

Michelle Ockers:

Ravina, hello. We're continuing our Elevate series on skills development. It's nice to see you again.

Ravina Bhatia:

Likewise, nice to see you again.

Michelle Ockers:

And of course, we had stacks of time together last week. We were at the HR and L&D Innovation and Tech Fest in Sydney, which is rapidly becoming one of my personal favorites for conferences in Australia. And you did a session about skills, which I thought you titled it very cleverly, Skills Accelerator, Putting the Excellence Back into EX. So the play on words there, what was that all about?

Ravina Bhatia:

I love that question because there was a fair bit of thought that I put into that. And that really is about firstly, this approach that we're going to talk about today. We truly believe and have seen in organizations that we've deployed this approach, that it does truly put the excellence back into employee experience by accelerating the ability to build skills, by giving people in an organization, employees of an organization, tangible ways to develop themselves now and also into the future. And so I thought that was that title aptly captured the essence of this approach.

Michelle Ockers:

I thought it was very clever as well. And I love that they put you on the big stage where they brought together both HR and L&D streams, if you like, into the one space for topics that were relevant to both audiences and not just niche to one of them. Which, of course, we've always tried to position skills development. We know it's not something L&D does on their own. And the approach we take is something that's relevant broadly across a range of HR or people in culture teams, Ravina?

Ravina Bhatia:

100%. And the process that we talk about today will bring forth a lot more of that, which is how do the different teams need to come together? How does the whole of the organization need to come together to ensure that we're truly building careers, we're truly creating that employee experience that we do want in our organizations?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, and so that leads nicely into process. We spent a fair bit of time in recent episodes looking at the seven elements of skill building with a deep dive into three of the most critical goal alignment, multifaceted development approaches and accessible development. And of course, the process that we've designed here does incorporate all of those seven elements, as well as coming from, you know, an extensive amount of experience that we've had with skills building over the course of our careers. So shall we move straight into the process?

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Ravina Bhatia:

So at Learning Uncut, we love doing things in threes. And so the process for skills building is in three as well. So what are these three phases? Phase one, co-designing a custom skills framework. Phase two, implement the framework, and phase three, developing a skills toolkit. Doesn't that sound very simple, Michelle?

Michelle Ockers:

I'm going to make it a cautious, hesitant yes, because often people get stuck on that very first step, Ravina, or fall into a few traps with that. And that's co-designing a custom skills framework, which lays the foundation for the entire approach. Of course, We did talk about some of the essentials to getting started in the very first of our series. I think that was Elevate 19. So assuming you've got those in place, what are you doing in this phase, the co-designer custom skills framework?

Ravina Bhatia:

I love that you've referenced what we need to have in place before we get into this process at all. So yes, absolutely. So assuming now you've got the essentials to get started, you start by defining the end state. I'm assuming you know the purpose, because that's one of the essentials we need to get started. So what does the end state look like? And I'd like to introduce something over here which we haven't talked about earlier, Michelle, which is a lot of people, a lot of organizations associate having a skills approach to the learning and development team only. And this concept is that it can be used throughout your employee lifecycle. You can use this approach to hire, onboard, develop, upskill, grow, both vertically and laterally, and to manage performance, to name just a few. So I want us to stop thinking about this being skills-based learning only.

Michelle Ockers:

We've seen a lot of issues with some of the teams we've worked with, with getting a common approach, getting everyone unified across their people and culture teams. When one team thinks they own the skills agenda rather than it being a joint effort, Ravina, I think that's one of the things we're really trying to address here, is to bring all of the people who touch the employee life cycle together, as well as the employees themselves and their managers around a common view. around skills in the organization. I think that's a game changer, right?

