

Learning Uncut Episode 46
Bee Hepburn – Leading a Distributed Learning Team
Hosted by Michelle Ockers:



Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to episode 46 of Learning Uncut. My guest is Bee Hepburn: who is the Education and Content Manager at Xero (which starts with an X). Xero is cloud based platform that connects businesses with their accountants and bookkeepers. Bee leads a team of 90 learning professionals distributed in six regions around the globe distributed. Their job is to provide education and content to their customers. Until recently they had local business reporting lines rather than reporting to her in a central L&D function.

Bee approached me about sharing her story about how her team created their learning strategy. While we do discuss how they created their strategy and what it looks like, during our preparation discussion we realised there was a bigger story to be told. This story is one that will be relevant to anyone leading or working in a distributed learning team or a decentralised organisational structure – both of which are very common. It's about the challenges of leading a distributed learning team. With a strong belief in collaboration and openness, over the past two years Bee has shifted how the team works together across the regions, lifted their impact and opened up new opportunities for them.

Bee moved into this role almost two years ago after returning from maternity leave. She found considerable duplication, inconsistency and waste in the way the team was working. She shares with us how she worked to clear the air and create a new sense of purpose and cohesion across the entire team. Listen in for lots of practical approaches you could adapt in your team, collaboration tools the team uses, and some fabulous catchphrases that form a common language across the team and reinforce their new ways of working together.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome Bee. It's nice to have you on Learning Uncut.

Bee Hepburn:

Hi, thanks so much Michelle, for having me.

Michelle Ockers:

Can you kick us off by introducing us to Xero, which is spelt X E R O, and what you do and who you do it for as an organisation?

Bee Hepburn:

Sure. So yeah, Xero with an X. So it's a cloud based platform that basically connects businesses with their accountants and bookkeepers. It gives businesses a real time view of what's going on from their finances, invoices, expenses, and it basically ensures that accountants and bookkeepers can work closely together to keep their businesses in a healthy state. It's a global company. So we've got over 2,700 employees now and we call them Xeroes, and they're all around the world. So my current role at Xero is - I've been there for five and a half years - and I'm now the Global Head of Education and Content, which is a

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bit of a mouthful. Sometimes I have to explain what that means. So that that's where I am currently, the role that I'm in at the moment.

Michelle Ockers:

So can you tell us a little more about your role, your team and the purpose of your team?

Bee Hepburn:

So the teams that sit within my world are responsible for providing education and content for our customers, being small businesses, accountants and bookkeepers. So we teach them how to use the product and solve problems when they need help. Our goal is to be the first place that our customers look if they do need help. And actually, currently, we're branching out into soft skills, so trying to help businesses start and grow. So things more along the lines of marketing, leadership, recruitment, wellbeing instead of just Xero product training. And so I think maybe it might be important to discuss what education and content means because you know, there's a lot of variations, education, learning, training. In this context at Xero, it just means providing external education as opposed to learning and development, which I associate more with internal training. And then content refers to support content, which is our help centre. So those are the step by step articles that customers use to help use the platform. And then education is more eLearning, face to face, webinars, certification, that sort of stuff, so that it's sort of those two sides of the spectrum.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so there's quite a lot of different types of content and formats that you use to help educate the customers. And I think you had mentioned to me in some of our prior discussions, you also do some face to face events. Is that right?

Bee Hepburn:

Yeah. So we do face to face certification. We do other face to face events, but our biggest one is called Day Xero. So XeroCon is an event that Xero host. It's the largest accounting conference or event. And we now have the day before XeroCon is Day Xero, which is a face to face education day for our customers. We change the content up, but that's more around the soft skills. So you might learn about leading people or leading the industry, things like that. So that's sort of new thing for us. And we take that around the globe. So Australia first, then the UK and then US. So that's a pretty big event.

Michelle Ockers:

It sounds like a big event. I've got visions of ComiCon but with different outfits.

