

Learning Uncut Episode 132
Building an Integrated Learning Technology Infrastructure
– Fabrizio Conrado
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Fabrizio, welcome to Learning Uncut.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Thanks for having me, Michelle. This, it's a great pleasure to be here and to meet you again after a few years.

Michelle Ockers:

It has been a few years. And of course, we, our paths crossed when you worked at Towards Maturity, which when I look at your CV on LinkedIn that I'm curious about the role at Towards Maturity, because it seems like a little bit of an unusual role. A lot of your background is like marketing and tech. How did Towards Maturity fit in with that?

Fabrizio Conrado:

It was an interesting journey. I started my career in technology and then marketing. I did my business studies still back in Brazil. And when I moved over to the UK I started working for a boutique, education company in the financial sector. With that, I wanted to do a master's. I ended up doing an MBA, so I ended up growing to management and doing a fair bit of like change within the business there, some expansion into the US and Asia and so on. So very exciting years there. And then I decided to move closer towards the sort of private equity space and Towards Maturity came as an opportunity when the company was acquired by a larger group, Emerald Group, at the time, and they had hunted me to come and help with, which was essentially a sort of a merger of a new acquisition. So that was, I think the core of my role was to help transform that business into a new unit, if you like, within the larger group.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. And you're still kind of working in that tech area, startup area as well?

Fabrizio Conrado:

Yeah, I've been moved on to another private equity group, Blenheim Chalcot, where I've joined Avado, always in the education space, which is where I've been most of my career. And technology has always been, it's always been my biggest passion and all the great things that you can do to deliver better experiences for the learner. And obviously with the digital age, it was always something that wasn't very high demand. So I've been running some digital transformation programs for the group at Avado for the last few years. And then more recently I took over the role of Director of AI and technology, which is essentially running the tech department with a very strong focus on bringing AI into the business and into our solutions.

Michelle Ockers:

It's a very exciting time to be in a role like that, Fabrizio. And I noticed I wanted to ask you about your accent. So you've mentioned you've come from Brazil, so Fabrizio Conrado is your full name. You've come from Brazil, you've been living and working in UK. How would you describe your accent?

Fabrizio Conrado:

I don't think I can describe it. It's well, I've, I'm an expert. I've been around, I worked with, during the lot of financial studies days, we had an office in New York, so I used to run that

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office as well. I used to go there regularly, interacting with people from all over the world. And then in London, you get to experience all the different accents in the world. I probably get influenced quite a lot by the people that I speak to. I might be speaking with a slight Australian accent towards the end of our podcast.

Michelle Ockers:

So I'm confused about something Fabrizio. So you've got this new podcast that kicked off on August the 15th, Fab's Daily AI roundup. What a great name. Fab's. Like what an awesome opportunity to use your name for a podcast. So that kicked off on August the 15th. It's about two to three minutes every day, on an AI topic. When I listen to it, the accent sounds American. What is going on there?

Fabrizio Conrado:

Well, that's because it's AI generated. So the podcast came as a, almost a bit like a play on the sort of updates that people kept asking me about across the group that I work for. So, Blenheim Chalcot, there's a number of initiatives, particularly with generative AI, exploding beginning of this year. I had been involved with it since last year. I've been exploring these new tools already, and I had people kept asking me questions, "Where can I learn more about AI? How can I keep up with things there?" Everything's moving so quickly. And first I signed up to a number of newsletters and different resources, and then I sort of created this folder in my inbox where I threw everything in there. And then I created a script that basically takes all those newsletters and all that content and sort of summarizes it, and then it sends to a small list of people.

