

Learning Uncut Episode 50
Laura Overton, Amanda Ashby & Jelle Buiting
– The Past, Present and Future of L&D
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to this really special episode of Learning Uncut, the 50th episode of the podcast. A big thank you to Amanda Ashby and Karen Moloney, who are my co-creators of the podcast and colleagues for the first 42 episodes.

I wanted to do something a little bit special to mark the 50th episode. I went out to LinkedIn and cast around for ideas. And the idea I picked up on came from Laura Overton, who's one of our guests today. She suggested we look out to the year 2050, you know, a play on the 50 bit, and ask ourselves well, in 30 years time, what might the world of work look like? And what might that mean for us as learning professionals? What can we learn from the past 30 years and what should we move forward with to prepare ourselves for the future? So we assembled three guests that represent people at different points in their learning profession across the span of 30 years. Laura, who can take us back through the arc of past 30 years, and in particular, she points to the promise of technology being able to personalise and individualise learning but us not really having realised that promise. She suggests it's time we start coming of age and playing a more adult role in the world of business.

We have Amanda Ashby - yes, our producer - who is back on the other side of the microphone. Amanda is a workplace learning practitioner at the coalface. One of the things she really talks about is the kind of demands and tensions and the tricky balance placed on learning professionals out in the workplace when there are so many different ways we could be contributing and making an impact and the range of skills and technologies has expanded so broadly. She does bring us really nicely back to grappling with the problem we are trying to solve and starting with problems and solutions as a way of adding value.

And then, early in his career one and a half years into his career as a learning professional is Jelle Buiting, who joins us from the Netherlands. He certainly also picks up on the idea of translating problems into solutions. In particular, he has an interest in data and HR analytics and how that can help us to be better partners.

We talk about what should we hold on to from the past as we prepare for possible futures, because it's quite clear that the original premise of this podcast was fundamentally flawed. You cannot look out 30 years and know what the future is going to look like. But what we can indeed do is understand what are the basic layers of expertise, the things that maybe aren't glamorous, but keep us grounded in the fundamentals of learning or creating business value, and ensure that if we ground our practice in those and if we are flexible and adaptable in how we respond and potentially in expand our view of our role into the future, we can remain very relevant and be valued business partners into the future.

I hope you enjoy today's episode - and just a reminder that we recorded this before COVID-19 had caused so much massive disruption in such a short space of time. I hope you find it relevant, informative and enjoyable.

Michelle Ockers:

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Welcome to today's conversation. I'd like to kick off by asking each of today's very special guests to introduce themselves and talk to us briefly about what brings them the most joy in their work as a learning professional, and what's their biggest frustration. Let's start with you Laura.

Laura Overton:

Okay, so I'm Laura Overton. I actually started in this profession in the mid 80s, so I'm probably the most oldest one on the conversation today. Really my work is probably best known for the work that I did by establishing Towards Maturity, which is the research arm of now Emerald Works. And really basically what brings me joy is really what drove me to establish that, which is when learning and development professionals really get what's needed by business and they adapt and they flex in order to add value back into business.

I think what really frustrates me the most is the fact that we often don't want to learn anything from our history. We're very excited about all the new things that are going on but we rarely look back and say, "Okay, what's already happened in my own field of work and what can I learn from that and how can I adapt as a result of that in the future?" So that really frustrates the hell out of me when we just ignore everything that's happened before.

Michelle Ockers:

I've got a suspicion Laura, we're going to give you a chance to elaborate on that theme in today's conversation. Okay, thank you for that and welcome. And Amanda, if you could introduce yourself next please.

Amanda Ashby:

Hi, I'm Amanda Ashby. I've been in L&D for nearly 20 years, and like many L&D people it was an accidental career choice that has ended up being a wonderful one. I started as a facilitator and now look after a digital learning team. For me, the joy is the possibilities of what we can do to make people's lives better at work and the different ways that we can go about it. And some of the challenges are the time it takes to do that, whether it's from stakeholders, the complexity. We all want to do so much more faster and so I always struggle with what's in the way that's stopping us making it easier to go to work.

