

Learning Uncut Episode 45
Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to Episode 45 of Learning Uncut. This episode is going to air in early February 2020. During January two special editions of Learning Uncut were published in the new What Happened Next series. I caught up with several of the early podcast guests to find out what happened with the solution we discussed in their original episode. We're now returning to normal format, bringing you a conversation with a guest about a real learning solution that they've developed and implemented in their organisation.

If you're tuning into Learning Uncut after a holiday break you may have missed the announcement about the change to the podcast crew. After an amazing two-year partnership, Karen and Amanda would like to put more time into other projects. So you're now with me as your solo host. I'll continue bringing you great stories every fortnight so keep tuning in and sharing the podcast with others.

And now on to today's episode. My guest is Craig MacDonald, the Executive Manager of learning product at Suncorp, a financial institution. There's been a lot of talk in recent years about disruption, the pace of change and the impact on skills required by organisations and individuals. The label 'future skills' is often used. However, the shift in skills necessitated by ongoing changes on multiple fronts has already arrived. I have a bit of a personal aversion to the use of the word future skills, but it's a little hard to find a better word - perhaps power skills might catch on. Either way, organisations cannot afford to be complacent and defer action to address this challenge, especially when some of those skills are in short supply in the labour market. Suncorp certainly hasn't been complacent.

Craig talks about the Future Ready programme, which aims to prepare people with the capabilities they need and that Suncorp needs for the future. The programme is part of a strategic workforce planning and talent management initiative, as well as being driven by a sense of social responsibility to ensure that their people are relevant. This is a really rich story, which also covers, amongst other things, moving to a learning strategy with more self-directed continuous learning in the flow of work, and changes to the learning team structure, role, mindset and skill set. Craig touches on challenges and aspirations that many other learning professionals are grappling with.

Listen closely for lots of little gems and indicators of the Suncorp culture throughout this episode. For instance, the renaming of Human Resources to People Experience three years ago, and Craig's surprising response when I asked him to share tips for others who want to do more to develop future skills for their people and organisation. Enjoy Craig's story.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome, Craig.

Craig MacDonald:

Welcome, Michelle. Thank you.

Learning Uncut Episode 45 Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

Michelle Ockers:

Can you kick us off by introducing us briefly to Suncorp?

Craig MacDonald:

I'd love to. Suncorp is an Australian financial services organization that looks after its customers in regard to banking products, insurance products and wealth products. It's a second to apply a very strong in insurance from but from a bank perspective, is a second-tier player in the system. Its whole purpose is around helping our customers when they need us most in the moments that matter. And with insurance, you can understand that that would be when there's an event or a crisis, or a challenge in someone's life. And with banking, it's around enabling people to earn the money that they need to live a great life. So Suncorp is a great company to work for and very focused on flexible working.

Michelle Ockers:

Thanks Craig. How long have you been working with Suncorp now?

Craig MacDonald:

14 years Michelle

Michelle Ockers:

Well, you've got some history there, haven't you? Excellent. And today we're talking about your Future Ready program, which you piloted in late 2018. And I believe the decision to create the program was actually made in late 2017. So from decision to actually piloting, which we'll talk a little about some of that history there, was around about a year. But let's start with some context about what was happening in your industry and in the organization at that time in late 2017, when the decision was made to undertake the program, and an overview of the challenge or the opportunity that you wanted to address.

Craig MacDonald:

Certainly, look the environment at that time, which is still sort of similar now is that the pace of change continues to accelerate. And it's just now continual change. A lot of our workforce aren't used to that. They have change that's occurred but they hadn't understood the continual change, the pace of technology development, the use of robotics, partnering and emergence of artificial intelligence is changing the workplace and changing the type of work that people will be doing now, but will accelerate that change over time. And so a number of those pieces were factored into our strategic workforce plan that identified that the workforce and the capabilities that we have today will significantly evolve over the future. And so, we will need different capabilities and different skills as certain roles are actually managed by robots or offshore partners or technology. So we need to look at how do we get those skills.

The other part of is when you look at some of those skills, they can be in short supply, especially in a country like Australia and New Zealand, those two countries. So the other piece of it was, when you think about the workforce you need in the future, you can think about significant change to that workforce, but you lose a lot of the people that understand the purpose of your organization, live it and love it. So our challenge was to work out, how do we build that workforce of the future, knowing that some will come from external, but how

Learning Uncut Episode 45

Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

can we support our workforce, build new capability in areas that they may not have thought that they would need, so that they can stay relevant, they can stay with Suncorp as best as they can, and if they don't for a range of reasons, they've got the opportunity to stay relevant in the workforce going forward. To be totally honest, it's actually number one a social responsibility, given the amount of change that I workforce will experience for us to support them to continue to stay relevant.

