Learning in the Cloud:  
10 Factors to Consider

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Executive Summary

Cloud solutions are the “new normal” as organizations opt to deploy more business systems “in the cloud.” For learning professionals, cloud-based solutions provide a wide range of benefits from cost savings to decreased delivery time, to global reach. Before selecting a cloud-based learning provider, you should understand all the benefits and be prepared to ask potential providers critical questions regarding the architecture and management of the service you are considering.
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Cloud computing and learning management

Cloud computing, in the most basic sense, is the use of services provided by a number of servers accessible over the Internet. There are a range of cloud providers large and small that deliver a wide variety of computing services from simple data storage to comprehensive applications. Without investing in technical infrastructure and personnel, organizations can enjoy various services and software applications as if they existed within their own data center.¹ This industry is growing at a rapid rate and the technology is becoming widely adopted. Gartner predicts the public cloud computing market will grow 18.5% in 2013, totaling $131 billion worldwide.²

Learning professionals continue to accept cloud technology faster than any other area of HR software due to the convenience, reduced administration and better user experience. And while learning systems are critically important to maintaining the ongoing health of a business, they are often given a lower priority than other business systems such as sales, finance, and payroll systems. As a result, learning systems are an ideal candidate for the switch to cloud technology. In addition, cloud-based learning allows leaders of learning and development functions, who may not be technologists, to present a viable option and discussion point to their IT team. If you are not using or considering a cloud-based learning system, you are missing out on one of the most valuable opportunities to deliver a comprehensive learning solution to your organization.

According to a survey conducted by Elearning! Magazine, nearly half the respondents indicated they would choose a cloud-based learning management system (LMS) for their next purchase.³

A system of engagement

Since the late 1990s, LMSs have helped organizations automate their learning programs by providing resources online. More recently, LMSs have evolved from a system of record to a tool that supports continuous learning with the learner experience at the forefront. According to Josh Bersin of Bersin by Deloitte, “Companies should focus on building a learning architecture, integrating their technologies, driving a deeper focus on content and the learning experience and driving a learning culture.”⁵ Today’s LMS needs the right learning assets and delivery options to enable users to succeed.

Cloud-based LMSs are highly interactive and are scalable for organizations large and small. Organizations with cloud-based LMSs can expect to engage more employees and provide a rich learner experience, whether their employees are in the office or on-the-go.

Choose a provider that has a history of experience with cloud-based solutions as well as a deep understanding of the learning needs you are addressing. To help you make an educated choice for your organization, we’ve provided information on the top 10 benefits of a cloud-based learning architecture.

**Top 10 benefits of cloud-based learning architecture**

1. **Cost savings**

One of the obvious benefits of licensing a cloud-based LMS for your learning needs is the elimination of upfront investments such as building out and supporting a technical infrastructure as well as the human capital costs of installation, configuration and ongoing maintenance. Most cloud providers license by seats, allowing you to pay for what you need and avoid capital expenditures.

This becomes even more critical given that learning departments are under pressure to keep costs under control. Recent research indicates L&D staffs are drastically reduced as compared to five years ago. Reduced L&D staffs can do more with less and effectively leverage their team members with the cloud resources at their disposal.

2. **Global reach**

Cloud computing companies invest heavily in architecting solutions that are robust enough to connect with users wherever they are on the planet. This gives you the ability to drive more learning to more people with lowered wait times and a better overall learning experience.

Organizations today have employees that must connect with one another all over the world. In the past, that meant your organization’s IT department had to build out the technical infrastructure to reach its people and to make certain that employees in the most remote locations also have reasonable performance—a technical challenge associated with the global reach of a business solution. Cloud computing alleviates much of this—employees simply need a computer or mobile device, a browser and a connection to the Internet and they have consistent, secure access and saved progress if their connection is lost. Connectivity today has gotten so good that employees can literally access learning while flying on commercial airlines.

3. **Rapid deployment**

Cloud learning solutions can be up and running almost immediately, without burdening your IT department. In many cases, self-service features even allow learning and development professionals to be in control of powerful features that allow them to deliver learning to hundreds of employees within minutes. Patches and updates are applied with little or no disruption to the learning experience.

