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Red6
DIGITAL LEARNING

A BUYER'S GUIDE

How to choose an LMS without being sold one.

The questions to ask, the demo tricks to watch for, and the four costs that never appear on the quote. Written by someone who doesn't sell learning platforms.

BEFORE WE START

Why this guide exists

Almost every guide to buying a learning management system is published by someone who sells one.

That doesn't make them dishonest. It does mean there is one conclusion they can never reach — that you don't need to buy anything. It also means their comparison tables tend to be organised around the features they happen to have.

Red6 resells nothing. No partner badges, no licences, no referral commission from any vendor. So this guide can say the thing the others can't, which is also the most useful thing in it: **a large proportion of organisations shopping for a new LMS don't need one.** They need the one they own to be configured, connected and run properly.

If that turns out to be you, section one will save you the price of a platform. If you genuinely do need to buy, the rest will save you considerably more than that in avoidable costs.

WHAT'S IN HERE

A note on the figures in this guide. Published prices in this market vary enormously and vendors rarely quote publicly, so the numbers here are drawn from industry pricing guides and are indicative rather than definitive. Those guides quote in euros and dollars; figures have been converted to sterling at rates current in August 2026 and rounded. They are included to show you the *shape* of the costs and roughly what order of magnitude to expect — always get your own written quotes.

ONE

Do you actually need a new one?

The most expensive procurement decision is the one made to solve a problem the new system won't fix.

Dissatisfaction with an LMS is real and usually justified. But dissatisfaction is a symptom, and it has several possible causes — only one of which is "we bought the wrong software". Before you shortlist anything, work through these five.

1. Has anyone owned this system in the last two years?

Not "been responsible for it" on an org chart — actually owned it, with time allocated. A platform nobody administers degrades in a way that looks identical to a platform that isn't fit for purpose. If the answer is no, you have not yet tested whether your current system works.

2. What has been switched on?

Most organisations use a fraction of what they've licensed. Reporting suites, learning paths, automation, competency frameworks, mobile apps — bought, never configured. Ask your vendor for a list of the modules on your contract and compare it with what's actually live. This exercise is free and it is frequently the whole answer.

3. Is the complaint about the platform, or about the data going into it?

"Our reporting is useless" is usually a data problem, not a reporting problem. If your user records are inconsistent because three systems disagree about who works here, a new LMS will produce equally useless reports faster.

4. Is the complaint about the platform, or about the content?

Learners saying "the training is terrible" are rarely commenting on the software. Replacing the delivery mechanism doesn't improve what's delivered through it.

5. What specifically can this system not do?

Write it down as a list of capabilities, not feelings. If the list is short and the items are genuinely absent from your current platform — not just unconfigured — you have a real case for change. If the list is long and vague, you have a management problem wearing a software costume.

> Replacing a badly-run system with a well-chosen one gets you a badly-run new system in about eighteen months.

THE HONEST TEST

If you spent 20% of the cost of a new platform on properly configuring, connecting and administering the one you have — would the complaints go away? If the answer is yes or probably, do that first. You can always buy the new one afterwards, and you'll be a far better-informed buyer for having tried.

TWO

What you're really buying

The quote you receive covers one of four cost layers. The other three are real, they are yours, and they are usually larger.

LAYER	WHAT IT IS	WHO TELLS YOU ABOUT IT
1. Licence	The subscription or licence itself, priced by users, tiers or a flat fee	On the quote
2. Implementation	Configuration, branding, roles, data migration, testing, launch	Sometimes on the quote, often as a separate line, occasionally a surprise
3. Integration	Connecting it to your HR system, CRM, identity provider and reporting stack	Rarely on the quote. Frequently priced per connector
4. Administration	Somebody running it, every week, forever	Nobody. This is the largest and least discussed cost in the market

Industry pricing guides suggest the full cost of ownership commonly lands somewhere between double and quadruple the headline subscription figure once the other layers are counted. That range is wide because these costs depend enormously on how many systems you're connecting and how clean your data is — which is precisely why they can't be quoted generically, and precisely why they get left off.

