Michelle Ockers:

This discussion with Tony Dunford from Westpac was recorded in May 2020. A few weeks prior to recording I hosted a discussion where Tony spontaneously spoke about how Westpac has been using micro-credentials and is planning to scale up their use. Westpac has partnered with a couple of Australian universities to gain recognition of specific skills for their staff using evidence from their work.

Tony describes himself as a zealot when it comes to micro-credentials. He describes the enthusiasm of the staff who have gain recognition of competency through this process and the range of benefits it brings to the organisation. We walk through the nuts and bolts of how Westpac has trialled and rolled out micro-credentials – and now plans to scale up their use with Tony aspiring to 15,000 micro-credentials being awarded over the next two years. He also discusses how they could improve the recruitment process.

If you are interested in operating models for learning and development teams listen closely to Tony's description of their enterprise- based curriculum structure, especially in an organisation that includes multiple brands or business arms.

I have a personal confession to make. I have started an MBA twice. Both times I successfully completed one unit then decided that the potential benefits were not worth the effort and cost to continue studying. It's been in the back of my mind to explore micro-credentials as an alternative way of gaining recognition for knowledge and skills I have gained through my work. So, I'm off to do just what Tony recommends – seek a micro-credential for myself. I'd love to hear who else has used micro-credentials as an individual or organisation and what your experience has been. Let's discuss this on LinkedIn using the hashtag #LearningUncut.

Michelle Ockers:
Welcome, Tony. Well actually, welcome back. You were one of our early Learning Uncut guests. We discussed how Westpac was developing future skills way back in episode three in June 2018. So it's lovely to have you back.

Tony Dunford:
Thank you. Pleasure. Seems like a long time ago and yet only five minutes.

Michelle Ockers:
Absolutely. Very true. So Tony, most people will know Westpac, they're one of the largest banks in Australia of course, but we do have an international listenership. So could you give us a brief introduction to Westpac?

Tony Dunford:
Yeah, absolutely. So Westpac Banking Corporation is one of the four pillar financial organizations in the Australian and Asia-Pacific market. Probably where we differ from other sort of large organizations in our stream is that we have a multi-brand strategy. And so Westpac is of course the majority brand and we also have a number of other really key brands such as St George, Bank of Melbourne, RAMS, so on and so forth. So there's a whole host more than all this now, of areas, different brands that we have. But that's

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probably what's different and we do all those things you expect that we do, business banking, personal banking, a whole lot of those sort of banking services.

Michelle Ockers:

And Tony does your team service people across all of those brands or is it just one or two of the brands? How does it work?

Tony Dunford:

Yes. We service all of them. So we have what we call an enterprise view across the organization and regardless of where you are, the design, work, and curriculum they all come through my team certainly.

Michelle Ockers:

How many staff is your team supporting then? It must be fairly big.

Tony Dunford:

Yeah it fluctuates depending on whether you include insourced, outsourced providers and contractors and all that sort of stuff. I believe officially on the books Westpac comes in at 32,000, 33,000, it's about 40,000 by the time you add in some key partners, particularly in the technology space. So, we support all of them.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. And Tony can you tell us a little bit more about your enterprise team? Especially anything that's relevant to the topic we're discussing today which of course is micro-credentialing.

Tony Dunford:

Indeed. And so we have a unique setup which I believe I did talk about all those years ago. What's different than in many organizations is that my team which does the design and the brain power around what good learning is in the organization, we don't actually build ourselves even though we do have some capability to do that. We outsource our build. We do the learning design in that way. We have my team structured in curriculums. So on behalf of the organization we're organized to support some of those key learning areas that everyone will expect, the obvious things like sales and service, credit and risk obviously being key areas, compliance and so on and so forth.

Tony Dunford:

But also, we have specific focus on things like AGILE, agility and that thing. We also have focus around digital, we have focus around resilience, so on and so forth. And so my team, I have actually curriculum owners and lead designers and they both support those curriculums and support the various needs of the business across the organization.