Michelle Ockers:

Craig, I think there's some themes that are relevant across many, many industries. This isn't a story that just resonates with financial services when we talk about the amount of change the pace of change, and I really like that intermingling in your answer there between the linkage to being quite strategic in the workforce planning and understanding that you're not going to be able to source all of your skills externally as well as the social responsibility about preparing people for the future - that's a really nice balance that I think lots of our listeners are going to recognize.

Craig MacDonald:

Well you hope so, and the things that you say and things that you do that are challenges to live that every day and have people say that in the symbols, the leadership behaviours and where we invest our money so that they believe they're working for Suncorp is a great time in my life, I get a lot of recognition and reward and interesting work. But I'm also have the opportunity to set myself up for my future roles and careers which might not have been created yet.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And what was the purpose or goal of the program? And if you can put it succinctly building on the need, as you just described it to us.

Craig MacDonald:

Future Ready was the name of the program that we've come up to. And the purpose of that succinctly is to prepare people with the capabilities they need, and that Suncorp needs for the future.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And, and so, the idea for the program really came out of the strategic workforce planning. You know, in a busy world, it can be difficult to get leaders and managers to engage in long term capability building initiatives which don't address an immediate need. But it sounds like you would have had good key stakeholder support and in fact, that maybe you were engaged by someone coming out of that strategic workforce planning activity rather than you trying to kind of wave your hand and get the attention of senior leaders which I often hear from other learning professionals. It is the case that they're trying to get people to get their head up and into the future. But it sounds like it might have worked in reverse order for you in terms of the stakeholder engagement. So just talk us a little bit through how that worked and your relationship with the key stakeholders on the program.

Learning Uncut Episode 45

Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

Craig MacDonald:

Sure, so one of the places that came out to came out of was a Business Improvement Program that Suncorp was running. And a lot of the times when you see those types of programs, people see them as cost reduction programs. And there were some aspects of that where we were looking at improving the way that we do our work, automating partnering and working on what are the key services that create the most value for our customers. But a part of that also was like how do you make sure that your people are as capable as we need them to be to provide that outstanding customer experience? And so the idea for Future Ready came out of those range of different things when you're considering the strategic workforce plan, the workforce we need in the future, the amount of change that an existing workforce will have and how we support them. The good thing about that was that as part of the broader Business Improvement Program, very strong governance and Steering Committee structures that are in place. And so the portfolio team within the Human Resources area, which we call People Experience, one of the ideas that they had was to be able to look at how do we help our workforce with the capability that we need in Suncorp, and the DNA going forward? So the proposed business proposal was put up for that. That proposal at the time was focused on how do we actually invest in that but also demonstrate a return from that investment. That over time, what we've realized is that it's our social responsibility, and it's an investment and we're not actually seeking a tangible financial return from it. That will come in a whole myriad of ways with the engagement and enablement of our workforce.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, I love that your HR areas now called People Experience - that's such a progressive shift, given all the talk about employees expecting something different in their workplace experience.

Craig MacDonald:

Yeah, we've been called People Experience I think for about three years now and part of that was that in Suncorp it incorporates you portfolio teams around talent and learning and a range, you know, diversity and inclusion, but it also includes your real estate, you're partnering teams as well. So where our people work and how they work is all grouped together so that we can shape the experience for their life cycle with Suncorp.

Michelle Ockers:

Let's talk about their experience of learning. I believe, at the time in late 2017 when the decision was made to build this Future Ready program you were also shifting your organizational learning strategy. What changes were you seeking to make and why?

Craig MacDonald:

We started that first. And part of that was also around, we brought all the learning teams together. They were decentralized. They were very effective for the individual business, but they all did different things. So there was a lack of consistency across Suncorp for what we were providing, which created gaps in the capability needs of our workforce. It also resulted in a lot of duplication of similar content being built and delivered in different businesses when you could have used one piece of content across them. So we centralized and were able to

Learning Uncut Episode 45

Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

save a significant amount of funding, and also target funding better, to the learning that Suncorp needed the most.

