

Learning Uncut Episode 119
People Analytics at Reece – Adam McKinnon
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Adam McKinnon, the People Data and Analytics Leader at Reece, joins me to talk about the fascinating world of People Analytics. Reece is using a People Analytics platform to gain some serious insights into their business questions and issues related to people, and Adam's here to share some real-world examples with us. He dives into how Reece is using data from a variety of sources, including their HR Information System, safety data and Service Now, to surface valuable insights – including in the Learning and Development space.

Now, I know that not everyone has access to a People Analytics platform, so I'll be asking Adam to explore what's possible in the absence of this game-changing tool. We'll be discussing how L&D professionals can get started or do more with data. Check out the show notes for great resources including Adam's blog and a range of introductory data analytics courses. Get ready to learn about how using data in your L&D work can benefit your organisation.

Michelle Ockers:

Hey, welcome to Learning Uncut, Adam.

Adam McKinnon:

Thank you for having me. Pleasure to be here.

Michelle Ockers:

It's a delight. And when I saw you... Well, I didn't see you speak at the L&D Innovation and Tech Fest in Sydney last November, that's November 2022, but we did talk and I thought there's something really worth sharing in the work you were doing, so thank you for agreeing to be here and share what you've been doing in the People Analytics space at Reece. Do you want to kick off by introducing us to Reece, who they are, what they do, who they do it for, maybe a bit about the workforce?

Adam McKinnon:

Yeah, by all means. So Reece is a family owned organisation started here in Melbourne just over a hundred years ago. Started selling plumbing supplies out of a back a truck and now has grown to in excess of 650 stores across Australia and New Zealand. Now, I suspect we're most well-known for plumbing and the materials we supply, and in turn, for shows like The Block which we assist with the renovations on. But in addition, Reece has grown into a much larger entity and has businesses in heating, ventilation, cooling, civil infrastructure and a variety of other domains; fire, irrigation and pools, you name it. So they've really grown to be quite a successful outfit, and in recent years, had acquired a business in the US.

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Michelle Ockers:

Fantastic. It's a great story. I love those stories that start with... It started in a garage or out of the back of a truck or something like that and evolved over time.

Adam McKinnon:

Yeah, it's inspiring.

Michelle Ockers:

Is it still a family-owned business?

Adam McKinnon:

So it's publicly listed. The major ownership remains with the business. But yeah, an excellent Australian success story.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, do you want to talk to us a little about your role? I think you've been with the organisation for around three years, is that right?

Adam McKinnon:

Just on two, in fact.

Michelle Ockers:

Two, okay.

Adam McKinnon:

Just ticked over two this month, which has been nice. So I started with Reece, reporting into our CHRO or Chief People Experience Officer, Sally Young. She brought me into the organisation, and I remember speaking with Sally for the first time. I had returned to Australia and was sitting in a hotel in quarantine, in Sydney. So it was a great way to re-introduce myself to Australia and the professional environment here. But Sally had brought me in largely to take ownership of data within the HR space at Reece. She had a very strong feeling that we were sitting on an immense amount of data and we just weren't maximising the full potential there, and she wanted someone to take ownership of that, I suppose that task, in optimising what we can do with data at Reece and start to drive more of a culture of evidence-based decision-making.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so there wasn't an existing role, if I understand it, you guys kind of got talking about the opportunity...

Adam McKinnon:

That's right.

Michelle Ockers:

And it was kind of like an exploratory thing when you first started?

Adam McKinnon:

It was largely exploratory. I had been living and working over in Europe for a number of years and been exposed to some great people and practices in the domain. I really felt like I'd done a very strong apprenticeship in that geography. And when I came back to Australia,

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I had the chance to meet with Sally, speak with her about what I felt was possible, and from there, it was largely an exploratory activity.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, you've got a really interesting background. Can you share a little about your background? Because I think it is pertinent to maybe the way you've approached some of the questions that you grapple with using analytics.

Adam McKinnon:

Yeah, sure. So I am trained as a psychologist and started my career in the Australian army as a psychology officer. I also have qualifications in IT, which I think... I had done this at the late 1990s, turn of the century, and just felt like technology was going to be the big thing that was going to characterise my career. And I'm glad I invested time and energy in that domain. I went into a little bit of finance study as well, and epidemiology. My PhD was in epidemiology, which was completely left-field, more opportunistic, but gave me a strong exposure to the Health and Safety domain when I worked in the army.

Michelle Ockers:

Right, which of course in a business like Reece, that's critical as well, Health and Safety, right?

Adam McKinnon:

Yes, it is. Yeah, yeah, they have a very strong focus on Health and Safety.

Michelle Ockers:

So it'll be interesting as this conversation unfolds to see if there's any strings that we pull on based on this variety of domains in your background. I remember reading a book called 'Generalist,' something along those lines. 'Generalist' or 'Range.' Range, it was called, which is about this idea of cross... And it's not a new idea, the cross-functional things we can bring from one domain to the other, that we get fresh perspectives, fresh insights. And often, we need to draw together diverse groups with different experiences to be able to tap into that. But you're a bit of a multi-functional package, aren't you? In terms of the perspectives you can bring to bear in your work.