Michelle Ockers:

So you end up having multi-skilled teams then for each of the curriculum, yeah?

Tony Dunford:

Correct. And what it enables, just a short five second pitch for anybody wanting to consider this, what I wanted to be able to do is answer the question, "What is the view from a learning point of view, we have on a subject matter say sales, which is easy to understand?" And

there might previously been many, many methodologies which we've whittled down to three or four. And so it was very difficult to do that on behalf of the entire enterprise without having people whose responsibility it is to consider those subject matter areas. And so that's why we call them curriculum owners. And so now I can get a really concise opinion on agile. I can get a really concise opinion on digital. I can get a really concise opinion on roll ready activities that we're building. So therefore all of those, it's just a different way of doing it. Because they answered those questions, we found it very effective.

Michelle Ockers:

Especially when you're talking about across all of your brands across the whole enterprise. So it cuts down a lot on the duplication and fragmentation, right?

Tony Dunford:

Yeah, absolutely. It's tremendously effective from the organization's point of view, reduction in duplication, et cetera. It also allows people to really dive deeply into a subject matter area and really become strong subject matter experts.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, thanks. I think that's really interesting from a structural perspective. So let's move on now we've got the context of micro-credentialing. What is a micro-credential in your own words, Tony?

Tony Dunford:

Indeed. I was going to put a little disclaimer and say that neither did I invent these, nor am I necessarily an expert. What I will say is we've spent some years now putting them into practice in my time obviously as well. And so therefore we have an opinion that I think is valid and obviously worth discussing today. So for me, micro-credential is an instrument that universities have on offer that varies depending on the university. Some have more, some have less, some have a slightly different definition. But if you consider it's a way of recognizing current competency in an individual for a specific skillset or skill area. And that may well be something as easy to understand as say design thinking, which is certainly where we started.

Tony Dunford:

And what a micro credential delivers is a couple of things. The elevator pitch is, it's recognition of what the person does now, the individual, and its recognition in a way they understand because the individual will provide evidence of application on the job using the artefacts of the job. And so for me, and certainly for our design in group learning development at Westpac, not asking people to re-certify in areas they are already competent, in fact, sometimes extremely competent at. And not asking people to jump through hoops of assessments and exams and all that sort of stuff is tremendously attractive and very people focused and reasonable in the sense that no expert wants to ask the re-certify just for re-certifying purposes as it were.

Tony Dunford:

And so a micro credential gives you that. And then obviously it also it gives you... We borrow as it were, the good name of the university or whatever the institution that issues the micro-credential. And what comes with that obviously is their commitment to the veracity of the evidence, the academic excellence that is required there. And so we meet that high standard, the individual evidences against that high standard and so they gain the micro-

credential. It's a, you achieve it or you don't and the artefact that is most obvious representation of that is a badge and a little digital badge that you can then drop onto your LinkedIn drop onto a whole lot of digital formats. That would be my 10 sentences.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, I think it ties together a number of things that mostly professionals will be familiar with. The idea of credentials, the idea of recognition of current competency as an assessment pathway and the digital badges, of course. We've been touring and throwing around them for a number of years. What about the micro part of the credential? What does the micro refer to?

Tony Dunford:

The micro bit again to my understanding is just as opposed to a credential. So there might be a number of subject matters rolled up into something larger. And so therefore micro-credential talks to the fact that it has one focus area. And so that focus here, as I said, it could be design thinking, it could be agility, it could be any number of things that you can build competencies around. And what it's not as like a master's of economics. Let's just take that. Which is like a multidisciplinary accreditation that you receive. One or two of those subjects, again, just for illustration, this is not actually factually correct, but if you took one or two of those subjects out of that and they are of the same topic, that might be something that would make you think micro-credential.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So the micro means it's just subject specific rather than a whole qualification.7

Tony Dunford:

Sure.

Michelle Ockers:

When did you start exploring micro-credentialing at Westpac and why? What prompted it?