Bee Hepburn:

Similar, there are some outfits I'll tell you the accountants they know how to ...

Michelle Ockers:

Let's not go there, Bee, let's not go there. These guys are your customers. So you talked about the fact that this shift into the soft skills area - leadership, marketing, wellbeing and so on - is fairly recent. What prompted that why you're doing that?

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Bee Hepburn:

So we basically went out to our customers and surveyed what they wanted and what they needed. They absolutely came back with specific things around the product. But what was really clear is that they actually wanted help in their business. So they wanted to learn how to market properly, how do they use Facebook? How do they use Instagram? How do I recruit people? How do I lead? All that sort of stuff to help them run the business. So that's basically where it came from. And we went from there. And like I said, it's quite new. So Day Xero is part of that programme of work. And we're currently building content so that when customers go to our platform called Xero Central, they would be able to find Xero content, but they'd also be able to find soft skills content as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Are you creating that content yourselves or are you curating it, sourcing it from elsewhere? What's your strategy?

Bee Hepburn:

It's a bit of both. Mainly we're creating it ourselves. So a lot of the theory behind it is that we do a lot of this stuff very well inside Xero as a business, so we're trying to share that knowledge. So you know, we have a great PX or HR team, so getting them to share how they do things, our talent team. So using that, but we are also working in collaboration with some other areas. For example, you know, mental health is not something that that we are experts in, nor do we want to pretend to be. So we're partnering with some companies to create content and bring that content to our customers. So bit of both, but mainly us creating content based on what we do well.

Michelle Ockers:

That sounds like a good approach. And how do you determine your success? How do you measure success? How do you know if you and your team are doing a good job?

Bee Hepburn:

Yeah, there's many ways. We're actually really lucky at Xero because we've got a lot of people that work on data. We've got data analysts and data scientists and you know, they can help us out but NPS is a good one. So we always want to make sure that our customers are satisfied. We try and track our courses and what our customers then go on to do. So as an example, you know, we've got a payroll certification course. So if somebody consumes that do they then go on to use payroll efficiently. So that is a really good way to prove the investment which as we know, in learning is often quite tricky. So this is kind of a new space, I would say for us data and, you know, having all of that at our fingertips. So we are definitely still working on ways to measure this as well as possible but we still use the traditional information sheet so we get feedback from our customers. Because sometimes, you know, the numbers are fantastic, but you actually need a little bit more than that. If we get any detractors in our NPS, we make sure that we call them so that we can have a conversation about you know, what was missing. We look at, so as I think I mentioned before, our platform is called Xero Central. So we look at the numbers and we look at searches as well. So if somebody's searching for a term that throws nothing up, then I know that we need to create something. We've got a gap there. Same if somebody lands on a

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page, we can see how long they've spent on that page. If it's very quick, that means maybe the title isn't actually reflecting what's in that content. So there's so many things that you can do. And like I say, I mean, this, in some ways, is still very, very new to us to have all this data at our fingertips. But it's really exciting. It's, I mean, going from just happy sheets to this sort of stuff.

Michelle Ockers:

It is, and you're in a really data rich environment. But I think it's a call out for our listeners, no matter what kind of context you're working and what industry, what platforms you've got. We all have platforms of some sort that support learning and make resources available. So if you haven't yet investigated what sort of data you can get, and the example you get there about what search terms people are using to look for things, if you're not already into some sort of thinking and work around your information architecture and looking at how people are using the systems, I think that's an area for people to investigate to get close to their IT department. And if they had the benefit, like you do of a data team, get close to them as well. Really good opportunities.

