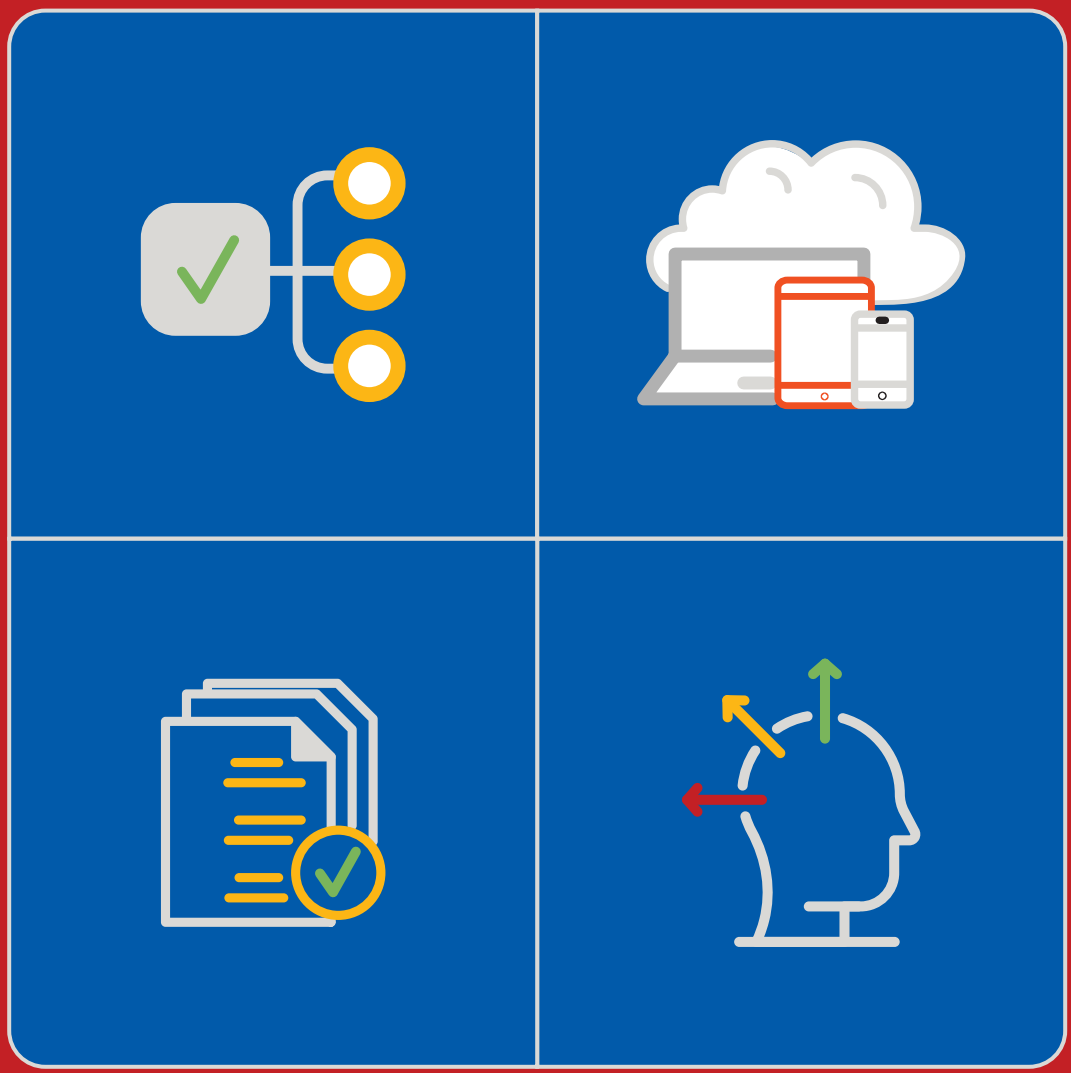
td at work
TIPS, TOOLS & INTELLIGENCE FOR DEVELOPING TALENT

DECEMBER 2021
ISSUE 2112

A Tech Guide to Learning Ecosystems

Becky Willis



atd
TECHNOLOGY APPLICATION

technology application
VOL. 38 • ISSUE 2112 • DECEMBER 2021

A TECH GUIDE TO LEARNING ECOSYSTEMS

Why Now....2
Framework....2
Selection Process....5
Implementing a Digital Learning Strategy....6
Conclusion....12
References....13

Tools & Resources

Learning Ecosystem Strengths and Weaknesses Chart....14
Learning Ecosystem Selection Questionnaire....15
Learning Platform Evaluation Checklist....16

Need a trainer's lifeline? Visit td.org/TDatWork.