Adam McKinnon:

I suppose it makes you look at things differently, and I must say I often borrow from, say, epidemiology, and apply it in HR, which is just not the norm.

Michelle Ockers:

No.

Adam McKinnon:

But there are these little nuggets that can be brought across, little valuable tools that often just don't get that exposure.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So you've had this conversation with Sally, you've been exploring the idea that, "Well, there's a stack of data we're sitting on in Reece, there's gotta be some value in starting to use it more effectively." In terms of the opportunity, the business challenge, was it as broad as that or was there something specific you were being asked? What was the brief when

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you started in the role?

Adam McKinnon:

Look, it was largely broad, but it's interesting that you ask because I was involved in a project that related to remuneration not long after I joined. And it was some months in the making and the delivery, and towards the end of that project, there was an opportunity to get feedback from the stakeholders. And during that conversation, the essence of the feedback was, "Adam, we like the outcome, but it took us too long to get here." And I felt that was a fair criticism. And at the time, I also took the opportunity to say, "I agree with you. It did take too long." I said, "But by the same token, things that would take me minutes in other organisations are taking me much longer here, and I think if we want to do better in this domain with our use of data, we need to invest in some infrastructure to make that possible." So it was perhaps a little bit opportunistic on my behalf, but it just seemed in keeping with the expectation of the stakeholders that we really need to evolve in this domain. And perhaps it was just good timing.

Michelle Ockers:

So you've taken that opportunity to float the idea of an investment in infrastructure. Talk to us about building the business case, what you want to invest in, why, how did you go about building the case for investment?

Adam McKinnon:

Look, and... At the time I spoke to Sally openly about this and that I felt that there was a better way of doing things, and that involved an investment in infrastructure, I was given the leeway to run a competitive RFP process where we invited people to analyse vendors. So these are platforms that essentially ingest and aggregate people data from many different sources and then enable you to analyse it and provide you with many standard metrics within the HR domain, a range that exceeds my understanding. I'm constantly learning. Because it is a very specialist domain. So after that process, we had identified vendors that were of interest to us, we were measuring up the pricing and it was decided that it would be idea if we could do a six-month proof of concept with a vendor. We decided to go with a Canadian technology called Visier at the time. We did a six-month proof of concept. My key stakeholders were my boss, Sally, our Chief People Experience Officer and the CTO within the organisation, Marcos. And at the end of six months, we essentially got together to review not only what had been achieved, but what was the business case moving forward?

And when I talk about the business case, I was essentially quantifying the impact of the platform through the cost of turnover, and trying to measure up against what could realistically save ourselves with regard to turnover of employees, if we were more informed through the data that we had at our disposal in this system. I chose very conservative numbers, I gave them a sense of the ongoing resource implications, the payback period and ultimately what was, I felt, a very conservative ROI. And on the basis of what we were able to show them in the pilot and coupled with the business case, I'm pleased to say that they approved the investment moving forward.

Michelle Ockers:

Talk to me a little bit more about the proof of concept. What were you doing in the proof of concept? Were you working on a specific business challenge?

Adam McKinnon:

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No. In essence, what we did was we implemented the system and we ingested as much data as we could within a three-month window around our people. So when I talk about that, I'm talking about the longevity of employees at the company. So when did they start? If they'd exited, when did that happen? But then everything about their tenure within Reece, so if they're current employees, how long have they been with us? How long have they been in their current role? Their current manager, what are they getting paid? How many career moves have they had? Has there ever been a safety event? You name it. We were trying to ingest as much as we could to really build out an understanding at scale of what our people leaders were looking to lead and manage on a day-to-day basis. And one of the topics of the day, a very strong topic, and I think this is true of all retail organisations, was turnover. And this was during COVID. So in some regards, COVID was a protective factor because it wasn't necessarily encouraging a lot of retail staff to change jobs. By the same token, it was also forcing people to evaluate their lifestyle choices and whether they wanted to make a move. So turnover was definitely the topic of the day.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So where was all this data coming from?

Adam McKinnon:

So we were drawing the data from our HRIS system, and we're a company that utilises Workday as our core system in that domain. And subsequent to that and the proof of concept, we've gone after other systems within our HR tech stack. So we have a safety system that we've gone after, we have talent acquisition data, skills data, we bring in our engagement survey data, and we've recently ingested all of the data from our ServiceNow HR ticketing system. And our next one, highly relevant for our conversation, is our L&D system which we just started on last week.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So when you say turnover was kind of a clear issue, challenge, and you're doing a proof of concept to show the value, you're not just doing a proof of concept to say it's feasible to pull all this data together.

Adam McKinnon:

No.

Michelle Ockers:

You're actually having to demonstrate, so why invest in this, how is it going to help us as a business? So you've got the turnover question.

