Learning Uncut Episode 109
Scaling Connection, Performance and Community in a
Global Remote Team – Penelope Barton
Hosted by Michelle Ockers

Michelle Ockers:
I'm joined by Pene Barton the VP People and Remote at Noissue, a global ecommerce start-up in the sustainable packaging space. We discuss scaling connection, performance and community in a global remote team. With a workforce of a little over 100 Noissue might be smaller than the organisation you work in. However, keeping people connected, learning and performing while working remotely is a near-universal challenge right now, and I'm confident you will discover relevant approaches and tips from Pene's work – like the development of journey maps to help recognise and act on key moments, or how sharing your work is incorporated into the operating rhythm. While we don't specifically discuss how technology has been used to enable connection, performance and community, you will hear Pene mention a range of tech tools that are used very smartly on a budget across the organisation. Be sure to check out the show notes for links to these and a stack of resources relating to topics we discuss.

Michelle Ockers:
So Pene, welcome to Learning Uncut.

Pene Barton:
Thanks for having me.

Michelle Ockers:
It's wonderful to have you here. I heard you speak, of course, at the L&D Tech and Innovation... Sorry. Let me say that again. The L&D Innovation and Tech Fest in Auckland in July. It's now October so that was three months ago. We talked very briefly after your presentation. I think I just wanted to say, "Hi. I loved what you shared. That would be a great story to share." And here we are sharing the story so thank you.

Pene Barton:
Thanks. Looking forward to diving into it a little bit further.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. And you work with a slightly unusual organisation with an interesting name, Noissue. Can you introduce us to the organisation to start with?

Pene Barton:
Yes. And great work on getting it correct. I have every variation, given it's no issue together, I have Noissue quite often pronounced that way. But Noissue, we are a sustainability packaging company, so an e-commerce platform supporting small businesses to customise and purchase sustainable packaging. Works all around the world, so a global customer base. We also acquired a company last year called Tapkit which allows small businesses to create microsites and QR codes. So really it's quite a full platform company now with the e-commerce and the net physical to digital with the tech at our firm.

Michelle Ockers:
So does the company cover everything in the, I want to say, supply chain, value chain? Someone says, "I want to go into sustainable packaging." Do you do the design of it all the

way through to manufacture and distribution? What does that look like in terms of the range of things the organisation does?

Pene Barton:
It depends on the size of the customer, really. Sometimes we have customers come in that are quite large. They have dyelines. They know exactly what they want, what packaging, all of the specs, and then they just sort of come in and we do manufacture distribution for them. We have smaller customers who might come in and look on our side and go, "I like the look of this. Here is my logo or here's my colours. Can you design it?" And then we'd do that sort of design support through to manufacture distribution, getting it out to them. And then others who might have a logo or some patterns and they come on our side and they sort of massage it into a template and a layout that they really like and then purchase it from there. So quite a full spectrum there in terms of what we provide but pretty heavy on the design support that we give, which is quite unusual in the space. You can edit on our website but then we also have a team of fantastic designers who will help with all of the editing and getting it print ready and then we do the manufacture and distribution too.

Michelle Ockers:
So do you outsource any component of that manufacture and distribution?

Pene Barton:
Yeah. We work with suppliers all around the world. Given we are a sustainability-focused company, a key part of it is actually reducing the travel time, so we work with suppliers so that we... If someone's based in the US, if feasible, then we try and get their products manufactured and shipped to them by someone nearby. That differs depending on the different product, what they're ordering, where in the world they are. But we're set up globally so we have global supply chain partners, manufacturers everywhere.

Michelle Ockers:
Okay. So tell us a bit more about your workforce. Do you have a special name for people who work at Noissue?

Pene Barton:
No, we don't. And I feel like this is one that we... It sort of had Noissuers. It doesn't quite have a ring to it.

Michelle Ockers:
It doesn't.

Pene Barton:
It doesn't. And I feel like it's something the team would really enjoy having a name for it but nothing really solidified yet. So we've got just over 100 people in our team around 10 countries globally so we've got a bit of a spectrum in there. We've got people who work in an office here in Auckland, maybe a couple of days a week, remote the rest. We have some people who like to come in full-time and then we have fully remote team members. And we've got team members in the Ukraine, Chile, Vietnam, really quite spread. Our main hubs, though, are Auckland, New Zealand, Manila and in North America and the UK.

Michelle Ockers:
Okay. So we're going to talk about Scaling Connection, Performance and Community, which was the very eye-catching title, I think, of your presentation at the conference, in a Global Remote Team. So they are global. People do work remotely. Can you tell us about kind of the start point for the story, and I'm not sure when the story actually starts, when you started looking at where we have to scale? What was going on in the organisation? What was the challenge, the need, the opportunity that you had to address?