And then I realized that it wasn't coming through quite like I wanted. I thought well, maybe I could... I wanted to test another tool which generates speech from that text using my own voice. So I then introduced this tool, and then I started to create these short audio updates, but they're basically all AI generated. I create it and Fab is how people called me around the group. And it just started from that email, like Fab's daily update and I just used it. It's yeah. It's a bit of a play. I'm trying to sort of keep up with it. It's the curation part of this is hugely important. In a podcast is the quality of the content that really matters. So it takes me about 10, 15 minutes a day at most to make sure that the content is relevant and it's accurate. But yeah, it's fun. It's interesting.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Lovely. So it's amazing what you can do with AI and I'm playing around with lots of tools at the moment, especially around the podcast trying, I don't think I'll ever get to the point where I can have an AI interviewing a guest. Although I did listen to a podcast recently from Robin Petterd, in Australia, the Learning While Working Podcast, I'll put a link to it in the show notes. We're a little bit off topic, but we're kind of still in the tech space, where he actually interviewed ChatGPT. And then used another AI tool to generate the voiceover. And he interviewed ChatGPT about using AI for learning and development, which was a very interesting way to kick off a series on that topic, right?

Fabrizio Conrado:

Brilliant. Yes, that's brilliant. I've seen... Yeah, I think I've seen, I think I might have seen that, some notes around that.

Michelle Ockers:

He does some interesting stuff. So I'll pop that in the show notes, but that's kind of a little bit of a lead into the topic today, which is about building an integrated learning tech infrastructure in a fast changing world. And you've talked a little bit about just generally the pace of change working in also the equity area, working in a startup environment. I imagine

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there's quite a lot of pace there, but the tech is changing pretty quickly as well. So we're going to focus on the work you've done at Avado to bring to light some of what you've learned along the way about how we can build an integrated learning tech infrastructure. So let's start with sort of philosophy and fundamental choices. So what are some of the core principles that you've used to guide your decisions about building Avado's L&D tech architecture?

Fabrizio Conrado:

Yeah, I think that's a consideration that I realized over the years in running, managing businesses and running change programs that sometimes is not considered in the depth that it requires when you're making a commitment to a new technology. But in large enterprise, we start to get more of that discipline. And I think probably the first thing is what is the flexibility that the partner offers you in terms of the technology that you already have and the goals that you want to achieve. Very often, and I'm talking about suppliers in general here, of course, we're focusing on a learning platform, for example, which is the core of what you do in the education world. But for any supplier, I usually want to see what is the flexibility that they offer to integrate into my business and into the architecture that we already run in the business.

Quite often, you find partners that want to sort of... Want you to fit your business into their platform. And I think it's almost a nuance there, but it's very important to find the right balance between the two. If you're starting from scratch and you use that platform and you're used to it and you think that's the way to go and you can run the business on that, then great. But more often than not, businesses evolve in not a 100% planned way. And then you need to make sure that the new tech that you're bringing in is going to solve more problems than create new ones. So that's one of the first things that I would normally look at.

The second thing is the match in terms of the size of the business to your business. So I've seen, for example, very small businesses use very large suppliers and they just don't have that leverage. They just don't have that resource to navigate and to get the value that they need out of that large resource. You know what you want or you know a feature that will make your life a lot easier, but you're just not going to get on the roadmap because there are some bigger clients that are spending a lot more money with them and so on.

Michelle Ockers:

So finding partners that fit your size, I think is the second fundamental choice you've talked about there.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Yeah, exactly. So that's the second thing. Well, they're interconnected, right? Whenever I look at a supplier, I want them to meet these three criteria. And the third one is how good a partner they're going to be. And this is probably the hardest part because when they're selling to you, they're going to be very friendly. They're going to be all over your questions. They're going to be, you know, it is the way it is, right? When you're in that courting phase, you get all the attention in the world. How are they going to behave afterwards? And one of the things that we do, which is very helpful, is to speak to some of the existing clients and try to get, you know, try to get a contact of about three people. So see who their clients are, see if you already know someone in a company that uses them, because then then you get the most unbiased view of how good a partner they are during the relationship that you have over the following years.

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Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. You know, what's interesting, Fabrizio, when I asked you there about fundamental principles that guide your decisions in building a tech architecture, you went straight to talking about choosing the right supplier. So when it comes to the question about build versus buy, there's an implied philosophy there, right, around going out and buying and finding good partners to work with rather than building yourself.