Michelle Ockers:

Thanks Amanda. Long-time listeners of Learning Uncut may well recall that Amanda was the podcast editor for the first year and a half, so it's great to have Amanda back in a different capacity on the podcast. Finally, our final guest is Jelle. If you could introduce yourself.

Jelle Buiting:

Hey, yes. My name's Jelle and I'm a Learning and Development graduation student. My goal is to practically help organizations make fact-based decisions with data. What brings me most joy at the moment is my graduation thesis at digital learning agency RMMBR in Amsterdam. I helped them to discover how they used data in their decision-making process. I believe that when you use learning data in addition to strong instructional design process you can create impact that's good e-learning.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you. And your frustration? Or are you too new to the profession and too young and optimistic to have any frustrations yet?

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Jelle Buiting:

No, I'm the field already for one and a half year, around that. But the biggest frustration at the moment is off-the-shelf e-learning, thinking that one size fits all and that's not working.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you. And you're joining us from the Netherlands, that's right isn't it Jelle?

Jelle Buiting:

Exactly. That's right. I'm joining you in from Nijmegen.

Michelle Ockers:

Well welcome to today's podcast.

Jelle Buiting:

Thank you.

Michelle Ockers:

So Laura, let's return to yourself. And I have been in the workplace since the late 1980s, although not quite as many years as yourself as a veteran of Learning and Development. But let's start by looking back over the sweeping arc of the past 30 years, and trends of course come and go but what do you feel has endured in the work of learning professionals in this time?

Laura Overton:

Well I think that the area that I would concentrate on the most actually is technology. It's been my personal kind of red thread that's run through the last 30 plus years. I started in the world of work Amanda, actually I wanted to get into training as my first job after my degree. That to me is really important to me. So I got my first job in a training department. There I was introduced in the mid 80s to technology and this incredible branching technology called interactive video. And so for me, that started my interest in exactly what you just said Jelle which is the fact that technology can adapt to us as individuals and really shift the way that we learn.

But I think over the last 30 years there's been a lot of discussion about this and there's been a lot of flow of technology really accelerating at a massive pace throughout the year. I think some of the significant arcs that I've seen Michelle are, particularly in the early stages. It was called computer-based training then Jelle, it wasn't called e-learning, but this kind of like you could actually go through a lot of training and consistency of content was very, very powerful. Now the trouble is Enron came in 19 years ago in 2001 and shifted our view from doing things which were important to the business like how we upskill new technology skills and the things we couldn't keep pace with, to looking at compliance training. I think that was a significant arc that I've seen over the last 30 years.

I think when the internet came in in the mid 90s, suddenly the introduction of the word e-learning was brought in. I think for me that was incredibly exciting because the internet allows us to do more than content. It allowed us to connect to communities, it allowed us to connect to resources, it allowed us to have individual pathways through a learning journey because of this connection and because of the fact things could be so personalized. And yet, the technology at the time didn't fully catch up with what was promised by the internet.

Those of us who are fortunate enough to be able to be working in the cutting edge of technology could see that that was actually happening, but it was bespoke and so proprietary that it was never going to take on as a learning system at that point in time. As a result, what

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did catch on, and again Jelle you've already alluded to this, is the fact that we can do content and we can push content out over the cloud and we can still do content and we can still push loads of people through it.

The smartphone came out in 2006 which obviously connected people to each other in ways that would go beyond voice. I think that was really interesting for us as learning and development professionals was social learning, and of course all the debate came up, "We've been learning socially for our entire existence."

There's a lot of discussion and debate that has been driven by technology as we've been moving through the decades, and obviously as we are now, Jelle you've already talked about data and how do we use data to connect and how do we use data to personalize. I think when we look at that arc of what's been happening over the last 30 years, the technology agenda has been influencing the L&D agenda. It's certainly been influencing our discussion. But when we look at 35 years on, that promise that we had right at the beginning, for me personally of technology being able to personalize, individualize, I don't believe we've fully appreciated it.