Pene Barton:
So Noissue was founded five years ago, actually just had our five-year birthday. And then we went through... It was 2017, quite a small lean team at that point and for the next couple of years from there, and we had a small range of products on the platform. Then in 2020, the pandemic hit. Everything kind of goes into flux from there. We already had a global team but small. And then during the pandemic, e-commerce took off, which is really a lot of our customers come from that retail sector. So business was taking off. We did a Series A funding round and at that point went, okay, well, where do we go from here in terms of scaling our team? A really great team already in place, how do we make sure that as we continue to grow that, and they were already global already remote, how do we build on top of that from that growth from 20 to over 100? What does that look like? What are our values? How do we want to design for that to make sure that we didn't lose anything that had helped us get to this point? But we needed to continue to become more efficient, more high performance, continue to scale globally and so set out, really, with how do we build this and a lot of intentional design at that early stage, so what set us up really for the last two-and a-bit years.

Michelle Ockers:
And so how would you describe the organisational culture?

Pene Barton:
Some of the words that I talked about before in terms of intentional and thoughtful, we've got really clear values in place that we actually co-designed with the team. It was back in in 2020... No, early 2021 that we co-designed with the team. They were already in place, but we wanted to just essentially get them out, not use our own language around it. Just actually get shared language from the team and that's around creativity. So making sure that if we hold that really strong in place community, bouncing ideas off each other, none of that kind of politicking or blame or anything. We don't have that today and I've always wanted to steer clear of that, which is hard as you grow. And then the last piece is sustainability, which is obviously the impact of the environment, but the other piece there is like doing quality work.

Pene Barton:
And actually to do quality work that doesn't require rework, you need to be really intentional about that. I have seen a lot of high growth start-ups go through this kind of chaotic period and just sort of figure things out as they go. But given we really set out to go, we don't want to go back and redo things. We want to have quality work that lasts because of that sustainability core value. Really, we take that time upfront in any project and in any work we do to go actually, what are we looking for? How do we design for this? How do we make sure we're not just going to redo it in a month or three months or when a new team comes in, we're just throwing it out and redoing it. So with that, just fantastic group of people, very collaborative very ambitious but also just thoughtful.

Michelle Ockers:
And it's interesting that word intentional, I don't recall that being a word that you used in Auckland. However, I do remember thinking that you had been very deliberate and purposeful in the way you had approached scaling. So now might be a good time to tell us a little bit about your role and your team, and then we can start talking about what you've done to scale during that period of growth.

Pene Barton:
So my role is VP of People and Remote. What that entails, the first part is the people side, and that's everything from your recruitment, workforce planning, learning and development engagement. All of your day-to-day sort of any questions, concerns, all of that would come through. And then the other side is the remote side which has been

kind of an evolution again over the last couple of years which is ways of working routines, processes, internal systems. I like to think of kind of people and remote as moving more upstream. So in a people role quite often you might do an engagement survey. You're talking with the team, they say, "Oh, this is a concern. This system's not working. We have to log in every day and do these five steps. And there's kind of no point asking us about happiness at work, when actually we log in and this is what our day to day looks like." So moving upstream to help teams solve those issues, be it internal systems, be it processes, be it accountabilities that then feeds into actually how they can operate day to day, therefore helping with their performance and engagement.

Michelle Ockers:
It's a nicely rounded role. I can see how the elements of it complement each other. So was there anything from your background which kind of either shaped the role or prepared you well for the role?

Pene Barton:
I think all of my roles really over the last 10 years have been quite generalist in this growth stage. So having been with companies from a couple of people through to a thousand plus global growth expansion, having seen sort of all of those stages, you can kind of get a bit of a sense for this is about to break or this is about to be a concern for us. And so coming into this role, having done this sort of four or five times before, you can go, "Okay, we're really going to need to think now about this, which is going to hit us in six months' time." And so I've always sort of shaped my roles in that direction and that's where you can really have a lot of value still retaining that people side and the development and upscaling the organisation to get it sort of prepared for that next stage.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. So thinking ahead to where are we headed, not just where are we at today?

Pene Barton:
Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
And being intentional around that. So there were three elements you talked about needing to scale: connection, performance and community. And of course community, you've listed as one of the organisation's value as well, and kind of connection has some overlap with community and needing to sustain that or build that while you're building performance as well. How do you see these three connection, performance and community? Do you see them as outcomes you needed to deliver or they, do you think about them, work with them in some different way?

Pene Barton:
Yeah, they're all quite intertwined. I'd say performance is probably the outcome. When I think about community, and there's been this interesting search of kind of community management roles and organisations in the last couple of years, which is quite interesting and to see. And for us, it's definitely getting, you can get great people together who have a lot of sort of shared interests. You can kind of get them in a room virtually or otherwise, if you don't have the connection piece on top of that, then you're just getting great people together. You're not really harnessing the value of that community and so you're just scratching the surface. I think connection and community definitely have that overlap to make sure that they're really building and supporting each other and sharing best practices within that. And then performance is the outcome from that. If you can get a really great community together or if we think about our organisation, I think if people in culture, could be people and community. If you can get that community together, you

can get that connection, you can get that overlap, and then you can really ensure that everyone understands where they fit in, where their roles are, where the organisation's going. You can then drive forward to that performance... To that performance piece from there.