And I think not many people would be thinking about building, except potentially as startups. And that point around, sometimes people get sort of very fixated on, I want one system, I just want one piece of learning tech that's going to do everything for me. If I get the right LMS or the right LXP, then all of my problems will be solved. What's your position on, that kind of one-stop shop versus, having multiple platforms or tools or apps that you have to integrate?

Fabrizio Conrado:

I think when you start thinking from the user perspective, right? The user wants to do everything or as much as they can in one place.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Fabrizio Conrado:

But that doesn't mean that you have to build a monolith to serve that one user experience. If you think about some of the greatest user experiences that we have, think about your Apple, iPhone, IOS, or you think about your... Even your like, an operation system in a laptop. Or you think about, any sort of interface that you use. You think about your Alexa or your Google Assistant, or it's one interface. But behind that, there's so many different applications that are talking to each other. There's so many different systems that are collaborating behind to deliver you that experience. The reality is to deliver one experience to your user, you don't need to have one platform in fact deliver a great experience. You more often than not, you will have a combination of services operating behind the scenes.

The more development you need to do in different areas, the more complex the business becomes and the softer it becomes. Right? We can see how, for example, over the course of history, we had some companies that, have invested a lot in building these monoliths. We have SAP, which is a, classic example used by lots of enterprise, and then they start to modularise it. And then, some companies would use their sales model. Some, companies would use their finest model. The idea of an ERP, the idea of one system is, it's good in theory, but it's very, very difficult to work in practice. My preference is usually to get together with a techies, and we put a whiteboard in front of us and say, okay, what systems do we need to make to talk to each other? Where's the data that we need and how do we collect that? And how do we present that back to the user?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And we will come and talk a bit more about data. I think that's a critical point as well. And understanding what are we trying to create, not just in, you've mentioned user experience and you've mentioned data, so there's multiple perspectives you have to bring to this question about your tech infrastructure. You know what we haven't talked about much, and I think we do need to do it for scene setting, is we haven't actually talked about Avado and what Avado does. So it'd be good to kind of just step back a little bit, tell us a little bit more about Avado, and also, about what the tech infrastructure looked like when you first began your work with Avado, which was, what did you say about three years ago now?

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Fabrizio Conrado:

Is almost four years.

Michelle Ockers:

Four years.

Fabrizio Conrado:

I joined Avado just before the pandemic. Interestingly enough, I had, a few months to get to know the people in the office still, which is very good, particularly when you're running a large transformation program. When I joined Avado is, an education company. It operates in the professional qualifications, part of the market with, primarily CIPD qualifications. You're familiar with the CIPD. Majority of people that apply for their CIPD certification, they will study with Avado in the UK and abroad as well. We have quite a strong presence in the Gulf. And, there's somewhere between, five to six, 7000 learners going through the ranks, if you like, every year. So it's quite a large learning population, active at any point in time.

Avado was again - very common in private equity environment - it was a combination of businesses that evolved and there were acquisitions, mergers and stuff. With that, you get a legacy of systems and you have this incredibly complex architecture of systems. And one of the goals was to simplify that, which naturally happens after you merge companies. We had to simplify quite a lot of that piping, if you like, in the background. At the time I joined, Avado was running several learning platforms, based on Moodle. Moodle's, very common and well known. It's, usually where a company starts from, because it's open source, it's very easy for you to sort of prop it up. It's not the first business that I worked with that use Moodle, and then eventually you sort of grow out of it because it becomes very challenging and complex and expensive to run a Moodle platform when you start to do all the customization that you want, all the sort of features that you want and so on. So with that, sort of first step was to sort of bring all the platforms together into one Moodle instance. And at some point we realized that the platform wasn't delivering for us what we needed in terms of the efficiency versus all the investment and the management that was required to run that. And we decided to, we decided to pivot and use an external third party sort of platform at that point. So the other interesting aspect here is what I mentioned earlier is our core business, Avado's core business is not a platform, it's not a learning platform.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And you've come in, you've looked at the architecture. You've done some integration of all these different Moodle instances, and then you've looked at it again and said, it's still not doing what we need it to do. What were your goals then, when you looked at what do we want out of this infrastructure and we're going to go out to market and try to find someone who can help us. How did you go about defining what you were looking for and then doing that search?