And so, that strategy that we came up with then was also considering not just the workforce that we need, but what's the type of learning strategy and learning culture we want to have in Suncorp going forward. So those key pieces were around, obviously, the explosion of technology. And most people have now got a mobile device. And most people are wanting to try to do more learning in the flow of work just in time just when I need it. So our learning strategy was shifting more from that push approach of learning where Learning would build content, Learning would deploy content, Learning would facilitate content, to much more fluidity in regards to how we build and deploy content and encourage our workforce to do that as well. So where we've really gone from is a push approach to far more pull in in our workforce. It's a cultural shift so it doesn't happen overnight. We're three and a half years into it, and we've still got a way to go. But we focused on more micro design. We focused on far more technology, particularly social learning technologies, to engage our workforce to build and deploy and share their own content, and also very much around driving self-directed, continuous learning in the flow of work. So all of our leaders are set towards how do we help people create that learning opportunity for themselves, deploy that learning opportunity for themselves, what are the tools we support them with, rather than continually just pushing learning to them, and they consume learning that they have to rather than seeking out learning that they need to.

Michelle Ockers:

Craig you are touching on so many common challenges that I hear people talking about in learning teams in many organizations. I feel like we could have multiple podcast episodes with you, but today, having set the same, we're going to hone in on the Future Ready program and hopefully some of these shifts you've just talked about will be brought to life with what you've done and continuing to do with the Future Ready program. So are you ready for us to dive in?

Craig MacDonald:

Let's do it.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so let's start with the idea of capabilities or skills. And I'm not sure which language you've selected to talk about them. But what are the capabilities that are included in the future ready program, and how did you actually go about choosing those?

Craig MacDonald:

Absolutely, so first we chose them out of the strategic workforce plan. So the broader Group wide strategic workforce plan identified the key capabilities we should be focusing on for the future. And so that's where we identified those capabilities. At the time, we had a slightly different strategy to what we have now. One of the capabilities was marketplace mindset, which was a bit tricky, because we hadn't really done that before. And Suncorp strategy at the time was to build a marketplace of solutions of a platform that our customers could access and third parties could access as well. We've moved from that strategy now. Really continuing the digital journey we were on with that, but refocusing on our core businesses banking, wealth and insurance. So those capabilities were identified out of the strategic

Learning Uncut Episode 45 Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

workforce plan. That included things like partnering, lifting the capability of our workforce in partnering, data analytics, because of the explosion of data and the criticality of using that to be able to understand how your business is performing and what your customer's needs are, innovation and creativity around continuing to drive that were a couple of the capabilities that we've actually identified.

And so what we chose to do was to partner with an external university. A number of companies do these sort of things. So we're not unique in what we're doing. How you do it, and how it aligns to your culture is what's key. So we partnered with an external university to build three months deep dive immersive program, and we sort of piloted it first. The design of it was three months immersive - three days with you were taken out of your role to actually learn through university lecturers, self-paced learning, a range of different things. And in two days we placed you in a business where you could apply the capability. The initial two that we piloted were digital and data insights, and partnering, which was rapidly enacting partnering. And so we applied some people in parts of our business that are that had strong capability in that or were doing it quite regularly, and so in that three month process, and so it was very formal, in a way that process. We paid the salaries of those people at a Group level that were coming out of the business. So the business didn't actually suffer by having not being able to replace those people for the three months with a secondment. And so we set it up so that there was minimal impact on the business.

Obviously, we got very good people that we put through a process of the selection, which included personality testing, a profile that they needed to complete, and also interviews with the business they were going into to select the number of people we wanted to use in the pilot. And we settled on 27 people that we took through. Eighteen of them did digital and data analytics, and nine of them did partnering. And they completed that in February this year, February 2019. We started at around about October, and I completed it in February 2019. I'll stop there and see if we got another question, Michelle?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, seeing as we've gone to the pilot let's talk about that a little bit more. What strikes me when you talk about it, is how comprehensive it was, including the selection process. I mean, that's a that's a really huge investment. How did you evaluate the pilot? And what did you learn out of it?

