Michelle Ockers

Welcome to this special edition of Learning Uncut. This is the first episode for 2020, so it is January and it is summer in the Southern hemisphere, so very hot. We're in the middle of school holidays and lots of people are at the beach and taking a break rather than the office at the time of publishing this episode. So what I've decided to do is use it as an opportunity to catch up with some of our earlier podcast guests and ask them the question 'What Happened Next?' I'll recap the story that they shared with us and get an update on how the solution has continued to develop and what impact it's had or what challenges it's faced over the longer term. And we'll also explore what our guests learned through this work and how it's influenced their subsequent work.

You've got three great guests in this episode. We're going to be talking firstly to Denise Meyerson from episode 4 about rethinking customer service learning. Then Nicole White from episode 2 about podcasts for learning and Emma Weber from episode 7 where she was joined by Marie Daniels to talk about a learning transfer bot. All of these episodes were published around 16 to 18 months ago, in the early days of Learning Uncut. It's going to be really interesting to find out what happened next and to catch up with some of the more recent work highlights and plans that our guests have for 2020.

DENISE MYERSON CONVERSATION

1:35 - Conversation with Denise starts

Michelle Ockers

So let's talk with our first guest, Denise Meyerson. Welcome back Denise.

Denise Meyerson

Thank you. Thank you. Great to be back. It's always exciting to share knowledge with everyone in the community.

Michelle Ockers

It is, and I always love your enthusiasm. You're always such an infectious person to be around. I always leave feeling inspired.

Denise Meyerson

Oh, Michelle. I don't know if this story's going to inspire you today.

Michelle Ockers

Oh we are going to learn something together, Denise. So thank you for being willing to come back and share a story which maybe didn't turn out the way you had hoped it was going to turn out.

Denise Meyerson

No, not the happy ending we were all hoping for.

Michelle Ockers

All right, well let's get real and have a conversation about that.

This was from the retail sector, which has struggled in recent years with employers looking for better ways to engage their sales teams and provide a better service to their customers. In the story that you shared, it was a case study of a project that took a very different approach to customer service learning, using improvisation and gamification. There was a toolkit which was made available to leaders. So instead of Training or the HR people coming in to deliver sessions, the team leaders and supervisors were equipped to be able to run a range of different activities, simple activities with detailed instructions, which they could run, brief and debrief. Initially, Denise, in the 120 days after the approach was launched, it was having a fairly dramatic effect. Sales targets were being reached and even stretched beyond what had been achieved in over two years. It looked like there was a, a real turnaround as a result of the program, or at least in part due to the program. But it sounds like that didn't continue perhaps. What happened next?

Denise Meyerson:

Oh, Michelle breaks my heart. What happened next was that they were still in an ongoing uplift and the sales figures year on year kept improving. It was really humming and popping, high levels of engagement of staff, drop in staff attrition, no more revolving doors with people leaving the organisation. And I thought this is it. Not only are we going to get an award for this, we are going to just slay every possible thing that I could possibly think of in the learning sphere. This is my moment. I've arrived and then my crowning glory before I retire. So big excitement.

And what happened then is that the, it's a global business. So globally they really started taking notice of what was happening in this little tiny part of the business that started excelling. And the company had a very big awards, internal awards evening and event, and the managers of this particular division or branch of the organisation we put forward for the internal company awards and obviously they won. I mean who else in the company would be able to achieve the type of turnaround and type of sales targets that they had. You know, there wasn't much competition.

Michelle Ockers:

So at this point it's looking good.

Denise Meyerson:

This is, that's what I'm saying. This is now a real crowning glory of my career and they're real excited. They have this amazing awards evening and they walk off with the awards.

Michelle Ockers:

So how long after the solution had been implemented was that awards night roughly?

Denise Meyerson:

I would say it was probably about six to seven months later when things were still ticking well, everything was just going in the in the right direction. Came the awards evening and I would say probably two months after that restructure in the whole organisation, people left, things changed, the area where they were had a new competitor, which took up their space and the whole thing just spiralled downwards, so down that this division now is probably the lowest earning from being the highest. It's now, it's back to where it started. It's back to square one.

A lesson for me is that there are some factors that you just can't control. You're not going to control what Head Office decides to do. They are thousands of miles away. They've got no sense of what's happening on the ground. That's lesson number one. Lesson number two is that the L&D people who

were supporting it kind of lost the passion for it as well. It became more business as usual. We weren't, although we had proposed that we come back and do a re-energise and a refresh and you know, just get people motivated again, provide different activities, add to the toolkits, that never happened, so slowly it just wound down and it's as if we were never there.

