

Learning Uncut Episode 91
Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

In this conversation I explore the shift in learning over the past three years at the New Zealand retail group, Briscoe. Aston Moss, the GM of Human Resources, is joined by Drew McGuire from Capability Group who have partnered with Briscoe to support their transformation. While the introduction of the Axonify platform enabled the substantial shifts in learning described in the episode, both guests highlight that transformation is not about a platform. It's about providing a different quality of learning experience across the organisation. They emphasise the L&D team capability, ongoing stakeholder engagement, change management, and a strong partnership between them as critical success factors. Another important theme is the effective use of data to build credibility in the organisation, allowing L&D to 'move up the value chain' as Drew puts it.

Our Learning Uncut guests are always generous in sharing their stories so that we can all learn from them and improve our effectiveness and impact. If you get value from the podcast please share it with a colleague and encourage them to listen. Let's get these real stories out to as many L&D professionals as possible.

Enjoy today's episode.

Michelle Ockers:

Today we've got two guests. Welcome Aston.

Aston Moss:

Thanks Michelle. Nice to be here.

Michelle Ockers:

Lovely to have you here from New Zealand. And Drew. Welcome Drew.

Drew McGuire:

Thanks Michelle. Great to be here. Looking forward to the conversation.

Michelle Ockers:

This is actually our last case study conversation for the year on the podcast, and I think, I'm pretty confident, it's the first story from New Zealand this year. I'm really pleased we're able to get in a story from New Zealand to add to the collection from around the world for Learning Uncut in 2021.

Aston, let's start by talking about Briscoe Group. If you can introduce us to your role, to Briscoe Group and what Briscoe Group does and who they do it for, that would be a great place to start.

Aston Moss:

Fantastic. Thanks Michelle. So Briscoe Group. We are a retail chain in New Zealand. We operate the Briscoes Homewares stores, Rebel Sport in New Zealand, and Living & Giving, which again is a homewares but slightly more upmarket and more select product range. We've got about two to two and a half thousand team members across the country, and

Learning Uncut Episode 91 Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

we're spread from the top of the north island to the bottom of the south island.

Michelle Ockers:

And I believe you have an online presence as well, Aston.

Aston Moss:

We have an online presence and we fulfil all of our online, or the majority of our online, from our stores. That makes our stores true hybrid operators, dealing with customers who come in through the bricks and mortar, as well as those who order online, so that we can get the products that they want to them quicker.

Michelle Ockers:

Can you tell us a little bit more about the workforce in the organization, Aston? Is there anything we should know about them as context and backdrop for our conversation today?

Aston Moss:

That's a great question, Michelle. I would say that we're a reasonably good cross section of New Zealand society, and very similar sort of demographics and features as you would find in many other retailers. We have a number of people who are career retailers, we have a number of part-time team members and lots of students, so we're a foundation employer from that perspective, and we also have a number of people where perhaps they're not the primary earner in their household, but they're one of the supplementary earners. What they do is they work a range of hours to meet their family or their home needs, et cetera. So it's quite diverse from the perspective of our retail team. And of course, we've got a professional management team in there as well.

Complementing that we have a distribution centre, which is based up here in Auckland. And again, that serves primarily our Briscoe stores, because a lot of our Rebel Sports products are fulfilled directly into those stores. And we have a support office that then supports all of our locations. We've got around 90 locations across the country and all of our support functions are based here in Auckland.

Michelle Ockers:

Thanks for that overview, Aston. And what's your role, Aston?

Aston Moss:

I'm the General Manager of Human Resources, so I look after all of what people would typically classify as human resources: everything from learning and development, OD, employment relations and business partnering. I also am responsible for health and safety and privacy officer as well. So little bit of a hybrid role.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, great. I think it would be remiss of us not to introduce you, Drew, before we continue on with the Briscoe story here. We've obviously invited you to join us because you're part of the story as well. Can you tell us a little bit about your organization and your relationship with Briscoe?

Drew McGuire:

Yeah, sure. So Capability Group's been around since about 1984, and a mate of mine and I, a guy I used to go to high school with, who's been a career consultant, bought it off the founders about 10 years ago, and then we've just sort of been on this huge journey of change ourselves. We're an organizational development consulting company and we

Learning Uncut Episode 91

Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

operate at the intersection of behavioural psych, learning design, and learning technology. The solutions we build out for our clients and design with our clients, cover all of those aspects.

I think, Aston, we've known each other for quite a long time through the different roles Aston's been in. Aston's had a long association with Capability Group and the previous owners, but I think we started doing work with you at Briscoes about five years ago now.

Aston Moss:

Yeah, that'll be about right, Drew.

Drew McGuire:

And we've been engaged in a range of different projects over that time.