With traditional IT infrastructure, it can take weeks to get servers procured, delivered and running. Considering the mission-critical business systems an IT department is likely supporting, it’s advantageous to have a cloud solution so L&D leaders get what they need without the burden on IT. A shorter timeline can sometimes be the difference between delivering something and not delivering anything at all. Today’s business climate often does not permit long timelines. New business skills and behavior changes often need to be taught on the fly at the speed of business with no time for lengthy deployments.

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*The estimated annual LMS market in 2013 is between $1.8 billion and $1.9 billion.*

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4. Application reliability
Cloud vendors’ systems are designed to provide high redundancy and availability. They provide services on a scale out of reach for most corporate IT departments. In addition, cloud vendors know their system better than a corporate IT generalist — making incident response faster. In short, the cloud enables a higher level of reliability at much lower cost. According to a recent study by Brandon Hall Group, depicted in figure 1, organizations with on-premise installed LMSs are 81% more likely to be dissatisfied with their system reliability versus organizations with cloud-based LMSs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTALLED LEARNING SOLUTIONS VS. CLOUD LEARNING SOLUTIONS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much more likely on-premise solution customers are dissatisfied vs cloud solution customers</td>
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<tr>
<td>System Reliability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feature Set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meets our current needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ease of use</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall Value</td>
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Figure 1 Client satisfaction for on-premise versus cloud-based Learning Management Systems

5. Secure environment
Most vendors who provide cloud-based solutions spend a great deal of time and effort to provide multiple layers of security, ensuring the protection of your data. Cloud vendors must maintain security standards that ensure the integrity of the most security sensitive customer’s data and content both foreign and domestic. These high standards are then applied across the board to all hosted customers.

They also are experts in their systems and can quickly identify and stop attempts to breach security. And, because cloud providers necessarily must support a wide variety of customer profiles they are naturally optimized to support a diverse range of business types and locations and specific expertise for elearning.

Trusted providers follow best practices to ensure your data is secure.

When considering a cloud-based solution it is important to make sure the provider can appropriately articulate the security of their systems which will house your data. The security of cloud-based solutions comes in many flavors and it is important to make sure that each aspect is proactively addressed by your service provider. The most trusted cloud-based service providers will address at least the following security areas:

• Application-level security ensures only authorized, authenticated users are able to access, view and report upon their own corporate data from within the LMS. This level of access control is designed into the LMS application and can often leverage existing corporate Identity Management solutions.

• Data protection ensures the security of data as it moves from the user, across the Internet to the cloud provider, and back. It also covers the safety of data within the cloud provider’s infrastructure including data backups to prevent the loss of data in the case of system failures.

• A secure, monitored infrastructure ensures that unauthorized persons are not able to break in to the network infrastructure housing the LMS and harvest data, content, or disrupt service. This can often be verified independently, reported upon and even certified by organizations such as TRUSTe.

• Finally, to be truly secure, cloud-based solution providers must assess vulnerabilities associated with their own employees that may have access to a customer’s site and data. Cloud providers must implement organizational policies and procedures to minimize the possibility of any malicious activities by their own employees.

If your LMS is in the cloud, does that mean it’s secure? The answer is yes, as long as you choose a trusted organization that follows best practices such as auditing their applications regularly, sharing results and making plans to identify security issues.

6. Enterprise integration

Cloud-based learning solutions can stand-alone or integrate with your other HR and business solutions. Cloud providers know they have to integrate with other corporate applications so they are more likely to have well-established, standards-based solutions for integration. That said, integration time and ease varies from vendor to vendor so you need to ask what types of integrations are supported and how easy they are to implement. A few examples of common integration points with a typical LMS include:

• Organizational data from an HR system drives learner account management and other LMS data.

• Users seamlessly move to and from the LMS without requiring additional authentication.

• Data captured by the LMS can be automatically exported, combined with other data, analyzed, or stored in other systems of record so you can track the success of your programs.

• Users search across assets in the LMS and sometimes federate information from other sources such as document management systems.

• The LMS integrates with talent management systems to simplify the user’s learning experience if the focus is on developing specific skills.

7. Support when you need it

Licensing a cloud-based learning solution should provide you with access to additional resources that act as an extension of your own team. Support services can extend beyond just technical and
customer support to include providing expertise to assist you with delivering the skills development and behavior changes your organization needs. Common services of a cloud-based LMS include:

- **Content installation** – A learning management system without any content is relatively useless. You will need to install and keep updated a potentially large library of content for your learning needs. It is important to understand how your content, both proprietary and licensed, is going to be managed in the LMS.