Layer four deserves its own paragraph

Every organisation that buys an LMS acquires an ongoing operational job: enrolments, user lifecycle, course maintenance, compliance reporting, release testing, troubleshooting. Depending on your size that is somewhere between one day a month and a full-time post.

It is almost never budgeted. It gets absorbed by someone in L&D or HR who already has a job, does it in the gaps, and never gets to the parts that would deliver value. Two years later the platform is judged a failure — and the cycle starts again with a new vendor.

BUDGET IT EXPLICITLY

Before you buy, decide who will run this and what their time costs. Whether that's an internal hire, part of someone's role with time genuinely protected, or an outside arrangement matters less than deciding it deliberately. A platform with an owner beats a better platform without one, every time.

THREE

Pricing models, and where each one bites

Four models dominate. Each is reasonable in the right circumstances and painful in the wrong ones.

Per registered user

You pay for everyone in the system, whether or not they use it. Simple to forecast. The bite: leavers, seasonal staff, contractors and long-dormant accounts all keep costing you. Organisations with high turnover pay heavily for people who left.

Ask: how do we remove users, how quickly does that reduce the bill, and is there a minimum commitment underneath?

Per active user

You pay only for people who log in during the billing period. Attractive if usage is patchy. The bite: the definition of "active". A single login on the last day of the month may count in full, and compliance campaigns can spike your bill unpredictably in exactly the months you can least explain it.

Ask: what precisely counts as active, when is it measured, and can we see twelve months of modelled cost against our real usage pattern?

Tiered bands

Priced in blocks — up to 500, up to 1,000, and so on. Predictable. The bite: the cliff edge. Being three users over a threshold can cost you thousands, and growth becomes a budgeting hazard.

Ask: what happens the month we exceed a band, is it pro-rated, and can we agree the next tier's price now?

Flat or enterprise licence

One fee, unlimited or very high user count. Excellent for large or fast-growing estates. The bite: it usually comes attached to a long commitment, and the negotiating leverage all sits at signature. After that you have none for three years.

Ask: what is the term, what is the annual uplift, and what are our rights if the service degrades?

THE CLAUSE TO FIND BEFORE YOU SIGN

The annual uplift. Many contracts permit an automatic yearly increase — sometimes indexed to inflation, sometimes a fixed percentage, sometimes "as notified". Over a three-year term this compounds into real money and it is rarely mentioned in the sales conversation.

The minimum term. Thirty-six month commitments with no early exit are common in this market. That is a long time to live with a decision made in a fortnight.

FOUR

The four costs that never appear on the quote

These are the ones that turn a comfortable budget into an awkward conversation nine months later.

1. Implementation and onboarding

Published guides report implementation fees ranging from around £1,700 to £6,900, with one platform charging roughly £6,000–£6,900 for an eight-week implementation and another around £3,700 for a twelve-week onboarding. Some vendors bundle it; many don't; a few quote it only once you're committed.

Ask for it in writing, itemised, before shortlisting. "Implementation support included" can mean a dedicated consultant or it can mean access to a knowledge base.

2. Integrations, per connector

This is the one that catches most buyers. Reported charges include around £2,200–£2,950 for a single Salesforce connection, and another vendor adding 10% of the entire subscription for the same thing.

Single sign-on, HR system connections and API access are frequently gated behind higher tiers rather than priced as add-ons — so the cost appears as a whole tier upgrade rather than a line item.

Ask: list every system this needs to talk to, and get a price for each one, at this tier, in writing.

3. The things that sound like they'd be included

ITEM	REPORTED COST
Premium or priority support	~£390–£430/month, or ~£1,700 for an "essential" package
White-labelling / your own branding	£2,150–£2,600 one-off, or ~£215/month
Additional portals or branches	~£340/month each
Third-party content library access	£860–£1,700+ on top
AI features	Often limited to a handful of licensed users
Storage above a cap	Varies; check the cap exists before you check the price

4. Your own people's time

Data migration and cleansing, content conversion and re-testing, writing new administrator processes, training administrators and learners, and running the project itself. None of this appears on a vendor quote because none of it is the vendor's cost. It is, however, entirely real, and it lands on people who already have jobs.