Michelle Ockers:

So that tech learning and behavioural science, behavioural psychology space, that's a really interesting and important intersection, and I know that's going to come up in the conversation. Thanks for that, Drew.

I think maybe we pick up the story - it's somewhere three to five years ago - we're picking up this story. Aston, I'm going to let you guide us as to where we pick up the story. But really, you've been working on learning transformation at Briscoe for a number of years now, and obviously Capability Group has been one of your partners, which is why we have them here to help tell the story today. But what was going on in the business? What were the business challenges or needs that were driving a requirement to do something different with learning at Briscoe?

Aston Moss:

Yeah, probably a combination or a confluence of events, I think, is how they often term these things. I joined the business just over six years ago and what the former COO referred to as a bit of a pay and rations HR function was in existence at the time, but the business wanted some different things. And as I joined, it was the opportunity to start to work through what the business needed, et cetera. So there was a pretty extensive assessment of what was in place, what the business' desires and needs were. And you can't often go straight for the desires, you certainly have to start with the needs. So I worked my way through that and identified some of the changes that we would probably need to look at bringing about. A large part of that is obviously enabling our team to be successful in their roles, and L&D and OD were absolutely core in that.

I was really fortunate around that same time, so probably around the five-year mark, so a year on into to my journey at Briscoe Group, to be introduced to Drew. I'd known the original founders of Capability Group for probably the best part of two decades and had had the good fortune to work with them in another business and at quite a formative time in my career as well, both as a manager within that business and also as an emerging HR practitioner. And I was very fortunate that Cheryl, one of the founding partners, then introduced me to Drew, and obviously Drew was in the process of acquiring the business. And I guess it's that perfect situation when there's a bit of a meeting of the minds. You get to meet someone and you go, "Wow, they're really intriguing and they've got some really provocative thoughts and ideas and this is well worth continuing with."

And I guess that's where it all started. Because while it's easy to go... I've probably dealt with Capability Group in different ways for several decades now, the Capability Group that exists today and as our true partner in the L&D and OD space is a very different animal than what we were dealing with then. And that's a reflection of what Drew and his colleagues and team have done with the business: very much are putting it on steroids and transforming it and taking it in other directions. But what I most like about that is they've

Learning Uncut Episode 91 Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

never lost the values that have underlaid that. It's always been a business that has partnered with other businesses, that there's been trusted advisors inside that you could work with almost as a virtual part of your team. That stayed the same all the way through. Even if some of the people have changed, that stayed the same. And then there's been all of these amazing other opportunities to partner on.

Michelle Ockers:

So Aston, it's interesting you say that Capability Group is a different animal to what it was two to three decades ago. The same could be said of learning, right? The way we think about learning in organizations and approach learning. So if you hadn't changed in the past two decades, then you're not keeping up with contemporary practice and the need to do better for our businesses. Which brings me back to the question at the start point: what did learning look like at Briscoe when you first joined?

Aston Moss:

We had an online learning platform in place at that time, and it was very different to the one that we have in place today. What I would describe it as is a bit like a sheep dip program and relatively inflexible in many ways. Or at least the way that we were operating it was relatively inflexible, and I think that's probably a game of two halves. The people you partner with or the platform you use and how you use it, obviously there's important dynamics within there.

But essentially we deployed online learning to the two to two and a half thousand people inside our organization. They would have a predetermined set of modules that they would go through. They varied in length considerably. Some of them were exceptionally long. I call it a bit of a sheep dip. We dip people every year to make sure that they're current on some things. Apart from that in very select areas, it was once you've been trained, you're trained and left your own devices almost. So there were some elements around that.

The other thing is, we were almost entirely beholden to the platform provider at that stage as to any changes that we were making. I didn't have an internal capability that had strengths in that area, and the platform itself wasn't terribly agile either. So when I looked at all of my costs, where all of my resources were across the function, et cetera... I have to say, I got to learning last. Because while it wasn't terribly broken, there were some other more pressing priorities in the business. But when it came to having a look at it, it became very apparent what the opportunities were. And we would've simply been unable to put those opportunities in motion and take advantage of them had we remained how we were.

Michelle Ockers:

So what did you see as the biggest opportunities?

Aston Moss:

A number of things. Number one, us having more agency, so the ability for part of my team to have a really strategic agenda for learning and being very mindful that that needed to be quite holistic and comprehensive. So we needed to go all the way from what I call foundation training, which is someone joining your organization, knowing what your organization does, how it does it, being a part of it, understanding values, all of that. Then moving through to enabling them to perform the core parts of their role, the tasks and the activities. Then progressing, going, "What are all of the complementary elements?"