Tony Dunford:

We started a bit more than three years ago on this and I have to give you credit to Deakin University and Deakin Co. who in a discussion about something else brought our attention to micro-credentials. I had sort of heard of it, but not really. And it was explained to me in this very simple way and instantly I understood the value proposition there for our people, of proving what you can already do, but the proof being things you do every day and receiving some sort of external recognition that had value because it was attached to an entity. That all made a lot of sense to me. And so after that we explored it quite deeply and we spent a lot of time doing pilots and implementing it in some reasonable scale and about to do it in a bigger scale.

Michelle Ockers:

Tell me about one of those pilots and maybe just walk us through for one of the pilots what you actually had to do to implement the micro-credentialing, even if just in the pilot.

Tony Dunford:

Yeah, no, absolutely. I think the easiest pilot to talk about, because it was the one we did very first and we learned all our lessons around is we've always believed that if you're going

to recommend something to the organization, you need to do it. And so therefore, I actually had my team who had spent some time upscaling design thinking. And so I had my team complete the, thinking micro-credential. And so the process basically works like this. There's a guide that is developed with whoever your provider is, in this case it was Deakin. And so there's a guide that is developed around design thinking. Now you can ramp up the complexity of the micro credential you're receiving using the AQF. And so therefore-

Michelle Ockers:

Just pause for me for a moment, Tony. Can you decode for us, AQF?

Tony Dunford:

Sorry. Australian Qualification Framework.

And so if you think of it, this is how I think of it because it makes it easy. There's a number of levels, doesn't matter what they are. At the bottom, at the most entry level is like a cert three, certificate three. So someone who practically can apply some of the basic principles of the subject. In this case it was design thinking. I had some very new to role designers who were learning how to use design thinking and applying it in small programs they were doing. They were the type of people who would go for an award at that sort of lower level. And then more senior people who were acting at a more strategic level would be awarded all the way up to and including the top level, which is equivalent to a masters.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So these are all, industry bodies set all of these qualification frameworks, requirements for each qualification is consistent regardless of who's doing the assessments. So there's some standardization there. And I think most countries will have something similar to the Australian Qualifications Framework. So people can kind of conceptualize what we're talking about here. At the point which I asked you to pull as you were talking about Deakin co-helped developed a guide which was based on the requirements for something out of the Australian Qualifications Framework.

Tony Dunford:

Correct. And so you read the guide, it's a multipage piece. And basically introduces you to micro credential, blah, blah, blah, all that sort of stuff. And then you'll start to read these descriptors at those various levels that talk about what you can do and how you are applying that subject, let's say in this case design thinking. And so you will read those and they'll say whatever they say and you'll be, "Oh, okay, that feels like the sort of level that I'm applying this sort of knowledge area or the skill area." And then you might read the next level up and go, "Oh, that feels probably like more than what I'm doing." Or actually, "No, no, actually I feel like this is what I'm doing. So therefore I can probably pitch my application at a higher level than I originally thought." And so anyway, that's the process of doing that.

Tony Dunford:

So you have a look at those descriptors, and then you'll go about then looking through the work that you do day in, day out and how it is that you're going to provide evidence. Now, the crucial bit here was articulating in the path that we've gone down, and I would thoroughly recommend everybody go down, is that there aren't many people in your organization who automatically convert a description of the demonstration of a skill into the evidence that they would have day to day. Very few of those in fact probably only people in your learning area or maybe the odd other person.

Michelle Ockers:

It's important to do that translation right from the requirement to day to day.

Tony Dunford:

Correct. And so what you will need is some level of intensity of coaching in order to get your person, the individual who's applying for the micro-credential, get the award. And so that could be as simple as some group sessions where you talk through what is evidence or required. If you're going to submit an email, because in that email you've articulated your engagement with a sponsor and you're talking them through the appropriate process or whatever that might be. For design thinking, it might be, "Here's a discovery session for a new piece of learning that the individual has designed. This is how they're going to run it." So on and so forth. And so you'll talk through those pieces and that might take an hour or so in a reasonable group size. And then, the individual goes away, start to source that information and then obviously we'll benefit from, the one in a coaching capacity, having a look at that evidence and saying, "Yeah, I think you're on track here. You might not be on track there," so on and so forth.

