



# MANAGING LEARNING in More Than One Way

By Bill Perry

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**Oregon State government flies with its own wings, instituting a streamlined and adaptable learning management system.**



Oregonians have an independent streak. It's been that way since pioneers voted to make the state part of the union more than 150 years ago. Even the state's motto, "She flies with her own wings," gives outsiders a hint that Oregonians like to do things their way. It comes as no surprise, then, to learn that when Oregon's government put in place an enterprisewide learning management system nearly three years ago, each of its 100 agencies wanted to run things independently.

That may sound untenable. But Theme Grenz, iLearnOregon's program manager, and his colleagues in Oregon's Department of Administrative Services, Human Resource Services Division (HRSD) have given each of the state's agencies a fair degree of autonomy to operate its own LMS. His success stems from the fact that he's passionate about the technology, but even-tempered and pragmatic enough to see complete control isn't always worth pushing for.



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“We have approximately 82 agencies across the state that are using the LMS, which we call iLearnOregon, for various things such as course registration, accessing e-learning, or tapping into performance management tools,” says Grenz. “Each agency is using the LMS to drive its respective mission. We have approximately 100 domains that reside under our core, State of Oregon domain. So in essence, we can have 100 separate companies all integrated into the system within the database, and executing differently.”

The iLearnOregon platform is a learning management system made by Meridian Knowledge Solutions. According to Grenz, the system integrates general learning management functions (for example, course catalogs, class registrations, enrollments, transcripts, and administration tools) with collaboration software and performance management features such as employee development plans and skill assessments. As of last year, iLearnOregon had more than 55,000 users, plus thousands of people not directly employed by the state, such as fire district personnel, city and county employees, and the general public.

Grenz says that the state’s vision for iLearnOregon is twofold. First, government managers look to the LMS to reduce the cost of learning and development while providing just-in-time training and certifications for the workforce and its private-sector partners. Second, Oregon hopes to change the way it builds its workforce by using the LMS to provide workers with individual development plans that will chart their skills and map what they need to learn to tackle more complex roles.

### **An LMS for one and all**

The nature of how Oregon’s state workforce uses its LMS has demanded that Grenz be equal parts technician and politician. Among other things, Grenz’s background includes learning and performance initiatives, including helping organizations leverage and integrate learning technologies into its strategic

planning. iLearnOregon is his third learning technologies implementation; in 2001, he implemented both an LMS and a virtual classroom platform.

Grenz’s passion for the nuances of implementing learning technologies has served Oregon well. To enable Oregon’s many state agencies to have their own LMS, Grenz and his colleagues have exploited the architecture on which iLearnOregon is built. For example, one level below the system’s base architecture rests two domains. One domain serves the general public, such as business partners, who can access learning and track certifications. And the other domain serves Oregon’s government workforce. Below the State of Oregon’s LMS architecture is yet another layer packed with “sub-domains,” as Grenz calls them, for each state agency that wants to deliver, manage and track training in support of its specific mission.

Grenz and his co-workers in HRSD consider these sub-domains as separate learning management systems. “We’ve capitalized on the flexibility of the system’s architecture in a way that allows our state agencies to think of themselves as running a unique LMS,” remarks Grenz. “For example, the Department of Corrections doesn’t have to tell its workers to log onto the HRSD for training; they just point people to Corrections’ LMS.”

Grenz says he’s “all for a centralized LMS, but currently, there’s no central body within Oregon government whose mission is providing training services; I think it goes back to the decentralized way our state agencies are structured.”

According to Grenz, the Oregon Department of Administrative Services (DAS), which HRSD is a part of, implements the policy and financial decisions made by the governor and legislature, but the department doesn’t directly have control over what, for instance, the Department of Corrections does within its LMS domain.

### **Exerting indirect influence**

Instead, Grenz and DAS have learned

that spurring iLearnOregon’s adoption has had as much to do with sharing best practices and being consultative as implementing the right technology.

“My program team provides documentation and project materials and especially advice to help each agency that’s interested in implementing iLearnOregon successfully,” notes Grenz. “Because of the way we’ve set up the system’s domains we can give each agency a consistent process and, if they so desire, an easy way to share content with one another.”

In spite of the perception that Grenz and his colleagues take a hands-off approach, the DAS iLearnOregon administrator can see all 6,300 courses (approximately 700 of which are e-learning classes) that reside in the system. And if the administrator spots, say, a similar customer service class used by two agencies, the program team will alert the respective agencies to the savings that can come from combining the elements of both classes into one.