Training someone how to use a checkout register, as an example. But how do you help them provide customer service, which is naturally aligned and should be integrated with that but is often left out? It's really easy to go, "Oh, you know how to use a register, therefore..." The metaphor I use is it's a bit like riding a bike or swimming. People go, "Oh, it's all really natural, all really easy. Why would you need any help?" But of course we can all get benefits of coaching in areas like customer service and many, many other areas. So if you don't train

Learning Uncut Episode 91

Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

people, you can guarantee people are still learning, they just might not be learning the things you want them to learn.

That core activities and tasks was an element that we needed to work on, and then moving our way up through much more higher level skills, so the management skills, the leadership, et cetera. And interestingly, our partnership with Capability Group has us working in that area today. While we didn't start there, it has taken us there for a whole range of different reasons as well.

So we needed to put all of that in place and in parallel. I actually needed an organizational infrastructure within my own team to enable us to do that. Because it was never just about a platform.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And when you say an organizational infrastructure, just unpack that a little bit for us. What do you mean by that?

Aston Moss:

Key is people. Having people with the capabilities. And they're both... Or not both, because there's more than one. They need to have the learning design, the instructional design capabilities. They need to have the learning lens across the top of that, and the ability to look at what learning outcomes are being achieved in the business, or what are needed and work out what the best selections are. So they're quite different from what I would expect from, say, one of my instructional designers.

And then of course you've got all of your subject matter experts and understanding how you liaise with them. Typically, what we found is our subject matter experts are increasingly... they're knowledgeable, they're passionate, but we can't replicate that for every category and every product that we sell, so we need to be able to get in and establish what the essence is that we can take from those amazing people and then spread across 2,500 who might work any of the seven days of the week and any of the hours that are in that week. And of course you can't just do all of that with face-to-face training.

Michelle Ockers:

When you were talking about your start point, having online learning, sheep dipping, set pathways through things, probably focusing more on some of that, what you call foundational training. I'm thinking there will be others who are listening to this who will be thinking either, "That was me in the recent past," or, "That's me now. I've got aspirations, but I'm stuck with system, skill sets, barriers to allowing me to move on." Drew, in your work at Capability Group, how often do you still see that situation, similar to what Aston's describing as the start point for Briscoe?

Drew McGuire:

Oh, it astounds me, because we've been in this game for a while. We've been working to share content and educate the market about what's possible today and what's coming, but there's a significant number of organizations that are really... they're lucky if they're discovering the basics of learning delivery and design. So yeah, there's a lot of places at that I think, in Bersin's learning maturity model, they're at that baseline, level one level of maturity. Very, very common.

Just another interesting point, Michelle, related to that I think, is that today there's a lot of people in learning that know a lot of the jargon and some of the terms about what's coming,

Learning Uncut Episode 91 Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

but there's still a piece to do to understand what does that look like implemented.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Yeah.

Drew McGuire:

Things like micro learning. What does micro-learning look like implemented well?

Michelle Ockers:

Right. I will put a link to the Bersin's maturity model that you've just mentioned there, Drew, into the show notes. Just if any of our listeners are scribbling down notes at the moment. But I think what we've established is there's plenty of people who'd be looking at this thinking, "I'd like to make some shifts, but where and how do I start?" That's kind of the story we're going to reflect on with Briscoes.

In terms of key shifts... And I'll start with you, Drew, and then go back to Aston. Drew, as the partner looking into Briscoes, what do you think are the key shifts they've made in their approach to learning over the past three years?

Drew McGuire:

In my mind, the shifts have been significant and transformational. I'd say in terms of capability of the team, and I'd say that the learning and OD team at Briscoes has absolutely moved significantly up the value chain in terms of how they're perceived by the rest of the business. Those guys now have data and can talk the language of the business. They can talk business benefits. They're not talking learning language as such. That leads to credibility.

And as I said, they've got the data. What that means is way more willingness, I'm sure. I'm assuming, Aston, that when you're putting in requests or ideas and concepts for a way forward, there's a lot more willingness to consider those given the demonstrated value that your team's added over time in recent times.

Michelle Ockers:

How has the conversation about business value shifted, Aston, in that three years?

Aston Moss:

We're able to talk to different things now. We're able to talk on a more targeted basis. We're able to use data to back up the points that need to be made. So simple things that we get out of the platform like, is everyone doing their learning. The learning that they need to be successful on the job, are they doing it? Can we check? Where are they doing it well? Where is that happening less well? So those kinds of things.

And then what I think is an important element is for us to be able to go, "And here is our advice as to what you could do if it's not going as well for you." Because again, it's really easy to poke a stick at people and go, "You're not blah, blah, blah." Organizations don't need that. People are busy enough, particularly in COVID times.