It was only this morning when I was thinking about it, it's 21 years since the term e-learning has been introduced and that original promise. I'm wondering today whether or not we really need to start thinking about coming of age with that. Moving from playing and talking and being almost childlike with some of these tools that we have as learning professionals to say, "Okay, we're adults now." We're adults in our profession now and we need to be starting to say, "Well okay, how do we play an adult role in the world of business?" I'm excited about that. I think my next phase of my personal journey is about connecting with adults in the learning industry who want to drive that agenda forward about really adding value back to business through the experiences that we've had.

That's a kind of a whistle-stop tour Michelle. I don't know whether it's what you were expecting but I thought I'd take one angle, and obviously that's the angle that attracted me in from the beginning was the fact that technology can make a difference if you let it.

Michelle Ockers:

But you think that it hasn't realized its potential because we haven't let it. You talk about moving from being childlike with the way we're approaching technology to being adults about it. What's the difference? How is it different if we're being adult about it to being childlike about it?

Laura Overton:

I think that we're not so threatened. I think whether it's because we actually want to actually move forward and we realized that technology is now all around us, I think the fear is potentially going down. And also the fact that we have seen a lot of new tool technologies come in. We hunt the jargon in our industry and we go for the new thing, and we lurch from one thing to another, to another. It's the foundations of what we do with that as the adult perspective that we can bring to that. I think we need to look at less at the tools, more at what we can do with them and particularly how we add value back into an organization with those incredible tools that we have to hand.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. Stop playing and get serious about adding value. And we sometimes talk about the shiny-new-toy syndrome. Amanda, do you think that's still a thing for learning and development professionals or do you think we are growing up a bit and we are getting more sophisticated in our approach to technology based on your experience recently.

Amanda Ashby:



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I think it's both. I think there's just so much stuff coming out. I feel like every day I hear about another tool and the problems it can solve. I think it is how do we step back and say, "What are the problems we're trying to solve?" Then go and look for what technology, rather than going, "Ah, this is going to solve my coaching problem! This chatbot, this is the missing piece." It's hard. It's just in our face. People are expecting more and more. We have access to so much technology outside work. I think how many apps I have on my phone, but then we get in the workplace and we're like, "How do we apply this? How do we use these? What's right?"

Michelle Ockers:

So Amanda, what do you feel has changed in the work of learning professionals in the past 15 years.

Amanda Ashby:

I was really reflecting on Laura's answer and I wonder how much geography has played into that, and in Australia pre good internet and pre internet times. When I started in Learning and Development, it was in ID, it was in facilitation. I wrote loads of workbooks and manuals and PowerPoint decks and overhead projectors, and that was the work of people in L&D. Anyone I knew that worked in L&D, that was what we did. If we were going to do video, it was so lengthy and expensive and we put it on DVDs because there's no way the internet could handle it. Even at times in Australia I'm not sure how we're going. But now I think the skills and the work required of L&D is just so different and varied so we need the people who can dig into the performance objectives and understand the issues. But then we also want them to recommend, if training will help, what kind of training.

So they'll need to know about VR, AR, video, podcasts, chatbots, e-learning. They should know about how to design and create them. And that's so many skills. They're still expected that we are facilitators and we can all step into that way, that they'll understand the learning ecosystem and what's available and that they'll gather and analysis data. There's so many skills in there now for L&D, and there's so many people that are expected to be all of that person. There's only really in a lot of the bigger companies where you can specialize more. I have lots of friends and know lots of people who are a one or two person L&D team. And so when they've got all this new tech, all these new ideas coming, I think, "Wow. How do we all keep up and keep adding value to the business?" And pushing back and going, "No, you can't just have the 30 minute e-learning course you want, let's help dig into what you want and try to balance all that."

