*Michelle Ockers:*
I am so excited about this episode. I have two amazing guests
from Mind Tools for Business joining me to talk about the 20th anniversary of the annual L&D Benchmark Report and key insights from this body of research. Welcome to the Learning Uncut Elevate series, Gent Ahmetaj.

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
Amazing pronunciation, Michelle. Amazing. Thank you. Thank you.

*Michelle Ockers:*
I took some care with it. It's nice to see you again. And Anna Barnett, Dr. Anna Barnett, welcome.

*Dr Anna Barnett:*
Thank you, Michelle. Thank you for having us. It's great to be here.

*Michelle Ockers:*
I truly am excited about this body of research because I refer to it and use it all the time in my work. I first came across it almost 10 years ago now as a practitioner working inside an organization as an L&D leader and found it extraordinarily useful. And it continues to be really useful and valuable with the insights it offers into the practices of high impact, high performing L&D teams. So, Gent, I'll get you both to introduce your role and what you do specifically in relation to this body of research. And then we'll talk a little bit about the background of the research before we talk about some of the 20th anniversary findings and the fantastic reports you guys have put out there into the world. Gent, your role, you've been with this body of research for a while now.

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
Oh, too long. Too long, Michelle. It's been, I think, almost seven years. I'm the head of research. Within this area of work, I really support Anna. She's kind of leading things right. So I don't really lead this side of the work. She tells me what to do, and I do it, Michelle. That's kind of our relationship.

*Michelle Ockers:*
That's true, Anna?

*Dr Anna Barnett:*
That is very true. Yeah. So I actually only came in a couple of years ago. So Gent took me under his wing from a very different background. I was sort of working academia with infants to studying brain development. So completely different in some ways, but actually very relevant in others when we think about learning. So I was really excited to join the team. And yeah, I work as senior researcher now with Gent and create these reports and think about insights and try and understand through conversations with the likes of yourself, Michelle, how we can turn them into sort of practical advice and move forward, I suppose, with this data.

*Michelle Ockers:*
So this is interesting, right, thinking about how we do research and even what L&D professionals listening to this could take away about their own practices, working with data, working with evidence. So you've got two of you, potentially with slightly different skill sets.

How does that partnership work? Again, you said you work for Anna. What does that mean, Anna?

*Dr Anna Barnett:*
Well, I think the benefit for Gent and I is that we both have similar but complementary skills. And I think the best thing you can have in any team are people that do very different things. So Gent is extremely good at looking at the data, thinking a bit more outside the box, sort of challenging me to think, well, pushing me a little bit further. I would say I'm quite good at probably bringing the insight into language that we can all understand and therefore use and think about in that sense as well. So our relationship has evolved to become, it's certainly in this side of the work that we do, one where, you know, I might take the lead a little bit more on our reports, but again, is my kind of sounding board, the person that I go to when I need some advice and some help and just, you know, able to see things a bit clearer.

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
I think Michelle, Mike did a lot of heavy lifting there. I think if not for Mike, she does a lot of the work and a lot of the data there, it's quite a routine analysis most of the time. But in some cases, again, analysis is done in collaboration. In the majority of times, you kind of want to have a sounding board where you say, did I do this right? Does this make sense? Do I analyze this in the correct way? There are so many analytical tools out there, Michelle. It's impossible to pick the right one always. So you always want someone to just kind of check your work.

*Michelle Ockers:*
Yeah. So now I'm thinking there's another episode we have to record up at some point about working with data analysis and working with the data analyst and how to do that. Well, again, but I'm going to park that for now. We're going to run out of time. Is it about eight, nine, 10 years you've been working with this body of research, Kent?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
I think it's been eight years. Yeah.

*Michelle Ockers:*
My God. Okay. And it is a 20 year long body of research. Would you like to briefly introduce us to the background to this body of research over that 20 years?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, it started with Laura in 2003. Laura Overton.Talent, thinker, brainchild of this kind of like project, if you will. And it started in 2003, trying to think about the impact of e-learning on business impact, right. How does that look like? And beyond that, it was trying to shift and understand why or how organizational learning has an impact on business outcomes like profitability, growth, transformation, productivity. And that has continued ever since.