What you want to be able to do is go, "Yep. We see an issue." It's actually a jointly owned issue, because we know that the learning's not going to be effective and enable the person to be effective in their role. That's going to have all sorts of implications from a productivity perspective, if you look at it being quite strictly commercial, or it might be a confidence and sense of competence from the team member's perspective. I mean let's face it, I don't think any of us would know too many people who get out of bed in the morning wanting to go and do a crap job at work. Everyone wants to do what it is they've got to do and to do it well. So

Learning Uncut Episode 91 Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

setting people up for success is really, really important.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely.

Aston Moss:

To be able to use the statistics to go, "Are the modules that we've designed, developed, implemented, hitting the mark? Do we know they're actually getting the learning out there?" So we can look at those kind of stats and we can look across any area you choose to pick. Is it around customer service? Is it around loss prevention? Is it around health and safety? And again, we can look across those areas and go, "Well, what are the other metrics that the business talks about?" So we talk about TRIFR or LTIFR in the safety space, or we talk about shrink in the loss prevention space, or we talk about net promoter score in the customer service space.

So again, the business has got this array of different business metrics that we can tie to. And interestingly, about 18 months ago, Drew and his team did a piece of work for us looking at our net promoter score and our performance on the customer service modules on our Axonify learning platform, and we were able to demonstrate that there was a clear link between the two. And it's not straight line. The reality is, in the people space rarely is anything ever quite straight line, but there's this important co-dependency that's in there around one reinforces the other. So quite powerful from that perspective, Michelle.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. And it's interesting, talking the language of the business, absolutely critical around credibility, and endeavouring to make the linkage between learning and business performance, even if you know that other things impact business performance. That is still a relationship that is worth exploring. I often see people in learning and development back away from it because there's too many other things that can influence business metrics. But that notwithstanding, it is still always worth exploring and having those business conversations with your stakeholders.

I'm picking up on several things that have shifted. You've talked about team capability, you've talked to a little bit about technology and platform. You've talked about the way you use data and business credibility as a result of that. We're going to back into how those changes came about after we explore something else that's really critical. And I know you value this but we haven't talked about it, and that's the learner experience. What does that look and feel like now?

Aston Moss:

Dramatically different. We're talking quantum difference here. The platform that we had in the past was pretty much deployed through computers in our stores for the majority of our learners. Obviously, if someone was in support office, they had a desktop computer anyway. That was somewhat inconvenient, because there's a finite number of computers in a store. What we've now got is basically the learn anywhere, learn anytime kind of approach that the Axonify platform does. And it can be done via web or it can be done via an app, which is just spectacular. We can also see how our team are making use of it. We can see what devices, what operating system, all of that kind of information at our fingertips, because of the way the platform is designed, which is great.

But most importantly, our team get a very rich environment, and it's not just about the learning. There's the gamification, there's the new modules. We've used it extensively as a comms platform, particularly during COVID. It's our only one to all, two-way platform in the business, which means that, when you've got a large, distributed workforce and suddenly they're all told they need to go home and shelter in place, to use the American phrase,

Learning Uncut Episode 91

Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

lockdown's probably the term here, but it's lost a lot of its appetite for people; how do you stay in touch? The risk is, the longer that goes on, the less likely they are to come back.

So how do you keep them engaged? How do you let them know that we care about them, we're thinking about them, that we've got a whole raft of other resources that they can make use of, so they're not cut off from the business? And how do you get through some of the really simple messages, like you might be at home and unable to work, and we can't operate the stores right now, but just know you're still going to get paid next week." Because that's really, really important. And we've been able to do all that.

Michelle Ockers:

It's really interesting. You're talking about your learning platform enabling that kind of communication and two-way communication. I think for people who work in organizations where the workforce is predominantly desk bound and everyone's got a computer, they automatically go to thinking about email as the main vehicle for communication. But that's actually not an option in many other types of businesses, particularly where you're dealing with frontline workers who are on their feet and not sitting at desks.

We had an interesting conversation in 2020, mid 2020, with a lady called Kristina Tsiriou who's the L&D leader at DECIEM, who of course have a lot of warehousing staff, they retail as well, and she said something similar, Aston, around their learning platform. She talked about it being the watering hole for the organization, how critical that was during COVID. And again, it's their one comms platform for everyone in the organization. So I think if you have a platform with those kind of comms capabilities, it's a really high leverage point.

You talked about two-way comms, it being a two-way platform. Can you describe what that looks like a little more?

Aston Moss:

Yeah, sure. We still do that relatively simplistically, to be fair. We can have people asking questions and so forth. They're not as targeted and rich, but the reality is the people who bother to ask the questions via the platform, you can almost guarantee if it's in their minds it's in some other people's mind, and probably many more minds than just one or two. So that gives us an interesting opportunity to really target our comms when we get some of that feedback. So yeah, it's been quite powerful.