Tony Dunford:

And so you need to adjust in your organization, obviously according to the amount of resources you can put into that coaching space, how many people you want to go through at any one time. The level of sort of tested understanding of how to evidence, et cetera. You'll work that out. What we've done is we've associated coaches in small groups, and we've found that one coach working in say five to 10 people over a reasonable period of time can have quality conversations and provide evidence that is accepted as being appropriate for the micro-credential time.

Michelle Ockers:

Tony, do the coaches need to have subject matter knowledge that's relevant to the specific credential or is that not necessary?

Tony Dunford:

No, it's not necessary at all. What they need to understand obviously is coaching, but what they need to understand is how to help the individual translate the skill descriptions into evidence. That's really it. And just to think outside the box a little bit about how it is that you might demonstrate that. It's very sort of common coaching skills now. I'm happy to share what we did and a lady in my team, Anne Brady has been running this program. What we did is we found we had downtime in our facilitators and most organizations I'd imagine having that push and pull, particularly with COVID, that push and pull between face to face and digital.

Tony Dunford:

And so we found we had this resource of very clever people who already had skills in the learning side and already had skills in engaging with people in a whole lot of different ways, virtually, over the phone, face to face, whatever it might be. And we were able to redeploy a number of those facilitators to be our credential coaches and have those really high-quality conversations. And we've found that a very successful model.

Michelle Ockers:

Great. It's a good way of expanding the skillset for people who maybe have been face to face facilitators for a long time as well if you're trying to make them more versatile.

Tony Dunford:

Absolutely. And you should have mentioned if you're a facilitating session, one of the skills you're going to be good at is asking people appropriate questions to test their understanding of what deliveries that you all are teaching, as it were, at the front. And that's a very translatable skill too. So let's look at this subject matter area that you're trying to prove against. What might you have to do that?

Michelle Ockers:

What happens with the coach and relationships going along and the evidence is being gathered, but there are gaps in the evidence?

Tony Dunford:

And so therefore the coach will have that conversation. "From what I can see here, you don't have sufficient in whatever you need. What other evidence can we find? Let's really have a good, thorough conversation about how you demonstrate this in your job. And let's look at what artefacts fall out of that."

Michelle Ockers:

Are there ever situations where there is a genuine gap in the evidence of can't be filled? And what happens then?

Tony Dunford:

We've not had that. But if you did just sort extrapolating, what I would suggest is there's two ways of going. You're either in an extreme case, you're going to need to pause that application as it were. You're not going to be likely to be successful if you don't have that level of evidence. And so therefore you might need to say, well, you need to be demonstrating whatever this knowledge is, whatever the skill is for a little bit longer if it's a newer learned skill.

Tony Dunford:

Or if it's a skill that you used to be demonstrating a lot and now, you're not doing a lot, well, maybe you need to think about whether or not there's a cyclic element to the application of that. And so let's wait until whatever time comes and then you'll probably find the evidence is there. The other way to do would be to intentionally target applying the skill and then evidence that appropriately. So do you put your hand up for a project where you're going to be able to do this? And therefore then you would have lots of evidence appropriately.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So the evidence has been compiled. Let's assume we've got the evidence together. What format does the evidence need to be in? How does it get presented? What happens next?

Tony Dunford:

Again, one of the very user-friendly components of this is as long as it's readable and reasonable, so emails, presentations, whatever it might be and a whole lot of formats. You then just upload that into the various technology appropriate avenues from the provider. So again we've partnered with a number of people and those universities have portals, as it were, and the individual can log on. This is a micro-credential they're doing, there's an evidence section, you literally just upload those there. And so again, I'll stress what we're not

wanting to do, and I think one of the reasons why micro-credentials is so successful is required the individual do things more than what they already have done. And so therefore pretty things up or make them more beautiful. If they have the level of evidence that is required, just upload them.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So it keeps the effort quite low to source and gather the evidence?