Adam McKinnon:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

So what new insights were you able to gain into turnover that made the business go, "Yeah, this is worth investing in"?

Adam McKinnon:

Look, I think one of the challenges historically had been just in understanding that there was an issue. I think for many organisations that don't have a clear handle on their data, it can often be the case that ignorance is bliss. And in being able to access and surface this data,

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we were able to show leaders in real time, the state of the organisation. Twelve months after my joining and the implementation of this system, our senior leaders now have targets associated with turnover. Now, I don't attribute that to myself, it's just more a case that we've been able to surface the data and provide people with more insight with which to make leadership decisions. So I think just that availability of content has been a huge step forward in people's ability to lead.

Michelle Ockers:

So it was around the sheer value of the insights you could get and what you could... In terms of actually understanding the reality of what was happening, as opposed to what people maybe thought was happening or was just invisible because the data hadn't been interrogated. On the basis of that alone, there was enough proof to go, "Yes, this is worth investing in."

Adam McKinnon:

One of the things I often say with analytics is we try to answer three broad questions; What's happened? Why has it happened? And what's going to happen next? And the platform was really good in helping us understand what happened. We've got a turnover issue that we want to address here. Why has it happened? What are some of the demographic factors that are associated with these high levels of turnover? And the platform also afforded us machine learning algorithms that would forecast into the future and provide a probability of people's likelihood of departure. So we can now surface this up to leaders and say, "Here's a picture of the future. If this is uncomfortable for you or not in keeping with your expectations, there's now an opportunity to step in and mitigate this risk."

Michelle Ockers:

So it doesn't tell you what to do, but it brings to your attention what's actually going on...

Adam McKinnon:

Yes, yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

And what... Why? The why is interesting. I want to circle back to the why, but also what will happen if we do nothing. And then it gives you the opportunity to say, "Well, we need to do something about this or we can live with this."

Adam McKinnon:

Yes, yeah.

Michelle Ockers: So in terms of the why, can you give me an example of how that works? Here's what's happened, here's why and what will happen in the future. But I'm really curious about how it knows the why, just based on the data and the patterns and so on in the data.

Adam McKinnon:

So I'd say there's three ways of getting at the why. The first is, you can go on a fishing expedition. Definitely. Yeah, and we can have a look at patterns of turnover and cut it with different demographic variables and enrich our own understanding of what's going on. Then there are methods that will scan all of the variables associated with a person and say, "Here

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are, I suppose, factors within a variable that are associated with a higher risk of departure." so we might find that very young individuals were at a higher risk, and I'm just making this up...

Michelle Ockers:

Got it.

Adam McKinnon:

Or that males are at a higher risk who are over the age of 45, things of that nature. And it will automatically surface up some of those relationships for you. And then the third way in which we can understand things is when we start blending some of our data sources. So I referenced earlier, we have a lot of information about our people in our HRIS system, but then we can also connect that to their responses on surveys. So how does their demographic variables coupled with their attitudes then associate with departure? And we can start to build out our understanding and what might be some of the levers that we can address in future, in mitigating that risk.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, yeah. So I am by no means anywhere near competent in actually using data at scale, this sort of volume of data. Many people talk about, "Well, we've got Power BI in our organisation and that's what our team uses, and there's dashboards available and so on." What is different about working with a people analytics platform versus, say, something like Power BI?

Adam McKinnon:

One of the key points of differentiation in the platform that we went after, and I see it happening more and more in the market now, is that it makes data accessible to people who aren't technical specialists. And my North Star whenever I do a role at a company is to make myself redundant. Because once I've done that, I know I've given people the autonomy to access the insights and the data themselves, and in a fashion that makes it accessible for them. And that's really, for me, one of the key selling points of a people analytics platform, is that I can now provide access to my staff. They don't need to be experts in Workday or some other platform, they can go into a platform, people analytics platform that is very simple and intuitive to use and start pulling variables together, or similarly... And this is what I do for the leadership team at Reece. I just create pre-fabricated dashboards that update on a weekly or a monthly basis depending on the timeframe of content that we want to provide them.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So maybe working with an example, and we can start with the people analytics space. I know we want to get onto some examples from what you've done with learning and development, which is sort of indicated is maybe a little bit later to the party, but is it the party now?

Adam McKinnon:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

What's an example of a business problem or a question that someone has come to you or a business challenge, that come to you and said, can you help us with this, Adam? And you

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just talk us through what that question was or what that challenge was and what you were actually able to do and how you did it.

Adam McKinnon:

Maybe a good one that I think speaks to the lifecycle from start to finish was Reece had implemented a referral program not long after I joined the company. And paid referrals for staff who brought in effectively retail employees or employees within the retail context. And several months down the path, the question was asked, is this having an effect? Are we getting bang for buck here? And if so what are the flow on implications? And I was able to utilise some statistics, in fact, a method called causal impact analysis, which is a method that had been open-sourced by some very intelligent people over at Facebook. So I could use that content to see that there had been an uptick in the number of referrals we were receiving in the vicinity of about 70% increase after the introduction of this program.