And again, because it's individualized, we can get the message back to the individual, but we can also then broadcast some of the broader messages and make sure that everyone on the team gets the benefit, or target it to specific groups if it's only relevant to certain groups. Again, the richness of the platform that we've got enables us to segment in some ways for various bits and pieces, just as we do with our learning pathways.

Learning Uncut Episode 91 Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

Michelle Ockers:

Let's talk about platform a little bit more then, as part of the shift that you've made. And obviously there's been a lot of investment in technology in the past 18 months, and COVID and the lockdown has been the trigger for a lot of organizations who might have been thinking about new platforms, to actually go ahead and implement them. When it comes to platform, was that where you started with your transformation? Or did you start with something else, like for instance, your L&D team? Because the two go hand in hand. You can't just put in a platform and everything changes, right?

Aston Moss:

Yeah, absolutely. Would you say, Drew sort of a bit of a chicken and egg? We probably kicked them off in parallel?

Drew McGuire:

Yeah, absolutely. One of the challenges that we had to overcome when we first started talking, Aston, was how do you build the capability of the team at the same time as release a vendor then bring on a new vendor, redesign all your content, and basically deliver a very different learning experience to all your employees so you're shifting expectation of what learning looks like across the business. And I remember you kept saying to me, "Oh God, do you think we can do this?" And I'm going, "Yeah, yeah. Four months. We can do this in four months."

And so, a big part of that, I think, was being aware of all the variables that needed to be managed, aware of all the risks, everything that needed to be done, and then really tightly project managing it. And I think that transition is definitely one of the quickest we've done. It's certainly been one of the most holistic that we've done, and by far one of the most effective. And a lot of that, quite frankly, was how well it was led internally by you, Aston, and then the people that you brought in on your team as well, and their openness to learn and grow really quickly.

Michelle Ockers:

I think the technical aspects of introducing a new platform, although in some organizations, there's a lot of hoops to jump through, it can be the simplest of the levers to actually pull. That it's more complex and challenging to shift, for instance, maybe we start with L&D team mindset and capability. And I know you've talked a little bit about L&OD team. Do you have one L&OD team, Aston, or are they separate teams? What does that look like? What do the teams look like?

Aston Moss:

Yeah. Team's probably a grand term. It has this vision of many people. We're a bit skinnier than that, to be fair. I actually have three people in my... they're termed the OD team, but a large part of their focus is L&D. So our instructional designers and our OD team leader sits in that area. But I also have an OD manager who sits outside of that team and has a more holistic business function. That's relatively recent. We only introduced that in the last year as part of what we were doing with some other business initiatives. And we are on several iterations of the OD/L&D team, but I try and simplify things and go, "There's only one HR team in the business."

So we're all working for the same ends and it doesn't... Part of what I wanted to achieve when I set out with a restructure in the team... And I'll put it on the table directly, there were some eggs broken in the making of the omelette, because you don't get an omelette any other way. There was some organizational discomfort with the change, but I think people would agree that what we've produced was worth the discomfort to get there, and we

Learning Uncut Episode 91 Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

wouldn't have got there had we not taken that path.

We literally have... And I'm sure many of your listeners will be familiar with the analogy, Michelle, of you take off in an aircraft and while you've got it flying from New York to Los Angeles, you're going to retrain the cabin crew, completely refit the interior. You're probably going to change a couple of the wings and the engines, and you're still going to land on time, in full at your destination airport. That's pretty much what we've done. And occasionally I refer to Drew and his team and how Drew and a couple of his other team members led the project from their side as it's a bit like the Betty Crocker solution that never fail.

And it was phenomenal. We had a great partnership from the get-go. I had some terrifically talented, committed team on my side. That was exactly the same on Drew's team. And they worked together to pull off something that was pretty close to miraculous with working that way, backing away from an old product, completely rebuilding or completely building new content for our new platform, putting the technology into place, the OD lens around slightly repositioning learning at this stage, and then actually getting it to launch at what is also one of our busiest times of year. Because we closed out the contract for the last provider at the end of December, and we were up and running in January.

Michelle Ockers:

So what were the biggest challenges? And I might throw to you on this one, Drew, and then Aston can elaborate. And I know, Aston, you talked about there being some discomfort, so I want to come back to that and see if Drew captures it or if the discomfort looked a little bit different internally.

So Drew, what were the biggest challenges to making this transition, and how did you address them?

