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Centralized or Decentralized Learning?

Effective learning organizations blend centralized and decentralized learning

The age-old battle of centralization versus decentralization has now extended to learning in organizations. When it comes to implementing a learning system, organizations often ask: which is better, centralized or decentralized learning?

While implementing a Learning Management System (LMS), organizations confront challenges like:

- What is the best method of delivering learning?
- Who determines what to learn?
- What records should be maintained?
- What are the compliance issues?
- What are the hardware and software requirements?

Besides the obvious consideration for the basic characteristics (size, diversity of products and services provided) organizations proposing to implement LMS and revitalize their development operations must consider the issues surrounding centralized and decentralized learning.

A common phenomenon

One theory states that organizations vacillate between centralized and decentralized philosophies in approximately three-year cycles. The theory at work:

A group of centralization enthusiasts, while analyzing a decentralized operation, will discover flaws in the system. The operation is labeled as fragmented and inconsistent, and employees are perceived as 'I' specialists working on their own accord regardless of organizational goals. This group finds a solution in centralization to improve consistent organization-wide reporting and data recording.

Three years later, when analyzing the centralized operation, a group of decentralization proponents perceive it to be too slow and ridden with red-tape. Hence, for speedy results and reactions the group lobbies for decentralization believing that responsibilities for actions and record keeping should be closer to the source.

This vacillation is both counter-productive and unnecessary.

Once organizations establish their goals and strategies, the issues of centralizing or decentralizing learning operations becomes magnified. Before deciding what benefits the organization most, learning managers need to look into the benefits of both of the methodologies.

How good can centralized learning get?



TenStep Supplemental Paper

Centralized learning is made up of a central learning management system with a central database to manage various functions. As a result of standardization and central reporting, this system is highly cost effective. Other advantages include:

- A reduction in infrastructure requirements and systems, and the number of administrators.
- Standardization of content, competencies and certifications.
- Simplified and accurate reporting.
- Easy alignment of employee and organizational objectives.

Advantages of decentralization

G. Morgan, an author of books on organizational learning, argues that learning is maximized in flexible, decentralized modes of operation. He insists that decentralized networks work efficiently provided they are fostered and not managed.

For decentralized learning, organizations use many LMS's, each with separate databases that deploy and manage large volumes of content that can be localized. The benefits of decentralized learning include:

- Local training departments can understand their responsibility areas better
- Local departments can create their own courses and manage costs, independent of corporate help
- Localized courses increase the ability to manage more content
- Increased control over local resources
- Localizing learning events increases the ability to add spot training

A hybrid model

TEDS, the global leader in learning management, recommends a model that captures the strengths of centralization and decentralization with cooperation from both local and corporate training functions. To reap benefits from both of these models, organizations need to address the issues of technical infrastructure of the system and execution of a plan.

Certain LMS models use four-tier architecture with centralized databases and decentralized Web servers. Such a model with sound technical infrastructure and functionality can manage reporting and record keeping centrally while delegating content for localization. Often large volumes of online content tax the server extensively. Once content is localized, it does not need to flow from a single server through restricted pipelines. Also, control of content at the local level is increased. The ability to control content locally is beneficial to global enterprises because local culture issues and languages can be accommodated.

Going global



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Many organizations have to manage human capital on a global scale. Therefore, their LMS should be able to manage multiple courses on multiple servers. It should be capable of assigning a global number to a learning event that is deliverable in multiple languages at multiple locations. In an effective LMS, while competencies are measured against global standards, courses and learning sessions are localized.

The TEDS “local content/global competency standards” model sends out content to various users worldwide in different languages through different servers. A centralized server keeps track of the records and certifications.

Hand in hand

While implementing a centralized/decentralized LMS, organizations need to manage corporate and local training functions. Upper management usually takes charge of the purchase and maintenance of the system, and the management of courses (apart from creating and maintaining records). They also assist in the process of creating and maintaining local records—a cost and resource saving initiative.

The organization’s local training groups create and maintain area-specific courses. They have control over their content and sessions. They can create their own reports, and thus better manage area specific training.

A tricky issue in this combined model is managing the cooperation between corporate and local groups. Management has the tendency to dominate or alienate local groups by excluding them while designing and implementing the new learning model. This creates a feeling of resentment that is difficult to overcome.

Local groups, on the other hand, might undermine the corporate initiative by non-compliance with the implemented model. Sometimes local groups perceive a loss of control even when they are involved in the planning and implementation of the system. Such groups then take on unauthorized management of corporate courses, worsening the situation.

The new combined model should therefore have a clearly defined mission and focus. Open communication and ‘buy-in’ from all groups are necessary for the success of this new model.

A smooth takeover

A centralized/decentralized learning model can be productive and effective with adequate infrastructure and when both corporate and local groups have similar learning goals. A right combination of both centralized and decentralized learning will reduce the inefficiencies in clearing the learning path of both single and multiple systems.