But I'm very passionate about asking two questions in my work. So what? And now what? It's the pragmatist in me. It makes sense that if you start paying for referrals, you are going to get more of them. That's just a no-brainer. So what if we get referrals? What's the utility in that? Traditionally, I think talent acquisition staff would look at metrics like, well, it's reduced our time to hire and that is certainly a valid way of measuring impact of the program. We took it to the other direction where we looked at the turnover of these people. Do people who are referred turnover at the same rate as those that we recruit off the street from our public platforms. And what was interesting is by looking at those two cohorts rather and comparing them, we could see that people that were referred tend to stay with the organisation at a far greater rate than people that we recruited through our public channels. And the beauty of turnover is, you can quantify it. And that's again, one of the insights that we provide our leaders at Reece. What is the cost of your turnover? So by looking at the cost, we'd avoided by having these people referred in, we could then say, well, the program has cost us X amount when we remove the cost from the cost saving, we're seeing an ROI here in the vicinity in the first 12 months of in excess of 500%.

Michelle Ockers:

It's amazing. It's great.

Adam McKinnon:

Yeah, it was a bit of a no-brainer in that regard. Clearly this is having an effect and the kind of effect that we really want. We don't want people to leave us early in their tenure because we believe Reece is a great company to work for.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So in terms of starting to kind of educate people in the organisation, you've come in, you've done your proof of concept in the first six months, been able to move that forward. Well, your proof of concept, the initial piece of work you did around the, what was it? The remuneration project?

Adam McKinnon:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

You've been able to move on to do the proof of concept, which looked in the end at the turnover data. In terms of then building, I guess organisational capability to work with data.

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But what does it take for an organisation to be able to work effectively with data? What sort of qualities, characteristic, culture... What's the magic there? Because some organisations I talk to to L&D leaders, and they're like, "Yeah, my organisation loves data. And people ask about it all the time," and others are like, "No one's interested in data." What does it take to build, I guess, A, the interest and B, the organisational capability work effectively with data.

Adam McKinnon:

Prior to returning to Australia, I had worked for a large multinational company in Germany that is both most well known for its pharmaceutical business. Now in pharmaceuticals, everything is predicated upon evidence. You just do not introduce anything to the market without a raft of evidence to substantiate not only its quality and its efficacy, but its safety. So their data is at the very core of every discussion that takes place. In an environment like that, it's a dream for a people analytics professional.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Adam McKinnon:

So what I try to offer you there, by way of example, is that some organisations will just have a natural tendency towards data, insurance, banking, the farmer industry and so on. Others will need to develop that and the one thing that I would say that is definitely required to build that capability is time. It just does not happen overnight and it is an ongoing activity at Reece. I think we are very capable when it comes to data from a retail perspective and have a long legacy of using that effectively. But we are really building our capability and it's like building a muscle. It takes time and effort. So when I talked to you about this people analytics platform, one of the things I did was that we have a weekly open office hour. I will be there, I'll be sitting on a Teams meeting you come whenever you like, you come and ask a question and we'll do it live. We'll do it in the moment. Either I'll help you do it or I'll do it for you, whatever you feel most comfortable with.

And I just found over time, people kept talking about data and there was just these incremental steps forward with regard to, is there any evidence to prove that point? I also speak to my colleagues on occasion about the calls to action. When should you be using data in your job? And I think there are three very clear ones to my mind when you're trying to understand a problem when you're doing reconnaissance of an issue. The second is, if you're building a business case, the stakeholders and the senior leaders, they want to know you've thought through this problem. And then the third is when you're measuring impact. So you've understood the problem, you've identified a solution, you've created a compelling business case and implemented a new people analytics platform for instance, did you go out and measure the impact? What have we been able to achieve? And I think they're just three really simple but powerful calls to action for HR professionals with regard to the use of data.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. That's a really great shorthand to when to lean into it. I've got a question about the measuring impact. I'm doing a series of interviews at the moment. I'm doing some market research about around learning evaluation.

Adam McKinnon:

Yes.

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Michelle Ockers:

One of the things I heard in my most recent interview was in the context of L&D people and their kind of motivation to try to link their work to business outcomes that there is a level of fear because they feel that they can't influence the business outcome, they can't be held accountable for it, so why measure something which a very different factor may impact. And my performance has been judged on something beyond my control, that level of fear there.

Adam McKinnon:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

So what would you say Adam, to L&D people who have a sense of trepidation or fear about trying to link their work in some way to business outcomes from a measurement perspective?

Adam McKinnon:

I suppose first and foremost, I'd be empathetic to the cause because I think it is a challenging activity at times because we do operate in an ecosystem and there are many factors at play. Maybe I can provide two examples that speak to the topic, and particularly the need to exercise a little bit of creativity to make it happen. The first of which is some work that I have done at Reece with our L&D colleagues, and that is around the importance of onboarding training in the first 12 months, and the impact that can have on turnover. I know I keep harping on about turnover like a broken record, but it's just been a very poignant topic for the organisation to address. And there's a consequence...