Printed in the United States of America.

For help or inquiries about your subscription, please contact Customer Care at 800.628.2783/703.683.8100 (international).

TD at Work (ISSN 2373-5570, Electronic ISSN 2373-5589, ISBN 978-1-95394-6-010, Electronic eISBN 978-1-95394-6-027) is published monthly by the Association for Talent Development, 1640 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. *TD at Work* is available for subscription in print or digitally. ATD national members receive a digital subscription to *TD at Work,* plus archive access, as part of their membership dues. The subscription rate for the Monthly All-Access (12 print and digital issues, plus archive access) is $119 (ATD national members) and $159 (nonmembers). The monthly digital subscription rate for 12 issues is $99 (nonmembers). Periodicals postage paid at Alexandria, Virginia, and additional entries. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *TD at Work*, 1640 King Street Alexandria, VA 22314. Claims for replacement of subscription issues not received must be made within three months of the issue date. Copyright © December 2021 *TD at Work* and ATD. All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or information storage and retrieval systems—without the express written permission of the publisher. For permission requests, please go to copyright.com, or contact Copyright Clearance Center (CCC), 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923 (telephone: 978.750.8500, fax: 978.646.8600). ATD Press grants permission for the material on pages 14–16 to be reproduced for personal use.

AUTHOR

Becky Willis
Becky Willis is a founder and the chief learning officer at Tractus Learning. She helps guide Tractus customers to implement successful digital learning. She is also the founder of WillLearn Consulting, where she helps companies plan, design, and develop high-performance digital learning ecosystems. Previously, she was the vice president of engagement at EdCast and led learning innovation at Hewlett Packard Enterprise and Hewlett Packard.

Content Manager, Technology Application
Alexandria Clapp

Editor, TD at Work
Patty Gaul

Managing Editor
Joy Metcalf

Senior Graphic Designer
Shirley E.M. Raybuck

Retaining and upskilling talent and delivering internal mobility have become all the more important for organizations. And many companies have started adding components to their learning management system to create an ecosystem that provides the tools to develop—and thus keep—employees.

Learning ecosystems bring people together with technology, content, and data for continuous employee learning and growth. They are especially important during times when innovation and creativity are needed. Indeed, the benefits of a learning ecosystem have become clear: A better user experience drives usage, engagement, and collaboration and, thus, more skills and retention.

But the technology for learning ecosystems will challenge many talent development professionals: LMS, LCMS, TMS, LXP, DLP, AR/VR, BI, and more. We need a translator. In *Star*

COPYRIGHT © ATD

Trek, a universal translator enabled the Starfleet crew to hear English when other beings spoke an alien language. In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a Babel fish enabled listeners to hear English in their ear no matter the language being spoken. However, we do not have such tools to make sense of the alphabet soup of technology for learning ecosystems and why learning ecosystems are so valuable. So, where do we begin?

In this issue of *TD at Work*, I will serve as that translator by sharing:

- Why you need to consider a learning ecosystem today
- The four main components of learning ecosystems
- Tips for selecting and evaluating system components
- Advice on implementing a digital learning strategy

Why Now

For nearly the past decade, new technology has been developed that expands our capabilities as L&D professionals. We have more agile, focused solutions to provide a better learning environment and amazing user experiences. Current technology enables us to respond quickly to market changes, providing a competitive advantage. We can provide self-directed, blended experiences and make learning easy, mobile, and open. We can partner with the business, develop employees, create a learning culture, and obtain business impact data.

But the technology tools we have at our fingertips challenge us to learn new strategies and transform to a digital ecosystem. The explosion of digital transformation sets high expectations for simple user interfaces and great user experiences. Who today does not have a mobile device that is easy to use and available on demand? Because of that, we need to adapt learning to take advantage of technology.