Ravina Bhatia:

100%. And one of the other things, the second thing we had said that you should have in place before you get into this process is getting buy-in from your business stakeholders, sponsors, but also getting your PNC and HR teams on board Now, assuming you've got them on board, you collectively then would decide the extent to which you would like to take this approach. What that means is you could decide to take a phased approach, where you might decide to use skills for employee development initially. Test it, make changes, make improvements, and then move on to, say, for example, upskilling to help people grow internally, either vertically or laterally, to manage performance and so on and so forth and you can phase that out. This doesn't need to be a big bang approach where you go every single employee activity will need to be based around skills from the get-go. While that's a great state

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to get to, there is merit in deciding firstly if that is something that would benefit your organization or not And second, if yes, it is something that you would want to do for the whole of employee lifecycle, how might you phase that out? What's the best phased approach for you? So I think that's really important to decide that end state at the beginning when you're laying the foundations, getting everybody on board so that every person who impacts employee experience in your organization can start working towards that.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, the other advantage of a phased approach is it gives you an opportunity to do some tests and learn, right? To try things out, see how they're working, see what adjustments you might need to make before you go broader.

Ravina Bhatia:

100% absolutely. And so let's assume you've got the end state, you've decided what your phased approach would look like, you then want to identify scope. We've briefly alluded to this in our previous conversations, but what we mean by defining scope is, what will your focus be? when you talk about a skills approach. There are typically three types of focus areas that you could have. You could decide that in your organization, you would like to adopt an enterprise skills approach. And what that means is really having, defining, and identifying critical skills at an enterprise level. What that really says is that every single employee in the organization should ideally have those critical skills. Those are critical to your organization's success. That's the first. The second could be specific job families. Think leadership, sales, customer service. So broad areas or skills, that your employees should have. And you can see how that starts to get a bit granular. You could still have some critical skills that would be relevant for every single employee in your organization, but you have specialization and customization for broad areas within your organization. And then you've got the third one, which is at role level. And you can see how that is even further granular. The decision to the scope, what the scope for your skills approach will be, will be based on your organization size, functions, the number of employees, and scalability, and so on and so forth. It will largely be driven by the purpose of your skills approach and the extent to which you want to take it. I'll give you a quick example without getting quite deep into this. So if your organization, the end state, is to be able to have a whole-of-employee lifecycle skills approach, which means to be able to hire employees using a skills-based approach, move them internally, and so on and so forth, using an enterprise skills approach will not help. will not help you meet the end purpose because it's not granular enough for people to be able to be hired, for people to be able to move internally. While you're discussing or deciding both scope as well as the extent, this isn't to say that if you've decided what your skills framework would look like, Anyone who joins the organization will need to have all of those skills if you're hiring for that role. Even within that, you will decide which of the skills that you'd like to hire in with and which of the skills that you would like to build internally. So you can see there's a fair bit of conversation that needs to be had around purpose, extent, and scope. even before you start to identify and define skills, because your identification and definition will depend on these key decisions.

Michelle Ockers:

And that buy or build decision is something that can fluctuate depending on market conditions. So we're seeing a lot more building than buying perhaps than we did two, three years ago at the moment.

Ravina Bhatia:

100%. You've talked about something that we get asked a lot, Michelle, and we were asked about it at the TechFest as well, which is why not just buy skills tech? Why don't we just buy a skills library? Because, well, the answer is skills tech or skills libraries come with thousands, if not more, of skills built into it. To be able to achieve your organizational goals, that is where that building is needed. So yes, you could buy it, especially if you're an organization that has, say, 40,000 employees. We've spoken about the example where we did this work for a global insurance provider. This global insurance provider has up to 60,000 employees globally. So there is merit for them to buy a skills library, but identify and build skills frameworks at a role level for these employees from that skills library.

Michelle Ockers:

So they can give you a kickstart, right? Hence, co-design a custom skills framework doesn't mean you have to do it from the ground up. You can start with a good quality library, but you do need to contextualize.