Michelle Ockers:

Things can really shift can't they. I've had that experience with being in an organisation where things were going really well and we, you know, sustained improvements over three to four-year period, great stakeholder relationships. There were changes in senior leadership and restructure. And it shifted everybody's engagement and focus.

Denise Meyerson:

Hundred percent. And I also, somehow think that because they felt it this awards evening that they were so recognised and they felt that was the zenith, that was the, you know, the, best part of it all. They felt like they've achieved the end point where was, that was just a little milestone along the journey. It wasn't the end point. That was just, you know, stage one.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And there's something in there about, you know, the energy and effort and focus to sustain solutions. Right. Nothing is set and forget these days, particularly where, and it's not all about, a trainer being in the centre of a room, it's not all about controlling everything. It's about sharing responsibility, and engaging others to help guide and facilitate the learning in order to keep it going. It requires different kinds of skills and different kinds of practices from the learning team.

Denise Meyerson:

Hundred percent, hundred percent. And I think where we went wrong and where we could've done better was that in the original strategy that should have already been embedded. So we should've really said at month three this is what happens, at month six, at month nine at, at the annual anniversary. So they should have been those milestones quoted for and embedded in the original proposal so that it would have given us a lot more sustainability than it had.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. And is that something that, when you work with organisations, of you're an external provider, you partner with organisations to shift performance and make a difference through learning. Is that something that you have now?

Denise Meyerson:

We try this, we try.

Michelle Ockers:

What sort of response do you get from organisations? Because you know what I find similarly, I, I like to have that conversation up front when I work with organisations around, you know, whatever the shift is, we're trying to make it take some time and let's set up a relationship where we check in and I can help you keep it top of mind.

Denise Meyerson:

I agree with you 100% on that and I think that obviously we all need the pat on the back that it's, it's going well. But that pat on the back is just phase one. It's not the end point yet. Sales are fantastic.

You've slayed the market, just killed off the competitor, but that's not the end game. The end game is making it sustainable.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes, yes, absolutely. The other interesting point you raise there was for the learning team themselves, they kind of lost their passion. You know, that it maybe the environment around them. Maybe they felt that they'd lost engagement with their stakeholders.

Denise Meyerson:

The sad thing is, Michelle, that when everyone went up onto the stage to collect their award, this big global internal award. I don't know how many staff are employed, but to achieve an award in that business is huge. The L&D team weren't invited up on the stage. They never got the award because they were kind of invisible in this process because it was all handed over to the team itself and the leaders and the managers in the team. So L &D had kind of spoken themselves as on any of the glory. Because it, well that was the point, you don't need L&D if you skilled up your leaders and managers.

Michelle Ockers:

Interesting conversation. Josh Bersin published a piece about two, three years ago where he talked about 'Invisible L&D.' The goal was that you get learning working so well in your organisation that it's like electricity running through buildings. Right? Everyone just takes it for granted. But you know, somebody still needs to set all that up and to keep an eye on it all. But there is a shift. But you know, the phrase 'invisible L&D' just didn't catch on because it's like are we doing yourself out of a job.

Denise Meyerson:

And that's what happened. They were invisible, but too invisible. Then they never got any recognition, which I'm sure also set the wheels in motion of "well, are we really so passionate about this any longer? Have we also achieved what we need to achieve. Let's move on to the next challenge."

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And to be fair, you know, it may well have been … having been inside organisations going through periods of change like this myself in learning teams, that the learning team was kind of fighting for its own survival as well.

Denise Meyerson:

Hundred percent correct. 100% correct. And look, I've painted it for you with the, you know, no bells or anything different. That is what happened. I would've loved to have sat hear and told you, Oh, it's even gone a bit, it's gone viral. It's spread to the entire organisation.

Michelle Ockers:

Tell me Denise, have you used a similar approach elsewhere around kind of creating toolkits, skilling up leaders and managers to run things?

Denise Meyerson:

We've been doing it in other places. It's just a little bit harder to measure. That environment was sales it was so easy to measure. There was nothing else that could have improved sales besides this intervention. And so in other organisations it becomes, well, it's just staff surveys and climate surveys, which don't come out all the time. So that's going to take us a little bit more time to really have some

data that we can say, yep, this by putting this in, it made that difference. It's too anecdotal at the moment.

Michelle Ockers:

So when you now use those kinds of approaches, what do you do differently in, in view of the lessons you learned out of the retail example?