- **Customer/technical support** – Troubleshooting technical issues and providing rapid responses to user’s questions is a minimum level of support that should be provided. However, leading cloud-based solution providers are also making their support services available 24x7x365 and provide a variety of ways for users to seek help including email, phone or chat. Some providers even provide support in multiple languages.

- **Program support** – LMS features can be complex and often provide many ways to deliver learning to your organization. Simply knowing the features of the LMS is often insufficient to meaningfully deliver time sensitive and effective learning. Leading cloud service LMS providers offer Learning Consultants that focus on understanding your organization’s specific goals. Learning Consultants can then help you to define programs, success criteria and work with you on how to best utilize the LMS to deliver your programs successfully.

- **Examples of best practices** – One of the most efficient ways to deliver programs in a timely fashion is to leverage what others have done before you. A good business partner will provide you with access to resources and experience they have learned from all of their cloud-based LMS implementations including content mapping, pre-defined marketing materials, best practices and other information that will help you to deliver you programs more rapidly and successfully.

- **Learning services** – Given the unique nature of learning, you can benefit from a range of additional services. Services may or may not be fee based and may include such capabilities as program management, program and curriculum design, content mapping, training needs analysis and learning strategy blueprinting, as well as other learning based services.

Simply comparing the technical features of a cloud-based LMS is not the best way to select an LMS provider. You should be looking for a learning partner that is invested in making sure you successfully deliver new skills and behavior changes needed for your business to be profitable.

8. **Scalable for organizations of all sizes**

Cloud learning solutions are scalable and can accommodate twenty, 50,000 or even a million learners. This can be beneficial for small businesses allowing them to purchase only what they need and scale up easily without any disruptions. It can also be particularly beneficial for very large companies just beginning to develop their learning architecture and taking their first steps in to deploying a learning management solution. Likewise it permits departmental adjustments as more portions of a corporation come on board to address their own learning needs. Additionally, most cloud learning solutions allow enterprises to partition learning to their large user base, thus more easily representing business units or disparate departments.
9. Consistent performance
With a cloud-based LMS you do not have to run the risk of running out of capacity and delivering a bad experience to learners. Cloud providers predict and plan for increases in capacity. Cloud service providers can quickly scale up and down the bandwidth you require depending upon what you are trying to accomplish. Your team can concentrate on delivering the right content and learning modalities without worrying about the technical platform. This becomes critical as more and more organizations seek to leverage learning modalities such as video or audio to reach their learners with contextually relevant content.

10. Reduced burden on IT staff
The cloud-based LMS provider is responsible for the entire technical infrastructure required for your users — all you need to provide is Internet access. Your own company’s IT department only needs to be involved in assisting in the product selection process and any integration work that may be required between the cloud-based LMS and your internal business systems. This frees up your team and your IT department so they can address other priorities. Cloud learning solutions require no investments in hardware or software maintenance. And, when new innovative features are available, cloud-based LMS customers can easily get them without having to burden their IT department. Cloud-based LMS vendors can simply push them to you automatically or your organization can remain on your current version while methodically planning for the upgrade.

Should I consider a cloud solution?
Like any software solution, there are cloud implementations that are well thought-out and quite robust, and others that are not as reliable. Before you make a decision on a cloud-based LMS, review this list of questions to ask your potential providers. In addition, you can present your IT team with this technical companion piece so you make the decision that makes sense for your organization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost implications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Though cloud-based solutions can be economical, it is important to make certain there are as few surprising hidden costs as possible. Below are questions that will help you to assess some of the potential hidden costs with a cloud-based LMS provider:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you able to scale and add additional users within your current contract?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is loading, hosting and maintaining content included or an extra cost? If so, what is the pricing model?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there a cost for upgrades to newer product versions?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there a cost for customer support or any form of troubleshooting?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there a cost for technical advice on integrating the LMS with other enterprise systems?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is there a cost to migrate historical data into the cloud-based LMS?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What additional learning services are available for free or for fee to assist you with your broader goal of delivering meaningful learning to your organization?</td>
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## Reliability and security

