A little more than a year ago, I was hired by Direct Energy Home Services to be the vice president of training. My team delivers sales and communication training, primarily in a classroom setting, as well as other developmental training through web-based meetings to our brands in HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning), including:

- One Hour Heating & Air Conditioning, Plumbing
- Benjamin Franklin, The Punctual Plumber, and Electrical
- Mister Sparky, America’s On Time Electrician.
**The Challenge**

My first priority was to review the current material. I quickly noticed that the content had become a little stale over the years and the participants had become disengaged.

I was surprised to discover that the company was using a learning management system (LMS) known internally as Clockwork University. My excitement was directly related to having launched online learning at my previous company and the knowledge I had gained from that exercise. Unfortunately, though, I quickly discerned that what we called an LMS was actually a dumping ground for 20 to 30 minute video snippets. These videos were informational, but they did not contain any method for checking the retention level of the user.

In addition, the reporting feature was restricted to the administrative staff at the corporate office. Actual location and center managers were not included in the reporting structure. Unless they created some sort of manual tracking system, they were left to request a training report to track what had been completed and by whom.

We also were using web-based training to provide short, weekly sales training courses. These offered valuable information, but they were advertised as a live session that would be recorded and housed on Clockwork University for those that wanted to access it in the future. This program was referred to internally as the Success Profit Network. Due to the organization of the program and the advertising, we effectively hosted the live versions during times that were not conducive to field users, and internal reporting showed that the recorded versions were not being used.

Ultimately, I learned that although Clockwork University had a lot of content, most of it was in dire need of being refreshed or simply retired. Needless to say, I had my work cut out for me.

**The Solution**

While simultaneously working on the classroom content, I went to work looking at new LMS partners. My challenge was not only to re-introduce online learning, but to overcome the negative perception of online learning based on the current Clockwork University site.

After deliberation and research, I made the decision to shut down the old site and move to a completely new LMS. I chose WestNet Learning, an LMS partner based in Colorado. I had a very positive experience with its LMS, and the partnership with Direct Energy has paid huge dividends.

My team and I went to work completing a general education course series to provide a consistent message to all new hires. We also began creating the weekly Success Profit Network sessions to go directly to the LMS and added a quiz to check for retention of the information.

We then launched the new site at the organization’s annual franchise convention. Just six short months later, we had more than 2,100 registered users and over 8,200 completed online courses.
We also have added the release of a monthly safety training course, are planning the release of a monthly marketing course.

Our success is due on large part to selecting an LMS that meets our needs—and then actually using all that it has to offer. Some examples include:

- **Announcements:** Each week, Success Academy features a course on the Dashboard of every registered user. The announcement not only highlights the WIIFM’s for the user, but the actual announcement is a hyperlink directly to the course enrollment.

- **Communication:** By capturing the email of every user in the registration profile, we are able to send communications directly to individual users, user groups, specific locations, specific job titles, or virtually any other way we wish to divide our participants. A weekly communication from Success Academy calls out highlights or milestones as well as information on current or future releases.

- **Recognition:** Every user dashboard has a section titles Learning Leaders, which recognizes the top three individuals that have completed specified training courses. This has created a lot of competition and aids in driving usage of the information provided on the LMS.

- **Interaction:** Success Academy uses discussion boards in the LMS that allow users to pose questions for the general population or answer a question that has been posed by someone else. A service technician in Florida may pose a question and another service technician in California may respond with an answer or best practice from their location.

- **Reporting:** Managers now have training information at their fingertips. The recommendation is for all managers to run a weekly training report and track completion of previously assigned work. Some work may need to be completed over a period of time but the reporting feature can be used to track progress toward the end goal. This weekly report is then reviewed and remarks can be made directly on the report before it is posted on the communication board at each center. Managers also use the report to schedule coaching or follow up meetings with individual employees based on their performance.

  The reporting feature has allowed my team to send out updates on course completions and even rank and stack areas to create competition. As an example, a recent course on Crisis Communication is now the second most viewed course and it was only released at the beginning of October.

The WestNet Learning LMS also allows the managers to assign specific courses to the employees based on proactive gap analysis or reactive performance improvement. Courses also can be assigned simply for ongoing development. The system allows for communication with the employees in a variety of ways such as to the individual, a specific location or even a specific job title. The manager can also use the Development Plan feature to create and assign full development plans for their employees.
**Bottom Line**

Our brands show positive growth and our operations are much more consistent. We have room for improvement, but the increase in engagement has been incredible. Most important, I learned that it can be hard moving your organization down the path towards online learning, but with some research and preparation, you can smooth out a lot of the bumps in the road.

**Author**

Jeff McLanahan

Jeff McLanahan is a seasoned training executive with more than 20 years of proven success with some of the most well-known and highly respected franchise brands. He attended the University of Central Missouri and graduated with a B.S. in Business Administration. McLanahan spent 10 years in operations with Yum Brands, working his way up from a unit manager to a multi-unit supervisor. After leaving Yum Brands, he joined Papa John’s International and led the entire company through the process of moving from an outdated paper-based training system that relied on management candidates attending training in a central location, to an online training system that is available on demand. In June 2013, he joined Direct Energy Home Services as the vice president of training for Success Academy, the exclusive training partner for the Direct Energy Home Services branded businesses.