So we when we first discussed sharing your story on the podcast, we thought it was going to be all about creating an organisational learning strategy. And for listeners, Bee actually approached the podcast to say I've got a story that I think it's worth sharing, and we're trying to encourage more people to come forward to see what we can unpack in the story. And what was really interesting, when you and I spoke about your story, what we realised was yes, it's partly about strategy, but there's a bigger story here about leading a distributed learning team. Many learning professionals work and distributed teams where they physically work in different geographic locations. Some, as with your team, all around the world. Sometimes they are also decentralised in their organisational structure where the reporting lines for each team are different. Some might report through to Human Resources or other areas of the business, some report through the business units. And this presents challenges in how the team works together and creating a common sense of purpose in some cases as well. So clearly, Bee, your team's distributed spread around the globe. Are they also in terms of reporting lines decentralised? Or does the Education and Content team around the world all report in to you?

Bee Hepburn:

Okay, so the team is centralised now. But it was previously decentralised. So I've got a bit of experience in both. And actually, it's only within the last few months, but all teams have come into report into me. And actually, we still have one team, our digital learning team, they report into another area. But now all the regions, so there's six regions - AU (Australia), New Zealand, UK, US, Canada and Asia - they all report into me, but prior to a couple of months ago, it was only Australia, New Zealand and then the global team that reported into me so it was almost half / half because there's nine teams in total. So that definitely did have its challenges. And I think basically what it took to make that shift was just to prove to the business, how much easier it was to get things done, to scale, to grow when everybody was reporting globally. So, Australia, New Zealand first and then slowly all the rest of them came on board. And so now everybody reports in to me, which I can tell you is a lot easier from my perspective with our structure at least.

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Michelle Ockers:

I think the challenge with the decentralised ... well, the challenge with a centralised structure, particularly for trying to convince your business stakeholders to agree to change the reporting lines, is there are always concerned that the closeness to customer is going to be damaged if the reporting line changes, even if the physical working location of people isn't changed, and they still sitting physically with the business. Can you talk to me about how you had those discussions and what it took to convince your business stakeholders to shift those reporting lines?

Bee Hepburn:

Yeah, look, you're 100% right. So the concern with any region was that if somebody goes and sits under a global team, are they not going to be focusing on what the region needs. So a lot of it was proving the model. And I guess I was lucky in the sense that before this current role, I was Director of Education for Australia. So when I moved into this role, the AU and New Zealand Directors, MDs, were quite happy for me to look after them. So I almost got a testing ground, so to speak. So we proved that it worked. We proved that reporting into global did not mean that the regions just forgot about what was required for them locally. We ask our teams to think locally but act globally. So the discussions really were around... I had to set realistic expectations. We're at a stage now where we have to scale. So we cannot produce a piece of content nine times in a different way. So it was explaining that we will scale things, will be more global, but we will never forget about what the regions require. And we do I understand that there are nuances in regions. We're talking about accountants. There's a lot of different rules and regulations. Tax is very different in countries and even sometimes states. So, you know, we're very aware of that. And we generally work to an 80/20 rule. So 80 percent Global 20 percent regional. So look, those conversations went down really well. And it was really just about sort of chipping away, and then seeing that it worked in Australia and New Zealand, and then getting them across a lot of it is sometimes red tape as well.

Michelle Ockers:

So demonstrating the viability with an initial pilot and building relationships of trust across the business.

Bee Hepburn:

Yep, yep. So far, so good, really good feedback. And yet none of the regions at all feel that they're not getting what they need from the global team. If anything, the feedback I've had is that they feel that their local education team now has so much more support behind them. And you know, so many more people benefits that come with being part of a larger global team with, you know, some of the roles that I was talking to you about before, you know, the data analysts, the digital people, the project managers, all those sorts of people can now help them as well.

Michelle Ockers:

You have a lot more flexibility with how you use the people in your team when you have that scale as well, don't you?

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Bee Hepburn:

Yeah, definitely. Absolutely. I mean, you know, we have big working groups, and we make sure that the regions are contributing. So what we don't want to end up in a situation is where a region feels that they haven't been heard. So if we just take a certification as an example, because I think everyone can probably visualise what cert looks like. If we just produce that globally or one region, obviously, that's not going to meet the needs of everybody. So we make sure we have working groups that span all teams, and make sure that they contribute during the creation so that we're hitting the mark for everyone. And then again, it comes back to that 20 percent rule. We produce it to a certain level and then the regions might need to tweak 20%. So there's still some local autonomy and flexibility around tailoring the content.

