

Changing Your Learning Management System: a case study at Konica Minolta Business Solutions

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The Gartner Group (Linden and Fenn, 2003) has suggested that all technology goes through a predictable “hype cycle”, with the following stages:

- Technology trigger
- Peak of inflated expectations
- Trough of disillusionment
- Slope of enlightenment
- Plateau of productivity

As an early adopter of both online courses and a learning management system, Konica Minolta Business Solutions (KMBS), in New Jersey, USA, managed to go through all five stages of this hype cycle. This case study outlines how the first decisions on adoption of e-learning were made, the problems that arose, and the management of the change from one learning management system to another. Both client and vendor perspectives are given on the change management and project management processes involved.

Minolta USA – an early LMS adopter

The early adoption of e-learning at Minolta USA (before its merger with Konica) started with a crisis. One of Minolta's copiers had a significant problem with a digital engine and needed to be modified quickly in the field. This necessitated service technicians at approximately 400 dealerships being trained as quickly as possible to fix the problem. Normally, this would mean sending trainers all over the United States to give courses to the technicians. Because there is no time for this, Minolta management decided that the only feasible solution was the development and distribution of an online course on how to service this particular copier.

At that time Minolta was working with a technology vendor who also happened to have a learning management system (LMS). Because Minolta already had a relationship with this vendor, it was relatively easy to adopt this particular LMS. Minolta's experience was similar to all early technology adopters - both the vendor and the buyer experienced a considerable learning curve. There was little research available on the impact of e-learning, or how it should be deployed. There was little projection of future costs, which meant that it was impossible to budget for any increases in e-learning use. Moreover, there is no particular analysis of whether e-learning would meet the needs of the business.

As Minolta staff began to use the learning management system, it became clear that changes would have to be made in order for it to function in a way that was acceptable for training purposes. Because there was no central authority over the learning management system, requests for changes were coming from several parts of the organization. There was no one in charge of e-learning at Minolta at that time, and online initiatives had been started in Sales, Marketing and Service groups within the company.

Analysis of Issues with the first LMS

By the time a new executive took over the e-business unit, problems and issues with the first learning management system were becoming apparent. The LMS was “hardwired” and required vendor involvement to make the smallest of changes. Each time the vendor made a change, a hefty bill arrived for their work. At the same time the staff felt “locked in” because this learning management system was built with proprietary technology that would not link or integrate with any other learning technologies at that time. Online courses built for the LMS had to be launched within the program, and could not be shared with anyone who did not have this particular software.

The software had not been developed from a user's perspective or an educational perspective, but reflected the thinking of a technology company. As the Minolta staff began to ask for changes, a big effort requiring lots of money was required from both the vendor and the Minolta staff. Huge amounts of resources were tied up with trying to improve a program that didn't work very well for the business. Minolta staff felt “boxed in”, and resolved to change the situation. The LMS was turning into a “money pit”, yet, because it was being heavily used, no one wanted to see it changed without a much better solution being in place.

The process of change started with Minolta staff drawing up a list of requirements for the vendor, who was then asked to give an estimate of the costs of making all the changes. The vendor's price turned out to be higher than many newer full-featured learning management systems available on the market. At this point the Minolta staff decided to start looking for alternatives to their learning management system.

Staff began to investigate the many alternatives in learning management systems that were available at that time. They also talked to e-learning consultants and business partners about their experiences with learning technologies. An intense period of reading, going to e-learning trade shows, and searching the Internet for information and demonstrations of e-learning systems followed.

By this time the Minolta staff had learned about the phenomenon of “vaporware”; vendors often promised features that didn't exist but were heavily advertised. Staff learned to distinguish between what was coming and what actually existed and would work if installed at that time. This caution was driven by the need to make sure that a new system would work before the plug was pulled on the old system.

At the same time, the unhappiness with the first learning management system continued to mount. Staff exhibited increasing frustration levels when told by the vendor that a particular change could not be made available “until the next release” of the product. By this time, problems with the system meant that it was now slower to use than the previous home grown system that Minolta had built itself.

The biggest frustration was that the system crashed when running reports, because the database had poorly designed architecture. As well, reports were impossible to obtain for the most up-to-date list of regions and business units, because these continually changed. As in any business, Minolta experienced organizational change on a regular basis. Because it took over 90 days to make any changes in the learning management system, most new reports were out of date before they were implemented.

The Change Management Process

The process of changing to a new LMS included defining detailed business requirements, and a realistic projection of costs for the new software for present needs and into the future. A business consultant who had an in depth knowledge of Minolta's business and its culture was able to develop a comprehensive requirements questionnaire of over 200 questions. The answers to this questionnaire informed the writing of a very detailed specifications document.

All business units within the company - including sales and marketing, service and administration - were consulted on their ideas for the future LMS. Because people were attached to what they had built in the first LMS, there was some resistance to change. Those leading the change had to proceed carefully, convincing sceptics that the new system would be better for them in doing their jobs, and would address their priorities. This involved turning those who had a high stake in the success of any new system into "ambassadors" for the change, convincing others that this was a good thing that was happening.

Process of choosing a new LMS

Because learning management systems can be major investments in time and money, the process for choosing a new LMS was thorough. As well, it was important that Minolta staff feel comfortable with any new vendor, as the implementation of any large scale system requires a close and sometimes intense working relationship between client and vendor. Relationship building is a necessary skill in managing all successful large scale IT projects, and, therefore, any prospective supplier would have to be committed to getting to know Minolta at a deep level.