Michelle Ockers:
That makes sense. So there's a key question you flagged in your session around one question per element. So for connection, how might we set roles up to be productive and perform in any location? In fact, that's not necessarily connection, that's how to be intertwine, isn't it? So how might we set roles up to be productive and perform in any location? How might we create strong teams where people feel a sense of belonging to work, learn and share? And how might we create one global community and unite the entire team to one strategy? So you have these three questions, were they... And they're about individual team and company, of course, it's the layering. So, were they questions that you... Like you talk about design and co-design and being intentional in design, did you start with these three questions and then designed them? Or did they bubble up? Talk to us about the questions and the design process and what that looks like, how you went about designing to scale on the basis of those three elements.

Pene Barton:
Yeah, I think the questions and how we phrase them sort of evolved a little bit over time, but at its core, we've always looked at those three areas. I think one thing that I see organisations through growth or particularly when they go remote, that index a lot on the company, the company side, and that's like all of the, kind of that shared interest communication side, but actually starting first was just, I'm an individual, potentially am going to be working by myself for several hours of the day in a different country, how do we actually set that person up to perform, to be productive and start there, then layer on the other pieces? If you log on at the start of your day and you're not sure how to do that first bit, there's kind of... You're never going to tap into the other pieces, they're never going to get to that stage they feel really comfortable in their team, the team has a shared purpose, a sense of belonging if they can do that individual piece well, and then likewise at the company stage, you can do all the communication, all the goal setting you want.

If the person doesn't know how to perform in their role, what's expected of them, then putting out those comms or working on that strategy, they're not going to be able to connect the dots. So I see a lot of companies that are starting at that stage and one thing having seen this growth a number of times, just starting with, if we can set individuals up well, they know what their role is, they know how to perform, particularly through growth, they know actually how to on-board into an organisation and choosing that as one of our key pieces that we focused on, then the rest of it will flow. You sort of get around 12 months from that point to start layering in all the other pieces really well but start first with each individual. If you set that up well, people will give you suggestions, feedback and be part of co-designing the future state.

Michelle Ockers:
So you make it sound and look very systematic, very coherent, but then you've talked about the kind of the messiness that sometimes goes with being a start-up and they're having to scale rapidly and you did have to scale rapidly. Was it very systematic or was... Did you have to experiment with things were you working on individual team and company at once? Just, if you can cast your mind back to kind of how you worked through the scaling challenge and involved your approach, where did you start?

Pene Barton:

I think, I mean, the first piece we started with was really the recruitment and onboarding. Really, if you can get great people, connect them into the organisation with a clear role scope, you can do a lot of other things from there. And when I think about those three stages, we had different parts of the organisation at different maturity stages, they may have teams that have been existing for some time, everyone knows how... Everyone knows where they fit in, they know how they perform, but they're unsure on company. So definitely, all three were working in tandem, but as we establish new teams, we try to be a little bit more thematic about our approach there.

Michelle Ockers:
Okay. So let's talk about onboarding then and the new starter experience. If I'm coming in to Noissue, what's my experience? How am I onboarded?

Pene Barton:
First you're going to start with what may seem like a little bit of an overwhelming Asana list. Most people on day one, and there are pieces before day one in terms of making sure the manager checks in instead of two weeks out, so you don't go into a black hole during that offer to start. So your manager checks in, we send out an onboarding overview before they start, make sure they have all their equipment and everything they need technologically to actually get set up on the first day. And then when you log in, you're going to have a conversation with your manager, and then hop into the sort of mega Asana list. And what we've found there is really, most people come from their organisation being very well familiar with how things happen, they know how to, like who to connect with, they know how to do things, and then you throw them in this new environment and everything is new, and actually the satisfaction of ticking things off gives that comfort of, "Oh, I'm doing something. I'm achieving, I'm doing exactly what they need me to do." So we've refined it over time, and I always think maybe we should have less things on it, maybe it should be less content, and then you check in with new starters and they're like, "No, it is so good. It is so detailed."

Just feeling that sense of accomplishment and ticking things off and knowing that you're on track, so that is broken down into your first week, all of the logistics, and then in your first week, you're going to get into learning about our customers, you're going to learn more about your team. In the second week, you'll learn more about sustainability, our company strategy, our different products, and then in the last... In sort of week three, you get more into creativity and creativity is spending time with different teams and understanding what's worked and what hasn't worked, knowing that to get creativity, you need to be comfortable taking risks. So we do so many showcases and teams just one-on-one, here's what our team is working on, here's what's going well, and here's what hasn't gone so well. So teams will share that, and then we've also mapped out the key moments for them, so, it's your first Note and Slack, attend your first social event, receive these products, we've mapped all of that out for them as well. So it's a mix of just kind of self-guided mega checklist program for them, and then we pair that with live sessions, synchronised sessions on strategy, on customers, and they've got a lot of time with their manager as well.

Michelle Ockers:
Okay. So how many people do you onboard at a time or can the onboarding just be an individual person and an individual experience, you have kind of set it up so it will scale as well?