Michelle Ockers:

So Jelle, you're still happy you've joined the profession?

Jelle Buiting:

Yes, I'm still happy I joined the profession. Of course, definitely.

Michelle Ockers:

Is anything that Laura or Amanda shared a surprise to you?

Jelle Buiting:

At the moment not really, because of course I read through Towards Maturity's reports. As I studied, they really dig into the basics of Learning and Development. So I think when I hear Amanda talk about future skills and we need to learn a lot of different stuff and we want to focus on one thing, or maybe want to focus ourselves on 20 different things, I think the most important thing is to just stay at the basic. Just stick there because if you then expand it with

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a skill you really like, or two skills, then you're just focusing on what's really important in the L&D, and that's just to help people learn and not to think about the shiny toys we were talking about.

They are helpful, but there's a lot of people in the IT field who can make virtual reality for example really good. In the time we know how to do it perfectly, to work with virtual reality, they already built it. So why should we focus on technique if we can focus on the most important factor, the human factor?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, that's really interesting. Going back to the learning, the foundations of learning and people and looking again to your whole ecosystem as someone involved in learning and finding others who perhaps who can do specific things for you if you figure out that that is the right thing to include in your solution, right?

Jelle Buiting:

Exactly.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And yet you seem to be going towards a bit of a specialization in data. So talk to me about how you decided to focus in on that and what sort of work you've been doing with data.

Jelle Buiting:

At the moment I'm doing my graduation internship at RMMBR in Amsterdam. It's a digital learning agency. They were asking me like, "Hey Jelle, what can we do with data to drive a learner's engagement?" for example. That made me think, "Hmm, what can I do with this in the field?" After visiting Learning Technologies in 2019, I saw a lot of information coming up on data and I was like, "Hmm, maybe we need to combine learning with data." I saw it coming even more and more and more. It started to be like a trend. Then I felt like I need to do something with this, so I started doing a minor in HR analytics.

I believe if we use data to drive fact-based decision making in L&D, and we combine it with the human factors so for example you do interviews with the people who have to learn. You look at organization's goals, what they want to achieve. And you combine it altogether, you have a strong and solid foundation to be a good L&D practitioner and not just doing things on gut feelings. What I really did with data is not a lot yet, because I want to specialize myself in it.

Michelle Ockers:

So based on your early work experience and your studies, what do you think is currently working well as you enter the learning profession? And what feels a little bit outdated or broken about the way you've seen learning being practiced now?

Jelle Buiting:

I also work with Joris Even at JE Ontwikkeling in Nijmegen. It's a digital learning agency and we create a lot of customized e-learning solutions for different kinds of customers all over the Netherlands. The main important thing JE Ontwikkeling does is focusing to be a learning partner instead of just building off the shelf e-learning that fits the whole group of employees for example. I think being a partner, my definition of being a learning partner to a customer is you really look at the organization's problem and the learner's problems and you... If it's possible to solve that with learning, you do that in the best way for the organization possible.

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Michelle Ockers:

So Laura, if you reflect on what we're talking about here do you think that some of the ideas that Amanda and Jelle have shared with where they see learning and development going, do you think that's going to address some of the challenges you've talked about with us leaning more into adjusting our role in the world of business and adding more value, and maybe not getting so caught up in the technology?

Laura Overton:

I think so, because I think both Amanda and Jelle have been talking about the attitude that we have towards what the outcomes of our role are and what we use to address those outcomes depends on us as a professional. I think it's exciting for us to really think of learning and development as a profession. I do not think that we are going to be without a role in the future. I think our role is going to become more significant. But I also think that certainly from my experience and also... and my experience back in the late '90s as well as my experience today, is that we will become more professional when we're actually starting to look at...