Michelle Ockers:

Not just for your organisation, but in a tight talent market, the sort of the whole movement we've seen post COVID, it comes up constantly the challenges of attraction and retention, right?

Adam McKinnon:

I feel it does, and I think in doing so it just helped anchor most conversations in a relevant issue but for this first piece of work, in essence, what I looked at was of the people that join us, if you do onboarding training or don't do onboarding training, because at Reece, it is optional, it is a choice as to whether you do that via the learning management system, what is the impact that it will have on turnover? And I was able to run what's called a survival analysis, which comes from epidemiology, public health in which organisations and pharmaceutical companies will test the efficacy of different drugs for different medical outcomes. In this instance, we were looking to see, does doing the training keep you around more so than not doing the training? And perhaps, unsurprisingly, that was indeed the case and that was statistically proven. Now, again, I asked myself, so what, what do we do with this? How do we quantify it and make it meaningful to our business leaders? Well, we can extend upon the methods and see that the relative risk or the risk rather of not doing the onboarding training means you're three and a half times more likely to leave the company in the first 12 months than if you do the training. And I think when you reflect on that, when you set people up for success, there's a greater likelihood they will succeed. And who doesn't like success?

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Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Adam McKinnon:

But when you don't give them the tools to be successful, and if you take Reece, we have a ton of products that we proudly support the market with, but it can be difficult to learn all of those products. And not going through the training doesn't make it any easier. So having that conversation and showing the impact and the risk associated with not doing it is a very powerful conversation to have with leaders. And from there, we can say, when you do the training, the protective effect is in this vicinity, which equates to this amount of dollars. Again, quantifying the impact of the training. So in this instance, I could say our average spend on L&D at Reece when I look at the LMS and the number of L&D staff, and then divide that by the number of employees we have is X amount. And when I apply it to this cohort our return on investment is again, astronomical.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Yeah. There's something about mindset in the way we approach looking at the data as for L&D professionals, that I think makes a real difference as well. If you are fearful that the programs or learning experiences and solutions that you're putting out may not have an impact on learning and your worry... Sorry, on business and performance outcomes or that something else will derail it. So the program, there may be a dip in business performance somewhere in an area where you are running development programs, but it may have nothing to do with your program. And I guess it's around looking at that with curiosity and asking, well, what is happening? Why is something that we believe is well designed and well targeted? Why is it not working? And being able to have that conversation. There's something about the psychological safety in the organisation as well, I think to make it easier to have those conversations. And I know we've talked a little bit about culture but in terms of how organisations have conversations around data, what helps to ensure that they are safe conversations and useful conversations. Do you have a view on that at all?

Adam McKinnon:

I think it's a great question. And in fact, I think in some ways it ties back to my earlier comments about the calls to action, particularly the third one around measuring impact, because sometimes you will get a result that is not comfortable and it takes a very strong practitioner to put their hand up and say, I thought we were doing the right thing here, but it's not having the effect that we anticipated. And I think that leads us to a point of, for the practitioner, I think it builds credibility because people know that they will be their own worst critic in some regards. They will hold themselves to account, but it also evolves the conversation more effectively, because from there, we get into the question you are asking, why? Why is this happening? And we can start to engage with people involved in the learning activity, people delivering the learning activity, and try to start to distil what might be the root cause of the issue that we're facing.

Michelle Ockers:

Knowing that root cause, well, it may not have anything to do with learning either, right?

Adam McKinnon:

That's right.

Michelle Ockers:

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It gives you the ability to think more systematically and engage with others. It may have something else going on in the organisation or the workplace, but without doing that measurement and asking the questions, you don't know that and who wants to waste their time? Either the time of the learning and development and creating staff or the time of people to engage and complete the programs and experiences, the use of resources you're offering. If at the end of the day there's some other friction point or blocker in the organisation.

Adam McKinnon:

Definitely.

Michelle Ockers:

So I think being comfortable leaning into the uncomfortable but it does take not just the L&D people to have an openness and curiosity about that, right?

Adam McKinnon:

That's right.

Michelle Ockers:

Others have to be willing to engage in that conversation as well.

Adam McKinnon:

I think one of the ways to create that safety though, is to do more pilots.

Michelle Ockers:

Nice.

Adam McKinnon:

Before you jump into bed with a new vendor or a new service provider, let's test if this will work effectively as anticipated in my context.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Adam McKinnon:

My CTO was very strong on that when we spoke about implementing a people analytics platform. Let's do a six-month proof of concept, let's see if this is going to work in this context.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes.

Adam McKinnon:

And I think that makes a lot of sense for many organisations.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes.

Adam McKinnon:

If you're asking me to put my money where my mouth is, maybe you'll meet me halfway.