Pene Barton:
Yeah, set it up so it can scale. The ideal is if you have multiple people onboarding at one time, you can add an even more synchronous elements to it, which I think makes an even better experience. There's also something nice about... We've had groups... I think we had one group that was around 10 people, and we were able to get that

group on all of the same synchronous conversations around strategy, we also got them into the same Slack group, and set them up as a, "You are the February 21 New Starters group, ask questions in here, get conversation going, get to know each other." So there's some real benefit in that, again, as we think about building that community, but it does work just self-paced. It's just a little bit... I think it takes a little bit longer to then build those connections, but we wanted to set it up for scale, the people and remote teamers too, myself and one other. So we couldn't really do something that's in person and really sort of high intensity for a single time.

Michelle Ockers:
So what's the role of the manager in onboarding then?

Pene Barton:
Their role is... We have mapped out what they need to do. It's kind of an organisational level. To be set up for success, you need to know these things about the organisation, how we work, where your role fits in, and we've mapped out all of that for them and where our customers are and who our customers are. As a manager, they need to plug in, here's your three-month goals for you in the role, here is how we're going to work together. We do... When people start, we also ask them to complete their user manual. So how they prefer to work, what their hobbies are, what their pet peeves are at work, again, just giving that shared language for teams and managers. And so the manager helps facilitate the person sharing that. They get the existing team to share theirs. So they really help with that direct integration into the team and into the role. We are also in the same Asana list. There is kind of a separate one that has all of the manager tasks associated with it and our managers are fantastic in terms of taking the new hires through that. And they usually have got really clear main to get goals they need to achieve.

Michelle Ockers:
So everything's mapped out in Asana, basically.

Pene Barton:
Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
Or anyone who needs to do anything to onboard someone, I imagine you've got it set up as a template and...

Pene Barton:
Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. So I use Asana. I love Asana. It's a great sort of project management, task management collaboration platform. I'll put a link to it in the show notes for anyone who hasn't come across Asana and is interested in it. So there were two things you mentioned there that have piqued my curiosity. One is this idea of key moments. What's a key moment? How do you identify a key moment? How do you use a key moment in terms of, I guess, both onboarding and just generally for employee experience?

Pene Barton:
So by my own I do the estimates, not very scientific, but you can absolutely start here and then layer in the data as you get it, as you grow your organisation and have more data available to you. I use the Emotional Culture Deck. And so, generally, you split your organisation into different personas. So new employee, new manager, experienced manager could be three different personas that you have. And with a new

employee, potentially, that's a junior person starting their first job through to a more experienced person. And then map out all of those employee stages from an offer to a new hire starting in organisation, your first month. And through each of those personas, map out potentially how they're feeling. And then what you're doing as an organisation that's going to help them feel that way. If it's more positive or if it's a negative feeling, like they're coming into an organisation feeling anxious, what specific steps are you taking to combat that and help shift that into a more positive emotion? And so you do that through the whole stage from onboarding day 1, pre-offer through to performance management, performance review, promotion, and really map that out.

As you grow as an organisation, you get employee feedback on your assumptions and you test those assumptions. It's a great starting place, but actually get real people involved and get them to input on it. And then when you also have your engagement data that starts to come through, you can again feed that into your process. So if by the engagement survey people are saying that actually the performance review process doesn't work, it's not helping them understand where they need to grow or there's not learning and development opportunities, you can dig into that a little bit further and actually look at the journey from there and what you can do to solve for it. And again, keeping it really small at, like, tactical things that you can do. You don't want to boil the ocean. You just start with small things and then keep refining as you spend more time with the team.

Michelle Ockers:
Okay, so it sounds like a journey map for each persona that...

Pene Barton:
Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
And it sounds like you continue to maintain those?

Pene Barton:
Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. Fantastic use of the journey mapping approach and human-centred design. So a key moment then... You use the journey maps for potential opportunities for key moments, which I guess are related to either creating a positive element on the experience or to getting ahead of the curve and preventing a negative moment?

Pene Barton:
Yeah, like one example of that would be anniversaries, for instance. And, yeah, I still haven't got a perfect model in mind for that, but that's a key moment for someone. For someone, they're reaching one year, they're really proud of all they've accomplished and some organisations that celebrate it and some that's not. But again, just thinking how that person might be feeling, what you as an organisation are doing and then putting steps in place to make sure you're recognising that is just one really simple example. Those moments are, yeah, kind of based off experience in the early stages in terms of, "I've seen this in other organisations. Let's just sort of carry that through." Input from managers in terms of feedback they have had from their team, things they have observed, where they have struggled as someone coming into an organisation. If you've got someone who's recently been promoted, having a conversation with them about that experience and perhaps they say, "I didn't actually receive any paperwork for it. I get it's an internal transfer. So you don't need to document it, but I really wanted something to make it feel real." And again, you

just... Okay, that's a key moment. Let's jot that down and make sure we're doing something meaningful.

Michelle Ockers:
How do you keep track of when these key moments occur? I think I know the answer. How do you keep track of when those moments are coming up for people? Do you use Asana for that or do you just use something else?

Pene Barton:
No, I feel like I'm going to become an ad for technology now. It's a mixture of Miro board, so just a classic online whiteboard there, or some of it is just in my Notes software. So just jot it down and just tag next it, moment and then you can just filter by moments.