Fabrizio Conrado:

We had, at the time Avado had a CTO called Mike Ferner. He's a great guy. I had a pleasure of working with him for a good couple of years here at Avado. And we set a number of criteria that we thought were essential in terms of the capabilities of a platform. So we start looking at the platform that we had and what were the things that that platform was delivering that our stakeholders were happy with. And what were the things that were on their wishlist that we couldn't deliver, or they were going to cost too much to deliver? And I remember there was about, I don't know, 35, 40 different features, so to speak. And then we went to market and we start looking at some of the platforms available, enterprise level. We were looking, we we're probably shopping a bit like a large enterprise would do because, you know, as I said, we planning a platform for thousands of learners.

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So probably looking into that sort of enterprise level market. And we ended up short-listing three platforms that met most of the criteria. So we did all of that before actually contacting them. It's amazing the amount of information you can get online these days. And we could get a very good understanding of what the features were there. And I think it's something that you often hear in conferences you often hear in marketing discussions. The buyer will have done 90% of their research before they contact you. And that was exactly the case. So we did a lot of research. We did, a lot of, investigation around what are people talking about these platforms, what are the sort of, you know, Trustpilot reviews, what are the sort of feedback that you're getting from people that are actually using it also...

Michelle Ockers:

And this was also basically online. Online doing online searches, looking at...

Fabrizio Conrado:

Just online search.

Michelle Ockers:

People's conversation what's often interesting, and it is public information normally is kind of like user support groups as well. What are people having issues with? How are they talking about the support that they're getting from the company, the vendor. Yeah.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Yeah. Which links into that point that I mentioned earlier is like if you go to a support forum and there are lots of questions there, it's not necessarily a bad thing. The important thing is how those questions are getting answered.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes.

Fabrizio Conrado:

And what sort of level of satisfaction is that driving? We know that problems and challenges will arise. It's how good a partner the supplier will be to help you address those.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep. And of course you can often do free trials of platforms as well.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Yeah, exactly. So what we wanted to do is we wanted to do a bit of a desk research and get to a short list for two reasons. One, we wanted to move fast. Again, private equity environment, you're usually moving at twice or three times the normal pace of things because investors are very close, very involved. You're watching sort of budgets and goals very closely and it's like there's no reason to take longer than needed on this.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes.

Fabrizio Conrado:

So we wanted to get through that initial vetting and then really focus on the three best candidates and then dive into it. And then we had that, trial period where we had a tenancy spun up for us that we could go around and test and see how it works. So we had to play

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with them for about, it's probably about a month we spent, exploring these candidate platforms.

And we had a small group of stakeholders from the business. So the people that would build content into the platform, the people that would manage the operations or on the platform so they could go around and see how the reporting work and see how friendly the platform was and see what sort of features were available. And then obviously the technical stuff to see how the integrations worked, how the sort of security of it worked and so on and so forth. So we did that with these top three candidates. And then with that, you naturally already initiated the conversation with them and we moved on probably in another month. We were signing a contract.

Michelle Ockers:

So it was a learning management system that you ended up purchasing? How would you describe it? I know the labels can be a bit off-putting sometimes to check.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Yeah, it will probably fall more into the LMS. Now, the interesting thing, the platform that we selected is very versatile and it's white-labeled and you can connect with lots of different other platforms. It uses all the standard, SCORM and all the authentication type that are standard in the market. So it's very configurable.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep.

Fabrizio Conrado:

But I think it will probably fall into an LMS category.

Michelle Ockers:

And it was from Thought Industries, Right? That's the platform you ended up going with?

Fabrizio Conrado:

That's right. That's right.

Michelle Ockers:

And what were the key reasons you chose that platform?