Ravina Bhatia:

100% contextualize, customize, ensure whatever library that you buy into or skills deck that you buy into has that ability for you to be able to tinker with definitions so that they make sense to employees who access them. So that employees don't look at them and go, that doesn't look like a skill that I need at all. And that's really important. And you do that by leveraging human-centered design techniques and benchmarking against industry standards. So going out to your employees, finding out where is it and what is it that the skills that they need are. Ensuring that we compare them with best-in-class industry, your competitors, what's out there to ensure that we've not missed any of these critical skills. We want to look both inward and outwards when we do this. And then come up, co-design, and review the framework collaboratively to ensure, most importantly, that it will get your organization to where you want to get it to. So what I'm trying to say over here is it's not just the skills that your organization needs today. It is skills that will likely be needed by your organization, by employees in your organization in the near future as well. Now I say near future because your skills framework needs to be dynamic. You will periodically need to review it, look at the skills, and find out and identify are there skills that are now redundant, do we need to retire some skills, bring in new skills, and so on and so forth. Now, that's a topic for a different conversation altogether, but I do want to introduce this idea to you that this isn't a static framework that stays forever frozen in time because it is unreal in today's evolving world. To tell employees these are the skills you'll need for forever more in your role. That's just not the way.

Michelle Ockers:

Very, very, very true. And that the co-design as well, you know, one of the principles we talked about or one of the key elements was around goal alignment and that co-

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design approach can certainly support that and gain buy-in along the way and make sure that what you're putting together is meaningful and appealing to your workforce.

Ravina Bhatia:

100%. So you can see, just in phase one, there's a fair bit of work, there's a fair bit of thinking that you're doing, some good quality thinking, just to identify and define your skills framework. Which then takes us, Michelle, to the second phase, which is implementing the framework.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. So I've seen a lot of instances, I think we talked about this before, where there's a beautiful skills framework, but nothing happens with it. So this is all about bringing it to life and making sure it's going to resonate and work well in your organization so that you can get it into the hands of The end users, your workforce, your managers, and it's not just something that sits there in the background and is used by, if indeed it's even used by your P&C team. So how do we do that? What do we need to do to implement the framework, Ravina?

Ravina Bhatia:

The first thing, and we do this so often, Michelle, across the different bodies of work we do, which is we test it. And testing and iterating it is one of the central elements of human-centered design. You take it to the users of the framework, of these skills, to ensure it is relevant and applicable to the real world of your employees and your workplace.

Michelle Ockers:

and that they can understand it as well, right? Hopefully, if you've co-designed, and this is kind of a bit of a challenging, interesting question, we might have people saying, well, if you've co-designed it, why do you need to test it? Like, surely the co-design takes care of making sure it's relevant. So, let's talk about that for a moment.

Ravina Bhatia:

So yes, you've co-designed it, which is quite true. So this assumes that you've asked people for their input and you've incorporated their input. But remember, with any kind of input, you put in your own filter on things. So when you test or you play back, what you're doing is you're going back to people that you've spoken with initially and said, Did I understand what you said correctly? Yeah. Remember, there is a fair bit of aggregation you will also do. So you will take input from employees, you will take them at across different levels. And we can talk about the how of human centered design, co-design approaches, etc. at a different time, because it will require probably an episode or a webinar of its own. However, having said that, when you play back, you're saying, so these are all the inputs that we got. We've also tested them in the market with industry best practice frameworks, with competitor frameworks, and this is what it looks like. And this helps you ensure interpretation is right, it's accurate, it's complete, but also that it resonates with people. So when you open their eyes to newer things in the framework, in the skills that they see, it resonates with them. And you're able to capture that feedback to iterate and adjust. And this brings in one of the important elements across our seven elements of

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feedback system, which is, using feedback to adjust and hone the framework to ensure it aligns not just with your organization, but your people as well, bringing to light again another element, which is goal alignment. And then finally, we create a plan and we take input from our people base, from our employee base on how they think, they would like to interact with and use the framework. And this is the phase where we ensure that employees have the ability to be able to assess and specifically self-assess their skills against the framework. So ensuring that is built into the process, that is built into the framework, because this is one of the elements that is critical to the success of a skills approach. There is no point telling me what are the skills that I need to have without me having the ability to be able to assess the skills that I have or don't have to be able to identify gaps and work towards a development approach to them.