> A quote is a price for software. A budget is a price for the outcome. Do not confuse the two in front of your finance director.

FIVE

Running a demo that tells you something

A standard vendor demo is a rehearsed performance in a pristine environment with invented data. It is designed to be impressive and it succeeds. It tells you almost nothing about whether the system will work for you.

Take control of the agenda

Send every vendor the same script in advance, built from your actual work. Not "show us your reporting" — instead: *"Here is a report our compliance lead produces every quarter. Build it live, in front of us."*

Three or four scenarios is plenty. Use the ones that are painful today.

A WORKABLE DEMO SCRIPT

- Enrol a group of 40 people onto a mandatory course, with a deadline and automatic reminders. Show us the clicks.
- A person changes department. Show us what happens to their required training — automatically, without an administrator intervening.
- Build our actual quarterly compliance report, live, and export it.
- Show us the administrator's screen for a task we do weekly. Not the learner's screen — the administrator's.
- Show us a real customer's live instance, not a sales environment.

Four things to watch for

"That's on the roadmap." Roadmaps are statements of intention, not commitments. Treat any feature not visible on screen today as absent. If it's essential, make delivery of it a contractual condition with a date, or choose differently.

The sales engineer's environment. Beautifully configured demo instances have had months of work invested in them. Ask directly: how long did it take to build what we're looking at, and is that configuration included in our implementation?

Perfect data. Demo data is always clean, consistent and complete. Yours isn't. Ask what happens when two systems disagree about a user, because they will.

The learner-side bias. Demos concentrate on the learner experience because it's the prettiest part. You will spend far more hours in the administrator interface than any learner spends in theirs. Insist on seeing it.

Then ask for a sandbox

Nothing substitutes for two or three of your own people spending a fortnight in a trial instance doing real tasks. Vendors serious about winning your business will provide one. That willingness is itself a useful signal.

SIX

Twelve questions vendors hope you won't ask

Send these in writing and ask for written answers. How a vendor responds to a direct question is data about how they'll behave as a supplier.

1. **What is the total cost in year one, including implementation, migration and every integration we've listed?** One number, itemised.
2. **What is the cost in years two and three?** Including any automatic uplift and the assumption behind it.
3. **What's the minimum term, and what are our exit rights if it isn't working?**
4. **Which of the features we've seen today are included at the tier you've quoted?** Ask tier by tier, not in general.
5. **Is API access included, and is it rate-limited?**
6. **Is single sign-on included at this tier, or does it require an upgrade?**
7. **How many days of your time are included in implementation, and what happens when we exceed them?**
8. **Who actually does the implementation — you, or a partner?** If a partner, you are buying from two organisations and should meet both.
9. **What are your support hours, in our timezone, and what is your contractual response time?** Not the aspiration — the SLA.
10. **How often do you release, and what happens to our configuration and integrations when you do?**
11. **Can we speak to a customer of our size, in our sector, who has been live for more than two years?** Longevity matters more than enthusiasm — a reference in month three tells you nothing.
12. **If we leave, what do we get back, in what format, and at what cost?** See the next section.

ONE QUESTION FOR YOURSELF

Who, by name, will run this system on the Monday after go-live? If you can't answer that, no amount of vendor selection will fix what happens next.

SEVEN

Getting out again

Nobody negotiates their exit while they're excited about the purchase. That is exactly why exit terms are worth reading first — you will never have more leverage than you do before you sign.

Your data

Ask what you can export, in what format, and whether it costs anything. There is a large practical difference between a structured export of completion records with dates, scores and certificates, and a CSV of names. Compliance history you can't produce in five years' time is compliance history you don't have.