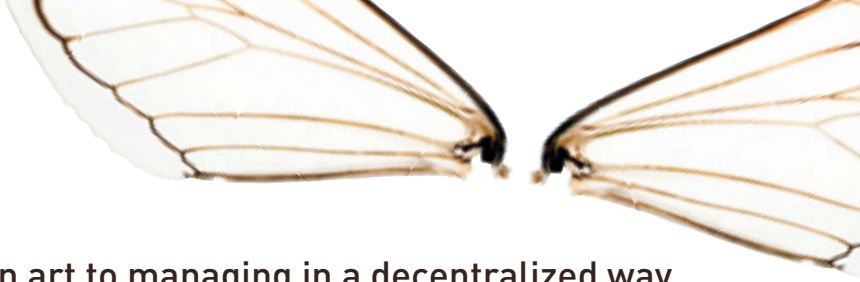
“It’s a way for us to exert indirect influence,” added Grenz. “From an organizational standpoint, each agency feels it owns its LMS. But we propose changes and encourage best practices.”

In keeping with his diplomatic style, Grenz reiterates that as much as he thinks there are benefits to a centralized model (that is, a central LMS portal for all agencies to tap into) he is far more interested in selling the benefits of online training and professional skills development to each agency’s leadership.

### **Reducing training’s carbon footprint**

By a variety of measures, Grenz’s work has paid off. For instance, this year alone, Grenz and his team will tally \$74,000 in savings over the last three years from turning a mandatory domestic violence course, required of more than 4,100 agency managers and HR staff, into an LMS-delivered e-learning course.

“iLearnOregon has streamlined our office procedures,” says Randy



Simpson, Oregon Office of State Fire Marshal. “We’ll be developing an online test for fireworks display operators, which will increase efficiency and save money for our office and the industries we regulate.”

The iLearnOregon team has also provided strategic direction for each agency wanting to make use of the system’s functionality. Grenz and his colleagues provide a variety of services to help agencies make the most of their piece of iLearnOregon, such as explaining how to set up skill-based competencies within the LMS and putting in place measurement strategies. With consulting from the iLearnOregon team, the Department of Corrections re-engineered its professional development around the iLearnOregon system, using curriculum-based and skill-based training for prison staff as well as tracking certifications.

“The state of Oregon, as with most other states, is facing unprecedented budget shortfalls. Training is typically one of the first things to be reduced or cut totally,” states Diana Foster, HRSD administrator. “iLearnOregon offers a different medium to deliver training to the desktop, so agencies can fulfill their training needs, yet not incur additional costs for instructors, materials, employee travel and per diem.”

### Training beyond the halls of government

iLearnOregon also benefits private-sector partners. For instance, the state fire marshal uses iLearnOregon to deliver training to firefighters in remote locations of Oregon, and track certifications. Firefighters have access via the LMS to the training needed for, say, a fireworks certification as well as a record of the certification once they’ve earned it. The system even generates emails to remind firefighters about the need to refresh their training.

Grenz says the state eventually hopes to have 100,000 users in the system. Getting there is a matter of trumpeting the benefits of the system, highlighting the successes each agency is having and

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enlisting the support of agency managers to bring additional sites online.

In spite of its dozens of sub-domains, the Oregon Department of Administrative Services (DAS) has done a masterful job inculcating best practices from agency to agency.

“We’ve impressed upon each agency the importance of naming all training content in a uniform way,” notes Grenz. “For example, any training developed by DAS would carry the acronym DAS as a prefix to the filename of the content residing in that domain. Everything written after that prefix is left to each agency to decide for its users.”

### Taking advantage of LMS architecture

DAS has also used iLearnOregon’s architecture to help agency officials keep their training organized in other ways. Since so many state agencies are pushing training content out to private-sector partners, DAS looked at many of the agencies’ missions and constructed groupings within the LMS that mirrored how government workers were carrying out their duties. Since fire license safety training is designed for a select group of external users only, DAS recommended that the state fire marshal’s office create a grouping within the LMS to cater to these people.

“If you understand how to take advantage of the architecture of an LMS, you can carve out groups very easily, instead of just mapping everything to an internal org chart that doesn’t always make sense for training purposes,” says Grenz.

Grenz notes that creating different groups enables agencies to easily select a set of learners for only a specific piece of content. The Department of Corrections, for instance, delivers its training to employees based on what role they have within DOC, not their job title necessarily.

Behind the scenes and working alongside Grenz at DAS is a team. One person has project management experience, and she creates all the documentation for iLearnOregon. She also serves as the team’s e-learning specialist, helping various agencies turn their classroom training into online courses. Another individual serves as the first point of contact on all things related to the LMS technology, and this person is a liaison to the agency LMS domain administrators. Grenz also works with a database administrator who manages the system’s back-office functions.

In one of the few standards foisted upon the agencies, Grenz says each must have an LMS domain administrator. But, beyond that, each agency’s managers make the call on what other types of training professionals (for example, a reports manager or talent manager) they want on staff.

There’s an art to managing in a decentralized way, to giving people the freedom to create their programs without a lot of oversight. DAS and Grenz have perfected that approach. But he’s quick to say that iLearnOregon’s underlying technology makes it possible to manage from afar.

“We can’t force any of the agency administrators we’re working with to make a change; they have their own way of doing things,” adds Grenz. “But they do see our expertise, and because of that we can make an impact with our recommendations and counsel.”

Grenz’s attitude allows each agency to learn with its own LMS, in typical Oregonian fashion.

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