

BETTER BUSINESS TECHNOLOGY REVIEW



At the top of the class

Continuing his exclusive series for *Professional Adviser*, Mark Loosmore from technology consultancy AT8 Group analyses Training and Competence tools for advisers. Each week Mark selects a tool currently available to UK IFAs and assesses its strengths and weaknesses. Our aim is to help advisers compare and contrast solutions so they can identify the tools that may be most suitable for their businesses. **This week: WBT Systems' TopClass 8**

As the push for higher professional standards gains momentum, many of the larger financial services organisations are investing considerable effort and money to ensure their training systems help take their staff to the new levels of competence required by RDR and to meet customer expectations.

AT8 has been reviewing some of the key suppliers of training and competence systems in the market and, to date, these reviews have focused on industry specialist software. These systems provide both the technological process support and the financial services domain content for learning material and testing progress towards competence and qualifications. The packages are ideal for many in the industry because they can be relatively quick to configure and implement. However, some larger firms are beginning to look beyond these industry specific suppliers and consider the more generic learning management systems.

Robust generic systems

The large generic systems will be out of the budget range for many distributors. They usually do not have the sector training content and need a substantial amount of tailoring to implement them, but they do have several significant benefits. The technology they run on is normally robust and scalable. Some run training systems with hundreds of thousands of users and still perform in a reliable manner. These large firms are used to dealing with large corporate customers and have the delivery and support infrastructure to deal with major financial institutions, such as the product providers and banks who often have demanding project disciplines. Having cut their teeth on the multiple users from many industries, they have usually

ironed out some of the more quirky usability issues we have witnessed from smaller, niche vendors.

To explore the benefits of the generic systems we decided to review WBT Systems' solution TopClass 8. The firm is based in Ireland and has worked with a number of UK companies including Standard Life, Diageo and Smith and Nephew. Its biggest customer base isn't in financial services but in pharmaceuticals. Given the heavily regulated nature of this sector, we felt this added weight to the comparisons we

would be making. WBT Systems also has a global client base, with many clients in the US, the UK and Ireland. The other big difference is the size of its clients. Many of them have in excess of 50,000 users; its largest customer has just passed the one million user mark.

Having given the above facts and figures, one would be forgiven for thinking this is a much bigger system than the ones we have reviewed to date. In reality, it's still focused on the training and learning management and does not have the workflow

capability of the Worksmart or Redland solutions, so doesn't claim to address areas such as case checking or recruitment.

There are three elements to TopClass: the TopClass Server, the standard application used to set up, manage and track learning plans while online; TopClass Mobile, which enables courses and tests to be downloaded to operate offline; and TopClass Publisher, which enables firms to generate their own computer-based training and testing content, or import existing material.

exit to a separate software application, breaking up the user experience. Having a single system allows a consistent experience and ensures data is passed seamlessly from the online training application back to the learning management system to log the progress of end-users. The authoring tool appeared easy to use and could even import Word or PowerPoint documents to convert into online training material.

The core TopClass Server module has the relevant learning management facilities you would expect, allowing training courses to be built, scheduled, booked and administrated from a central point. Learning plans can be developed and monitored, and the progress of individuals can be reviewed by audit and used to generate MI data. Individuals are typically monitored against the skills they possess, the certificates they hold and the competencies they have obtained. The system is structured around a flexible multiple hierarchy, which can capture the structure of most, if not all, organisations, then filter views and authorisations according to the position in the hierarchy. The user experience is consistent and logical throughout. It is difficult to get lost in the system, despite its depth, as it follows industry standard navigation techniques.

Offline capability

Before looking at the functions these modules support, it is worth dwelling on the availability of an offline capability. Few of the companies we have spoken to so far offer this, and it is worth considering whether there is a legitimate need for an offline model in our own financial services industry.

From WBT Systems' point of view, it is an absolute necessity for some of their customers as they service many large remote user bases that are not able to connect remotely in a reliable manner. In the case of the pharmaceuticals, some are not allowed to connect using wireless communications.

In our industry, salesforces can often be remote, and while wireless connections may be an issue for some, many have reliable, fixed-line broadband. Each organisation will have to decide what their own specific operating needs will be in considering the online/offline debate. I suspect some will value the offline functionality for a few more years, but less so as remote communications improve.

It is worth noting some of the key attractions of TopClass's functionality. The availability of the authoring tool in the same suite of products is a big bonus. In other systems, when the online courses are accessed, they often

CORE FUNCTIONS


Learning and development plans	✓
CBT	✓
Online Testing	✓
CPD record keeping	✓
Case checking	✗
Training activity management	✓
Complaints management	✗
KPI management	✗
Financial promotions management	✗
Monitoring forms builder	✗
TCF tools	✗
Offline	✓
Regulated recruitment process	✗
MI reporting	✓
Online	✓
Sales activity management	✗

PRICE

Given the large scale and variety of the implementations it is difficult to list exact prices. Pricing for third parties offering bureau services to clients will have a different pricing structure than direct clients. However, a typical project for 10,000 users taking both the TopClass Server and the Authoring tool would start at £150,000 once-off licence and £40,000 implementation costs. Support and Maintenance would be an additional 18% per year. All prices exclude VAT.

This data summary is part of a wider survey conducted by AT8. For more specific information, contact: marketing@at8-group.com

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