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That's the sign of a good partner for me.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Sometimes six months is too long to make progress, right? So we move pretty quickly, and I'm just thinking, going back to your point, the data, the point at which you use data around trying to understand a business problem, this idea of test and learn rather than experimentation rather than a full pilot. If you use the data to inquire what is going on here, what might be going on and shaping our hypothesis around what might help to address an issue or challenge, and then thinking about what's a small test? What could I try and what data could I use to see whether a certain approach might make an impact.

Adam McKinnon:

Michelle, I'm with you a hundred percent. Whether we call it a pilot test and learn or some other thing, all we're really advocating for is greater experimentation.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. And data helps with experimentation, right?

Adam McKinnon:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

Which helps with innovation and more organisational agility. It's like this whole virtuous circle.

Adam McKinnon:

It is.

Michelle Ockers:

So I know you've talked to us about coming back to the use of your work with your L&D team at Reece. We've talked about the onboarding training, and I know you're only sort of more recently starting to work with the L&D team but I believe you've been doing some work around the sales space with capability building the sales space. Do you want to talk to us a bit about what that looks like?

Adam McKinnon:

Yeah. Yeah. So with regard to the onboarding training, one of the things that had come out of that had been the desire to pilot a three-day face-to-face training program for our new starters. And we're now some months into that, less than half a year, but it's early days and what we've been able to do is to take some of the data from those attendees and actually connect it to their sales performance in the environments in which they work and use that cohort as a test group, and then start to compare it to those individuals that don't undertake the three day face-to-face training. So who might do the online learning or simply have chosen not to do any learning as part of their onboarding. And from there, we're now in a position to make some comparisons, and it appears initial indications are very strong. We are seeing an uptick in sales performance amongst those people that get to do that face-to-face intensive training that helps them learn not only the systems and processes at Reece, but also the vast product line that I referenced earlier.

Michelle Ockers:

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Yeah.

Adam McKinnon:

So it seems it's having a positive impact, but the beauty of the data is that we can quantify that impact and we can put our hand on our heart and say, "There is statistical value in going down this path, and we can give you an ROI of what that looks like."

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Now, everyone listening to this is going to go, "How do I get an Adam? How do I get a people analytics platform? Am I doomed without it? How far can I go without a people analytics platform?" So let's talk about that for a moment. And of course you started at Reece without the people analytics platform and no doubt have worked pre or without a people analytics platform at other times. For the majority of listeners who won't have access to an Adam and a people analytics platform, how do they start working more effectively with data as L&D professionals? What advice would you give them?

Adam McKinnon:

Oh, it's a challenging one because I think in the absence of some of the infrastructure that I referenced earlier, there are limitations on what's achievable but the one tool that I always come back to, which is ubiquitous in business, is Microsoft Excel.

Michelle Ockers:

I knew you were going there.

Adam McKinnon:

It is everywhere and it is such a useful bit of kit. I use it day in, day out. I program in two languages and enjoy doing that. But there are some things that are just so much easier in Excel.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Adam McKinnon:

You can do statistical tests in Excel, you can do simple things, filtering data, just better understanding what you're dealing with. You can bring data in from a variety of different systems. So I just think it's a great tool to be very familiar with, and it's a great launching pad for more sophisticated activities.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep. Yep. How do you get the data?

Adam McKinnon:

Yeah, it's a good question because I think it's a good prompt for when you go and acquire new technologies, yeah? I think there is a strong leaning towards getting platforms that are best in breed as opposed to this omnibus platform that purports to do everything. And one of the things you need to be asking when you go to new vendors is, how do I access the data? What data do I immediately have access to first and foremost? A good example of that is with a survey vendor. There are some vendors that will say, we will retain the data on your behalf, but you can't access it in its raw format. So these are considerations that you need to know about upfront. The second is, how do I access it? Is there an interface or do I

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need to use an API?

Michelle Ockers:

Yep.

Adam McKinnon:

Yep. And then the third is, can I get usage metrics on my platforms to see whether people are actually engaging with this content? Because again, that's your form of impact measurement. So they're probably just some immediate things that spring to mind with regard to accessing data, but you will find that all of your platforms, whether they are HR related or not, leave this digital exhaust behind them and it's really about capturing all of this content and doing something with it.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. I'm going to throw another couple of things at you while I've got you in the hot seat here.

Adam McKinnon:

All right.

Michelle Ockers:

These are things that often come up. I am a strong advocate of aligning learning with business impact. Like any other function, learning should show business value about why we are investing in it if it's not making any difference to business growth, to business goals. And I often have conversations with people around this, and there's kind of a series of objections or challenges that come up. People get, like L&D leaders get enthusiastic and they go to someone in the business who is the holder of the data set and they start asking for data.

Adam McKinnon:

Yep.

Michelle Ockers:

And sometimes what they hear is, why do you need that data? That's not your data. How would you advise an L&D professional who is kind of just starting out on this journey and has a curiosity, wants to start getting familiar with business data, but needs to explain, because no one in L&D's ever asked to look at business data before in their organisation. How would you recommend to them to go about starting that journey, starting that conversation to say, well, here's why I want to look at the data. Here's what I might do with it.