Denise Meyerson:

We just make sure that we do a slower release of all the activities, so they have to keep coming back and learning a few more to keep it going. And when they see the success of what they've done, it's much easier then to release a few extra and activities for them, like linking things to Valentine's Day or linking it to you know, kind of events that are happening in the organisation does make it a lot better. And you know, when the CEO stands up and says this is what we are going to be doing and he does something from it, it also makes a world of difference.

Michelle Ockers:

So it feels like that does two things. One is it keeps the connection and contact going between the business and the learning team because there's this ongoing feed of different activities rather than all going out at once. And that in turn helps address that issue around visibility and being able to say that you are supporting them.

Denise Meyerson:

So what happened in this recent one that we've just started, because I must be frank, I also lost a bit of my motivation when I saw what happened. You know, we'd also put our heart and soul into this and were so encouraged and I really thought that this is going to take over the world. And so we also kind of sat back for a few months until we could reignite our own passion again. We are starting a program, which maybe I'll come and talk about in another year's time, which is a global program for leaders. All leaders in the organisation across the world will be doing parts of this. And so that would make an interesting case study and definitely learned lessons from the previous example.

Michelle Ockers:

I really love the fact that we've now got this opportunity to follow a body of work and see how it evolves. So I will keep in touch with you on that. I'd really like to share that next part of the story.

Looking back on 2019 would you like to share one or two highlights from your professional year?

Denise Meyerson:

Certainly. Some of the ups have been, we participated with the national disability insurance scheme, the NDIS, to help train up the local area coordinators. They are the guys who do some of the planning for people who have disability and work with the carers or the parents. And so we did an amazing, amazing, set of holistic training for them from the induction through to ongoing micro learning and even some virtual reality. And the results of that have been just incredible in terms of staff retention, in terms of knowledge, in terms of confidence. And so we've got a lot of measures around that. So that I would say certainly one of the big highlights.

Michelle Ockers:

And 2020. What are some of the goals and plans you've got for 2020?

Denise Meyerson:

First of all, 2020, my mission is, and I'm determined to do this, Michelle, I am firing the feedback form. That's it done. I really don't care if you like the trainer, I mean obviously if the trainer was really shocking, let us know but liking the trainer and liking and liking everything is not a problem I see for what you learned and the feedback form is going to be dead and I don't want to care about it anymore. Rather we'll be asking questions. What do you remember from the training? We'll ask that later. What have you actually applied and what difference has it made in your workplace? And I want that data. I'm not interested in whether you have a good, whether the air conditioning was too hot, too cold, and all of this absolute nonsense information. So that's my mission for the year.

In terms of goals, we definitely going to be pushing a lot more of our virtual classrooms. A lot more of the MCI Live because there's the demand for that has definitely increased with people's attention spans not catering for the full eight-hour classroom day. And the people are really wanting things in a lot more visual, lot more punchy, and get to the point and let me get on with work. Yeah. So that's, that's something that we'll be focusing on.

Michelle Ockers:

I love death to the feedback form. Let's see if we can build a campaign around that and let go of something that's not working anymore.

Denise Meyerson:

Yes. That's the new hashtag.

Michelle Ockers:

Denise, a heartfelt thank you for coming back and sharing.

Denise Meyerson:

Thank you. I always love chatting to you. It's really great. Thank you. I hope that's helped others in the community as well to, you know, maybe give them a bit of food for thought.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. I think there's some valuable lessons. I think keeping it real by sharing things that maybe didn't turn out the way we had wanted gives us real insights into things we can do to get different outcomes in the futures. Thank you so much.

NICOLE WHITE CONVERSATION

18:50 - Conversation with Nicole starts

Michelle Ockers:

Today we're catching up with Nicole White. You may remember from our earliest guest podcast, episode number two, where we talked about a little bit meta here, but we talked about podcasts for learning. Nicole is from the ID Crowd and we talked about the wonderful project called A Normal Day, which was delivered via podcast series for health practitioners. The client here was AVIL who, Nic, I believe is a, an organization predominantly made up of drug users - I'm quoting directly from your original transcript - who worked with other drug users. Do you want to recap for us just a little bit about the work of AVIL?

Nicole White:

AVIL actually sends for Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League. I actually had to refer to my notes still to this day to remember all of that. Basically they exist to help reduce stigma and discrimination against people who use illicit drugs. That's probably it in a nutshell.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And you worked on a project where you use podcasts for the solution instead of traditional self paced e-learning, which I think was what you were originally requested to provide for this particular project. One of the great things you did on this project was open up the conversation when you've got a particular request around, "Hey, we want you to do something like what we've seen you do for someone else" which was eLearning. And you opened up the conversation and at the time what you said about that and how to do that when somebody comes with a specific order is that "it's really about asking questions. It's not about telling people something and telling people what they should and shouldn't do is just never successful unless you've already got really good credit and there's a lot of trust built in. So you ask the right questions and then the responses from the people that you're trying to convince are often the most convincing components." So ask great questions to get them to convince themselves about a different solution.

