



Effective teamwork

Giving teams time to cohere has been fundamental to the successful implementation of an online learning management system, says Linda Chapman

TO ENSURE that the NHS continues to provide high-quality care, it is undergoing radical changes, many of them involving information technology (IT).

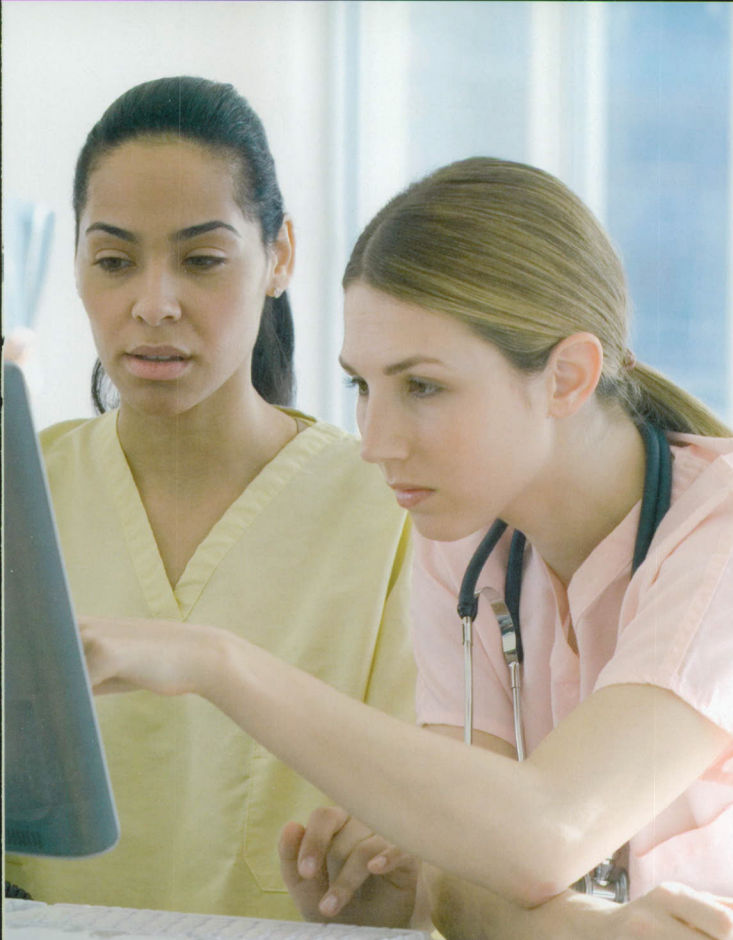
In response to these changes, the education centre at the Royal United Hospital (RUH), Bath, has introduced a new, internet-based

learning management system (LMS), which provides employees and employers with ways of booking training programmes and recording training outcomes, as well as opportunities to undertake e-learning programmes.

The features of the LMS are summarised in Box 1.

In implementing the LMS, many challenges had to be overcome. Effective teamwork and communication throughout the RUH were essential to achieve the objectives of the trust, and to meet the requirements of staff and managers.

In this article, theories of group collaboration are examined to help



Box 1. Learning management system features

- ▶ Staff members can access at any time their training records and find out whether training programmes are available
- ▶ All training records and programmes, irrespective of mode of delivery, can be recorded centrally
- ▶ A range of e-learning programmes, for example on fire safety awareness, infection control, conflict resolution and information governance, is supported, along with interactive activities and assessments
- ▶ Links to externally hosted websites and to relevant information such as recommended reading lists for taught courses are provided
- ▶ Communication between trainers and trainees is allowed, so that potential students can request information about training programmes and trainers can respond to their requests

describe the teamwork required for the LMS to be launched and implemented successfully.

Principles of the LMS

Before the LMS was implemented, the RUH faced two major strategic and economic challenges: the provision of training programmes for staff and the collation of accurate records of these training programmes.

Like many NHS trusts, the RUH had found enabling large numbers of employees to continue their professional development while maintaining adequate staffing levels on wards increasingly difficult.

Trainers, many of whom are also nurses, therapists or specialists, often cannot be released regularly from their other duties to deliver taught sessions. Similarly, groups of staff often cannot leave their clinical commitments to attend them.

The trust's solution to this problem was to offer staff flexibility through e-learning and a self-service mechanism for booking courses provided through the LMS.

The self-service element of the system enables staff to log on to computers, either at home or at work, and to view, choose and book training programmes that are appropriate to their roles.

The benefits of the LMS to both staff and the trust are summarised in Box 2.

The successful launch of the LMS required effective teamwork and communication between RUH staff.

Changes in the organisation of healthcare services are notoriously difficult to achieve; as Shacklady-Smith (2006) estimates, only one third of them are ever fully realised. It was deemed crucial therefore that the trust considered the appropriate change management approach to ensure successful implementation, particularly because some staff members were not familiar with electronic media.

According to Kotter and Cohen (2002), the two most essential elements to successful change are building teams to carry out and guide specific change projects, and enabling communication between these and other teams.

Implementation team

An implementation team was created. It comprised 15 staff members from inside and outside the trust, and from areas including training, management, IT, food hygiene, human resources, library services, course administration and nursing.

These team members had a range of qualities and abilities, including leadership, and organisational, training, problem solving and IT skills, and all had an interest in staff education. They met monthly at first to give them time to build a solid team.

Team development

Tuckman (1965) describes three stages of team development: 'forming', 'storming' and 'norming'.

According to Tuckman, forming is the time when each team member finds his or her place in relation to the others. During this stage, the LMS team leader ensured that all the team members got to know each other and understood the purpose of the meetings. Objectives were set to clarify the task ahead.

