

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome back, listeners. In the spirit of reconciliation, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. I'd especially like to acknowledge the Brinja Yuin nation on whose lands I stand today. And I'd like to pay respect to elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who may be listening to this podcast at any point in time. So today we are continuing the Small Elevate mini-series sparked by the skills research report Ready, Set, Upskill, which was recently published in March 2024 by RMIT Online and Deloitte Access Economics. It's part of a four-year series, four years so far on Going Strong. And this year, the report was subtitled Maximizing the ROI of Skills and Training. The last two Elevate episodes have focused on this report. So in episode 31, I discussed the report with Kade Brown from RMIT Online and Rhiannon Yetsenga, who was deeply involved with the research from Deloitte Access Economics. In the subsequent episode 32, I gave my perspective as a practitioner about the recommendations for maximizing your investment in skills and training. There was one part of those recommendations that particularly captured my attention and interest, sparked my curiosity, which is why we have Nick Petch here today from Deloitte. And we're going to be talking about skills sprints. Nick, welcome to Learning Uncut Elevate.

Nick Petch:

Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here.

Michelle Ockers:

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and your work, Nick?

Nick Petch:

Yeah, I'm a Senior Specialist Lead at Deloitte as part of Human Capital. I tend to answer the question about what I do by saying that I'm a design-based researcher who spends their time at the intersections of learning, design and strategy. I've been in design for about 23 years and I think about half of that I've been dedicated to learning.

Michelle Ockers:

Fantastic. And having worked in design in other areas, it's always interesting to talk to people who bring the lenses of other disciplines to their work in learning. And I know we've got a lot of that happening with the work that you do. I know there's also a strong academic body of work you're pursuing at the moment. You're doing a PhD, I understand.

Nick Petch:

Yeah, almost there considering it. But yeah, I continue to do my own research on the side. So whether it's a hobby or just a lifestyle choice, I'm compelled to continuously do research.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So there's a little term I have for certain people in our field who have legs in two camps who are squarely based in research and also in practice. And they're kind of our research translators, research practitioners. I know other people have other terms for them. I put you in that camp and we're going to stay on the practitioner side of that line today, because I really want people to understand what skill sprints are and what they potentially mean for L&D. And we're going to follow up with a case study in the regular Learning Uncut series to bring this to life. But we want to lay some foundations with you today, Nick. So let's get started. Can you explain to us in simple terms, in layman's terms, what's a skill sprint?

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Nick Petch:

Yeah. So skill sprints is really a method for learning, one that accelerates the skill acquisition journey by pairing the learning experience with real world job tasks. And the idea that underpins that is that each job task is supported by just enough performative resource. So from an end user's perspective, this means that learning becomes your day-to-day. Each week, you sort of start out by planning and prioritizing from essentially a list of job tasks that relate to a skill that you might be developing. Your week really becomes focused on actioning these tasks in the flow of work. And this will be supported by a formal and peer-led support network that we build around you. So I guess in many ways we've taken the principles of problem-based learning and action-based learning and crossed these over with an agile methodology to create a cure for modern learning and performance.

Michelle Ockers:

So Nick, it sounds like there's some elements that people are going to be familiar with already in this description, so we can bridge from what people know to maybe what's new. So tell us, how do skill sprints differ from more traditional approaches to on-the-job training or to courses that include opportunity for practical application, practice back on the job?

Nick Petch:

Yeah, it's a really good question. So to create skill sprints, we tend to take a job task first approach. We sit down and we go, OK, well, what are the job tasks that pertain to a particular skill? We find that the average skill has around about 16 job tasks, give or take. And the philosophy, I think, is more of a customized iterative learning experience that is really tailored to the needs in those particular job tasks. And what this enables us to do in comparison to training is rather than a predetermined one-size-fits-all curriculum, it enables us to produce a fast-paced type setup that provides rapid skill acquisition and application. So no longer do we need to pull people out of work and put them into a training simulation. We just give them work because it takes the stance that learning is work and work is learning. There are many other facets, including the structure. So we want to promote more of an iterative, immediate application structure to what's happening. One of the learnings that's come out of Skill Sprints is just how little instruction people really need. If we sort of think about it from a content perspective, we're also shifting heavily away from hypothetical learning outcomes and topic-focused learning and towards go and do this particular task with just enough resource. So, these tend to differ, I believe, in terms of not only how they're delivered, but the pace in which they operate. And also, I think the actions, activities of the end users that we're actually designing for as well.

