



LEARNING SYSTEM ADMINISTRATOR GUIDE

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I've had the experience (I think some of you will be in the same boat) of having to be my own Learning System administrator while running training at a company. It's not ideal, and honestly, you would rather have a dedicated person, but budgets are budgets. On the other hand, I've been fortunate to have hired folks for the role and even trained others who were new to the space, in another role at the business, and now have this opportunity to become a Learning System administrator.

As a result, I'm here to provide insight and guidance into finding the right candidate. Experience is nice, but let's be honest here, it is not always easily found in this online learning world.

And, as with anything else, just because a person was an administrator at a previous place doesn't mean they were a good one; therefore, never base your decision solely on that factor.

You want to find and hire the best candidate to be your Learning System Administrator.

If you have an LMS, LXP, Learning Platform, Talent Development System, or another type of learning system, and regardless of the size of your organization, having a full-time administrator is strongly recommended. Suppose you can't, then buckle up for a wild ride. Can you go solo, i.e., run training/L&D/HR, HRIS, Marketing, etc., and be the Learning System administrator? Sure, anything is doable. The question is whether you would want to? For me, if you have a budget line item to hire this vital resource, do it.

Number of Administrator(s) to number of active users Ratio

If you work at a large company or have the flexibility to hire multiple administrators, then consider this option. I had a complex learning system and worked with one administrator, managing several thousand employees, as well as

a B2B channel. Once the initial legwork is done, if you create a process that is followed, you can pull it off. That said, if you have 10,000 employees or more, and again, have budget line items for two or more administrators, then go for it. But, for me, I see the number of administrators for internal/external or both as the following (based on user base size)

- 1 to 5,000 internal employees = One administrator. If you are extremely concerned, then one will not be enough; go for two. Anything above that isn't needed with today's systems (as a whole)
- 5,0001 to 10,000 employees – One to two administrators. Can you do it with one? Yes. But if you plan to have this person also build courses, then it's best to hire two. Again, this depends on the number of courses factor. I once worked at a place that, besides being corporate, had 46 locations/agencies, and we also provided external training. I had one administrator. It wasn't a problem, but then again, I had courses built externally, not internally, so that my administrator focused on one role – being an administrator.

That said, there is nothing wrong with hiring multiple administrators, one of whom could serve as the super admin, if you have the budget line items to do so. Just ensure you have the necessary work to validate the budget. And I mean no offense to anyone here, seeking an administrator role, as it relates to being a number on a budget sheet – sadly, that is the reality of the workplace.

- 10,001 to 50,000 employees – Two to three full-time administrators. Once you break the 25,000 plateau, you should have three administrators, one of whom should be a super admin.
- 50,001 to 100,000 employees – Three to five administrators. You can make it work with three for 100,000 employees, depending on the system, but it's safer to go with five, especially if you have a multi-tenant system.
- Anything above 100,000 – Five or more. If you have 1 million active users, then you should have at least eight full-time administrators. Again, you

could pull it off with five, to be quite honest, but it is quite likely that each administrator might be handling additional roles, such as course building, dealing with department heads who rarely check emails, and then blaming you, etc. Thus, having enough to handle all that and more is the key here.

- Any B2B/B2C – Depends on the user base and the system. Without any issue, I've had one full-time administrator for a 20,000-plus active consumer base. But that is me – and I'm not you, nor should I try to be. Go with what makes you feel comfortable. I should also note that at one place I worked, I had over 50,000 active users in a B2B/B2C environment, and there was no budget option to hire someone, so I handled it on top of all my other duties, including running training for the company. I didn't like it, but I wasn't the CEO, so what's the point in griping? Again, once you set up a process, work with the appropriate departments – forge relationships with these departments to make the process run smoothly (i.e., the process, not a real machine). The workload of handling multiple cases, but I should stress this: as my dad once said, "If they are paying you the big bucks, then they expect you to do more than someone else." So, there is that.

What should I be looking for when hiring an administrator?

Rather than jumping straight into their specific skill sets, I'd prefer to start with "looking for" because this is where people often make mistakes in the hiring process. I'm referring to something along the lines of "what you want out of your administrator, and what you expect this person or persons to accomplish in the role?"