Michelle Ockers:
But what about identifying who's coming up to what moment?

Pene Barton:
Yeah. Part of this right now is a little bit... It's a little bit easier because there's two of us in the team, so we're across everything that happens and we're still a smaller sized organisations, so you know who has anniversaries, who's coming up for promotion, and it can be quite organic around that. We've done some pieces around setting up automation into Slack-based off anniversaries, so we know this person's been here for 355 days, so they're about to hit their one-year anniversary. Let's make sure that we send some automation off to a manager and let them know and make sure they recognise it in this way and to do X thing that's associated with it. So we've done that where we can for anniversaries, outside of that, it's a little bit more manual right now, but reasonably easy to stay across. We'll look at turning it into something... To a little bit more systematic in the future as we grow.

Michelle Ockers:
And are your managers aware of this concept of key moments and using key moments, or is that something that it's really yourself and your team colleague who kind of manage and use?

Pene Barton:
Yeah, more, probably more internal right now, and again, it's just that balance of what they need to know to kind of do their roles and to make something really sort of beneficial versus the language we may use internally. So they absolutely know it's important. They know what they need to do for it. They know how it feels having gone through that themselves, and they'll absolutely kind of jump in and recognise all of these key moments or they themselves might spot them, but the actual language around it would be something more just in the people team, we're trying not to create our own language or way of doing things really.

Michelle Ockers:
I completely get that. I completely get that. And now what about performance and development? How is that approached?

Pene Barton:
Yeah. We've tried a few different things. I think that the trendy thing would be to say we've gotten rid of performance reviews, but we have not. What we have done there is we found that actually people really like to know where they stand. They like to have a structure for it, but what they don't like is the amount of sort of admin that goes with it. So we're trying to find this balance of doing performance check-ins frequently but reducing the admin and making it as straightforward as possible. So some of the things we've done

there from onboarding, you're going to have your 90-day goal. So that sets you off for the first three months, and then you'll fall into having a quarterly check-in from there. It's based off just a few key questions, and then we also have a rating scale, which seems a little bit old school, but again, it's like... It's clear, it's concise, and it gives a shared language for the manager and team member about actually how things are tracking. So standardising those ratings as well, so they can say, "I'm exceeding and they know what that looks like, and then the manager could say, agree, disagree, give a rating, and again, just forcing more of that conversation with a lot of clarity there.

So everyone is going through check-ins quarterly. That's reasonably new before sort of last year. We were doing a three-month, six-month annual. So it was three in a year. We've now increased it up to four times a year.

Michelle Ockers:
Okay. And what about development? Is that the individual's responsibility? Is there stuff done at a team level, an organisation-wide... Do you have a learning management system with stacks of e-learning? How do you go about... Whose job is development and what does development look like at Noissue?

Pene Barton:
Yeah. It's sort of a team effort. So it'd be the people team and the manager and the individual. So the individual in terms of what we ask of them as they have done that reflection and we give them coaching questions and reflection to understand where do they want to go. We can then work with the manager to look at... In a reasonably standard three Es model. So we look at how we're providing them with that exposure, with experience, education. We look at those three aspects and we partner with the manager to go, "Okay, well, we could look to do this. If it's they want to move into a totally different part of the organisation, how do we help facilitate that?" And it's more ad hoc in that way. If there was a need for sort of e-learning content, we do have e-learning available. We haven't rolled it out company-wide yet again, 'cause it's a bit of that push and pull. If I sort of push it out right now but nobody's asking for it, then it's never going to get traction, but if I have it available and people have done the first step that they know where I want to go.

Their manager is helping them on that way, then adding in content that is going to be put into practice is great. So we have that available and it's sort of on-demand, which I'd say for all of our learning resources we have... We've put together a bit of a library. So on the leadership space, books you can read, podcasts. So we've got people who just want to have a bit of a direction. And then they'll go off and do things. And so we go here some recommended reading and podcasts and books and things you could go after. We have e-learning available, and then we have... Pretty straightforward to create that job shadowing experiences, and we do have a capability framework as well. Again, it's based off like... We've got it there. So when you go, "I think I want to go here, but I'm not quite sure of the skills," then we plug that piece in as well, so you can do a bit of a self-assessment and identify the gaps with your management. That's a team effort.

Michelle Ockers:
Yep, yep. So the e-learning content you have available is a third-party library that you use rather than creating your own, if it's kind of so needs based, it feels like it would probably be a third-party library?

Pene Barton:
Yeah, we're using Go1 for that. So having a library available, we have, in the past, done our own content, found that incredibly time consuming.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah.

Pene Barton:
We've also done our own sort of learning groups where we go, here's this content and then let's come together, sort of communities of practice and let's discuss and debrief. Again, you're just getting people at different levels, points in time, different locations, so it doesn't quite click. But this sort of on demand, you identify a need, we help you solve for it. That seems to be kind of a better model rather than the other one, which we definitely played around with last year in terms of building out our own content of programs.