If I take up Jelle's concept of this partner. When we actually start to look at becoming integrated into the world of business, and certainly through the research program that I've conducted, it was about 7500 Learning and Development leaders over 15 years. Those that did step up and become more integrated started to become less producers of learning and more enablers of learning. I think one of the most significant research pieces or thinking that we applied was back in 2018 when we were starting to see everybody's talking about change but nobody's doing it.

We wanted to look at the data. Jelle, as you talk about being informed by facts, being informed by decades and millions and millions of data points of what correlates back to business value. And we certainly saw in the report that we wrote called The Transformation Curve, was that those to the left of the curve were very much about producing content in efficient ways, in exciting ways, in experiential ways but producing an event that will support an environment.

Those to the right of the curve were much more likely to be reporting value back such as improving individual growth, improving organization growth, improving engagement of customers not just employees. In those organizations, the L&D people were starting to say how do we enable learning to take place in our organization? How do we work with the key players, the individuals and also the organization itself to be able to create an environment which we called the high performing learning culture to really start to help the organization learn from itself?

Michelle Ockers:

So are we going to be moving quickly enough that we're actually still going to be here in 30 years? If we kind of start looking out into the future, and that was part of the original premise of the conversation today was looking out to 2050. I mean A) can we even imagine what work is going to look like? And B) is it possible that given that we've grappling with some of these same challenges Laura as you've seen through the Towards Maturity research for a long time, and there are some who are making progress but a lot who are kind of stuck and still holding onto the stuff we're good at. Are we going to be able to move and make sure we're still here in 30 years?

I know there's two questions there. Firstly is, do we have any idea of what the world's going to look like in 30 years? So maybe we can just start with that. I'm happy for anyone to kind of pitch in and give us a view on can we even image? Can we think out that far?

Amanda Ashby:



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No. No. I can't. I spent a lot of time today trying to think and I get stuck at 2030 and how much technology will accelerate and what the world will look like, the demographic makeup and everything. I think in 30 years time it's going to look so different to... What the pace of change has felt like pretty fast and I just think it's just going to be so much more hyper over the next 30 years. I can't even imagine what the work we'll do will be. There'll just be so many new industries and work that the idea of what I do now is going to look so different that I just can't think what that will be.

Jelle, what does it look like for you? What does your future look like?

Jelle Buiting:

It's like the basic... the foundation of our future will be data. How that unfolds is I think in an exponential way. In an exponential way, for example, how AI will expand. But exactly in detail? I don't know. I can't say because... yeah. When it goes exponentially fast, it's really hard for us to say, "A, L&D will look like this in 30 years." I think it's really hard to predict.

Michelle Ockers:

I think even the people whose jobs it is in some of the big consulting firms and so on, to look out into the future can't accurately say what it might look like, and I'll include a link in the show notes to a report I came across from PWC which was published in 2018. And they were just looking out to 2030, and they've got four possible future scenarios. I think there's something about preparing ourselves for a range of possible futures rather than thinking the future is one thing. The future is technology or the future is personalization. I mean who knows what's going to happen with AI, and whether something else is going to come along and whether it's not technology we need to be focusing on but something completely different.

Laura Overton:

I'd really like to pick up on what you've just said Michelle there about scenario planning because I think that is the key to our thinking, because we don't know what's going to be going on. I know the PWC have done this work. The RSA in the UK have also looked at scenarios in the future. I quite like their idea. They've got four scenarios. They've got the big tech economy where technology is going to take this pace of changing Amanda that you've just mentioned and everything's going to become much more efficient, prices are going to go down but it's going to have an impact on jobs.

You've got that kind of precision economy where perhaps the technology might not move quite as fast but picks up on your point Jelle, about the data and how do we tailor and make things a lot more precise in that environment?

Jelle Buiting:

Exactly.

Laura Overton:

Things like making things a little bit slower, but we'll probably be a lot more sensitive to who knows what about us. Then you've got potentially they backlash against that. They talk about the exodus economy where people are saying, "No! Enough is enough. I'm moving back from this." And in fact, legislation might have an impact on the rate of change in which we actually look at technology engagement. And then they also talk about the empathy economy which is that kind of balance between that technical advances and also our own public awareness and how do we do this in a responsible and paced way.