Tony Dunford:

Yeah, absolutely. And everybody, like everything new, and depending on your personality, some people will be daunted by it and then after they've done some of the evidence gathering will realize this is easy. Others would just go, "Yeah, I've got a whole file full of this stuff. I keep this anyway." Or, "I'm doing this project now, of course I'll pull out a project plan and whatever else is there." It's not an onerous process. It requires brain power to obviously think about it in terms of evidence not work. But once you flip that switch and you start thinking about your work as evidence, it comes quite quickly.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. So once it's been uploaded to the platform, what happens next?

Tony Dunford:

Indeed. And so there's the process that we're introduced to that we love and have been replicating is the evidencing process. And the second part that is critical is a reflective essay to use the academic term or some reflective writing of a reasonable size, 1,000 words, 1,500 words, that could vary. And that's, I think, one of the most valuable parts of the process because some of the best learning, I'm sure everybody will know listening to this, happens on reflection. And we don't often spend time reflecting. And so therefore the individuals asked to write that almost reflection on their evidence as it is a testing against the skillset.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And again, that's uploaded to the platform? The coach will review that before it's uploaded, I take it or is it just?

Tony Dunford:

Absolutely. And again the coaches aren't assessing anything he assesses works in the universities and that's an appropriate distance anyway that we wouldn't want that to happen. And so they're making recommendations as best they understand. There's no guarantee, of course the coach says yes, then you'll get it. But again, we've not had that to be an issue at all. And then the final stage is some type of, and the reason why I say some is this does vary, some type of interview or testimony or whatever it might be, where just to really ensure that it's your own work and you really can articulate what is in that basically paper-based evidence, there's an interview, whether it be over the phone, record yourself, some sort of digital medium. And we're not talking half an hour, I'm talking exhaustive multi-hour here, where you'll just be asked a few reasonable questions that talk to either the evidence or your experience in the reflection.

Michelle Ockers:

So that helps confirm the authenticity of the evidence?

Tony Dunford:

It does. Again I've done this myself, my teams of all done one or two or more micro credentials. And yeah, it's just not onerous. This is a very easy thing obviously, because you've spent time evidencing.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. How many people have now gone through the micro-credentialing at Westpac?

Tony Dunford:

Indeed. And so it depends on how you count it and all the stuff. We're in the thousands, 2,000, 3,000 who have done it. We've done all sorts of different subject matters. Some have been more pilots we've done in the 50s and 60s to get a feel for the subject matter that people want to go down. Others. we've been micro-credentialing off the back of one of our leadership programs that's in the mid thousands.

Michelle Ockers:

So how have people responded? The people that participated in the program in a program and gained a micro-credential? What's their response been like?

Tony Dunford:

Yeah, overwhelmingly positive. It's really one of those amazing value propositions. I say all the time on occasion, having spoken about micro-credentials that in my experience, this one of those very few win, win situations in corporate learning where the organization gets benefit out of it and the individual gets tremendous benefit out of it in equal measures, really. And so therefore, we have both an extremely high success rate. We're well in the 90s of those who apply for a micro-credential or awarded the the one they apply for at the right level. And even higher percentage if that's possible of those who do one micro-credential who automatically want to do another, because the experience is very positive.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. So what about from the business perspective? What are the main benefits from a business perspective?

Tony Dunford:

Yep. I think that it's a really easy discussion. So to start I would say that if you really want to understand at a quality level of competency what your people can and can't do, I don't know another mechanism that's better than a micro-credential that requires the individual to use evidence of the work they do day in, day out to reflect on that, to have a discussion about it, to meet a standard that is recognized externally and be awarded. I don't know, there's a better way for you to understand the capabilities of your people while benefiting those individuals differently. I do believe that we're yet to get here yet, but when we are en masse, what you'll get from micro-credentials is an inventory across your organization of who is capable in what in a very meaningful way that I don't believe has existed in organizations before.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So you have to track that yourself, right? Particularly for using multiple providers. So that's something you would track on some sort of learning management system or learning record store or something like that?

