies, which we could respectively indicate as top-down and bottom-up. An LMS assumes that the user is provided with a course that includes lessons to be followed sequentially, according to an established order. For this purpose, the **Instructional Designer (ID)** - the designer of the course -, can adopt different techniques, including microlearning, storytelling or gamification. The starting point remains the design phase of a course, from establishing the length of the lessons, to the level of depth of the concepts covered, to the relationship between theory and practice. The pivot around which everything revolves is the level of user attention for retention of the information presented. In addition to maintaining a high level of attention, microlearning also allows the user to "break down" important concepts into their essential components, according to a modular logic: in this way, depending on the levels of a course, the lessons can be ordered, integrated or left out in different ways; the user will still be presented with a path to follow in order to obtain the skills and, eventually, the final certificate. This is what the top-down approach is all about.
In contrast, in LXP there is not necessarily a set order that establishes the user's training, but rather it is the user who chooses how much to delve into a concept and what further skills to obtain, depending on the tasks he is performing or aspires to perform. His choices can be guided by the personalized suggestions provided by the software's Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning algorithms in addition to those of other users. The key word is "personalization" of content. This is what characterizes the bottom-up approach.

This solution allows to extend the available course catalog, acting as a content aggregator: in this way a user can also access lessons that would not be part of the original content library. Ideally, an LXP also allows a user to create his own content, to be shared. The Copernican revolution, it can be said, is to revolve content around skills: as the Chartered Institute for IT exemplifies well, the best LXPs can integrate multiple internal and external sources into a single catalog, and in this unify multiple skills models into a single taxonomy of skills.
Think of all the skills that make a good salesperson: customer empathy, negotiation skills, product knowledge - even of competitors -, familiarity with financing solutions, etc. Group them into a single internal catalog. Link lessons on external best practices. Allow users to exchange opinions and navigational tips. What you get is as much detailed as comprehensive training for your employees. And maybe some useful feedback from them that you wouldn't have expected.

So, if an LMS is the equivalent of a website, an LXP can be seen as a search engine. If anything, the limitation is that it is more difficult to track user behavior: deciding which topics to investigate, evaluating their usefulness and pursuing the chosen direction is more complex to analyze than passing a final test. Also in this case, xAPI is the tool that allows to improve learning performance considerations. We could simplify by saying that if an LMS represents a map of a path, the LXP is a compass for orientation, that the former can be assimilated to a chain of lessons while the latter has a network structure.

We would be wrong, however, to think that LXP, as the most recent solution, is destined to supplant the LMS in toto, for the simple fact that the autonomy of power in deciding what to study in depth and, conversely, what to leave out, does not always fit with the skills and certifications that work requires to be obtained or the procedures that need to be known. The question concerns what choices the instructional designer, mentor or couch, and the HR manager make about the type of training for users and how to mix the two different solutions: focus on theoretical skills, LMS more suitable; more attention to their practical application, LXP to be considered carefully.

As far as LXP is concerned, think about the impact that in-house content production could have on a **company's organization**: how much easier it would be to save, store and share among team members the acquired wealth of knowledge and specific skills; the turnover between employees - the experienced doyen at the end of his career and the promising youngster - could be performed without fear of interruption or loss of experience: Indeed, for the former, one could go so far as to consider a role as an external consultant once he leaves the team, while the latter could use the experience to assess in which direction to evolve his corporate career.

Once again, the power of the tool calls for reflection on organizational work choices to fully grasp the benefits. We have already seen this with PCs compared to teletypewriters, with email compared to faxes, with videocalls compared to phone calls, and now we are at another juncture.

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