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I think when we look at different scenarios, that actually helps us as learning development professionals, and again I want to put the emphasis on the word professional to say what is our role in all of that? In the big technology economy and fewer of us have got more traditional jobs, does learning go away? Does that motivation to continue to grow and develop? What is the context that's actually changed? In the role of the empathy economy, how do we actually build our own individual awareness of how we continually learn and unlearn and contribute to society to work?

I'm excited about our future as learning professionals if we don't stick too rigidly on a definition of what it is that we need to be in. I think scenario planning is a really powerful way to embrace our future and get ready for that change. I've always talked about the fact that... I've only visited Australia a few times Michelle and Amanda, but that kind of surfing analogy, when the wave comes, we've got to know how to actually stand up on the boards that we've got. It's not good throwing our surfboards into the waves and hoping that we're going to be able to ride it. It's either going to crash down on us or we're going to be ready for it. I think scenario planning is actually one way of actually becoming ready for that environment.

Michelle Ockers:

Well, and waves can be big and they can move fast, right? And that's something we're more and more, to the point you made earlier Amanda around one of the big challenges is the time it takes, particularly if you're going to go down a path where there's a lot of intervention, programs to be built and so on, versus when Laura's talking about those at the... who've integrated themselves into the world are more enablers and learning cultures. There's a lot of interest in learning culture at the moment.

There's almost kind of... I don't know if friction is the right word, but there's different approaches and roles we could take. Which of those paths do we head down? Do we continue to focus on being producers? Do we shift to being enablers and becoming less involved in learning itself? Does the role shift? Where do you think this is heading? Do you have a view?

Jelle Buiting:

I think we be for the most part enablers. As I said before, if you go to focus on producing stuff then you start maybe being a good producer. But the question you have to ask yourself then is are we helping people to learn? I think most of the time, if you totally focus on making videos, totally focus on driving purely in data then you lose the human aspect. The human aspect, that's where our job is about. We need to help people learn. How do we do that? By looking at the problems or what problems does he have? Are they solvable with learning?

I think when you go to the enabling factor of learning, we as L&D professionals are the linking pin between an organization's problems and learner's problems and we combine these things together. We are translating the problems to solutions. If the solution is a video, if the solution is an AI system or whatever it is, it doesn't matter. If it helps people learn, then just do it. Looking how to do it, that's a problem for later because like Laura and Amanda said before, you can get these people from all over the world and because technology it's not a problem to ask someone in India, to ask someone in Australia, "Can you help me with making this video?" Or, "Can you help me with making this design?" "Yes, sure. No problem. Next week you have it in your mailbox." "Okay, lets go."

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Part of the solution might be for us to get out of the way and just connect people in our workforce, or people in the workforce with other subject matter experts or specialists

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outside of the organization, right? So sometimes it's just moving aside and making connections.

Jelle Buiting:

Yeah. We translate problems into solutions.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes.

Jelle Buiting:

If that's... I think that enabling is the best thing to do.

Amanda Ashby:

It's such an interesting one. I think as we think about work will change, tasks not roles will become automated. So the work that people are doing is changing. And then if we step back and think, okay, if we can automate their tasks and then we want to unlock more of those human skills of creativity and problem solving. What we're actually looking at is how do we embed that in, "Oh, we need a creativity workshop." But how are we helping people unlock those ones in... And that's a tricky challenge to work through. I'm looking forward to hearing how people will do that. The enabling one is beautiful. We know that people out in the workplace are solving problems, sharing knowledge and doing things, so what are we doing to help encourage and support that in the environments there? Rather than hoping in 20 years someone's still coming to us to say, "Hey, I need some compliance training." I don't want that in 20 years. I want us to have moved on that we're doing that.