Before you start the hiring process, it's crucial to have a clear understanding of what you want from your Learning System Administrator. Simply saying 'I have a Learning System and I need to hire someone' isn't enough. You need to know what you expect this person to accomplish in the role. If you're not clear on this, then maybe those strategy courses aren't working out so well for you.

It's essential to ask yourself, 'Why do I need a Learning System administrator?' This question doesn't require a lengthy answer, but it does require some thought and consideration. It's a way to ensure that you're making a strategic decision that aligns with your organization's goals.

This is going to be an ever-changing role, in terms of duties and responsibilities and so forth, so you need to recognize that what you think of today, may not – and likely will not be the same, a year or two years from now.

Ongoing learning for that person or persons is a must. And it needs to be included in your expectations component. As a group of individuals – i.e., us running training, L&D, or HR - we struggle at providing ongoing learning to our teams—an irony.

So, here are a couple of recommendations to include in the ongoing learning expectations

- Member of a professional association (at least one). There isn't a Learning System administrator association. I'd join ATD – an international association. I wish they had more seminars at their trade show for administrators, but they, along with other shows, including LTUK, don't, which is a problem in itself. If you are working in a specific vertical as well, provide them access to any magazines, etc., that you get. For example, if you work for an association and belong to ASAE, they have access to your materials as part of your membership.

The benefit is clear – they learn more about the audience at hand, more about the industry, and gain insight into who these individuals are. Knowing who your user base is goes a long way in working with said user base.

- Attend at least one trade show in the training/L&D industry. Again, depends on your location in the world. Many countries today have one training and

development show. For folks in the U.S., they are more than that, as is the case in the UK and some parts of Europe. For the U.S., ATD is a must. The UK and Europe? LTUK.

- Give them access to take any courses/content they want that are available in your Learning System. Who cares if it is not in their wheelhouse? You never know what someone is interested in learning. I mean, no one begrudged you because you are interested in learning more about how to mark up the price of baseball cards by forging the autographs, so allow folks to learn what they want to learn and leave your "old grandma/grandpa hat" at the nursing home.

Skills you want, Skills they need

Before diving into the specific skill sets, let's address one question right away, as I often hear it asked. Do they need to be an IT/IS professional, or do they require strong technical skill sets?

Answer: NO. NO. NO. Unless you plan to push data into a SQL database, an Access database, or a similar database, you need that specific skill set. Otherwise, the answer is a flat no.

If you are connecting with an HRIS or ERP, the answer is still no if they are going to upload your data files. CSV files? The answer is still no. The key point to all of this is that you do not need someone with strong IT/IS skills or someone whose background is solely in IT/IS.

Now, let's move on.

What you need/want

- Independent worker – Don't get fooled by the adage that everyone loves and, more importantly, thrives as an independent worker; it isn't always the

case. Some people say they need a day-to-day, step-by-step approach and a more hands-on management style. Those folks are not the people you want. Instead, an ideal person is provided with expectations, tasks, processes, and so on, and then builds upon them. I was a very hands-off manager, but I found my administrator needed to have someone check off that items were done daily. Autonomy was not a good thing in her mind.

That said, you want that in your administrator – i.e., being able to work autonomously without needing a to-do list.

- Able to access the internet via whatever browser you use internally, or they operate. Do they know how to access the internet, navigate, and visit websites? Do they know where to find the address bar in a browser? Have they ever heard of the term URL or website? If yes, score a point. The address bar is where you type in the website address. :)
- Can they upload files from their desktop or via your intranet (assuming you hire them)? Yes? Score a point.
- Are they able to multitask? Again, everyone says yes to this. But seriously, this is something that is a must.
- Can they handle change quickly? This is a role where change occurs frequently, from system updates to new process changes, etc. – Again, people often claim they have no problem with change, but as you well know, that isn't always the case. This person is a change agent – and thrives on it.
- An out-of-the-box thinker who gets the vision of where the company wants to go with e-learning (which you have explained to them), and with the Learning System, for that matter. Of course, if you are not such a person, i.e., out of the box, and prefer a very straight approach to everything, then hiring what I noted above won't work. You have to breathe and live online learning, as well as the LMS itself. You can't say "yummy, but deep down think yucky, and expect the administrator to work in synch. It's all or nothing on this train ride, and out of the box is the necessity, not the never.