*Michelle Ockers:*
Okay. And it evolved into, it didn't start out as a benchmark. It started out as a more broad inquiry. At some point it evolved into a benchmark when some common practices and themes were identified. So now it's run as a benchmark since 2008. So it's 15 years it's been running as a benchmark, which anyone can go and do and put a link to the benchmark. in the show notes, but you continue to work. You have like 800 plus L&D leaders and their teams complete the benchmark every year. Is that about right?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
On an annual basis, yeah. Yeah, that's correct. So it's about 700 to at times a thousand, depending on the year.

*Michelle Ockers:*
Okay. So you've developed this deep set of insights and you publish a freely available public report every year, which is an amazing contribution for the profession to make that accessible to anyone in an L&D role who's interested in lifting their impact. yields incredible insights. And the thing I'm constantly impressed by is you kind of bring something fresh to the data every year. So I'm not sure how you figure out or how do you figure out every year? Like what's the question or how are we going to approach this? How are we going to make sure it just doesn't sound like every other annual report? What does that look like?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
Very good question, Michelle.

*Dr Anna Barnett:*
It's that curiosity though, isn't it Gent? This is where our curiosity comes in for sure. Because Gent and I, we do ask a lot of questions and it gets us in trouble sometimes, but we push. And I think that allows you then to start thinking about things in a different way. So in the past, we've often focused on, well, what are some of like the activities or behaviors of like higher performing teams? Whereas this year we thought, well, let's reframe it into think about, well, how do they do that? And what is it about the how rather than the what? And it feels like a small change, but actually the impact of that is huge, because then we're like, well, let's think about how can we reanalyze the data in ways that we haven't done that before. And so we can change it without actually having to do very much at all to the data. You can kind of just flip the question and you completely open up a brand new sort of tunnel, I suppose, to start looking at.

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
Also, it's very funny, because analysis in most cases leads to nothing, in a lot of cases. And so it's just the willingness to try out something different, you know, a different approach, a different way of looking at things, you know, manipulating the data, you know, segmenting the data in a different way, trying to understand, you know, maybe I've missed something in the previous years, let's look at it fresh again, let's not have we might have routines in data collection and data processing, which impact the manner in which we analyze the data as well. And so getting rid of those and starting fresh also can impact how you analyze it ultimately. So every year or two years, you kind of just want to step back and say, am I processing the data correctly? Maybe I should do it in a different way. And that will yield a different insight.

*Michelle Ockers:*
Okay and we're going to come back to that in a moment because you did something different this year and it did yield a different insight which I'm very excited about. So because it's the 20th anniversary you published not one but three reports this year, you did this three-part series. Part one was looking back on what have we learned from the past 20 years and I know Laura Overton did the foreword for that and did some work with you on that which I think is very fitting given you know she's kind of like the mother of the benchmark, if I can put it that way. She'll hate that, but anyway. So then we came to part two, which is kind of current state, where are we at now? And then to part three, which is looking into the future, which is a very brave place to go. And we're going to do a two-part series here. on the 20th anniversary reports. In this one, we're going to focus on the analysis of this year's data and thinking about what does it tell us right now? And then in the next episode of Elevate in two

weeks time, we'll take a look at, well, what are those kind of, how did you think about the future and what the data might tell us about the future? So let's start with the part two in the series. And of course, I'll link to these in the show notes. Really interesting title, Unlocking Excellence, the Strategic Business Alignment Blueprint for L&D. Where did the title come from?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
A lot of transitivity prompting, discussion between myself, Anna and Nadia, and tweaking from our editors, who I would say actually know the English language compared to us in the Insight team that are just winging it. So I think that's kind of like came along, but we were very happy with it because I think it represents the report.