Michelle Ockers:

I think this is a really good point as well, that linkage into continuous learning and encouraging our people to take more ownership of their own learning. We often talk about these and aspire to these things in organisations, but we have to give them the wherewithal to do that and give them some sort of way of navigating their development around what skills are useful in the organization to figure out what skills do they want to develop. So I think this is a really useful way of encouraging and equipping people to be able to take more responsibility for their own development and also to do that in collaboration with their managers, which is why this step around, how do we get the skills framework in a format that's usable out to the workforce for them to interact with and actually use it in a meaningful way. Such an important point, Ravina.

Ravina Bhatia:

Absolutely. And, you know, really for a skills framework to make an impact, and you've said the obvious here, unless you've got a tangible way, for employees to be able to use it. It's just a framework, maybe an Excel sheet, maybe something beautiful that you've created without effective tools. And it becomes a very theoretical exercise. So you've got to have that development approach associated with it. Now, at this point, we're talking specifically about having a development approach, upskilling approach. that'll help across multiple exercises. There will be different toolkits that you might need depending on the extent that you want to go with for your framework. So if you're looking at being able to hire. for your organization using a skills-based approach. In that case, you will need a toolkit that is meant for hiring. So this conversation or phase is focused towards development, and I just want to call that out over here.

Michelle Ockers:

So we're in phase three now, right? Develop a skills toolkit. In this case, the purpose of this skills toolkit is for development.

Ravina Bhatia:

Absolutely. And having said that, you could use, we are using the word development. You could use it to onboard employees. You could use this toolkit to be able to move upskill people, develop people, performance conversations. You could use it for

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moving people internally, either laterally, vertically and so on. Preparing people for succession. So just consider all the different purposes that you're using the toolkit for and don't limit it simply to learning and development activities. Focus on holistic employee development here. So that's the first thing to consider when we talk about development. And here are where two really important elements that we've talked about that are one of two of the three critical elements of skill building is multi-faceted development approaches and accessible development. And the third one, which is feedback systems. So you need to incorporate these three key elements into your toolkit to allow employees to develop themselves. And it allows employees to develop themselves where, when, and how they want to. This toolkit has to be able to enable what we constantly refer to as a continuous learning culture. And that is why these three critical elements are really important in the way that they're developed. Consider the environment that your employees work in. Is it online? Is it offline? And it has to be tailored to the unique needs and platforms of your organization to ensure employees can access them. So to ensure that employees can actually use this toolkit that you're putting together for development. And an important element that people tend to miss, I've referred to multifaceted development already, we've talked about it in previous episodes as well, is that we often see people have like these list of courses and resources, which at best I'd call a curriculum to go, this is how you develop yourself. But In reality, that's not how people develop themselves. We've had research tell us that 80% of learning happens either by working, by looking at different people on the job or actually doing things yourself. So you know that the experiential and learning from others elements is a lot higher than the simple courses and resources, which have their own place, but that makes up for only 20% of the learning that we have as individuals. And I don't want us to get stuck on the numbers.

Michelle Ockers:

Let's be careful about numbers. I know that there's at least one framework out there that's gotten really hung up on the numbers, but I think your point is a valid one that consistently, and there's a whole body of learning science around the need for practice, the need for reflection, the need to do things, spaced repetition, things that aren't part of going and doing a course, particularly if they're kind of one-shot courses for just a set amount of time or one day or half a day or something like that, that we need to offer employees the opportunity to practice, to apply in their work, to reflect, to interact with others. So I think that general principle is one that's well founded in the evidence about how learning works, particularly organizational learning or workplace learning.