Craig MacDonald:

Okay, good question. So the evaluation of the pilot initially, based on the business case was that we were expecting to identify people that were either in our redeployment pool whose jobs had been made redundant or soon to be. And that was part of the initial thinking. We quickly moved away from that. And in the end, out of the 27 people, we only had two people that were in the redeployment pool and 25 of them came from businesses where there may have been significant change being planned. So when we, as we went through that we had fortnightly catch ups we also had had appointed a Future Ready leader that manage those people for the amount of time that they are in the project. So they had a different people leader for that. In the end instead of dollar saves at the end, which we did to return some dollar saves, but knowing what the original intent was, what the evaluation was is how quickly were these people being placed in roles for the future where they could utilize these skills. So that was their key measure. Our goal was to have 20 out of 27 people placed in a role within three months of the program completing, and ideally we'd get all of them but 20

Learning Uncut Episode 45

Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

out of 27 was the target. And that really was the key measure around whether the program was successful or not.

Michelle Ockers:

How many did you get placed out of the pilot within three months?

Craig MacDonald:

I was waiting for to you ask that question.

Out of the 27 people after three months we had 23 out of 27 placed and so we didn't ended up tracking it any further than that. Because we hit the target. What was really exciting was 17 out of those 23 people actually got a promotion to go into a new role that the business had. So what the unintended consequence of it was, was that other parts of the business got access to really talented people who they didn't know anything about who obviously had to apply for this program and to get accepted on it, had a great mindset, great motivation and a desire to learn. And what happened is that those people stood out to those businesses that were trialling them. So they saw before they bought and most of them got bought. So that was a really wonderful outcome. So those people that have put themselves out there to learn a new capability who are now in a far better place in regards to they career, working in capability areas that are for the future and have moved from capability areas that may not have as big a future.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so how many people do you have working at Suncorp?

Craig MacDonald:

About 13,000 people.

Michelle Ockers:

All right, so this is a drop in the ocean, right 27 people, and I know it's a pilot. It strikes me that you've had a fairly thorough and careful selection process. And so is there any skewing in terms of you know, what you're seeing out of this and the benefit out of it, and the extent to which it's equipping the broader workforce?

Craig MacDonald:

Yeah, great question. And that was when we did the retrospective and review of the of the pilot. There are a number of questions that were that were being asked. One was the desire. well, the original desire that it needed to make a tangible return on the investment, that for three months to run two cohorts, totalling 27 people was significantly expensive, taking people out of the business and then replacing it. There was an FTE issue there - significantly expensive. It was also a lot of work for 27 people.

And so the challenge that was brought to us and we put to ourselves was, how could we scale this? How could we make it simpler for all of Suncorp people to be able to access this if they chose to? And then obviously we'd want to encourage them to. So how can we scale this? That's where the next iteration and phase of the design started to occur from February,

Learning Uncut Episode 45

Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

so that we could get a level of budget approval for implementing the next phase of this journey in FY20, which we are in the process of doing now.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so talk to us then about the current structure of the program, what it looks like now and how you have addressed the scaling issue.

Craig MacDonald:

So we've taken a bit of a three tiered approach with the program, thinking about our people and where they're at and what their future might look like. So we've taken three tiers in mind.

One is how do we provide access to learning pathways for these capabilities for anyone in our workforce to choose to do. So what we've done is with the capabilities that we revisited as part of the end, you know, the business planning process for it for 2020. We identified capabilities such as product innovation now is something that's really important to us. Data Analytics, and digital are still there, but we've split them out to be two separate things. Project Management is a key capability that we've identified that we want to drive. And if you're in Australia and listening to this you'll know that there's been a recent Royal Commission into the financial services industry. And so risk management is now a really critical capability for people going forward around making sure we're doing the right things by our customers. So those range of capabilities were identified.

Tier One or phase One is 'how do we create generic pathways for all of those capabilities for anyone to go in and do?' Our goal was also was to create a pathway that gave that person something tangible at the end of it. That could be from a badge, you know, in a system and, some sort of digital certificate in regards to what you've completed through to the opportunity to get credit points or certifications. And so we've looked at partnering with providers that can help us with that.

And we've partnered with Skillsoft, who is a global content provider, to help us. They've got three different project management frameworks and methodologies that you can choose from. Suncorp chose the one it wants and so that there's a pathway for people to do around 36 hours of learning at the pace that they want to do it at. Self-paced in their own time to be able to build their capability in that space, while our workforce and the work we do in Suncorp is evolving so that they can apply those skills. So that's the first tier - generic pathways for people to be able to access.

Second one is providing people with support around their career, around their well-being, and around financial advice to help them be thinking about their personal situation and personal well-being, and planning and preparing for the future. So lifting out people's capability and knowledge in that area and supporting them with that.