Tony Dunford:

Yeah, you could definitely do all of those. Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And you indicated that you're going to continue to use them potentially to scale them in certain areas. What are your plans around scaling and what are the limits to how you can scale? What areas might you be looking to use them in?

Tony Dunford:

Yeah, absolutely. We have used them, as I said, quite thoroughly in supportive leadership program and the demonstration, obviously, of those skills on the job. I should point out if it hasn't already been clear that this is not a way of testing the learning that you just rolled out for somebody. This is a way of understanding if someone can actually apply that on the job. So therefore you won't finish the training on Friday and do your micro-credential on Monday. That'll never happen. Because you haven't had a chance to apply it nor will you have a chance to provide evidence of how you've applied it. To me they're important wins.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, important part of the ongoing challenge around learning transfer. And how do we understand that learning transfer is happening?

Tony Dunford:

Absolutely. This is where I could be accused of getting on my soapbox. I actually do not believe there is a better learning transfer assessment nor a better embedding mechanism of anything that you're trying to build capability for in your organization, than a micro-credential. Because you really know if an individual can do it and do it on the job. I sometimes have this debate with those in the university sector about the value of a degree or any of those types of qualifications. And I say, "Well, I fully understand this value and having that piece of paper and achieving that award. But as an employer and a leader, I want to know someone can do what it is they say they can do. And a degree doesn't show me that they can do it. It just says they have learned it. But a micro-credential says they can do it."

Tony Dunford:

And for me that's one of the most powerful components. And absolutely, if you are rolling out critical learning across your organization to build capability, which I'll allude to in, I should say, scale, and you wanted to embed that and also as it were, get for free, an understanding of whether or not people had competence then micro-credential would be perfect. And so that is exactly what we are doing. Everyone will be aware that risk management is hot now and as it should be post Royal Commission for a number of organizations, including us.

Tony Dunford:

And so we're in at the moment involved in a quite substantial capability build for risk fundamentals across the organization. And at the end of that journey, which is as you'd imagine a whole lot of different training components, a whole lot of different coaching and supporting components, at the end of that is a micro-credential that people will go through. And so the organization then will be able to attest to application on the job of these key risk components.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. So there is a level of effort involved with that as well. So a lot of the uses, obviously the pilots that was about learning how to do it. Some of these other use cases you've talked about, they're kind of strategic or critical. So it's not necessarily given the level of effort with the coaching, particularly if you're following that route. It's not like you would open everything to micro-credentialing, Tony?

Tony Dunford:

No, I don't think you would. Nor would that probably be appropriate. However, again, sometimes being accused of being a zealot, I would argue if you had looked at your training budget at the cost of all of the programs that you run, they will all fall in that for the same price, way cheaper than a one day face to face. But for a number of programs you could go from zero to micro-credential and include the coaching costs in there for exactly the same price.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Because of course you don't have to have training or some sort of formal learning activity beforehand. It's about recognizing what's already there as well. And then I guess if there are gaps understanding those more specifically and filling them. It's almost like assess first and train or promote learning to close the gaps later. Right?

Tony Dunford:

Yeah, absolutely. We've been working on one for a little while now and we'll be rolling out with RMIT around a range of application and innovation on a job in one of our areas. And so therefore often you sit around and go, "How do I teach innovation? How do I know that people can do all this sort of stuff?" Actually you know they can do it if they evidence that they've applied it. And so therefore that micro-credential, which is a bit more multidisciplinary in that sense will be far better than us rolling out any number of clever, even best practice programs that support innovation. But still we won't know whether or not people are innovating, are continuously improving, are shifting processes and reducing times, et cetera. However, we will because we'll have evidence built into the process with the micro-credential.