*Michelle Ockers:*
Yeah. And I think the strategic business alignment piece is the kind of the central focus of this report. Right. So you did something you talked about again, stepping back and going, how am I looking at the data? Is there something I might be missing? How could I analyze it afresh? You use something called network analysis this year. Is that the first time you've used network analysis to look at the data?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
Yes, yes, it was a steep learning curve. I think, yeah, the main reason actually we even used it was because Anna asked a very key question. And looking back on our reports, we asked, what makes a difference for top performing teams? Why are they top performing? You know, we tried to answer this question many different times, in many different ways, via the maturity model, via practices, via behaviors, but they were all while very relevant, very, very important contributions, I would say they were all kind of like, two dimensional, they were looking at chronological steps, if you will. Whereas the network analysis is a slightly different way of looking at things. So put it simply, Network analysis is the study of connections between and across various points in your data. Points in this case could be anything. It could be people in a social network, which is very, very, you know, that's where they use it most of the time. It could be stops in the transportation system. So if you have a train system or traffic, that also is a network in itself. Or it could be specific behaviors that you observe in people and therefore then you take note of, right, in the workplace. And in technical lingo, the manner in which you analyze this, they're called nodes, right? So that's what they are called if you were to devise a data structure for network analysis. So within this node, we look at frequency. How often does this thing happen in the workplace, let's say, which indicates the level of importance of activity.

*Michelle Ockers:*
So in this case, what was a node? Was a node a specific behavior that you gather data on in the benchmarking?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
Exactly. And we collect data on a hundred plus behaviors within the benchmark. So that was the way we wanted to understand the frequency of this behavior. And that was the, if you look at the network analysis that we did, those bubbles, They are those variables. Yeah.

*Michelle Ockers:*
And I would encourage everyone to open up the report and take a look at it and refer to this conversation while you're doing it. Pull it up now if you haven't got it already, because it will help you to make sense of it. So you've got these bubbles and then you've got the lines connecting the bubbles. What are the lines all about?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
So the lines is very interesting because when you do network analysis, you have to have two data sets. You have to have one data set, which is telling the algorithm what the nodes are. So these variables, like how frequently are they happening? And then you have to have another data set indicating the connections between these nodes. And they are called edges. I know, I don't know why data scientists make these names up, but it doesn't really matter, right? So there's nodes and edges, and the edges tell the algorithm where the weight of the connection. The higher the weight, the more important the connection. And so that's where you see the green lines coming to fruition, right? So the green lines are telling us that the weight of this connection is much more important than the other connections that you see in the system. So it's very central to the whole network, these connections. They make everything else happen, if you will. And so, The node and the edge make up the network graph. So what you see is the visual manifestation of network analysis. Does that make sense? I hope it does.

*Michelle Ockers:*
It does. It does. And I think it's really helpful. I've seen many social network analysis diagrams. And that's kind of, it's easy to get your head around a social network analysis because you can, the weight of those lines is easy to understand. It's about kind of frequency of connection or interaction between different points on the nose. How do you figure that out from the benchmark data set? What weight to allocate to the connection between different practices?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
Michelle, I love your question. So we had this discussion between Anna because we were talking about what, how do we, how do we understand the relations between two variables in, in social sciences, in most cases is correlation. But correlations are symmetric. So if, if variable A is correlated with variable B, at let's say, point three, the connection is both ways. So it's point three on one side, and it's point three on the other. So that's a problem for network analysis, because you need to understand which direction the connection is going. So there are some types of, again, not going into technical detail, but there are some types of correlations that you do that are asymmetric. So you want to see the direction of the correlation that is higher than the other way around. That's how we created the connections.

*Michelle Ockers:*
So you just took the direction of the connection, whichever was the higher?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
Yes. So it could be, for example, from A to B, it was like 0.5, but from B to A, it was 0.2.