Adam McKinnon:

I'd always start in my own backyard. So if you've got an LMS, what have you been able to learn from your own system, first and foremost? Yeah, get a lay of the land in that domain. Understand what the learning system is telling you in the first instance, because in doing so it will prompt a new range of questions and that will be the next extension of your activity. And it will provide you with an evidence base and also a platform for conversation with your colleagues in the business. So one of the things that we will do at Reece, an example of this is I told you we're bringing in our learning data into our people analytics platform. We started that process last week, and that will be the making of some months... Some weeks

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rather. One of the next things I'd like to do is bring in the sales data so that we can see when people complete the sales training, what is the impact financially speaking, and what is the time taken to realise that impact, if there is one. But it's only through having the data within HR at our disposal that we have the platform to have that conversation with our business colleagues. And I'm never asking them for something. I'm telling them what I want to achieve. There's a difference in the conversation.

Michelle Ockers:

So with that in mind, if I'm the L&D person, and I think I need a certain type of data, rather than going and asking for the data. Opening the conversation with... Here's what I'm curious about, here's what I'm trying to achieve and why. How might business data help me like framing the question differently, Adam, as a start point?

Adam McKinnon:

I think, so I often say to people, think of me like an insights journey. You can come and ask me, can you give me this analysis? And chances are, I'd like to think after this amount of time in the field, I can. Or you can come and have a conversation around, this is what I'm hoping to achieve. What do you think is the best way that we could come to that? Now, I might be pandering to my ego in saying that, but I would like to think that in having that kind of conversation, I can give you some of my expertise on what might be ways in which we could do that. What might be things that you haven't considered up until that point, that might further compliment that objective?

Michelle Ockers:

Yep.

Adam McKinnon:

And I would hope that our business colleagues would think of things in the same fashion.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. Yes. I think there's a relationship between people in your business being willing to explore data with you and the kind of relationships you've built with them to talk about the positioning of L&D in the organisation. Building relationships based around, I want to make sure I understand what you do, how you do it, what makes a difference to you and your people so that we can support you effectively. I think there's a whole stack of influence skills that come into play around building relationships so that you set the environment up to use data together to explore business challenges, business opportunities?

Adam McKinnon:

Yeah. Look, I 100% agree with that. I've got a very good friend in the organisation who's in the merchandising team. Like me, he's a bit of a data jockey. We program in the same environment, and I can just reach out to him and say, "Hey, I'm trying to do this. This is where I see myself heading, you know the commercial data better than I do. What would you recommend? What does your experience tell me?" And it's just an easy relationship.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Adam McKinnon:

Symbiotic.

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Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So data fuels better conversations and good quality conversations and good quality questions fuel greater insight from data. This is a virtuous cycle.

Adam McKinnon:

Yes. Yeah. Great call on the questions piece. I think the better quality of the question, the likelihood of the outcome being improved is many times over.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So when you look back over the two years you've been working in people analytics at Reece what's gone well with the introduction of people analytics, not just the platform, but just people analytics generally at Reece And why has it gone well?

Adam McKinnon:

Look, I think the conversations have started changing, and I see that happening at two levels. One is within the people experience function. I find that there's, at some point in the conversation, we now always reach the juncture of data, and then people asking for it. And it's not necessarily coming from me, which is a great thing to see. People are saying, can we prove that? Is there any evidence for that? How would we go about measuring that? And so on. And it's great to see the evolution of that conversation occurring amongst peers who are not technical experts when it comes to analytics. So that's been a great thing. The other thing is to see it used more actively by leaders in the business. I think historically, it was likely that a lot of decisions were based on experience and gut instinct. And now we can complement that. I'm not trying to eradicate people's instincts, but we're just looking to complement it with data and we're presenting data on a monthly and weekly cadence to different leaders and measuring their usage of it. And I'm pleased to say it's being used. That's one of my KPIs, how often they use the data.

Michelle Ockers:

Have you undertaken any deliberate efforts to improve data literacy in the organisation?

Adam McKinnon:

I'm fortunate to be in the position where that is also being undertaken by my colleagues in the IT environment. So they're doing training around usage of Power BI, which is another tool within the Reece ecosystem. They're also doing training around data privacy and security, and I think...

Michelle Ockers:

Important topic.

Adam McKinnon:

Yes. Those kind of topics are really influential at this point in Australian business. So there are complementary messages occurring in parallel, which I think is assisting and creating momentum.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. I think those drop-in sessions you talked about as well, very powerful for people to get confidence with using data in real world applications as well. So what do you think have been the key challenges you've had to address, particularly since introducing the people

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analytics platform and how have you addressed them?