Michelle Ockers:

How many people total are in the education and content team Bee?

Bee Hepburn:

We're at about 90 now.

Michelle Ockers:

Has that changed at all with the shift in structure?

Bee Hepburn:

So it's probably doubled in the last six months.

Michelle Ockers:

What's driving that?

Bee Hepburn:

Well, those people always existed. They were just in a team that didn't report directly in to me. So they're a little bit hidden in terms of where they were. We always tried to work as one team and you know, you can do that to an extent. But when you do have different reporting lines, that can sometimes be a challenge.

Michelle Ockers:

I understand. And you had come ... you mentioned you'd worked in one of the regional teams, the Australia New Zealand team. I think you had a stint on maternity leave and then when you came back ... congratulations ... When you came back, you moved into your new role about 18 months ago? In what way, if at all, did it influence the way you approached your new role being the global leader, having worked in one of the regional teams?

Bee Hepburn:

It influenced me quite a lot. I think it gives me a really good understanding of the pressures that the education managers in regions face. So that's why I say, if we had have just taken a

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global perspective, and not worried about what they needed in region that never would have worked. So it also made me very aware of the need for each region to be heard. So honestly, we can't make everybody happy 100% of the time, you know, sometimes we need to create content that's needed by maybe four of the six regions, but my lead team understand that and that's just that's just how work sometimes. I think the other thing that I learned being in the role previously, is the importance of having a really strong lead team that collaborate and also having a leader to guide them. So having a global team that dictates doesn't work. You need to collaborate across regions if you're really going to have a cohesive team.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. When you moved into the role, what opportunities and at that time of course, it was decentralised, what opportunities did you identify to improve the you know, the way the team was working? Or the nature of the service delivery? Just generally, what opportunities did you identify to make improvements when you first went into your role?

Bee Hepburn:

There were quite a few actually. So the first one was that overall, the teams were working in silos. They really were. So as we said, reporting lines were scattered and that doesn't help, but the teams didn't know what other teams were working on. So there was a lot of duplication. Global, the Global Education team ... so I sort of mentioned before that there's regional teams, there's also a Global Education team ... they were producing content that the regions didn't necessarily want or need. And yet the Global Education team felt that the regions weren't contributing to the content, but complaining when things didn't meet their needs. The other thing was that content looked and felt different from each team. Processes were different for each team. So I think those were the biggest opportunities, the ones that I knew I had to tackle head on. We needed a reset, and we needed it fast.

Michelle Ockers:

It sounds like a lot of waste, if I can put it that way. A lot of energy going into things where you've only got a limited resource to provide a great service and there's a lot of duplication and waste and overlap in there and inconsistency. So Bee one of the things you did to address these opportunities was to gather team leaders from around the globe together in Melbourne for a week. Who came along to that session? Wow many people did you have? And what did you want to achieve in that week?

Bee Hepburn:

That was all the teams that I've mentioned previously, all of the managers from each team, so basically all of my direct reports, so I think it was, it was 12 in total, one of them being the digital team that reports elsewhere, but it's very important for them to be involved. Look, the ultimate goal for me, if everyone walked away with a better relationship and a sense of belonging to one team, that in my mind was success. We ended up doing a lot more than that. But part of it was really just building up those relationships again, and doing some repair work. I mean, we worked really hard, but we also had some fun, you know. We went out together for dinners and got to know each other. So some people have been working together for years. Some people didn't know each other that well, and some people actually needed to sort of rebuild the relationship. I understand it's a very big investment. But the benefit of this meeting being face to face was immeasurable. And it totally set us up for