Nicole White:

Yup. That sounds very wise.

Michelle Ockers:

You did say that. I've paraphrased a little bit, that that's obviously something that you've brought to your work. So I am curious at this point about what has happened with that particular solution or initiative. What's the impact been? Have there been any further developments or changes to it?

Nicole White:

Yeah. I think one of the good things about working on this sort of project and with AVIL is as the type of organization that they are, is that it was a government funded project. So it means that they needed to do evaluation. And I know that doesn't always happen and we certainly don't always, as a supplier, we don't always get even if evaluation happens in timely, we're not always privy to it. So that's why this is pretty exciting for me, even to get some data is kinda cool. And I think in, in summary, and I can go into a couple of things that were actually interesting that came out of the data. But in summary, I'm just gonna say that young female university students are now my most favourite people in the whole world.

Michelle Ockers:

And why is that?

Nicole White:

Well, look what AVIL actually ended up doing and actually ended up partnering with some other organizations as well. So some of the other organizations were ASHM, the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, ANU, the Australian National University Medical School and also the Australian Medical Association, the AMA. So essentially what they all did is they all kind of banded together to evaluate, but also to increase distribution. So try to get this podcast out as much as possible.

I think the thing that I liked the most is actually the fact that these went out to ANU. And the story with ANU is the one that I'll go down that little rabbit hole the most I think. ANU actually did a pre and post survey that they actually did before and after the podcast. What they actually did is, they actually kind of, I've got a little note here as well. So if anyone was interested about surveys the format was actually adopted from a validated stigma and discrimination tool, which actually kind of cool in itself, right? Like being able to have like a university sort of put, you know, actually using that collective knowledge to put something together around this. What ANU actually did is they actually made it part of the curriculum. So it wasn't mandatory for these students to do. But they made it available and they called it out as part of their program for medical students. So they got them to do the pre and the post survey.

So some of the things that kind of came out of this was that they did actually say some, some change in attitudes with students. And this is why I'm going to say, so this is particularly true for female respondents aged between 18 and 24. I'm not going to make any sort of speculation or anything like that, but it's fascinating that female medical students kind of responded the best to this type of you know, this type of learning. So, for them there was a decrease in the belief that people who use drugs can be identified by stereotype, which I felt was really interesting and it was actually one of the key objectives of the project itself. I mean it's that whole kind of unconscious bias piece, right? Actually just a moment taking a beat, not relying on stereotypes to actually make a judgment call. Something else that came out of it as well was that respondents were actually less likely to report that they had less respect for people who use drugs when they compared to other patients or other perceived patients. So again, it's that just taking a beat just to kind of think of these people as people who just happen to use drugs.

There was an interesting one that kinda came out. It came from one particular person, which they were really clear that this was the attitude, a comment of one person. But that this particular person actually commented that there was an impact around their awareness of the limitations of knowledge about people who use drugs and the treatment options that are available to them. So I think for AVIL in particular in that collective of organizations that were working together, I think for them there's a potential opportunity there as well to kind of delve into that a little bit further. So you have that is broader than that one person's comment. And there's opportunity for expansion there I think.

Michelle Ockers:

I see you've touched on something really interesting there. As an example with the university being involved in evaluation of the program, we've just done an episode which aired in November with an aged care home, which has been using something called Empathy Suits, which were designed by Sydney University ,and now Sydney University and Flinders University have partnered with them (i.e. ACH Group) around assessment and evaluation. So it's really nice to see those kind of partnerships evolving. Fantastic to get the feedback and the data to know that what you've done over time has made a difference. Right.

Nicole White:

Oh, that's amazing. Yeah, I'll definitely listen to that one.

Michelle Ockers:

We've talked about the impact that the work is having in some of the evaluation data. When you look back now, what do you think the key things were that you learned from that project that you've taken forward and used in your work since or in the work of the ID crowd?

Nicole White:

Yeah, I think the key things to me is I've kind of got four that I kind of think about . People who know me are probably used to be banging on about these particular four. For me it is that learning really isn't a one off event. It really does require a program around it. I often still look at this program and look at this data and actually look into some of the more detailed comments that were provided. And I think one of the reasons that the university had so much success was because it was part of a broader program in the first place. So I think it was, you know, it made sense. It was in context and it was continuous, which I think is really cool.