Michelle Ockers:
Yep, yep. It sounds like, I don't know if you come across Jane Hart from the Centre for Modern Workplace Learning. She talks about the idea of having a learning concierge service where if people have a learning need and they're looking for how do I address this learning need, you can kind of provide advice to them, options to them, but it's still their responsibility to identify their need and to actually take the action. It sounds like that kind of approach.

Pene Barton:
That is a great way to call it. We have a learning concierge, so.

Michelle Ockers:
Excellent. That's very fancy, Pene, I must say. And it sounds like you're small enough that that still works for you. That kind of more personalised approach, it does sound very personalised. Yeah?

Pene Barton:
Yeah. Yeah. Trying to create one of my dilemmas, things I'm always thinking about is how you create personalisation at scale. I think people always have this expectation because everything else in your life now is personalised from what you see on Instagram to the vitamins you get. Everything is personalised to you and then you come to work and it's one size fits all. So trying to make it personalised and then how we actually set the organisation up to keep running that, it's something I spend a lot of time thinking about and learning is an interesting way with that. We're still at that stage where we can help people define pathways. It doesn't have to be you do ABC, it's like you could do a bit of A, then you could hop over here and do Z and then hop back. We're still at the stage where we can provide that, but how we do that at scale is you kind of get to that 500 plus will be interesting.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah, yeah. Oh, we'll have you back at 500 plus to talk about that, shall we?

Pene Barton:
We'll see how we've tackled it then. Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
So something else you mentioned there was mini showcases, which gets us onto the idea of learning and sharing in Teams. What does learning and sharing in Teams look like at Noissue?

Pene Barton:
Yeah. Again, it's going to depend a little bit on the team itself for they prefer to do this. So in some teams that lean a lot more into asynchronous communication, they just do this fire showcasing their work on Loom. So I've done this cool thing, I'm going to record it and I'm just going to share it in a Slack channel for the team to view...

Michelle Ockers:
So Loom, of course, is a screen sharing and video...

Pene Barton:
Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
Sorry, screen and video recording tool.

Pene Barton:
Yeah. So some teams do it in that way and we're definitely trying to encourage more of that, just record and share, rather than having to wait for a specific routine. But then we do have routines across the organisation that encourage that. Every quarter we run sort of do a bit of a retro, company wide, how we been against our goals, what went to plan, what didn't go to plan. We do showcases at a company level. So this team is working on this area at all hands. They will talk more about it. So we're encouraging at a company level. Team level could be Looms, it could be in a team meeting. Some team meetings have just a segment at the portion of each team meeting where they've got a bit of a showcase in there as another way that they do it, everyone will have some form of it. It'll be either written or maybe a recording or at their team meeting, they'll share different pieces of work. So.

Michelle Ockers:
Okay. So building it deliberately into the operating rhythm is one approach. Is it a culture where people... Where other things might trigger people to share something? And sometimes, we talk about show your work, talk about your work process so that others can learn from it. What might trigger someone outside of the operating rhythm? And there are some great ideas and approaches you're using there, but what might trigger someone outside of that rhythm to go, "Ooh, there's something here worth sharing," and how would they go about sharing it?

Pene Barton:
Yeah, it's probably... I mean first going to be still identified in that operating rhythm, someone's probably likely to pick up and go, "Oh, that's really interesting, what's happening there?" And then either sort of encourage that team or that person to share it in a more company level, perhaps that's just in Slack and an all-company channel or perhaps that is at that next all hands, we want to showcase that specific piece of work. So I think it would still be spotted within that operating rhythm. One thing we're trying to do a little bit more of though, we just introduced a Slack channel called Today I Learnt, again just to try and encourage people to share more of those little learnings.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah.

Pene Barton:
Cause it's one thing definitely to spot it and pick it up in our operating rhythm and go, "Let's showcase it." But more those that are like I just learned how to do this in a system or I just learnt this about a customer, and so we're trying to encourage more of that at the moment, so a bit of an effort. Slack channel is kind of again, the output forum, but providing nudges and teams at the moment to get people to share things they've come across or things they've learnt. So getting some really small things in there which are really interesting, and you see I think one was... One recently was just on when Google Meets went live with how to recording meetings and someone found it and was just like, "Oh, this is really cool," and

just quickly screenshot how to do it and put it in that channel, so trying to encourage and have a space for that as well.

Michelle Ockers:
I've got an approach I like to call the Daily Extract, which is a one-minute-a-day habit, and I do it myself at the end of every day, and I talk to managers whenever I can around have a think about setting up a little daily extract challenge in your team, just everyone takes... Finds a point in their workflow, for me it's the end of the day, where they spend one minute thinking back through the day what's something that went well, what's something that maybe didn't go well and what can I do differently or what would I continue to do with that, and then I guess you're adding the cream of just share that quickly out. It doesn't take a lot of time and it really accumulates, I think, over time.