Ravina Bhatia:

Absolutely. And there's one really important factor that goes a long way in this toolkit to ensuring that employees are able to develop themselves. And that is the role of leaders and managers. So this true development can only be done when leaders or managers are invested in the development of employees. And it's not just in terms of here is a list of development courses and resources you have to do or a list of development activities. It is equipping managers and leaders with the tools that they need in order to help employees. So when you think of your development toolkit, it is, of course, your employees who are going to develop themselves. But equally

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important, if not more, is tools that you would like to give to your leaders, to your managers, in order to help them develop their employees, their teams. And these could be, when we keep talking about providing tools, look out in your organization. There are likely tools that you already use that can be embedded into what we're calling a toolkit. This isn't about reinventing the wheel, creating everything from scratch. So if there are existing performance link tools, development conversation tools, this is where you should link them in and maybe help them with some guidance with some development that would help incorporate these into skills development conversations.

Michelle Ockers:

It's a really nice supplement and solution for a problem we often hear from organizations around that individual or personal development planning process and either people aren't engaging with it or the quality of the development planning and the conversations is not where it needs to be to truly get people's skills building. So it fits really nicely in with any organization who wants to get more out of their development planning process that's already in place, Ravina.

Ravina Bhatia:

Absolutely. One of the questions that we did get asked at the HR and L&D TechFest, and in fact, this was in a panel where we had three of us who'd implemented skills-based approaches in different organizations. And the question was, how can I get my employees interested in skills-based development? Now, if your leaders, if your managers are having development conversations focused on skills and they have the tools to have those conversations in the right way, your employee base, your workforce will have no choice but to engage in it. If your performance management approach and your approach to helping people build their careers and move internally in the organization is skills-based, your employees, again, will start to think in that same way. Because you've got a common language now. You've got the tools, the common language, and a framework. And that sets you up for success. So this is where we talk about, we go back to one of the points that we raised early on in our process, the extent to which you would like to take a skills-based approach.

Michelle Ockers:

I just love that this is about making it easy for people by giving them the guidance, the tools for them to engage with the skills approach. I think most people will embrace something that's useful for their development. And if people aren't engaging with your development approaches, look at how you're supporting and enabling them. I think this three phase approach makes a lot of sense. We're seeing a lot of good results with organizations that we've been working with. And in fact, in our next episode, which we at the moment anyway, will be the final one in this special skills development series for the Elevate podcast, we're going to talk about a couple of real world examples. We've given examples along the way in every episode, of course, but we're going to build that out, almost like mini case studies with a couple of the organizations we've worked with, which I'm excited about. And there's something else I'm excited about, Ravina. The webinar recording, we did an introduction to skills development webinar earlier this year, October, not that long ago. Gee, time is flying. Five weeks ago, six weeks ago as we sit here today. There

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has been a lot of interest. So we've done something in response to the popular demand around that webinar from people who weren't able to make it. Do you want to share with everybody what we've done?

Ravina Bhatia:

Absolutely. So we have a webinar recording, and this is now available for viewing via the resources page of the Learning Uncut website. We'll include a link to that in our show notes, won't we, Michelle?

Michelle Ockers:

We absolutely will, as always. So I'm excited for the next episode, Ravina, where we'll be unpacking a couple of real-world stories. For those who have listened, thank you for your ongoing interest in skills building and be sure to check out that webinar recording if you haven't already engaged with it and some of the other resources that are available on the website around skills. Thanks, Ravina.

Ravina Bhatia:

Thank you, Michelle.

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Learning Uncut are learning and development consultants that help Learning and Development leaders and their teams become a strategic enabler so that their businesses can thrive. We work in evidence-informed ways to drive tangible outcomes and business impact and are strong believers in the power of collaboration and community. We specialise in helping to build or refresh organisational learning strategy, update their L&D Operating Model, enable skills development, and conduct learning evaluation. We also offer workshops to shift learning mindset and practices for both L&D teams and the broader workforce – as well as speaking at public and internal events.

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About your host, Michelle Ockers



Michelle is the co-founder and Chief Learning Strategy at Learning Uncut. She is an experience, pragmatic organisational learning strategist, L&D capability builder and modern workplace learning practitioner. She also delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events.

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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