Fabrizio Conrado:

I think there's probably two things that really stand out. One is the flexibility that it allowed us. It doesn't, if you go into our platform, you can't tell it's Thought Industries. The level of customization is really unrivalled. I haven't seen that level of customization in any third-party platform.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Fabrizio Conrado:

And even to get like a Moodle platform to look more like your own thing, you need to spend a lot of resource changing it. With Thought Industries, you can apply your own styles, you can create your... It's, it really looks like your own thing. To the level of changing all the labels, changing all the wording that the learner sees in the sections and so on and so forth. So very, very configurable, again, from a user perspective. And the second part, which

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really, I think won us over, was when we were having conversations with them about the integrations that we wanted to do. For example, we have a very specific assessment platform that we don't expect any of the big providers to have because it's for CIPD and it follows the model of assessment that CIPD requires, which is very specific. So...

Michelle Ockers:

And CIPD, of course, some listeners may not know who the CIPD is, the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development?

Fabrizio Conrado:

People Development, yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

And I heard you're saying they have some fairly specific requirements around their accreditation...

Fabrizio Conrado:

Yes. The assessments.

Michelle Ockers:

Processes, assessment processes.

Fabrizio Conrado:

So at every unit, the learner needs to submit an assessment that then get marked against a brief that is issued by CIPD. And that brief is renewed every, so often or every six months, every year. And you need to, imagine you need to assess thousands of learners every year. You can't do that manually, so you want a system to do that.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Fabrizio Conrado:

There is a provider, a smaller provider that offers an assessment platform that does that. Now this naturally, this assessment platform, they know they're going to have to be integrated into other bigger platforms, so they use this standard called LTI, Learning Tools Interoperability, which is a technical integration protocol, if you like, for learning applications to talk to each other.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay.

Fabrizio Conrado:

And Thought Industries also connect with that really well and seamlessly. So you can serve the assessment inside the experience for the learner in Thought Industries, and the learner won't notice that they're submitting their assessment into another platform...

Michelle Ockers:

I understand.

Fabrizio Conrado:

And they're just continuing their journey.

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Michelle Ockers:

So, I am probably more on the layperson end of the scale when it comes to tech than the expert end, Fabrizio. So this is good because of the other people out there going on, there's a bit of jargon in here. Right? So this Learning Tools inter...

Fabrizio Conrado:

Interoperability.

Michelle Ockers:

Interoperability, I've written that down. I'll find out about that protocol, I'll pop a link in the show notes. So I'm often used to hearing, well, it's got an API, we can integrate via the API. I haven't heard of the Learning Tools Interoperability protocol. If people are out there looking at different platforms and they're told, well, 'it's got an API, you'll be right for integration.' Is it the same thing? Is it different? What are people... Just give us a bit of education here. What are people looking for when they have to... When they're looking to keep in mind how easy is it going to be to integrate something else with this platform if we need to do that?

Fabrizio Conrado:

That's a great question to differentiate. An API is a standard for systems to communicate with one another, but not specific to the education world. So in API, you can have an API, like the vast majority of systems today offer you some sort of API. The API will depend... API stands for Application Programming Interface.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep.

Fabrizio Conrado:

So the API will be as rich as the supplier have, has developed their API. They can give you the ability to do certain tasks, and some of them will have richer APIs, and some of them will have very basic APIs. But to interact with an API, you need to write some sort of code.

Michelle Ockers:

Right.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Or you could use no-code applications, but you still need to sort of configure that logic.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Fabrizio Conrado:

When you talk about the learning world specific integrations like LTI or SCORM type integration, it's a lot more accessible for a user that is perhaps at the sort of more medium level of technical competence. You don't need to program or you don't need to sort of define any logic in that.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep.

Fabrizio Conrado:

So the integration of... An assessment platform like the one we used with the LMS via LTI is a lot simpler and is done by learning technologies, for example, rather than me having to get

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someone in the data team writing some codes that will then use the API, I mean we have, we use all the API integration as well for Thought Industries, but for other things, but I would definitely look for how much your platform offers in terms of learning tool interoperability...

Michelle Ockers:

Great.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Protocols. Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

And do you need a tech department? Do you need an IT team to do all this set up for you? How much of this is potentially do it yourself in learning and development versus how much do you need... How closely do you need to be working with your tech team in your organization?