Laura Overton:

I think a really interesting thing about what you just said is that to date, and rightly so, I think we've been looking at how do we apply our skill to the individual in an organization? How do we personalize? How do we help them perform? I think what's really been striking me is from looking at the data that I've gathered and also the case studies that I've been listening to. Since I've left Towards Maturity, actually the stories, the corporate stories through things like the Learning Uncut podcast, which have been fabulous at sharing stories. I think that also our role needs to expand beyond the individual to the way that organizations themselves learn and retain corporate memory and corporate knowledge.

Not the way that they hang onto the past, but how they can learn and stand on their own shoulders as an organization. You talk about standing on the shoulders of giants in order to move forward, and yet I think with all of this personalization and focus on the individual, and the individual leaving the organization and not wanting to stay in the organization, I think our future needs to be expanded, our views need to be expanded as learning professionals. I'm deliberately calling us that rather than L&D professionals because that concept of supporting organizational learning, we might come from an OD background, we might come from a knowledge management background, we might come from a business background but how do we help an organization to learn and adapt and change and shift its goals?

I think that's very exciting when we start to apply our task-based knowledge that we've gathered over the last 50 years into the future. I think potentially we could have a potentially incredible influential role on building corporate knowledge, corporate memory, organization learning. I don't just mean about culture. I mean about the way that an organization changes and adapts and is agile in this new work of work. I think we have a significant role to play there. I see some people starting to play that now and it's starting to pay dividends as well.

Michelle Ockers:



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So Laura, what do we need to hold onto from the past in order to fulfil a role like that?

Laura Overton:

I think we need to hold onto our evidence-based common sense. It's not glamorous. We've talked about this before, but a lot of the stuff that we uncovered in the last 15 years was not stuff intuitively I could see happening in successful organizations in the first 15 years of my career. Individual organizations where the learning professionals are first and foremost focused on aligning to the business problem. This is not new. We're talking about it more but it's not new. For us to be most interested in the business problem, an alignment, to be listeners, wanting to know what is going on with the individual and with the business and to be able to assimilate that information. To be influencers, to understand that we're not working in isolation, we're working in context.

So aligned, to listen, to influence, to enable. We've already talked about those different skills we need for that. To be able to engage and connect because it's all very well to have understood the problem, created a great solution when those of us around us don't understand what we've done. And then to be able to continually improve. These fundamental pillars and foundations of success are going to be the things that we need to be completely in our DNA. They are the characteristics over the last 15 years that consistently correlate back to adding business value back to individuals and organization. But they're consistently low in our behaviour.

Laura Overton:

And in fact, over time often we see our behaviours in those areas, as learning professionals, reduce in our pursuit of the next thing that we think might be able to make it easier for us. If we get that right: align, listen, influence, enable, engage, improve. Build that into our DNA all the time, then I believe that we'll be set for the future. That's what we need to be taking forward.

Michelle Ockers:

So this sounds aligned, Amanda, with what you were talking about earlier on around creating value and being able to start with the business problem rather than jumping to a specific solution. If we take what Laura is reporting back from the data and research that she's been involved with through Towards Maturity, is that we kind of know what needs to change or we see what works and yet it's hard sometimes to shift our behaviours. Do you have any sense of what we can do as learning professionals, or some other things that maybe you have done as a learning professional to be able to work in different ways?

Amanda Ashby:

It is tricky. I think people get really used to what the role of L&D is in a business, that are people we go to and they'll make us training. And so when we now decide, as learning professions, "No, no. We're enablers." We need to take everybody on a journey with us. I can't just walk into work on Monday and go, "Oh soz, we don't do that anymore. We now do this." What has worked quite well, and what we've been working really hard towards is chipping away and managing the attention of doing both. So we're still producing work but we're partnering and enabling and showing those solutions and showing the impact and how that is. So that when someone comes and says, "Hey, I need an hour e-learning module." We're like, "Okay, let's talk a little bit about what it is first." And changing our consulting approach and going back to the basics that Laura talked about and doing them more consistently and doing them well and demonstrating with confidence.