Your content

Content authored inside a vendor's proprietary tool frequently cannot leave in any usable form. SCORM packages you uploaded are usually retrievable; courses built in the platform's own editor often aren't. If you're planning to build content natively, understand that you may be building it there permanently.

Your integrations

Everything you connect is work you'll repeat when you move. This isn't an argument against integrating — the value is worth it — but it's a real switching cost and it belongs in your thinking about term length.

The notice period

Check when notice must be served, because auto-renewal clauses commonly require it several months before the renewal date. Miss the window and you've bought another year. Put the date in a calendar the day you sign, owned by a person rather than a team inbox.

THE THREE EXIT CLAUSES TO READ BEFORE SIGNING

- What data you can extract, in what format, and at what cost
- The notice period, and the date by which notice must be given
- What happens to your data after termination, and how long they keep it

EIGHT

A scoring sheet

Take this into the room. Score each vendor out of five as you go, while it's fresh — memory reorganises itself around whoever demoed last.

CRITERION	A	B	C
Fit — does it do the specific things on our written list, today, without customisation?	/5	/5	/5
Administrator experience — how many clicks to do our most common weekly task?	/5	/5	/5
Reporting — could our compliance lead build their own report unaided?	/5	/5	/5
Integration — does it connect to our named systems, at our quoted tier, at a stated price?	/5	/5	/5
Total year-one cost — itemised and in writing, including everything	/5	/5	/5
Three-year cost — including uplift	/5	/5	/5
Contract terms — term length, exit rights, notice period	/5	/5	/5
Data portability — what we get back and in what format	/5	/5	/5
Support — contractual response times in our timezone	/5	/5	/5
Reference quality — our size, our sector, live over two years	/5	/5	/5
Straight answers — did they answer the twelve questions directly and in writing?	/5	/5	/5
Total	/55	/55	/55

Weight these to your situation rather than treating them as equal — but decide the weighting *before* the demos, not afterwards. Deciding what matters after you've seen the options is how organisations talk themselves into the most charming vendor.

AND THE OPTION THAT ISN'T ON THE SHEET

Add a fourth column headed **"Fix what we have"** and score it honestly against the same criteria, using a realistic estimate of what proper configuration and administration would cost. If it wins, that's not a failed procurement — it's the cheapest good outcome available to you.

FINALLY

A short word about who wrote this

I'm Marc Denman. I've spent more than fifteen years administering, configuring, rebuilding and connecting learning platforms.

That's included Totara, Moodle, Learning Pool, Docebo, LearnUpon, Absorb, Cypher, Learning 360 and Unifyr, for charities, government bodies and private companies, on estates ranging from 300 learners to 45,000, in the UK and overseas. I've built the integrations between those platforms and HR systems including Workday, SAP SuccessFactors and HiBob, CRMs including Salesforce, HubSpot and Zoho, and identity providers including Okta and Microsoft Entra ID.

I started Red6 because I kept meeting organisations with perfectly capable platforms and nobody to run them, being advised by the people who sold them the platform.

Red6 sells no software. No partner badges, no licences, no vendor commission. That's a deliberate commercial choice, and it's the reason this guide could be written the way it has been.

If this raised more questions than it answered

A half-hour call costs nothing and there's no obligation attached to it. If you'd like a more structured look at what you already own, the Red6 LMS Health Check is free: a scored review of your platform across experience, operations, compliance and reporting, with a written summary you can keep and forward.

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Sources for the figures quoted. Cost ranges for implementation, integrations, support tiers, white-labelling, additional portals and content libraries are drawn from published LMS pricing guides by TalentLMS and Capterra, accessed August 2026. Those guides quote in euros and US dollars; figures here have been converted to sterling at rates current on 27 August 2026 (€1 = £0.86, $1 = £0.74) and rounded. They are indicative of market ranges rather than specific to any named vendor, and are included to illustrate the shape of the costs. Always obtain your own written quotations, in your own currency.