Michelle Ockers:

Obviously, the quality of that evidence or quality of the micro-credentialing is important that you want to be confident that the assessment is robust, that when a third-party institution hands out a micro-credential that it actually does, is backed up with solid evidence against the qualification. So how do you find the right partners for micro-credentialing? Can you talk us a little bit about the lessons you've learned there and any tips you have for people who are interested in this?

Tony Dunford:

Yeah, absolutely. I would say in your question is two parts I think that are critical to talk about. The first one being the veracity of the evidence in my experience and certainly Anne who works with me, in our experience, you don't have to ask for that. No university who you want to work with or institution who you want to work with doesn't want extremely high-quality evidencing before they go out to the public with an award of any sort, including a micro-credential. And so therefore that comes for free for want of a better term. We're never saying, "Well, gee, I don't know, we'd like this to be a little bit more stringent." We'd be more having the opposite discussion and saying, "Well, yeah, if I understand academic application might be this, but in practice, blah, blah, blah." And so therefore you get that.

Tony Dunford:

In terms of partnering, there's a couple of things I would suggest first. Very first question I have in talking with any universities or institutions is this, "Are you comfortable to offer us an assessment only micro-credential award?" Because a lot of as you'd imagine, these organizations are wanting to on-sell their learning, their faculty to teach, to provide materials and so on and so forth. In most cases, we're not building a new skill. And so therefore I'm

actually after recognition of what things can people do already. And that can be a stumbling block. A lot of people want to package the two up.

Tony Dunford:

And so for us, that's not something I'm interested in because it's rare that the institutions who could provide a micro-credential would also be the absolute best provider in the market to teach that. Now if that happens, great. Wouldn't worry me at all. But that's unlikely to be the case. So therefore that's the very first question I ask and that often stops the conversation pretty quickly with a huge number of universities because they really want to package those two things together.

Tony Dunford:

After that, I think the richness of the discussion is in both how well the guides can be written to articulate to an average person what that practical skill looks like applied on the job. There's a lot of effort and time put on that. And equally the support process, the ease of uploading, the portal, the technology considerations, how they do it, all those sorts of things are probably the next most important factor to the individual. An arduous process, a link that collapses or when you find things like in the early days, and we've overcome these, but all form formats supported in terms of upload are actually not in that format. And so just stuff like such a frustrating experience for the individual.

Tony Dunford:

So we've gone through all that evidence gathering, I got to upload it and I find, "Oh, no. I can upload these. It's not a PDF but say something else." And so have that conversation about the ins and outs of how that happened and absolutely do it yourself. I don't think you should be recommending to your organization any micro-credential using any provider until you've done it yourself with them and you have a good experience of what that's like. Because it's the only way you it'll even matter.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Great advice. So we've talked about your team's role in coaching people through the evidence gathering process. What's your team's role in terms of setting things up with the university? You talked about the guides for instance, that have created the evidence guides. Is there any upfront involvement, if you've got a new credential being offered with the set-up, before you start gathering the evidence?

Tony Dunford:

Yes, there is. Absolutely. And while I imagine there is another way to do it, certainly the way we've done it is we've found, and again as I mentioned, Anne Brady in my team is doing all the heavy lifting on this with other people. The hard work is writing the language of descriptions of the skills of how to apply those in a way that normal average people can understand yet still meets the requirements of the organization to attest to that skill being applied. And so we have found that there's at least a 50/50 relationship between learning professionals in my team and the appropriate people who are thinking about assessment in the various providers and to give us, those guides are built and those guides are effective. Our experience is, it's unlikely that you will find something off the shelf even as good as it could be. You'll find something off the shelf will be readily understandable. I think I'm making up words there, by your people on average. You'll need to actually spend a lot of time thinking about how to word it.

Michelle Ockers:

I understood what you were saying. So, your readily understandable was readily understandable, Tony.