- Enthusiastic about the position. This isn't an entry-level role; it is a position to grow and build upon, so the person should be excited and eager to take on this job. You can tell the difference.
- Basic knowledge of Microsoft Office, specifically Excel, Word, and PowerPoint. We are not talking about someone knowing macros or VBA in Excel; rather, can they open a file and save it as a .CSV? Are they willing to learn how to do more in Excel (if need be) – this would be (if they do not know it) – how to add columns, add labels, and enter data. Word is used for writing a document, saving it, and performing some basic editing. PowerPoint is the basics, and that assumes you are uploading content from PPT into the LMS.
- Do they know how to use the email program you are using, assuming it is either Gmail or Outlook? If it is like Lotus 1-2-3, forget it – no one is using that unless they are still using floppy discs at your workplace. It is easy to say, 'Are you willing to learn X?' if they have never heard of it or are unfamiliar with it. If someone uses Hotmail or AOL (God Forbid), they can figure out how to use Gmail/Outlook.
- If you use Office 365, check if they are familiar with or use it as well. Again, knowledge of specific software is beneficial. None is a bad thing. That said, if you are using Salesforce, do not expect someone to be familiar with the program unless they have worked at a company that used it. That is not likely. Office is another matter (or if they use Mac, whatever the office program is there, besides Microsoft, which is available).
- Basics of Adobe Acrobat or Reader. Can they open a PDF and save a document as a PDF? Please don't laugh, I know plenty of people at the senior level who don't.
- Can they delegate? If you are expected to have more administrators, this is a must.
- Strong interpersonal skills – communication via phone and email is essential. This is a Face-to-Face (either via email, phone, or both) position – they will deal with unhappy people, frustrated individuals, and those who

are simply being difficult, so they need to maintain their composure, be friendly, accepting, and approachable. At the same time, they will need to be able to provide specifics and details, if needed, to the Learning System vendor's customer support in the event of an issue. For that, they need those interpersonal skills. I'd argue that interpersonal skills are the number one priority. Communication is essential here.

- Remaining calm in any situation. It is easy to fly off the jets these days, but people calling your administrator are facing some form of an issue; it might be the product, more often than not, it is something they did or forgot to do, or didn't do, which creates the problem. An administrator should be able to tell, and if unsure, test to verify – before the admin calls their POC at the Learning System provider.
- Be able to do basic QA – in other words, if there is a problem, verify that it exists and is not related to human error (i.e., whoever called/contacted you)
- Handle Criticism. This is a significant requirement, as the role necessitates someone who won't crumble at the first sign of an end-user, manager, or other contact complaining. Everyone says they can handle criticism, but honestly, it just isn't the case.
- Be a stakeholder. A champion of the system. This gets back to being enthusiastic. They will need to become someone you know will champion the system to anyone or everyone. An unhappy administrator leads to dissatisfied end users.

Bonus Winners

If they have experience with your system or the system you are acquiring, that should elevate them to the top of the consideration list. However, please do not make it the sole requirement for getting the job.

If they have experience with any other learning system, regardless of the brand, again, it should be at the top of the consideration list, but as noted earlier, do not make it the only requirement. Who knows, they may have been horrible on it.

How to verify that someone who claims to know your system knows it?

Create a simple assessment in steps, then give them access to the system and observe them as they complete it. Unless they used the system 10 years ago and not since, then they should be able to perform the fundamentals, regardless of where they worked or their processes (i.e., at another company).

If they say, "Well, I never learned that," you do not want them. Not because they didn't learn it, but rather because they were NOT interested in learning it on their own to begin with. You want people who can think critically and are willing to learn on their own.

And if they are "it's not in my job description" or "since I was not taught it, I do not need to learn it or want to learn it – in the system I am using" – why would you want them? I want someone always eager to learn, especially when it comes to using software solutions. They are going and/or should be the expert on the system – the go-to person.