I think we've touched on this one already - the importance of evaluation and measurement and actually having valid objectives that can be measured and being able to kind of use that data to evolve a particular piece and to find out - like nobody expected that, like when you first put a piece of learning out, nobody expects that 18 to 24 year old female medical students are going to be your core audience for something like this. It's kind of cool.

I think another big one for me is the importance of story. And you touched on it with empathy. For the importance of story to move people. I think that a lot of the time when we're kind of talking to people about using like audio stories or podcasts or something like that, they're like, "Oh, well story's not real learning, right. "I kind of often respond to that with "only since the dawn of time." You know, we don't have the fire or the threat of saber tooth tigers looming around. But story is just something that is so much easier for us to absorb. It creates context around things. It just such a beautiful way to learn and then it can be backed up by harder facts and data and all of those sorts of things as well.

I think one of the things that we've spoken about quite a bit as well, Michelle, is around that the true partnership model between customer and supplier. That can also be L&D team and internal customer as well. It's that trust in that relationship. We could never have done anything like this if there was an authoritative model that was there because it was a model of co-design and trust. I think that's how those beautiful stories came out in the first place.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, very powerful. Four great lessons and great things to be bringing into the way we work in learning. Thank you so much Nic. And in terms of 2019, what was one or two key highlights when you look back at your work over 2019?

Nicole White:

I think we can, I can have like a little brag about some awards and that kind of stuff. So I think I mean obviously A Normal Day got finalist in Best use of Tech at AITD (*i.e. Australian Institute of Training and Development Excellence Awards*), pipped by VR. VR - I wave my little fist at you. But I mean that's really something in itself, podcasts featured in that sort of category. So I think that's a really good thing for a little win for podcasts.

Michelle Ockers:

It really is. And when you think about the range of tech that's out there now, it's mind boggling, right. And some of the more high tech stuff, sometimes it's something a little bit simpler just to use really well that makes a difference.

Nicole White:

Yeah. And not everyone has access to VR. I have all the time in the world, I'm such a fan of learning tech. But you know, like these sorts of technologies are cost effective and they quick to put out, they actually answer some of the, you know, some of the restraints and issues that are kind of happening out there in the industry at the moment as well, which is what I really liked.

We did have the opportunity to create some more audio based learning in 2019 as well. The CSIRO Indigenous Program is something that I talk a lot about because it's all of those four things that I mentioned before around the truly beautiful partnership and just really great use of stories to drive empathy and change. We actually got two Brandon Hall awards for that particular program as well. So that shows again around using story and how it's actually getting noticed as a real valid form of learning.

Michelle Ockers:

Congratulations. And I know in the Australian market, certainly, the ID crowd is known for the quality of the work and the beauty of the work that you guys do.

Nicole White:

Thanks.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, you have a big fan base out there, Nic. 2020 - any plans, any aspirations either from an organization perspective or from a personal professional perspective?

Nicole White:

Yeah, look, I think that I feel change a-comin in my waters. There's different responses and different conversations that we've been having with our customer base and with potential customers. And look, everything is changing, but I think in particular the L&D industry you know, where funds are being distributed, all of that sort of stuff. So while that happens, we're also talking to our customers around, well, you know, where are your pain points? And where are the things that, you know, if more people are kind of spending on internal custom development for example, where are the pain points that are there for you, so I think timelines are getting shorter, budgets are kind of getting tighter, all of that kind of stuff. So we've been kind of like working on something around how we can actually support people to have those constraints, but still create something amazing anyway. Because I just couldn't bear if the only driver was just to get something out there. So we've been working on something there, so there should be more on that end of November

Michelle Ockers:

Looking forward to that - by the time this goes to air in January, we should be able to share something about that. So for our listeners we'll share obviously a link back to Nic's original podcast, episode number two. If you haven't listened to that already, go back and listen. It's still one of our more popular episodes and if there's some other resources, links to some information about some of those award-winning projects and so we can share Nic, we'll pop that in show notes as well. Thank you for taking the time to come back and let us know what happens next.

Nicole White:

That's okay. Thanks, Michelle. Thanks for having me.

EMMA WEBER CONVERSATION

34:00 - Conversation with Emma starts

Michelle Ockers:

Our third guest today for this special Learning Uncut episode is Emma Weber. Welcome Emma.

Emma Weber:

Thank you.