And the third tier was identifying up to 500 people annually in the organization that we may choose to offer an accelerated pathway to. They can apply and we can also seek out and offer (them) an accelerated pathway. So what that accelerated pathway would be would be taking elements of the generic pathway for those capabilities, but customizing it to that person. And that customization may be based on their location. It might be partnering with an industry body to be able to enhance the solutions that are there. So that person can get an industry certification for what they're doing. So for example, in project management it was identifying who we can work with, inclusive of Skillsoft and potentially industry bodies to

Learning Uncut Episode 45

Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

create custom pathways for our people. Now 500 custom pathways is a lot of work. So we would obviously expect that the people we have there still be a fair bit of synergy and alignment in those pathways, but it's working with them to find out what really just works with them. So really personalizing it.

Michelle Ockers:

Right, so you've got these three tiers in terms of the target audience and access to all of these tiers. Can anyone just self-service opt in for the generic, the first tier?

Craig MacDonald:

Yes. So the challenge we had in the pilot was, we actually just had one set program that we're running people through, and anyone that could apply. So the different levels of maturity and complexity of people that work in our organization ended up making it really hard for all that content to be valuable. So in the end, what you don't want to have as a learner is you have people that are sitting in doing learning, completing things that are digital and going 'I already know this' or 'This isn't relevant to me, I've got it.' So the generic pathway gives people choices to choose their pathway from a broad range of content for the complexity that they see. So that's, that's one of the things that we recognize we needed to do smarter. And also it aligns with our approach to enable our people to be self-directed in the learning that they choose to do.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, and it's that generic pathway of pure content play - here's a whole stack of curated content, go and do it - or is there more to it than that?

Craig MacDonald:

It's a lot of curated content. But it's also, again, it's curated content, but its content that's been drawn from multiple sources into a pathway that ideally enable someone to go through sensibly the process of building that capability. So it includes, as I said, the Skillssoft content, but it also includes internal Suncorp content. It also includes videos of Suncorp leaders talking about how they use it. So there's a range of different experiences and channels that people are accessing as they self-direct their way through it.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, and talk to us a little more about that second tier, I think you called it, the 'wellbeing tier,' which is all about career planning, wellbeing, and financial advice. Can anyone participate in that? And as a participant, what does that look like? How are people supported? How are skills built?

Craig MacDonald:

Anyone can but it's pretty much on a first, in first served basis based on the budget that we had for the year. So for the career advice we've partnered with an external company that provides career advice and collateral, so we've got a portal where the people can access that. But also sessions to help people work through what they love to do, what they may not like to do and help them shape what that might look for and how their skills might apply in the world going forward, and where some things could be that they would develop on.

Learning Uncut Episode 45 Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

The financial wellbeing - Suncorp is a financial services company so it's providing discounted financial advice and financial plans if people would like to go down that path. And wellbeing is again, partnering with an external partner that we leverage for all of our employees wellbeing for more targeted learning solutions around your own personal wellbeing through environments of significant change. So it's not as focused on things like what mental wellbeing and, you know, stress and depression and things like that. It has elements of that, but it's more about your wellbeing and managing that through times of significant change and helping yourself be aware and positive about future capability build.

Michelle Ockers:

It's interesting because, you know, in terms of managing our careers, there's a lot of discussion at the moment that it's about skills rather than roles because of the changing nature of work and the shifting roles, right?

Craig MacDonald:

Yeah, yeah, I have a favourite saying that, you know, your next role hasn't been created yet. So it's about capability and the relevance and the performance of those capabilities that you have. And a lot of that leads to, obviously, the opportunities that you can get for the future.

Michelle Ockers:

Now Craig, there's lots of evidence that shows that one of the biggest influences on people's development is their manager. What's the role of the manager in all of this, for someone who's undertaking one of these tiers?

Craig MacDonald:

Yeah, it's a really good, a really good question. So one aspect of it is leaders in Suncorp are accountable for ensuring the development planning process takes place for our workforce, but also having regular conversations around performance with their people. That's no different to most organizations globally. So with Future Ready, they have an awareness of what's available there. Some of those capabilities may be more relevant to the industry that those people are working in. So it's having a really useful development conversation around where that person is and where they'd like to be in the context of Suncorp and in the context of the broader working environment, and encouraging that person to think through, identify their opportunities and then plan for those opportunities.