The new learning management system also needed to be highly flexible. In any enterprise, constant change is a given, especially in the high-speed hypercompetitive atmosphere of the past decade or so. In addition, it was important that the new LMS be designed by educators, rather than "techies", so that it would conform to sound educational principles and practices.

It is not enough to trust vendor claims of their educational pedigree. The only way to verify how a system will work is to try it out. Minolta staff fanned out to various e-learning shows and tried out a variety of learning management systems. As the new LMS

was being reviewed, staff who tried it out then went out to different branches of the company to demonstrate its capabilities.

The LMS that Konica Minolta eventually chose was LearnFlex™, an adaptable full-featured learning management system from Operitel Corporation in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada (full disclosure: one of the authors of this chapter work for Operitel). LearnFlex™ had all the mandatory features listed above, and most of the optional ones as well. In addition, it had a few unique wrinkles of its own – for example, capabilities for multiple languages (changeable on the fly), the ability to fine tune the “contextual language” of the navigation interface to conform to local usage, the ability to change “look and feel” for various communities using the same system, support for conferences and workshops, grouping of courses into diplomas or certificates, and the ability to enter and change a variety of “business rules” that impact on the usage of the system. LearnFlex™ integrated with a wide variety of authoring tools, and supported industry standards such as AICC and SCORM.

The flexibility of the new LMS was demonstrated when Konica Corporation merged with Minolta USA in 2003 to form Konica Minolta Inc., in the middle the installation and implementation of the LearnFlex™ system. New communities were added, the corporate branding changed, business rules were adjusted and legacy data migrated without any significant issues or delay in the project.

Process of implementing the new LMS

In order to have a successful implementation, both the client (Konica Minolta) and the vendor (Operitel) needed to have strong project management procedures in place. While e-learning project management is a relatively new field, there are already “best practices” that were followed in this implementation of a major learning management system. A list of what needed to be managed for implementation included the following:

- Formation of an executive steering group to manage the entire initiative, including vision and strategy
- Formation of a project management team for day to day management
- Requirements gathering exercise, including the development of “use cases” and a 200+ items questionnaire on specific needs of each business unit
- Development of a detailed specifications document
- Development of a comprehensive project plan
- Management of budgets
- Management of technology, including the software to be implemented and the hardware on which it will be installed
- Management of the expectations of end-users
- Planning for the uploading of content into the LMS
- Development of both print and online help and documentation for the system
- Change management procedures while the implementation is underway

- Management of all personnel involved in the project
- Testing and quality assurance procedures

Konica Minolta began by organizing an internal “virtual corporation” that included the executive team sponsoring the initiative, Konica Minolta IT and training staff, as well as representatives from the vendor. This group met online on a weekly basis throughout the project. Both the client and the vendor appointed project managers, who then worked closely together. The project managers made regular reports to the team.

The project was governed by the detailed specifications document and the project plan. The team tried to set realistic goals for the completion of the project, in spite of pressures to change the system as quickly as possible. A schedule was set, but had to be adjusted as the project progressed, something quite common in any IT implementation. Because of the high stakes involved, it was important not to pull the plug on the old system until the new system was in place, and shown to be working properly.

From the vendor’s point of view, project management procedures included the appointment of a dedicated implementation team for the project, headed by an Operitel executive who has extensive technical, business, and change management experience. Konica Minolta staff members were considered part of the vendor’s implementation team, and treated as such. Continual communications and the reduction of barriers between client and vendor greatly helped in delivering a successful implementation, in spite of the fact that the client was changing its business in significant ways throughout the project.

One of the reasons that Operitel was able to deliver software that met changing requirements, is that all its software is built to be highly adaptable. Changes are a matter of reconfiguring the many properties of a feature, rather than writing new custom code. This approach to software also means that future changes can easily be implemented for Konica Minolta’s business. These changes in the LMS can be carried out by Konica Minolta staff with appropriate administrative privileges. This approach illustrates Operitel’s business philosophy of transferring 100% of the knowledge of the business use of its software to a client’s staff. Konica Minolta staff was given training in the easy-to-use administrative tools that come with the software.

All changes in the software are fully documented. When there is a need for a change that goes beyond the simple reconfiguration of the LMS, Konica Minolta staff fill out an online change request form. This goes into a central document repository, and is assigned a “ticket number” so that it can be tracked until the change is completed. Because changes often improve the usability of any software, change is seen as positive by both the vendor and the client.

Discussion

Two years after the implementation, the amount of e-learning at Konica Minolta has tripled, and the training department has changed from a cost center to a revenue generator. Courses on product use and maintenance are now sold to dealers and end users using the built-in e-commerce capabilities of the system. Competencies are being tracked, and related to sales and service performance measures. New communities and new courses and assessments are continually being added to the system by Konica Minolta staff. There is no frustration or stress in delivering online training.

Training is now in high demand, as thousands of users across the company see the value and possibilities of online training. With that comes a new vision for the future of training at Konica Minolta, and increased confidence of the staff that as they innovate their pedagogical methods, the LearnFlex system will evolve with them.

Reference:

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Morrison, Don (2003) *E-Learning Strategies: how to get implementation and delivery right first time*. Chichester, England: John Wiley.

For more information on the LearnFlex™ Learning Management Systems, contact Operitel Corporation, toll-free at 1-866-849-3630.