Moodle Implementation - Build or Buy?

eLearning White Paper

Introduction

As business organisations look to save costs by considering more affordable open source Learning Management Systems, Moodle invariably presents itself as a great solution option for induction or compliance led e-learning programmes due to its flexibility, lack of licence / vendor lock-in, 'customisability' and product longevity (the open source code can never be taken away, unlike proprietary software, which is licensed for a fixed period and is expensive to modify).

Having done your research you probably already know that Moodle is hugely popular with a global user community including some of the world's biggest business and not-for-profit brands. So - having made the decision to move to Moodle and open source, what's the best way to strike the best balance between maximising your ongoing value from your LMS / minimising your total cost of ownership (TCO)?

Let's consider this by looking at the generic elements of implementing any LMS - these include IT as well as learning design, user training, and other "commercial support" costs that will always be both relevant and real, regardless of the software distribution model (open source or proprietary).

Options for Managing your Moodle

The dilemma that managers often face is whether to insource (install the Moodle software and have the configuration / migration work done by their internal IT department) or outsource to an expert provider of Moodle installation services (a Moodle Partner).

On the face of it, installing, hosting and managing your Moodle behind your corporate firewall might seem an attractive option and a means of trimming your LMS costs even further. However this vision does not always materialise; a good starting point is to list out the costs involved.

Total Cost of Ownership (TCO)

IT professionals undoubtedly have the ability to download, install and maintain a Moodle LMS, but the involvement of your IT team doesn't end with installation and configuration - actually, that's just the beginning.

The danger with loading the burden of delivery plus the ongoing maintenance on to your internal IT department is the increased TCO over the lifecycle of your LMS implementation.

What begins as a low capital cost project can quickly turn into a support nightmare for the IT team, who may not be prepared to handle this within existing budget constraints - or alternatively, internal IT support costs will spiral.

Competing resource demands can mean that timescales for time-critical activities (such as migrating data from legacy systems that are due to expire) become threatened. Specific skills (e.g. PHP / Moodle database expertise to integrate with software plug ins) may need to be acquired.

Infrastructure support costs

System administrators will have another IT system to manage, and must be able to guarantee performance and availability that must often be in line with demanding corporate Service Level Agreements. All this is aside from the costs of additional infrastructure that may need to be procured and supported to provide Moodle monitoring and backup services.

Furthermore Moodle usually needs some tweaking to meet your exact needs, and this can be a frustrating and time consuming task, given that the LMS is just one part of your e-learning project. Do your colleagues in IT really have time to do this?

Wouldn't it be easier - and far quicker - to consult with a Moodle Partner that's completely familiar with the LMS?

Moodle development costs

Of perhaps greater concern is the future development and customisation of even the basic Moodle features. While Moodle forums may provide some help, can your IT department keep up with the updates and patches?

If your IT team doesn't have the necessary skills (PHP, SQL database and a good understanding of Moodle code) then additional costs will be incurred for Moodle training or hiring specialist developers.

Moodle code is well understood and familiar to highly skilled Moodle Partners, who can understand your business objectives and quickly implement changes.

Release management costs

Of course, one of the great strengths of Moodle is its extensive user community and regular schedule of releases to plug any bugs or deliver new functionality. Creating and transferring code patches to new versions is easy for a Moodle Partner to achieve on your behalf - but can take significant time and resources to achieve with your IT team. You may get stuck with the existing version and do your own upgrades internally - but you'll still need to manage the hassles of versioning, transitioning, data migration (if needed), etc.

Moodle Adoption - User Journey is Key

Once you've downloaded Moodle, the software is yours. However, user adoption (and achievement of their learning objectives) are only likely to happen by making the software easy to configure and use. At the same time, content should incorporate the services of an instructional designer to make it engaging.

It's vital that the design, the look and feel, the 'ambience' (call it what you will) of the Moodle interface is wellstructured, engaging and tailored to learning requirements if learners are to embrace the platform. Learners should be able to navigate to courses, track their progress and have the flexibility to dip in and out of a supportive learning environment as and when required.

This is where the services of a Moodle Partner can be invaluable to the learning journey. Moodle Partners can often support your content creation and delivery goals by bringing in experts that make sure your training information is clearly presented and has real meaning and purpose for your learners. Once your users understand why the information is important to them, they'll be much more likely to have a meaningful - and productive - learning experience.

Using a Moodle Partner - the business case

Any cost savings you think you'll achieve by insourcing can be quite easily lost when measuring the Impact on Business (IoB), along with RoI, learner feedback and performance and the L&D department's performance itself.

Organisations looking to support Moodle themselves need to carefully evaluate and understand whether they have the capability to assign sufficient IT resources, perform source code modifications, connect to community support or create exciting user journeys and design themes to achieve the maximum benefits that Moodle offers.

The 3 Keys to Moodle Success!

Outsourcing your Moodle project to the right Moodle Partner will provide you with the three Keys to Success that will unlock the potential of any Moodle LMS project.

Key #1 - Technology expertise

To really use open source technology requires skills and expertise which normal IT staff often don't have (PHP and Moodle knowledge), plus the ability to manage a programming team, clear understanding of the hosting and infrastructure costs, and a support team. Costs of setting up this necessary internal infrastructure and maintaining/upgrading it may be significant. Also, if you're looking to customise Moodle to a significant extent, be aware of both ongoing code development and maintenance costs before making any investment decision to manage Moodle internally.

Key #2 - Strategic development consultancy

Your online development strategy will be provided with the wings to fly by a Moodle Partner's open source development skills, and ability to dig deep into the core Moodle code and customise it. Many Moodle Partners that offer managed hosting services will have skills to customise your LMS, maintain your Moodle code in line with the latest releases and provide strategic direction for future development, including integration with other online business systems (e.g. sales CRM, product stores, marketing websites).

Key #3 - Learning design

Thirdly, and perhaps most important of all, consider the effect on your eLearning initiative. Unless your internal IT department is expert in learner interface design with a track record of designing and configuring Moodle based solutions, focusing exclusively on the technology costs to the exclusion of learning outcomes might result in a sub-standard offering to the end users. A disengaged user base will not help carry the initiative forward.

After spending so much in time, money and energy, if the initiative has not worked out well it can be a huge cost to the organisation. Not only will it take a long time to recover the users' interest in eLearning, but it might take longer to get management backing again. This is the real risk that you would have to mitigate.

Wouldn't it be simpler, and cheaper, to engage the services of a Moodle Parter at the outset?

The future of course management

Webanywhere specialises in learning technologies that enable the concepts described in this paper, and stretch the learning potential of an organisation's most important asset - its people. To discuss social learning, multi tenancy or the effective implementation of a learning management system in your organisation, contact our workplace learning team on 01535 604026, or email workplace@webanywhere.co.uk.

Webanywhere UK
Orchard House
Aire Valley Business Centre
Lawkholme Lane
Keighley
West Yorkshire BD21 3BB
Tel. 01535 604026

Webanywhere Poland
Klimczoka Business Area
ul. Klimczoka 9
40-857 Katowice
Tel. 32 6304137

Webanywhere US
210 West Rittenhouse Square
Suite 401,
Philadelphia,
PA, 19103
Tel. 866 713 0496

www.webanywhere.co.uk/workplace
workplace@webanywhere.co.uk

webanywhere
stretch beyond