Drew McGuire:

One of the biggest challenges from our perspective was always internal capability. There was no doubt that there were issue on the team, but Aston was working on that. And I suppose what we were able to do through conversations, I think Aston, was get real clarity. Or I could share some thoughts and ideas about the sorts of capabilities that would support you moving forward, and you had a bunch of your own ideas based on the research and what you'd seen in other organizations too. But we had very future focused capability discussions for their L&D function and that really helped the selection process.

I think with a change like this, one of the big things is stakeholder management internally. Aston is all over that actually, and lots of people in these senior exec roles, but he managed that perfectly and then drew on us as he needed us and pulled us into conversations if he needed a bit of subject matter expertise, or some advice around change management, or just some outside perspective on the change. And that, I think, worked really effectively. So you've got the capability thing, you've got the stakeholder engagement thing, drawing on external support to use that really wisely when you need it.

And then in terms of the changing learner experience, to be honest, we didn't see a lot of risk with that, so I'd say that's a low risk. I know there's a lot of people we talk to that really worry about the changing world of learning and the impact it will have on the workforce or employees. Are they really up for this change? Will they adopt, will they adapt? I've never seen them not, generally, with a platform like Axonify. It does depend on the platform, to be honest, and the drivers or what changes you're trying to drive. But I'd say in this case there was very... We certainly had no concerns that this workforce wouldn't adopt quickly and adapt quickly.

Michelle Ockers:

Let me start there with you, Aston. There's three things I think Drew's mentioned there. One was internal capability within the L&D team, another was stakeholder engagement, and

Learning Uncut Episode 91 Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

another is adoption by the workforce. I want to start with adoption by the workforce, because like Drew, I often hear people talk about resistance to change from the workforce and they just want to be... Spoon-fed is too harsh, but they want to be in a situation of formal learning where someone's telling them what to learn, when to learn it, where they've got a facilitator, rather than more self-directed and self-managed learning. What was your experience around mindset and potential resistance? Did you find any, and how did you address it?

Aston Moss:

I think I'd say that we were probably laggards there, to be fair on that one. I think our learners were ahead of us in terms of what they expected and probably had... While we've got a very diverse and quite spread demographic within our team, we do have a lot of young people and their expectations. They're watching Netflix, they're watching NEON, they're watching a whole range of other on-demand services. They want what they want, they want it how they want it, and they want it when they want it. The beauty of it-

Michelle Ockers:

You just made me feel very young, Aston.

Aston Moss:

Axonify does that, and that's the upside.

It is like the Netflix of learning. It knows what you need to learn, it knows what you've learned, how well you've learned it and what you might need some more assistance or helps you learn what comes next. So the platform is really good. If anything, I guess one of the biggest frustrations I've had organizationally is around the appetite get to the next level. Things like BYOD. We don't have that in place today for a number of different reasons, but we need to get there.

One of the mantras that I've had in my time at Briscoe Group is, I call it more on the floor, which means we enable all of our people in whatever role they're in to do the task that needs to be done in the place that it needs to be done at. And learning should and could be no different in terms of that. Whereas it used to be, go back to the computer upstairs in the office or in the stock room or somewhere else, rarely at the register, because primarily there for customer facing and you want to be focusing on your customer when you're at the registers, let's face it.

And we can't ever pick when the right place is often. That's the beauty with Axonify, it being able to be portable, so potentially on someone's cell phone or on a tablet, it might be in a break, it might be... Not that we necessarily encourage people to be doing it on their breaks, but we know that it's a little bit addictive in terms of some of the learning. So enabling people to do it on their terms is really important and hence my comment. I think we were a little bit behind on that. We didn't have the technology enablement, but people have made that work for them. And we've still got some distance to go. So more on the floor was really important.

The stakeholder engagement... When we were working through the business case to go, "We're going to replace platform A with Axonify," did a whole lot of work, both within my team and with Drew and his team, came up with what we thought was the compelling business case. We knew we needed to change. The question was going to be what to. We did have a preferred platform for a range of different reasons, and it is around the functionality of the platform that we ended up choosing, which was Axonify. But it's also all of the other things that it delivered us. The reality is, four years on with our platform in place, and we'll head into our fifth-year next year, we still haven't rolled out all of the functionality to the extent, because it's such a feature rich platform.

That doesn't mean we're underusing it either. The stuff that we're doing, I think anyone who would look at it independently would go, "Geez, you are really doing a lot with it." But we know that there is just so much more that we can still do. So working through with the

Learning Uncut Episode 91 Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

stakeholders. When we got to the business case, I sat down with our COO and our CFO and went through and, "Look, here's the business case. This is what I'm intending to do." Had some good discussions. Drew and his team came in, they did a presentation, we had some independent discussions and the rest, as they say, is history.