Pene Barton:
Definitely. And we have that spark to other thought... We do have, again, a certain operating rhythm, but we do have daily stand-ups, most of our teams have a daily stand-up prompt, which is yeah, what are you working on, what's gone well, what are you looking to do differently from yesterday? And then another question we have in our performance check-ins, is what can you do now that you couldn't do three months ago? And again, just forcing that prompt around what they've learnt, 'cause in these environments, you blink and suddenly you're three months on, you go, "I haven't learnt anything or I haven't evolved, I haven't progressed," and actually just having that prompt there as well can be quite useful.

Michelle Ockers:
That's a really nice question. And that really is at the heart of learning, right, what can you do now that you couldn't do? What are you better at now than you were three months ago? And it gets people thinking about how they've gotten better, how they have improved, and not sitting there thinking, "Well, no one sent me on a training course in three months, therefore I'm not getting development opportunity." It's a different paradigm. It sets up people's thinking differently about learning.

Pene Barton:
Yup, definitely, we can't... The budgets required to send people on courses all the time versus really just encouraging their reflection day-to-day, which I think your daily extract is quite a... Might borrow some of that language, and then where possible, we include some of those prompts, have tried a few variations of it in different performance review cycles just to try find the balance but it's usually some variation of that.

Michelle Ockers:
Nice prompts. I'd like to talk about a phrase that really struck me, "Creating collisions." You talked about that when you were talking about community, and the idea of creating collisions via shared interest channels which are driven by the team. What does this phrase creating collisions mean and how do you... Why is it important and how do you help to create collisions in a global remote workforce?

Pene Barton:
Yeah, I think I first heard the phrase... It was done... I think it was the founder of Zappos back in the day, and really he was trying to build office environments, and open the floor plans to create collisions, so finding opportunities to put teams near each other so that they essentially run into each other, spark conversation, so that's what it initially started it. And then when you think about remote, it's very easy to just stay in your lane all day, not run into anyone because you don't have that physical environment, you're just going to walk past someone's desk or run into them while you're making coffee, you don't have any of that. So what we've tried to do, again just using Slack for this, is the team

create different shared interest channels, they put in... There's one, what TV show you're watching, it's one... We've got different ones in there around... I'm trying to think of them all off the top of my head. There's one in there for K-pop, so people who're really into K-pop. There's one in there for food, so people just sharing pictures of food.

Michelle Ockers:
Of course there's one for food.

Pene Barton:
Yeah, of course there's one for food, and then there's one for pets and people sharing pictures of their pets. Again, just creating spaces for people to engage like that with people they may not otherwise run into in their day-to-day, realise they've got a shared interest and then spark a conversation. And we also run a program called Fika, which is Swedish for... It's like coffee and conversation or tea and conversation, and there are tools that facilitate this, but again, just starting a little bit more lo-fi there, and having people matched up every month for coffee and conversation.

Michelle Ockers:
It's a kind of... I've heard of the idea of a coffee roulette where two people kind of randomly picked. They would volunteer to say, "I want to be part of this," and they're just randomly allocated to each other to catch up?

Pene Barton:
Yeah, definitely. So it's exactly the same. We've had a few variations of it, I guess at the start, what we've learned through this process is just throwing two people together and assuming they'll have a good conversation is quite an ask, so we've evolved that into... We have a little bit of a kitsch in terms of prompts for conversation, we create a little bit of a bucket list, so each month tick off these challenges, but it just gave people a starting point when they get on a call with someone they don't work with, you can at least just refer to that set of questions like, "Oh, this is what we're here to do." And then evolve from there, which has been good.

Another learning I think we have was opening it up instead of two people to three people, so it just offsets it a little bit and takes the pressure off at being such an intimate conversation, so that's a nice easy way to ease into it. So creating a lot more structure and prompts for it, opening it up to three people. It's been quite busy in the last two months, so we haven't run it, we've had people asking for it to come back, so we're looking to kick it off again in the coming weeks but do that in more of a sort of a low admin way for the team rather than needing to find time to chat to someone, 'cause you do if you're matched up, you still need to book a time, and we're global and it's a lot of time zones, and we're just going to start opening it up, so join a call at this time and whoever's on the call, then we're going to split you out into breakout rooms from there with these prompts. They're just trying to make it a little bit more easier for people as well, 'cause we find once they're in it, it's great, it's just some other... Like you can get some drop off in the admin side.

Michelle Ockers:
Yup, yup, so it sounds like a bit of experimentation and refining along the way. So when you look back over the last two years from early 2020, and you think about how you've scaled, what do you think has gone well, particularly when you think about the learning and performance side of things?

Pene Barton:
I think what's gone well is one of the refinements we've continued to make is around strategy and goal setting, and again, by no means perfect here yet, but I'd say

if you chat to people in the team, they would know where they fit in, what their success is measured by, when they're going to have their next check-in with their manager, they're getting feedback regularly and they know how the company's going. So we've done a lot there on transparent comms and the mechanisms behind strategy and goal setting, which helps that performance process immensely. You don't get to performance check-ins and not know how you're going, and then likewise on development. If you know where the organisation's going and how you are going, understanding where you could go gets easier as well. So that's one thing that's gone yeah, really, really well, I would say over the last couple years.

Michelle Ockers:
Yup. So you've obviously brought a lot of background experience with scaling into the role. What have you learnt over the past two years and what might you do differently next time?