Michelle Ockers:

It's fascinating. I've got so many questions. The next one is, you know, it kind of feels like for today's fast paced world where time is again and again and again, the biggest barrier to learning and people are thinking learning means I have to come off the job and I don't have time to come off the job and down my tools. There's some kind of obvious benefits to this approach. But what makes them particularly effective in today's environment? And when would you choose to use this approach over other options?

Nick Petch:

Yeah, it's a very good question. You know, some of our early research in this particular space led us to an insight that told us really, there seems to be a decline in the volume of reskilling initiatives, yet at the same time, an increase in the change in complexity of job tasks. So what this tells us, I feel, is that the traditional construct of training is, in fact, too slow to keep pace with the change of the world. I've been in this industry a long time. We know that to build a decent training program, it takes time, it takes money, it takes

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resources. And then by the time we deploy it, well, things may have well changed. So I think this is really part of the real need for a better way of doing skills and skills acquisition in the current landscape of things. I think that if we think about why you would want to use this particular method over a traditional training method, I think skill sprints really shines in terms of proving return on investment and learning's impact. And I'll talk about that in a little more depth if you like. It's primarily used for skill-based learning, for changing ways of working, for dealing with disruptions and augmentation to skills and to tasks. I think Generative AI is going to be a really good example. Generative AI isn't necessarily going to dismantle a skill, but rather change the way in which job tasks are performed. So how do you do that? How do you implement that into a workforce? Well, Skill Sprints is really a perfect answer for that. I think also it potentially sets a new standard for organisational learning. Coming back to the theme of time and not having enough time to learn, I would argue that you know, when are we learning always? When are we not learning? Never. And that work is learning, that actually the best simulation for learning is work. And that's something we've been trying to get at, something we call the chasm, which is really that massive kind of hole that happens after training, going back into the workforce. And, you know, when we go to organizations and we try to work inside of them to change the way in which they think about learning and change the way in which learning interacts with their day-to-day, that is absolutely the number one thing we run up against is time. But if you take a deeper look across what's being done in L&D, I feel like there's a lot of wasted energy and organizations continuously pump themselves full of third party content and massive skill taxonomies, which aren't corollary to job tasks. So we really need to ask ourselves, you know, do skills relate to job tasks actually have any performance at all.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. So if we're talking about starting with job tasks and the skills that are needed on the job, does this mean that if you're thinking about future skills development for roles that people aren't yet in, that this isn't the right approach?

Nick Petch:

It's a good question. And I think it's one of is the organization ready to begin practicing those types of job tasks? And this is really where the rubber hits the road because we made a lot of organizations and they might say, we want to be cyber ready or generative AI ready. And it's like, okay, well, what do the job tasks look like? And they go, we have no idea. And this is where it gets really, really interesting because for a long time, I feel like L&D has been sitting as an order taker, producing topics and content and deploying and sort of crossing fingers and hoping that has a bit of a real world impact. But since we start talking about skills and job tasks, that all changes. The conversation completely shifts and we're able to start actually forming what the future workforce practice really looks like. So I would say twofold. I would say can you even have a skill in an organisation if people aren't practising the job tasks? It's an interesting notion. And I think also B, we can begin to simulate these job tasks inside of the organisation in order to start preparing for the future.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. So it actually gives you the opportunity to have a different kind of conversation about future skills and bring them more into the organisation now and help the organisation get a clearer understanding of what those skills are going to look like, how people are going to use them and maybe even start to introduce them into some real world job tasks, Nick.