What we don't want to do is have a manager tell the person what their learning should be. What we want is a really rich conversation based on where that person is at in their life and where they'd like to go to help them identify and then plan. So the leader's role is support and also to stimulate thought, and ensure that that person has a plan in place, but the details of that plan, they can influence with that person, but really, you want it to come from the individual because again, it's just demonstrating the culture that we want around a self-directed, continuous learning employee.

And the reason why we're so keen on that is thinking about the workforce of the future. And there's more thought leaders and specialists we expect to see in the workplace. People that are successful are the ones that actually look at a problem, see a problem, analyse the problem and solve the problem. Less so the person that's told there's a problem or escalates

Learning Uncut Episode 45 Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

problems. Because if you got a workforce that actually identifies and tries to resolve their own issues and other issues they, see, they're more likely to be doing that for our customers as well and providing a better customer experience.

Michelle Ockers:

Let's talk a little bit more about the people in the targeted bracket. You did a lot of rework at to make it more scalable after the pilot. When did you roll out or relaunch or fully launch the target pathway?

Craig MacDonald:

The 'targeted pathways' which way I was using that language. And then we've now turned into 'accelerated pathways.' They're in design at the moment. So what we focused on when the funding came through was to target generic pathways so that we gave that entire workforce opportunity. So we've deployed project management, risk management, data analytics and digital pathways for our entire workforce now that are out there for them to use. We didn't launch them until towards the end of August. They were launched by our Chief People Experience Officer, but we haven't heavily marketed them at this point in time. We're trying to let it grow generically through word of mouth, more than heavily marketing

And the accelerated pathways - the first one that we're working on at the moment is risk management. So we've already got a risk management generic pathway out there. So now we're customizing that to be an accelerated pathway. And that accelerated pathway will have core and common components. And then we're building it to have variable components that a person might like to choose from, but also have the flexibility that they may choose something that they'd like to do in that that will actually enhance their learning experience. And so within the funding envelope that we have, we're looking at trying to be able to meet everyone's needs in that but definitely, that those people that are doing the accelerated pathway, ideally, I'd love to see out of that is that we've got visibility of those people doing it, and that we are then identifying that talent and placing that talent where it needs to be in the organization over recruiting externally.

Michelle Ockers:

From the time the decision was made to do a capability build around Future Ready to now we're looking at around two years. Right, which seems like on the surface of a quite a long time. What's driven the length of time it's taken to get to the point of really getting some traction with rolling out the final, well, the current shall we say version of the program, because I'm sure it's going to be iterated even further, what's driven that length of time?

Craig MacDonald:

So I think about it, it started early it like 2017, early 2018 with the idea. So part of that was going through the process of building the business case for it in a tight financial environment. So we needed to go through that business planning process that happens mainly through Q4 in the financial year - in Australia that's April to June. And so getting then Board sign off of overall business budgets which then approved the funding for Future Ready. We got that approval in July to be able to move. And so then we we engaged vendors and built that to be able to deploy in October for the pilot. So we went from October to February. And then that we were in the business planning process, again, with the review of the program. We had a change of CEO in late April, early May, I think it was. And that pushed back the business

Learning Uncut Episode 45

Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

planning process and Board sign off of budgets, which meant that we didn't get the approval for the next round of Future Ready until early July.

We did start working on it before then. And the curation actually is taking a little bit more time than we think because we go out and identify the key sponsors in the business and their SMEs, engage them and we work quite closely with them to curate the content that Suncorp needs. So significant work really started from July, and we deployed our first this pathway at the end of August. So there's been some down periods where we've had to do lots of papers to get approvals. And you couldn't go too far ahead with spending money and investing resource until you actually knew what funding you got today with probably the challenges that we had.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, so quite a bit of wait time in there. And I guess that's the reality of working on these large-scale whole of organization initiatives.

Craig MacDonald:

Yeah, it can be in sometimes, you know, there's business needs where overlays are required, where funding needs to be diverted to something else. We've had some, you know, challenges there where we've needed to consider that and look at that, but the beauty of it is, is the CEO of Suncorp, is very, very supportive of the program, often talks about the social responsibility we have to our people. Our challenge now is that we are building and delivering the offering for people and it's part of the range of other change aspects that are occurring across Suncorp around robotics and technology and partnering and artificial intelligence that will continue to build that foundational driver for our people to go 'I have a real opportunity right now. The world is changing, I've got a choice, I can change with it. And Suncorp said it helped me do it.' Or I can stick my head in the sand and pay the consequences for that. Obviously, we want to encourage that people with a range of levers, not just learning, going out there saying, Hey, this is really good, do it. But there's a range of levers that are encouraging that and people can say the support that's available for them.