*Michelle Ockers:*
You know what, I think I'm going to have to go and spend some time with chat GPT and say, explain this to me from the perspective of a nine year old and see what happens. I think you just exceeded my technical ability to follow it. But I'm going to trust you because you are the data analyst and I can go and do my research afterwards. When you did this and you created a separate network analysis, you've got four levels in your maturity model. And at each level of the model relates to the extent of impact that L&D teams are having on their business. What was your key finding when you compared the network analysis for the L&D teams in each of these levels of maturity in your model?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
I mean, Anna can jump into this too, because we discussed this extensively between each other. There are, the most interesting finding for me personally was the fact that the

networks between stage one and stage four, so the least performing and the most performing are fairly similar in terms of activity. So there is very similar activity in terms of like the frequency of things happening between these two, uh, segments. but they are having vastly different outcomes. And that was really fascinating for me because I wanted to understand why is that? Why are they doing the same amount of activity? They're both running at the same speed, if you will, but they're having completely different outcomes. And that's where the strategic and business alignment aspect came in because on one side of the network analysis there was no center, there was no connecting tissue between all the activities they were doing versus top performing teams where strategic and business alignment was at the very center of the network connecting to all other practices in the behavioral ecosystem.

*Michelle Ockers:*
Right. So does that mean it was that strategic and business alignment practices were the biggest bubble or just the most extensively connected to other practices or a bit of both?

*Dr Anna Barnett:*
A bit of both. So it was through this analysis, really, that we focused in this whole report on strategic and business alignment. So in the past when we've done these annual reports, we've tried to cover pretty much all sort of the big practices that we do track.

*Michelle Ockers:*
And there's kind of six meta practices, right, that you divide all these little practices into.

*Dr Anna Barnett:*
Yeah, and strategic business alignment, of course, is just one of them. And then we start this analysis before we did anything else quite early on, actually, we tackled this. And then we saw the visuals of these graphs. And we thought, gosh, like right at the center of the graph for the top forming teams is strategic and business alignment and activities that are relevant to that as a practice. And we thought, right, that there's something about this. And so we really started to deep dive into that as an area.

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
And one thing to note, actually, is the additional analysis that Anna, you did on regression, trying to understand how much does strategic and business alignment predict outcome in comparison to the other six practices? And wasn't one third more? I can't remember exactly the numbers.

*Dr Anna Barnett:*
Yeah, it was, I think it was, yeah, about a third, it predicted about a third of the behaviours that or the achievements, sorry, that organizations have, strategic business alignment or activities related to that were the predictors of that success, I suppose. Whereas if all six practices contributed the same, it would be about a sixth. So you can see the difference in that just when you think about numbers.

*Michelle Ockers:*
Okay, so just doing more stuff. We've known that just doing more stuff, you've got to do the right stuff, right? So you can be equally busy as an L&D team between one team and the other. But this idea of focusing on strategic and business alignment and the set of practices that fall under that will lift your impact significantly. And there's also a key insight, Gent, that you've shared with me in the past around the difference between the higher performing teams and those who aren't getting the same degree of impact lies in how well all these

activities are connected to the business as this kind of amplifies things. What does the data tell us about how the high performing teams actually achieve connection to the business?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
It's a hard question to answer. And, you know, most of the data that we collect answers questions of what, because it's quantitative, how is usually answered by process research or quality research in most cases, right? So I don't think I can pretend to say that we know exactly how they do it, that would be more context dependent. But one thing that was very counterintuitive in our finding, and, you know, we every year, we see this variable being a top performing signifier. So the behavior is, we analyze the business problem before recommending a solution. So that is an absolutely critical practice in top performing teams, all of them do it at a very, very high rate in comparison to local teams. However, Anna, And I'm telling you this, when she told me this, I was like, definitely incorrect.

*Dr Anna Barnett:*
You made me check like three times that I got it right.

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
I was like, there is no way, there is no way this is correct. And so I'll let Anna explain what she found.