Nick Petch:

Yeah, a hundred percent. And so we found that most organizations are taking a top-down approach to this stuff. They'll go, okay, we've got a skill taxonomy of 500 skills we're going to implement. And then they go, what's the training content need to be? And it's like, it sort of

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starts and ends there and then it goes to the LMS and that's where learning goes to die. As we know, if we take a job task approach, it's very, very interesting because we can go, okay, well, What are the 16 job tasks to this skill that need to be performed in context, and what sequence do they run in, and who's involved, and what technology does it cross over with, and is that a changing practice, right? All of a sudden, we're really looking directly down the barrel of where learning really, really occurs, and where performance really, really occurs, probably mostly where human error really, really occurs as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Nick Petch:

So it's fascinating, I think it's a fascinating future to be thinking about. I guess, yes, skills are the future, but job tasks are actually the currency that will get us there.

Michelle Ockers:

It is really fascinating. Who are the key players involved? In terms of people who need to get involved to run a skills sprint? who needs to get involved and where is L&D sitting in all of this? What's L&D doing and who are they working with to do it?

Nick Petch:

Yeah, it's very interesting. Let's talk about the environment first, the broader environment. So I think the most important thing for learning is to create the right conditions, particularly outside of a training container or simulation, right? If we want people to learn in the flow of work, then the actors in the broader ecosystem are really, really key. There's going to be various scenes that need to be played by managers, by coaches, by peers, by SMEs and experts that are going to be supporting learners in the flow of work. So that's sort of where we tend to start in terms of creating the right conditions in the broader environment. And I guess to bring that to life, we have to think about designing for everyone, not just a single end user, but also for the people who support our primary use case or user. The role of L&D, I think, changes. I think it becomes far more integrated. So we often hear about getting a seat at the table and things of that nature, right? When you go and define a set of job tasks, you're going about as deep as you possibly can to the smallest atomic particle of work if you will, which means that you really need to go into the organization, into the area in which these job tasks are occurring and actually work directly with those practitioners, those SMEs, those people who actually perform the tasks. And what kind of gets interesting is we can sort of start to go, okay, well, this is what we do today. What do we need to start doing for tomorrow? And are the job tasks we're going to train for today for these particular skills going to be the job tasks of today, or are they going to be the job tasks of tomorrow? So that's, I think, the role of L&D is actually to kind of go in and do deep performative observation and job task analysis and really form those job tasks up. One of the benefits of doing that approach is this bottom-up approach enables us to actually also validate the skills and even the competencies as well. So we might have a skills taxonomy and it's got its definition and levels of proficiency, but we don't know if those skills are necessarily true for the environment in which we're actually talking about. So the job task up approach is really also offering itself as a way in which to validate those skills or get those skills to fit into the context in which we're actually designing for.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, my brain is going to all sorts of connections here, Nick. So I'm thinking this idea of we have to do the fieldwork, as my friend Nigel Paine would say. We're very much in the field. Trish Uhl, who's been a past guest on the podcast, talks about going to Gemba, going to the place where the work is done. And this is very much grounded in the place where the work is

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done. And I know one of my other guests, David Broadhurst, talks about the difference between work as imagined and work as performed. Yes. And that's one of the traps for us in L&D is if we're just going off, you know, job SOPs, procedures, descriptions, job descriptions and so on paper, that we miss the work as actually performed. It's the work as imagined in too many cases. So it cuts through a whole lot of challenges for us. I have another question, which I'm going to suggest we defer for our case study example, because I think it will be answered there. But just in case listeners are thinking, come on, Michelle, ask this question. And that is around personalization versus scaling. And how does this scale whilst also being personalized? And I think the answer is it does. And you've done this, but I think the case study that you're looking to bring to us will demonstrate that. Did you want to comment briefly on that so we don't leave people hanging, but to leave them with a nice hook?

Nick Petch:

100%. So I think this is the most personalized learning I've really seen out there implemented in the field, because if we use a simple sprint structure such as plan, do, review, for example, in that planning phase, you can actually pick and prioritize which job tasks you're going to go after as an end user, right. So what that really means is that you are in control of your personalization. It's not like a preset bunch of pathways or, hey, I want to watch a video over reading a document. It's no, I'm going to go and tackle this job task with this person and I'm going to go off and I'm going to do this job task with this other group of people. So you're in full control. And that's a situation we can sort of settle between like a manager and a learner at the start of the week. And that sets them up for success by helping them to find the right opportunities. There is something important to touch on. I think I'll maybe just shine a light on it. So if we look at the L&D model at large, again, one of the bigger problems we see is there's an inherent lack of permission to engage in authentic learning in the flow of work. Whether you want to sort of chalk this back to a fear of failure, a fear that people are going to run off and break things, you know, the idea of permission is really, really interesting because without giving people permission to personalize and to go after what they want in pursuit of their learning through their own inquiry, then there's no motivation. There's no human motivation, intrinsic motivation that's going to follow. And part of that is about, again, creating the right conditions and the opportunity and the permission to actually personalize and go after this stuff as an end user. So I think part of the personalization comes back to the problem-based and action-based learning principles. So the idea that potentially the workplace problem is the trigger, that it actually urges you to go after inquiry and investigation. It really promotes more of a lifelong learning skill. Rather than just sitting there and consuming. And it sort of puts you in the driver's seat of integrating new knowledge in the flow of work, which I think is probably about as relevant as you can possibly make learning for adults who go to work. At the same time, the way in which we tend to design job tasks and the way they operate and the sort of learning goals that sit behind them is we encourage experimental collision and engagement with peers, with coaches, you know, and iteration and application. So one of the interesting learnings we found is how long it can actually take to master a job task. You know, it could take five, six, maybe seven iterations of practicing that job task to get really, really good at it. And that's one of 16 job tasks in a particular skill. So there's so much richness down there. I think the other really powerful thing about a job task is what happens when you take a job task and you apply it across different contexts. I've always said context is queen, and I think when you take the one job task and you apply it across three or four contexts, that's where the real learning happens. That's where the real mastery begins to come to the fold, and that's where I think you start to form what was once a skill into more of a capability where you can use it in more adaptive, unfamiliar situations.

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Michelle Ockers:

And that's something we can never capture in training, right? In a classroom in particular. Exactly.

Nick Petch:

Because it's the art of surprise as well. It's the art of adaptation. It's the art of, well, you know, we're going to adjust the brief with a bit of a random variable here from the real world where it's kind of like the job task we've given you, but it's actually in a different context. So you're going to have to really think, problem solve, adapt, communicate to kind of work your way through this. In terms of the benefits, I think, around the overheads for L&D and a lot of people are probably going to be asking questions about content, of course, because we tend to be stuck in that domain in L&D and how does customization kind of work. We found that curating the job tasks and building those from the ground up enables us to then really effectively work across an organisation to curate from what they have, their various tools and frameworks. We tend to reshape that content into performative job aids and process guides and attach those to each of the individual tasks. And that method's been really effective for us. So we've found that, A, we've been able to reduce the cost of training, the speed of implementation, and then the measurement side of things has been really, really impactful, not to mention the ROI as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Immediate application to the job. Nick, I'm going to pause and I'm going to put a line in the sand over this episode. We could talk for another two or three hours. You've completely captured my curiosity with this. It's an example of a real approach that gets right to the workplace and skills people up with where they're at. It does sound resource intensive, so we'll explore that when we look at the case study and what did it take for the particular example we're going to explore in the case study episode to work. And we can talk then about how do people get started. In the meantime, if people want to know a little bit more about Skills Sprints, are there resources that you can point us to that I can pop in the show notes or anything, if it's not already in the public domain, anything that you can share with us that we can pop in the show notes?

Nick Petch:

Yeah, so look, the best thing, reach out to me directly is always the best way. Look, this is something we've been working on for about three years. And we've been iterating with different clients through different implementations. And we believe we've sort of finally landed on the right formula, the right methodologies and methods that bring it all to life. And we've been creating a platform that facilitates it. And so we are due to go to market very, very soon, actually, on this. And there will be a lot of resources coming out shortly over the next month or so.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, well, I'll keep an eye and if you can keep me in touch with those resources and I'll start adding some links to this episode so people have got the latest and greatest information available to them. Nick, thank you so much for joining us today. I'll put your LinkedIn profile in the show notes as well if people have any difficulty finding you. But it's Nick Petch if people want to look you up on LinkedIn and reach out to you. And listeners, I encourage you to keep an eye out or an ear out for the case study episode with Nick. Thanks so much for joining me today, Nick.

Nick Petch:

My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

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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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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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