Fabrizio Conrado:

So it depends how much, depends what features you want to use. So one of the things that we really liked about Thought Industries is that they have some native integrations with some other tools. And when I say native integration is a plugin type integration that uses their APIs, but you don't need to write your own code or script to use those APIs. So they have a native integration to Salesforce that does some basic functionality. They have a native integration with Alchemer, which is a survey tool that we use for getting learner feedback, for example, calculate NPS and a number of other things. So again, these things are kind of plug and play. You just add, they have native integration with Zoom, so you can create a Zoom session from within the course and that will create the Zoom session for you, with your company's Zoom account. And it will link into the course. And when the learn navigate to it, they just click the link and they register.

Michelle Ockers:

That's actually a really nice approachable example, right, because in this day and age, many of us have using one tool, seeing, you know, little apps come up for integration and it can be quite easy and quick to actually click on, we'll integrate Zoom into this particular platform. And it's not, it's so straightforward that you don't need any special tech expertise to do that. Right?

Fabrizio Conrado:

Exactly. There is this sort of No-code movement if you like, and you know, probably hear all people talking about No-code, which is exactly right, you know, you point and click and things work. So they've spent some time building some of these integrations with these market standard tools, you know, you can expect.

Michelle Ockers:

So you've got the assessment platform, you've got Thought Industries platform, you know, how were you thinking about, what does this architecture need to look like? How are we going to pull it all together? What's the design? And how did you then approach building what you designed?

Fabrizio Conrado:

So I think we're probably going to need a couple more hours, Michelle, but...

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Michelle Ockers:

I'll try not to take us down anymore, rabbit warrens then.

Fabrizio Conrado:

We integrated the tools via LTI and the features available there. And then we started to enrich it as we went along. So things like, the Zoom calls, they came in later, because there is a learning curve, and there is a learning curve in terms of learning how best to use the platform, how best to organize the content in a way that you can deploy at volume. So our, the actual migration, and you asked me earlier about how much of the tech team you need to bring into this. The actual migration of learner was a project that I ran very closely with a couple of people. I had a data engineer and a lot of support from the Thought Industries tech team as well. So we did that migration over the course of six to nine months because these learners are in active cohorts and we needed to find the right time between one unit and the next. So we wouldn't impact their assessments. You know, you don't want to migrate someone two weeks before their assessment.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. That's a long migration period. Right?

Fabrizio Conrado:

It is, it is. But it wasn't like we were the nine months straight working on that. Once we had the first few in place, then we had our script already created and we had our process already set, and it was like usually every two or three weeks we would do a batch and we sort of, you know...

Michelle Ockers:

So it became like a process, if you like.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Exactly. Yeah, exactly. So I think you probably think about these three distinct phases. So the first one was we set everything up, we propped everything up. Then we took a fresh new cohort that started in the new platform, and then we gave it a couple of months to see how they were doing. And if there was any adjustments that we wanted to do to our setup, then the next stage was, okay, let's start migrating live learners. We got the first sort of template, if you like, cracked. And then the remaining of it, it was just moving the remaining learners across.

Michelle Ockers:

That's really smart to start with fresh learners rather than risk moving people who are midstream across and being able to play with play, I don't know if that's quite the right word, but try out your functionality and building it. So it sounds like to some degree the architecture evolved rather than here's this master blueprint that we've put together right up front. We know exactly where we're going and what the end game is.

Fabrizio Conrado:

I think it evolves. You need to be sure that your critical components are doable. I think that's probably the more challenging part of when you're making a commitment to a new supplier, a new piece of tech.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes.

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Fabrizio Conrado:

Are my critical needs going to be addressable. And I think we got to that again, back to how responsive and open Thought Industries were with us, and we worked with one of their solution architects from the beginning. And he was basically sitting with us on calls and working through, okay, you wanna do this thing, these are some ways that you can do it. And we were looking through options, where like, okay, so there's this one or two options here of how to do it that we're confident with. That is technology that we know, or technology that is industry standard. So we're happy to learn and that's how it progressed. But I think from the moment we signed, we were very confident that the things that we needed were... The core things were going to be addressable, and then there were other things that would evolve along the way that we knew we'll find a way.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So start with a well thought out core, make sure it's doable, and then evolve as you go.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Yeah, exactly.