Administrator Responsibilities – TIPS!

Learn the system. Seems simple enough, but it is rarely maximized to its full potential. Contact your support person or sales person and have them provide you with training. Don't just have them give you a guide; no one reads it, least of all of them.

If there was a previous administrator, inform them that you are new and require training. Don't back down on this. A good Learning System vendor will provide it free of charge. After all, the thing they don't want is repeated calls to tech support, which costs them money.

Mention this is a must – if they still won't budge, get your director involved. I've had numerous administrators, including newbies and replacements, and I always received free training for the replacements.

2. What are the tasks you will do repeatedly? As you learn and use the system, you will soon come to realize that there are specific tasks that you will perform repeatedly. I'd love to tell you that there are systems out there that have a "favorites" or "tasks" section, where you can save those everyday tasks to save time, but alas, the number out there is countable on one hand.

As such, it is up to you to take charge. You will find yourself doing specific tasks over and over again. Many administrators rarely use the entire admin section (depending on the platform), so you will find your favorites.

Here are some favorites err items administrators tend to do –over and over again

- Assign users to groups.
- Assign courses to users /groups, so that X sees only Y courses, and V sees a different list of courses.
- Create a learning path or curriculum and assign users and relevant content/courses.
- Reports – Create and run them
- Create and set up email notifications
- Create and post events, i.e, ILT, vILT, Blended on the system's calendar
- If you charge for content, assign pricing, and use e-commerce
- Reporting

- Send reports to people who want them on a weekly basis and never read them (yes, I'm being cynical here, but how often is this true?)
- Upload users and upload courses/content.
- Some administrators are tasked with creating courses either within the Learning System if it exists or via an authoring tool and then uploading them into the system. If it is a system issue, request training on the tool specifically. If it is a third-party content creator (also known as an authoring tool), contact the vendor and seek training on the solution.
- Skills mapping (may or may not exist in your system; if it does, and you are unsure what skills should be mapped to the content/job role, find out who does and get them to help you)

Start creating a list of "Have to do daily" tasks, need to do "Weekly", need to do "Monthly or another set time". Create a list of your favorites – this is something you like to do in the system, perhaps it is a unique report or a quick way to do something – and place that information somewhere. If you are out sick that day or on vacation, someone can review these items and step in for that time.

3. Remember that support person? Get their name, phone number, and email address. This is your new BFF, until they ignore you, then you want to call the salesperson who sold the system to your company. So, get that person's name, email address, and phone number.

Being polite is important, but if someone is ignoring you, not calling back, or telling you they are "on it" and doing nothing, being polite has to take a backseat. Because your learners, whether they are employees, customers, or both, only see the system as the company's – i.e., you, and not Vendor ABC.

Support in the learning system space overall is below average. The items I mentioned above, such as not returning calls, having the admin repeatedly call the vendor, and the vendor ignoring calls, are standard.

While everyone thinks their issue deserves high priority, whether it does or not, there will be times when, yeah, it should be #1 in the rotation to be fixed.

If the system is constantly crashing, that is a high priority. If the system goes down during prime-time access, that is a high priority. If you can't do something in your system that you do often, that's a high priority.

As a precaution to the "ignore" scenario, identify the head of customer support or service at the vendor. Get their number and name. Ignore the email because they may ignore you.

Then call them. If you have to do it repeatedly, do so. After all, their job is to provide top support, and if your system isn't working and no one is returning your calls, then they, of all people, should be the ones to help you.

4. Create an administrator group. This rarely occurs, and yet, with sites such as LinkedIn, having a Learning System administrators group makes a great deal of sense. You don't have to share proprietary information, but you could share problems, issues, and difficulties. There is nothing better than knowing that someone else is having the same challenges.

You can also see if your Learning System vendor has their own LinkedIn or Forum group and join it. Some vendors post their updates and fixes deep within their sites, making it nearly impossible to find them. Some use a knowledge base, which rates right up there in the user-friendly category, like the person who works behind the counter at your local gas/petrol station.

Sharing information is the best way to resolve and relate to others. It should be universal, i.e., on the Learning System side of the house. However, if the vendor won't do it, then move forward and do it yourself.