*Dr Anna Barnett:*
Yeah, so essentially, we kind of plug lots of different behaviors, activities into you know, my data analysis to see which ones are having an impact on achievement. So it's quite an easy kind of analysis in the sense that we're working out what's predicting the number of achievements that organizations have or goals each year. And we found that this year that that particular behavior, so, you know, analyzing problems before recommending a solution actually was having a negative impact on the number of achievements that you have. So we saw that it dropped by about, I think by 8%, less achievements overall compared to say the average. And this made no sense, we both were just sort of stumped for a good afternoon trying to think well how on earth do we explain this in the report because for a long time we said this is really, really important. And so then we started thinking, well, maybe it's not about maybe this is where this connection piece comes in. Maybe we need to be thinking more about, well, maybe you can't do that, that behavior in isolation. Perhaps it has to be done alongside other activities. And when you think about, you know, meeting needs of businesses on time, so delivering learning initiatives that are in time to meet the needs of the business. that seems like a really good activity to kind of combine with, you know, analyzing a problem before recommending solution. Because if you are taking your time analyzing that problem, eventually the business moves on. And you're therefore, if you're not going to manage to deliver a solution in time, then it's no longer relevant. It's no longer important anymore. So then we started looking at these behaviors and we found quite overwhelmingly that when organisations do these things at the same time. So they really find that balance between making time to think about, well, what is our problem? What can we do about it? But also keeping very close to, OK, we have this amount of time to get something in place. We need to kind of meet this need, you know, by this point. we found that actually organisations achieved about 14% more of the goals that they would otherwise achieve for the year. So I think it shows really nicely how things are connected in that network that we were talking about. And this is a really nice example of where probably one of those really strong connections between two behaviours were found.

*Michelle Ockers:*
That's really interesting. Go ahead, Gent.

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
No, I was just gonna say coming around to your question, Michelle, because it seems like we went a whole roundabout if you so it, it's about simple, end to end behavior and practices. If you analyze the problem, that's amazing. You know, you have this capability to do so. But if you don't execute the findings, is just half the answer. It's half the outcome.

*Michelle Ockers:*
Yeah. I have a bit of a hypothesis here as well. And maybe if you haven't already looked at, you can think about this one. Not all problems are equally important to the business. So you can spend time analyzing problems and going for a whole stack of goals, which are not as important to the business, right? So I often, when I work with clients, everyone is busy. you know, more than ever, there's so much pressure on L&D teams to work on so many things. And we are getting more astute, I think, around this idea of doing your analysis problem, properly aligning to business. So I often fall back to the 80-20 rule. Do you understand what your business's top priorities are and how are you going to focus your energy and effort on the things that matter most to the business? And I think, I don't know if your data says anything about that, but I would be curious about that.

*Dr Anna Barnett:*
I think that's exactly what you've summarized there, Michelle, is exactly what that network graph shows. It's about those top performing teams are thinking before anything else about how does what we do align to the business? What does the business need? What are the goals? And therefore, if it doesn't serve the needs of the business, then it's just not a priority to them. And that is what makes them top performing because they're holding at the center of all their activity.

*Michelle Ockers:*
Yeah. Anything to add, Gent?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
Last point, I promise. I was just going to say, when we did the analysis on business leaders and their priorities, so when we released the report, I can't remember if it was this year now. God, Anna, you've done too much. It was earlier this year, right?

*Michelle Ockers:*
It's something you do every couple of years, looking at the leader's perspective on L&D.

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
Yeah, that's correct. Yeah. One of the key things that we found in this case was that there is a lack of, less so than previously, is consistency in terms of what the business is prioritizing. So there's less coherence between leaders on what is priority. And that has a unique challenge for learning and development, because they have this area of leaders, all important, all wanting to do their thing. having different priorities, different expectations and different thoughts about where L&D fits and navigating this is extremely difficult.