Michelle Ockers:

Can we just talk about... Go ahead, Drew. I think we're going to talk about the same thing. I was going to ask about the way you presented to the executive team, because that's often a challenge. You've got to ask for money sometimes. You can't do everything without some investment, and that can often be tricky to... How do you create a business case for investment in a learning platform? So if you perhaps could share your thoughts using as an example what you did to support Aston with this at Briscoe.

Drew McGuire:

Yeah. That meeting, Aston, has... Actually, I don't think I've ever told you this. It's always stuck in my mind, sitting down with your COO and CFO and you prepping me on what you thought was needed for that meeting, which is what we did. And it was getting down to it. We had 30 minutes of their time. And what Aston shared, which is always critical, is what matters to these guys? What matters to these two key stakeholders the most? Obviously it was business performance and dollars.

Aston had kind of covered off on the dollar side of things, I think. We didn't talk too much about learning at all in that session. It was more about the metric. That if we got the content design right and delivered in the right way through the platform, which we were confident we would, that these are the sorts of metrics in retail that you can expect to shift. And we had wanted to quantify what that might look like at Briscoes, but we ended up shying away from that and thought, "Actually, these two guys know the numbers off the back of that... they know them off the cuff, so actually let them in their minds look at all of those metrics and do the calculations and let them figure out what the efficiencies and financial benefit might be to the business."

So that's how we played it. Ended up being a very simple conversation, huge amount of prep from Aston ahead of time to get them ready so that when we went, all we needed to talk about was what could be shifted.

Aston Moss:

And it was very balanced. Drew talks about the work that he and I did together in terms of prepping for that conversation, but there was another side to that conversation, which was the work that I was doing internally with my colleagues around, these are the things that matter most in terms of learning inside our organization. We need a solution that does that. Our current solution doesn't deliver that, or to do it is going to be inordinately expensive if we can ever do it. So the ability to help make sure that they had comfort around all of the attributes that were important for our business... Because from my perspective, I needed a solution and I needed both Capability Group and our internal lead team to be aligned around, this was going to be a solution that was going to be a win-win. Because anything else wasn't going to be sustainable. That was really important.

Look, I'm really fortunate. We've got a fantastic CFO and COO at the time. Again, incredibly committed to learning. Funnily enough, I guess I had a bit of an advantage over potentially some of my peers in the wider learning community. I already had a platform in place, so I didn't have to go and ask for a kidney transplant or a kidney donation to put the new platform in. I was able to offset some of my costs. And I was already working to a commitment that I'd made when I started, around trying to fit organizational change within existing headcount and budget at that stage as well. And so, we made that work around that. So yeah, some things were shifted in priority, but I'm really happy that we did that because it became an

Learning Uncut Episode 91 Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

enabler for some of the other internal strategies.

To give you an example, learning can be a little bit abstract and removed from talking about doing the business. But the reality is, we had some opportunities in the health and safety space as an example. And so, one of our early tranche of modules that we put onto Axonify, reimagining them and putting them onto that platform, was health and safety, because we knew that was really important to keeping our team safe and well. So we did those modules as a priority, and we've built upon those over time as well, to be fair. But we were able to then talk about some of the benefits that they did. What used to be a 20- or 30-minute module, we were able to get down to a series of two to three and a half minute modules, which made it a better learning experience for our team. It meant that they retained more. It meant that we had better confidence around where were the areas of strength and the opportunities for developing their knowledge.

And so, again, using all of the data we were able to provide better learning experience, better learning outcomes, and it did help improve our safety performance alongside a number of other initiatives in that area. But that's how you make it real. Again, as I was talking about using statistics from a particular area to go, "That's what we want to improve." And yeah, we improved them.

Michelle Ockers:

And clearly data literacy and talking the language of business are coming up again and again in this conversation.

Aston Moss:

Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

There's a great research report from Emerald Works called Same Team Different Sides, which I'll pop into the show notes, which talks about what are senior leaders really looking for out of L&D and what do L&D think senior leaders are really looking for. And there's quite a difference, hence the same team, different sides. I think that would be valuable for anyone looking for investment and looking to get buy-in. Not just dollars, but also a level of commitment and engagement from their exec teams. That's a resource well worth taking a look at.

We are just about out of time, which is a real pity, because I think there's more to explore here. But if we can summarize, what of the key things you think went well in making this transition as to why?

Learning Uncut Episode 91 Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

Aston Moss:

I'm going to start with the easy one, which was the partnership. I've used the Betty Crocker analogy, but it's that never fail. We knew from the get-go that the commitment was there from Capability Group to help us successfully deploy the new platform, develop new content, and to build the capability that I needed within my team to have almost a self-sufficiency model moving forwards. That was absolutely critical, because it wasn't just about the platform.