Framework

Much has been written about different technological pieces and parts that are possible in a learning ecosystem. The reality: There is a plethora of choices, and the ones you select depend on your needs. As you strive to make decisions, you will encounter marketing hype, crossover categories, and mixed messages.

A learning ecosystem has four areas: management, platform, content, and point solution. They can work independently or be integrated. A few choices even move across two or more areas. That breakdown gives you a high-level perspective of the options you can evaluate by segregating them by strategy and capabilities.

Be aware that the ecosystem components are cloud-based, so integration and security are important. Adding digital options to your learning ecosystem will affect your company tech stack, which then involves

Figure 1. A Learning Ecosystem Framework

Management

- Learning management system
- Learning content management system
- Training management system

Platform

- Learning experience platform
- Digital learning platform
- Collaboration
- Performance
- Adaptive

Content

- Aggregator
- Library
- Content portal

Point Solution

- Digital adoption platform
- Modality
- Knowledge base
- Video

COPYRIGHT © ATD

IT and the budget. Let's break down considerations and criteria based on those four areas.

Management

The management components of a learning ecosystem enable you to manage learning and training, typically from the back-end or administrative side. They include LMSs, learning content management systems, and training management systems.

LMSs are the most widely used and known and focus on managing formal learning. While there are more than 700 LMS vendors, the market primarily comprises a few large, well-known vendors. Niche players specialize in vertical industries such as healthcare, manufacturing, or legal. A few newer LMS vendors can manage digital learning, but most work best managing compliance and event-based training.

Learning content management systems are a niche solution and combine the LMS with structured content creation tools and a database that simplifies managing content.

Training management systems often work with an LMS to better manage events. They are great for companies with considerable instructor-led and virtual instructor-led training. A typical TMS will manage both faster and more cost effectively, using advanced tools and a better user interface.

Platform

Learning ecosystem platforms enable easy discovery, collaboration, management, and measurement of learning that is geared to a blend of digital, synchronous, internal, and external content. Digital learning systems are built for today's learners, rather than learning management. That makes them more agile, responsive, and experiential.

Platforms are a mixed area that can run the gamut from an entry point to the learning offerings—that is, a full front door to learning—to niche areas. In general, they are digital in design and experience. That design enables a better user experience, easy curation, and self-directed learning capability. At the center of a great user experience are the principles learned from mobile use, web development, and design thinking. The result is a learner-centric digital system.

The wide variety of digital learning systems varies from the latest learning experience platforms (LXPs) to other digital learning platforms (DLPs). While LMSs manage learning, LXPs give learners control and add in collaborative and social learning to the formal learning for which LMSs are known. From the vendor point of view, there are several leaders in the LXP category and a host of smaller players. Recent additions also include early versions of LXPs from LinkedIn Learning and Microsoft.

The growth of LXPs in the past five years has been remarkable. Hundreds of large enterprises have demonstrated LXP return on investment by developing a learning culture, better internal mobility, personalization, skill tracking, and collaborative experiences. LXPs provide a modern user experience that drives usage with self-directed learning, curation, easy management, and excellent analytics.

Some DLPs offer both an LMS and an LXP integrated. Although that can be an advantage, it is hard to create both capabilities in one full product. Often either the LMS is on the light side—that is, it doesn't include all the features of a robust LMS—or the LXP is only similar to an LXP user interface. In the same vein, it is worth noting that some LMS vendors are attempting to or saying they play in the LXP space. That is not always successful, but it is a step forward. Carefully investigate the features you most need, and be wary of marketing hype.

Other players in the platform space include collaborative platforms, adaptive learning platforms, and what I call "market-needs platforms"—those that address vertical markets.

Collaborative platform players provide solid, simple platforms that can be best used in specific learning programs that require cohorts or group work. Good examples of use cases are leadership development or sales enablement programs. These platforms are a mix of massive open online courses (or MOOCs), technology, and a more modern user interface and tools for simplified development. When exploring them, look for how well they integrate with other systems, including Microsoft Teams.

Adaptive platforms and market-need platforms fill specific or vertical market needs. Some microlearning platforms serve retail markets with solutions designed for easy, mobile learning. One has also recently added

COPYRIGHT © ATD