*Michelle Ockers:*
Yeah, it can be. I often advocate to clients to set up some sort of governance board, predominantly made up of business leaders or people that they've delegated, have got decision making authority and pull them together. Because the decision about where the L&D team invest their time, effort and budget is a business decision that should be made by the business and get everybody else to arm wrestle it. Don't get stuck in the middle of those decisions if you've got too much to do right. And if it's unclear, you're getting mixed signals about what's important in the business. So I want to round out, there was a comment you'd

made to me previously about shared responsibility, Gent, and the importance of persuading key stakeholders that organisational learning is a shared responsibility. and how critical that is to aligning the efforts of the L&D team to business critical KPIs, which I think relates directly to that part of the conversation that we just had. Do you want to elaborate on that a little and any insights from the data?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
What a hard question, actually, because we get this with our clients very, very often. How do I Sorry to say, but it's just there's no answer to this that is amazing for everyone that can use. It's very, very heavily context dependent. And as an example, if learning in the organization is seen as an activity, a day out, then there's work to be done first in shifting the mindset. So you have that aspect to deal with. But you simultaneously have to still do your day job. You still have to kind of succumb to the demands of the business that is seeing you as a training center, maybe. And taking small wins, almost deciding, you know, which wins am I going to go for and which losses am I going to take for now as I'm shifting the dial slowly. And I think most L&D teams are in that space. You know that statement that you mentioned, Michelle? I would say that's an ideal. I would say 90% of organizations or L&D teams are not close to that. They're not close to having a shared responsibility. And so I think, yeah, it's an ideal. It's something to strive for. And a lot of organizations are not going to be there just now, but it's taking small wins and accepting that. just because you accept a training request doesn't mean you're terrible.

*Michelle Ockers:*
I think that's the key. I often say to people, it's about, I mean, change happens one conversation at a time is what I often say to them. So even though you might raise, you know, if we can use the jargon, like you might raise, you know, analyzing a problem or taking a performance consulting approach when you get a request, even if you get a, no, just give me the training, you've raised it and you are one step closer to a yes in the future, right?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
You could even be sneaky and maybe, you know, put in a measurement in there when you get a training request and say, OK, OK, that that's cool. Let's do that. But let's just let's just put this measurement in. Let's just see if it actually works. And in that way, the person that asks understands, OK, this is being measured and you know if it's going to have an impact. If it does, amazing. You've done your job. And if it doesn't, then the person will have maybe a change of mind.

*Michelle Ockers:*
Yes. OK, so I think we're close to the end of this part of the conversation. There's so much more we could discuss about this particular report, but I love how it's just focused very clearly, as you say, on that one meta practice because of the work that you did to kind of unravel it. That's the glue that binds all of these other practices together for those that are making the highest impact. Is there anything you'd like to round out the conversation with Anna?

*Dr Anna Barnett:*
No, I think it's more just that I think what I've learned this year, and I think it's just worth remembering this, is that we don't always have to look at everything. And I think the research that we normally would do in these reports would cover, you know, so much in just one report. And this year it was different because we did only focus on strategic business alignment. And actually, I think it's a nice almost, I don't know, metaphor or, you know, it helps us realize that that's precisely what I think others should be doing as well. Focus on one thing at a time. Don't try and do everything like a, you know, stage one team, try and

think a little bit more about, you know, we can do one thing, and we can really focus on that. And let's get that going. And actually, other things fall into place sometimes a little bit.

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
And so yeah, so I think I've learned… That's stage two. Yeah, that's stage two. If you look at the network analysis, the second network analysis is a huge drop off in activity.

*Dr Anna Barnett:*
Yeah, yeah.

*Michelle Ockers:*
Yeah stepping back and thinking. I think that's great advice. Anything else you want to add, Gent, before we round out this particular part of the conversation?

*Gent Ahmetaj:*
No, Michelle, I've said enough.

*Michelle Ockers:*
Okay. We can never hear enough. And I think for anyone who is interested, I obviously will put this part two of the report plus the leader insights report you mentioned in the show notes. But it does just focus on the one meta practice. Go to, I'll put a link to the research section on the Mind Tools for Business website where you can access all of the past reports. So you can take a deeper look at some of the other practices as well as you think about this. Thanks so much, Gent and Anna.

*Dr Anna Barnett:*
Thank you, Michelle.

 **About Learning Uncut**

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.

Learn more about us at our website.

## 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*

Find Michelle on LinkedIn