Michelle Ockers:

How does that sound? Yeah? Okay. Let's talk about, and I never quite know how to say data or data, but I think I say data generally, data utilisation. So you mentioned data upfront and saying you were thinking about what data do we need as part of your selection process for what platforms are we going to go with? So what kind of data insights do you extract from your tech and how do you use that data?

Fabrizio Conrado:

So at Avado we had, because of that legacy of several systems and the fact that we have an assessment system that is separate from the LMS, we had an e-portfolio System because we were operating in the apprenticeship market, which is yet another one that we had to integrate. So we had data coming in from lots of different systems. So we have a data warehouse where we pull the data from all these systems into this one database or to this one data lake, and then that data gets transformed into more meaningful structures into a data warehouse that we then use for our reporting. So we do our own reporting internally, and some of large enterprise will have similar ways which use, consuming data, use some Power BI or Tableau for their reporting and interface.

For us at Avado we are very interested in data and we're very interested in generating insights. We've been in the data science space exploring things for quite some time, and we really like the fact that Thought Industries has a very rich, what we call BI Connector, which is a business intelligence connector, essentially it's a pipe from their database that we can pull into our data warehouse. So we can pull virtually every piece of data that happens in that platform into our data warehouse, and then we can combine it whichever way we want.

So one of the more exciting things that we've been doing in the last few months is we launched in partnership with another venture at Blenheim Chalcot, we launched a CoachBot that we embedded into Thought industries that looks and feel like it's part of the platform and utilises data from the platform in combination with data from the assessment platform and all the other places that we have information about the learner. So this chatbot, which is powered by these new large language models, can answer questions, like what was my grade in my last assessment? What's my next unit? When does this start? Where is the unit where I can find information about employment contracts or things like that? So all of that is

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possible because we have access to our data inside that platform and we can pull that data and manipulate and deliver it to our chatbot in very effective ways.

Michelle Ockers:

So I'm mindful of your time as well, Fabrizio, but what I would like to ask about a little, you've obviously got a special interest in AI, and AI is part of your job title. And you've got your podcast. In terms of where you see AI and drawing on, obviously, the example you've given us there, the chatbot is one example. But how you're currently leveraging AI or thinking about using AI. I'm happy to make this a broader question just generally around implications for L&D and how we should be perhaps thinking about AI as learning and development practitioners.

Fabrizio Conrado:

I'm definitely biased to talk about it, but I think it's an opportunity that we have never seen in our lifetime, Michelle. To just reinvent learning the way we would like it to be.

Michelle Ockers:

Oh, I like that.

Fabrizio Conrado:

If you think about, go back a thousand years and think about how you'd like to learn, before all this stuff existed, how would you like it to be? You can have your own personal tutor who knows everything about you, who knows what you already know and what you don't know, who can serve you just in time. It's one of the things that we have today is this information overload and sometimes you do a course and then you get involved in so many activities that you forget what you learn at that point, and then you don't use it when you need it. So it's like, how do you learn in the flow of work and at the point of need, just enough for what you need.

Michelle Ockers:

Oh, but Fabrizio isn't that what Microlearning is for? So can't we just access little bits of... Little chunks of content and that's learning in the flow of work?

Fabrizio Conrado:

Yes, but...

Michelle Ockers:

Tongue in cheek. Tongue in cheek.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Microlearning... No, no, I think that was the... No, because, see, microlearning...

Michelle Ockers:

It's a common perception we strike about, what learning in the flow of work is though, isn't it?