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success. So apart from that first thing being to build relationships, the first thing that we did was - I opened it up for everybody to be really honest and open about their frustrations and issues. And they were they were fantastic. They were constructive. They weren't personal. But they expressed the challenges so that everybody understood the underlying tone of what had been going on in the past. So we spent almost a day noting and discussing what wasn't working in the team with the idea that we would then move on to resolve those issues. Then what I said is, we're drawing a line in the sand, no more back channelling, no more complaining about what happened in the past. We committed to each other that we would no longer work in that way. And we need to trust each other that that will move us forward. So that's how we moved into the following days. And that really set us up to start working on our strategy. And everyone had such a positive mindset. And it actually, it went better than I could have hoped. I think part of that, as you mentioned, I was on maternity leave. So in a way, I was more neutral. If I had have gone straight from my regional role into this role, I probably would have got somebody external in to facilitate it. But because I came back and hadn't been around for nearly a year, I thought I was neutral enough just to gather information and do it that way. And it worked really well.

Michelle Ockers:

It sounds like it was a fresh start in a way. Because you had just sort of come back from maternity leave it was an opportunity to say well, here's a clean slate. I'm fresh in the role. Let's talk about how we're going to do this. An interesting aspect of it is that the leadership team weren't reporting in to you at this point. So you had to work through influence, through looking at bringing people together ,through a lot of goodwill. There was no working through authority involved here. Right. Not in terms of formal authority.

Bee Hepburn:

No, only for a couple of them. But I wouldn't use that anyway to be fair. That doesn't make it very different, but absolutely was all about influencing people and making them see the benefit of us working as one team. And it's also about bringing the company's strategy to light as well. So Xero is growing at a massive rate. And so, Xero is scaling. We need to scale if we're going to keep up with the rest of the business. We were not going to do that if we just remained in silos. So it was kind of trying to paint the picture of what it would look like if we didn't make a change. And to be honest, I mean, these guys were easy to get on board. They're really smart people. They could see that that was, you know, best for the business and the benefits that they would get as well. So, and I think I think calling it out again, let's not pretend that everything's perfect, let's call out what the issues are, work through them and move on. And I think that helped to get everybody on board as well.

Michelle Ockers:

There was a lot of clarity and a lot of goodwill and people ready to engage. And you also created an opportunity on that day for people to gather insight, to generate goodwill and create some sort of sense of shared purpose. And I think you're right, the face to face is really important. I've worked with a number of communities of practice with getting them started. And one of the things I've learned along the way is to build relationships and to build them quickly there's nothing like getting people together face to face to shift the subsequent interaction when they're remote.

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Bee Hepburn:

Yeah, absolutely. And look, there's things that we have to do virtually. And we work around it. You know, we use technology, we use Miro, we use Hangouts and all those things. But especially in the situation where you've got some relationships that need some work - and I appreciate that not everybody can do this, it is expensive an exercise - but like I said, before, the benefits were just huge. And it just, it moved us forward at a much quicker speed than if we had have tried to do this from all the corners of the world.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. So you've reached a point at the end of that first day where you cleared the air created some goodwill, some sense of intent around how you're going to move forward together. One of the things you then went on to do in the rest of that time together was to create a new learning strategy for the group. And you use the Strategy On A Page format, or the SOAP for short, and we're going to include an example of a soap template with the show notes. Can you describe that format, or the elements in a strategy on a page for our listeners?

Bee Hepburn:

Yeah, sure. So there's quite a few elements to it. You've got the mission, financial objectives, values, goals, and pillars, and then your foundation. So with our mission, the most important thing was to make sure that it does tie into the company's mission, but our is a specific, targeted area within the company's mission. Then your financial objectives. So this might be things like NPS or reducing customer churn. Obviously, you've got to look at how you can back that up as well.

Michelle Ockers:

So that you can actually measure it. Is that what you mean?