Michelle Ockers:

Last time we spoke with you Emma, well actually you've done two episodes and both with someone else. The episode where we're going back to and talking about what happened next today is episode seven, which you did with Marie Daniels from a pharmaceuticals company about your learning transfer bot and the use of the coaching chatbot to support learning transfer following a formal course. So we covered in the episode both learning transfer and the use of a bot. I think that the bot is the bit, you know, the two are intrinsically linked, but I think the bot is the exciting bit to focus on in terms of understanding what happened next. At the time when you started working with the bot, you were searching for a technology that would empower individuals to implement learning based on what they feel is going to give them a good result in their role. You almost gave up. I remember you said in the episode "look, I almost gave up because I just wasn't confident I could find a technology that was really going to empower the learners. You said it's a little about the individual having a conversation with themselves. Then you decided to try a bot, and you went from being sceptical about it to absolutely thrilled with the results. Do you still feel that way?

Emma Weber:

I think we can take it up another notch, Michelle. I am absolutely astounded on where this journey has taken me. And I kind of think back to when I was talking, you know, with, with yourself and Karen and Marie in our first episode, I don't think we even knew then what we were sort of birthing in this space. And so the learning has been phenomenal as to how we've started to drive it forward. The results of different types of projects, just every project are really blowing us away in terms of what's possible with this type of technology.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So, is the bot still called coach Em? Tthe most important topic first.

Emma Weber:

So the bot is called Coach M, but it's actually called coach and then the capital letter M

Michelle Ockers:

Nice and gender neutral. Right?

Emma Weber:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

In terms of the solution itself, the bot itself, has it evolved any further or is it largely as was described back in episode seven, which our listeners can go back and listen to for more information?

Emma Weber:

Yeah, so it still has the same purpose - that it's helping people take what they've learned on a training program and put it into place. But it really evolved in terms of the level of sophistication of conversations that people are now having with the, and also the number of conversations. So we have a client where we have eight learning breaks that people are having. So essentially they're having eight conversations with Coach M, 20 to 30 minutes each. We had a cohort running for that particular client. We had 100% of people still engaged at learning break seven and this was running over a five month period and I would, I would have not thought that was possible.

Michelle Ockers:

Just for comparison, what's your experience with, I know traditionally you've done a lot of phone based coaching, people talking to a coach and I think maybe three learning breaks was, you know. What kind of drop off rates were you experiencing up many years of refining that?

Emma Weber:

Yeah. So you would still be at a good 85 to 90% of people still engaged at a third learning break. But I think one of the interesting things is this isn't a human, you know, it's artificial intelligence that is having such a high level of engagement with people without the refinements that a human can give. So in a way, I think the bigger comparison is what I have researched online in terms of online follow up. Whereas typically people are perhaps ending up with 20 to 30% of people still engaged 10 to 12 weeks after a program, and we are now looking at that being around 70 to 80% consistently.

Michelle Ockers:

Do you have any sense of why that is?

Emma Weber:

I think, we did some video testimonials the other day and five out of six people said it was like talking to a human. I found that hard to see it myself because of course I've, you know, programmed it, and know that it's not a human. One person, even though we were completely transparent up front, that it was artificial intelligence, they had the impression that someone was sat there replying to them as in a human.

And what I have discovered, so I've started, I'm clearly now much more in the technology space than I've ever been in my life. I spoke at the CEBIT conference in the last couple of weeks, which is a fully technology crowd. You'd have to hunt out the learning person. What I discovered is that our work is really innovative in what terms of what's being done around the world in the tech space. Whereas I think when I first spoke and I'm sure people, other people may have this experience with their learning programs, that you're, you're learning as you go and you're learning a bit on the fly and it's all, you know, trying things out and experiments and you always, you never know when you're going on to unearth something really special. And that's kind of how I, how I feel when we, we last spoke to you, we didn't know what we didn't know that. We're absolutely on the cutting edge of what's happening in this conversational interface space.

What I have discovered is some people call chatbots chats, some people call them bots and some people call them conversational interfaces. I think that is to just differentiate between customer service bots because I think people have got, there's almost like a stereotype around a chat bot that it's going to frustrate you and it's going to say things that you don't want to hear. Whereas really the

technology is about having, it's a conversational interface with the technology. And so I think we will start to see that happening far more.

Michelle Ockers:

So just remind me, is it still, it was SMS based text based and basically it was a whole stack of scripting based on your years of experience with these learning transfer conversations around the questions that typically get asked, the kind of answers that come back and where a human coach would take the conversation next. So I'm picturing this kind of branched script behind the whole thing. Is that how it works?