Michelle Ockers:

So it's clearly a long term strategic and social responsibility play for the organisation.

Craig MacDonald:

Yeah. So at the moment, we've got funding approval through for three years and we have to keep going back for that approval each year, but there is a three year time frame at this point in time to build and deliver and adapt it over that time, and we'll see where we're at.

Michelle Ockers:

So your intent is to continue iterating to adapt based on how the program is being received and the impact it's having I take it.

Learning Uncut Episode 45 Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

Craig MacDonald:

Absolutely. And what I would love is that we get to a point and when in say three years, we're really only in year one now, the pilot's not considered year one - that was a pilot to get a point where we have a three-year strategy. And what I really love is that all of those levers that we're pulling at the moment around learning culture, around investing in yourself, self-directed, continuous learning, we start to be able to we shape the framework that we've got here where our people are shaping it rather than Learning feeling that they need to do all the curation and deployment. And you've actually got your workforce shaping more of that content and more of that experience, because it's going to suit them better than if we do it for them.

Michelle Ockers:

I'm really looking forward to conversation with you in 12 months-time to check in on how you progressing. Let's talk briefly about your learning team either specifically in regard to this program or to the shifts in your broader learning strategy. What changes have been needed to the mindset and skills of your learning team? And what have you done to support the team to make these changes?

Craig MacDonald:

Great question. And when you think about the rest of the workforce that's having different capabilities, the same applies to learning. You go from a traditional learning framework and structure to one where you're trying to drive social learning, where you're trying to drive self-directed continuous learning, micro learning, then the traditional capabilities around instructional design and around facilitation and training, and the logistical support of that evolve. So if I look at the learning team within Suncorp, to support Future Ready, and also the broader programs that we've got, what I would probably call as the two significant capabilities that we've needed to build in our team are enhanced project management capability. And that project management capability which is quickly delivering short and sharp micro pieces and finding the simplest way to do that. We have always been very robust and considered and governed in our approach to learning. But sometimes that's meant the timeframes can be quite long. So a challenge now is how are we turning around things far quicker and more with more agility. So that project management capability to not only deliver, to set the plan up and get the learning delivered, but to drive the business for the information that you need rather than wait for it. So working with the businesses, partners, and engaging them and keeping them engaged.

But the other piece that's been really interesting has been, one, the use of data. So how is Learning leveraging more data around things and adding that in regards to how learning is designed, the data that the business is using around their business performances that you layer in as well. So project management and data. But in project management, there's also that ability to project manage, not just yourself, but other people within the group and SMEs, but also external partners that Suncorp uses both on and offshore to get the design and build and deployment done. And that's been a real shift because it can be quite difficult, especially when you're dealing with partners from different cultures and countries, to be able to get that momentum trust and drive to be able to deliver quickly to your customer satisfaction.

The second one I wanted to talk about is curation. So less about how can we design the perfect product and the design principles that an instructional designer normally has. I'm

Learning Uncut Episode 45

Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

looking now more that there's a lot of content out there, yes, some bespoke design will still need to occur, but in a social learning environment and the more that we build that in it workforce, we draw all of the knowledge in a lot of cases for what someone needs in bespoke learning from our own workforce, and our own SMEs. So we're trying to build them to create content, share it socially as well. So curation has become more and more important for our design workforce to be able to pull content into a story and a learning flow, rather than build and create it yourself.

And I think you're going 'so what have we done to be able to build that capability?' Which is an excellent question. So Future Ready has actually got project management as one of its key pieces. So encouraging our learning workforce to be doing the generic pathway in Future Ready. We've also got Skillsoft content, which has multiple project management, problem solving digital and data transformation content, so encouraging them to get into that. And the other piece is holding them accountable. So the first thing we look at when we're doing design is, what else is already there, rather than what do I need to build. So it's what else is already there when you're thinking about the problem you're solving or the experience you want to create. And so not letting design and the old way be the default. It's shifting the default with our workforce through our processes, and through the way that we approve learning to be designed and prioritised. So we've changed some of our processes in learning, encouraged our people to grow their capability. And if we are looking for new employees to come in and join Suncorp, it's looking at different capability now for what we need.

Michelle Ockers:

It's an exciting time to be in the learning profession, I think.

