

Box 5.8 Caveat Emptor: Evaluating a Management System

If you decide you need a CMS, LMS, or a system that does it all regardless of what you call it, review several different options to find the right one for you. There are solutions at different price points, including some that are free, but determine if the functionality you're after matches what the system can provide. Following are some questions you can use to evaluate a system you're interested in. I recommend you get a full, synchronous, web-based tour of the product by an expert. Also ask for references from current users. You may also be able to obtain a free trial copy or sign up for an account on a demo site for a limited amount of time. No matter what you pay up front, you're going to expend significant resources—time, people, and money—over the life of your program, and changing platforms can be tedious and expensive, so make sure you test it out before you commit.

How will you manage data about course content?

- What operating systems and browsers does it support?
- How do you plan to use the system? For each, consider what technologies or media are supported and how easy they are to use.
 - Present text and images
 - Demonstrate processes and sequences through multimedia
 - Host asynchronous communications
 - Host synchronous communications
 - Monitor student learning
- How easy is it to add, edit, or delete content?
- How does the system track user progress through the content?

How will you manage user information?

- Can you assign different roles (e.g., participant, facilitator, developer, administrator)?
- How many participants can be supported?
- How is user participation tracked and reported? To administrators? Facilitators? Participants?
- How easy is it to import and export data? What reports are included? Can reports be customized?
- How easy is it to modify data? For administrators? Participants?
- What security measures are employed to safeguard data?

Standards

- Does it meet technical specifications like SCORM or SIF? Find out what version it is, and have the vendor demonstrate exactly how it meets these specifications. Even though a system may support SCORM-compliant content, you may not be able to create SCORM-compliant content with the system.
- Does it need to interface with other existing data systems?
- Does it need to support reusable learning objects?

Pricing

- What is the pricing structure? How many users does it support?
- How much data storage is included?
- How much data transfer is included?
- What kind of technical support and training is included?