Emma Weber:

It's sort of how it works. The branched strip kind of makes it sound quite linear ,that you're on a path and you either go down a path and then, and it's a lot more sort of circular than linear. And I think partly one of the things that I've realised is, you know, as an organisation, we've had over 18,000 one on one conversations in this space and we really know and understand the structure of those conversations. And so that's what we've been able to take and use that to train the AI. You know, in a way that sort of the semi-structure of it, but as we have had every program and even every learning break we're updating and refining the processes we go now. So almost the initial pathways, it'd be hard to even hunt them down now. We're using human learning rather than machine learning. There's a lot of challenges around bias within machine learning that people are finding it very difficult to kind of get behind, get out of. So we're doing all human learning rather than machine learning. But fascinating.

Michelle Ockers:

It is fascinating. And talk to me about some of the types of organisations or contexts in which coaching has now been used.

Emma Weber:

We're working with a bank in some leadership work. That you know, sort of starts out as one project. It's now two projects. We're now looking at more work for 2020. We're working within retail. The original client where we were working, we're now deploying across five countries for them. That's part way through that deployment.

Michelle Ockers:

How does it go with scaling? Are there any challenges with scaling it like that or is it a really easy solution to scale?

Emma Weber:

There's a question. Is it easy? Is it easy to scale? So we're currently in five countries, we're just going into our first language. So we are going into, we've got obviously English and we're going into French. That has some complexities which has been interesting. So that's been good to learn through that process. I think the fact that it's in tech means it is inherently more scalable and will be so. We're in discussion with some projects for 2020, where we'll really be able to answer that question. I think one of the things that I realised Michelle and again others may be able to relate to this. I think we'll start certainly start to see it where people have got artificial intelligence coming into a core business where you're used to working with humans. It's really challenged us as a team to then say, well actually what's the role of our human team versus our artificial intelligence team? I think of Coach M as one of the team.

Michelle Ockers:

Right? And do the rest of the team see her that way, or him that way?

Emma Weber:

I tell you, you could not want for more supportive team who are very, very excited about the work that we're doing. Again that has just been such an amazing group of people to work with.

Michelle Ockers:

How have you guided the team through that? You're saying it's challenging and that issue is going to come up all over the place and is coming up all over the place for people who have a team where automation has been brought into augment their work, changing their work. How have you guided them through that?

Emma Weber:

So the first thing was just transparency and sharing. The team have been able to use the tech and I have, I do monthly videos for my team. So for those that don't know, I have a core team that help me run the business. Then I have a contract team around the world. So we're currently in 12 languages, 16 countries. And so we have team calls every month. So we will have an update of what's happening. But I also do a video out each month to people so people will get the update from the video. So I think transparency and keeping people in the loop so that nothing's a surprise. We've also got a working party together at the moment that's looking at the augmentation of the human team and Coach M. So what we're finding in AI is a lot of best solutions will really be augmented solutions of the human team, leveraging the tech to get an even better result or to be even more efficient. So we've got a working group on that at the moment. There's I think the seven of us from the team who are looking at how those two products actually work side by side as opposed to having a tech product and the human products.

Michelle Ockers:

Can you integrate them to create a better solution?

Emma Weber:

Absolutely. Yeah. And I, and I think Michelle, one of the other pieces just to throw in, which was a complete surprise by-product, which we didn't know when we were talking to you a few months ago now if not years ago, 18 months maybe.

Michelle Ockers:

Sixteen months ago I think.

Emma Weber:

With the data that is actually generated by Coach M. So the data analytics, as long as you can protect the anonymity of your participants, for us it's important that people can speak confidentially and freely, the data then that's available to an organisation through those conversations is quite immense. That's been a real added bonus to our core principle of learning to create behavioural change and impact from learning interventions. So I just, I guess the reason I'm sharing that is for when people are out there working on new products, it's almost about being open to what other benefits might come even if it's something you weren't intending.

Emma Weber:

I've been doing some work with Trish Uhl across in the US and Trish has been a great supporter of Coach M, fantastic to work with her on it. And we really at one point were kind of coming to loggerheads. I was "can't you see the impact, the opportunity, this has to create impact for behavioural change" and Trish was "can't you see what this data can create for organizations?" And so we were both coming at it from completely different viewpoints. Which again, you know, that's the benefit of being able to collaborate with others I guess, who can bring a fresh approach. And luckily Trish helped me be not so precious. I said, "Nope, the data can't be used for anything." So we've got protection of the confidentiality and being able to use the data and getting some advanced data analytics happening now with the product as well. So that is very exciting.