Craig MacDonald:

It's interesting, I was talking to my boss, I've been in Learning from a fair bit of my work career, and to been on the journey of transforming Suncorp's learning for a while and you get to a point where you go Okay, so what's next? And I was talking to my boss about that in my development, career conversation, feeling that it was time for me to test my skills in another area and see how transferable they are. And she said, 'Yes, we can do that. But I don't think you'll find anything is more exciting as learning at the moment.' Given the pace of change and the fact that capability of your people is a clear differentiator for organizations, and we are getting more and more people asking us to do things and to invest and for us to invest in changing technology, in the way that we design, which is just making an opportunity to innovate. So I'm loving it. And at the moment, I have not planned to move because there is just so much happening in this space, not just in Suncorp, but in learning globally.

Michelle Ockers:

It's clear it comes through that you love what you do, Craig. And so in the interest of helping people to try new things, if anyone's listening and is keen to do more with developing future ready skills in their organization, what would be your key takeaway tips to help them get started?

Learning Uncut Episode 45 Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

Craig MacDonald:

I think that the first thing is to have a really honest, is honest and transparent conversations. So that starts with deep care, which is really, organizations are built on care, relationships with customers are built on care. That between an employee and someone else up here, employee and their leader it's around deep care and open and honest conversations about where that person is not only in regards to their performance, but in their growth in their development and where they'd like to be, but also in line with where the world is going. And having that, building that awareness. And that doesn't necessarily always happen in the blink of an eye and the light bulb just switches on. That's, you know, creating the environment where you care enough to continue to have those conversations and encourage those and always think about it with a leader is that you're actually setting the example and the role model for the leaders of the future. They may not get it immediately, they may not get it in a year or two. But over time, people start to demonstrate the behaviours and the values that they've taken out of what you've done. And so that's, that's my first port of call is the open and honest, transparent conversations that talk about the good and the not so good, and the opportunities there.

But then it's also about how that helping that person I find, make the first couple of steps themselves. So how can you support them do something different and try it and get those little wins that come from that to motivate them to continue to go and walking by them while they do that.

So they're probably my two, my two big points. It really is down to care. The challenge for a leader is how much time can you do that? So you've got to be really smart around how concise you are with your language, the relationship we've built up with you people over time, but it's creating that environment where people feel comfortable to have a go, comfortable to try something different, and that if it doesn't go well, the support is there for either them to continue to do it or to shift to something else.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you for that, Craig. I've got one final question I like to ask. Can you share with us one resource you find valuable for your own professional development?

Craig MacDonald:

Yeah, it's interesting. I don't focus as much now around resources as around my need. And I flick from things like podcast videos, to books, to attending events. And generally, funnily enough, the greatest resource I've ever had, and I think any of us ever have is the experience in the moment of trying something challenging, failing, succeeding, learning. That's the biggest thing, that if I think about what I'm doing right now, it's in my development, it's all about risk management. So as a leader in Suncorp, in the environment that we're in and the change that's there and the regulatory oversight, it's how am I building that risk capability in myself to be predicting planning and identifying the risks for my people, my business and our customers. So that we're managing those. So what I'm using is anything I can get my hands on to do that. Fortunately, in learning I've got access to great risk professionals within Suncorp, have got access to the learning pathways in Future Ready. And I've got access to a whole heap of content we've got through Skillsoft and other providers, and we built internally so I am I'm touching things as often as I can.

Learning Uncut Episode 45 Craig MacDonald – Building a Future Ready Workforce

Michelle Ockers:

Excellent. So a lot of its experience and need driven. Craig, we're going to include a link to LinkedIn profile if anyone would like to get in touch with you to find out more about the topics you've discussed today. I know you've been doing quite a lot of speaking so many of our listeners in Australia may already have some familiarity with your work and I'd encourage people to reach out to Craig, if you're curious and want to explore further. Thank you so much for sharing your work and your insights with us, really valuable.

Craig MacDonald:

Wonderful. Thank you, Michelle.

About Michelle Ockers

Michelle Ockers works with business and learning leaders to realise the untapped potential of learning in organisations. She is an organisational learning strategist and modern workplace learning practitioner. Michelle works with organisations to develop and implement transformative organisational learning strategy, and to build the capability of their learning team. She delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events. Michelle also mentors learning professionals at all career stages on career planning and professional development.

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*

Michelle can be contacted at michelle@michelleockers.com.