Bee Hepburn:

Yeah, exactly. But I find the financial objectives really help to keep the strategy and goals in check. So as we know, in learning, sometimes we can get sort of pulled pillar to post. And if potential project doesn't help achieve the financial goals then you may want to question its relevance, and it can really help to keep teams focused. So I think that one's quite important. Then the key value drivers. So as an example, ours were trust, collaborate, delight, quality and consistency. So these underpin everything that we do in the team. So for each, the way that we got to these as well might be useful to know, is we literally were just shouting ideas and writing them up on a on a whiteboard. It was it was just amazing. You know, when people were thinking about our key values as a team, they came up with some great things. And what we then did was we grouped similar sections together, and then try to find a word that sort of defined all of those as much as possible. And that's sort of what we did for each section. And then the goal. So these were our must win projects. So for us, it was a new LMS, we desperately needed one; a global style guide - as I mentioned before, all the content looked different. And hashtag One Team is a phrase that we use. So, you know, those are examples of goals for us that we have to achieve. And then you move into your strategic pillars. So our pillars are scalability, work together, impact, quality, and customer centricity. And these are the basis for your initiatives, so they're the overarching topic. So underneath these pillars, we have initiatives that we work towards So as an example, work

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together had an initiative like clarity of roles or workflow management. Quality - style guide was under that, global templates and maintenance of courses. And then the final ones, the one that I think is the best is the foundation, enablers. So these are I think they kind of like a catch phrase. These ended up being our commitments to each other. So 'think locally act globally' was one 'quality over quantity', 'the customer at the heart of everything,' and 'one team aligned culture' were a few of ours. So that's the SOAP template that we use. And that's how when we were all together we worked it out. And I think the most important thing was making it a collaborative experience. If I had to devise a strategy on my own, and then tried to push it out, it absolutely would have failed it, we would have been back to square one. So for me, it was really important exercise to make sure that the whole team was involved in building that strategy.

Michelle Ockers:

That's right. The ownership and buy in is really important, right?

Bee Hepburn:

Yeah, absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

So you had this experience together, cleared the air, got really energetic around setting a new vision, figuring out how you wanted to work together, what things you could work together for the common good. And then the leadership team, everybody sort of split up and went back to their home office. What happened back out in the regions in terms of then engaging the teams out in the regions who hadn't been through this bonding experience and experience of shared purpose being created through being together? How did the flow down work to them?

Bee Hepburn:

I relied a lot on my leads. It's impossible for me to be everywhere at once. That would be an unbelievably expensive exercise, and I would never ever be home. That's not something that I can do. So I really rely on them to take the messages and all the lessons that we learned during that week and filter it down to their team. So the first step was to make sure that everybody within all the Education and Content teams knew what the strategy was. So we have a monthly town hall, where all of us get together. And I will say that that does take dedication considering the time zones. But if people can't be that they'll watch the recording. So the first thing to do was I went through the new strategy. It wasn't overly detailed, because I wanted that to come from the leaders. But I went through it explained what we did during the week, I think it's important for the people underneath to understand what you're doing at these offsites and what you're working on. So there was a bit of discussion around what we did that week and then working on the strategy and letting them know what all our initiatives were. After that we changed a few things. So previously, in the town halls, we would get a team update. Every team would go around and talk about what they did what they were doing. So we changed that to initiative updates instead. So to make sure that people were continually focused on this strategy, they knew that it wasn't something that we just set and forget, this was really something that they needed to get behind. And it was something that that should drive decisions within the region. So we constantly talked about the initiatives and where they are up to. And then probably the only other thing is with the leaders. So like I said, I introduced the strategy, but not in too much detail of town halls,

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probably not the right place for that people might fall asleep. But within their team meetings, I asked them to go into a lot more detail about the strategy and the projects that everybody would be working on. So that's how we rolled it out, and then made sure that it was a continual conversation.

Michelle Ockers:

Bee, how long ago was the strategy formed? When did the workshop occur?

Bee Hepburn:

This one was probably only a couple months after I got back, so yeah, maybe 18 months ago now.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And in that intervening time, what have you found the most challenging about sustaining the improved working relationships and the focus on being a cohesive global team, particularly as most of that time reporting lines were still decentralised.