Fabrizio Conrado:

Yeah. Microlearning is one of those things. I remember when you sort of came around, I remember us in the... In the Learning Technologies event, as everybody was talking about microlearning. And it was this really exciting thing, for me as a technologist, it was very exciting. But the challenge is, and I saw a stat recently in, I think it was Bill Gates podcast, that about 15% of learners, or 15% of population of learners, are these very curious people that go after things and they sort of go and search, so when they need something, they will

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go and search it. So I think microlearning is excellent for people like that, but what about the other 85%? So there is an element of educating learners on how best to learn, or guide learners on how best to learn. And I think artificial intelligence has the, this sort of unique capability of really nudging you and proactively initiating something, it's, "Hey, it looks like you're trying to do this. Why don't you try it this way?" Or "Oh, I see you trying to sort of create a table here in Excel. Why don't you use this formula?" "Or here's a suggestion for how you can sort of do this." It's almost like having that coach, that tutor sitting right next to you, and nudging you along, which if you stop and think about for a moment, it would create such unprecedented productivity in the world that, nobody can say how far we can go.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Yeah. So I think that's, I think it's still very early stages, but the, we are starting to see some real, real cases and real benefits from some of the application of AI and there's much more to come.

Michelle Ockers:

I agree. It's got huge potential and requires, I think, a pretty radical rethink of what's our role as learning and development professionals, beyond just how can we use it to make better courses quicker.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Yeah, exactly. And it's a more exciting role because there's so much of day-to-day activities that we don't like to do that much, right. When you need to create and organize sessions for lots of different groups and, all this sort of admin related part of it. Or this... It's, this is not the exciting part of the job. The exciting part of the job is to think about how are we going to inspire people? How are we going to make sure that this message sticks with them? That they sort of get out of here excited about how they're going to apply that and thinking of a use case that they can actually apply and see the difference. So it's about creating more time for us to think about what's next.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. Okay. I'm going to ask you to wrap up then. Coming back to the topic of today's conversation, Building an Integrated Learning Tech Infrastructure in a Fast Changing world for L&D people who perhaps haven't tackled that challenge before or are a little unsure about tackling that challenge, lack a little confidence perhaps, what would your top tips be? Maybe two or three tips for how to best build, go about building an integrated learning tech infrastructure?

Fabrizio Conrado:

Okay, so I think the first thing is don't try to fit your organization into a platform, right? You should find the right partner that will give you enough flexibility to wrap around your organization, and that will have huge implications in how you run your operations downstream, how much you need to spend on support and training and all of that stuff. So the more you can sort of work with that partner that will be flexible around you, the more time and effort you're going to save downstream and things just work better. The next thing kind of aligned to that is, it's not a platform, it's a service. So we often think, oh, we're buying this piece of tech, it's really you, you're buying a partnership and you're buying the team that comes with it. So make sure you get to know the team and make sure that you sort of, you can get along with them, make sure that they're adding value to you from a technical

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perspective, from an industry understanding perspective, they're seeing similar issues with their other clients as well. And they can always bring you some interesting insights.

And then the last point is just tune into the fact that the world is changing faster than ever. It will continue to change. It will just get faster. So, keep it flexible. I would say don't think about a plan for, "Oh. This is going to be our plan for the next five years or for the next 10 years." You can realistically only plan for the next 12 months [chuckle] So keep it flexible, do things in a modular way, try out first as we showed earlier in the example there. We launched the platform for one fresh cohort of learners and we saw how that went and then we sort of started to migrate and then we sort of eventually migrated everybody. It might feel like, "Oh. The project's going to last for an extra nine months to do the migration." Well, it's not a full-time project. So, why do we need to compact it now and take too much risk when you can see how things will evolve. So, just keep that flexibility in because it allows you to change more often instead of waiting for that bigger shock that happens when things change too fast around you.

Michelle Ockers:

Great. Thank you. There was some fabulous tips in there, Fabrizio. I really appreciate you sharing your experience and expertise with listeners today. And I will be sure to keep following Fab's daily AI roundup to stay abreast of all that is happening in AI. Thank you.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Brilliant. Thank you so much, Michelle. It's great having a chat with you again and yeah. I look forward to see when the episode goes live and continue to follow the next episodes as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you. Bye.

Fabrizio Conrado:

Thank you. Take care. Bye.

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

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About your host, Michelle Ockers



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

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

- Australian Institute of Training and Development Dr Alastair Rylatt Award for L&D *Professional of the Year – for outstanding contribution to the practice of learning and development*
- *Internet Time Alliance Jay Cross Memorial Award – for outstanding contribution to the field of informal learning*



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