Pene Barton:
Woah. To be patient.

Michelle Ockers:
Pene's looking very thoughtful, listeners.

Pene Barton:
I think what I would do differently is and based a little bit more in some other physical artifacts. So because we have focused quite a lot on making a really great digital experience, that onboarding recognition, you would've heard a lot. And what I've said is quite indexed on internal systems, because of the size of the team, the speed, we haven't done so much in sending things out to people, so like you've reached one year, here's something that sits on your desk or here is this sort of swag, and we've stayed clear of swag because of the environmental impacts. And I would love to do swag really well and really purposefully. So there are plans around that, but particularly in a remote setting, people love to have those markers at your desk, create that at home office that feels a little bit more connected. And so I'd probably do more at the start to build more of that in just physical things that you can send to people that help them feel part of a team and recognise those milestones.

Michelle Ockers:
You might have some suppliers who can help you with that, Pene.

Pene Barton:
Oh, there's so much we could do, I think if they have...

Michelle Ockers:
Or some customers, sorry, customers, right?

Pene Barton:
Yeah. I mean, we have so many customers that we... Yeah, if I think about swag and bringing our customers closer to our team, there's a lot we could do. If anything, I get stuck in a little bit of a paralysis on just how amazing it could be and actually where do we start, but yeah, even just small things that could represent our brand and our customers and people have those at home would be great.

Michelle Ockers:
So speaking of where to start, listeners here are going to be in all sorts of different sizes of organisations. Some of them are going to be in similar size organisations like yourself, some of them in much bigger organisations, but there might be some stuff here around building connection community and performance in remote workforces, which

of course is something that many organisations are still grappling with the remote workforce element and how do you keep people connected, how do you maintain community? What would be some key takeaways from you for people who want to get started or do more with a connection community in a remote workforce?

Pene Barton:
Yeah, I think the first thing to start with would just be having those conversations with different groups, so your little focus groups or one-on-ones with people at each stage and understand really in quite detail, what is it like when you... Where do you start your day? Maybe you start your day from the kitchen table, and then how does your day progress? Who do you interact with? How do you understand what's going in the company or what's happening in that team? So starting with that and have different stages, so your execs, your managers, your team members, your team members of different varying levels of experience and really trying to get a good feel of what that day-to-day looks like for them.

Usually, the data points we get are quite limited or just surfaced up where people can share what's going really well or not so well, but it's actually some of that mundane day-to-day pieces that you actually see opportunities in. So starting with those conversations or focus groups depending on size of organisation is really really important, so I would start there. The other piece would be looking at all of the routines you have in place right now, and what those are actually... The outcome of each of those. So you mentioned habits earlier and I'm a huge fan of habits and James Clear's work, so what are the habits or routines that your team has in place right now, and how are those working for the team that is remote? Particularly if you're in a hybrid, is the routine in place or the habit that your team is doing like a quiz together every Friday, but actually it was just in the office and so they've just left it for those in the office, and if you are remote that day, then you're not included.

Looking at those routines, how are they designed and then what is the outcome from that? If it's just team getting together, bit of a debrief, some fun via quiz, that's great, but does it achieve what you need it to? So having a look at those habits and routines, the outcome of it, and then actually how they're designed to make sure they're inclusive in both settings. And then just, yeah, looking at some of your people practices and making sure that they're designed for remote first, that's the hardest to master I would say, everything remote and then as you layer in in-person, it gets easier from there, so taking all of your people practices or how you interact with the team and how different teams interact and going is this setup for remote first? If it's not, how might it be? And then work back and add in sort of in-person aspects. But if you design for in-person first, layer on remote, yeah, it just defaults to the easiest point which is in-person but taking it going how might we do it if it was remote first and then work backwards from there.

Michelle Ockers:
Lovely, thank you. So lots of great design tips there. I love it. So I love the very intentional way that you've gone about this body of work and keeping it simple and scalable. So thank you so much Pene. We'll put a link to your LinkedIn profile in the show notes. I have got a

stack of ideas for resources. So listeners, I'll pull together additional resources in the show notes as well. And feel free to reach out to Pene via LinkedIn if you'd like to find out more about the topics discussed in today's episode. Thank you so much, Pene for sharing your work and insights with us.

Pene Barton:
Thank you. That was a lot of fun.

Michelle Ockers:

And let me know when you're at 500 and we'll have another episode to find out what else has happened when you reach 500, okay?

Pene Barton:
Can't wait.

Michelle Ockers:
Okay. Thank you.

Pene Barton:
Thanks.

About Learning Uncut

Learning Uncut are learning and development consultants that work with learning teams and/or business leaders to accelerate learning transformation. We specialise in supporting organisations to create or update their learning strategy, enhance their learning team's capabilities, align learning to business value, and implement modern learning approaches.

We are highly collaborative and pragmatic. We partner with organisations to align learning to their business needs, unleash continuous learning, and build capability to help them thrive.

Learn more about us at our website.

About your host, Michelle Ockers

Michelle is the founder of 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 or Twitter