Adam McKinnon:

I would say the biggest challenge I've had is scaling myself. I had been very purposeful when I joined the organisation in not asking my boss for additional resources in terms of headcount, I mean. And I had said, let's invest in the people analytics platform because I think that will most effectively scale me within the organisation and what we can do.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Adam McKinnon:

Post the introduction of that, I felt like I was spinning a lot of plates in parallel, and it was a real challenge at times to keep abreast all of the stakeholders that you create and service through the platform, but also maintaining what's happening with the platform, responding to unique requests that don't happen in the platform, and then bringing on new data sets into the platform. It felt like it was a bit discombobulating at times.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. Yes. So have you felt like you've had to push people to use the platform, use your services to create your own demand, if you like, or has the demand just kind of grown naturally as word got out?

Adam McKinnon:

Look, I probably wasn't in a position to push anyone just by virtue of the scale of the organisation. I think I was surrounded by some key people who were influential in driving the conversation. I spoke with my boss Sally, who's the Chief People Experience Officer. As things would come to her, she would be asking, where is the evidence? Where is the data to substantiate these comments or this direction or this activity? So it started to occur very naturally. I think in that way, I would always make myself available to people and do my best to be available. I didn't always get it right I must admit, by virtue of keeping all the plates spinning. But yeah, I think over time it created a bit of a momentum, and in doing so we've now been able to bring on another team member who's able to run the sessions every week, create more dashboards for people, doing more bespoke analysis. So the success has begotten more success.

Michelle Ockers:

Clearly the investment has been an absolute game changer for Reece in terms of the people analytics space and increase in the value, creating greater value from the work that's being done. What tips do you have for others who'd like to get started to do more with data in HR? I guess specifically L&D people and I guess one of the tips might be go out and get a people analytics platform but even short of that, to bring it back to most of the listeners who won't be there yet, I don't want them to throw their hands up and despair and go, well, all is lost because I don't... There's no way my organisation's going to invest in a people analytics platform at this point. Some of them may not even have a decent learning management system, to be honest. So it is like what tips do you have for those people who want to get started? They'd like to do more with data.

Adam McKinnon:

Yep. I keep a blog and I write articles on different topics and I also provide code examples

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of ways to get things done. One of the examples I provided probably about 18 months back was with another colleague here in Australia where we measured the impact of two parallel learning programs. And we were looking at it from a cost perspective in terms of delivering those programs over a one year period, and then also the performance of people on the post course assessment and determining whether there was statistically significant differences in terms of performance and then cost, that was all done in Excel. These are the kind of things that I think if we're a little bit creative, we can do with the resources at our disposal.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Adam McKinnon:

So I'd say start small.

Michelle Ockers:

Start small. Use the data you have available to you already?

Adam McKinnon:

Yes. Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Grab Excel, build up your Excel skills. Work with the data you've got to build up your confidence and competency and literacy with the data as a start point?

Adam McKinnon:

Definitely.

Michelle Ockers:

I think in a nutshell. Is your blog a public blog, Adam?

Adam McKinnon:

It is. Yes, I'm happy to share that with you.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. We'll put a link in the show notes to that. I'll get that from you. In terms of getting started, final question, are there any kind of like if someone wants to do a basic course or grab a book or other resource other than your blog, of course, to help them get started with data and improve their data literacy, do you have any recommendations?

Adam McKinnon:

Yeah, I do. This is a conversation or a question rather that's come up multiple times in the last three days.

Michelle Ockers:

I bet it has.

Adam McKinnon:

One that I've come across recently that I really like the look of, I've not done it myself, but I really like the look of it, is through data camp. So this is a resource that I use and have used

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in the past for coding purposes but this course is around an introduction to data and analytics.

Michelle Ockers:

Nice.

Adam McKinnon:

Again, I'll provide you with a link to that in case it's of interest to the listeners. LinkedIn Learning, I really like Coursera, Udemy, these are all short course platforms where I've used them for more technical endeavours, but I believe there are courses in those platforms

Michelle Ockers:

Oh I will do a little bit of searching and pop some links now. They won't be courses for listeners that I have completed, but I'll just take it that first step of the searching out of the equation for you and have a look and pop some links to some introductory courses. But yeah, just for listeners, go and have a look on Coursera, Udemy, LinkedIn Learning, if you've got access to it.

Adam McKinnon:

Definitely.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Do it with a colleague. Try some experiments together, work with your data as a result of doing the program together, right?

Adam McKinnon:

Yeah, definitely. If you can use the skills, you will remember the skills.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. Adam, it's been an absolute pleasure speaking with you today.

Adam McKinnon:

Likewise, Michelle. Thank you for having me.

Michelle Ockers:

Oh, thank you for being a guest. You talked not only about your people's analytics work, but indulging me asking, "well, what if someone doesn't have this, and how do they get started?"

Adam McKinnon:

Pleasure.

Michelle Ockers:

Plenty of take-outs for everyone. We'll pop a link to your LinkedIn profile with the show notes, along with a stack of these other resources so if anyone would like to know more about topics discussed today, I'm assuming you'd be open to them approaching you via LinkedIn, Adam.

Adam McKinnon:

Happy to do so definitely.

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Michelle Ockers:

Great. Thanks so much for sharing your work and insights with us today, Adam.

Adam McKinnon:

Pleasure. Thank you.

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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 experienced, 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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