Bee Hepburn:

Yeah, look, I think one of the challenges is sometimes having everybody on the same page. So if you look at the different regions, they're at different stages. So you know, we've got say, UK and EU who have big teams of twelve. And they're an established region. And we've got Singapore that's a standalone person. And they have very different challenges. So sometimes when we're discussing options or trying to make decisions it can be quite hard having very differing opinions, but that's when it comes back to the leads in my team really thinking globally and this is something that I'm just amazed by on a daily basis with them, they really don't just think of their own backyard. They do to an extent. They need to do what they need to do for business as usual, but they really think about what's important for the business. And I think the emerging regions also think that they're going to get to this stage at some point, so having all these processes etc, worked out that's helpful. So that can be a challenge. And then probably the other big one is, is finance. So, like I say, face to face is fantastic. We try to do this every six months, but it is a costly exercise. So that can definitely be a challenge. We do, as I mentioned before, try to do things virtually. And we've got some great ways of doing things now. You know, we've got voting, we have voting polls, and we measure things ...

Michelle Ockers:

Let's just stick with the voting thing for a minute. What sort of things would you vote on and who would get invited to vote?

Bee Hepburn:

Recently, we actually voted on our prioritisation list. So this is all the leads again. So we've got a list of courses we want to create and when to work out what order we're going to create them. And before that it was our new set of initiatives. So obviously initiatives come and go and when you finish them, etc. So we needed to vote on our new initiatives, and we weren't at a stage that we could get together in person. So we had to do this virtually, which was a real test, to be honest. But we use a platform called Miro and it's kind of, it's amazing

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to watch actually, it's like virtual post it notes. And so you can use a voting poll. And so people can vote on the initiatives. And so we grouped them in terms of our pillars, and worked out which ones were the priority, and did it that way. So it's some very cool technology out there that can help.

Michelle Ockers:

There is. Miro is M-I-R-O, is that right?

Bee Hepburn:

That's right.

Michelle Ockers:

Do you want to give us one more example of something you've found particularly helpful - either a technique, a way of working or a tool to help the team to work together globally.

Bee Hepburn:

I think the pods is probably the thing that is most successful. So that's not necessarily a tool, but it's more of a process. But whenever we are working on something that that does sit across different regions, we need to make sure that all teams are contributing. So otherwise, we would end up in a situation where one area creates something and it's just not meeting the needs. So really committing to taking that extra time up front, when you're starting a project and getting the right people involved and making sure that you're putting a brief together on what the outcomes are. I think just when you get to a point where the team is so big, you need to take a little bit more time up front to be clear so that that people can get across things and be aware of what's going on before you move to the next stage at lightning speed. And then it's done and dusted before they know it and it's not even what they want.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. You use the term PODS - P-O-D-S . Is that right?

Bee Hepburn:

Yeah. And for that's just as in like people, a group of people. We call them working pods. And it's just so as an example, what we might do if we were rewriting certification is we would have one person from each region, and it wouldn't be a lead. It would be an education specialist or curriculum writer, something like that. We have a digital education specialist. So from the get go, we've got somebody looking at the output and visually how it's going to look. We'll have somebody that might be connected from the content perspective - do we have something that we could connect to from the help centre? So just making sure that all the worlds are across these big projects that we're working on. And like I said, probably the biggest key to that is one of our new phrases actually, 'slow down to speed up.' So we like to say that to each other if we think we might be going a little bit too fast sometimes and people were falling behind. So sometimes it's really important. I mean, don't get me wrong Xero is lightning speed. I think most tech companies are. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that it's important just to take a little bit extra time to get everybody to the same point.

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Michelle Ockers:

I really like the use of these little phrases to get a response and there's a common language you guys have developed - these little phrases like 'think globally act globally', the 'slow down to speed up.' They mean something and they trigger a response and a behaviour.