Tony Dunford:

Good. And you know what it's like. It's like, one of the examples we used to use, which is just so classic and common for everybody, it's like you're buying a new piece of technology. In the old days for those who remember, you bought a DVD player, a video recorder, what you would do is you get the manual and you start reading and like, "Oh, my goodness. I don't know who wrote this. But this is nothing like actually what it would be like if I took a video of you pressing record, et cetera." And so we have to write it in a way that's to press record, not that talks about the functions of 15 buttons you're never going to use.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. So are there any other challenges that we haven't discussed that you've had along the way and how have you addressed those?

Tony Dunford:

I think if someone was wanting to go down this path, there's things we could different talk about that would be specific to the journey of working with higher education institutions who have goals different than organizations. So our best providers and we've got good providers. As I said, our best providers don't view building capability and recognizing capability in the same way we do. Or they might be the commercial arm of that university and that's great. But the vice chancellor has a very rigid interpretation of attaining an academic achievement. And so they are lengthy and robust discussions that we've had over years and years to get us to the position where we're in. And so be prepared for those. Definitely the awarding and assessing at an academic level is something I realize that is a closely held belief for a number of people in the background in universities. And so therefore our particularly practical approach can be a bit of a rub for them. But in the end, we've got there.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. So a good case for putting the time and effort into building relationships and longer-term partnerships with the institutions you work with if you're going to do this at scale, right?

Tony Dunford:

Absolutely. And this is advice for everything in life, but don't give in. Keep pushing to get the outcome that you want. Don't be cajoled or convinced into some sort of closer relationship between the learning that someone needs to do and the awarding of some sort of academic award. That's the old model that universities have worked under for years. What we're doing is working with a new model.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So where would you like to be in two years' time with micro-credentialing, Tony?

Tony Dunford:

Well, in two years' time we will have done 15 plus thousand micro-credentials. So obviously we're gearing up for a huge number there. And I would like us to be in a position where the market has changed and micro-credentials is the currency that people recognize represents current capability even in some basic format, like a job interview. In a perfect world I imagine that we would never have a discussion in a job interview about can I do, can anybody do? Because they would have evidenced via micro-credential or something that might be

invented in the future. We would have discussion about culture and fit. Because at an interview, it's ridiculous to think that you can get a feel for whether or not someone can actually do something. A badge from an institution that represents a micro-credential actually says that that individual can do it. So don't talk about it, just move on to other things.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. A nice vision from an industry wide perspective or profession wide perspective. I like it, Tony.

Tony Dunford:

It's probably more than a year ago now, I remember reading a Josh Bersin report which said, one of the things we kid ourselves in the HR business is that from an interview you can determine whether or not someone can do anything. And my answer to that is, "Oh, I totally agree. Let's talk micro-credential."

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. They're very flawed and there's this increasing emphasis now on skills and portability of skills. So I can see that they have a place in the job marketplace and in the recruitment process as you say. So Tony, to tie it up then, I think you've given some fantastic tips along the way. This has been a really practical discussion, which I appreciate. But to summarize your key takeaway tips for others who are considering getting started with micro-credentials, what advice would you give others?

Tony Dunford:

Pick a subject that your team itself would like to demonstrate capability in and do that first and make sure your partner is aligned in terms of the goals that you want to have. Otherwise it just won't be successful.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Thank you. Thanks, Tony. I'm going to include a link to both your LinkedIn profile, and you've mentioned Anne Brady's involvement a couple of times.

Tony Dunford:

Yeah, absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

I'll include a link with the show notes to Anne's profile plus some of the providers that you use for micro-credentialing and some other good quality resources around micro-credentialing. And if people would like more information, they could get in touch with yourself or Anne via your LinkedIn profiles.

Tony Dunford:

Yes, that'd be great.

Michelle Ockers:

So thank you so much, Tony, for sharing your work and insights with us. And to our listeners, if you found this episode particularly useful, or if you are finding other episodes useful and valuable, please take a moment to rate the podcast, to share it with others. Our guests are sharing some really good quality experience and insights and it'd be great to get that out to as many learning professionals as possible. 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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