Over time, team members became more comfortable and relaxed with each other, and the atmosphere at the meetings developed to allow fair discussion and participation.

As team members began to suggest ideas and solutions, the storming period had been reached.

The team had become cohesive and members began to establish

particular roles within it, generally depending on their areas of expertise rather than their grades or positions.

As team members discussed how the LMS could work, and identified actual and potential problems with its implementation across the trust, the norming stage was beginning.

Although team members sometimes disagreed with each other about how the system should be implemented, consensus was reached after debate and negotiation, and action was planned.

Throughout the change process, team members were reminded frequently by the leader to keep focused, and the team's aim was always to meet the needs of the service and trust staff.

Team maintenance

Adair (1986), an expert in the field of teamwork, in noting that all teams have a human dimension, developed a 'needs of group life' model to identify the overlapping relationships between teams, the tasks they perform, and their members' needs.

Adair also suggests that the term 'group' should be used to describe an embryonic team, and advocates

'group maintenance' as well as attendance to the needs of individual group or team members.

At the RUH, team maintenance was achieved through monthly meetings, regular emails between members and the creation of several work streams on which different team members could focus. One of these work streams involved evaluating the project, for example, while another involved an analysis of staff training needs.

At the monthly meetings, team members offered feedback on the problems they had encountered so that the whole team could be involved in solving them and in deciding on future actions.

Personal fulfilment

Adair also highlights that each group member needs personal fulfilment. These individual needs can take any form, and are part of what motivates members to become part of teams and contribute to group tasks.

To address personal needs, the leader, the other team members and their managers all provided individual support, including simply thanking members for their contribution. This ensured that members did not think that they had to implement the LMS on their own.

Although a variety of problems arose from among the different workplaces in the trust, the knowledge and skills of team members were sufficiently diverse that solutions to them were always found.

After a year, the LMS system was launched at the RUH and the implementation team's contribution to the project was recognised by the chief executive, who awarded it the accolade of 'team of the month'.

Positive feedback such as this is vital, and has increased the team's motivation to continue to work on the project as it evolves.

Box 2. The benefits of the learning management system

- ▶ The manual process and duplication involved in reporting activities associated with staff training and development, for example when updating attendance records, have been removed
- ▶ Staff can view the online course directory, apply and book at any time, and receive notification of their placement on waiting lists
- ▶ Staff can view their learning achievements and recommended schedules according to their roles. These indicate learning progress through modules and learning achievements against mandatory training requirements
- ▶ Trainers and trainees can access information about training opportunities including times and venues, learning outcomes, teaching strategies and how training relates to the *NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework*
- ▶ Verification of completed training can be printed and used for staff appraisal and professional portfolios
- ▶ Staff can use online tests and quizzes to assess their knowledge before and after completing courses
- ▶ Managers can monitor the educational achievements of staff
- ▶ Evidence of training for the Healthcare Commission and NHS Litigation Authority can be provided

Staff consultation

Establishing an effective team was an integral part of the change process. Many front line clinical staff members found implementation of the LMS difficult because they could not always spend time away from their clinical practices to attend the necessary meetings.

To ensure that these clinicians were consulted throughout the process, and that their opinions were taken into account, networking between implementation team members and members of their other teams was essential.

Shortly before the launch of the LMS, implementation team members visited staff in their practice areas or during trust training events, or contacted them through the intranet, to discuss the system.

In addition, an LMS co-ordinator was appointed to visit wards and departments and help staff to engage with the new system.

Lack of computer skills

Some staff members, including nurses, were apprehensive about using the system because they could not access workplace computers or could not operate the software. Some, for example, did not know how to access the internet or to use email software.

Steps have been taken to improve staff IT skills, and members of the implementation team are working with IT department staff to develop and provide regular basic computer literacy courses.

Access to the LMS has been permitted from staff members' homes, more computers are being introduced throughout the trust and staff can use the computers in the trust's library at any time.

Meanwhile, a link has been put on the RUH intranet home page to provides users of all on-site computers with direct access to the LMS.

Meeting quality standards

Trainers recognised the benefits of the LMS such as its flexibility but were at first concerned that its e-learning packages would fail to meet the needs of the trust.

To address this problem, local guidelines were developed to help trainers evaluate the relevance of the content and suitability of e-learning packages for RUH staff.

By taking part in additional training programmes, implementation team members have become 'super users', and can coach trainers to become administrators of their own online courses, and to communicate directly with students and potential students.

Further developments

Although the LMS has been formally launched, its development is ongoing and more functions, including online classes and meetings, may be added.

Team members' time is limited by their other commitments, however, inhibiting the speed at which the system can be refined.

The team is continuing to work together to sustain the changes and improve the LMS, and ultimately improve the quality and standards of care for patients.

The lessons learned so far are summarised in Box 3.

Conclusion

The LMS project had two beneficial outcomes.

First, the LMS itself, although at an early phase of implementation, is proving to be highly useful in collating records of staff training. It also supports e-learning as an alternative way of providing flexible and accessible learning.

Second, the teamwork required to develop the LMS was exemplary. Often, groups of people are put

Box 3. Lessons learned

- ▶ The success of change processes depends on group maintenance and on giving groups time to develop into teams
- ▶ Team members must be open in their thoughts and, when appropriate, critical during change processes
- ▶ Teams must not ignore but address problems and issues that members find challenging
- ▶ Teams must remain focused on the aims of change processes, and their benefits to staff and organisations
- ▶ Positive feedback during change processes is essential if the motivation of team members is to be maintained

together and called teams, and are then expected to be effective and achieve success immediately.

The successful implementation of the LMS required effective, multi-professional team collaboration, and enough time for the group to work through the stages of project development.

These elements allowed each group member to become a well-performing team member **nm**

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