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I think there is definitely... I know I've had a period in where at different workplaces we've really become producers and we've forgotten how to have those meaningful conversations. Now we're getting better at doing them to get better solutions.

Michelle Ockers:

Excellent. And if we can move probably to the final point for this discussion, although we could go on for hours. It's such a fascinating topic to talk about. And that is how do you personally, so each of you as a learning professional, how do you personally prepare yourself for your future as a learning professional? Amanda, we're with you so perhaps we'll start with you on that one?

Amanda Ashby:

This year more than most, I read as much as possible. I have a reading list that I've gathered from trusted learning sources, so Aurn Pradhan, whenever he presents, he puts reading lists up. I just go, "Great. That's what going to make Arun smart, I'm stealing that reading list." Research reports, so like everyone in L&D, I've read every single thing that Laura would put out and look forward to it and looking at that data and looking for every evidence-based thing that I can find. And podcasts, hearing people's stories and experiences, that is to me one of the most meaningful ones. Having the chance then, I'll often reach out on LinkedIn and say, "How did you do that?" Or, "How did you connect those dots?" That is what's keeping me as informed as possible. There's still so much more to learn.

Michelle Ockers:

And how about yourself Jelle?

Jelle Buiting:

At the moment I'm also reading a lot because reading information you think you like is really... yeah. It's also really nice to read. If you learn something from it to prepare yourself for the future, why not? That's one thing. Besides that, I watch a lot of YouTube videos and sometimes I see YouTube podcast video, so for me it's easier when I see people talking to understand it, and sometimes they show PowerPoint slides. So for example anything on screen, it's easy to capture it. But another thing is I'm doing several MOOCs. For example, I'm not doing the whole MOOC from A to Z, but I just pick out the stuff I really like, and I think, "Ah, this is going to be really useful."

On the other hand, like what is it? Two months ago, I did the national AI course in the Netherlands. It's to prepare all people to be future ready on the topic AI of course. I think looking for practical situations with new technology for example, and how we can use it as an L&Der in the future, it's one of the most important things because then you will have a clear feel of how this is going to be in an organization? How is this going to work for myself at home? Or how is this going to work in my study because if we look at real practical situations, it's going to live. It's not a plain text for us. Maybe we can do something with this in the future. You know, you give it feet, or you give it hands to make it work and compare it with your own situation.

Michelle Ockers:

So a mix of formal, informal and application. And Laura, how about yourself?

Laura Overton:

Well I do everything that those guys have just said. In particular, I think it's really important to keep challenging ourselves and to keep challenging our thinking. I was very lucky for the last 15 years that the data challenged me. But also, what I found consistently over the last kind

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of 30 plus years that I've been in is that I learn and grow the most when I'm willing to let go, when I'm willing to let go of a familiar environment. I started Towards Maturity because I felt that I had to move on from my previous role, and that was kind of accidental learning if you like when you haven't got all your normal props around you, you have to start to say, "Okay, well who am I and what is it that I really believe in?"

I knew when I started Towards Maturity, I believed that learning professionals added value back to business. It's just that not all of us did that. That's my kind of North Star, my red thread through my career but sometimes you've got to let go of things in order to find new ways to pursue that thing that's most important for you. That to me is the scariest learning environment, but it's also for me the most profound and the most powerful learning environment which is it's exactly the environment I'm in at the moment. It allows me to look at things in completely new eyes when you're not having to hold onto something in the past. Build on your past but let go and move into the future. That's what excites me at the moment.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you so much Jelle, Amanda and Laura for joining me today for this discussion around the past, present and future of us as learning professionals.

Jelle Buiting:

You're welcome.

Amanda Ashby:

Thank you.

Laura Overton:

It's been fun.

Jelle Buiting:

Thank you.

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*

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