While cloud-based LMS providers endeavor to produce reliable and secure solutions it is worthwhile to seek out as much validation as possible. Below are questions that will help you assess the integrity of the solution you are considering:

- Can the cloud-based LMS provider supply you with an independent audit report that details results and responses for periodic penetration tests?
- Can the cloud-based LMS provider supply you with an independent attestation report validating the reliability of the solution?
- Is the LMS certified by a recognized, independent authority such as TRUSTe?
- Can the cloud-based LMS provider share their internal operational procedures and guidelines. This helps minimize the possibility of their own employees from maliciously impacting the LMS.
- What are the provider’s annual uptime metrics and how are they measured? What is the average length of an outage? What is actual reported uptime vs their Service Level Agreement (SLA)?
- Is there a technical overview of the technology and security for your IT department to review?

## Performance, scale and reach

Be certain your cloud LMS provider’s solution has a proven track record that will meet the performance, scale and reach criteria you will need not only for your business today but as you anticipate growing and expanding.

- How many countries are served by the LMS?
- How many LMS products does the LMS provider support with their R&D budget?
- Can the vendor provide usage and completion metrics?
- How many customers does the LMS vendor service with their LMS?
- How large are the largest customers supported by the LMS and do they compare with your projected audience size?

## Deployment and integration

It will be important to understand both your own deployment timeframe and integration requirements as well as the experience of the vendors and support from each of the vendors you are considering.

- What is involved with implementing the vendor’s solution?
- How much lead time is required to implement the solution?
- What assistance is provided for implementation? And is there any charge for any of this assistance?
- What automation/integration vendors, tools or specifications are supported?
- When new product versions are released, will you receive lead time to assess how they may impact your learning programs?
- What content integration specifications are supported? AICC, SCORM 1.2, SCORM 2004, Tin Can, other?
How Skillsoft can help

As a learning company first and foremost, Skillsoft has built a robust feature set over 10 years that includes the most important capabilities for delivering learning. Skillsoft has data on tens of millions of meaningful content interactions and course completions, helping learners develop new critical business skills, answer questions, or solve problems when they need to.

Skillsoft has been offering “cloud-based” learning before the term was even invented. We understand the challenge of finding a learning management and content solution that integrates easily with your infrastructure and is flexible for your learners. Skillsoft’s LMS, Skillport, is a modern, global cloud-based LMS that provides an unparalleled learning experience by connecting formal, informal and collaborative learning. Our innovative platform quickly delivers highly targeted learning—when and where people want to learn. Skillsoft can deliver Skillport, and all of our solutions, combined with content, service and experience to help your organization build talent and deliver powerful business outcomes. To give learners an engaging experience, our latest release, Skillport 8, is designed around the key pillars of a rich learner experience, mobile accessibility, community and learning administration.

To support our customers’ success, Skillsoft offers world-class services — not just technical support. At no additional cost, we offer organizations core services including learning consulting, upgrade planning, impact analysis and more. If you need technical assistance, our team is available 24x7x365 via phone, email, or chat to help you troubleshoot any difficulties.

The Skillport architecture offers organizations the flexibility to grow with the system and upgrade when they are ready.

### Key features and flexibility

LMS solutions comes with literally hundreds of features. It will be critical for you to prioritize features that you see as critical to the success of your LMS implementation.

- What features of the LMS are specifically targeted to the learning needs of your users?
- What features does the LMS provider believe are unique to their solution?
- Describe how learners will find content within the LMS?
- Is the vendor able to isolate individual customers and not force them to upgrade?
- What learning modalities are supported? For example:
  - Courseware
  - Digital Books
  - Videos
  - Instructor-Led Training (ILT) – Both in house and externally run
  - Virtual Instructor-Led Training (ILT)
  - Game-based learning or simulations
  - TestPreps and assessments
  - Other
Next steps

- As you consider your LMS options, make sure you carefully consider the benefits of a cloud-based LMS.

- Review the list of questions to ask a cloud-based learning vendor and customize the list based on your own unique requirements.

We hope that you will consider Skillsoft’s Skillport cloud-based LMS along with our world-class content and services. To learn more about Skillport, share the technical companion piece with IT, contact your local Skillsoft representative or use the contact information provided below.

For more information or to learn more, call 866-757-3177 or visit www.skillsoft.com