The platform itself has been phenomenally successful because it's truly a great platform. It's not just the flexibility, it's the data it gives us, it's the learning experience for the learners that we touched on right at the beginning, the gamification, it's the knowing where our development opportunities are. But it's also that rich functionality that we're still tapping into and finding new ways to make use of. COVID and comms is one example, but we now use it as part of our long-term leadership and management development program. We use it as a hybrid tool. Some of it's face to face, some of it's pre delivered and followed up with reinforcement. So again, we've learned, as part of it, to have a rich approach to developing true capability in the business and knowing... Then we've got a fantastic hammer, and we have got a fantastic hammer in Axonify, we use that as part of the solution but it's not all of the solution. So we never tell anyone we'll be putting screws and using the hammer.

So the partnership, the platform, the people in terms of my team. I'm incredibly grateful to all of the team in my team, some who've moved on to the next stages in their careers, et cetera, for the commitment and the energy that they've put in there. We've had that continued support from Drew and his team. Got some incredibly talented people who've worked with us on various bits and pieces. Sometimes it's the technical, sometimes it's the learning content in some different ways, sometimes it's helping us bring new people in and up to speed with micro learning and those kinds of things.

Then the other bit is just having a whole of business approach. My approach as an HR practitioner is I have one HR function. We serve all of the business and we're there to get outcomes that the business wants. So let's use the portfolio of tools, techniques, the talents, all of those things, to deliver the solution that the business wants and deserves to get.

Michelle Ockers:

Great. And Drew, by way of tips for others who are listening and thinking, "I'd really like to be in the position that Briscoes has reached," maybe they're early on in the transformation journey and trying to tackle some of the problems that Aston and his team have worked through in the past three years; what advice would you have for them around getting started or about approaching transformation of learning?

Drew McGuire:

Well, watching what Aston did in the early days, it was educating and demonstrating leadership with your key stakeholders, and then being tenacious about that as well. As Aston hinted at, there was elements of this change that were a bit disruptive. And so, I just think that leadership, tenacity, I think the leaning into the data and impact story also... A small part of it's about learning and how people learn and what we now know about how people learn best and the way our people work and learning in the flow work and all that sort of stuff. That's definitely got to be part of it, but a more important part is demonstrated anticipated and then committing to that and making sure you follow through with reporting back to the business on the impact that you're having.

So there's a credibility thing there as well and you're building trust through that as well. Because what you don't want to do is get buy-in to this thing, run with it and then you've kind of lost interest and the impact and the effectiveness of what you've done. Those are probably the key things.

Then just the last thing I'd add in as well is just that thinking through the change

Learning Uncut Episode 91

Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire

management aspects of something like this, I think, is really important as well. And I think it's part of when you're building that case for change. You've got to just touch on that as well, how you will look to manage that effectively and give confidence that you've got that in hand and that you've got strategies around that.

Michelle Ockers:

Great.

Aston Moss:

The one thing I'd say to add to that is, whether you're an L&D professional, an OD professional, an HR professional, however you want to term yourself, if you're the person at the vanguard of it, stay tenacious. Don't give up and stay on top of it. Today I still see every E-learn before it's released to the business. It's that important to me. Making sure our team get good product, that learning is easy and successful for them and that we're getting the right new messages out there, and that I'm staying in touch with all of the messages that are out there, is incredibly important. Because that goes to having a holistic practice. You can't ever step away. And I would never want to step away and be accused of just let learning do its thing, because that's such a critical part of how we enable our people to be successful and how we keep them successful. And me being close to that's part of just a good duty of care.

Michelle Ockers:

Great. Thank you so much for those tips for listeners. Lots of good things for people to pull out. We do have a transcript with every episode, so if anyone would like to go back over some of those recommendations, slower time, please go to the site and the show notes and you can pull down the transcript from the show notes. We'll also include a link to LinkedIn profiles for both Aston and Drew if anyone would like to get in touch and find out more about anything that's been discussed in today's episode. Thank you so much, Aston and Drew, for sharing your work and insights with us today.

Aston Moss:

Thanks for having us.

Drew McGuire:

Yeah, thanks Michelle. It was great.

Learning Uncut Episode 91 Getting learning on the floor – Aston Moss and Drew McGuire



About Learning Uncut

Learning Uncut are learning and development consultants that work with learning teams and/or business leaders to accelerate learning transformation. We specialise in supporting organisations to create or update their learning strategy, enhance their learning team's capabilities, align learning to business value, and implement modern learning approaches.

We are highly collaborative and pragmatic. We partner with organisations to align learning to their business needs, unleash continuous learning, and build capability to help them thrive.

Learn more about us [at our website](#).

About your host, Michelle Ockers



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

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

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



Find Michelle on [LinkedIn](#) or [Twitter](#)