Bee Hepburn:

Yeah, it's amazing actually. So we use Slack as a communication channel. And so the guys have found little emoticons to use. So, if we post something, you know how I just said slow down to speed up, if it's something that we need to take their time, they'll put a little icon of a turtle. If it's something I need to make a snap decision on it's a crocodile. You know, there's little things you can do like that to make it a bit of fun. It's really nice to see that stuff filtering down. That's not just sort of from my lead team that's throughout all the people across the world that have sort of caught on to our little catchphrases. Which I really like, it's good.

Michelle Ockers:

It is good, common language. Bee, reflecting back on how you've grown as a leader in this period, what do you feel you've learned as a leader over the past 18 months?

Bee Hepburn:

I think the most important thing for me, I've always believed in collaboration, and I absolutely will say collaboration is key. Making it a safe space for people to air their concerns in a healthy way is unbelievably important. So we talk about healthy conflict. If you want a unified and cohesive team, everybody does need to be heard. But probably my biggest lesson is that sometimes I need to step in. So especially when you've got a big team, you know, eleven direct reports, it could go around in circles sometimes. So collaboration is amazing. But sometimes as a leader, you need to be able to step in and just know when it's going too far and make that decision for people. That's probably my biggest lesson learned.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you. You've spoken already about a few things that I think are great takeaways for people who are working in distributed learning teams. You've spoken about the value of getting together from time to time face to face, even though it's expensive, it's worth doing. You spoke a little bit about some of the tools and technology that you use, about some of your operating rhythm with your monthly town halls. If anyone is keen to work more effectively, either as a member or as a leader of a distributed team, apart from these things you've already shared with us or maybe you want to pull out one or two of those if they're your biggest tips, what would your key tips be to help them to work more effectively as a distributed team?

Bee Hepburn:

Look, I think you have to be honest and upfront. Don't let things fester. When I came back, that's exactly what happened and it had just spiralled out of control, which is why it required such a reset. The other thing that I do like to talk about is to be open to other people's ideas. Even if you go in thinking you have the answer. Be curious to hear what other people have to say, because it might just be better than your idea, you never know.

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Michelle Ockers:

I find a lot of that. Bee, I have one final question for you. Could you please share one resource you find valuable for your own professional development?

Bee Hepburn:

Ooh yes, there's one I'm loving at the moment. It's called trendwatching.com. So you can subscribe to the newsletter, you can get the feeds through your laptop. It's not education specific. But they talk about trends and insights. And a lot of it crosses into our world. So as an example, last week, they were talking about brand avatars, and the first virtual news reader in China. And so I was thinking about all we need to start thinking about virtual trainers. So not tomorrow, but you have to have this stuff in the back of your head so that you can be ahead of the curve. So I'm absolutely loving that site.

Michelle Ockers:

It's fantastic. Okay, I'm off to subscribe. Thank you. So Bee, we're going to include a link to your LinkedIn profile if anyone would like to get in touch with you to find out more about any of the topics you've discussed with us today. Thank you so much for your generosity in sharing your work and insights with me and with the listeners. And thank you for having the courage to approach me to do a podcast episode. I really appreciate that.

Bee Hepburn:

No, thank you, Michelle. It was a great experience. I definitely recommend other people contact you. It's great.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you for that. So for our listeners, I'm still settling into the seat as solo host of the podcast. I'd love to get feedback from you as to what you're enjoying about the podcast and any ways I could improve it. So please just connect with me on LinkedIn and share your thoughts with me. Also while I remain absolutely committed to sharing stories from Australia and New Zealand, I'm also taking the search for stories from learning professionals global. So if you have a project or initiative undertaken in your organisation, regardless of where you are in the world, that you think may be of interest, please approach me. Use Bee as your role model. Don't be shy, and let's get more great stories out there. Thanks again Bee - it's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you.

Bee Hepburn:

Thanks Michelle.

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

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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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