Michelle Ockers:

It feels like we maybe need to do a follow up episode at some point later in the year about the data analytics side of things. Right. You grapple with that and figure out in conjunction with Trish perhaps, you know, how could that be used to create a new set of benefits or extended or deeper impact.

Emma Weber:

I certainly think that is something that's really worth exploring.

Michelle Ockers:

What have you learned through doing this work over this sort of 18 plus months?

Emma Weber:

Don't make assumptions. You know, the tech has really surprised us in terms of what's possible. The whole classic of when you're in an experiment and you have to get out of your own way and not be too prescriptive. But you know, leverage your experience, use it to leverage your experience. I've had a fascinating journey having a startup tech company inside an already established business.

Michelle Ockers:

Interesting. And that's, you know, bigger organizations, many of them are consciously trying to create that right - little tech incubators, innovation incubators. It's happened almost without your consciously seeking it.

Obviously Coach M has been one of your highlights in 2019. Have they obeyed any other highlights you'd like to share with us from 2019?

Emma Weber:

I think the opportunities given to go out and speak with other learning professionals. So I've been doing a lot of speaking this year and sharing the story and of course then that sparks other conversations and finding out what others are up to. So I've really loved that this year, really being out out and about talking to people.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. And for 2020 and obviously more with coaching, looking at the data, you know, continuing to work on that as a long term project. Any other key goals or plans you'd like to share?

Learning Uncut Episode 43
What Happened Next Part 1 – Denise Meyerson, Nicole White & Emma Weber

Emma Weber:

So I am heading back to Learning Technologies (*i.e. Learning Technologies UK Conference*) in February, 2020 and I am heading to ATD (*i.e. Association for Talent Development International Conference and Expo)* in Denver in May 2020 and also New Zealand, and hopefully speaking in Australia as well. So I think they're almost becoming an anchor point for my year to keep the learning growing and to keep conversations happening.

Michelle Ockers:

Excellent. And you shared something that was I thought was really important in the last conversation we had on Learning Uncut, the episode on conferences with JD Dillon . When I asked the question of what's one resource you use for your own development you talked about self-care. Obviously you have a busy schedule coming up so I know you will take care of your self-care. For all learning professionals, you know, it's January at the time this episode goes to air. I hope people are taking some time to take care of themselves to refresh, reflect, come back to the year recharged and thinking about their self-care. Because in learning we've got so much change going on and there's a lot of aspiration to do things better. I'm really optimistic. In the Year in Review episode which went to air on the 24th of December Karen and Amanda and I talked about the level of optimism that we have because of the kind of conversations we get to have on Learning Uncut. But you know, it's not without its challenge trying to be transformational and innovative in your work and it does require resilience and sometimes working with influencing people who maybe aren't ready to hear about some of the things you want to do. So I think self-care is really critical for both personal wellbeing and for professional success.

Emma Weber:

Yeah, for definite. I think one of the things I see when I'm out and about talking with people is that it can be challenging to find time to do new things because we're feeling so pushed actually just meeting current requirements and meeting demands from an organization. But what I have found as much as it's impacted time and workload, the amount of energy also from doing something different and experimenting and exploring has been an absolute plus. Compared to perhaps just staying with the business as usual, so although it can be hard to find time and yes, absolutely we need the paramount of self-care within that, I'd really encourage people, whatever their experiment is to really find time looking ahead for 2020 to say "OK, well let's just try and do one thing differently and one thing to experiment with because I think that will give energy back four-fold. And as we have found, you will never know where it leads

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. It's reinvigorating. So thank you so much Em. So for all of our guests who've listened to our little three mini episodes, minisodes, in today's episode, we'll put links back to all three of the original guest episodes as well as everybody's LinkedIn profile. And if there are any additional resources, we'll be sure to share those with you. So enjoy the rest of your summer holiday break. If you're in the Southern hemisphere and listening today during your holiday. Have a great 2020. Thanks Em.

Emma Weber:

Thanks.

About Michelle Ockers

Michelle Ockers works with business and learning leaders to realise the untapped potential of learning in organisations. She is an organisational learning strategist and modern workplace learning practitioner. Michelle works with organisations to develop and implement transformative organisational learning strategy, and to build the capability of their learning team. She delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events.   Michelle also mentors learning professionals at all career stages on career planning and professional development.

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:
- *Australian Institute of Training and Development Dr Alastair Rylatt Award for L&D Professional of the Year – for outstanding contribution to the practice of learning and development*
- *Internet Time Alliance Jay Cross Memorial Award – for outstanding contribution to the field of informal learning*

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